

## S2E02 Foreword: Literary Journalism

### Guest: Dr. Rob Alexander

[00:00:00] **Alison Innes:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Foreword, the podcast where we ask the journalists the questions. I am your host, Alison Innes, and each episode I bring you a conversation with one of our researchers from Brock University, Faculty of Humanities.

[00:00:20] My guest today is Rob Alexander, an Associate Professor with the Department of English Language and Literature, who specializes in the areas of rhetoric and composition and journalism studies. His research looks at how journalistic subjectivity expresses itself in literary journalism. And we're going to learn more about what that means in our conversation.

[00:00:47] Rob's scholarly work has appeared in various journals and edited books and he has written about literary journalism and eco criticism for the "Routledge Companion to American Journalism", and most recently published "Fear and Loathing [00:01:00] Worldwide: Gonzo Journalists Beyond Hunter S Thompson" edited with Christine **Issachar** of the University of Copenhagen.

[00:01:07] His fiction work has appeared in "Wild Rose Country" and "Prairie Fire". Rob has been actively involved in the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies since its founding in 2006. The association exists to encourage and improve scholarly research and education in literary journalism around the world. And we will also be asking him more about that today.

[00:01:27] So welcome Rob.

[00:01:29] **Rob Alexander:** [00:01:29] Yeah, thanks, Alison. Great to be here.

[00:01:31] **Alison Innes:** [00:01:31] We're very glad that we have been able to connect and have this conversation today, for sure. So to get us started, what is literary journalism and where might we find it?

[00:01:44] **Rob Alexander:** [00:01:44] Well, literary journalism is a, it's referred to as a hybrid genre. It's a type of writing that combines journalistic practices of you know, associated with gathering facts with [00:02:00] narrative styles that we associate with the novel or, or with fiction. So it it's it's also referred to as long form journalism, narrative journalism. You could, you know, you wouldn't might also associate it with.

[00:02:13] Long magazine articles where, where would you find it? I mean you know, feature articles in newspapers would have some elements of literary journalism in in, in them. But the most commonplace would be in magazines. New Yorker, for example, has been a key venue for, for this type of writing for, for many decades. In Canada you think of the Walrus as, as a place where this type of work appears, but also things like Esquire, Vanity Fair. The, these magazines have been where it's typically been found. Also, I think increasingly it's it's it

appears in books there, there there's books. So you know, uh, books are where one would expect to see [00:03:00] this type of genre represented.

[00:03:04] **Alison Innes:** [00:03:04] What are some of the, some, some of the differences that, that we would notice between between kind of that everyday journalism that we're seeing online or in newspapers compared to the longer form?

[00:03:16] **Rob Alexander:** [00:03:16] I guess, you know, regular reporting is it's, there's some things we associated with with a news story.

[00:03:22] It's objective. Straight news stories tend to follow a particular pattern. Inverted pyramid format is. Typical news stories deal with empirical matters. There's a lot of facts, a lot of numbers and evidence there consists of quotes from often from experts and so on. You know, the format for journalism is, is generally a pretty strict.

[00:03:47] And if you look at it historically, the, the sort of paradigm for newspaper reporting has been the camera, right? That, that sort of objective lens of the camera, looking at the world, taking a picture [00:04:00] in which, you know, the notion is there's no commentary by the author of that representation that the reporter leaves him or herself out of the picture.

[00:04:10] I literary journalism is in many ways, a sort of a sort of response to that. The sense that, well, for one thing in, in newspaper reporting, the reporter is the word commonly used is alienated from the subject. In some ways there is a distance between, between the writer and the thing about which he or she is is, is, is writing.

[00:04:29] So there's an attempt to sort of establish a closer relationship between the writer and the thing about, about which he or she is writing. Other things you could say, literary journalism it's literary. It is. And you know, people tend to interpret that as being well, you know, some fancy language, some good writing, some, some elaborate metaphors, but it's, it's actually a much.

[00:04:54] More profound, the differences that the literary aspects bring to it, right. There is a, there's a sense that [00:05:00] if I'm, if I'm in literary journalism, I will be writing about a subject, but the subjects that are the best ones to write about are ones that as the writer, Susan Orleans, as they sort of funnel out and they suggest a Broader significance, right?

[00:05:14] You may be writing about a person, a but their story should be one that will have a sort of wider significance in the same way that we look to fiction to suggest broader themes. That's not really the case in newspaper stories where, you know, there's an accident at the corner of X and Y street, and we just want the facts and the details.

[00:05:34] So, so, so there's that aspect of the literary aspect is that, you know, the, the voice of the. Writer, which is repressed in mainstream. Journalism is allowed to flourish here. And along with that voice, you know, the, the personality of the writer is allowed to come out. That's in fact, that's an important part of the genre.

