

@Risk: The Calls Coming from Inside Journalism

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Jodi: Hey, I'm Jodi Butts. Welcome to @Risk, brought to you by Interac.

We're all pretty familiar with external threats to journalism like insufficient ad revenue, fake news, and declining paid subscriptions. But sometimes like in the urban legend, the call can be traced inside the house.

Today I speak with two thought leaders in the industry to explore the more overlooked internal threats to journalism.

Up first, I'm joined by Jeff Jarvis, the author of *Geeks Bearing Gifts: Imagining New Futures for News*, *What Would Google Do*, and the Kindle single *Gutenberg the Geek*. He blogs about media and news at buzzmachine.com and cohosts the podcast, This Week in Google. Jeff is also the Leonard Tow Professor of Journalism Innovation and director of the Tow Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York 's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism.

Next, I'm joined by Nana aba Duncan. Nana aba is an award-winning broadcaster and advocate of underrepresented perspectives in journalism. She is the founder of Media Girlfriends, which started as a podcast and has grown to include peer mentorship, events, and a 14,000 scholarship for women or non-binary students in high school, college, and university studying media, technology, journalism, or communications. Currently, Nana aba is a Williams Southam Journalism Fellow at University of Toronto's Massey College, where she's studying the experience of racialized leaders in Canadian media.

Listen to Jeff and Nana aba as they share their views on the overlooked internal threats to journalism and how they can be overcome.

Jodi: Well, thank you for joining me Jeff and welcome to @Risk.

Jeff: Thank you so much Jodi.

Jodi: So just to get right into it, is journalism itself at risk or just its traditional business model?

Jeff: Every institution in society is now at risk right now in the sense that it is being challenged with change. And it depends on how they adapt or don't adapt. We're seeing that United States with policing, with banks, with the government, lord knows, democracy itself. So yes, journalism as we knew it is at risk. But to me the greater risk

is trying to preserve journalism as we knew it in a time of changed circumstances. And so I want journalism to change. It must change, or it will be at more risk.

Jodi: You sometimes refer to Journalism with a capital J. Can you explain what that is?

Jeff: I'm not one who talks about the journalist. I think anyone can perform an act of journalism. The person who takes a photo from a demonstration and shares that, the 17-year-old young woman who bravely videoed the death of George Floyd, those are acts of journalism.

There's also then the institution of journalism though, and it acts in one way and I think society and a new journalism have to act in another way. I had the privilege of starting a new degree at my school at the Newmark J School in what we call social journalism, or others call it engagement journalism. Which means you start with the communities; you don't start with the idea of content.

And I follow the words of the late Columbia professor James Carey, who said that journalism doesn't so much inform the public conversation as it should be informed by the public conversation. Journalism needs to learn first to listen.

Jodi: And how does journalism need to change? So if it embraces the change, that's kind of like if you think of it as a wave, it's sort of a tsunami that's like right on top of it right now. What does a positive response to the risk today look like?

Jeff: I'm accused by some in the field of being radical, but I don't think I've been nearly radical enough in rethinking what journalism is, can be, and should be. As I say I think it starts with learning to listen. I'm trying to work on a book on the Gutenberg age, and one thing that struck me is I think that that we lost our ability to hold the public conversation. And what's happening right now is that we're re-learning how to do that.

And so if we rethink about journalism in an age when we are not the only ones who control the press, but everyone has their press. The internet so far has been built to speak and I celebrate that, I welcome that, because it's through that that we've heard Black Lives Matter and #Metoo and other movements from people who were excluded from the voice of mainstream media.

But now that everybody speaks, the next problem is what and who are worth listening to? And I think that's where journalism can come in and can figure out ways to point us to those who are experts, those who have something worthwhile to say, those voices who were not heard who now need to be amplified.

Journalism can find ways to help us relearn the skills of argument and debate, and you may think we have nothing but argument now but it's obviously bad argument. So how do we debate society well?

Journalism needs to do a better job of giving us a picture of that public debate, of the public conversation. Opinion polls, as James Carey said, pre-empt the conversation.

