

# [***Nicholas Kristof says press 'shouldn't be neutral' with coverage of Trump's threats to democracy***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1D-D9V1-JBSS-S11V-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

New York (CNN) &#8212; Editor's Note: A version of this article first appeared in the "Reliable Sources" newsletter. [*Sign up for the daily digest chronicling the evolving media landscape here.*](https://www.cnn.com/newsletters/reliable-sources?source=nl-acq_article)

Famed New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof on Tuesday will release his memoir, [*"Chasing Hope: A Reporter's Life."*](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/720814/chasing-hope-by-nicholas-d-kristof/) In the 432-page work, which I was provided an advanced copy of, Kristof vividly recounts some of the most pivotal experiences that have made up his decades as a reporter, foreign correspondent, bureau chief, and columnist for The Gray Lady.

The book, of course, arrives as the American press still wrestles with how to cover Donald Trump and the anti-democratic movement which he leads. Kristof, having spent years reporting on repressive governments across far-flung corners of the globe, is not shy about offering the lessons he has learned covering autocrats. The American press, he writes in clear-eyed terms, "shouldn't be neutral about upholding democracy" and must not "dispassionately observe our way to authoritarianism."

We spoke with Kristof over email for a Q&A about this and more. Our conversation is printed below in its unedited form.

**The opening scene of your memoir takes place in the Congo in 1997. You write that you thought you might lose your life on that reporting trip. At the end of your book, you write about how being a foreign correspondent has dramatically transformed as a profession. Today, you explain, foreign reporting trips are highly choreographed. The New York Times has its "own James Bond-style Q" who hands out special gear before heading into the field for trips and security consultants are there every step of the way. How beneficial have these resources been to journalism?**

They keep journalists alive. Look, in the old days, we just took off into war zones and sometimes got extraordinary stories by taking imprudent risks. I lost friends because of the risk-taking, and the reason I'm able to write this answer for you is that I repeatedly was lucky. Early in the Iraq war, I calculated that journalists were dying proportionately at ten times the rate of American troops, because we weren't careful enough. When I last crossed into Syria during the civil war, I grumbled because the Times sent security consultants to escort me and they didn't let me sneak into Aleppo - but then journalists soon began to be kidnapped and tortured, so now I'm very grateful to The Times for restraining me. My wife is even more grateful.

**In the 1980s, you write that as a reporter for The NYT you "had a freedom that journalists today could barely fathom," in that "much of the time, editors had little idea" what you were working on. In your view, and broadly speaking, do reporters not have enough independence to go out into the world, find stories of importance and chase them? Is the 2024 journalist too chained to their desk?**

This is strange for a pundit to admit, but I think there's too much punditry in journalism today and not enough reporting. There can be a good audience for a political hit piece whipped out while sitting at a desk without actually talking to anyone, or for a talking head to do the same on television, but I deeply believe that where we in journalism most add value is when we go out and report; it's not when we stir the pot but when we add to the pot. I also think that's where we have the most impact. If I write about Trump, abortion, the Middle East, guns or other issues at the top of the agenda, fellow liberals will cheer me on, and conservatives will scoff - but I won't change minds. In contrast, where I've been able to have an impact has always been by projecting issues onto the agenda. Darfur. Sex trafficking. Some human rights, poverty and health issues. And that happens only by getting out of the office and reporting.

That's not just true of global crises. We're losing more than 100,000 Americans a year to overdoses, and I don't think we in journalism have adequately covered that catastrophe in working-class America. I think that's partly because of a lack of class diversity in our ranks.

**It's been a very difficult time to work as a journalist over the last few years. Scores of people have been laid off at nearly every major outlet, local newspapers have shuttered from coast-to-coast, and newsrooms continue to search for a viable economic model to remain operational into the future. You write in your book about how journalists should focus more on solutions. Is there a solution to these problems afflicting the industry that you see?**

I would never have imagined saying this a decade ago, but today I'd be open to government grants to keep alive local news organizations around the country. The National Endowment for the Arts provides grants for local artists, and I'd say that it's even more important that a town have a newspaper than that it have a theater.

In terms of larger news organizations, philanthropy may be part of the answer. But I'm deeply worried about what A.I. may do to the business model of news organizations. That's a shadow hanging over all of us. If we're not careful, down the road we won't be getting news from The New York Times, CNN or even TikTok, but from an A.I. assistant who pillages content from journalists and gives us a rehash that is tailor made to reinforce our own biases.

**As a foreign correspondent, you write openly about living with the consequences of having "occasionally got[ten] sources in trouble" when you perhaps were not careful enough. What advice might you offer journalists, particularly those reporting in countries ruled by oppressive leaders, so that they do not make such mistakes and live "haunted by the fear" that they may have "inflicted suffering rather than alleviated it"?**

Too many journalists aren't careful enough about protecting sources. The ethos in journalism has tended to be to provide as much description of a source as possible, and that makes sense in Washington. But with a Chinese person who may not understand the risk, I think we have a duty of care that may involve withholding part of someone's identity.

