

Religion and Politics in an Age of Fracture: Emma Green and John Inazu

(The third of three conversations in this series)

April 3, 2018

Emerson Auditorium in Knight Hall at Washington University in St. Louis

Eboo Patel

Good evening, friends. My name is Eboo Patel, I'm a visiting professor at Washington University this term teaching a course with my friend and colleague John Inazu called "Religion, Diversity, and the University" as part of the Danforth Center for Religion and Politics this is the third and last of our public presentations. I have to say this is the kind of course I dearly wish I could've taken as an undergrad, which is a course of seven extremely bright and inquisitive students basically hanging around with John and I and talking about big ideas and probing them every which way, and we get to bring in a dream list of guests and fellow intellectuals and scholars, and we have one of them with us tonight, and that's Emma Green. She's a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, and I have to say, if I could only take a handful of writers on religion work with me to a desert island, Emma Green would definitely be on that short list. I'm dead serious about that. You'd be hard pressed to find a more fair, inquiring, "how does this work in a generous way" writer on religion, politics, and policy working in America today. I appreciate her work a ton, and I appreciate her even more in the way that she helped lead our seminar this afternoon. Emma Green will be joining my friend and colleague John Inazu on stage. John is the Sally Danforth Chair in the Danforth Center of Religion and Politics, he's also a professor at the Law School, author of the terrific book "Confident Pluralism," which, at the various conferences and campus that I'm at, if someone doesn't tell me about it first, and it's probably happened at a half dozen places—*Hey man, have you read Confident Pluralism?*—I will be sure to tell them about it. So, I will accept some of the royalties from that, John, but know that your book has made an impact on the places I'm at, and I'm grateful for that.

John Inazu

Your thirty-dollar check is coming in the mail. *[Laughter]* Well, thanks to everyone for being here, and thanks to Emma, it's a pleasure, and I'll just echo—I'm not going to do the "desert island" thing—but I do appreciate your approach to what you write and how you write, so thanks for being with us. I thought we'd start with just a few comments about you and your background and then get into some questions about the substance of what you write, but maybe for those of us here you could get tell us a little about how you got into doing what you're doing.

Emma Green

Sure, so, I have been at *The Atlantic* now for six years and have been writing about religion for almost that entire time. The first article that I ever published with *The Atlantic* was about an order of nuns who, on some of the secret background, had helped to create this document the Catholic Church about its first statement on anti-Semitism. This is of course extremely nerdy, and I was very lucky that I had an editor who was willing to go with me down that path to write about this very niche and interesting and, I thought, really fascinating topic. Since then I've really tried to develop religion into a beat, and now that's my full-time job. I write about politics, policy, and religion, in part because I think religion is an underappreciated door into understanding so many issues, not only on a policy level but on a cultural level in America and of course around the world. So, I have really enjoyed being able to have that as my focus, or sort

of my lens and door into understanding the political world, because it's also underserved in the general media market, and there's a lot of hunger out there, I think, for religious coverage, and I've enjoyed getting to hear the feedback from audiences who are interested in reading about religious life.

Inazu

This is a thing that Eboo and I have often touched upon in our courses as well, that for all its good and proper focus on diversity, elite higher-Ed. often neglects religious diversity and loses some of those perspectives. I'm curious, given that we have some of the same concerns or questions in the media, how has The Atlantic managed to double-down its focus on religion even when other outlets have seemed under financial or other pressure to move in a different direction.

So the dirty little secret of religion reporting is that there's actually a great economic case for it, and this is one of the reasons I have a hard time understanding why it is that national newsrooms have largely cut their religion beats, which is the case; many religion reporters are the first to go in rounds of layoffs, and as we've seen newspapers shrinking, this is an area of coverage that's really suffered. But the truth and fact of it is that there is a huge hunger for religion coverage; nothing to do with me, I think just generally the topic, these stories do quite well. We get a lot of feedback, comments, people writing in, a lot of people who will send emails with tips asking us to look into certain stories. So I think there's a really great economic case for it and that ultimately has laid the foundation. I think ultimately, though, I'm very fortunate to be in a newsroom where the senior leadership, editors I've worked with directly as my bosses, but also people who are overseeing the editorial direction of the magazine, see religion as something that is serious, that is valuable to consider as a topic of media and culture and politics, and who believe that ultimately religion is one of these engine drivers of this world that we see around us that is so complex. And that is not a common opinion and not a common outlook among, especially, East Coast elite newsrooms. So I feel very fortunate that I work in that kind of environment.

Inazu

And can you tell us a little about how you conceive of a story idea. How do you know when something's likely going to be a story, how do you realize when something's going to be a bad story, and what's the thought process that takes you from idea to story.

Green

I don't know if I could be so direct about what's going to be a bad story, hopefully I catch that before I actually am writing it. The stories that I have most loved working on that hopefully also are always the stories that get readers and reader interest are trying to understand how religious communities and individuals are conceiving of themselves and talking about themselves—their internal tensions, their big questions about who they are, what direction they want to go, and then trying to authentically hear the kind of language they're using to describe those internal conflicts and tensions, and translate that for someone who doesn't exist within that world. I think so often we have religion coverage either as a function of politics—so, seeing religious actors as only being political actors, that we're only writing about them because they'll vote one way or another and that's the only reason why we care—or, we see it as groups being pitted against one another, groups who have different denominational affiliations or creeds sort of fighting against each

other. But actually I think those inside stories of people trying to figure out who they are in the context of their own community and their own internal family disagreements often make for the best stories.

Inazu:

That brings me to a related question, which is, how do you balance the tension of maintaining the critical distance of a journalist with this desire for empathy, and do you have examples of when you've overshot in one direction or the other? How do you self-correct when you find yourself getting close to Stockholm Syndrome or getting close to outsider critic, and trying to find that middle ground between judgment and empathy?

Greene:

This is probably the hardest thing to do and to master as a journalist and a reporter, and I certainly don't think I have mastered it. This thin line that you're describing, which is the balance between being deeply empathetic and to understand people on their own terms and their own language but also being a journalist who is willing to ask hard questions, to be critical, and in some cases be quite hard on people is very difficult. It's not formulaic and I think it's a line that every story has to be found of its own right. But my leading theory would maybe be two things. The first is that there's a very different way to approach people who are in positions of power, or elected public office, and I think in those situations often the job of the journalist or the religious journalist or whatever sort of journalist, is to be sort of nasty—not nasty, we're not nasty, no matter what people say about journalists, we're not that nasty of a crowd—but the job is to be very hardened, to ask the hard questions, to be very sort of gun-ho. I think it's very different reporting on just regular people who aren't public figures and asking them talk about these very personal things. Like their religious beliefs, sometimes in the case of conflicts, family fracture, leaving a church, having to deal with some sort of very painful internal conflict. In those cases, I think hard questions are appropriate, but empathy can be a really wonderful tool there for helping people open up but also understanding why people have made the decisions they've made, so I care a lot about trying to be empathetic towards my subjects.

Inazu

You know, your comment about public figures made me think of in the law, defamation law distinguishes between public figures and private figures and a couple other layers and categories. But in today's social media world, that line is starting to blur. So, as you were talking, I was thinking about the person who is publicly on social media and becomes a story because of that. Is that person more of a public figure or do you maintain the distance between the person formally in an elected position or a person who just has become famous overnight.

Green

The example that came to mind when you said that are the people who have gone through public shaming, perhaps. What kind of people come to mind when you say overnight public figures?

