

“It wasn’t about democracy at first. It was about getting rid of corruption.” My father said ruefully, as if he was embarrassed by his participation in the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations. I couldn’t imagine this middle-aged man, always clad in button-up shirts and khakis, ever being in a protest. “But then all these ideas from Beijing were coming in, and you know, we were young, we were radical. The leaders would come yelling through the dormitories – the walls were so thin! – and we would join the protest.”

In the days following June 4, 1989, however, the world was strangely silent. The first ringing gunshot marked the end of not only many young lives, but of press freedom. The Chinese government suppressed coverage in the media, allowing victims to speak only to recant their statements. There was no massacre in Tiananmen Square.

“We knew the truth, of course. But we weren’t brave enough to speak out. This was the government’s way of telling us, ‘We have the power. We can kill you and make the media say it never happened.’”

When I read George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the protagonist’s job of revising history seemed all too real. I wondered if there had been a Winston Smith in China, carefully removing traces of blood from newspaper print. I thought about the blank faces reporters had to wear when reporting the protests. I imagined them sitting in front of a mirror, carefully powdering away any traces of sympathy. The same blank faces greeted me when I carefully asked my cousins about what they thought happened in Tiananmen Square, but their confusion was genuine. There was a gap in their history lessons as wide as the Pacific, and countless men and women had drowned in it: Tiananmen student leaders, Falun Gong practitioners, dissidents.

If Rousseau is to be believed, then what exists between the people and their government is a social contract. If the media had been able to report freely about what happened in

Tiananmen, the people would have been able to hold the government accountable for breaking that contract. But when the media was paralyzed, the people were too.

The news exists not only to preserve, but to spread what living memory cannot, linking citizen to citizen. For me, it will always be my father's voice, untainted by fear or cowardice, that narrate the events of Tiananmen. But it is the voice and words of brave reporters and journalists that tell me about Tahrir Square, Yemen, Syria, so many other places where the truth has helped to engineer revolutions. Sometimes the stories are grim and the accounts are sickening, but those actions still must not be forgotten. No man or government has the right to rewrite history. An independent news media makes sure of that.