McGill

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Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication
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EXCERPTS FROM GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Making editorial decisions around critical election year issues
Samira Jafari, executive editor of CNN's The Row

Race, identity and divisiveness
Sonya Ross, managing partner and editor-in-chief of Black Women Unmuted

Inside the fight for press freedom in the age of alternative facts
David McCraw, legal counsel for the New York Times

Examining what democracy means across the U.S.
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WELCOME

McGill Program Director Diane Murray

On behalf of my colleagues in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, welcome to the McGill Symposium. I am honored to direct the McGill Program for journalistic courage, which includes the McGill lecture, now in its 41st year, the McGill medal and the McGill symposium.

Today marks the 13th McGill symposium. Roundtable discussions in 2006 with industry professionals and faculty led John Greenman, professor emeritus, and me to develop the McGill symposium as the next step in honoring McGill and exploring journalistic courage. The McGill Symposium brings together students, faculty, and leading professionals to consider what journalistic courage means and how it is exemplified by reporters and editors.

Today 12 McGill Fellows – undergraduate and graduate students selected by a faculty committee for their strengths in academic achievement, practical experience and leadership – join three McGill visiting journalists and one attorney for a six-hour discussion. Also joining us at the table today is Carolyn Crist, a McGill Fellow alumna, who will record today's proceedings for a symposium report to be posted early next year.

With an eye on the 2020 elections, topics include:

- Making editorial decisions around critical election year issues
- Race, identity and divisiveness
- Inside the fight for press freedom in the age of alternative facts
- Examining what democracy means across the U.S.

Today will be a success if the professionals, faculty and students engage each other rigorously to try to answer the question "What does courage look like in journalism?"

Making editorial decisions around critical election year issues

***Samira Jafari**, executive director of CNN's The Row*

*Moderated by **Janice Hume**, Carolyn McKenzie and Don E. Carter Chair for Excellence in Journalism at Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication*

Tasked with monitoring a 24/7 news cycle often fraught with political issues, ethical concerns and potential misinformation, Grady College alumna Samira Jafari practices the importance of "getting it first and getting it right daily."

At CNN, three departments regularly weigh in on wire reports, sources and news packages. Legal, Standards and The Row — known in the newsroom at The Triad — look for accuracy, transparency and clarity in news stories. The Triad staff promotes content that is vetted, engaging and approachable for as many of CNN's 24 million readers and viewers as possible. As an editor for The Row, CNN's editorial oversight team, Jafari has handled questions about anonymous sources, breaking news on social media and potentially libelous claims among politicians. As the 2020 election cycle ramps up, it's not a job for the faint of heart.

"We do the editorial gatekeeping for CNN. I try to give every platform at CNN the best ingredients they can use for a story," said Jafari, also president and chair of the board of directors for The Red & Black, the independent student-run newspaper at the University of Georgia.

The ingredients and stories depend on CNN's various platforms, of course. The international website might emphasize a point that differs from the domestic website, and CNN Sunday Morning may highlight aspects of a story in a different way than CNN Tonight with Don Lemon. The facts are still the same, but it's important to deliver news and context in the way that the specific audience receives it best, Jafari said.

All of the news platforms cover immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border, mass school shootings and bombings across the world, for instance, and The Row ensures that the news teams have the news nuggets they need to build stories. Reviewing and approving the content can be harrowing, especially when some of the videos are graphic, but it's necessary to bring the best content to audiences worldwide.

For example, Jafari and colleagues became involved as breaking news surfaced on social media about the 2017 Charlottesville attack, where a driver plowed into a crowd of protestors. The team had to investigate the original Twitter post, determine its accuracy and decide what to report. They couldn't make assumptions about injuries or the death toll, and they didn't release information about the driver. Importantly, they decided not to show the actual footage of the car hitting the crowd because it might reveal a moment of death for one of the protestors.

"These conversations happen — all of that in five minutes, tops, and ultimately I had to make the call whether to show it. I made the call," she said. "I told them to show the video as the car was moving toward the crowd, stop the video, and then show it pulling away."

With stories around Brett Kavanaugh, for instance, CNN carefully studied the legal filings, particularly the most serious rape allegations. Ultimately, the team opted for transparency — they stated that documents were published with accusations that were far more serious than previous ones, and CNN was still vetting the details. For instance, they didn't use the most egregious terms from the document, such as "gang rape," in headlines, because they didn't have the evidence to support the allegations as they were first reported on Twitter.

