

CARLOS: My name is Carlos Dada. I am a journalist from El Salvador. I'm the founder and editor in chief of El Faro. It's an online media that turns 25 years old this year, which means, we were born before Google. We were born in a country where not many people had access to the Internet in 1998. And we started it just as an experiment. And here we are.

ROSE: This is Carlos Dada - an award winning journalist who for more than two decades he has run the newsroom of El Faro, based in El Salvador.

El Faro is a special newsroom because it was the first exclusively digital newspaper in Latin America. In English El Faro means "the lighthouse."¹

Known for its investigative reporting, El Faro has been referred to as "a breakthrough digital newspaper blazing an independent and ethical trail in Central America."²

CARLOS: I think that we were able to attract a very talented generation of Salvadoran journalists. All children of the postwar.

ROSE: When Carlos references the war. He is talking about El Salvador's civil war - a conflict between a leftist guerilla coalition that opposed the government and far right paramilitary. It lasted 12 long years, formally ending in 1992. It's estimated that more than 75,000 civilians were killed.³ Nearly a quarter of the Salvadoran population moved to the US.⁴ The devastating effects of the conflict linger to this day - and El Faro reports on those lasting consequences - including government corruption and gang violence.⁵

CARLOS: We do long feature stories that deal with violence, with organized crime. With corruption. With human rights violations. And with politics.

ROSE: Carlos and his colleagues are no stranger to threats - police have made unofficial visits to the newsroom... Unidentified people - unmarked cars - different characters representing various interest groups have shown up uninvited and unannounced to the El Faro offices to intimidate its journalists."^{6, 7}

CARLOS: I think there's a whole range of different threats that we've received by different ways. We've received messages from organized crime. We've received public threats from gangs. We've received veiled threats from public officers. Gangs publicly said that if it was up to them, we should not exist. The Interamerican

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2018/06/19/espanol/america-latina/el-faro-periodismo-de-investigacion.html>

² <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/salvadoran-journalist-carlos-dada-two-mexican-newspapers-among-winners-of-2011-maria-moors-cabot-prizes/>

³ <https://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/>

⁴ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/12/the-rise-of-navib-bukele-el-salvadors-authoritarian-president>

⁵ <https://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/>

⁶ <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/salvadoran-media-outlets-el-faro-and-revista-factum-threatened-for-publishing-about-alleged-police-death-squad/>

⁷ <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/el-faro-navib-bukele-press-freedom.php>

Human Rights Court registered car bomb threats against our newsroom. We received threats from drug traffickers. And also from police officers.⁸

CARLOS: We have been harassed in the form of physical harassment, of having strange people standing out of our homes. We have received drones standing by our windows.

ROSE: Carlos and his team are used to harassment. Because they have been operating in such a dangerous environment for more than two decades, they have processes and practices when they are working with their sources. They're careful with how they communicate with each other. They often use encrypted apps - and they pay attention when something seems (a little) off -

CARLOS: One of our colleagues who read the. Her phone started doing things by itself. Kind of strange things. And she thought it was weird.

CARLOS: She says that the battery was draining too fast. The phone was overheating and the screen started turning off or opening up so that she was not opening.

CARLOS CONTINUED She consulted a friend of her who's a technician. And the guy said, look, maybe... maybe you have been infected with Pegasus. Let's send your phone to be examined.

CARLOS: She sent the phone first to Access Now. And Access Now sent it to Citizen Lab in Toronto.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: The lab had been aware that something was up in El Salvador. There was something going on with Pegasus there.

CARLOS: John Scott Railton was the main person in communication with us.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: My name is John Scott-Railton, and I'm a senior researcher at the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto's Munk School. A lot of our work has focused on tracking mercenary spyware like Pegasus.

ROSE: ~~John Scott Railton is a senior researcher at Citizen Lab.~~ We have featured Citizen Lab in previous episodes - a Toronto-based digital watchdog group that essentially tracks human rights violations on the internet - and they have been tracking Pegasus since they discovered it in 2016.

⁸ http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/pdf/2021/res_12-2021_mc-1051-20_es.pdf

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: It's not uncommon for us as researchers to know that Pegasus spyware might be being used in a country, but there's really no idea of who those victims are. And the problem is you just go hunting for those people. You're looking for needles in a stack of needles.

ROSE: Citizen Lab confirmed there was Pegasus on Julia Gavarrete's phone. They then started to put the pieces together of what was happening in El Salvador:⁹

CARLOS: And they were very surprised by what they found. So they asked about who is this person, who does she work for, and what about her colleagues?

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: There is a pattern to Pegasus cases, which is if you find one in a given country, you're probably going to find a lot more.

CARLOS: Well, since they kept asking for more phones, we sent all the phones.