They are meant to measure by having just two buckets. That's what we've done in journalism is throw everyone into binaries: red or blue, black or white, 99 or one percent, pro or con. We've stolen the nuance from the public conversation.

These are all opportunities to fundamentally rethink journalism.

Jodi: There was a great article in a Canadian magazine called The Walrus. And full disclosure, I chair the board of directors of The Walrus. But this particular article was about Russell Smith, and he used to write for the Globe and Mail here, and he was invited to depart.

He was talking about the algorithms that he saw that that was so core to the Globe and Mail's strategy, and he wrote this. He said, "Algorithms that tell us which topics are trending don't merely reflect trends, they can also help create them." Is that just bad listening?

Jeff: Yes, well said. By the way, I love the Walrus. I'm a canadophile and every time I'm in Toronto I buy a copy. Yes, I hate trending topics because they're, first and foremost they're meaningless. If you look at a trending topic on Twitter or Facebook only a tiny tiny percentage of the whole actually sees that.

The problem here is that it's the reflex of mass media thinking that we have to reach everyone all at once with our one product. And I think what the internet kills is the mass media business model, with it mass media itself, and with it this idea of the mass. But we don't get rid of it in our conversation. So you see headlines all the time that says, Twitter says, or Twitter is going nuts over. There is no one monolithic Twitter. Twitter is nothing but a collection of millions of individual voices, and the hard part we have to learn now is how do we find, and listen to, and amplify those voices that are worth amplifying.

What that shows when we have trending algorithms and trending reports and most links on newspapers is that we can't get away from that mass reflex of thinking that only the majority matters.

Jodi: And so if the trend kind of continues as they are, in terms of a dwindling number of news outlets, what happens? Are new risks created, or do we just end up relying on the New York Times and the Atlantic for our news?

Jeff: That's a great question. I think we have to look at this in a larger timeline, so pardon me for a moment of Gutenberg geekery.

Jodi: Love it.

Jeff: But I like to point out to my students that printing started in 1450. The first newspaper wasn't created until 1605, a century and a half later. The first major technology change in printing didn't come until 1800 with the steel press. The mass came along in the 1820s with steam, broadcast in 1900, and here we are at 2020.

Then we look back and say okay, what have I left out there? Well, the internet. And the commercial web started about 25 years ago, which means we're at the year 1475 in Gutenberg years. And that is to say that we're at the beginning, in my view, of a very long transition. We don't know what the internet is yet. We don't know what it can be yet. It is far too soon to think that it's defined and over and done.

So what that means is we're in for, I think, a huge amount of volcanically disruptive change. And our media house was already on fire, COVID threw gunpowder on the flames, things are going to burn down. And what rises from the ashes will not be an orderly new institution that we'll look at and say, oh, there's the new journalism. What will rise from the ashes will be a bunch of brave experiments from innovators, and many of them will fail as we try to learn what a new journalism can look like.

Jodi: In *What Would Google Do*, you talk about the inverse relationship between trust and control. So that you write passionately about trusting choice way more than control. And underpinning that preference is a belief in abundance breeding quality. Does the spread of disinformation since the writing of that book surprise you?

Jeff: No and yes. Yes to the extent that I, like people in Silicon Valley, was too optimistic. And because of that optimism, Silicon Valley did not build in enough controls to recognize what they now know well which is that any system that can be gamed will be gamed. And so they weren't as ready and able to find and counteract the manipulation as they should have been.

Now to the no I'm not surprised. Studying the early days of print, we see ballads that spread the news of witches who burn down towns. There's been fake news and disinformation forever. And the response to that usually reflexively is let's stop it, let's stamp it out, let's license the right guys, let's control things. We see that reflex going on especially in Europe, now spreading into Canada, and into the United States. And I fear that.

And it brought me to reread John Milton's legendary pamphlet called *Aeripogitica* in which he opposed the licensing of print in England. And what he argued in the end was that we need to face the lies and the untruths so that we exercise our brains and make them able to reject them ourselves. If we try to protect society from itself and we try to shut off these voices that we think are dangerous, we are doing society a disservice.

