

Title: Michael Kruse, Being a Journalist in a Social Media World
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Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Michael Kruse is my guest today. He's a senior staff writer at POLITICO where he writes about presidential candidates and campaigns. He has been a journalist since his undergraduate years at Davidson College, where he and I were classmates, and worked for the Tampa Bay Times before joining POLITICO. He has won a number of awards including the National Press Foundation's Dirksen Award for Distinguished Reporting of Congress. We'll be talking about the supposedly post-truth world that we live in and what college students should know about the nature of journalism.

Chris Martin: So one point I thought we would start with is people say we live in a post-truth world. Do you feel like people care less about the truth than they used to?

Michael Kruse: I do not. People always have told stories to others and to themselves to try to make a tidy sense of the inherent senselessness of existence, the inherent chaotic-ness of existence. That's a forever thing and it will be a forever thing. What's different now I think is that these stories that aren't true spread so much more easily, exponentially more easily with the interconnectivity of the internet. So whereas it used to be the guy wearing the tinfoil hat so to speak and the people around him, his neighbors would sort of talk about him in hushed tones and keep him at arm's length.

Now, all of the tinfoil hats can get together and create an entire universe over the internet and then not just over the internet as we've seen more and more. And because of this, because of this just reality, the reality of the way information travels at this point, it is an entirely different scenario than I think it has been in any other point in, fair to say, sort of hyperbolic about the human history.

Chris Martin: So because of this scenario though, do you feel like it's easier for people who want to lie to use their lies to get ahead?

Michael Kruse: Definitely, just the machinery is there to make those lies seem less like lies. I think it's just human nature to listen to the volume of messages and the reach of messages and to assign some measure of value to those metrics. It's hard not to. It's hard to dismiss louder and louder lies that are coming with more and more frequency, right? Do you agree with that? I mean it's just – it's harder to dismiss. You need to be in a position of some knowledge and some privilege to be able to sift through all that stuff to the extent that it's even possible, neatly put what's real over here and keep it front and center and then what's not over here and keep it secondary.

You have to pay attention to it but you don't have to – you have to acknowledge it but you don't have to agree with it. You don't have to give it increased – you don't have to shine light on it, if you're in my position. You don't have to. That is not my job. It is not my job to play this on the one hand and – this true thing on the one hand and this untrue thing on the other. That is not helpful. That is not my job.

Chris Martin: Well, I agree that we tend to look at converging evidence as valid. So if you have 4 or 5 different sources or 10 or 20 and they all seem to be giving you the same message, it looks like you have more evidence or it looks like you have converging evidence so – and that can happen with social media if you are following the wrong accounts.

Michael Kruse: We all have to make choices and arm ourselves the knowledge to make those choices, whether or not you're a reporter whose literal job is that. But as citizens, we have to make choices. What sources of information are we going to value the most and use to make decisions on how to live and how to be a participant in the civic fabric?

Chris Martin: So if you were to teach a course to college students on today's news environment and social media, how would you prepare them to the extent that that's even possible? How would you prepare them for this world which is quite different from the world that you and I were in when we were in college?

Michael Kruse: Well, it's not quite what you asked but the first thought is that it needs to start well before you're teaching college students. I mean ideally, this is something that we incorporate into the curriculum in elementary school and in middle school and in high school, how to be not a consumer of news but a citizen of your place. And I think that is a distinction that more and more gets lost.

Chris Martin: Have you seen middle schools do this?

Michael Kruse: I have not but I'm not typically in middle schools here and there for certain stories. But I'm not – I don't know. I'm not an expert in the curriculum of sort of what might at one point had been called civics. I think this is a lifelong effort. It is not something – well, a college class that can – a college class you're describing is useful and better than nothing, better late than never. This is a discipline. This is an exercise or a series of exercises that need to start much, much earlier.

But you referenced how it was different when we were growing up, when we were similar age. Here's how I – here's part of how I became not only a professional journalist but more importantly, a citizen of democracy. In my house, in my parents' house, The Boston Globe showed up and The New York Times showed up. Initially and for quite some time, sports were my chief interest. I read the sports section word for word starting in elementary school. But over time, as I transitioned to say, middle school, I couldn't help but see and be interested in other parts of the newspaper, the metro section, the front section, the editorials.

And so, the field of view broadens from did the Celtics or the Red Sox win last night to essentially, where do I live and who is making decisions about the place that I live, the place that I live being the suburb of Boston, the Boston area, the United States of America, the world, just sort of an organic introduction to the time and place in which I was growing up.

What is the equivalent of that now? Because that is the start of—I think—of the question you are asking about how to teach college kids to do this. So, I guess it's a separate question. Am I teaching college students how to be engaged participants, engaged citizens or am I teaching them how to be the reporters or am I teaching them a little bit of both? Because there is overlap here, right? I mean to be a reporter is to be a citizen first and foremost. To be a journalist is to be a human first and foremost.

Chris Martin: Right. Well, let's say we just pin this down to the issue of fake news or news that's deliberately manufactured with no semblance of reality, how would you prepare – well, maybe prepare is the wrong word. What sort of case study would you talk about of how there is a market for creating this and consuming this and how that developed and how you can just be aware that that market of information is now out there?

So when we were growing up, AM radio, I mean I didn't listen to – well, I moved to the US when I was 18 so we were in the same class with Davidson but I grew up in India and I moved to the US at 18. But yeah, I listened to Rush Limbaugh second hand because other people were listening to it. So there was a degree of lying and fake news even on AM radio.