"When everything is on fire in your office and everything is moving quickly because you know the New York Times and the Washington Post are also reporting the story, you could screw that up very quickly," Jafari said. "I thought it was the best decision to not pretend that this didn't happen but to be transparent with the audience."

In addition, rather than searching for "balanced" voices, such as two Democrats versus two Republicans for every story, The Row's mission is to look for overall accuracy and whether a story serves the audience with the most factual information possible. Jafari reminded the McGill Fellows that journalists don't have to work with their blinders on and ignore their own pain, personal experience or life experience, which can hone moral clarity. Instead, it's important to understand the basic difference between "right" and "wrong" and make informed decisions.

"You're going to screw up. But then own your screw up. That's the big differentiation," she said. "Also own your good work. That's what you have to do to maintain trust."

For instance, The Row directly oversees and addresses stories with anonymous sources. Vetting sources can be tough, especially when whistleblowers want to share an anonymous tip or sexual assault victims are concerned about the ramifications of revealing their identities. Jafari's department carefully asks whether a source is qualified, whether the source has direct knowledge of the accusation and whether sources can provide documents to back up the facts.

"What is the person's agenda? Anonymity is a privilege," she said. "For most stories, I start with 'yes' and then punch holes in the story. With source approval, I start with a 'no' and then check boxes because I don't want to grant anonymity unless I must. It's a much higher rate of scrutiny."

McGill Fellow Cat Hendrick asked how often The Row must make decisions about anonymous sources. Several times per day, Jafari responded, which has increased in recent years. During her stint as an Associated Press reporter in Kentucky, Jafari requested anonymity for a source once, but now more sources are asking for it and more news outlets are allowing it. Sources with security risks, concerns about their immigration status and worries about their personal safety are more likely to receive anonymity, but public officials and information officers shouldn't, she said. At times, however, anonymity is necessary for officials speaking against a wrongdoing, so balance is key.

"Especially when you're covering this administration, where they're not cooperative with the media, they never want to be on the record and they refuse to do press briefings unless it's Trump outside his helicopter, you have to make that compromise," she said. "But I start with the 'no' and ask why."

Related to that, Fellow Sam Jones asked about the environment at CNN around "truthfulness" among sources and whether Jafari has seen a shift since 2016. She has. The guests on broadcast shows, particularly live TV, are the toughest to monitor since the producers can't be sure what the sources will say or whether they'll launch allegations that require fact-checking. Previously, Democrats and Republicans focused more on debating the question at hand, such as an international relations policy or universal health care, but now advocates say more "alternative facts," which CNN staffers must fact-check and report again in another story later. To showcase "both sides," producers have become more carefully involved in vetting who appears on shows and what their motivations may be.

"That's the hardest thing to deal with right now," Jafari said. "I don't want to silence anyone, but some voices are full of falsehoods and ill intent."

Based on this, Fellow Will Salter asked how journalists should balance a spokesperson's point of view in a story.

Jafari recommended thinking about the value to the audience, assessing each source for validity and taking time to uncover the details and motivations.

Similarly, Fellow Wangechi Warui asked how reporters in small counties and news organizations can best fact-check their stories. Jafari suggested using primary sources, documents and multiple points of view to ensure all aspects of a story are included. Find the additional context and counterpoints to make stories complete, especially reports focused on allegations, she added.

Fellow Collin Huguley asked about the dynamic between CNN and the Trump administration, particularly when the president attacks the news organization itself. Jafari said the comments don't change the way CNN staffers handle reporting — and in fact, they make a conscious decision to continue reporting as they would, even when others call them "anti-Trump." "We've gotten used to being attacked, and we keep doing our jobs," she said. "The tricky part is the volume of these attacks and the viewer fatigue in this unprecedented time. I've never seen anything like this."

More than that, the public support of Trump's attacks is disheartening, she added. When local governments want to prosecute newsrooms for not using a press release, it worries her.

"That scares me," she said. "People feel empowered."

Ultimately, as Jafari moves from her position as executive editor into a new role as an investigative reporter at CNN, she plans to apply her "hole-punching" technique to her stories to ensure that they have vetted sources, accurate information and insightful analysis to serve readers who are searching for information to guide them during the 2020 presidential campaign.