ROSE: John has seen Pegasus at work. But there was something different about how Pegasus was being used on Julia's phone -

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: I still remember the first time I saw that it was just like, cannot be right. Is there some kind of a bug? I've never seen anything like that. It was that they were really targeted just in a radical and obsessive manner. It's not something that we'd seen before. In anything like this volume or this number of cases.

CARLOS: Citizen Lab, were so impressed by our case, we thought, well, maybe this is really big. This is something extraordinary. And that's what it was.

[SONG/ TK montage]

DANA: It's this magic thing, it can infect your phone. And once it does, it's inside of your phone, and it's like a little worm.

AMITAI: When you find the vulnerability to iOS, you got all the all the iPhones in the world.

BILL: It wasn't just, oh, well, you can see what's going on in Safari because you click on the link in Safari. No, it was you can access everything on the phone. You can turn on the microphone to snoop in on conversations happening around the device.

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<https://cpj.org/es/2022/01/las-infecciones-eran-constantes-julia-gavarrete-estuvo-entre-los-mas-de-30-periodistas-salvadorenos-que-fueron-blancos-de-la-tecnologia-de-vigilancia-pegasus/>

RON: It's not uncommon for victims of this type of espionage to be both traumatized and to feel guilt. [Clip Group B¹⁰]

NANDO: This is Shoot the Messenger, a new biweekly investigative reporting podcast from EXILE Content Studio.

Every season, we investigate one international news story. You may have heard the headlines; this is the deep dive. I'm Nando Vila.

ROSE REID: And I'm Rose Reid. When Nando and I started reporting on this project we had one question: what is the biggest threat to journalists today?

When we put up a bulletin board and stuck a pin for every journalist threatened or assassinated in the past 5 years, we found one repeating link over and over. From Mexico, to DC, to the United Arab Emirates: Pegasus.

Over the course of ten episodes, we're doing a special partnership with the Committee to Protect Journalists for our first season, "Espionage, Murder, and Pegasus Spyware."

NANDO: In this first season we've covered Pegasus, the NSO Group, and we've talked about the scale of the targets - 1400 targeted through the WhatsApp breach, or the cluster of 65 in Catalonia, Spain¹¹. ~~There have been tens of thousands of phone numbers identified as Pegasus targets¹²~~—but who is on the other side of a targeted number?

What life are they living? Who are they? And how did Pegasus impact them?

And what does it feel like to have been hacked, your life invaded?

In this episode, we showcase the second largest Pegasus cluster identified to date.

More than 20 people connected to the newsroom of El Faro were infected. One person in particular wasn't just infected - but actively spied on for more than hundred days.

In this episode, we have a special interview with Carlos Dada, the founder and editor in chief of El Faro.

ROSE: This is Episode 8 - Living with Pegasus

[theme song close]

¹⁰ <https://www.dropbox.com/s/m45ckcgozowj3yq/Clip%20Group%20B.cgrp?dl=0>

¹¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/04/25/how-democracies-spy-on-their-citizens>

¹² <https://forbiddenstories.org/about-the-pegasus-project/>

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Since the initial discovery of Pegasus, we've been on this journey to try to understand where it is, how it's evolving, who the customers are, where the targets may be.

ROSE: John Scott Railton has worked with Citizen Lab for the past decade - and has been tracking Pegasus since 2016 -

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: That journey has kind of continued unbroken since those first findings around Ahmed Mansour, and that approach gave us a trail of digital breadcrumbs that we continue to follow to this day.

ROSE: In a previous episode we covered Citizen Lab's initial discovery of Pegasus- when an activist from the United Arab Emirates , Ahmed Mansour sent them a strange text he had received. The Lab followed that link all the way to Pegasus and servers belonging to the NSO Group, and they have been looking into Pegasus ever since -

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: One of the components of our work, of course, is this constant effort to try to understand where Pegasus is located in cyberspace. Where are the different customer's deployments? Where is the data that's being taken from phones going? Which phones may be being infected and where are the servers that are doing that infecting? That's an ongoing process. But it's nothing magical.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: In some cases our research has been able to determine clusters of servers that belonged to we could say a single deployment and then try to understand where in the world the infections are that are talking to that cluster.

NANDO: A single deployment - and a cluster - can indicate a single client, and as the NSO Group claims they only sell to governments - that means a client - or deployment - represents a sovereign government - a single country.¹³

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: And sometimes those infections can be in a couple of countries. But in other cases, those infections can almost be exclusively geographically located in one country. And that was true of the targeting that we saw in El Salvador.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Back in 2020, we observed an operator that appeared to be involved in El Salvador. So this means there's a Pegasus operation going on in El Salvador. From that time we sort of were waiting. By the next year, we were investigating these cases.