Inazu:

Shaming, a tweet that's gone viral, whether good or bad. A person who yesterday was known by his or her neighbors and today is on the front page of most newspapers or websites.

Greene:

I always think that it's incumbent upon a journalist to step inside the shoes of anyone that we're interviewing, and think about what it feels like to be talked to or reached out to by the journalist. The reason I say that is even if you're a viral tweeter, if you said something that happened to be particularly funny about a Donald Trump tweet and then it got retweeted 43,000 times or something and now you have journalists knocking down your door, you don't necessarily have the savvy that a public official does about how to deal with journalists or understand what that interaction means, and you also don't have the same kind of accountability to a public, so just because you become Twitter famous doesn't mean that you owe anybody anything. I think journalists largely exist to first hold people accountable who do have accountability--that's public officials, public figures--but then it's also to tell stories that help to create understanding. And, in my view, people who are these accidental finders of fame--especially people who have gone through big public shamings, which is unfortunately often the reason why we start to hear about random individuals overnight--are not necessarily accountable to anyone, and we should treat them as people to be empathized with or to be treated generously.

Inazu

That's a great point about professionalism, it reminds me one of the things I try to tell my law students, is that you might be preparing for your hundredth trial but it might be the first time this person is testifying, so that divide about experience where you have to maintain a kind of professional compassion in what you do with the human being on the other side of the equation. How about your most surprising story, the one that you started and it went into a different direction or you learned nuance you didn't expect or you were just kind of thrown off completely.

Greene

So, this is probably my favorite story that I've ever written, although I have a few. Several years ago--and I could not tell you why--I wanted to write a story about Mennonites. I actually don't remember what the original trigger was--somebody had said something vaguely interesting, so I had decided to go to a church to talk to some people to see if I could find a story. That's the way it often starts out; you're in this fuzzy cloud and you're trying to figure out if you can find something clear in the fuzzy cloud. So I visited a church in Hyateschool Maryland right outside of DC that I thought could just be an interesting starting place, and I found out when I arrived that they had been in the middle of a ten-year long process with their conference to consider whether or not they would be kicked out because they had first allowed LGBT people to be part of their membership rolls and later hired an assistant pastor who was herself gay and also had performed a same-sex marriage. All of these were things that defied the agreements or the tenants of Mennonites USA, which is sort of the big umbrella organization that they were a part of, and this was significant because Mennonites being sort of a low church tradition are very independent but they also care a lot about being in fellowship. So, the conference that they were a part of, the Allegheny Conference, was a group of people, essentially groups of churches from all around Pennsylvania and DC, that they had been in community with--meeting multiple times a year, trading notes, trading advice, friendships--for decades and decades and decades. And it turned out that just a few weeks later after I just showed up on their doorstep they were going to be traveling to the annual meeting of the Allegheny Mennonite Conference to find out if they would be kicked out after this ten-year-long disciplinary process after their decisions to

move towards LGBT openness. So, I said, "Hey, can I tag along?" didn't know that this is what I would be getting into, but thought it might be interesting. So I drove out to rural Pennsylvania, to meet with them very early in the morning, they had a nice potluck breakfast in the basement, which is a very Mennonite thing, and they were all in this little rural church, and the day as it wore on, two things became very clear. The first is that Mennonites are very dedicated to debate and discourse, they are very rule-oriented, all of this was in Roberts Rules of Order, they were debating, they were discussing people were standing up making pro and con speeches against this church, for this church, these people who were their friends and neighbors in the church, and something that really moved me was that *song* was also a huge part of how they were dealing with this moment of crisis and tension in their conference. At various points during of the day, after they had particularly contentious moments of debate, they would sing together. And Mennonites, like many low church traditions, have beautiful four-part harmonies, so as the day wore on I started recording the songs on my phone, these four-part harmonies that they would break into at various points. So finally the vote comes, they all had these ballots somebody had printed out on a piece of Microsoft word paper, to say in or out for this church, and they come back and they're counting them and they're talking about quilting or pies or whatever as they're waiting for the votes to be counted, and it comes back, and it was two or three votes, it was some percentage of a margin, very very few, had voted to let them stay. And immediately when that happened five or six churches stood up in the back and walked to the front and announced that they were leaving the conference because they disagreed with the decision. And this stuck with me, you can tell I'm going on and on about this story because I love it so much, but it stuck with me because what they then did was that they sung together, and it was this moment of seeing really how community and communal bond is such an important part of working through these contentious political issues that often are quite divisive for religious communities. So the final story that I wrote was outlining this process they had gone through and the context but in the story was embedded the recordings of the different songs, so the different sections and tension points for what the fate of the church was going to be. There were songs that sort of mirrored the progress and the decision-making process that led to the decision process that let this one church stay but ultimately led to other churches leaving.

Inazu

You know, as you were telling that story, and as I was thinking about some of your other writing, it's true of religion in general, but so many of the conflicts are inter-religious conflicts. We were talking at dinner about the variety of Muslim voices in America today, and you've had articles on tension within Liberty University or inter-Catholic debates at Notre Dame or recently the book "Still Evangelical" about evangelical debates. So how do you as a journalist come to what is often a normatively fraught debate inter religious, you might have your own priors about a certain position, and how do you balance your own views of a story with the difficult work of trying to get on the inside of a tradition, what's really an internal argument within the tradition.

Green

So I would say that there are two layers of complexity to that question. The first is being able to find the stories of inside conflicts, which is often quite hard because when you're not a person who lives inside of a very particular world, it's very hard to hear about and know about and understand the questions that might internally animate division. There are some that are common across a lot of traditions; for example, the story I told about the Mennonites and LGBT issues is

a storyline that we see across Christian denominations in the US, and in some way or another all groups pretty much in one way or another are struggling with this question in different ways. But there are others that are very intricate and wouldn't be guessable from the outside. So the first challenge is finding a way in and having good sources who can help to guide into those communities. And then the second question you asked about being able to keep an authorial distance around particularly charged subjects--and this can be LGBT, it could be abortion, it could be things around gender or identity, all things I write about a lot--I think for me the most important value in my writing is not asserting a viewpoint or furthering a particular agenda, it's trying to first of all be accurate, in that any time there's one viewpoint there's almost always an opposing viewpoint, trying to find those and accurately convey both of them, and then also to create understanding, so to, as accurately as possible, using the language that groups use to talk about themselves, but also having that critical outside distance, being able to convey why people are worried about a certain thing or why they are invested in a particular position. And like I said earlier in the conversation, this is one of those tasks that is the slow boring of hard boards over a lifetime, and certainly I haven't mastered it.

Inazu

One of the other areas you write about occasionally or frequently is pluralism, which is near and dear to my heart, and I remember reading that you wrote at one point, or maybe an editor said, "Emma, pluralism is a word that puts people to sleep." And thankfully, as someone with a book for whom pluralism is half the title, I'm glad that you continued to write about it but tell me about some of the challenges you have in reducing this word and this concept to a digestible format, and what are some of the impediments you find with audiences who try to wrestle with this concept.

Green

It's funny that you remember that, because that was actually a tweet that I put out, and it was a little passive aggressive, my editor, who I adore, for the record, and who is also deeply religious, for the record, so he gets me and he gets this and he gets pluralism, he made me edit pluralism out of a headline because he thought it was awful, so I was sort of getting out some steam, and the funny thing about that is that I tweeted out, "My editor says pluralism puts people to sleep," and I immediately got back this chorus of people--sort of like you, John--who clearly have a dog in this fight, who said, "No, pluralism is a great word, you go, Emma, keep fighting the good fight."

Inazu

Could you say that again?

