

Special Episode: Resisting Fake News by Exercising Truth Muscles

Transcript and credits

Credits:

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Special thanks: WUNC for use of a studio, Sinan Goknur and Ellen O'Grady for puppetry

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#) is available from University of Chicago Press or wherever you get your books!

TRANSCRIPT:

Lewis Raven Wallace: Hey, everyone, this is Lewis Raven Wallace, and we are in a special moment at The View from Somewhere podcast. We have launched our Kickstarter campaign. Our second one, the first one supported our pilot episodes and the first few episodes after that, which was amazing. And now we're trying to get to the end of our season by fundraising through a new Kickstarter. We're taking a break from regular programming. Today is gonna be a special program where I actually read to you from my book, *The View from Somewhere*, from the conclusion, which is the part that I feel the most connected to. So please do stick around for that. And in the meantime, go to view from somewhere dot com. View from somewhere dot com has the link to the Kickstarter. You can just Google us or find me on Twitter @lewispants

Lewis: Pretty much everyone who gives gives what they can. So, you know, five, ten, twenty five dollars with a fifty dollar donation, you can get one of these incredible posters that Billy Dee made of Ida B Wells or Marvell Cook or Ruben Salazar, which are so gorgeous. And you can also get signed copies of the book and other things. But point being, people give what they can because they value this programming and know that it's really and truly not possible without this kind of grassroots fundraising, which is the model that I really believe in. It keeps us from having to seek out corporate sponsorship or compete for limited grant support.

And we know with like a lot of people giving a little bit that we can do what we need to do to produce these high quality episodes for the next few months for y'all. So that's enough out of me with the pitch. I am so grateful to everyone who's given so far. It's already going really, really well. And again, view from somewhere dot.com.

The conclusion of the book, *The View from Somewhere* is called *The End of Journalism*. And as some of you might know, I've been on tour recently and talking to a lot of people and people often ask me these like big questions and I love big questions. But the questions are like, are things going to get better? Or...should we work from the inside or from the outside of journalism to change journalism? How do we change people's minds? What do we do about fake news? What do we do about alternative facts? What about the fact that people don't care about facts anymore? People ask me that. So this conclusion in a way is kind of my own take on some of that.

BOOK EXCERPT:

My generation, my upbringing, was defined by lies and conspiracy. In the 1990s we had Y2K and Troopergate; in the 2000s, we had truthers and weapons of mass destruction and "Mission Accomplished." On September 15, 2008, when Lehman Brothers and AIG went under, an NPR host said, "Remember this day . . . it will go down in history." It was my younger brother's twentieth birthday, and I still remember where I was standing, in my kitchen in Chicago. In my neighborhood, condo developments would stand half-built for years while rents skyrocketed. Years later, I would report on how the same investors who'd made a fortune off the crash bought up rental properties en masse across the country, making a fortune off the people who'd lost their homes.

Ten years have passed and I still remember the progress we were promised when Barack Obama was elected, the promise of an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the promise of a post-racial era and a return to socioeconomic progress. None of that has materialized: instead we got government shutdowns, a half-assed health care bill, birtherism, drone strikes. Later we got an election that may have been stolen by Russia and a legislature without the will to find out, a sinister Rudy Giuliani on TV spouting, "Truth isn't truth." As I write this, the economy is strong again, but the benefits are being sucked up by the fabulously wealthy, and for the rest of us, nothing is guaranteed—not health care, not retirement, not personal safety, not a safety net. What little social change we made in the last twenty years around gay rights, anti-racism, and the rights of people with disabilities is being chipped away. Trans people are a lightning rod; gender and racial scapegoating is at a new high. No wonder people seek refuge in near-reality, in the Kardashians and Naked and Afraid and President Trump's tweets.

I'll admit: I seek refuge in the NPR newscast at the top of every hour—even though, for my whole life, it's given me a vision of the world that doesn't align with my own. Still, there's something comforting in a world that seems fundamentally the same as it did last week, last month, last millennium, something comforting in the distillation of the news of the day into a three-minute clip. My friend Ramona Martinez, who used to be a producer at the NPR newscast, once said that "objectivity is the ideology of the status quo." On the one hand, as this book has made clear, I can't stand the status quo: it doesn't have room for me and my communities, it's an emperor with no clothes, it's a mess. But on some days, for me, that status quo can feel like a refuge—it relieves me of responsibility and fear. Let's just pretend those are clothes on that monarch, that everything is fine. Wildfires and hurricanes, wars and mass shootings, celebrity

deaths and congressional stalemates become something easy to digest. The calm voices keep the listener at a distance, and I get to be the listener, a member of the anonymous crowd.