The problem right now I think is that because this disinformation did surprise us, we're concentrating all of our talk and all of our energy on that and we're avoiding talking about the good, the credible. When COVID started, I started a Twitter list of experts. You can find it at Bitly slash COVID Twitter list, with more than 600 epidemiologists, virologists, geneticists, biologists, frontline doctors, and so on.

And I've watched them and I've learned a great deal from how science and medicine adapted to an open information system in this crisis. They wanted open information, so

they put their papers up not peer-reviewed on so-called pre-print servers. They come up with structures to find among the tens of thousands of them the things they need. They peer review these papers, I honestly mean this, they peer review the papers on Twitter. They also review their peers on Twitter and say who's not worth listening to. And they use social media to explain things to the rest of us.

They adapted to this new reality in a matter of weeks, where we in journalism have not been able to in decades. They did it because they said we have certain goals and needs in science. They've had peer reviews since Cicero, and they said oh, here is a new need and a new way to accomplish that need. We didn't do that. We didn't stand back and say what does society need and how do we present this? Instead we said what's our business and how do we preserve it?

Jodi: I think some of science's success, and it's had some challenges too right, fraudulent papers being published in the *Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. But I think one of the things that makes science a bit more immune or more successful in this new environment is that it figured out a long time ago how to deal with mistakes or changing information. They don't view it as mistakes at all, they say well that's science. We believe this to be true today.

And because they've been able to kind of integrate that idea that things are only correct today and new knowledge is welcomed and being told that you're wrong is a gift, it seems to be able to thrive in this environment much better than politicians or even journalism.

Jeff: You couldn't be more right. Science understands that knowledge is a process. We in journalism don't. We tend to treat the latest word as the last word, and it's a problem of Gutenberg, I think. I'll call on Marshal McLuhan as well. We start to look at what we think of as conversation instead as content that fills a product. And as McLuhan said, the line, and this sentence as an example, becomes our organizing principle. We think everything has a beginning and an end and it's all neatly tied up in a bow, and that we in journalism can present that as a complete package every day.

And so we don't say hm, there's a new study that says this. But the context of which it fits into was 100 studies that came before, and here's the questions that still need to be examined. Instead we say here's a study that wine will kill you, and then next week we'll say here's a study that wine will save your life.

And so I had a student in our entrepreneurial journalism program who was a scientist herself who's been examining what would it look like to do journalism in the scientific method. And you would say here's a hypothesis, now we're going to read everything that came before so we understand the context. Then we're going to seek out data to prove or disprove that hypothesis. Then we're going to report that and we're going to say, but here's the questions that are not answered by this.

We don't do that in journalism, not at all. And quite to the contrary what's happening in my country these days is that science is being doubted. We're in an epistemological war where if you're a scientist you're an elite and if you don't trust the elites you don't trust the science and you don't wear a damn mask.

Jodi: So one of the things in the evolution of free speech, we did introduce some level of regulation. So libel and slander laws in Canada. We have hate speech prohibitions. And we are definitely hearing legislators around the world talk about regulating the internet giants for a number of reasons, but one of them being to try and save journalism I guess, to put it succinctly.

And that's happening here in Canada too. Recently the throne speech of the government was delivered by the governor general, and in it said the government will act to ensure web companies revenue is shared more fairly with our creators and media. Do you think this is the right direction to go in?

Jeff: It is patently ridiculous. It is an act of desperation and protectionism on behalf of media companies that are spending their political capital in conflict of interest to get politicians to try to save their old institution that simply did not react to the times and doesn't deserve this kind of protection. God did not give them the revenue they had. Google did not steal that revenue, nor Facebook. Platforms came along, recognized a new reality, and provided better opportunities for their advertisers to be more effective and efficient and our customers left.

And then as far as the readers go, I was thinking about this the other day. Facebook didn't start for news, it started for hookups and parties. It was our readers who took our news there because we didn't give them the place to talk about it. Twitter didn't start for news, it was going to tell you, hi I'm in the bar right now. It was witnesses who took news there because we didn't provide that opportunity for them. The company Nextdoor is thriving because we didn't provide an opportunity for neighbors and local news to get together and talk. Tik Tok is providing a means to collaborate in creation that we didn't provide in media.

