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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

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Journalism in the U.S. in times of crisis

Interview with Jelani Cobb, Dean of the Columbia Journalism School

On January 20, 2025 Donald Trump was inaugurated for his second term as U.S. president, accelerating his aggressive attacks on journalists and universities, including those with journalism degrees, such as Columbia University. On March 10, Jelani Cobb, the Dean of the Columbia Journalism School and Henry R. Luce Professor of Journalism, gave the 2025 Reuters Memorial Lecture, entitled »Trust issues. Credibility, credulity and journalism in a time of crisis« discussing that journalism has not yet found its footing to report on the Trump administration. In an interview with Wayne State University's journalism scholar Stine Eckert on September 15, Jelani Cobb expounded on the thoughts he shared in the lecture and spoke about how U.S. news media handled the reporting on the killing of the right-wing activist Charlie Kirk and how to cover government in repressive times.

SE: In March, in your Reuters Memorial Lecture, you spoke about trust and journalism in times of crisis, and you said at the beginning of the speech that it was a »developing speech« because so many events in the U.S. are happening at such a fast pace. Now, half a year later, with many events having come and gone again, which additional concerns would you add?

JC: I would add the capitulation of media organizations and law firms, universities, to the belligerence and overreach of the federal government. I would add something about political violence for lots of reasons in the United States. I probably say more about the necessity of us publishing things that are true, even if they're unpopular. And just even in this country in the last week, in the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's murder, people seemed completely unwilling to talk about his

own words, people being castigated for quoting things that he actually said. And so while I agree that it's important for people to maintain a certain kind of decorum when discussing a murder victim, that doesn't preclude you talking about who the person actually was and what they actually said and did. And there was hesitance and reluctance, this actual fearfulness I think about doing that here. I think those are the kind of big things that I would talk about and include.

SE: Are you also meaning the political violence against journalists?

JC: Sure, that as well, and the targeting of journalists, which we've seen happen in Gaza in two separate instances in recent memory, in other instances, likely prior to that. But that's another dynamic that at least in the United States has received scant attention, and it goes to the conversation about credibility and about what people believe our vested interests are, and even internally, being among journalists, our willingness to tell stories about actual journalists being killed.

SE: Have you perhaps added other trainings or workshops to the curriculum for emerging journalists?

JC: No, we've already been teaching about this subject matter. It reinforces the importance of it, I think.

SE: Charlie Kirk was shot fatally on September 10, 2025 and very quickly speculation came up about the perpetrator, even though that person was still on the run. Very quickly also Trump put posts on social media speculating who's to blame, and it was reported in news media. I was wondering if it is problematic to report on that while things are ongoing, and to give these speculations so much room. I was just wondering what you would make of that.

JC: I saw a number of different outlets. One of the first things that stood out to me about the coverage was that it was referred to as an assassination before people knew that it had been done for political reasons, based on what we know now. But if we just had this single incidence, knowing, the kind of contrary fact that often when a high profile political person is attacked physically, whether it be shot or stabbed or harmed in some kind of way, is not done for political reasons, or a very significant amount of the time is done by a person who's unwell, or is done by someone who is motivated to seek fame or glory of some sort. But an assassination implies an explicitly political motive, and you saw headlines that said Charlie Kirk assassinated before we knew anything about the nature of his death. There was speculation that was rampant among irresponsible political actors, and I think that needed to be handled much more delicately than it

generally was. The default was toward the political sensitivities and the emotional sensitivities of people on the right, but it wasn't necessarily toward the ethical responsibility of journalists. So it would not serve anyone's purpose to report on speculation, even if it's done by the president of the United States, speculative statements about who might have done something or why they might have done it. It might be useful to report that the president speculated, but it's not necessarily useful to report who or what they were speculating about.

SE: Why do you think ethical standards for journalism were disregarded in this really fast developing story? Why do you think so much speculation was given so much room?

JC: Fast developing stories require a particular skill set that not all news organizations and not all journalists have. So that's part of it. They should, but not all do, and that's why there's a Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News, for a reason. It is a very specific skill set. The other part, I think, is that, maybe – and this is me speculating – maybe the impact of the attacks on journalism are being felt and people have defaulted to not wanting to upset the administration or the president. That's possible. I don't know that to be true, but it's a possibility. We really would need a kind of postmortem of how this was handled. I think that this would be a really good thing for media organizations to do or kind of media watchdog publications to do in terms of looking at how the coverage has been handled.

SE: How can journalists report on Trump in a way that is sufficiently critical and aggressive in terms of quantity or quality without giving him so much space, without running into the situation that journalists end up spreading falsehoods? How do you navigate that path?

JC: That's entirely individual depending on the publication in terms of how often someone's reporting or what they're reporting. Those are particular editorial decisions that I couldn't dictate. In terms of not reporting falsehoods, you have to point out before you quote an allegation or speculation that there is no basis for this idea. Or you don't report the specifics of the speculation. You could say the president made unfounded comments about the nature of the shooting and leave it at that. And so if people want to go find what those things are, that's what YouTube is for. But you don't have to echo things that are of questionable reliability.

SE: I saw a story in *The New York Times* following the Charlie Kirk story, and they linked to a social media post by Trump. I was thinking they want to be

transparent, linking to the source, but at the same time, what you just said, it may have gone too far. Instead of just stating the president said something about the shooting, and that's it. I was wondering why *The New York Times* made that decision.

