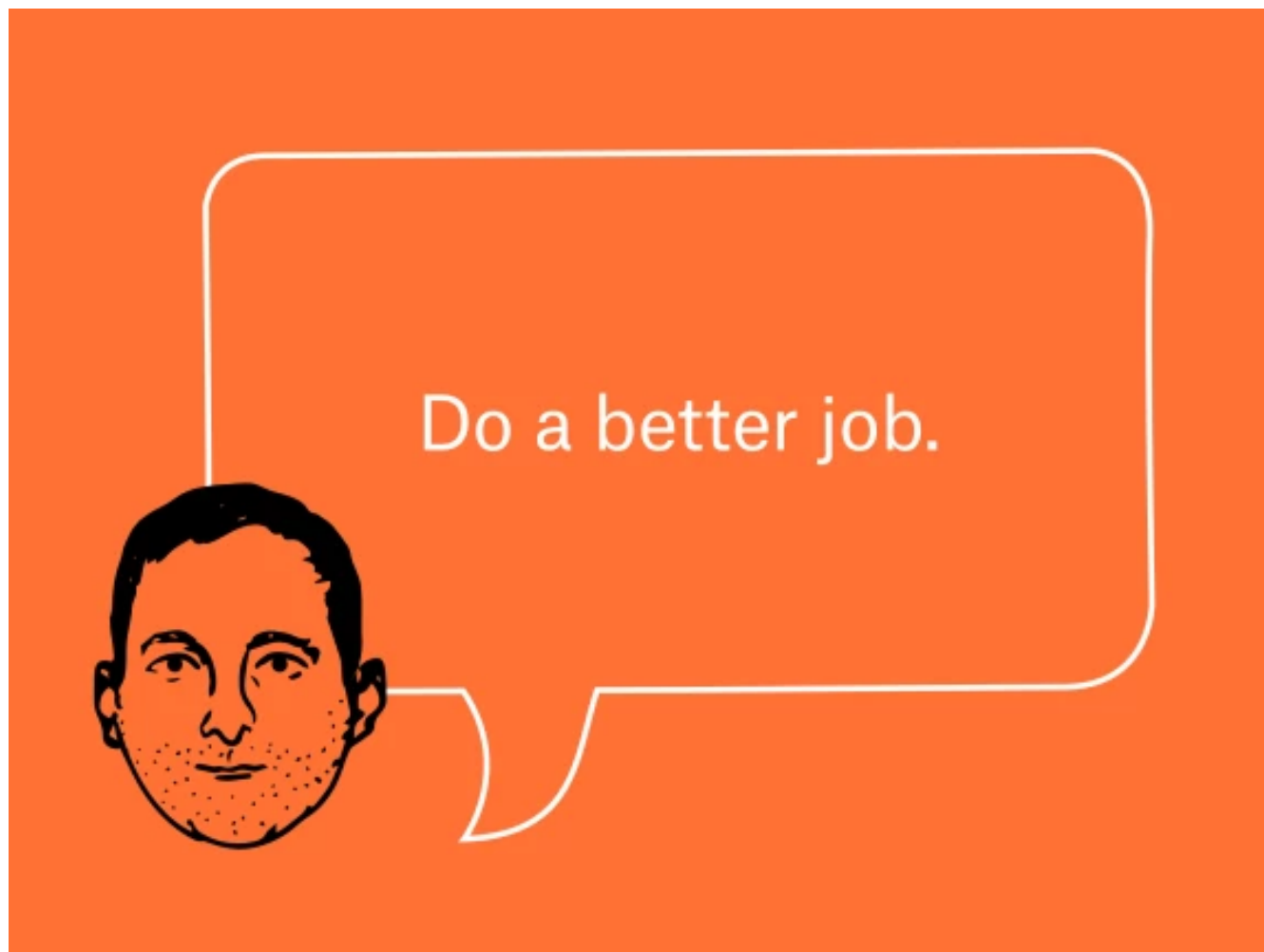


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# How Can Journalists Prove They're Not The Enemy?

A FiveThirtyEight Chat

Filed under Slack Chat

Welcome to FiveThirtyEight's [weekly politics chat](#). The transcript below has been lightly edited.