Our own people left us. We don't deserve that rescue. And the problem comes along here when the government says we're going to make a market intervention on behalf of the big old lazy players who screwed this up, then it also becomes regulatory capture such that new entrants find it much more difficult because the old entrants are artificially held up.

And I say this with perspective. About seven eight years ago I will confess that I was on the digital advisory board for Post Media. And I know how screwed up that company was way back then and it's only gotten worse. So who is to say that the government of Canada should step in and protect an incompetent company?

Jodi: So Google itself has announced that it will pay 1 billion to news publishers around the world over the next three years and invites them to make more editorial decisions about how their content appears on its products. And of course this also follows the news licensing program that they announced earlier for paywalled publications. And regulators are saying yeah, like this is us, we achieved this. By even hinting at regulation we've pushed Google into doing this. Do you think that's the right way to think about this announcement?

Jeff: It's blackmail. It is the fruit of blackmail. I've written about that. And I'm not gonna be popular for saying this because any time that our industry of journalism gets more money, we should say hurrah, but the problem here is that Google sets a precedent that says that they get the equation of value wrong. Give me a moment here.

The problem is that Google made what I think was an ethical moral decision early on that affects this equation now. They decided early on not to sell position in search. You have ads around it but the search itself is sacrosanct, unlike Yahoo which was selling position, and other companies were selling positions. Google said no, that is something we're going to give to the public and that's how we create our value.

Well as a result, every time Google links to a publisher and sends them a reader and sends them a potential relationship and sends them value, there's no market value for that in the discussion. And in the Australian move to make the platforms pay for news, Google is not allowed to bring to the table that idea that hey, we send the publishers tremendous value. We send them more value than we get from putting their snippets online. That's not allowed to be part of the discussion because that law was written basically by Rupert Murdoch and company.

And so no, I think that this is not a victory of regulation. This is a victory of protectionism. Now mind you, I know I sound like a libertarian right now. I'm a Hillary Clinton come Kamala Harris come Cory Booker now come Joe Biden Democrat. But when it comes to the internet I sound more like it because I believe in free speech number one, and number two I believe that most of the government intervention we have seen so far on the internet has damaged the internet and paradoxically has only given the platforms more power.

I was on a kind of commission, a transatlantic high-level working group on content moderation and freedom of expression. That long title just boils down to a group about regulation. We came out with a model that I actually endorse that doesn't have the government do market intervention, doesn't have the government to intervention in speech, but does have the government hold platforms accountable for their promises and actions by demanding transparency and data from them to judge their actions.

I think there is a structure where we work in a flexible framework to try to understand the impact of the internet and to decide where we want to intervene as a result. Right

now most of this is being done on presumption, not on data, not on evidence. And it's politically... It's just purely political.

Jodi: So if what we're seeing is politics in terms of the regulation of, I guess, the internet giants, it's not the regulation of journalism. But is there a risk that the regulation of the internet giants bleeds into the regulation of journalism?

Jeff: Absolutely, and that is the base of my fears. Let's not call it journalism, let's call it speech. And when government tries to regulate speech of any form, including journalism, I get hives. I get very nervous because that is not where government should be. Now I'm sounding, I know, extremely American right now and very much a believer in the first amendment because I am. I think that there's tremendous benefit to it. I think that we've got to understand the value of speech and there's never too much speech.

So when government comes in and says we're going to try to control things, it inevitably fails. In the history of this from the first princes who tried to stop the internet to poor Mr. John Stubbs whose hand was cut off for printing the works of Luther, to the Vatican's index of forbidden books, which was actually a bestseller list because it existed, to efforts to censor movies and such in the US, every effort to control speech in the end dies. Because what you're trying to control, again, is the public conversation and that is our first and primary right and a necessity in society to talk with each other.

So yes, when you go after the platforms and treat them like media, which I firmly believe they are not, and you try to put them in in that boat as happens in Europe then you end up affecting the speech of the public. Look to at Donald Trump trying to outlaw Tik Tok. Well, what he's outlawing is the press of the people. He's outlawing Sarah Cooper making fun of him, he's outlawing speech. And yes, I think that's terribly, terribly dangerous in a modern democracy.

