

Democracy AND THE INFORMED CITIZEN

Carl Bernstein weighs in on
truth and journalism

INTERVIEW BY DICK PRYOR

OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES HAD A RARE OPPORTUNITY to invite Pulitzer Prize winner Carl Bernstein to give his opinions on the role of journalism in our democracy as part of a nationwide initiative, “Democracy and the Informed Citizen.” The following interview with Dick Pryor, General Manager of KGOU Radio, features Bernstein’s thoughts on the challenge journalists and news consumers face in the distrustful climate of “fake news.”

DICK PRYOR: Why is there such a high level of anger and distrust of the news media in the last several years, especially during and since the 2016 election cycle?

CARL BERNSTEIN: It’s part of a cold civil war that’s been going on in this country for a while. The Trump campaign and his presidency have fanned the flames of that cold civil war, focusing on the media as an easy target for demagoguery.

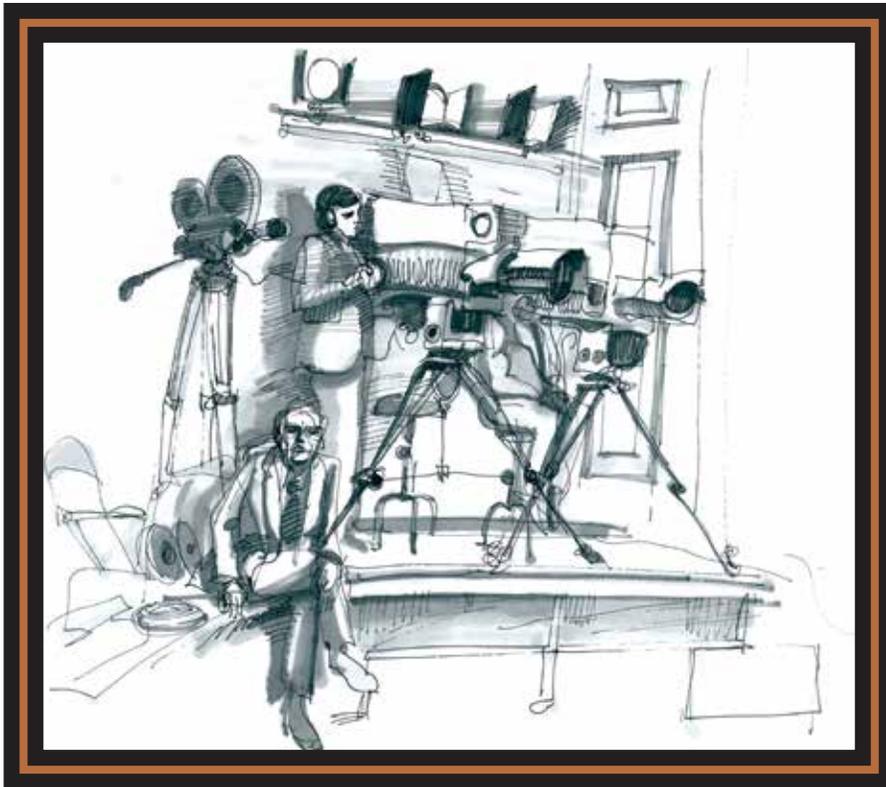
Here’s another thing. Obviously we make mistakes, but we are in a golden age of reporting today by the major mainstream news organizations. What *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, CNN, and other news organizations have done in terms of reporting and investigative reporting on the Trump presidency is nothing short of heroic. It’s probably the greatest confluence of different news organizations reporting on a single story in which rather consistent themes emerge from all of their reporting. This has to do with the conduct, behavior, and questions of fitness about the President of the United States and particularly as related to the so-called Russian investigation.

Did you see the same kind of pushback during your Watergate reporting?

Nixon tried to make the conduct of the press the issue in Watergate. It didn’t succeed but it was a much simpler time. There was no FOX News. Let’s not kid ourselves. The creation and success of FOX News is probably the most important political development; it’s not really about news, it’s about advocacy of a particular point of view masquerading as news.

This goes back to your first question. Increasingly over the past forty years, people are looking for information to reinforce what they already believe, their already-held prejudices and religious and cultural beliefs, rather than being open to the best obtainable version of the truth. That is what good reporting is really about, what real journalism is—the best obtainable version of truth.

So, if you look at the numbers of people who are not open to the best obtainable version of truth, it’s almost impossible to have a fact-based debate in this culture. I’m not talking just about the Congress of the United States or a state legislature, but increasingly at dinner tables.



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News and television cameras, perhaps related to the Senate Watergate hearings, Joseph Papin, c. 1973. Library of Congress

How do you believe professional journalists can best respond to these charges of fake news and a media strategy that talks about alternative facts and never gives an inch. How can the media overcome that and earn the people's trust?