Race, identity, and divisiveness

***Sonya Ross**, managing partner and editor-in-chief of Black Women Unmuted*

*Moderated by **Marcus Howard**, PhD student of journalism at the University of Georgia Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication*

To Sonya Ross, the Fourth Estate has never been challenged in quite the way it is now. In an age of divisiveness, journalists must be courageous in their reporting, and every reporter's responsibility to the field is extremely important, she told the McGill Fellows.

"You have to have nothing but courage if you're a journalist in these times," she said. "With the country changing the way it is changing, we're at the front lines of a historic transformation."

Journalists write the first drafts of history for the historians of the future, she said, yet journalists of the past didn't always do the best job of chronicling occurrences in the United States for the sake of the future. In particular, news outlets have long underreported on race, identity and the contributions of minorities to the formation and growth of the country, she added.

In a presentation to the Fellows, Ross highlighted the history of minority voices, especially African American publications, in the press — and how mainstream media have grappled with race coverage in recent decades.

To start, Freedom's Journal was the first publication by African Americans to provide coverage of issues and concerns that were important to freed black people, former slaves and current slaves who read in secret. In the first issue in 1827, the editors spoke about the importance of telling their own stories: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us." Although these two sentences have been repeated often, Ross pointed to an equally important third sentence that isn't emphasized as much: "Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly."

During the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, she said, newspapers didn't have the infrastructure to report every story that should have been told about the seismic changes in American culture. Some stories moved to the bottom of the priority list.

"Does any of this sound familiar to you?" she asked. "Does this sound like the times in which we live right now?"

At that time, African American reporters decided to cover those stories — and tell them in their own words. One of those journalists was Ida B. Wells, who ran a newspaper in Memphis and chronicled what happened in the South at that time, including lynchings and false accusations.

"It took a brave person to say that in those times," she said. "The response was immediate and swift."

The newspaper was burned, and Wells fled Tennessee to save her life. In 1892, the New York Age published her assessments about corruption in the South, as well as her reasons for reporting on incidents that weren't being covered. Today's historians still cite her records.

Decades later in 1925, Arthur Schomburg wrote "The Negro Digs Up His Past" to discuss the importance of reporting on underrepresented voices. Following that in 1962, Lerone Bennett Jr. wrote "Before the Mayflower" to underscore how African Americans contributed to the formation of the United States, as well as their deep involvement in the American experience. A few years later, a 1967 story in Newsweek titled "The Negro in America: What Must Be Done" attempted to explain the complexity of law enforcement, crime, education and race relations during the Civil Rights Movement, yet even then, the editors concluded that they "couldn't fulfill their journalistic responsibility" of covering all sides of the story.

"We're on a chronic quest for knowledge about black people in America," Ross said. "We've been in search of this information for generations."

When the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, commonly known as the Kerner Commission, released its report in 1968, the commission concluded that news outlets failed to report adequately on the race riots and racial issues in the country. The commission also found a significant imbalance between what happened and what was reported and concluded that media organizations were "shockingly backward" in hiring, training and promoting black journalists to do this reporting. The commission suggested hiring reporters, photographers and managers from the communities that the outlets cover.

Although local publications began pivoting in this direction, it was slow. Most often, a "race beat" was established, which meant

a single reporter was assigned to stories about “race.” These stories often ended up in the culture section and fed into a “steady diet” of reporting around race and illiteracy, low socioeconomic status and low education. This tone fueled the race coverage of the 1970s and 1980s, and few stories featured discussions of the black middle class, Ross said.

The “race beat” emphasized that race was an important subject to cover, she added, but a singular reporter wasn’t enough by the 2000s and 2010s, especially given the racial profile of the United States. By 2045, white Americans will no longer be the majority race for the first time since the early 1800s, when slaves outnumbered whites. The country has become a collection of races, ethnicities and experiences, she added, and news coverage — as well as newsroom staff — should mirror that change. Now, media outlets need race-knowledgeable reporters and editors who can provide deep-dive angles into race within stories, including breaking news and enterprise stories produced in traditional and nontraditional formats.

An example of that is Nikole Hannah-Jones’ “1619” project in The New York Times, which marked the 400th anniversary of the first Africans being transported to the U.S. as slaves. Her project, a long-form narrative about the descendants of slaves in the U.S., discussed some of the history that has been neglected over time — and how slavery policies still appear in the country’s health care system, politics, law enforcement, education and race relations today. So many readers picked up the story that the newspaper ran multiple reprints.

“For a newspaper in 2019 to have to do multiple printings in a dying format sounds beyond logic. Why?” she said. “This is information that people were hungry for. They felt they could learn from it. The Fourth Estate’s very function in this country is to impart knowledge.”