¹³ <https://citizenlab.ca/2022/01/project-torogoz-extensive-hacking-media-civil-society-el-salvador-pegasus-spyware/>

CARLOS: We always suspected we were being tapped. Either with microphones in our offices or through the telephone company. We just didn't know.

NANDO: There were many incidents that Carlos and his colleagues could not explain - like how people knew where to find and intimidate them. They thought maybe there was a bug in the newsroom or in one of their homes.

CARLOS CONTINUED: We learned about Pegasus almost by accident.

ROSE: Carlos and the journalists at El Faro learned that they had Pegasus on their phones in the summer of 2021.¹⁴

They had suspected that the Salvadoran government is behind the targeting, hacking and spying on them.

The government has denied the use of Pegasus, For over twenty years Carlos has covered the terms of six different Salvadoran Presidents - some of those administrations have tried to intimidate or silence independent press in El Salvador, or just make their business difficult:

CARLOS: In the form of legal harassment, we are the subject of four different tax audits. The president himself has accused us of money laundering on national TV¹⁵.

CARLOS: Harassment has intensified during this administration of President Nayib Bukele.

NANDO: President Nayib Bukele. Bukele was elected President in 2019 at the age of 37. He has a beard, wears leather jackets and backwards baseball caps. Fluent and prolific on social media, he has said that Instagram posts can be more important than assembly floor speeches.^{16, 17} He's been called a mix between Alexander the Great and Steve Jobs.¹⁸

Bukele has led a brutal campaign to crack down on gang violence. Since El Salvador's civil war, gangs have been a powerful force.¹⁹

Bukele is in the process of building the world's largest prison - during his tenure, more than 65,000 people have been arrested for being "suspected gang members".²⁰

¹⁴ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ArwCAs1_d3_836vTVf5lyj6QJSzoN4cz/edit

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-54408910>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-48458077>

¹⁷ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/12/the-rise-of-navib-bukele-el-salvadors-authoritarian-president>

¹⁸ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/12/the-rise-of-navib-bukele-el-salvadors-authoritarian-president>

¹⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/el-salvador-gang-crackdown-prison-state-of-emergency-d95e1fcd5b806c38077ffb060c8c2f48>

²⁰

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/el-salvador-president-orders-completion-of-worlds-largest-prison-pjfvcmpzb#:~:text=The%20largest%20prison%20in%20the,of%20El%20Salvador's%20proposed%20facility.>

Before he was elected President by more than 50% of the population²¹, Bukele was a city mayor. El Faro was one of the few Salvadoran outlets to cover his unconventional race for President - as Bukele ran outside the two main political parties²².

CARLOS: Mainstream media in El Salvador will not cover his political messages or his political conferences. We did. By that time he was only talking to us because we were the only ones willing to talk to him. But as soon as he became president, we started reporting on his government. And I think the breaking point came less than a year after he took office when he entered Congress with armed soldiers, which had not even happened during our dictatorship years.

ROSE: During Bukele's first year in office, he began to work on consolidating his power. He turned his attention to the parliament.

MEDIA CLIP: *In other news, soldiers entered El Salvador's parliament as the President demanded lawmakers approve a 109 million dollar loan to equip the military and police to fight against violent gangs.*²³

MEDIA CLIP: *After speaking for half an hour the president went into the legislative assembly. He said he would give the members of Parliament another week to approve this loan and he said if they didn't do that next Sunday, he would return to the assembly.*²⁴

ROSE: In February of 2020, Bukele was trying to push through a loan of \$109 million dollars for military equipment and was meeting resistance from Parliament. Then one day during the session, heavily armed police and soldiers arrived to occupy El Salvador's parliament building...²⁵

CARLOS: He entered Congress, followed by soldiers armed like for conflict with helmets and with bulletproof vests and in whole campaign uniform. To threaten the congressman that he was going to sack them that day. When that happened. He didn't in the end. He prayed to God, sitting in the chair of the president of Congress, and he left the place and he talked to the crowd outside Congress. And he told the crowd, God asked me for patience. I'm. He was. Pushing Congress, which he didn't control by then, to approve a huge loan to buy security equipment. And Congress was asking for more information about it. And then what he did was to threaten Congress, that he was going to stage a coup d'etat against Congress. Not long after that, we have parliamentary elections. He won the majority. And on the first session of the new Congress that he controlled. Congress dismissed. Some Supreme Court

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-47112059>

²² https://www.cidob.org/biografias_lideres_politicos/america_central_y_caribe/el_salvador/navib_bukele_ortez

²³ [Soldiers and police enter El Salvador's Parliament](#) [0:00 - 0:12]

²⁴ [FtS 10-02-20: El Salvador: Troops sent into parliament](#) [3:48 - 3:54]

²⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/10/804407503/troops-occupy-el-salvadors-legislature-to-back-president-s-crime-package>

justices, judges, which is, of course, unconstitutional. And that's how Bukele got in control of the whole of all the institutions of the state.