Green

Which I thought was quite funny. I'm not sure that you're representative of the whole, necessarily--

Inazu

That's probably true.

Green

--but I did think that it was funny that there are pluralism defenders out there just waiting to be seen. In terms of the translation, which is kind of the question that you're asking, how to translate these concepts, again this is one of those tasks of a lifetime to get good at it, but in general I like to think about my work as translation work, which is even if there's some technical concept in Judaism or some very layered theological concept out of Christianity that I'm having to use as context in an article, or some legal doctrine, my goal is to make the big questions that often sit at the core of these great stories accessible to people. So giving them enough information to have a nuanced understanding of things like pluralism, of complicated legal doctrines in so far as I understand them, but also to understand that there's something deeper here, that's not just about the technicality, that's not just needing to have a PhD or a JD to understand this latest Supreme Court case, really there are ideas here that are about people and humans and communities, so making these things accessible is always my goal, and generally staying away from jargon and trying to write around in order to maintain that balance between accessibility and nuance, that's my goal. But again, it's one of those asymptotic goals that you can always strive for but never quite reach perfectly.

Inazu

I'll let you answer this in a general form so as not to point any fingers, but are there stories that the media is either, in the religion space, either covering poorly or not covering that you would like to see covered, and how would you like to see the path from A to Z to get those covered correctly or properly?

Green

I'm happy to point figures. I won't call out news outlets, because that's bad form, but I actually think about this a lot, largely in a reflective mode, which is the gaps in my own coverage, and how that's in conversation with the larger media landscape. So I would say a couple things. I mentioned this earlier, but I think there was an awakening that happened on November 10, 2016, when newsrooms suddenly realized that religion matters, and the results of that were sort of a soul-searching process among a number of newsrooms about hiring religion reporters to understand this mysterious creature, the evangelical, who had some role in getting Trump elected. The result of that has been more religion coverage, but often it has exclusively treated religion as a function of politics. This is a big hobby horse of mine; I'm technically a domestic politics reporter for *The Atlantic*, I'm on our domestic team, so I'm not going to trash politics, I think politics are extremely important, but I think it's a huge mistake to only care about religion in so far as it's correlated with certain voting behaviors or certain ideological commitments. I think religion matters unto itself. So that would be the first thing; covering religious communities as themselves and not trying to just see religion as a driving force or a motivating force for voting. The second thing is I think in general the experiences of POC are not served well. And I say that less because of some political correctness or whatever it is, but I think there are a number of structural factors that make it more difficult to cover religious communities of color, and also biases in our conception of what religious communities are, that perhaps blind people to stories that should be being told. So, for example, one thing I think a lot about in my coverage is covering the rise of Pentecostalism, which is a version, a neighborhood of Christianity that emphasis on gifts from the Holy Spirit, often there will be experiences like speaking tongues or having sort of charismatic worship experiences. That's very broad and I know I'm in a room full of religious studies scholars so if somebody wants to grade me later then you can feel free to give

me notes on my general definitions. One thing I think about a lot is the rise of global Pentecostalism, which is huge, it's the demographic future of Christianity, and in America in particular Pentecostals often tend to be—although there are many middle class Pentecostals—they often tend to be people of color, a lot of recent immigrants, especially from Latin America, black Pentecostal churches are huge in understanding the black church—and often these churches are hard to access, because they tend to not be elite, they might be in storefronts, they don't have people who are out speaking on CNN representing the Pentecostal church, they don't tend to have centralized structures where you can call up the head of such and such denomination—that's not always true, but most of the time it's true. So that is all a problem for someone like me, who has to find a person to go out and shove a recorder in their face and get a quote and write it down and record their perspective. So that's an example as well of something that I hope to improve in my own writing, but in general speaks to some of the defaults in religion coverage—not finding those communities that are hard to find, and that tends to be communities of color, or communities that have less class, or less elite affiliation.

Inazu

While we're on the subject of the media, which I took us to, conveniently, I heard Nick Kristoff about a year ago say that the structure, the business model, of journalism and media is in dire straights. And his point was, if you thought the last ten years were partisan and non-subtle and encouraging the worst in us, just hold on for the next ten, because the market is driving certain news shops in certain directions, and combined with the social media phenomenon, there's a fracturing of information and authority. So I wonder what your views are on the media as an industry, and where you see either signs of optimism or signs of particular despair.

Green

So in general, I agree with that diagnosis, as a journalist but also as a citizen, this is one of the things that I find to be scariest about this political time. The separation of facts, a sort of epistemic cleaving, to use my fancy academic language here at WashU, this idea that we as a democratic community, smaller communities, local communities of friends and neighbors, don't share facts anymore, we can't agree on what's real. I think that largely has to do first with the decline of the news industry, especially local and regional papers, which do that really hard shoe-leather on the ground reporting the facts of what's happening at a local and state and regional level, I think the second is the rise of an aggressively partisan media landscape, and I think this is true in very different ways, but I think this is true both on the right and the left, this rise in partisan affiliation or ideologically framed news outlets, I think is extremely damaging. Especially when people go exclusively to those sources for their only sources of news. And I think true, too, social media is huge, and we're having this big national debate right now, "Did the Russians infiltrate Facebook, how much fake news was circulating before the election?" And that's an important conversation, but it often obscures the really deep question here, which is when people are getting most of their information from these social networks that rely on these algorithms that we don't know much about to arbitrarily surface different kinds of information which may be very ideologically, may not even be factual at all, and these are the realities that people are inhabiting, there are effects in our democracy. There's disagreement about what's real and who candidates are, it makes it very hard for a journalist to do our job of keeping officials accountable, so I would say in so far as you're offering one analytic perspective, or one analysis of what the future is, I definitely agree. And, I am not your optimism girl, because I don't see a

lot of really strong rays of light. I do think that this has been a very important time sort of as a counterweight for the Washington Post, the New York Times, in certain ways national publications like the one I work for, the Atlantic, in that we've seen surged readership, we're seeing a lot of people really getting invested in the news, the WP and the NYT have been in a good old fashioned scoop war, which is great, that's a great sign for the media that that kind of reporting is coming out of this era. But it's scary, and I think about that a lot in terms of my job, because I'm sort of trying to work against that as a countercurrent but it's very difficult to have one publication and certainly one journalist being any kind of effect in this mass, mass, mass system of this sort of information collapse that we're experiencing.

Inazu

And to sort of double-down on the pessimism for a moment, the scariest article maybe I've read in a month or so are the deep fakes, the way videos and photographs are being altered in sophisticated ways where people won't be able to tell the differences, so for all the challenges we have with varying textual narratives about facts, once we get into competing and dueling video narratives that can't be neutrally arbitrated, are we heading even toward more of a divergence—I mean, the title of this video series is Religion and Politics in an Age of Fracture—so I'm wondering, are we headed in terms of our common discourse towards more and more fracture. Put on your optimism hat and tell me how we mitigate that.