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**micah** ([Micah Cohen](#), politics editor): It's time to gaze at our navels!!! We're chatting about the media. Everyone ready?

**nrakich** ([Nathaniel Rakich](#), elections analyst): I'm not not ready.

**julia\_azari** ([Julia Azari](#), political science professor at Marquette University and FiveThirtyEight contributor): Technically, I'm in a different field full time, academia,

where we never do any navel-gazing, sooo ...

**micah:** On this week's [FiveThirtyEight Politics podcast](#), we talked about President Trump's [attacks on the press](#). Trump's criticisms are mostly wrong, but the press as a whole (yes, it's not great to lump all the media into one) *does* have [a trust issue](#).

With that in mind, our mission for today: What resolutions do we think journalists (us and everyone else) should make to improve Americans' faith in the press? Who wants to go first?

**julia\_azari:** I nominate Perry as the seasoned press type among the three of us.

**micah:** Perry, Julia has thrown you under the bus!

**perry** ([Perry Bacon Jr.](#), senior writer): OK ...

**micah:** I will say, to Julia's point, I like the mix of experiences we're bringing to this question: Julia is from academia but is obviously deeply immersed in the media world. Perry is an experienced reporter. Nathaniel is newer to journalism and comes more from an online/quanty background.

**perry:** The media should stop aiming for a middle or for a balance between "both sides."

Some issues have four sides. Some have one. But there aren't many issues with two sides, with the Democratic and Republican views equally valid.

The "both sides" model manages to annoy the left *and* the right, as well as undermine trust in media.

In other words, I think, for example, CNN should avoid panels of two Republicans and two Democrats giving their talking points, no matter the issue.

**nrakich:** The problem is: How do you assess "validity"?

**micah:** That's a journalist's entire job!

**julia\_azari:** That's a question — how do you assess validity — whose answer is in your *process* for gathering information, not in the answer itself.

**micah:** Julia, waddya mean by that?

**julia\_azari:** In academia, we sometimes say “the content is the method.” Information is only as good as the method by which it was gathered. So if we’re trying to, say, assess the validity of different perspectives about immigration, you don’t just say “well here’s talking point No. 1 and here’s talking points No. 2.” Instead, you can say: “Here is a study and how it was conducted. But I also talked to 12 people who think immigration is affecting them in X way. That doesn’t mean it’s objectively true, but it’s their experience.”

I am not explaining this well.

**nrakich:** No, I think that’s helpful.

**julia\_azari:** To be clear about perceptions vs. hard facts: Both are important but do different work.

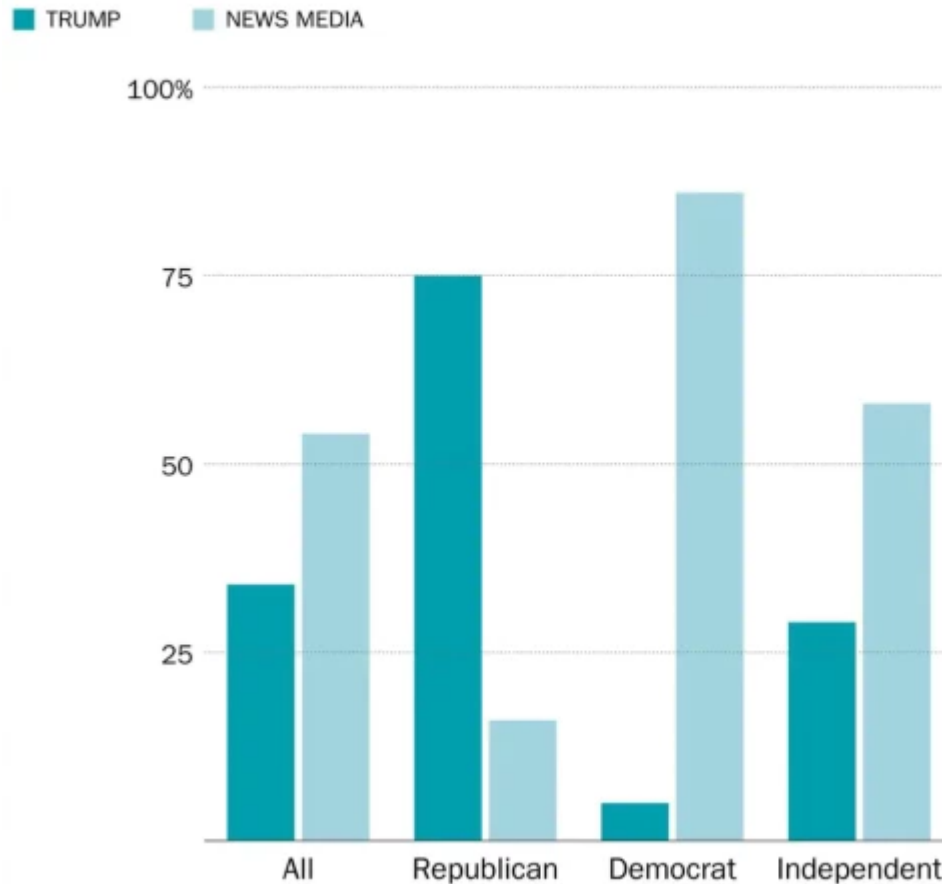
And journalists could also be clearer about whether information was derived from interviews (how many), observation or a large-scale study or whatever.