[00:05:55] We see this person engaging with their subject matter [00:06:00] and just like in a novel that sort of engagement can develop over the course of the narrative. In fact, the writer may and in fact, find themselves. Changed by by what happened? I could go on, I mean, the language itself is, is, is, is you know, they say, they say with literary journalism, the important thing about it that I didn't mention it is factual.

[00:06:21] Everything here. You have to be able to corroborate you can't make it up. This isn't fake news, but the literary dimension of it allows for a certain amount of leeway that isn't necessarily there in mainstream journalism. They say that literary journalists editorialize through their imagery. Right through the metaphorical language, through the way their stories are constructed.

[00:06:42] So there is a lot of leeway in there for the writer to insert their subjective opinion of things. So the language would be about themselves. Like, they'd be saying I do this. I do that some cases. Yeah. In some cases it's only implied. I mean, there's a whole range of [00:07:00] possibilities here that the person may not be evident there.

[00:07:02] But in a lot of the, particularly the stuff that I study, the process of getting the story becomes part of the story, the relationship between the writer and the source becomes a part of the story. And this does also, you know, typically a journalist journalism is by and large. As one reporter, I know, complained to me it's a desk job, not always, but we tend to think of, you know, the foreign correspondent is this Intrepid person traveling around the world.

[00:07:29] But I think many journalists work from, from their desk, phoning up sources, getting the story, getting the quote, putting it down. Whereas, uh, in this case, the the sort of sort of hallmark of this is that you're out there, right? You're out there. With your sources, often spending long periods of time with them.

[00:07:51] It's another name for the genre. It's, it's characterized by what's called immersion journalism. You immerse yourself in your story for an extended [00:08:00] period of time. And what that does is it allows you to experience. Person or the subject about which you are writing in a more sort of profound way. Right?

[00:08:10] You can get a sense of, you know, newspaper stories because they tend to be banged out rapidly, tend to almost character, their sources. They tend to be reduced to often you say stereotypes are, are, are often, often evoked in new stories, but if you hang out with someone, someone like. The writer, Adrian, Nicole Leblanc.

[00:08:30] Did she hang out with her sources for 10 years? So if you're hanging out with someone for 10 years, you're going to be aware of all the complexities of that individual in a way you would say with. You know, a spouse, you know, you would be, and it is like into a marriage sometime. So you're aware of that.

[00:08:48] Th th it's, it's not possible to stereotype someone that you've hung around with that long. Right. But in that sense and what they often discover the writers often discover they start seeing themselves in their sources, [00:09:00] right. They start seeing aspects of

this person that was totally other before they start recognizing aspects of themselves and they start relating to them.

[00:09:08] In that waste. So a newspaper reporting that sort of interview techniques often referred often characterized as an interrogation, or if you use an environmental metaphor, it's sort of extractive journalism. You're trying to get, get the truth out of that person. Whereas literary journalism, it's more a long-term relationship where, where where you become aware of the, the source.

[00:09:33] And I guess the deeper. Less simplistic way. So when you talk about journalism, I know you talk from experience because you worked as a reporter at one point. So I'm interested in hearing a little bit about your story, how you went from, from reporting into studying and, and writing about literary journalism.

[00:09:53] Well, I, I went to journalism school to Carlton journalism school and in the. Late seventies, [00:10:00] early eighties. And that was an interesting time in journalism school because on the one hand, the journalism schools in that they were packed largely because of Watergate and Woodward and Bernstein. And the fact that, that, that, that someone with a Panama as.

[00:10:15] Pad could take down a president. This was very encouraging for a lot of people. And so I did that and got that sort of practical knowledge. But at the same time, a lot of the people who I was in school with, they were, they were, they were aware of that, you know what they were reading was a different type of journalism.

[00:10:31] They were reading. What was then called the new journalism. So they were reading works by Tom Wolf, hunter S Thompson, Joan Didion, these people that were innovating a new style of journalism that is now sort of like what I'm describing here as literary journalism, right? These were people who were in their stories who were participating, even someone like hunter S Thompson.

[00:10:52] I would in fact, be a catalyst for a story rather than just simply a neutral observer about things he would become a performer who made [00:11:00] things happen in the story. So I also, there were these two sort of avenues in journalism school. One was the straightforward investigative reporting of the Woodward and Bernstein type that was very encouraging, but there was this other sort of literary side.

[00:11:12] I mean, journalists are writers and they do like to think of those possibilities as being open to them. So, sorry, the question was, how did I get into this? So, so I've got a journalism background where the sports editor and I worked in west bureau of the Toronto star doing stories for a couple of years, but then I had a long interest in, in literature as well.