Green

Wow, my optimism hat is in the closet with the mothballs and I'll have to go and get it. It's hard. I'm trying to think of something to upsell you on, and it's hard to tell you something. Here would be one thing I would say. I report about religion, and I spend a lot of time in churches and religious communities, and part of the reason that I do that is I believe that there is value in local communities and in fellowship of real human beings getting together in real spaces and getting to talk and break bread. And that's not even a creedal claim, I think people who don't believe in god can do this, I think all sorts of civic associations and voluntary associations which have so long in America been the backbone of how our democracy has functioned are also equally important. I believe that that kind of gathering is the antidote to all of this. That people still being willing to come together with neighbors, especially neighbors unlike them, and be in community together, is important. It's important for our politics, it's important for our culture, and that too is in its own separate kind of crisis. We see this with not only a decline of religious affiliation and participation, but also the unwinding of voluntary organizations, "bowling alone" to use the famous Robert Putnam cliché, but I see a little bit more hope in that, in that I think there is a really deeply seated human need, and in the DNA of America, a deep orientation towards this kind of gathering, and I hope that maybe there's sort of a give and take to be had here as we're having this period of remaking, and information, and the fast flow of politics and divisiveness, and whatever—that actually there is still kind of hope in the fact that everyone gets together at PTA to yell about something that they hate about what the fourth-grade teachers are doing this year in their curriculum. So that maybe is a ray of hope.

Inazu

I hope it's not just the PTA, but no—this talk about the importance of the face to face, and the neighbor and the local, made me think of Twitter, which is exactly not that. So how about our own social media practices as individuals and citizens. We've been talking about the structural

challenges of journalism and media, how about how we do this. Your PTA example struck me, because I was thinking about how when I played—I guess it was soccer, not very well, as a kid, but when I was doing youth sports, parents were on the sidelines talking to each other, and increasingly my son says, when I go to my own kids' events or something else, we're checking up on email, or we're on our phones, so even that Putnam-esque aspirational, "we're going to form friends on the sidelines," seems to be under some strain. So what do you think of our own social media practices and how we could think about them differently.

Green

I'm so tempted to reflect on my own personal social media practices, and I of course am just as much a part of the problem as anybody. We were talking earlier about being rats with dopamine, I think I was actually with you, Leigh, when we were talking about this feeling of disinformation and distraction, this age that we're in, we're all sort of rats on a treadmill getting these hits of energy and entertainment and just trying to find the next thing to pay attention to, and I certainly feel like that sometimes. I see, in my reporting, some cuts away from this. I don't know if it is some sort of cultural salve that is so general and totalizing that it will fix our addiction to smartphones, but, for example, I was in London this October, and I was surprised to see, on billboards and the sides of buses, advertisements for Shabbat, which is the Jewish observance of the sabbath. And I was thinking, *Hm, that's interesting*. Because the UK and London in particular has a sizable Jewish population, but it's not that big that they need to have bus advertisements. And I didn't know this, but the Jewish community in the UK has tried to institute—I think it's London-wide—one day a year, an institution of Shabbat, where everyone takes a mini-Shabbat or they do Shabbat-like practices. This is interesting for a million reasons, which I could get into but it probably is too nerdy and I would sound a little like a wind up doll reporter being excited about the commodification of Shabbat. But I think it's interesting because I've seen patterns like this in a lot of places. People really latching on to these very ancient forms of community that have to do with stepping away from technology, really getting together as a community, taking time to re-charge and re-center, taking time for spiritual connection. So perhaps the answer for you at your soccer game is to take some sort of Jewish framing, and offer it to everybody, and have everybody get off their phone for that soccer game. Probably not the answer for you at your soccer game, to be honest. But, I think there is potentially a backlash culture coming, we're in the middle of a backlash culture, and I think that could potentially help to provide some ballast, or at least temporary reprieves from our addictive life.

Inazu

Yeah, temporary would even be nice sometimes, I think. You've spent this current year in Israel, and you kindly flew back from Israel to be with us, but can you tell us about how your experience in Israel affects how you're viewing your primary role as a domestic politics reporter on US politics with an emphasis on US religion. But now having seen that and thought about that from afar how has that experience shaped your sense of things.

Green

Well, as my boss said to me as I was preparing to leave for Jerusalem, "I don't know if you've heard, but there's a little bit of religion in Israel." And I said, "Yes, I've heard that, I know it's a rumor." And that was the point, in that Israel is actually a fairly decent place for a religion reporter to spend a year. It's been pretty wild to see the way that religious life permeates every

aspect of Jerusalem, and just to have that as a lived experience, something that I know and think about all the time, but really to be inside of it in this intense form has been quite wonderful and I feel very lucky to have experienced that. But more than just that general context, I think Israel will be a great ballast for understanding the interactions between American groups, particularly American Jewish groups and American evangelical groups, with affairs in the Middle East, with affairs in Israel in particular, and to bring back from the other side of the ocean the perspective of organizational imprint and the pilgrims who come to Israel and the way that Israel looms large in American diaspora life, will be really powerful, I'm hoping. So I've certainly gotten a lot out of being there, it's a complicated and hard place to be, but it certainly has a lot of resonance for many people in this country, and I hope it will help to thicken my reporting and thinking about communities here.

Inazu

I'd love to bring you in on an argument—an ongoing dialogue—that Eboo and I have been having, and there's a right answer to this question, but I'll let you—

Green

Oh, it's a test! You're saying that it's a test.

Inazu

--it's a test of sorts. Eboo and I both write on questions of pluralism and religion, but I take it that in some ways Eboo has a greater degree of optimism—he doesn't have the microphone right now, so he can't come back at me.

Green

This is a little bit of an unfair fight.

Inazu

Absolutely, it's an unfair fight.

Green

It's a debate presented only by one side of the argument.

Inazu

Exactly, this is the lawyer thing to do. No, that's not at all what lawyers do. That pluralism as Eboo sometimes talks about it is in my view drawn from a frame of debates around religious pluralism that were asking questions a couple decades ago about how do Muslims and Jews and Christians get along and how do they find a common good in the midst of deep differences, and it's an incredibly hard and complex political question, but we now have a political space and a demographic space in this country where we've introduced not just the religious pluralism question but pluralism outside of the umbrella of religion—so, as we mentioned before, nonbelievers, or other demographics, the nuns or different versions of that, so given the expansion of that question of political pluralism, what's the big umbrella? What is the common good? This is a pretty big question. Is there a common good as a political matter? You can think of different religious traditions or nonreligious traditions naming a common good that is derived from a purpose or a narrative framework, but is there a broader narrative framework that can

hold all of us together, and is it coherent to talk about a common good within that narrative, or is there a different vocabulary that you would recommend.

Green

Wow, you're asking me to offer a coherent political theory of the common good in our age of fracture. Alright, I'll get out my old term paper paper and start writing here. I, because I am a politics reporter, am biased. For all of the big talk I was making about treating religion as itself and not just treating it as a function of politics, I'll go ahead and do that now and violate my own rule. I'm biased as a politics reporter to think in terms of our political community and what the whole project is here that we're trying to do in America, and I think all these questions of pluralism that you're alluding to having to do with emergent forms of identity and conflicts over whose rights battle with other people's rights, and those sorts of questions, I really think that has an umbrella of everyone being willing to participate in this project of debating with each other, and being willing to participate in local democracy, trying to work out disagreements and differences in town hall meetings and campaigning and writing articles and essays and having this big swirl of ideas. And ultimately, the way that you do that is being willing to both mutually recognize the dignity and the validity of other people who have different lives and experiences, and also to be willing to participate at all. And that's why I think what I just outlined can sometimes seem like a very hoity toity, Tocquevillian, in the air notion of what politics is. Because when we come down to it, the way that we function in the United States today doesn't look like that much at all. Many, many people have a hard time seeing the validity of claims of people who are not unlike them, particularly across ideological lines, but this is across so, so many other lines, and there's also a lot of rage and apathy and disengagement and a combination of all three. I think the Trump era is going to be interesting to see what kind of political yields that has. For example, the 2018 midterm season—typically midterms are low turnout, you get the old people and you get the real partisans who turn out—but there isn't usually a groundswell of political activism, for as much talk as the media gives it. I'm very curious to see whether Trump is going to have ignited a set of activist impulses in a much more broad-based way. We'll see whether that pans out. In general, I think there's a lot to be desired in our current state of politics and the notion of the common good, but I do think it's out there, and I think it's possible to bring it all under a mega-umbrella.