When I'm in China, there are armies of State Security people tailing me, using a zone-to-zone defense where they pass me from one person to the next, plus cameras on streets - and it's not a game. You make a mistake, and you destroy someone's life. One story I tell in "Chasing Hope" is of a Chinese man who had information about missiles that I desperately wanted to get, and I met him secretly several time trying to wheedle the information out of him. And by the end, I told him just to go home and never be in touch with a foreigner again. I knew that there was always some risk that I would get a great story, and he would be executed. It wasn't worth it. It felt strange to be turning away from a good story, but I'm glad I did.

**You wanted to become governor of Oregon to change society for the better but were found ineligible to appear on the state's ballot over a residency requirement. You write in your book, however, that afterward you realized, "Perhaps the grass is invariably greener on the other side of the fence." Do you believe that one can be more impactful working in journalism than *politics*?**

That's certainly true at times. William Safire, when asked if he would leave his Times column to be Secretary of State, replied: "Why take a step down?" Look, there are great journalists and great politicians. I bellyflopped as a politician, so I'm doing what I can with my keyboard.

**In the book, you write about efforts led by Donald Trump and his allies to "undermine democracy." You offer a chilling description of what a "populist authoritarianism" might look like in the U.S., noting the federal government could be weaponized and "used to punish or intimidate news organizations." You even write about how there could be "assassinations" that occur amid heightened polarization. As someone who has spent his entire life reporting across the world, do you believe that the American public truly understands the risks that you outline? Or do you believe that people are under the illusion such horrors cannot happen here?**

I've seen how countries can unravel and how democracies can become more despotic, and I do think that many Americans don't appreciate the risks. We tend to think that change will be linear. Sometimes it zigs or zags.

**You write in your book that with so much at stake in 2024, "Journalists must not settle for being dispassionate stenographers, quoting first one side and then the other." Instead, you say, "Our foremost obligation is to report the truth, wherever it lies and whomever this offends. ... We journalists shouldn't dispassionately observe our way to authoritarianism; we shouldn't be neutral about upholding democracy." Do you believe your colleagues in the press are as clear-eyed about this as you are?**

Some are and some aren't. Look, it's messy. Traditionally, we try to be fair and truthful. We aim to be fair by quoting all sides in a dispute, and most of the time that serves the interests of truth. But not always. During the Joe McCarthy period, it didn't work to quote McCarthy's rants and also the defenses of people he accused of being Communists; it took Edward R. Murrow to say clearly that McCarthy was a lying, bullying demagogue. Likewise, in the civil rights movement, it didn't work to quote Martin Luther King Jr. in one paragraph and George Wallace in the next. It took reporters going down South and, at considerable risk, conveying the brutality of Jim Crow segregation. Likewise, I think in 2016 we in the media treated Trump as just another candidate when, in my view, he was quite different. We were fair but perhaps not truthful, and I think our paramount responsibility is to convey the truths we know. But doing that with humility and effectiveness is really hard to pull off.

**Why do you believe that institutions and so many journalists find it difficult to flatly state that Trump is an anti-democratic candidate?**

I have enough trouble defining and defending my own square foot of principle. I won't try to speak for other journalists.

**I must ask: The NYT's top editor, Joe Kahn, recently drew backlash for saying, "To say that the threats of democracy are so great that the media is going to abandon its central role as a source of impartial information to help people vote - that's essentially saying that the news media should become a propaganda arm for a single candidate, because we prefer that candidate's agenda." What do you make of Kahn's comments?**

I think people are reading too much into a brief quote that can't encompass the complexity of running a newsroom today. I've known Joe Kahn for 35 years, I admire him, and I believe in his commitment to accountability journalism - in China and in America. Will we periodically make mistakes? Of course. But The Times is an amazing institution that takes very seriously its responsibility to this country, to its democracy and to its future.

**Let's try to find a positive note to end on, amid all this doom and gloom. What gives you hope for the future of journalism?**

Bad journalism may never have been as bad as it is today, but great journalism has never been better. I'm staggered by the brilliance of some of the multimedia, video and audio journalism I see today, by the dedication of colleagues to uncover the truth and by the courage of journalists risking their lives today in Gaza, Russia and elsewhere. The way photo journalists rush toward gunfire - it's poetry! I'm awed by the caliber of young journalists flocking to the field even though we don't have a clear business model to provide them paychecks. And as I say in "Chasing Hope," journalism itself is an act of hope. We do what we do because we believe it makes a difference. What we do matters. I believe that journalism - along with law and the civil service - restrained the Trump presidency and is a force for civilization and democracy.

When I was on Tiananmen Square that terrible night of June 3-4, 1989, as Chinese troops opened fire on us to crush the pro-democracy movement, a rickshaw driver picked up the body of a young man who had been shot. He drove his rickshaw by me, so that I could witness the broken, bleeding body and report on it. "Tell the world," the driver shouted, as tears streamed down his cheeks. "Tell the world." He believed that reporting mattered, that truth can eventually prevail, that what we do makes a difference. Some day, unpredictably, truth triumphs. He believed it and I believe it, and that is why I say that journalism is an act of hope.

By Oliver Darcy, CNN

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