Jodi: So do you have hope for journalism? Do you think it's going to make the change?

Jeff: Yes, because of my students. I would be quite the hypocrite if I were teaching journalism and I thought it were going to die, and I don't. In our social journalism program, our engagement journalism program, I am very heartened by what I see in their creativity. Now we tend to be a bit heretical, we ask questions like whether the journalist is an advocate. I ask questions about the forms of journalism and the goals of journalism, how we must utterly rethink it. I tell the students to learn what we teach them, and then to question everything we say and ask how we got here. And usually the answer is money. And to stand back to our primary *raison d'être*, which is to help improve the public conversation.

Because I have tenure and I can do obnoxious things like this, I redefined journalism. My definition of journalism now, my mission for journalism now is to convene communities into respectful, informed, and productive conversation. Yes, informed is

still in there. But respectful is necessary. We've got to learn how to make strangers less strange, how to learn to understand and empathize with each other, how to build bridges. And productive matters because we've got to try to improve society. And that's a different definition of journalism as nothing but a transmission wire for information.

We have a role in our communities. We have... In the United States we have damaged our communities. There was recently a paper that came out that showed the role that early publishers of newspapers in the US had as agents of the slave trade. We owe reparations to communities. We hurt too long. We can no longer stand back and say, oh no, no, we're objective and practically inhuman and above it all. We have to understand our impact. We have to understand the goals. We have to be able to have goals like damn it, people, wear your masks. And that means it's a different kind of journalism. And our students take this on. My colleague Carrie Brown and I marvel at how they take the gospel farther than we do, better than we do in short time. And they invent amazing things.

So yes, in the long run I have faith in journalism. In the short run, it's going to be tough.

Jodi: Jeff Jarvis, thank you so much for joining me to discuss risks to and arising from journalism. I appreciate it.

Jeff: Thank you so much Jodi.

Jodi: Thank you for joining me Nana aba, and welcome to @Risk.

Nana aba: Thank you for having me.

Jodi: So just to dive right in, it's Carleton University's 75th anniversary and the theme that they've chosen for their online event is journalism in the time of crisis. Why is journalism in such a crisis in your view?

Nana aba: Journalism has been in a crisis for a long time, but we're just seeing why in this moment. A lot of people are more aware of the... I guess the toxicity of white supremacy and what it means or what it can do. And right now the crisis really has to do with the idea of objectivity. Because the question is whose objectivity are we talking about? And for many of us in journalism, getting into journalism, at least for people of color. I'll speak from my point of view because that's all I can speak from, is that you very quickly get the idea of who the audience is and who the reader is and usually that person is white. Unless there is something else really specific that we're talking about, I don't know, like Ramadan or Caribana. Do you know what I'm saying?

Jodi: I do, I do.

Nana aba: And so now some of what I'm saying might seem oversimplified, but these are the thoughts that are running through my head. These are the conversations that that a lot of us are having with each other. Just for example, the idea that some people

have been told to think of when you're trying to do a national story, "Think of Suzie in Saskatchewan." And who is Suzie in Saskatchewan? Suzie in Saskatchewan is a white woman and likely is maybe middle to upper class, right, she's got an education, she's straight.

There are there are a lot of assumptions of who the reader is. And I think right now the crisis is, well, we have to rethink who our stories are for and, not only that, who's telling the stories. We've got to look at our newsrooms and try and change what it feels like in the atmosphere.

I think a lot of people will say look, we do have a number of people of color in our newsrooms. They're here and they have been here for me for many years. But now the conversation is changing to okay, when you suggest a story from a certain perspective, I'm just gonna hold off from thinking that that's not a story for example. I'm going to hold off on thinking that your perspective is biased. I'm going to open my mind to the idea that there's a whole group of people who just don't think like me, and it is an active, active way of approaching journalism. It's not to say that people haven't been doing that now or approaching journalism actively but it's from a different lens.