[00:11:31] So at a certain point, I went back to a university and I got a PhD in English. So I had this two interests, right? On the one hand, I have a great affection for journalism and journalists, but on the other, I like literature. Right. And I was hired by Brock and I think 2001 and a ma to, to lead their writing rhetoric and discourse.

[00:11:57] Studies program or to [00:12:00] work in that program. And among those courses, there was a journalism course. So that was, that was a great pleasure to teach just as my, my first, this is anecdotally, my first journalism class at Brock was September. 12th 2001, that's a date you won't forget. And the topic that day was what is news?

[00:12:21] And I thought, well, I have this background in literature, I'm teaching in an English department. Maybe there's some appetite for a course in literary journalism, which could be pitched also as a magazine writing course. So with that came about, and I still teach that. And that's a, that's a, that's a lot of fun.

[00:12:34] So I think that's, that's how I got in it. And Brock was helpful to me in, in, in, in, in realizing that that sort of Possibility. So you've been a part of creating a, a new discipline and a new academic discipline of studying literary journalism. How, how does a new academic discipline kind of arise?

[00:12:55] Like a new area of research? I can, I can tell you the sort of story of it. And it [00:13:00] does relate to, to this idea, I had to create this course in literary journalism or magazine writing. So that must've been in 2005 or so. And I had proposed a grad course on this and I thought I'd do some research and in doing so I discovered that that year, 2006, I believe 2005, maybe a group of people about 15 people got together in.

[00:13:26] For a conference in Nazi, France, France on, on Upton. Sinclair's the jungle. And I guess at this meeting, this group of people, some were from the U S some from France. There's a couple from Portugal decided, Hey, there's something here. We should maybe propose another conference on literary journalism. And so that meeting came about in 2000.

[00:13:51] Six. And that was at the Paris Institute of political studies seals PO in Paris. And I went to that and that was there [00:14:00] were about 20 people there, but among the people, there were some of the people who had been writing about this and sort of keeping this key had been, had been sort of poking and prodding at this, at this, at this sort of.

[00:14:12] The genre that had not really been acknowledged in a scholarly way, I'd been sort of testing this and they were there. And so that was 20 people there. It looked like it had great potential and it has. And since then, so since that was 2006 and since then there's been annual conferences, the numbers of people who are members of crone, it's an international membership.

[00:14:33] So, so, you know, people from all over the world are, are participating in this. And it's, and it's given rise to a journal that's that, that is not a published biannual or it's published twice a year where I think it's, we're now up to the third, 13th volume of that. So and, and numerous books have come out of this.

[00:14:53] So, so it's been really interesting seeing this thing. Get its feet and, and sort of come to life [00:15:00] numerous books last year, that was the Rutledge companion to American literary journalism studies published that struck me as a landmark. And then in 2022, there's going to be the Rutland companion to world literary journalism studies.

[00:15:14] I believe it's called. So All of these things, sort of there, there are people who are, who are, I, I think it said that that what will mark its emergence as a sort of discipline or, or, you know, whatever is when there are a significant number of PhD dissertations in in, in this field emerging.

[00:15:34] And I know that in June, it's not a PhD dissertation in, in literary journalism as such, but Baraka will be a student defending her thesis that has a significant component in it. That is, that is that deals with literary journalism. So, you know, it's, it's been very interesting seeing this thing become real.

[00:15:53] That's really exciting. My, my own background is classics, which is a discipline that's, you know, it feels as old as the [00:16:00] Hills, right? So it's, it's, it's exciting to hear how there's, there's still new areas of study and research being opened up and kind of how it happens. I mean, it's, it's sort of interesting too, because classics is well established.

[00:16:13] It has a foothold in, in, in, you know, in, in most major institutions, literary journalism though. It's pretty obscured. It's pretty, it's pretty niche, right? But what's interesting is that if you take as your sort of you know, your, your catchment area, the whole world, you can find enough people to do it.

[00:16:32] So, you know, we're the global constituency of maybe 200 people. And the great thing is when you go to these conferences, So people like me, you know, I have, I have a journalism degree background in journalism, but also literary you know, PhD in literature, literary study. So this sort of weird hybrid that I am you sort of fit into literature department, but not exactly because you have new foot in this other world and.

[00:16:58] It turns out, you know, when [00:17:00] you meet people at this conferences at these conferences, it's like, they're looking for their people. Right. Definitely see you. And you can see the look on their face. It's sort of like, wow. People like people like me, this is, so this is so, so weird. And so, you know, it's fine giving these people a sort of scholarly home has been, has been a, a great you know, a great experience and finding a home like that.