ROSE: The harassment at the newsroom has Intensified under Bukele. In November of 2020 the President criticized El Faro on Twitter, saying:

*"They say they do "independent and truthful journalism."
At least the pamphlets are good for ripening avocados or cleaning up after pets.
El Faro (and friends) have become a website with opposition content.
If there was any journalism left there, it's gone."*²⁶

CARLOS: Bukeles is not only the president, he's the most popular president in the whole Western hemisphere²⁷. He has around 85% of popular support²⁸. When a president with that traction, with that huge percentage of followers, which that divisive speech declares you a public enemy. That means that a lot of that 85% of the people will believe him. Well believe that we are not publishing the truth, because the truth is what the government says. Bukele has. The most efficient propaganda machine also in the Western hemisphere. And he's, of course, very effective on this. So what he has not managed yet is to damage our credibility outside El Salvador because. We have refused to get into arguments with him at the level of the tweet you just read

ROSE: The evidence collected by Citizen Lab points to the Salvadoran government (either under the permission or instruction of President Bukele) as the likely source behind the targeting of Carlos Dada and El Faro journalists.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Sometimes we get lucky and we get a device that's just been infected. And when that luck holds, we're able to say, okay, well, we can connect this infection to a cluster of servers that we were monitoring. So typically when we're looking at an infection, we might come late and we can say, well, we can say with high confidence that these devices were infected during these periods. What's interesting about the El Salvador case, we did have one case where we were able to connect one of the infections to an operator.

CARLOS: And Citizen Lab managed to see a live intermission when Citizen Lab was analyzing Carlos Martinez's phone...

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: In the case of Carlos Martinez, we were able to discover that there was a failed exploit attempt on his device and we connected that failed

²⁶ [NOV 2020 BY PRES BUKELE:](#)

²⁷ <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2022/01/13/navib-bukele-supera-a-amlo-en-aprobacion-ciudadana-mitofsky/>

²⁸ <https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/presidente-navib-bukele-recibe-85-de-aprobacion-gracias-a-que-ha-dado-mejores-condiciones-de-vida-para-la-gente/>

exploit attempt to the operator that we called Dragos, which had been pretty much exclusively targeting within El Salvador.

CARLOS: They saw the operator live into Carlos Martinez's phone that allowed them to geolocate the operator. And to no surprise, it's a state based in El Salvador. That's that's who was operating against us in our phones.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Which further adds to the suggestive evidence pointing at the likelihood that the Salvadoran government may be the operator in this case.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: We don't always get that lucky. And sometimes it can take a long time to get to that place where we can even connect a group of infections to a particular operator simply because it's a little bit like dusting off a crime scene. You know, you you don't have everything you want. Evidence is imperfect.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Since Pegasus is bought by states, that means that's money from the taxpayer. Obviously you can hack somebody, but you have to review that material. You're going have to look through it, understand it and parse it. And so with each infection, you can kind of hear like a chink in the background as you imagine the process of analyzing the data, the process of targeting the person. All of these other pieces that would have had to go into it, I imagine just reams and reams and reams of paper and documents authorizing and requesting infections again and again and again and again, and then reports generated based on that material.

CARLOS: Since NSO keeps such a secrecy over who they sell Pegasus to, the government of El Salvador has been able to say it's not us. Because we can't determine it for sure. But NSO claims that they only sell Pegasus to security agencies, from states²⁹.

NANDO: In most cases of Pegasus - because of how expensive it is - and because of how effective it can be - the operator will usually extract an entire backup of a phone. So an operator will typically break in a phone, take everything, and get out.³⁰

But that was not the case for El Faro and those in El Salvador -

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: I'm pretty accustomed to looking at the readouts and the number of infections that we show when we do an analysis and. Again and again. The results from the off our journalists would literally fill my screen with cases with

²⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/8/what-you-need-to-know-about-israeli-spyware-pegasus>

³⁰ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ArwCAs1_d3_836vTVf5lvi6QJSzoN4cz/edit

numbers of infections. And that was really startling for me. ~~I still remember the first time I saw that it was just like, cannot be right. Is there some kind of a bug? I've never seen anything like that. And it wasn't a bug.~~ It was that they were really targeted just in a radical and obsessive manner, you know, ten, 20, 30, 40 times the same individual that was astonishing and chilling.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: We've been accustomed to finding cases where people are monitored for a bit and then the monitoring stops. **This was really different.** This was like obsessive, everyday, constantly hacking and re hacking every time this person would restart its phone. That was very remarkable to me.