**nrakich:** Exactly. A big part of journalism is seeking out how people perceive an issue or event — whether through interviews or polling.

**perry:** Let me make an aggressive statement here: We have already lost something like [30 percent of the audience](#), in terms of confidence in media. As a rough proxy, let’s say it’s the portion of people who said in a [July Quinnipiac University poll](#) that they trust Trump more than the media to tell the truth about important issues:

## Trust to tell the truth about important issues?

Quinnipiac University polling, July 2018



A significant bloc of conservatives are not going to tell pollsters that they trust the media — no matter what.

So I think we are really talking about, as people who might trust the media, Democrats and Jeb Bush-style Republicans. I worry that the “both sides” obsession fails in building support and trust for the media from either side: Democrats feel the media strains unfairly for balance; a lot of Republicans, I would argue, hate the media as part of their partisan identity — it’s on the other “side.” So, I don’t think that group would be placated by media moves to show it is in touch with conservatives.

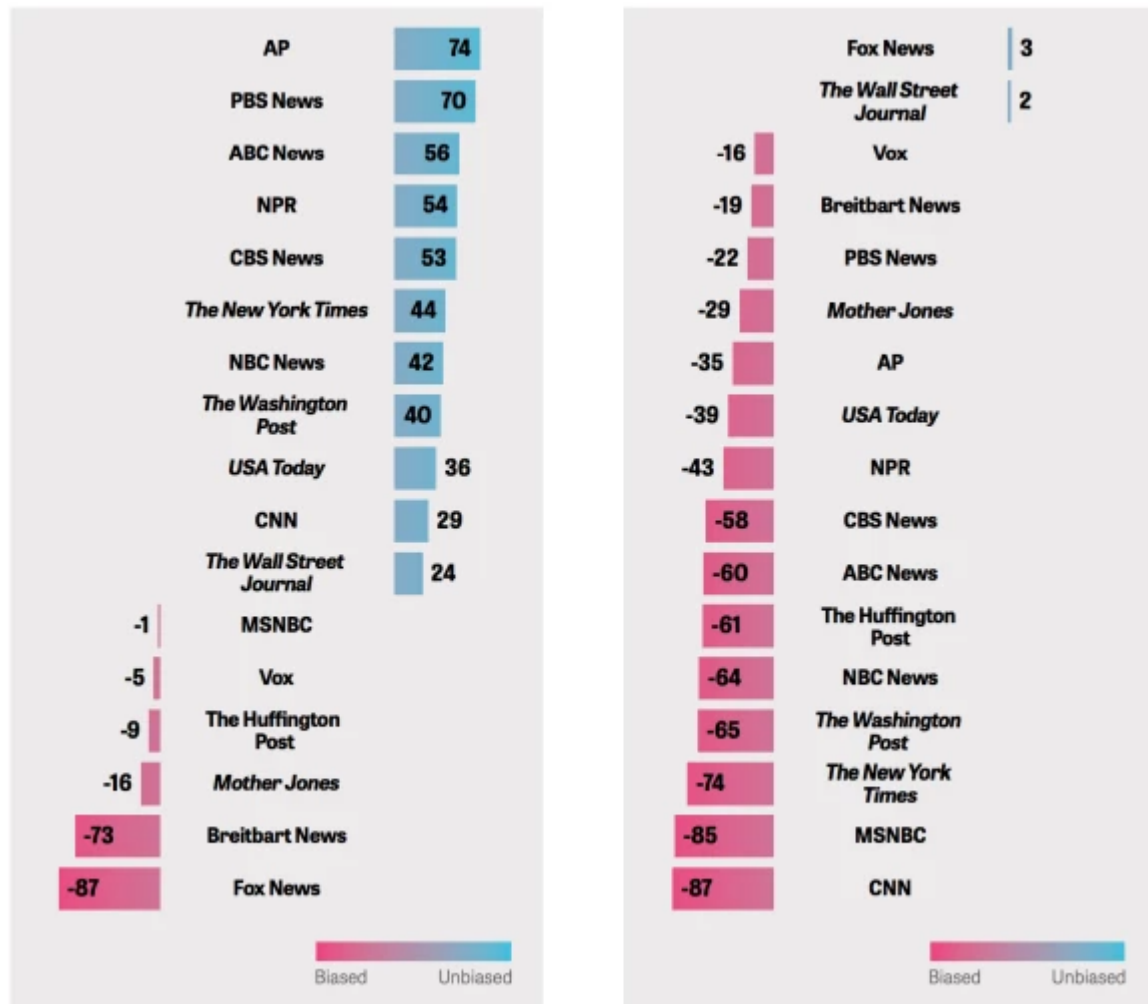
**nrakich:** Here’s a question I’ve battled around at dinner parties (yes, I know I have no life): Do we think it would be better to return to the days when there was a liberal media and a conservative media and they were just open about it?