[00:17:25] Yeah, and we're going to include links to, to the organization and the journal in our show notes. So if our listeners are interested in learning more about this, check out, check out our notes. You mentioned that you are working on, on some upcoming projects. You've got a volume on social justice and literary journalism with Willa MacDonald.

[00:17:47] That will be. Hopefully coming out 20, 22 and, social justice issues are often in the news these days. And I'm just wondering, how does literary [00:18:00] journalism address social justice issues? I, I think, you know, journalists, I think go into it in many cases because they are motivated, motivated by this desire to address, you know, problems that they see in society.

[00:18:16] And there's been a long, long history of that. So, so there is, you know, a sort of right in, in journalism's DNA, there is, you know, and there's lots of problems with journalism. So let's not overlook that fact, but. But there still is this sense that the, that the, that the journalist is there to to, uh, try to address inequities things that aren't fair, maybe address questions of marginalized groups, try to represent their experience.

[00:18:44] And it seems, you know, and it seems that literary journalism is. Particularly well adapted to this because of the way that it's it. The literary journalists will spend a long time on a story, right. We'll spend a long time with the people who are, who are affected by the sort of social [00:19:00] social problems.

[00:19:01] I think historically it goes back. It can look at Nellie Bly who I'm sorry, I don't. No the dates exactly. But you know, late 19th century, I believe Nellie Bly was a us journalist concerned with the state of things in mental hospitals, in New York state. And so she had herself sort of put into one for a while and reported it at length on what was happening in there.

[00:19:25] And the result was a lot of changes to the legislation. So. Journalism can change things. There's no doubt about it. And I think literary journalism has a particular set of, of tools in his toolbox that that will allow for for issues to be foregrounded that will allow the experience of individuals who are subjected to wrongs to be represented in a way, something that literary journalism does it that's Particularly unique in my mind is the way that it can sort of shift scales.

[00:19:54] It can, you can go from on the one hand to bribing in a sort of empirical [00:20:00] research sort of way, the big picture of a problem. But then in the next paragraph, you can focus down onto an individual who is sort of a victim of this problem. So you can do both. So you can give a person, you can give the reader an understanding.

[00:20:14] Of structural problems that may be contributing to someone's life being miserable, but then you can actually go into that. You can hang out with that person and live with them and describe what that person's is life. So, so you get a sense that you can understand it reasonably sort of rationally, but you can also get a sense of the feeling of it.

[00:20:32] And that's something that literary journal journals journalism does. It gives you it's often said it allows you to feel the facts. And this seems like a potent way to, you know, but, but, but not, but not without losing sight of the, sort of of, of, you know, the sort of material that one would expect in, in, you know, research papers on, on a particular topic.

[00:20:54] So, you know, these are, these are all this book we have, we have you know, various accounts of, [00:21:00] of different, different case studies. There's something on the daily. Activists Mina can can dazzle me. I think her name is in India and Behrouz, blue Chani, who is a refugee who was incarcerated in Australia, sort of holding tank there, mantis island.

[00:21:17] A lot, a lot of, a lot of these stories will come and clear. So, and just that the sense is that, you know, literary journalism does provide a special way of getting these, these these stories out there. Yeah, it reminds me a little bit of our conversation in season one, with Linda steer on drug photography getting at some of the same, same themes, but from a visual representation and how we depict things visually.

[00:21:43] And this is how we Use their use stories to, to bridge some of some stigmas or stereotypes, or just the limits of our own, of our own personal experience to connect [00:22:00] people. Yeah, I think that's right, because what this genre does is it tell stories, right? It is about telling stories. So they, so you will have scenes, you will have dialogue.

[00:22:08] You will have always things to put the reader right there in the same way that they would be there. You know, in a novel being sort of with the people in the room, observing what's going on, and then, you know, that scene would then be reframed in a larger context that would show that would, that would suggest, you know, why this is the case.

[00:22:26] So, yeah, for sure. Very, very, very much like that. You also are writing about eco journalism. Does that, does that intersect with social justice and. As well for sure. Yeah. I propose the grad course on this a couple of years ago. I thought, well, you know, I, you know, because we all want to do something about environmental crisis that we're in the midst of, and it seemed like a good opportunity for me to learn both eco criticism.

[00:22:59] And [00:23:00] particularly since, you know, literary journalism or, or more broadly nonfiction have been sort of key. Genres in environmental writings, you know, from, since, since the late 18 hundreds, in fact that it was sort of dominated by non-fiction genres that's changed since. So you know, so there was a sort of natural, I had my foot in the door with it that way it was a way of, of getting into it, but it also grew out of a paper that I wrote on a book by John Vaillant called the tiger.