I think we just have to do our job. A lot of this gets back to the fact that too many people are not open to real news. They want to see information that they believe will advance what they already believe. If we're talking about the political system here—and, incidentally, this goes way beyond mere “politics,” it extends to all kinds of cultural questions about who we are—we just need to do our reporting and get it out there and also call out stories that are not true.

The other thing is that sometimes, particularly in such a highly charged atmosphere where all kinds of accusations are thrown at the press by the president and others, we are a little too prone to take the bait. We are perhaps smug

or provocative or self-righteous in our appearance, though it might not be the reality. I think we could probably improve on that a bit.

You mentioned facts. For citizens who don't know really what to trust, who to trust, what to believe, why does the truth matter?

I think this is a cultural question. We are living in a time when many, many people are disinterested in truth or honest contextual information. A string of simple facts put together is not necessarily the truth. Context is a really important element of truth.

What do you wish regular citizens would better understand about journalism and the First Amendment?

I would reverse that question and say, “What do you wish citizens would understand about the First Amendment?” because what follows from that is what journalists do. The First Amendment has protected us

throughout our history. I think we now have an authoritarian president with no regard or understanding of the First Amendment. Even today, while we're conducting this interview, he's threatening to file lawsuits against publishers. No president who understands the Constitution of the United States would dare do that or even make the threat. Donald Trump has done this throughout his career. He's indeed filed lawsuits against journalistic institutions as well as people who have spoken out against him.

There's a reason this amendment comes first; freedom of speech, freedom of expression is what keeps us free. We have presidents and other public officials who want to constrain that. They are more interested in pursuing leakers than they are in the truth—and that's about a lack of understanding of the First Amendment and the role of a free press.

The work that you and Bob Woodward and *The Washington Post*, in particular, did during Watergate inspired a generation of young people to become journalists. Do you see that happening again?

I have to say I see tremendous numbers of young people doing great work in journalism, in nontraditional news organizations, online for the big news organizations that are the successors to the great print institutions. I think it's a very difficult environment because of the attacks on the credibility of journalists. There are those who would abuse governance by demagoguery, by authoritarianism. You know that in every single tyrannical, despotic country, it's always the media that is the first institution to be shut down. Now we have a President of the United States who has not only shown an inclination himself to inhibit and constrain the free press, but to make it a basic part of his demagogic appeal.

Finally, I want to ask you this: Given your vast experience, having gone through tumultuous times, covered tumultuous events, seen the threats against the media, what's your best advice for journalists today who may be experiencing this level of intensity in their work?

Journalists need to do self-examination. We need to be better listeners. A story, more often than not, is different than our preconceived notion of the story. Certainly my experience has been that almost no story I've worked on has come out precisely as I thought it would when I started on it, before I really did the reporting and came to know the facts and context.

I've found that while covering almost everybody, including many people who have been really angry at the press, if I listen to them closely enough I'm able to get better information from them as well as understand their points of view a little better. I also can measure what I'm hearing against what other sources are saying as a means of getting to the best obtainable version of the truth.

You know, I think it's a matter of the most important elements of doing our job:

be thoughtful and not in too much of a hurry. Most stories can wait a day before they need to go. They require checking and additional information. I think that today's news environment—with the internet, with social media, with cable news and the 24/7 environment—is antithetical to the kind of thoughtful reporting that we need. It always goes back to the basics about the best obtainable truth. It requires a lot of effort, a lot of perseverance, a lot of listening and respecting your sources and the people you are covering. This includes covering the Trump presidency. Hear what they have to say. That's one of the reasons the reporting has been so good about the White House. A lot of reporters there really got their ear to the ground and came up with a picture, interestingly enough, not too different from what Steve Bannon has suggested in interviews in the Michael Wolff book [*Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, Henry Holt and Co., 2018]. Reporting needs to be methodical, thoughtful, energetic, contextual, and with a sensibility that we need to serve, not preach.

CARL BERNSTEIN: For forty years, from *All the President's Men* to *A Woman-in-Charge: The Life of Hillary Clinton*, Bernstein's books, reporting, and commentary have revealed the inner workings of government, politics, and the hidden stories of Washington and its leaders. In the early 1970s, Bernstein and Bob Woodward broke the Watergate story for *The Washington Post*, leading to the resignation of President Richard Nixon and setting the standard for modern investigative reporting, for which they and *The Post* were awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

DICK PRYOR is General Manager of KGOU Radio. He has more than 25 years of experience in public service media, previously serving as deputy director, managing editor, news manager, news anchor, and host for OETA, Oklahoma's statewide public television network.

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AN EVENING WITH CARL BERNSTEIN

Fake News! The Media, the
Truth, and Our Democracy



THURSDAY, MARCH 22, 2018

5PM VIP Reception

6:30PM General Admission

OCU Law School

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