**julia\_azari:** Nathaniel, does anyone answer that question, or do they just quickly move to the dessert course?

**nrakich:** Usually the dinner parties end when I ask that question.

**julia\_azari:** Resolved: Nathaniel needs better friends.

**nrakich:** My gut instinct is that an explicitly partisan media is a bad idea. But it might very well solve some of these problems we're talking about. The people who hate the media don't hate ALL media — their readership could probably be retained by partisan media that agrees with them. Case in point, here are “net bias” scores from [The Knight Foundation](#), via [The Nieman Lab](#) (positive scores mean more people think the outlet is unbiased; negative scores mean more people think the outlet is biased). Democrats are on the left, Republicans on the right:



**julia\_azari:** Can I come back with a reframing of the question? At the risk of alienating Micah and everyone else forever.

What if the question was less, “how do we win back people who hate the media because of their partisanship,” and instead was, “how do we help people who want to like the media become more engaged consumers of it.” Or, “how do we make the product resonate more with the questions people already ask themselves and guide them to ask deeper ones.”

**perry:** “What resolutions do we think journalists (us and everyone else) should make to improve Americans’ faith in the press? Who wants to go first?” was Micah’s question.

As you are all saying, that question depends on which Americans we’re talking about. There are different reasons people hate the media: the Democrats (too much both sides-ism) vs. Republicans (too liberal/it is part of their party tribe to be against media). It won’t be easy for media outlets to build trust with Republicans — they’ve been told [for decades](#) that the media is against them.

**nrakich:** A partisan media would resonate more with people’s internal questions because they would be asking the same questions. And a responsible media outlet would guide them to those deeper questions.

**julia\_azari:** Right. Explicit first principles like “we believe less government is better” and “we believe in reducing economic inequality” and then real reporting.

**nrakich:** Right — exploring WHY those principles are “good” (from their perspective) to have. Then at least people will be intellectually informed about why they believe something instead of it just being tribal.

**micah:** I think an explicitly partisan media structure sidesteps the problem.

Don’t we all need some agreed-upon facts?

**nrakich:** In this admittedly idealistic scenario, all media would still stick to the facts.

But there are some facts that support liberal positions and some that support conservative ones.