CARLOS: In my case, out of a year and a half Citizen Lab says the intermission might have lasted 167 days. That's not only getting into your phone, sucking the information and that's living with you. Basically, I had someone living in my home next to me, turning on the microphone, turning on the camera, knowing where I was going and who I was meeting with. So I think that was very surprising for everybody.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Pegasus can do a lot of things on your phone. It can do everything you can do on your phone and some things you can, like enabling the microphone and turning on the camera, silently pulling your files in the background. But I think many of the Pegasus cases that we see, the infection duration may not be that long. You know, a spy can break into a house and do many different things, right? They can plant a bug or maybe they're just there to steal a document. Well, Pegasus, is Pegasus the same? But what we can say with somebody like Alfaro is that spy broke into those people's phones, you know, ten, 20, 30, 40 times. That's really intense.

CARLOS: He was allowing us to understand what... I mean, the scope of this, that this was not normal. He understood much sooner than us the dimensions of what had happened. And he was very patient trying to explain that to people that don't know much about this, which is us.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: I think what matters here is really the scale of targeting of organizations like El Faro. It wasn't just one or two people at this news organization. It was like somebody had done a core sample through the entire organization, monitoring people left and right. Journalists, editors, publishers, the works.

CARLOS: It was more surprising that even people from the accounting department, from the managing part of the El Faro was. Was also. I don't know the exact word contaminated with Pegasus. Which which lets you know the scope of these

information and the amount of money they spend. To find out everything about our operation and about every single one of us.

ROSE: Citizen Lab found there was a total of 226 infections detected on ~~the~~ 22 members of El Faro between the summer of 2020 and fall of 2021³¹.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: We try to get people informed very quickly, there are times when I will go to sleep knowing that the next day I'll have to talk to some people and give them some some tricky news. And that weighs on me.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: People often want to know. people are relieved to learn that they have been hacked. I think for a lot of people it is also clarity and truth in a scenario where those things are hard to come by. Autocrats gaslight their population. They lie about what they're doing. They pretend to be open, even as they're repressing. And technical analysis, like what we do, can provide a kind of a lighthouse of truth and clarity in a very murky situation. It doesn't mean that it's good news to receive, but it is like a diagnosis.

JOHN: People take the news very differently, but it never gets easier.

NANDO: Carlos met with his newsroom - before they published, they had to discuss what this meant for them personally - and for their sources -:

CARLOS: Our lifestyle was already different. ~~Everybody knew what was going on inside El Faro. We we have a very solid team intact in that sense. Some family members or relatives were telling some of my colleagues, or at least in one thing, is that you take the risks you want with your life. It's a completely different game when they have the pictures of my kid. So in that sense, yes, it it changed a lot of things for the lives of many of the final people.~~

CARLOS: ~~I think this requires a personal commitment and personal decisions.~~ I felt that my first obligation was letting everybody know. That. The most that the healthiest decision would be to leave, to quit El Faro. That would be the healthiest decision. And that I didn't want anyone to stay because they felt some kind of obligation, that no one had any obligation to go through this. I have been very insistent about that Some people left. And we all let them know they were entitled to that. That we completely understood that. And that was a normal thing. But if you want it to stay, you should know that silence is not an option. So we are not going to let these things silence us while we are working here.

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https://elfaro.net/es/202201/el_salvador/25935/Veintid%C3%B3s-miembros-de-El-Faro-fueron-intervenidos-con-Pegasus-226-veces-entre-2020-y-2021.htm

ROSE: You had said that people who work at El Faro, that our lives were already different. What does that mean? How are your lives different? Working at El Faro.

CARLOS: I think our public life, meaning going out to parties, to public places. I have already diminished a lot. [...] We give you a good example. One day after a tough. Knight in health wise. I in the morning of a Saturday, I went to the pharmacy, I think it was 8 a.m. to get medicine and buy a couple of Gatorade. 15 minutes later, the press secretary was tweeting a photo of the drugstore where I went saying, Carlos Dada, was just here buying five Gatorade. That's the size of his hangover. Let's hope he didn't rape any women yesterday night. That's and that's the kind of things that were happening.

I think it's much harder for the younger members of our newsroom who, of course, are on the age where you go to parties. Let's put it that way.

ROSE: The most important thing to the reporters at El Faro was what this would mean for their sources - the people who risked their jobs, their careers, and even their safety to share with them critical pieces of information and evidence about Bukele's administration, or corruption:

CARLOS: We talked to a lot of sources every week, so it's impossible to talk back to all the sources that we have dealt with during all the time that turned out that we were being tagged with Pegasus.

CARLOS: We asked citizens lab for the dates of the information into everybody's phones. And we crossed this information with our news cycles. And to no surprise, it turned out that the red points were all around. Our biggest stories that have to do with corruption, with Bukele's deals with gangs and with irregularities in the administration.