That distance, the sense that we are not implicated, yields a temporary comfort—probably a false one, but this, too, is part of the promise of “objectivity.” If you can stand outside of the world, you can afford not to change it.

Mine is not an argument against the rigorous pursuit of facts, or even an argument that the job of every journalist is to write opinion pieces all day and then protest by night. I love the NPR newscast like a childhood stuffed animal (in an alternative universe, I once fancied myself a less-cool Korva Coleman). I feel sure that there is still a place—a big, important place—for people who seek the truth, who shape and give it meaning. But we have to know what power we have in the shaping.

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What to do about “alternative facts,” about the bullshit and dishonesty that dominates our political discourse today? The truth is, I don’t know. And one of my deepest beliefs, one of the practices I value the most, is admitting what we don’t know—allowing our minds to swim in the questions, to be submerged. If autocracy and racism and fake news foreclose imagination and colonize doubt, I believe curiosity lies at the center of a framework for resistance that cultivates imagination, that cultivates the skill of living in questions. And when journalists offer this to the world—the attitude of not knowing, and of endlessly seeking to know more—I think we can gain the power to change it. When we foreclose imagination and curiosity, foreclose fierce analysis in favor of feigned objectivity, we sacrifice that power—feeding, instead, into cynicism and indifference. Truth isn’t truth, so what’s the point? This is just the way things are, people say, and then they change the channel, click back to puppy pictures on Facebook.

Journalism without bias is impossible, and our audiences know it. In the postmodern era, and in the internet age, readers and listeners can also always look elsewhere, for a voice they like better, someone they find more honest or identifiable. Rather than making truth impossible, I think accepting the possibility of multiple truths is a positive element of the fight against binary thought and intellectual foreclosure. It doesn’t solve “fake news” or insidious bullshit, but it does give us more narratives and more voices, tools with which to fight back against falsehood.

Kevin Young writes, “What if truth is not an absolute or a relative, but a skill—a muscle, like memory—that collectively we have neglected so much that we have grown measurably weaker at using it?” Maybe what we’re trying to work out here is how to build back up a muscle that has become atrophied in this country: our ability to ask questions. But inquiry is hard to do, humility before the terrible wide world too easy to forget in favor of simplicity. If we understand truth as a skill, it requires us to break down the barriers between journalists and “the public”—to move toward the end of journalism as profession and toward new models driven by collaboration and education. What if exercising our ability to seek out truth, using our muscle of curiosity and questioning, was a job for all of us?

One thing I do know is that we should not succumb to hopelessness in the face of “alternative facts.” Truth matters even when it is multifaceted, prismatic, and strange. If cries of

“fake news” lead us to the conclusion that nothing at all can be true, then the game is pretty much over. The winners are the people in power, the people with something to hide.

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Lewis: That was me reading from my book *The View from Somewhere*. One of the rewards for our ongoing Kickstarter campaign is a signed copy of the book, if you're able to donate at the hundred dollar level and there's other really great rewards, including bonus episodes for everybody who gives. So please do go to [view from somewhere dot.com](http://viewfromsomewhere.com). And thank you to WUNC for studio use today. We're distributed by Critical Frequency, Dogbotic does our music. Additional music is by Poddington Bear. Billy Dee is our brilliant in-house artist and you can enjoy a full on puppet show by Billy Dee by viewing our Kickstarter video, it's really, really cool and fun. And we are at [view from somewhere dot com](http://viewfromsomewhere.com). Thank you to producer Ramona Martinez, as always. She's amazing. She...there's a really cute puppet of her. Check that out. I'm on Twitter [@lewispants](https://twitter.com/lewispants). You can get the Kickstarter link really easily that way, too. And we'll be back really soon with some more special programing while we kind of take a break from producing new stuff so that we can raise the rest of this money.

We're definitely gonna get there, but it takes all of you. So don't forget to find us and donate. And I'm Lewis Raven Wallace. Thank you for listening.