**micah:** Yeah, I don’t think that works.

**julia\_azari:** Micah, do you think we have agreed-upon facts that would be assumed, or does everything have to be interrogated? (I was taught in my one journalism class to fact-check my mother’s love for me.)

**micah:** lol

What did you find?

**julia\_azari:** We just took a long car trip together, so the facts are evolving.

**micah:** I think everything gets interrogated.

But let's return to Perry's resolution real quick and then go to the next one.

Perry, don't you think this is less of an issue than it used to be?

Both-siderism, that is.

This is actually one area where I think people have improved.

**perry:** This is from [a New York Times story](#) about the Georgia governor's race:

ATLANTA — The Republican won the nomination Tuesday after branding himself a politically incorrect conservative who would “round up criminal illegals” and haul them to the border in his very own pickup. The Democrat all but opened her campaign by demanding that the iconic carvings of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson be sandblasted off Stone Mountain.

**micah:** Eek.

**perry:** The story implies both candidates are really partisan. That is a useful frame for news outlets trying to show they are not partisan. But it's hard, and maybe this is my bias as a black person, to take that framing seriously as an example of both sides being really partisan. (How reasonable is it to expect a black candidate to not be opposed to Confederate monuments?)

Coverage around Trump himself seems less both sides-ish. But once you leave Trump, coverage of Democrats vs. Republicans has many of these problems.

**micah:** That's a good point. I was thinking of coverage of Trump.

**nrakich:** I don't know that it's gotten better. I think back when politics was “normal” and Democrats and Republicans had their relatively moderate platforms, it was easier for the media to say “that comment was racist” when, say, [Steve King said](#) that Mexicans cross the border with “calves the size of cantaloupes.” But now the goalposts have moved, and the media isn't sure what to call out as racist or sexist anymore since it's become clear that these views are mainstream enough to get you elected president.

**micah:** OK, Nathaniel, you're next. What's your resolution?

**nrakich:** I kinda have two, because we haven't already gone off on enough tangents.

1. More diversity in newsrooms. This one's pretty obvious — we need people with a wider range of perspectives, including women, non-whites and conservatives.

2. I think the media needs to seriously beef up coverage of local politics and issues. Most governing that affects people's lives happens at the state or local level, but local media outlets are being [decimated](#). And state capitol bureaus are [shrinking to almost nothing](#). That's a real problem.

**julia\_azari:** On No. 1, some of those groups may be at odds. Adding [women](#) and [non-whites](#) is not likely to pull a newsroom to the right.

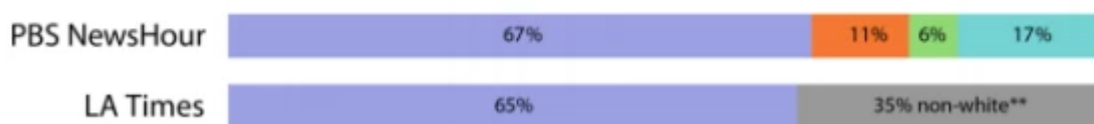
I mean, add everyone! But that's gonna make things interesting.

**micah:** For some context, this is from [a report](#) from our former colleague Farai Chideya and the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard:

Racial breakdown of 2016 political reporting teams by newsroom



Racial breakdown of all editorial staff\* by newsroom



\* The LA Times and PBS NewsHour did not provide data for their political teams specifically.

\*\* The LA Times and the Washington Post did not provide more detailed racial breakdowns.

**julia\_azari:** This seems like a good time to point out that FiveThirtyEight contributor Dan Hopkins (also a political scientist) has written about how the [nationalization of media](#) has contributed to the [nationalization of politics](#).

**perry:** I'm pretty opposed to calls for ideological diversity. A few reasons:

1. It could result in favoring whites and disfavoring minorities (blacks in particular) in hiring. Do we have a national history of discrimination against conservatives for jobs?
2. Also, do we want job interviews in which people are asking applicants about their ideologies? What if the person lies? And, again, that will create a racial bias. (It will



be harder for a black person to credibly claim he or she voted for Trump.)