Inazu

You know, we were talking earlier today about how in some ways the university community is a microcosm or a reflection of this broader political community, and I'm wondering—you've done a fair amount of writing about particular university environments or inter-university tensions. Do you have a sense either about specific institutions or higher Ed. as an institution at large about how we're doing in terms of fostering civic ideals or negotiating across difference or accounting for religious pluralism. You could even speak to both more religious schools like Notre Dame or Liberty or other schools you've been on or campuses you've seen.

Green

That's really interesting. In class earlier today we were having this interesting conversation about the myth of the fascist teenager who's taking over the American campus, which is something you hear in the fever swamps of Fox News all the time. If you can't tell, I'm a little bit skeptical of that narrative, because I don't believe most eighteen year old Americans are anti-free speech

fascist, but it was interesting having an exchange with the students about ways they have seen things like this come up, in small ways, in one way or another, people feeling pushback against a broad range of viewpoints, and particularly more conservative viewpoints. That's interesting to me, and I offer that less as any sort of conclusion or conjecture, and more as just an open question. I often deal in questions, and that's sort of the cheat of being a journalist, I get to ask questions but I don't necessarily have to find answers, or don't have to provide answers. And it's an open question for me on secular campuses in particular what the formation of young people in this crucible of very difficult questions of identity and speech and how to deal with difference and all these speakers who come to campus and get booed—what's happening among this generation of college students is still very much an open question for me. I'm skeptical of the narratives that get packaged around it, but I do get the sense that it's important and what's happening is interesting. So that's sort of an open question, to dodge your question—

Inazu

Well done.

Green

I have a little more experience on religious campuses just because that's my beat and my train, and I've been able to report at a number of different schools, which is always really great, and I think this is equally a hard moment for campuses with a religious history and mission, although in a different way. For example, I wrote recently about Notre Dame, which has been struggling with its policy on contraception. It was part of many, many years of litigation against the Obama administration, which, long story short, had created in their view an insufficient cop-out for a requirement about providing contraception coverage, and they claimed it violated their religious freedom. The Trump administration comes around, they sort of wipe out what the Obama administration had done, and Notre Dame surprisingly chose that moment to say, "Well, we spent a lot of time objecting to this contraception rule, but actually, we're going to implement, of our own volition, a kind of liberal contraception policy." This is of course very shorthand, and a lot of people would disagree that it's a liberal contraception policy. The latest piece of news was that Notre Dame has decided to provide itself what they call "simple contraception," which is basically oral contraception, in its campus health plans, which is huge, because the Catholic Church teaches that contraception is against Catholic teaching, and this was very controversial in the Catholic World. So, I'm rehearsing that story which is complicated--and which I just want to caveat again, that was a very simple version of what was quite complicated--but the reason that is relevant to your question is that Notre Dame--father Jenkins, who's the president of Notre Dame--they were struggling immensely with these competing demands on their identity as a university. The first is to be an authentically Catholic institution, that has creedal commitments, that they believe the teachings of the church, the head of the university is a clergyman so he has commitments in his vows to uphold certain teachings of the church. But the other is that Notre Dame is a huge university that has some 17,000 people on its health insurance plan, and this requires Notre Dame to grapple with pluralism, to say, "There are people in our community who aren't Catholic, who maybe do have health care needs that wouldn't be met under our plan otherwise, and wouldn't be able to get this healthcare without the help of our plan. So those kind of struggles I have seen reproduced in a lot of religious campuses across the country, and I think it's not new, in the sense that religious universities have always had to grapple with their relationship to promptings from the secular world or the outside world, but I think now really is a

pretty extreme crucible time for a lot of them because many are trying to figure out what kind of university they want to be; Notre Dame chose to be a major research university, other smaller Christian colleges have a very different identity question ahead, and they've come into contact, either through their students or through federal regulation, with these demands from the outside world that they really have to figure out how to deal with. So it's a complicated moment, I think, for identity on religious campuses, both in terms of the student body but also more broadly the institutions themselves.

Inazu

I agree on the complexity for sure. I've got one more question for you and then we'll turn it over to your audience questions. My last question, just to shift a bit, is your role as a public writer and the way in that that necessarily invokes criticism. I think about this too; so how do you manage criticism as a person and as a writer. One particular puzzle I'm thinking of is that in some ways you have to kind of be immune to a lot of it, because a lot of it is noise that is not helpful, and if you spent your life reading unhelpful critiques it would just make life a lot less interesting. But in the midst of that, there are critiques that will come your way that you will want to receive. So how do you filter the good critiques from the bad ones? Maybe this is a long winded way of saying, do you have any coping mechanisms for how to deal with critiques? Asking for a friend. What happens when you write something and you're trying to receive feedback?

Green

I'm really not trying to be performative when I say, people who take the time to write thoughtful emails or even give me a call if I really know them well, but to write a thoughtful note offering constructive feedback about my work is the most valuable thing I can get. I'm really not trying to say that because it's obligatory to say; it is very, very hard to find constructive feedback in particular from people who are inside of communities themselves, and I have a responsibility to always try to hear people better, and do my job better, to write more clearly, to get more perspectives, to be more accurate, and so when people help me to do that in a constructive way, it is invaluable to me, and I love that. So feel free to shoot me an email if you hate one of my articles, and we'll talk it out.

I would say that Twitter is a little bit of a different beast. Sometimes there are constructive comments that do come back on Twitter; more than once my butt has been saved after I've published something and then somebody noticed something that was a little error, and I'll fix it, and that's so much better because the only thing I hate worse than making an error is having an uncorrected error in my pieces. And I really do hate making errors. But Twitter is essentially a trade publication for journalists; journalists talk to each other all day every day on twitter, but it's also an outside-world-piles-on-space, too, people who hate journalists because they don't really see them as people and will just type really nasty things about their articles, there can be pile-ons of really nasty stuff--in terms of just nasty, derogatory language that comes back--and it is hard to not look at it. I would say I have not developed the kind of discipline and Zen that I should potentially have. Some of my colleagues will just shut twitter after tweeting out their arguments in order not to look at what comes back, and I am not that disciplined, in large part because I don't want to miss the valuable feedback that do come. It's really tough. I would say as I've gotten more experienced I've felt more vulnerable, in that it's become more and more apparent to me how much I can be hit, and it is painful to be hit, and I haven't really developed a way to deal with it, except for that I should take seriously the criticism that I get

that's coming from a place of really wanting to help me do better, to try to set as much of it as I can aside, and that in general, putting down the twitter is always the right thing to do.

Inazu

Good take-away principle there. What questions do you all have for Emma?

Audience

Emma; thank you very much for your presentation, it was very enjoyable. I want to go back to the question of the partisanship in news media journalist beat today. You said you could not find any real ray of hope. You might remember a former general secretary of the United Nations said, "More potently and by any other means, change the university and you change the world." So here you are at Washington University; if you could say something to faculty and students who are here, that you would encourage them to be doing that could change, potentially, that partisanship in journalism ten years from now, what would you say to them?