Today’s journalists have a new opportunity to serve today’s readers — and future historians —by including racial knowledge into everyday stories. As reporters gather facts, whether following the president, describing a local school board meeting, covering a football game, or interviewing celebrities at awards shows, they should consider ways to include this lost knowledge in their stories.

Ross suggested several tips to do this:

- Be aware of viewpoints that are opposite of your own and avoid stereotypes as much as possible.
- Resist the majority’s point of view.
- Frame the news from the perspective of the most marginalized.
- Help others understand how previous beliefs and premises have changed.

- Don’t try to tie “race” or racial stories into a bow.
- Always follow up on stories, which is rarely done today, she added.

“How can I best be an advocate for people of color in the workplace?” asked McGill Fellow Cat Hendrick. “I, as a white woman, am never going to understand what it’s like to be a person of color. Even though I don’t understand the experience personally, how can I contribute to a well-rounded newsroom, and from that, coverage of my community?”

“What you just said is enough, and that is the best start,” Ross said. “Saying ‘I will never know what it’s like for you’ and becoming an advocate for others to say what they know and their truth — that’s enough.”

Fellow Adia Randall asked how minority voices can speak up for themselves as well. Ross pointed to Black Women Unmuted as an example. She and fellow reporters watched political shifts in recent years, particularly black women’s support of President Barack Obama, and recognized how many stories went untold. For instance, she said, black women marched to the polls in Alabama to elect Democrat Doug Jones over Republican Roy Moore, putting the first Democrat into a statewide Alabama seat in a decade. In addition, seven black women were elected to mayoral positions in the countries’ largest 100 cities in 2017, but most news outlets didn’t report on the significant moment.

“We were watching these behaviors and occurrences — you could see them, but you weren’t hearing anything,” she said. “Then we wondered what would happen if we took them off mute. We’re doing that one story at a time.”

Fellow Wangechi Warui asked how young reporters can step up and share minority perspectives in mainstream media as well. Specifically, she asked how to approach the conversation without being singled out as the “race” advocate.

“Why would you need to worry about that? Give the natural refute and say, ‘Hey, if you don’t see this country changing colors, the train is pulling away from the station without you,’” Ross responded. “You have to flip that question. You can’t allow that dismissal and succeed as a journalist. Their mentality is wrong — not yours.”

Inside the fight for press freedom in the age of alternative facts

***David McCraw**, legal counselor for the New York Times*

*Moderated by **Jon Peters**, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Georgia Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication*

In nearly two decades at the helm of the New York Times' legal counsel, David McCraw has answered countless questions about the First Amendment and press freedom. In his 2019 book, "Truth in Our Times," he discusses major issues such as the freedom to publish, the freedom to pursue news and the right to information.

Despite the discussion around these "classic media law" questions, though, McCraw feels confident that the traditions of press freedom will stand the test of time based on previous laws and court decisions in the United States. Although some laws have gaps across the country, including source protections and some Freedom of Information Act laws, he believes that most will persist through time and survive recent challenges.

At the same time, the most concerning legal aspect he sees today is the "hearts and minds" problem, or the fading support of the press in general.

"I feel very concerned about the decline in the public support of the free press," he told the McGill Fellows. "Ultimately, that is both a threat to press freedom and a form of press control."

Debasing and discrediting journalism looks the same as censorship, he said. With censorship, people aren't given the information they need to change society or keep the government in check. However, if those in power are able to convince the public not to believe what news outlets report, the same outcome happens. In essence, the information that should drive change in society can't reach the citizens, and the change won't take place.

"We as Americans, across the political spectrum, need to find ways to stand up for press freedom," he said.

When McCraw joined The Times' legal team 17 years ago, his position was focused on libel, but now it's more focused on access to information and news gathering, including traditional Freedom of Information lawsuits and new reporting techniques such as website scraping. He also helps journalists with their rights to obtain leaked information and protect their sources.

About two decades ago, he said, traditional news publications focused on ways to avoid lawsuits, but now, it's more important to help journalists find and obtain information. During the Obama administration, for instance, the legal team filed 31 lawsuits. During the Trump administration so far, they've filed 27 lawsuits.

"Sustaining that sort of legal effort is hard," he said. "But we think it's very necessary to do."