NANDO: When they looked at the timeline - they noticed something extraordinary -

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: ~~It really became chillingly clear that~~ there was this nexus of timing between reporting on corruption and reporting on negotiations with murderous gangs like MS13 and some of that targeting.

CARLOS: ~~One of the most intense ones, if not the most, was when we published that Bukele has been negotiating. The leaders of MS-13 gang in secret.~~ That was a huge story. MS-13 is a gang, the biggest gang in Salvador from. I don't know how to describe how powerful they are because it has to do not only with a number of members, but also with the. The businesses they have or the things they move.. It's the most or it was the most powerful gang in El Salvador, ~~but that was the first story,~~

ROSE: A few weeks after that, we published a new story. That. Said that it was not the only gang that Buckeles was negotiating with. He was also negotiating with the 18th Street gang. Which is the other big gang. And those were two big red dots when we crossed the data.³²

CARLOS: What we had were videos, photography and official paperwork from the prisons where the leaders were taking out or where government offices would visit to talk to them. We got the files from. The state attorney general's office. He has a special unit investigating this. So we, we had also those files and that proved that Bukele had been negotiating with them. And that's what what explained the reduction of the homicide rate in the country.

ROSE: El Faro published their article about Bukele negotiating with MS-13 on September 3, 2020.

The article outlined how Bukele was making an alliance and brokering deals with the leaders of MS-13 to reduce violence in exchange for favors, better prison conditions, AND the release of high-ranking members (ATL: gang leaders) from prison.⁶

During the month the article was published, at least one El Faro employee was surveilled with Pegasus every single day³³:

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: ~~I remember some of those conversations and I remember just feeling a bit of a chill because we had found cases before where you saw a nexus between Pegasus infections and murder, and~~ you saw a nexus between Pegasus infections and corruption investigations. But this one really hit home. ~~Everyone knows the story of the gangs in El Salvador, and everybody knows~~ the kind of difference between what the government of El Salvador has been saying publicly and what's actually going on there.

CARLOS: The United States Justice Department presented an indictment in New York in a federal court against certain members of the Ms. 13 gang where they detailed the negotiations between the gang and President Bukele's administration. According to this indictment, they were negotiating in exchange for economic benefits, for territorial control and for the refusal of the Bukele administration to come extradition requests from the United States. Those three elements are new for us and we are waiting for the trial to see if if they are able to prove this. But we know they have reduced the homicide rate in exchange for better conditions in prison and better communication between. The gang leaders and the guys on the street. We in the end also knew and published that some. Weekly administration

³² https://elfaro.net/es/202108/el_salvador/25668/Gobierno-de-Bukele-negoci%C3%B3-con-las-tres-pandillas-e-intent%C3%B3-esconder-la-evidencia.htm

³³ https://elfaro.net/en/202201/el_salvador/25936/22-Members-of-El-Faro-Bugged-with-Spyware-Pegasus.htm

officers personally took out of prison MS13 leaders and drove them to the border. With Guatemala.

CARLOS: So these are the kind of stories we were publishing during this cycle.

ROSE: When you think back on the timeline, how did you think about it as a person in your personal life and how did you think about it as an editor in chief for your newspaper?

CARLOS: That's a very good question, Rose, because it actually has both very different effects. I'll go to the professional terms or consequences later. The personal consequences are to know that people that want to harm you. So the impact is. Wider than just the person that has been infected with all the consequences that this means. Now in professional terms, when we published the story that we have been infected with Pegasus, we felt the obligation to run an editorial,. Which was titled to our sources. Basically telling our sources we have done anything in our hands to protect you. But there's this. So there's people that may already know that you were talking to us. So take your own measures. Just know what is happening. And of course, what happened the day after is that no one else wanted to talk to us anymore. And it has taken a long time to. Construct. Systems of communication with sources that are safe. And of course, to regain, their confidence, their trust.

CARLOS: So there's no other way to get public information than from sources that are risking a lot under an autocratic government by giving us information. So, of course, this has made life much more difficult.

ROSE: what do you think that the people behind the attack were looking for?

CARLOS: My first impression is that they want to know who we're talking to. They want to know who our sources are, who we met with. Because we've been publishing inside information in the last two years and that's how we found out about Buckele's deals with the gangs, and that's how we found out about some corruption scandals.

CARLOS: You can imagine the risk for those people. So that's my first impression that they wanted to go after that.

CARLOS: I mean, we talked to a lot of sources every week, so it's impossible to talk back to all the sources that we have dealt with during all the time that turned out that we were being tagged with Pegasus.