[00:23:30] This is an article I wrote on, on John valence, the tiger, which was his account of the hunt for us. Siberian tiger in in Eastern Russia. No. What about that? What came out for me in that book was the difficulty of writing. Journalistically about animals that the work that's done, sort of highlights the, the, the sort of parallel between writing about human subjects and writing about non-human subjects in a sort of ethical, [00:24:00] effective way with literary journalism.

[00:24:02] As I said, you know, you hang out with your sources for a long time. You, you, you do research on them. You understand all that. So much of newspaper journalism. That deals with animals tends to be, well, I think it's called the moose in the mall story. It's when it's, when a deer ends up in someone's back yard, it's whenever an animal sort of encroaches on the urban human space.

[00:24:25] Right. And B it has to be, you know, it has to be tranquilized and that's sort of like the extent of it. Right. But people writing about this, they think, how do we, how, how can you write about animals that and it sounds sort of odd at first, but that represents the animals. Perspective that represents the animal's viewpoint on this.

[00:24:43] And there are ways of doing it. It does involve hanging out, you know, talking to scientists, making sure you understand the particular way in which that animal exists within its environment and interacts with its environment. So, you know, I got interested in that. And then from there I got interested in just in the more general [00:25:00] question of, of Environmental environmental writing or, you know, eco ecological, literary journals.

[00:25:09] Again, it seems to, you know, and there are some great examples of this one that I teach in my undergraduate class. It's like, how do you alert people to just how dire the situation is? Newspaper stories. We tend to get a lot of numbers, you know? Well carbon levels have risen to their highest level in, so, but you know, the numbers.

[00:25:30] The numbers have sort of limited impact on people because, you know, we can't imagine, you know, the thing with ecological stories is it's hard to imagine the scale. It's hard to imagine the numbers, what's the difference between a billion and a trillion. I mean, it's huge, but it just looks like a couple of zeros on the page.

[00:25:48] So this sort of writing maybe allows people ways of understanding it in, in, in a manner that the newspapers. Don't allow and a great story that, that I [00:26:00] teach in my undergraduate course, it's called the ballad of the SIADH climatologists as a 2015 story in Esquire, by a guy named John Richardson.

[00:26:11] And what he did was rather than just, you know, Recite the numbers and talk about this is melting and this is, this is going downhill. He went out and he actually hung out with the climate scientists themselves, just to see what they say, what they say. Sure. But also not just what they say, but also how are they feeling?

[00:26:30] How are they coping with this? And, you know, some are coping. Okay. But a lot of them aren't, it turns out in this article, a lot of them are suffering. I can't remember if he, I can't remember whose Tara was. They they're, they're suffering from something that you could call a pre traumatic stress disorder or something to that effect.

[00:26:49] They're there, they're depressed. They're anxious. They're, you know, not only are they getting death threats from people who opposed their sort of recent, but they're actually suffering [00:27:00] psychologically. And these are the canaries in the coal mine sort of right. That, that it's. So in my mind, this was a, this was a great way to tell the story.

[00:27:07] Let's look at the people well, who are closest to who, who have the greatest insight into what's happening, and let's just see how it's affecting them. Personally. There you get, you know, literary journalism is a boat, the felt experience. And so we get to see what these people are feeling and the bad news is they're not feeling so good.

[00:27:26] Right. She brought that up and it, it actually kind of ties in with, with a conversation that we're having this, this series with Christina Santos about the mental toll that telling stories can take. And, and so I'm kind of curious how do how do literary journalists. Deal with that, because if you're immersing yourself in this, in the subject or in the, in the setting, you're, you're, you're developing this, this, this relationship and you're dealing with [00:28:00] heavy topics is the well, is the mental wellbeing, coping skills, that kind of thing.

[00:28:06] Like what's, what's the impact that these kinds of topics have on the journalist. It's not an area that I know a lot about, but I do, I do know this. I mean, the objective journalist is regarded. Like I said, the, the camera is a sort of metaphor for what they are. They're supposed to go in there, neutrally record what happened and just go back right.

[00:28:24] Go home and and, and, and suffer no consequences, but that's not the case at all. Journalists suffer. Trauma regularly. And it's something that I don't think the business had properly acknowledged, but increasingly I think there's more and more research being done into it. And I think it's being acknowledged as, and it sort of puts the lie to the objective journalist.

[00:28:47] The fact that this person can just be a neutral observer. It's not possible. Right. I believe there's a mark. He has a book on the, on the relationship between trauma and journalism. So there is research being done [00:29:00] on it and it is being acknowledged now in a way that it wasn't before. So that's encouraging.