McCraw's book came after a particularly popular letter that he wrote in response to Trump's campaign lawyers. In October 2016, Trump's treatment of women became front and center after the infamous Access Hollywood tape around groping. Following that, two New York Times reporters wrote a story about women who had complaints about groping as well. Before publication, McCraw read the story and saw it as a good example of how good journalism should be done — the facts had been vetted, and the details outlined how the reporters investigated the complaints. After the story ran, however, the Trump campaign lambasted the story and said it would sue the newspaper. The news of a potential lawsuit spread like wildfire across talk radio, cable news and social media.

That evening, the campaign's legal team sent a letter that called the story defamatory and called for a retraction, and before responding, McCraw emailed the news staff to remind them to speak with one voice about the story. By then, however, the two reporters had already appeared on two morning news shows and were on their way to a third. McCraw then

wrote a response letter to Trump's lawyers, which was released publicly, but he had no idea how much traction it would gain. Its popularity exploded.

"While I'm proud of the letter, I think it was of the moment," he said. "There was something about making a point in a crisp, punchy way that resonated with people."

After that, however, Trump's lawyers never responded. This happens often with legal correspondence, McCraw said.

For one, The New York Times has a "no settlement" policy for libel suits, which removes any pressure to negotiate around stories. This helps to drive away libel suits since the newspaper isn't an "easy mark," and it's a testament to how strong the libel laws are in the United States, he said.

"The law is set up so that public officials shouldn't be suing for public criticism," he added. "The courts should not be the avenue for that."

Fellow Myan Patel asked about McCraw's concerns around the public's perception of the free press — and how to address that on national and local levels.

"The surprising thing is

not what President Trump says at rallies about the press," he said. "The surprising, disturbing thing is that it resonates."

For instance, a June 2019 Hill-Harris poll showed that 33% of Americans see the press as the "enemy of the people." The blame goes around, too — the press should better explain how it does what it does, McCraw said. Newspapers, in particular, became "out of touch" in 2016 in terms of not telling stories that were meaningful in readers' lives, he added. Similarly, the Internet profoundly affected the "viral" and "fake news" aspects of media that have led to apathy, cynicism and distrust.

"We have to start much earlier in schools to teach media literacy as a serious topic," he said. "We have to help kids understand what's real and speak out about the importance of the free press."
McCraw wrote a letter recently about Freedom of Information Act laws across the country. During the past year, he's considered ways to make FOIA laws less important to the reporting ecology. Local laws may be able to require certain information, such as police reports, to be released regularly.

"There are states where FOIA works, but not enough of them," he said. "As local news organizations falter, it would be helpful to have government databases that are up-to-date and available."

At a local level, the decline in local news organizations has led to a drop in trust as well. Management stripped publications to save them, McCraw said, but it didn't work. Digital advertising didn't help, and it won't help in the future either, he added. Instead, local news organizations will need to live on subscriptions or nonprofit money, and in reality, this likely means a renewed focus on subscriptions and creating better value for the dollars being spent.

"They [news publications] need to be worthy of peoples' subscription dollars," he said. "Ultimately, you have to have a product that people want to buy."

Beyond public perception of news organizations as a whole, the increased threats against individual reporters are alarming, McCraw said. The attack on female journalists, in particular, is serious and infuriating, he added. Now the New York Times has a 24/7 security hotline, building barricades and visitor management system to protect staff.

"When you sign on to be a reporter, you do not sign on for your children to be threatened," he said. "We've changed so much about security."

Although most threats don't become a physical issue, they've escalated in recent years and can range from comical to creepy to serious.

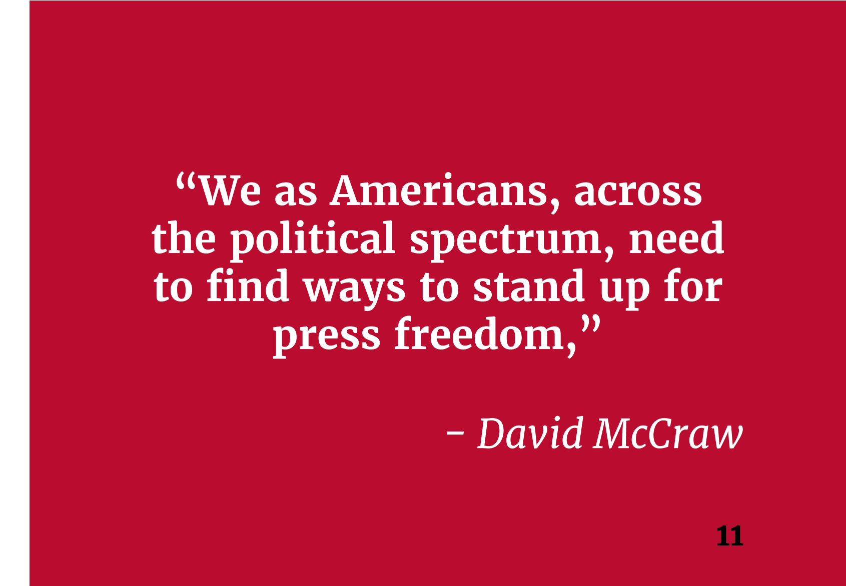
"I give credit to our journalists for hanging tough, but it's really hard," he said. "I don't know how we get back to civility in our discourse, but we need to."