Green

It's a good question. I have a couple of thoughts on that. The first is that I would like to think that the kind of student who comes to WashU would already be fairly media savvy and media literate. That could be overly optimistic. I think there's a lot of media illiteracy out there, which I think is a huge problem; not using that in the condescending frame, but I think as media has changed, many people have a hard time distinguishing a neutral news source from an opinionated news source from a non-legitimate news source, understanding what the signs are of fact-based reporting versus non-fact-based reporting, and that I think is a huge issue, but I don't think that's necessarily the issue of the kind of person who would be studying here at WashU, so I'll give much narrower advice, or perhaps pleas from somebody inside the newsroom. The first is to subscribe. There's a lot of free media available out there; support the newsrooms that you want to get news out of, don't be a free rider on the internet, this stuff costs a lot, subscription still matters, subscribe to the Washington Post, The New York Times, don't just use your mom's login. The next is to be thoughtful and careful with the way you're engaging with or criticizing media.

One thing that was a really big takeaway for me from 2016 which may resonate more with the kind of crowd in this room were the massive media critiques from both sides of the aisle. From the right, it's sort of a predictable, biased-New York Times, liberal-CNN, can't get any fair reporting, which has been a complaint on the right for a long time. But on the left, there was a lot of complaining about the coverage of Hilary's emails, the fawning coverage of Trump. All of that is legitimate, but I really feel that we're in a time of media vulnerability, in the sense that we have public officials, who will remain unnamed, who have mounted massive attacks on the credibility of the media and see that as a priority, and media criticism and undermining the media as an institution is a really serious thing. So I would say, treat it as precious. Not to be reverent, not to never angrily tweet a bad New York Times article or, god forbid, a bad Atlantic article, but just to take seriously the fact that--and you know, I'm biased, because this is my line of work--but taking seriously the fact that the media is a precious democratic institution, and that it's really all of us, it's not just about journalists keeping their jobs, it's about how all of us are able to engage with one another as peers in a democratic society.

Audience

On that point on that it's both the right and the left, the right wing media since Nixon, since Spiro Agnew, has gone for the throat of the media that's not in line with them, and all these years there's been so little punch-back from the so-called mainstream media, which is actually a huge variety of different things. I'm seeing just barely, barely, a little bit more now. And I think that's got to be part of the answer. You know, religious people, gentle people, are not used to dealing with psychopathology, and dealing with the devil, people don't get how awful it can be to deal with the devil. I'm not calling him the devil the way he called Hillary the devil, but this thing about giving him a Mulligan--I have trouble dealing with that one most of all, I guess.

Green

So the question I hear you asking is the reason why right wing media, which is a particular kind of machine, has often gotten a pass, perhaps, from mainstream outlets or from people who are more liberal. So I would say a couple of things about that. I do think that the state of right-wing media is really troubling, and I don't say that from an ideological perspective. I think that we've seen evidence that there is a low priority put on fact-based, evidence-based reporting, especially in television news outlets, certainly parts of talk radio and the way that that has become an institution in certain parts of America, has really conditioned a partisan political environment, and I think the left is starting to build up--has built up, to a certain extent--institutions that are designed to counterbalance and match it, which I don't actually know is the right impulse, to try to be the same on the other side. I think there have been callouts of Fox News, there are people whose professional job it is really to trash on Fox News, I think that in general from my point of view as someone who's working for a magazine that likes to claim that "We are of no party or clique," even though some people might assign us a certain ideological bent, it's just important to pay attention to the people who are trying to do the right thing, who are trying to report the facts, find out information, present things accurately, to subscribe to those publications, to try to support them, and trying to diminish or take apart the right wing media machine or the left wing media machine, whatever form that may take, is sort of above my pay grade but I personally am a reader and supporter of mainstream, fact-based, evidence-based, reported news. The reality-based universe is the one that I like to exist in.

Inazu

That makes me think, so I think about these questions a lot from a first amendment perspective, and I'm close to a first amendment absolutist, but when it comes to either the press or the speech, do you think there is room for censoring or limiting certain out-of-bounds kinds of speech, or should we go for the default of let it all fly?

Green

I think you will find nary a journalist who will mount you a strong defense of censorship of the press, so I would say I am probably part of the vast majority of journalists who don't think that government censorship and regulation of the press is a good thing. I think that it is just a clear fact that regulation and specifically deregulation of the airwaves was a huge part of the rise of right wing media in the form that it currently takes, so that's something that you can't ignore. But, nor do I think that if we had taken a different regulatory path in this country that we would still be back to the days of the big three television networks and everyone sits down in front of their sets--this is how I imagine the 1960s because I wasn't around--everybody sits in front of their sets and they're watching the news and Dan Rather is telling them what to think about the

politics of the day, and we're all in this happy wonderful shared-media universe—that was just never the fate we were headed to. In general, my disposition is not to think that government interference in speech is the right way to answer it. I do think, however, the place where regulation could potentially be helpful is thinking about the social media environment, in particular the big companies that have come to dominate our social world. Something that a lot of people outside newsrooms don't know is just how much Facebook owns our butts. I mean, they own everything. Facebook, Google, lesser extent Twitter, certain other properties, Youtube certainly to a certain extent, as distribution platforms for news. Very few people go to the homepage of the New York Times—I mean, some people do, but not a lot of people are going to the homepage of the New York Times. They're getting their news through Facebook. And the fact of that shift towards these third party environments for the distribution of the news, and the deregulation, or the lack of regulation, on those third party environments, I think has been a huge part of this. People have sort of joked about Facebook that Facebook wanted all the advantages of being a news outlet and none of the responsibilities of being a news outlet and I think that's largely true, so I think could be potentially one space where the government could offer some constructive regulation

Inazu

And is your intuition that that would require some boundary drawing about what the press is? That's a super contested category right now; what is the press? Is Facebook the press, when I tweet something am I the press? Will we need to recover or define the category or can we exist in kind of a more amorphous sense of the press?

Green

That's an interesting question, and I want to pull a journalist here, which is that you're alluding to an extremely complex area of the law that I don't feel like I'm fully versed in, but I do think that there is some advantage to thinking about things like Facebook as a public utility, so it's a kind of service and a public good that everybody relies on, that largely is able to do what it wants now. But, things that it does that are damaging have these large common good aftereffects. So shifting that framework I think would be useful, but I don't know that I'm well versed enough in the “are bloggers journalists” debate to offer a legal thought there.

Inazu

Well, you're right descriptively; the market share of Facebook dwarfs any actual public utilities today, so as a functional matter, this is absolutely...other questions?

Audience

So as we're talking about the possibility of government interference or regulation, I agree that that's really difficult, and I can't fathom how we would do that effectively, but it prompted a thought of how we have a lot of professions that are regulated with licensure, those often come with state laws that require you to hold a license to practice, but then other industries will have certifications and more peer-reviewed things that the private industry itself will regulate, and it's not that you couldn't partake in that profession without that particular certification but it becomes so much the norm and the mainstream that you would have a lot more difficulty making a living if you didn't have a certain kind of certification. Is there a possible future for legitimate, reputable news sources from all over the spectrum—or hopefully the middle of the road, like we

would like to see more of—to have some kind of a peer review process that helps the rest of the public understand the difference between something that is a legitimate news source maybe with some ideological leanings and something that is totally not legitimate that wouldn't require government interference or government laws or Constitutional issues.