[00:29:04] I know when I consume my news and my media, I'm not always thinking about what the impact is on the person who is, is, is reporting it. In today's news where we're kind of conditioned, especially for online or on social media to these, like bite-sized, you know, the, the video clip, the th the, the ten second video clip and the 240 character tweet to sum up a news story.

[00:29:32] So, so what's the place of these slow, immersive reporting techniques that that you teach what's what is their place? In the media today. And are they, are, are they being appreciated or is it a form that is struggling? Hmm, that's a good question. And I'm not sure the answer to that. I think, you know, I think, I think print is, is, is suffering in many ways, including in this, but there are online [00:30:00] venues for, for this type of journalism.

[00:30:02] And I think there always will be a market for anything. I'm not sure, but I think it may be increasingly in books, but when you call it slowed. Journalism, but when you refer to it, the slow aspect of it, you can see that there's certainly a need for it, right. There is the need for, for like the slow food movement and and, uh, Barbara CBRE's bright slowing down the pace of everything there is.

[00:30:26] There, there is a, certainly a need for this. And I could tie this back to environmental reporting. I mean, Rob Nixon. In his book on slow violence, he describes this sort of environmental destruction that happens as something that is this totally beyond the scope of daily newspapers, daily journalism to report daily journalism likes things that explode.

[00:30:51] They like gunfire. They like. You know, crime that happens in a sort of punctual way that you can easily identify. But, you know, Rob [00:31:00] Nixon will say, well, the sort of environmental degradation happens through a slow attrition. It's something, it's something that happens over periods that we can't even properly, you know, witness just by being there.

[00:31:10] So the sort of the sort of attention to those larger scales of time is something that literary journalism is, is I think well adapted to, to To represent that the focus on the every day and, and so on are things that things that seem to seem to hold out a lot of promise, I think, and that people you would think will, will respond to that people will, will want to to read earlier the idea of journalism as seeking some kind of.

[00:31:40] Objective truth. And we've seen in the past few years, this, this rise of quote unquote fake news. I kind of hate the term. I've heard it so many times. And misinformation, and, and around the, the, the pandemic that is that is an issue. So how. How has that [00:32:00] changed or influenced how you think about and how you teach journalism?

[00:32:04] Yeah. So fake news, you know, it is maddening that, you know, I think as scholars and academics, so you have a certain commitment to truth and certainly journalists do, and

to see the sort of rhetoric. This is that that gave rise to to these cries of, of fake news. A couple of things happened, you know, I, I, I've taught in the social justice department, I've taught a course on news.

[00:32:30] And in that course, I'm highly critical of news for a lot of ways. The political economy of news, the certain ways in which formats dictate messages being constructed and weight high is highly critical of this. But then fake news comes along and this sort of awe. Uncritical assault on, on the news media.

[00:32:50] And I suddenly, you know, you find yourself defending this thing that you were wanting to critic of saying, well, wait, you know, there there's a lot that the news does that we really [00:33:00] need that is really valuable. You need a well-developed sort of media environment in order to sort of, if nothing else to sort of hold the corrupt.

[00:33:08] Polish it politicians to account. Once it went to the, once the news media becomes sort of you know, themed out there's more room for that sort of malfeasance. So you know, I, the fake news is, is, is, is disturbing. Event, but I do teach it, I use it as a sort of jumping off point in my first year class on rhetoric where the topic is the relationship between rhetoric and truth and rhetoric and truth have had a vexed long-term relationship.

[00:33:40] You know, the Sophos were seen as people who would just say whatever would persuade people with, with little regard for truth. So, so it's a theme of that course, but I should say here, I tried. I began editing a book on fake news about 15 years ago. And at that time, and I couldn't get a lot of [00:34:00] traction with it, but at that time, fake news was something else.

[00:34:03] It meant something else. It meant news. That, well, I guess this is what the people who talk about fake news are talking about, but it, but it was, it was about people who make about journalists who make stories up. And there have been a history of these people, Stephen classes, when, for example, that, that comes to mind, Jason Blair, there are numerous accounts of journalists who have made stuff up, and it's an interesting phenomenon journalism at these people could like it.

[00:34:29] The thing about it is it's exceptional. It's not the rule. Right. And like, But the Trumpian sort of people say it, but it was interesting to sort of look at these exceptions to see what they could reveal about journalism. Stephen Glass makes a story up, has gets it through the fact checkers and the editors at the new Republic and it gets into print, but this shows us something about the sort of desires of those editors and the sort of things that they imagined as being possible in the world.