Jodi: So and on this topic of object of objectivity, Pacinthe Mattar has a piece in The Walrus on Canadian media's racism problem. And the question I asked myself was how embedded is this concept of objectivity? How integrated into journalism is it? And so what happens when you pull on that thread? If there's success in pulling on that thread, of trying to get at what you were saying getting beyond Suzie in Saskatchewan, how will we know that's happening? What will look different?

Nana aba: I don't know that I can answer the question of what will look different but I can try. So your question of how attached is the idea of objectivity to journalism, I mean it's baked in. It's baked. I mean that is, I mean, the central tenet of journalism is to tell the truth objectively.

And I think a lot of journalists will say even before we started having these conversations that objectivity is like, come on, you're a human being. You can't be completely objective, right? But some of these same journalists when you talk to them about objectivity or maybe looking at objectivity through a more inclusive lens, they're challenged. They're challenged to see that thinking about, talking about race isn't a biased perspective. This is not everyone, I'll say that again. But some people are challenged in thinking that when you talk about race that it's not political. But we have to challenge that.

So what will happen, I think, is I don't know, some type of unraveling. It might make things even more... It might be more divisive. Some people may think you can't apply race to this, or I don't know. I actually don't know. But I do think that we could be at a wonderful turning point for journalism if we are really to do this. I mean can you imagine? I mean...

Jodi: It's uncharted territory, right?

Nana aba: It's completely uncharted territory. So it might be that, if you want to talk about Pacinthe's article, when she was in the streets talking to young black men in the US, it would mean that she would just say to somebody, I talked to these two men and their names are x and y. And not, well, are you sure that those are their names? Have you verified?

Those of us who have to come up against these kinds of comments know is that a lot of us always say to each other, I mean would you say that if we were talking about something else and it had nothing to do with race? Like if it was just a streeter and somebody said that somebody told you about an experience, would you say to them like did you verify that with the police?

Jodi: Well on the subject of verification of police events, I have to say I actually didn't know that police versions of events don't require the same level of verification as information received from other sources. Like to me that seemed like a not only important vital difference to demand that police version of events also have a second source of verification. But it also is like really practical, right? Trying to address change within journalism, some of it is very complicated. But that's a really particular example of something that's very executable.

Nana aba: I think what this all speaks to is that we have to really take a look at the things that we take for granted. We have to look at our regular practices, our ways of doing them, and now apply a few key questions to them. Something like why do we accept this? Is it still acceptable? How can we change this so that marginalized communities are not left out of this process? And those are big questions, those are big questions.

But what I've learned this year is that if we want to change something in society, we're really capable. I mean that's something that you've been hearing about COVID-19, is that if you want to change the way that you do something, it's possible. The governments can change things. And I want to say that these tough questions are required of me as well. Just because I'm a black woman, just because I'm a person who comes from one underrepresented or misrepresented or marginalized community doesn't mean that I too don't have to apply this kind of thinking to myself, and I'll give you an example.

So once I was hosting my show and I was in the middle of a conversation with two gay men. And they were on the show because of their podcast, they had done really well and they're from Toronto. And one of them made a comment saying that gay men's brains are much like those who have experienced trauma. And my answer to that was how do you know that? And I do not... I regret how I answered. And the reason why I regret how I answered is because I immediately told both my guest and the listener

that I don't trust him. I told my guest and the listener that I don't think that this gay man knows what he's saying about gay men. I mean how ridiculous is that? That's not fair.

So I think what I can do better in moments like that is to suspend my first reaction. And I mean it would have been really easy to just say tell me more. Right? It would have been very easy for me to say, I didn't know that. That's interesting. Can you tell me like what exactly is the similarities?

And I had an intense conversation with someone at work about this topic because I was trying to explain that all I want, and any of us really, I think what we can do better is to allow there to be just a switch in the atmosphere when we're met with something that doesn't sound like an experience that we know about.

I mean how dare I ask how do you know? This is a gay man, and he's talking about other gay men's brains. I don't think that he's done this work? Come on, that's not fair. That wasn't fair to him, and I will sit with that. In fact I'm thinking maybe I should send him an email. I mean I think the point really is it's not about apologizing. Really, the point is, and this is something that I say to other people who want to apologize to me, the point is about how you're going to go forward. How are you going to change yourself now? And how I'm going to change myself is I will just say tell me more, because that's all I want to know, right, I just want to know more.