CARLOS: But as we've seen that happened to journalists in other autocratic ruled countries. They are looking for. Intimate images that they can blackmail the reporters with or discredit them by sending them to the public. But when you think also about the professional consequences of these. Is that? We became the story, which is very uncomfortable for journalists. We tell other people's stories when we become the story. We're starting to invest a lot of our scarce resources on telling our story and not telling stories that. We should be investing and telling them. So in a way, just by that they have already been successful because we've spent a lot of time going through this.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Information collected surreptitiously by different governments trying to stop the press or frustrate human rights defenders gets used in different ways at different times. Maybe it's used purely strategically, right? They don't want to do anything that would show that they have it. And so instead they try to use it to frustrate the designs or plans or activities of an organization. Maybe in other cases it's going to be used to blackmail people, or maybe it'll be used to try to discredit people. Take a moment yourself and think about all the things that you do on your phone and then imagine what would happen if all of those things were dumped out on the table ~~in front of a bunch of authoritarian creeps who were trying to think about the best way to harm you.~~ Think about what they might do. Think about what they might do in your personal life, in your work life. Reflect on that for a minute. That kind of creativity, unfortunately, is the stock in trade of security services in authoritarian or repressive regimes.

NANDO: In January of 2022, Carlos and his colleagues prepared to publish an article on El Faro about the widespread abuse of Pegasus in the newsroom. [They were sharing the level of intensity with which they had been hacked and warning their sources.]

CARLOS: I told my family. I told my girlfriend. I told some of my friends. These is what happened. You should know from me before. You know from our publication El Faro

CARLOS CONTINUED: When we published then we finally had time to think on the personal consequences. In my case, it was I was very surprised because I have not thought about it. And during the last months, because I was working on it. When I had time enough to think about it, I felt like so invaded and that the only thing that I felt that I needed to do was get into the shower and open it. I needed to clean myself from something very dirty. I felt very invaded.

CARLOS: They have all my photos, they have all my videos, they have the photos of my dear ones. They have been listening to my conversations in my apartment

with my girlfriend, with my friends, with my not so friendly friends. They have been living with me her for many, many days.

ROSE: You described once that there was a drone that came into your house. What happened?

CARLOS: It was like two or three years ago. My apartment has a considerably big window that opens all looking at the volcanoes El Salvador. A drone have already stopped in front of the window once when this second one came, the window was open. The drone entered. And stayed there, like, for a minute?

ROSE: Did you think it had something to do with your reporting?

CARLOS: No, I think it has to do with I don't know if it's intimidation, if it's a way of letting you know we are observing you. What I actually thought when that happened is that they were eager to make a biometric analysis of my middle finger. So I put it out for them enough time so they could have their analysis, and then the drone left.

ROSE: TODAY, The reporters at El Faro remain dedicated - and they have found new ways to communicate safely. It makes their work more difficult, more tedious. They often have to travel - within El Salvador, and outside the country - to work effectively and be safe

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CARLOS: We are going back and forth. Going out and going back in. Some of them have spent months out of the country and then they go back. We are trying to measure the risks week by week.

JOHN: These people are at such risk. And clearly, even though they knew that they were at risk at the time, there were risks that they didn't fully understand, these digital risks that made me angry. It made me angry because I thought that the work that they were doing was critically important so the world would understand what was going on in El Salvador. And yet there was this digital subversion going on on their devices, trying to make it really dangerous for them to do truth telling and to talk to sources.

CARLOS: Pegasus is just one element of the harassment and attacks against independent press in El Salvador. They passed a law criminalizing publication about gangs. That can bring a reporter or a publisher or an editor up to 15 years in prison³⁴ for publishing a story about gangs with the clear intention of silencing us who

³⁴ <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-04-06/bukele-amenaza-a-los-medios-con-15-anos-de-carcel-si-reproducen-mensajes-de-las-pandillas.html>

were publishing Bukele's secret negotiations with gangs. Since we decided that silence is not an option. When we publish a story about gangs, we have faced the need to take those reporters out of the country for some time. Pegasus is just. Another means that these government has to attack and harass independent press. But far from the only one.

JOHN SCOTT-RAILTON: Think about what happened to El Faro as a canary in the coal mine. It is highlighting what happens when an unaccountable government, or an unaccountable security service gets its hand on a powerful surveillance tool. It will be abused. It's just a matter of time now. Companies like NSO aggressively seek investors. What they want to do is sell around the globe to as many customers as they can find. They want to sell to American police departments, Right? If they if they got their way in the last couple of years. Right. They would be selling to like city police departments in the United States. Reflect for a minute on what might happen in our democracy if that took place. That's what people should be taking away from this. We are seeing early cases, high risk places, places with maybe, you know, security services that are not as good at hiding their tracks. But that's not where this ends. It ends in a police department near you. And that should concern all of us.

NANDO: When we started researching Pegasus two years ago - and we put up our bulletin board of journalists who had been threatened, or assassinated, one name stood out - Javier Valdez.