[00:34:57] This guy was making stuff up out of whole [00:35:00] cloth. So. So when I teach my course on rhetoric and truth, we, we look at those sorts of fake news stories as a way of talking about journalism itself. And as a way of addressing what to me seems like a, at least a threat as big as. Fake news, these, you know, or, or, and that is the sort of way in which the public relations industry has encroached on journalism.

[00:35:30] You used to have a sort of clear line between editorial and advertising in newsrooms. But what's happened over the years as, as fewer and fewer people, as

newsrooms are hiring fewer and fewer people. There's fewer and fewer journalists out there. There has been at the same time, an incredible rise in the number of PR practitioners out there, trying to get their sort of interested message into legitimate media outlets.

[00:35:54] And what's happening is there's fewer and fewer journalists, more and more PR people more and more of the stuff you're [00:36:00] getting in your newspaper is. Not news. It is essentially sort of propaganda for specific interests. The specific interests that the a reporter works at. So I guess my point here is I have a slightly different take on fake news and how it, how it is conceived.

[00:36:15] But I think it's one that, that makes sense. If you look at what's happening in this sort of larger sort of news media ecosystem, public relations is, is becoming increasingly. It's leaving its footprint in bigger and bigger ways in the news all the time. You just think, well, you know, that's good.

[00:36:35] Even, even, you know, you look at Trump and look at Trump and I'm trying to recall how this work exactly. But he you know, when he was trying to, when he was making a name for himself in the 1990s, in New York, he would pose as a guy. I think John Barron, who was. Apparently who was, who was supposed to be Trump's PR person.

[00:36:55] Right. He was in fact playing the role of a PR person saying, oh, [00:37:00] this Trump, he's not a bad guy. I've met him. He's okay. He's, you know, he's not such a bad guy. So we have Trump playing a public relations person. And, and you think about it, these sort of world was that in, in many ways, right. He was about creating pseudo events.

[00:37:14] And so, you know, it's a big question and I don't pretend to have the answers for it, but It certainly it certainly, it certainly does point out to just how the news is under assault in many, from many, many quarters. Do you have any thoughts about why misinformation, why, like, why these stories are appealing to consumers?

[00:37:36] Like, are we consuming them unwittingly or are we drawn to these kinds of stories? Yeah. Again, you know, I'm not really an expert on that, but I, I, I think, you know, the studies show that people like, you know, there's confirmation bias, people like things that confirm what they already think. There's, you know, if you, you know, some of these, some of these websites that were generating stories that [00:38:00] people had no stake at all in the political outcomes of what these stories represented, but they did know that the more sensational, the more outlandish the story is.

[00:38:09] The more hits it's going to get. So, you know, I think in a lot of cases it's driven, it's driven by the, the, the by the business models of the websites that these people are working for. So, you know why do people fall for it? I, you know, I don't know. I mean, it's just, it's, it's maddening. And particularly when you look at it, in terms of all of the disinformation circulating about, about COVID and vaccines and things like that, it's it does seem like a, a meme, certainly.

[00:38:39] Yeah. It doesn't it doesn't amount to research and it doesn't amount to knowledge. And there's certainly I suppose, influence from, from social media, which again, operates on the basis of kind of what is outrageous is what gets engagement. And that's

what the platforms like, because it, it. Gets users using it and advertisers advertising, just the, just the [00:39:00] sort of orderly world that a conspiracy theory presents to the readers, as opposed to something that's far more nuanced and complex and stuff like that.

[00:39:08] It's like, you know, it's just, it is, it is, it is a sort of a, it is a narrative that's easier to say. Oh yeah, that makes sense. Right. As opposed to things that we can't sort of fully see our way through, I guess, We've been decrying for a long time now in, in Canada at any rate about the decline of newspaper reporting.

[00:39:30] I know even in my own lifetime, when I was a young growing up in, in rural Southwestern Ontario, the nearest town had its own newspaper and its own reporters. And now. That newspaper it's still going, but it's largely the same kinds of articles that you find in other newspapers owned by the same big conglomerate.

[00:39:52] So how do we, as consumers of news, both kind of the, the, the quicker [00:40:00] daily journalism, but also the longer form in investigations, how do we demand better? I hate to have a simplistic answer, but it's by the newspaper, by a newspaper, by a couple of newspapers, subscribed to a newspaper of support, you know, we're, we're so used to, to back.

[00:40:19] We, we take it for granted that the, that, that the news is, is like you know, is free from from the news aggregators, but it's certainly not free. And that those people are, those aggregators have thinned out the news newsroom. So, you know, I, I subscribed to Should subscribe to more, but I subscribed to a newspaper.