Jodi: I sometimes worry... You started off your comments talking about how what a powerful moment for change and how catalytic in many respects it's been. But at the same time we're all being told for the sake of health and safety to stay inside your bubble. I often think about that I'm like wow, stay inside your bubble. That's, and I mean I get it, you want to limit chains of transmission. But it's also a time to just burst our bubbles, right?

Nana aba: Our social bubbles you mean?

Jodi: Yeah, invite others in. And I mean, and there's safe ways to invite others in.

Nana aba: There's safe ways to do that. If you're listening right now and you want to change your bubble, your social bubble, start following people who don't look like you on social media. Change what your Twitter list looks like. And if you want you can start with the journalists, start with journalists of color. Look at what they're saying. That's what I did when I started thinking about perspectives from Indigenous people. I started following certain people.

Jodi: Start by listening.

Nana aba: Start, and yes exactly. You listen. You don't have to engage, and maybe right now as you start is not the time to engage. It's about you just watching, reading, that kind of stuff.

Jodi: Okay, let's talk about the journalism workplace. Tell us about your research.

Nana aba: What I'm interested in is the experience of leaders of color in Canadian media. And the reason why I'm curious is because, I mean personally leadership is something that I've been just sort of playing with in terms of the idea from my own career. I don't know what that means. Right now I'm a host, and a lot of people will tell you that a host does have some leadership baked into the position.

But I've just been looking around. The thing that I was always asking is like, are they okay? Like are they all right? Because I know for me, my experience has been fine for the most part. That's the truth, I've been really supported in my career. And so one of my questions is just like when they go to boardrooms or meetings where they want to voice their opinions, are they heard? If a leader of color wants to do something or initiate a project that privileges the voices of marginalized people or even a specific set of marginalized people, is it a difficult sell? I don't know.

And I mean I was sort of writing about these thoughts before, and I was thinking like I know for myself there are things that I have to endure as a black woman. Does that just go away? Ha ha, of course it doesn't go away. But like does it become exacerbated?

To add the goal of trying to stem systemic racism or prevent it or any of those things as a person of color onto your job as leader I suspect is very burdensome. And the reason why I suspect it is because even as just a person working in the newsroom or a person who's not a leader in journalism, it's burdensome. Right?

Like the thing that I struggle with, and I don't think that I've actually done that good a job representing black people in my job. I've tried to do my best, but I even found that there was a time when if I had a black guest, I would get kind of fumbly and weird because I didn't know. This is going to be pretty nuanced but I'm going to try to explain my struggle.

I would be met with a black guest and because I wanted, to be perfectly honest, because I would want to kind of give them space and serve them as a fellow black person, I would wonder if I was like doing the job right, being too hard. I wanted to make sure that I serve them well in the questions. Like if the black community was listening, I would try and bring questions that would be coming from my perspective. Like I would actively try to think don't think of Susie in Milton or whatever. Like try to think of somebody who was maybe either in this person's family or like another person. Like what would a black person ask? And hello, I'm a black person. So I go inside myself and I go so what would I want to know, you know what I mean?

And like what that tells you, or what that tells me, is that for a long time I've not been coming from the perspective as a black person. I've been putting on this other thing. And when I realized that this year, it really screwed me up. It really screwed me up, because I thought oh my god, what have I been doing?

Jodi: Wow, that's profound.

Nana aba: It's weird is what it is. And so it makes me understand why some people, they just leave. Right? They just leave the industry, because it's too much. Because sometimes when they try to go from their perspective they're being screened for activism.

Jodi: Right. Desmond Cole comes to mind right and the way he shared his journey, but I'm sure there's many others.

Nana aba: There are many other examples. Like you're being asked if you're an activist, why? Because you brought three stories about your community? That's not cool, right?

So I think so to answer the question about leadership now just to get back to that, my question is if I'm to consider leadership, I've not seen a black woman leading a newsroom. I know that it happens. I know that it will happen more, but I have not experienced it so I don't know what it looks like.