3. Hiring a reporter who is supposed to be *for* conservatives will basically force that reporter to find articles favorable to his or her team. Do you then find an explicitly pro-Democrats reporter too?
4. I think this kind of hiring approach would undermine the idea of nonpartisan reporting as a field with defined skills or norms, like lawyers or doctors. I believe people can be experts in their fields and put aside their personal views. I worry that when [Trump attacks the lawyers](#) on special counsel Robert Mueller's team for [having donated to Democratic candidates](#), he is undermining the idea that somehow these lawyers can't separate the law from their personal opinions. You can have experts in their fields who ignore their personal views and act objectively.

**julia\_azari:** The [ideological diversity](#) thing is a big question right now in academia, too.

**micah:** That's a tough one.

**julia\_azari:** Here's the thing: I'm happy to have a colleague who teaches students to read the big works of libertarian economic thought. You go in a classroom and make comments about [race science](#), and I am coming down on your ass.

**micah:** I think you're right, Perry. But it's also hard to argue with a conservative who just feels like the mainstream media is coming from a different place than he or she is.

**nrakich:** Very good points, Perry. I have no idea HOW you'd do it. I certainly don't want to create litmus tests. But if The New York Times magically hired the entire staff of the National Review, I feel like conservative trust in the media would increase.

**perry:** It would not.

**micah:** Perry, why don't you think it would?

**perry:** [Jonathan Martin](#), the one of the top political reporters for the Times, used to work at National Review. So [did Robert Costa](#), one of the lead reporters at The Washington Post.

**julia\_azari:** There are some very smart folks at National Review. But it's an elite publication.

**nrakich:** That's a good point, Julia.

**julia\_azari:** When we talk about distrust of elite media, that's a populist attitude, and the [point of populism](#) is that the institutions themselves are suspect.

**perry:** The Weekly Standard is pretty [skeptical of Trump](#).

**nrakich:** Yeah.

**perry:** In January 2016, National Review [ran a series of essays written](#) by prominent conservatives who were blasting Trump.

**nrakich:** And newspapers aren't going to hire non-elites, nor should they be expected to. The Times should hire the best and the brightest! Even if they were all conservatives, a lot of Trump's base would hate them.

**perry:** If The New York Times changed its journalism practices and, say, got rid of pieces saying that Trump is lying, that would help with conservatives. But then it wouldn't be The New York Times, a fact-based newspaper.

**julia\_azari:** It's a problem when people who distrust elite media aren't starting zines or indie blogs, but rather watching Infowars. Or consuming other non-factual or racially inflammatory material.

**nrakich:** It kinda goes to the point that maybe the true divide in this country isn't Democrat vs. Republican, it's elite vs. non-elite. Bernie Sanders's and Trump's rhetoric (if not positions) kind of wrapped around to the point of almost touching in a lot of ways.

**julia\_azari:** Also, how many people on this chat have a degree from Harvard or Yale?

**nrakich:** 75 percent.

**micah:** Not me. I barely graduated from college.

**perry:** I think I object to this framing too. I, a black person from a working-class area in Louisville, got on the path to get this job in large part because I went to Yale. That credential really helps in an elite field like this. I was not vacationing on Cape Cod as a kid.

**julia\_azari:** I technically have three degrees from Yale (but a B.A. from a state school), so I'll see myself to the guillotine.

**micah:** But Perry's right that the standards are different.

**perry:** Here's an idea: What if publications, instead of having a program of specifically hiring conservatives, had beats like rural policy, religion, regulation and family development. (I know there are some religion reporters, but maybe we need more of them and at every outlet.) That would diversify their coverage. Which is what I care about.

**nrakich:** I really like that idea.

**julia\_azari:** That is an excellent idea.

**perry:** Part of this is how news organizations hire. "The race reporter" is maybe not going to be a conservative, but the religion reporter will understand how deep and sincere opposition to abortion is among religious conservatives.

**micah:** It would diversify coverage *and* expose a mostly cosmopolitan reporting force to new worlds — which probably would have some effect in making them more conservative, honestly.

**julia\_azari:** This again is true about academia. People who write on religion and, say, the military are probably still often left of center, but they are a lot more sympathetic to certain perspectives than a randomly selected social scientist.