Fellow Sofia Gratas asked whether reporters should handle these issues or pass them along to their legal counsel. McCraw prefers to address many of the concerns so email and social media debates don't escalate. The New York Times encourages social media guidelines, as long as it doesn't interrupt journalists' free speech. Importantly, he said, reporters should be "impartial, honest brokers of information" and attempt to avoid political discourse.

"We all have points of view, experiences and prejudices, and the key is how you deal with that," he said. "You need to report against your own bias. You have to push back and make sure you've gone out of your way as a reporter to prove yourself wrong."

Fellow Sam Jones also asked how journalists and legal counsel can work together to prevent a "chilling effect" in newsrooms. Ultimately, news management must be willing to stand up, McCraw said. When publications pursue journalism seriously, they'll be threatened with a lawsuit at some point. It's part of the cost of doing business, he added. Since small news organizations often can't do this financially, major publications such as the New York Times, CNN and Washington Post need to stand up and push back on behalf of all news organizations.

"Some people are going to sue over true stories," he said. "Journalists need to double down in getting things right so we can stand up."



"We as Americans, across the political spectrum, need to find ways to stand up for press freedom,"

– David McCraw

Examining what democracy means across the U.S.

***Andrea Bruce**, independent photojournalist*

*Moderated by **Mark Johnson**, senior lecturer in photojournalism at the University of Georgia Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication*

Although photojournalist Andrea Bruce worked in prestigious newsrooms such as the Concord Monitor and the Washington Post and spent years documenting war-torn Baghdad, she considers her current work in the U.S. some of the most courageous yet. As part of a yearlong project, which will be published by National Geographic in 2020, she's asking a vital question: What is democracy today?

Bruce first became interested in the question when she began shooting scenes in Iraq. A few months after she started working at the Washington Post, the harrowing events of Sept. 11 occurred, and she was sent overseas to document the Iraq War. Four male reporters were scheduled for the trip, but at the last minute, one couldn't go for personal reasons, and she was sent in his place with one week to prepare. Although she felt "green" and was only scheduled for one four-month trip, she returned again and again — for seven years. The stories were too important and compelling not to go back.

"As photographers, for me at least, we are the road to empathy between cultures or people who don't understand each other very well," she said. "When I returned and saw that no one was paying attention and the Iraqis were still misunderstood, I took it personally and thought I should try again."

When she started the first tour, Bruce covered the daily happenings of war, suicide bombings and embedded trips with the U.S. troops. During her first few trips, she realized that Americans and citizens in other countries wouldn't care about another culture unless they could relate to the people first. She decided to document everyday life to help others understand how Iraqis' lives were being affected by war.

For one project, Bruce spent a year with a woman who cared for her two children and earned money as a prostitute after her husband died following the initial invasion of Baghdad. Since news coverage often comes from men's voices and prostitution is common for women who are victims of war, Bruce focused on one woman's story to show another side of war. Even then, the story ran in the Washington Post's Style section, which broke Bruce's heart to see the feature placed between food recipes as a "woman's issue." Fortunately, she said, story placement and coverage of underrepresented voices have improved during the 15 years since that publication.

"She was the first person to ask me what the word 'democracy' means," Bruce said. "Most people in Iraq thought it meant money and that they would become wealthier."

Bruce explained the Constitution and Bill of Rights to her sources but ultimately felt like she couldn't adequately explain the concept of democracy. As she later covered the Arab Spring and stories in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and India, the question followed her. It prompted her to apply for and accept a Knight Visiting Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, where she studied democracy from Aristotle until today. She held "democracy dinners" to discuss ideas about the subject with professors and community members and hear their views, which ranged wildly and encompassed many facets.