[00:40:40] I get the standard every day and, and I find that, and I'm glad I do too, because I, I, you know, I know what's going on in my community. I feel like I am able to understand what's happening in, in St. Catherine's in Niagara now in a way that I didn't prior to subscribing to it, I'm supporting, you know, and, and, and, you know, the thing is the, the quality of [00:41:00] the journalism there, I think is pretty good.

[00:41:01] I think they, they, they they've done some great. Work over the last couple of years in particularly holding, you know ho holding the powers that be accountable and coming forward in many cases with that sort of with the fearlessness, you know, with that, that we do associate with journalism. So, yeah.

[00:41:19] So by a newspaper it's like, you know, How do you support support or how do you support authors while you know, you buy books, right? Yeah. It's, it's, it's I think it's, it's probably as simple as that, I suppose, on a larger scale, there could be movements like what Australia is doing, trying to make the, make the aggregators pay for the news that they know that they.

[00:41:40] Take from, from the print news sources. And that there's probably something to be said about that. I think as well, the federal government is sort of chipping in supporting newspapers by, by funding certain, certain initiatives, funding, certain reporters in different jurisdictions to do work. [00:42:00] I don't know how comfortable journalists are with.

[00:42:02] Governments, you know, paying for, for paying, paying for a portion of journalist's salary. But it seems like you know, it's, it is a dire situation. You just. You just have to imagine, what would things be like if there were not the reporter's eyes on, on different public things happening? Well, any hope, any any, any hopeful thought we can we can end on in, in, in terms of Maybe some examples of, of how journalism has changed has changed things.

[00:42:38] Well, I, you know, I think the fact is that, that it has right. We, we, we see that, that, you know, there's a lot of disinformation and the journalists. Don't have the resources that are available, but it seems like there are people who want to, you know, investigate things and tell the truth. Be it, you know, there are, there are sort of journalists [00:43:00] have lost their jobs, but, but some of them have gone and set up websites where they report on, you know On municipal issues in a way that, that they felt their local media wasn't.

[00:43:10] So I think there is an inclination among a certain type of person to want to expose things, to want things to run better than they do. And I am optimistic about that, about that sort of spirit. I think that's something that drives, you know, many journalists and I don't think they're, they're willing to to, to just let that go.

[00:43:30] Well, that's good. And in terms of teaching teaching the next generation of, of journalists and of lit of literary journalists in, in, in particular, what what kinds of courses have you been teaching this year or have, or have coming up that People might be interested in well, just relevant to this.

[00:43:51] I taught my literary journalism class, this term and, and you know, there's people from who have taken that course who have gone on to [00:44:00] to work in journalism, have done things. I should say this term was unusual because we're all locked down. We're all engaging in through, through a little, little screens and students could not go out and hang around with the people about whom they were writing.

[00:44:16] So I haven't done. The story has just arrived. So I haven't had a chance to read them yet, but I'm, I'm interested in seeing how they, how they, how they have, have managed this. It is possible to do it. But if you think about, you know, immersion journalism is about being there. Well, we can't be there these days.

[00:44:33] We can, or the students certainly can't. So I tried to offer them some strategies on how to do it. And some of the stories that have been described for me sound great. Right? Someone has written a piece on death. Doulas and death doulas. These are sort of like midwives for people who are in a palliative setting.

[00:44:53] So this is, this is a topic, but it's a great story. And I have a lot of confidence [00:45:00] that this person did manage to use the technology in such a way that they were able to get that story that they otherwise would have. Had to get sort of in person. So, so yeah, that, that, that was it was weird. That was a strange, it was strange teaching this in that format, but but I think, I think people adapted well, thank you very much for joining us today.

[00:45:21] I'm glad that we have had this conversation. I always enjoy our conversations and. Someday I want to be in that class. It sounds, it sounds really interesting. And, and I know in the past I've had, I've had the occasion to, to to visit, your, with your students and and see the care that, that, that you take in, in teaching.

[00:45:45] So thank you so much for making the time to join us today. Thank you, Alison. Thank you so much for listening to forward. Find all of our [00:46:00] footnotes links to more information transcripts and past episodes on our website. Rob, you don't see a forward slash humanities. We love to hear from our listeners. So please join us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at rock humanities, please subscribe and rate us as well on your favorite podcasting app.

[00:46:21] So you will never miss an episode forward is so Sudan produced by Ellison in this for the faculty of humanities at Brock university. Our sound design and editing is done by Nicole aren't theme. Music is by Kali D mom, special, thanks to Brock universities, Makerspace and Brock university marketing and communications for studio and web support.

[00:46:48] This podcast is financially supported by the faculty of humanities at Brock university.