If I do decide to take on a leadership role, will I be supported? I do think now that more ears are open and many more people are really trying, and I commend anyone who's really trying to take a look at themselves and how they've been doing their work and how they can better support their colleagues.

But ultimately what I want to know is if the promise of inclusion and diversity in the real way that we're talking about, if the promise is fulfilled you're going to get a legion of people of color who are being promoted into higher positions, into more powerful positions. Will they be supported? And if they are supported, how far does that go, right?

And I also want to say that not everyone who's a leader of color who's going to get a new job is necessarily going to be waving the flag of inclusion. Some of them will just want to do their damn job. Right? That they'll just want to do their job how they have been doing it or the way that they think that they should. And yes, they will be thinking about inclusion in their own way.

But I want to say that that's allowed too. And also, I'm curious about how they will be engaged with by their direct reports who are both white and not white. So now if I'm a leader and I get this job, is everyone under me going to be okay with me being there? And if they are, that's great. And then is anyone who's under me who's also, for example, who's also for example a black woman, how am I gonna engage with her?

Am I going to be worried about other people looking at us when we do engage with each other? Am I going to be expected to give her special treatment? Will I give her a special treatment without knowing it? Is that bad? And what is the special treatment precisely, is it just treating her like everybody else? And that's going to be seen... You know what I'm saying?

Like I have so many questions about that, and I'm also ready to hear that when a leader of color gets a higher position that they just get a higher position and they get more money and they do a great job and then that's it. You know what I mean? Because there have been many. There are many now, they've been doing their jobs. I'm very curious about their experiences. I don't think that the racism ends, I don't think that it stops when you get a higher position. I just think that it probably just looks different. I don't know.

Jodi: I don't know. We look forward to your research.

Nana aba: Yeah, me too.

Jodi: You are involved in Media Girlfriends. What role does Media Girlfriends have in helping achieve positive change within journalism today?

Nana aba: I mean when I started Media Girlfriends, I did not think that that was the goal. The reason why I started Media Girlfriends was because at the time I wanted an opportunity to interview and so I thought I would just give it to myself. And so what I did was I kick-started my own professional development by, from my perspective, I would just interview a lot of my girlfriends who work in media and they would tell me if I sucked. And no one has, so I always like to say that that means I'm perfect.

But I mean in terms of it making any change in journalism, I don't know how much we've changed journalism because it's just a... We're a small group of people who really care about supporting each other no matter what in our professional endeavors and in life.

And one thing that I can say we're proud of is the scholarship that we launched. And the scholarship is for women and non-binary students who want to study media, tech, journalism, or communications. And the reason why we did that is because that's a time where people are considering getting into these fields and money can be a real problem barrier. I mean, like internships, even trying to get that first job. I mean we all know that it's hard to get these freelance gigs.

And so at least for the time of getting into these courses, we thought that it would be really great to support someone just getting into the field. So from our perspective that's one small thing we're doing.

I have to say just personally as we talk about structural change, I've been wondering how Media Girlfriends can make real change. And I don't know what the answer is right now. But I would love us to continue the scholarship. Right now we're doing a scholarship drive, by the way, so if anybody wants to help you can do that.

But what can I do, I've been thinking, what can I do to actually make structural change? And that's a big question. I mean that's something that the big media companies are also trying to do. So that's where I'm at.

Jodi: Well, what I love about the scholarship is that across all big challenges, so I'll use climate change as an example. A lot of people have hope, or at least part of the foundation of their hope is built on generational change. So in that sense a scholarship is a very smart and very strategic way at going about supporting change without directing it, which I also think is important.

Nana aba: Hope is a nice word. What comes to mind for me is faith. Like I have faith that things will change. As crappy as things have been, as much as I've cried in the last few months about the state of our industry and how I've experienced things, I still have faith that things can change. I don't know why. Maybe because I keep getting real beautiful glimpses of what that change is and what it looks like. But I don't know, I just think that over time things have been... They get better and I just I think maybe I have to have faith. I've got to have faith that things are going to change, and I know that I I'm part of it.

[Music]