**nrakich:** This also goes to my resolution about local media.

**micah:** Yeah.

**perry:** Right, the rural reporter would be more likely to work in Iowa than Seattle.

**micah:** OK, we gotta move on to Julia's.

**julia\_azari:** My resolution is that we should be more attentive to power dynamics when we write.

**micah:** I like this one.

**julia\_azari:** This is a set of growing pains that academia had to deal with and still does — primarily that when you write about someone, you attain a certain power to tell their story. How do you do rigorous work while simultaneously allowing people to tell their own stories? This set of questions is really for writing about people who are marginalized, not for reporting on powerful officials.

How would we want to be written about if we were the subject of the story? Is it respectful?

But also I need to slag on WaPo.

**micah:** Haha ... go on.

**julia\_azari:** [This piece](#) — about white workers who feel like they're in the minority working at a chicken plant — got [a lot of pushback](#) (some of which the [Post published](#)).

This is the kind of story where you need to tread a delicate line between letting people tell their stories as they see them and questioning concepts like the sense of entitlement to be in the majority or surrounded by people who share your language.

So you want to ask multidimensional questions about what kinds of power different people have.

**perry:** My objection to that piece is that I think its genesis was an attempt at balance — i.e., “if we do stories about how ICE [mistreats some undocumented immigrants](#),” we need to do this one too. The subtext is: “Conservatives/whites/rural people have problems too.”

**julia\_azari:** I read it more sinisterly than that, to be honest. I read it as centering white perspectives in a way that was worse than both-sidesism.

**micah:** Julia, are there concrete things that journalists can do to better account for power dynamics? I just worry “think about power dynamics” is hard to put into action?

**julia\_azari:** I'm an academic, as we said at the top. I don't do “action.”

**micah:** Haha.

OK, we gotta wrap.

I had a couple, but maybe we don't have time.

**perry:** I would love to hear them

Maybe we quickly weigh in on them?

**micah:** OK, real quick ...

**micah:** 1. Do a better job. I don't mean this flippantly. A huge share of journalism is sloppy or ill-conceived or surface-level. Much of that is unintentional or *seemingly* unavoidable — deadlines, resources, etc. But not all those factors are set in stone. I'm pretty sure that newsrooms could put in place some incentives to just improve the quality of their work by, say, 30 percent.

**nrakich:** Employ fact-checkers! We have a phenomenal copy desk (hi, guys!). Other places I've written for haven't had nearly as stringent a fact-checking layer in the editing process.

**micah:** 2. Be more transparent. This is really the big one for me. Treat the reader/viewer as an equal, explain how you're doing the work you're doing. Explain what assumptions you're making and what you don't know.

**perry:** Endorse both of Micah's

**julia\_azari:** Same!

**perry:** No. 1 is hard to define, but I see bad work all the time (and produce some of it myself). And I just wish editors were stepping in more at times.

**nrakich:** As for No. 2, I agree, obviously. I feel like the mindset for a lot of places is to be the "expert" and insist to their readers that they know what they're doing, even if they're a lot less sure themselves. I agree that it's OK to say, "Hey, we're not sure about X, but maybe it's a thing?"

**julia\_azari:** Agreed.

**nrakich:** As we like to say here at FiveThirtyEight, get comfortable with uncertainty.

Not every article has to come to a firm conclusion.

**micah:** Being able to say "we're not sure about this" is a huge advantage, and — going back to No. 1 — removes an incentive that pushes people toward crappy work.

Also, more transparency shows readers/viewers that we're just people trying to do a job.

**julia\_azari:** Can I add something to kinda maybe answer the "what do we do about power dynamics" question?

**micah:** Take us home, Julia.

**julia\_azari:** Warm, fuzzy feature pieces need more analytical framework, IMO. Why has employment changed in certain circumstances? How does the rate of immigrants in community X compare to surrounding ones?

Put people's stories into a more structural context, highlighting how something like state budgets or other policies might affect what people are facing. Framing a piece like a biography puts too much emphasis on both individual experience and individual responsibility for circumstances. These are part of bigger — and often more technical — stories. I'm not saying that some journalists aren't already doing this, but in my opinion, some of the stock frames for pieces need an update.

If that makes any sense.

You have a lot of efforts to humanize policy. Maybe policy-ize humanity.

*Check out all the [polls](#) we've been collecting ahead of the 2018 midterms.*