Green

That was the most lawyer question that I could think of, and it's great, I love it. So, let me just answer reflexively, which is, we are somewhat remarkably living in a time when at the very least the federal government—but also state governments, local governments—are demonstrating open hostility towards the news media, both in delegitimizing news media, also threatening the revision of laws having to do with libel, denying access to public figures, trying to undermine credibility that is a violation of norms that have existed for a long time. I don't offer my opinions very often, but this is something I can be opinated about, which is media is good, journalism is good. I'm biased, but that is a view that I have, and I think government trying to undermine the media is bad. So similarly, I think relying on any kind of regulatory scheme, even if it were state and local, that depended on some sort of government agency to offer a lifeline certification to a news organization, potentially one that's highly critical of that same government body, is problematic. Just dispositionally, and again I think this is probably representative of a lot of American journalists—not European, but a lot of American journalists—I'm instinctively skeptical of that. But, you know, lawyers come up with all sorts of fancy and interesting solutions to problems all the time, so it's possible that you in your time in North Carolina will go and you'll come up with a wonderful regulatory scheme, and we'll all be living under your great licensure solution in the future, and I will look forward to it.

Inazu

As will I.

Audience

We read your article on Liberty University for class, which you talked about in the wake of Jerry Falwort Jr.'s endorsement of Trump, how some of the students wanted to move away from a tie to Republican politics to a focus more on Christianity and more on Christ. You have a line in that article where you're quoting one of those students, and the student says, "You can't link politics with salvation. That's a line you don't cross." So I wanted to know, what do you think that means and why do you think that's a view held by the student? Because it seems to me, depending on how you would define salvation, the two are sort of inextricably linked, because political success leading to social change will lead to deliverance from harm, or salvation. So I was wondering, why do you think that the student would feel like politics and salvation are two incompatible concepts?

Green

So, just for context, the article that you are referring to was something that I wrote in the fall of 2016 right before the election. I visited Liberty University, which is the campus in Lynchburg Virginia which was started by Jerry Falwell Sr., the great figure of the religious right, which is now run by his son Jerry Falwell Jr, who has been a great defender of Trump. And I went there because I was trying to understand how Liberty students were understanding themselves in this time—what they thought about Trump, what they thought about their president Jerry Falwell Jr,

what they thought about the fact that Liberty really is designed to kind of be a machine for soldiers of the religious right, they have all these speakers come; really it's a very politicized place. What I found when I went was a sense of fatigue. These were very smart, very engaged students; some of them were clearly destined to be future politicians, but a lot of them seemed to be feeling the burden of being the inheritors of 1980s style culture war politics. Most of them, all of them, were deeply committed Christians, and cared very deeply about their faith, and their church, and politics in whatever form, but didn't necessarily like being forced into a box of a particular kind of ideological form. So all of that is to get to your question. The students who I spoke with, first those who were a little itchy about the political situation, I think wished that there could be a little more space for their generation to define what it meant for them to be involved in politics, and to lift up issues that were important to them. So, on Liberty's campus, there are young people who care very much about police violence, for example, but that isn't necessarily an issue that gets lifted up very much in the framework that their president might offer to them in terms of speakers. I would say that the particular quote that you were offering probably was more a theological question which was about what the nature of salvation in a specifically Evangelical Protestant context is, and creating a barrier to salvation being a checklist of being a foot soldier of the religious right—is not something that grabs with that person's own sense of what theology is. Anyways, the takeaway that I had from that whole experience is that there is a real generational divide among Evangelicals, and even at these hotbeds—really strong institutions of what we consider to be political Evangelicalism—there's a lot of fatigue. And mostly my takeaway from that reporting experience is really having eyes on the future of what this generation of young Evangelicals will do, some of whom are stepping into that mold, but many of whom are finding or grappling with new ways to be a church and to be young Christian leaders.

Audience

I just wanted to backtrack to an earlier point you made, and I'm not sure I caught the whole thing accurately, you mentioned that you didn't think that on college campuses there was a rise of suppression of free speech, and you used the word fascist in relation to that, and I am kind of wondering what your take was on that and where you're coming from there. When I was an undergraduate back in 1979, even way back then, I came from Kansas and went to an Ivy League school, and I was really stunned at times when I would walk into what I thought would be an open discussion about issues and those on one side would shout down the minority who had a different point of view and wouldn't even let them talk. And the latest thing that happened at Yale with Erica Krisistacus, I was stunned that the University wanted to devote another fifty million dollars to diversity improvement, but not maybe allocating anything to learning about civil discourse. And to me, the possibility of civil discourse gets to the root of the problem, which is that if we can't even talk at our best Ivy League schools in a civil tongue with one another about our differences, how are the media going to be able to do that too, because they come from those schools?

Green

So you're right, I was offering what was the caricatured version, in part because the commonality that I often notice of these accounts of illiberalism and anti-free speech tendencies on college campuses, is that they very rarely actually go to the college campuses or talk to the students who are involved in the controversies and try to actually understand what's going

through the head of the fascist 18 year old, so I was sort of making light of it, but you're right, that that there are very real issues of pluralism on campuses. Certainly making space on elite college campuses for people of diverse ideological viewpoints, diverse religious backgrounds is something we were talking about in class today, is a huge challenge. And I think this connects to this broader conversation about polarization and people not being able to recognize the dignity in one another and share the same facts, is that not only in those spaces are certain viewpoints potentially marginalized, but I think actually the bigger question is are the conservative kids from the Midwest just not even going to go to Yale at all because they think Yale is this godless liberal bastion, and they're going to go to Wheaton instead, or they're going to go to a small Christian school, and then there's never a chance for two students in a dorm room to have a late night conversation where they're trying to see each other and understand each other's differences. So that, I think, is actually the bigger question here—in general, America becoming self-segregated ideologically in terms of background experiences, potentially religious lines, racial lines—obviously racial lines—those compounding effects are really destructive. So, I see and dignify your point, and I'm not dismissing at all the question of speech and pluralism on campuses, just the specific notion that all 18-year-olds are P.C.-loving tyrants, because I don't think that's right.

Inazu

I'll just jump in here too because we were talking about this earlier in our class. I mean, there's plenty of stuff on this campus that I think is bonkers. It comes in once in a while, and then 24/7 students living here most of their lives, and in the classrooms and discussions we have week after week, it's pretty normal stuff, and it's engaging stuff, and it's serious discourse across disagreement, and the worry—I won't speak for you—the worry that I have is increasingly there are snippets of the crazy cases that form the entire narrative in certain demographics, so that college becomes this awful scary bastion of fill in the blank, when in fact, college, like most spaces in life, is really complex, and like most spaces in life, has a lot of just the mundane relating: the dorm discussions or the meals shared, those sorts of things. That's how real people live, so in the midst of challenging times, there's just a lot of life that goes on, I think.

Audience

Thank you, first of all, for your presentation, it was really good, I thought, and pretty balanced. And that takes me to the heart of my question. I'm a pretty old guy who was born in the 50s, so I grew up with the Walter Cronkites, the Mike Wallaces, so on, Hutnly and Brinkly. In any case, my perceptions from the 60s right up until about '72 I guess, were that there was really a great deal of attention paid to just reporting the facts, at least ostensibly not biasing the reporting one way or another. And as an old guy, I really have a yearning to return to those days—not all of the bad things about those days, particularly the pre-Civil Rights era and so on—but I have this desire to simply here the facts reported. And I just wonder, do you think there is a subterranean market for just the facts, or have we become so wrapped up in this—it's either gotta be Fox News or CNBC and there's no middle ground—that we'll never be able to recover to a position where there's a source that you can go to? Because I'm telling you, I work all day still, so I don't have time to fact check everything I hear, and at least I find that I have to take a position on issues that I'm faced with, with limited facts. I literally don't have enough hours in the day between work and grandkids and so on, to go and fact check, and frankly I'm not sure that there are any sites out there, Snopes included, that I would believe to be an inerrant source of truth to

check any facts anyway. I'm sorry, I've wrapped completely around the axel now, but do you perceive that there is a market more than just me out there that really earnestly desires some unbiased source that he or she could go to for facts, or am I just a relic of the past?