"To me, democracy is the idea that you have the power — that everybody in the community has the power — to change the way government in your life is structured," she said. "Whether we have that in the United States is also another question."

After the 2016 Election, Bruce wanted to explore this among Americans.

She took the idea of "community journalism" and reapplied it during her travels around the country. To start the project, Bruce compiled a diverse sampling to choose the communities. She visited about 20 by the time of the McGill Symposium and will visit dozens more through 2020. A selection of these will be published by National Geographic leading up to the 2020 Election, and several high school classrooms that participate in the National Writing Project will contribute as well.

Rather than approach a community with a story angle already in mind, Bruce talks to high school students, teachers, community groups, unions, artist collectives and more to understand what matters most to them. She gives a presentation with three basic questions:

- What do you like about your community?
- What do you wish you could change about your community?
- How do you do that?

For Bruce, these three questions approach the idea of democracy without mentioning the word "democracy," which often prompts responses that Americans learn to say from their school-age years or repeat from memory without adding their personal input.

"Doing this gives me an opportunity to hear the real issues they're dealing with," she said. "When I hear silence about what they would change, [I wonder if] they feel like they can't? That in itself is telling to me."

Based on what community members say, Bruce then reports on the town. She shows them her pictures from Iraq and other communities and then encourages them to take their own photos as well. For instance, veterans in New Hampshire presented their own photos from Vietnam during a Veterans Day presentation, which empowered them to participate in the journalistic process.

When placed side by side, she said, it can be difficult to see how all of her photographs fit into one country. In reality, the United States is full of many different communities — and many times, they don't mix.

In each community, Bruce focuses on one character — who she calls the "keeper" — who holds everything together. They embody everyday democracy and try as best as they can to succeed. She also holds

local "democracy dinners" that mimic her Neiman Fellow experience to build a connection and learn the local point of view about what's happening in the community.

"The takeaways are often surprising and not what I thought going into it," she said.

Fellow Gabriella Audi asked how Bruce showcases the sometimes "broad and vague" views of democracy through photographs. Bruce says she looks at the places where people have power or lack a voice. That's why she uses the broad three questions that she asks.

"With all of the divisions in our country, I thought I would be covering conservatives and liberals, but the divide is between the rich and poor," she said. "All other divisions make people draw lines that don't matter. The bigger issue we need to pay attention to is poverty."

Fellow Myan Patel asked how to best convey culture in news media in an accurate and effective way. Bruce recommended focusing on emotions — the common human conditions that people share across the world. Have empathy and practice patience while reporting, she added.

As a follow-up, Fellow Will Salter asked if anything during the reporting process can encourage the authentic moments to emerge. Time makes the biggest difference, Bruce emphasized. If sources begin to pay too much attention to her during the reporting process, or if she feels like she's becoming part of the story, she'll take a step back and encourage them to continue with their daily routines. Although it's impossible for a reporter to remain completely invisible or not affect the situation at hand, she attempts to remain as hands-off as possible.

"You can't go into a country or community you've never been to and come out with a deep and telling story in two days," she said. "Live with a family for a week to understand what's happening."

Bruce also asks each town's residents how they define their own communities, whether that's based on location, race, ethnicity, gender identity, language or religion. Income disparities, for instance,

appear in every community she's visited. Most towns are divided in some way — by natural or manmade geography — with poor residents on one side and wealthy residents on the other. This observation prompts further questions about democracy for the rest of her project.

"Does democracy mean that you have an equal chance to succeed or you can succeed against all odds? Is equality part of democracy at all?" she asked. "Most communities have abandoned a lot of that, and some don't think the government does anything for them, so they're going to move forward on their own."

Student journalists can ask these questions and adapt the democracy project in their communities as well, she said, however that may be defined. High school teachers often know about the community and have connections to parents and administrators, which gives them an accurate window into

> "Every community has a different voice... Talk to [them] without preconceived ideas..."
> *- Andrea Bruce*

various parts of the community. Social groups often gather at fast-food restaurants for regular meals, whether a retirees' circle or mom's group, which can be a fascinating and fantastic place to meet people, she added. Community leaders who organize food drives and seek to help the voiceless and penniless are often aware of community conflicts, too.

"Every community has a different voice," she said. "Talk to organizations without preconceived ideas and do on-the-ground reporting, talking to people and seeing what their concerns are."

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