Javier Valdez investigated corruption and drug cartels in Sinaloa, Mexico. Valdez was shot in his car near his newsroom in 2017³⁵ - police investigations have revealed he was killed for his reporting.³⁶

Citizen Lab discovered that his widow was targeted with Pegasus within weeks of his murder.³⁷ Javier Valdez was close friends with Carlos Dada.

ROSE: I know that people call you brave, and I've seen you kind of recoil a little bit at that. But I also know how impacted you've been personally by that, the threats and the harassment. And also the impact of the people that you care about. And I was wondering if you might describe what your friend Javier Valdez was like and what happened to him.

CARLOS: Javier Valdez This was a character a. He was not a mexican journalist. He was harvestable. There's there's no one like him. With a marvelous pen to describe in a very literary way, the horrors of drug trafficking and its consequences

³⁵ <https://cpj.org/data/people/javier-valdez-cardenas/>

³⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/crusading-mexican-journalist-javier-valdez-shot-dead-in-sinaloa>

³⁷ <https://cpj.org/2019/03/widow-of-slain-mexican-journalist-javier-valdez-ta/>

in a place like Sinaloa, in Mexico. He was exceptional as a journalist. But his ultimate fate was not exceptional among Mexican journalists. There's more than a hundred of them that have been killed.³⁸ This is why I recoil when someone calls me. I'm brave. I'm telling this story because I believe that any soul NSO should be called to disclose. Who they are selling and how are they checking on their clients? Because there is a lot of damage being done to people that are not terrorists. But that's the only reason I am in much better condition than most of my Mexican colleagues. I am privileged in a way. But again, also, Mexico is not an exceptional place. It may be the worst, if not one of the worst places to do journalism, but not the only one where journalists are being killed. The commonality in these countries is a level of impunity. Which allows criminals to think we can kill a journalist and we won't pay the consequences. In the case particular case of Javier Valdez this, professionally, his voice is missed. I'm. Personally. He's warm and. She's. Way of living life with such joy. Even though he was working almost all the time under threat until he was finally killed. Is something that is that he's, of course, missed. I am in as much contact as I can with his best friend and co-founder Ismael _____. He's my elbow caucus. Who keeps doing brave journalism in Sinaloa, despite having his partner and his best friend killed in front of those his office. I have a huge admiration for them. But as I have told Ismail. No one wants to be Javier Valdez in that sense. No one wants to end up like him. No one enters or pursues journalism as a career to end up killing. No killed. No one wants to be a hero in this. In a way, I refuse that journalists are being called heroes. Because that objective is earned by conditions external to us. We don't want to work the way we are working now. We want to work freely. We want to have access to information. We want to do our job in safe conditions. It's not like we are pursuing to be in danger or facing risks.

NANDO: The committee to protect journalists has reported that since 2017, the year Javier Valdez was shot, 60 other journalists have been murdered in Mexico.³⁹

Who takes on the work of slain journalists like Javier Valdez? That's on the next episode...

ROSE: On our next episode of Shoot the Messenger, we interview the reporters and the forensic specialist behind Forbidden Stories - the journalists who carried on with the work of Javier Valdez also discovered the leak of ~~more than 50,000~~ Pegasus targets - and organized a global coalition of journalists to report on the biggest findings - including the hacking of French President Emmanuel Macron.

³⁸ <https://articulo19.org/periodistasasesinados/>

³⁹ https://cpj.org/data/killed/americas/mexico/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker&cc_fips%5B%5D=MX&start_year=2017&end_year=2023&group_by=location

SANDRINE 37:45 ~~—if Macron who was' in the list mean. Everybody could have been on the list if macron could have been spied on with pegasus I mean all of us could have been.~~ We also discovered that this was going to be a huge story and much more dangerous story than even what we were thinking.

SANDRINE 41:56.91 Imagine the power of that list. ~~I imagine how it is to have the list of people targeted by a dozen of governments and not the most democratic governments in the world. It's~~ It's a list that every ~~of every government of every~~ government would dream to have in its hands.

ROSE: That's on the next episode of Shoot the Messenger.

Special thanks to the reporting by EL FARO AND CARLOS DADA. Follow them on Twitter at @elfaroenglish and @CarlosDada. And special thanks to the research and reporting from The committee to protect journalists and Citizen Lab. You can find John Scott Railton @jsrailton

Follow Shoot the Messenger on Apple Podcasts. And, if you can, leave a written review - it actually really helps other people find us. And, if you haven't already, share it with a friend.

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For more information on the status of journalists and freedom of the press - visit the Committee to Protect Journalists at cpj.org.

To learn more about EXILE, our other podcasts and films, visit www.exilecontent.com.

We want to hear from you - so find us on Twitter and Instagram @exilecontent.

Or, send us a voice memo with your questions about Pegasus to stm@exilecontent.com.