JC: Yes, I don't know why the *Times* made the decision. I can't say or speculate about that. I don't know. There's an argument for linking and an argument for not linking. The argument for not linking is that you magnify something that is of questionable veracity. The argument for linking, however, is that you, if you don't link, you don't really have proof that the president said something speculative. I've been a person that said you should show your work, you should show what you're referring to. And so I think the link might actually be a good middle ground where maybe you don't explicitly echo what someone says, but there's a link, and if a person wants to look this up, having already been notified that this is not verified, then that's on them.

SE: But doesn't that also drive traffic to the problematic site?

JC: Possibly, but also it leaves you the kind of the least, worst examples. Do you just tell the public to take your word for it that the president speculated? No, you don't want to do that. Do you want to explicitly echo it? No, you don't want to do that. And so the fact that you drive traffic to it is probably a necessary side effect of trying to create some distance, reiterating something that's a potential false falsehood and leaving the public less informed.

SE: More broadly, we often teach journalism students, that government sources in the past were relatively good sources to cite, that they're generally reliable, but this has now completely changed. How to shift teaching emerging journalists how to deal with government sources. What are you telling journalists?

JC: Well, I don't know that we tell people the government sources are generally reliable. We start with the presumption that a person may be telling you the truth or may not be telling you the truth, and that your job is to verify to the greatest extent possible. Now, of course, there are things that are more or less presumed to be accurate or that the public government is giving the best information possible. If you look at, say, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and their unemployment numbers – that was why the firing of the chief economist there was such a big deal – because those numbers are generally expected to be reflective of how the economy is actually doing. That notwithstanding you report about the report, report about the veracity of the report. If the economy is going to operate on the

presumption that the report is accurate, then you report on that dynamic. What we don't have, or generally presume, is that government information, especially from purportedly non-partisan sources has been skewed in order to serve the purposes of the administration. That's the situation that we're in now.

SE: Another point I wanted to touch on in your memorial lecture is the question of solidarity. You argued that, after there were some incidents where journalists were not allowed to be part of the White House press briefings or couldn't travel with the president, that all journalists collectively should boycott these events. I thought that was a brilliant idea, but I don't think anything like that, even in part, has happened to my knowledge. Maybe I missed something. But what do you think should solidarity look like? And do you think that could happen still?

JC: I don't rule anything out. I think it's possible that this would happen, but I think that we have to have a different kind of consciousness about what the moment calls for. We have to have a different understanding for even what moment we're in. And I think that we're still not quite there, as evidenced by the kind of reaction, the generally cowed reaction that media had to the death of Charlie Kirk. Other instances you could probably cite as well, that we're still operating under the old order, as if this is a normal presidential administration, as if they didn't try to ove1throw the government.

SE: What you call the left handed, right handed problem [in your lecture]. Journalists or news media, and we still have not figured out a new modus operandi in order to anticipate what's happening and finding a new pattern.

JC: Yes.

SE: I want to turn to journalism education again. The Columbia Journalism School, faculty and alumni, just started a new newsletter, *CollegeWatch*, in September. Is this newsletter also meant to hold your own institution in some way accountable in that ecosystem of higher education for journalism education.

JC: I think that was the whole point. We were trying to report on what was happening at universities as a consequence of the federal overreach. That was a story that wasn't being told, at least not being told comprehensively. We have the money that's disappeared, the repression of particular viewpoints, the incursions into free speech and academic freedom, and all of these dynamics. At best we are getting things from outside the higher education world. So that was what

we were hoping to do. We were thinking that we had to respond to the moment with the skill set that we have. The economics department might respond differently. We had to think about what we could contribute in this moment. And we thought that reporting was the best way.

SE: It's definitely a great resource. Another recent event, also on September 10, *The New York Times* reported that at Texas A&M University a lecturer was fired because a student filmed an exchange with that instructor, in which the student said, the course breaks the law because it has a statement or assumptions that there's more than two genders. How does that impact teaching journalism in the context of culture, race, racism, sexism, etc. What does that mean? How can we not run afoul of these executive orders? Is that maybe Texas specific? I was really rattled by reading that.

JC: That was very particular in a case, in an instance about Texas. But it could be something that could happen other places because Texas represents, on some level, the kind of direction that the federal government has gone in. And so that was very alarming and concerning. What we've seen happen and we're actually pretending that this is not what is happening, is that we're outlawing particular viewpoints. It's not that someone is saying you can't teach something that's factually wrong, which would be a reasonable position to hold, is rather that you can't hold a particular interpretation of facts in the world, and that is, by definition, repressive, and so it's something that we should be very concerned about.

SE: In your lecture, as a path forward, you suggest there should be a »well calibrated skepticism«, and that maybe each significant article should have a complimentary piece that shares how the story was reported to have another level of transparency. Would that warrant creating new positions, such as a transparency editor, or if maybe AI could play a role in that since AI is now thrown into the mix for everything. How does your idea look like in more detail?

JC: I think a transparency editor would be a great idea. AI can probably be useful in this regard although we have to be very careful because AI could further misinform people, and that would not serve anybody's purpose. I think that we just have to be creative in general and we have to be innovative in pushing ourselves to the far extreme of transparency. Anything that we don't have to hold back for the purposes of safety, we should be willing to tell the public.

SE: Thank you for taking the time to update us on your thoughts that you shared in your lecture.

About the author

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