Green

No such thing. Even if you did live in my imaginary time of sitting in front of the television like this. I come from a journalism family, and my dad and I often talk about journalism now, which is a really wonderful blessing. He came up as a journalist in that Golden Age, you might call, of “just the facts, man.” And one of his favorite things to point out is that this is a total lie and a myth, and that there was never such a thing as “just the facts journalism.” Journalism has always been a process of making choices about what stories you’re going to cover, making choices about who you’re going to quote, making choices about where you’re placing things on the layout of the newspaper and how many words to give to a certain story, so even though it may seem to have the patina of neutral, it certainly had judgment that went into it. And this claim that the news is biased in one way or another has been around for as long as there’s been news. And news also has this wonderful storied history of these yellow newspapers that went after these crazy stories, and were sort of sensationalists—the point is there’s no such thing as neutral news and there never has been. But I sympathize with what you’re saying, which is, I think we live in a market environment, particularly amplified by social media, in which partisan spins and ideological spins on the news get a lot of traction. And news outlets spend a lot of time analyzing what you click on, and they have noticed this. So the New York Times has become less like the New York Times and more like sort of an opinion mix of all these different amalgam of things that exist on the internet, in part because it’s just responding to the environment it has to exist within, and part because it knows that readers respond to these things, they respond to provocation, they respond to op-ed page pieces, and that is a really hard environment to work against, because that’s asking news outlets to work against their economic interests. But, I will once again affirm, cutting back yet again in the other direction, I think there are a lot of editors at major national news outlets right now who are thinking about this question that you ask, which is the problem of the reader who feels lost in this crazy environment, how to navigate all of these things that are happening which are so impossible to situate and contextualize, and how can we as journalists do our duty to make people understand what the facts are of the world that they’re living in, and prepare them to make decisions, have conversations, take political action. Not in an agenda way, but just arming them with the facts that they’re looking for. So I don’t think you’re alone, I think many people are frustrated by this environment, and I hope that we can help contribute to that, I hope that my peers at other papers and news publications can, and I think people care about it still, even though it may not seem like it from a reader perspective. There are a lot of journalists out there who do still just care about the facts, man.

Audience

So this is kind of going back to something you said early in the talk, but you brought up the idea of a culture translator role. I think from having followed your work and read you a lot you do an excellent job of that. How do you think we do more to promote and create figures who have that agenda? Because that’s not generally a job description that’s out there, it’s not a college major, but especially in the world we live in it’s increasingly important so people realize shared humanity, so how do you think we go about doing that?

Green

That's such a hard question. The first answer that came to my mind was give a billion dollars to a foundation for journalists and train people to give them jobs. Crazy wishes notwithstanding, I see that as something that's not just exclusive to journalism. I don't think of what I do as particularly special. I think that all of us, in one capacity or another, have the ability to seek out, empathetically, people who are unlike us, to try to be involved in communities of difference and diversity--thick diversity, across a lot of lines, not just fact-checking diversity--and to do our best to dignify the other, to create communities of understanding and fellowship. This is what I was saying before about my dream of voluntary associations, the age when we'll all go back to bowling club and live happily ever after. I think there's something real there, which is all of us have the capacity to invest this way in our communities. I don't know if I have something very helpfully prescriptive other than go out and do it, and hopefully people encourage their friends to do it and try to build that world. That's the world I want to live in, and that's the world I try to offer, to work towards as best as I can.

Audience

So, going back to a little bit about the social media role in media, the default right now has been--or what most social media sites have been doing--is to create this user-customized feed that creates a filter bubble, an echo chamber where what you already believe in is what's going to show up. What kind of accountability from a news outlet would you like to see from these third parties like Facebook in combating that user-customized content.

Green

That's a really, really good question. I would say a couple of things. The first is a little bit of an insider media point, which is: the biggest beef that media outlets have with Facebook--and I'm generalizing here--but the biggest beef is the fact that Facebook has been an inconstant partner. Nobody can really prevent the rise of Facebook, but Facebook has had quite a manipulative relationship with publications, and has made a lot of promises about trying to be a partner in supporting the good outlets over the bad news, and trying to create a garden where there's a lot of great stuff for people to come to, and creating these dependent relationships without always paying back that dependency or being worth it. And I think now, in particular, post election we've seen that Facebook has sort of turned the fire hose down of news content in the news feeds, in part because it is doing exactly what you're describing--it's trying to personalize, it's trying to make people happier, make them see less news because news makes them angry and they don't like being angry, and they want people to stay on Facebook, so they want them to be all happy and in their own little pods. So in general I would say the first thing is service news and be a reliable partner if you're going to take on this role as a giant mass feeder of public information, you need to take the responsibility for that and take that seriously. I don't know that I have specific viewpoints on the way that Facebook should balance the algorithm to have news from family and friends versus news from the New York Times, other than generally being someone who roots for the New York Times, but I do think there are ways of creating these partnerships, as tenuous as they are. Google, for example, I think has done a much better job of trying to be a reliable partner for publishers. So I think there is a way forward in this crazy media environment with all these third party distributors, but it's really tough, and it's a scary time for publishers, because they recognize that our livelihoods are basically at the mercy of Mark Zuckerberg, and nobody wants that.

Inazu

I hate to end on that note, but can you join me in thanking Emma Green?

Audience applause

Patel

So I've been tasked with offering a few words of closing. First of all, John just asked us to thank Emma, let's thank John and Emma together. So in addition to saying a few words about this session, I just want to say a few words to close the public lecture series. Maybe I'll begin with this story. My friend David Bornstein who writes for the New York Times that we cheer for, he writes for the Fixer column, he tells a story where his dad calls him one evening and he tells him, "David, humans are worse than dogs." And David says, "Dad, did you just get done watching cable news?" And he had, true story. I feel like the story that is told about who America is and who the people are on cable news is a lie. It's a lie. There's a great line by Joan Didion, "A writer is always selling someone out." And that's a lie also—because we've met Emma Green, and we've met Ken Stern, and we've met people who are storytellers and writers who are asking different questions, who are, as Marty would say, "re-storying the republic." Emma Green wanted to know about Mennonites; she went to a Mennonite church and a Mennonite conference and she said, "I want to hear how you understand yourself." And I imagine she had quarrels and qualms with the set of things that went on, and she was also really moved by the four-part harmony, and moved by the moment when this conference split, and they sang. That's really beautiful, right? Ken Stern said, "Look, I love the street that I live on, Hobart Street, but I don't like the fact that we make assumptions about 50% of the country, so I'm going to go out and learn a little bit." There's a great line by Lincoln, "I don't like that fellow, so I gotta get to know him better." How else do you live in a diverse democracy except to, as Danielle Allen says, talk to strangers? If something is strange to you, maybe it's you. Maybe it's you. I feel like what we've had in object lesson—from Emma, from Ken, from John, from the students in our class—is that it's our job to develop that sympathetic eye and ear. What else is a citizen except for someone who takes an interest in the citizens around them, what else is a citizen except somebody who takes an interest in the citizens around, and says, how do we build a place? Maybe I'll end with quoting Emi Sazer, which I always think about in relation to America: "There is room for all of us at the rendezvous to destiny." And I call that place America, and we've been writing that story on stage. Thank you.