But when you see stories on Facebook that really are packaged to look authoritative, you need to be prepared for the fact that they might not be. You're inside the journalism machine, so from your perspective, how do you explain to students why it's easy to look at fake journalism and think of it as real journalism?

Michael Kruse: Well, there's a market for it partly because of what we discussed at the top of the episode, that there's always a market for alternate realities. Now, you can share it more easily and you can find kinship with others who are in the market for that or who find some solace or for some reason need to look at that stuff rather than something more credible.

I mean it's interesting that the term “fake news” and the way it has changed over the last four years, I mean initially in the 2016 election, fake news was just that. It was a very literal term, fake news, news that is not real, news that was specifically sort of engineered by content farms in Macedonia I think is where it was. But a variety of places, anybody could do it and lots of people did do it to just throw it out there and sort of the more clicky and the more sensational and the more grabby a headline, the more it is widely shared.

And it is quickly – I mean this is the way it worked in the 2016 election, quickly debunked by credible fact-checking outfits. But it doesn't matter totally, because it's already out there and it will always – it will keep spreading to certain places in spite of those fact-checkers. That's what fake news meant until really the transition from the Obama presidency to the Trump presidency when Trump very quickly, and cleverly in some respects, co-opted that term and shifted it almost

180 to real news outlets. Your fake news it has become obviously, I mean not to do to almost the point of cliché at this point but it has – this tactic has not subsided and I don't see when it will or how it will.

But more specifically to your question, how to teach impressionable, young, intelligent minds to distinguish between fake news and real news, and of course, this exists on a spectrum too. There is like the easily identifiable “fake news” to use that term the way it initially existed and then there is the sort of the more sophisticated stuff, right? But you can start by sort of identifying what's credible, what should be in a responsible citizen's news diet. I mean I think that's how I would attack it with college kids who may or may not still be confused about how to distinguish.

There's an infinite number of newspapers and magazines and digital outlets that are responsible, credible, real. They don't get everything right all the time but when they don't get something right, they publish a correction. They strive for intellectual honesty and play an integral role in any function in democracy, right?

So I don't really care which of those, which handful of those outlets an up-and-coming citizen/college student is reading. I just care that they are because that is in itself makes you sort of immune to being duped to less credible, not even outlets, it's just a creation, a figment, a substitute of a news article that is showing up on your uncle's Facebook page.

Chris Martin: Right. So what would you say the most – if you were to name a few news outlets that you consider really trustworthy news outlet for they are really good gatekeepers but ones that don't engage in false equivalence, who would you say?

Michael Kruse: I work for Politico. Let's start there. Politico, the major newspapers that are papers of record and are robust and still resource-rich even in the time of pandemic to have reporters on the ground and best in class journalists working on behalf of the citizenry, New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times. Wherever you live, invest in your local newspaper or another local outlet. I live in the Charlotte area. I subscribe to the Charlotte Observer. I support an outlet called Charlotte Agenda, which does great work around Charlotte. I support the local NPR affiliate.

I mean all this is important for the health as much as these places in many situations, most situations, are ailing at this point. It becomes all the more important if you are serious about being a citizen in your place first, in your place, the place that you make your home in. It's important to the extent that you can financially of course. It's not – well, I wouldn't say it's cheap or expensive. It depends on what your ability is. But if you can, to the extent that you can, I think it's very important to pay for your news close to where you sleep. That is like the step number one to being a responsible news consumer, which is to say, a citizen, the exercise of citizenry reading.

And I would say, I would add, read your news. And I would say this to college kids, read your news. Don't watch it. I mean watch it fine. But read it first.

I think that's a different experience and a more substantive experience because news you watch is almost unavoidably more entertainment than news you read.

Chris Martin: Yeah, that point is one that I try to make to college students too if I remember. Sometimes I forget. I mean sometimes I just take it for granted but watching news on TV is generally not worthwhile and I don't even make it explicit.

Michael Kruse: Well, I find myself in conversations with people about cable news. People who are smart, well-meaning, regular people who complain to me about the conflict, the constant conflict evident on cable news and how they feel like everything is so partisan on cable news and I try to respond by saying, "That is the *point*. That is the *point!*" It's not that you are not getting any information necessarily. It's better than nothing.

But if you don't want to live in this sort of hyper-partisan-conflict-driven, which is to say, entertaining, because conflict is entertaining, conflict-driven-news ecosystem, shift to a different better ecosystem. If that's your deal and you like watching that, fine. It's the same reason you watch a good docu-drama on Netflix. But don't confuse these two ways of getting your news and understand what you are getting by watching cable news. Understand what its role is, what its mandate is. If it didn't do that, it wouldn't exist.

Chris Martin: Right. Earlier this year, I interviewed James Poniewozik, the TV critic for The New York Times. And for people who are listening who didn't check out that episode, you might want to check out that episode or the book itself that talks about how among other things shows like *Survivor* and professional wrestling changed all of TV and made shows like *The Apprentice* possible.

Michael Kruse: Which is what made, one might argue, I have mentioned, which is what made the Trump presidency possible. There is no one reason but *The Apprentice* certainly helped build the bridge.

Chris Martin: Right. The academic evidence supports that. People felt like they knew Donald Trump better because they had watched *The Apprentice*. That's part of James Poniewozik's argument too. He is approaching it as a TV critic, not as an academic. But that is in a way how Donald Trump got into people's homes and sold them the fantasy of who he was.

Michael Kruse: To that level and as a person in charge and capable of swift, invaluable decisions. That is the character he played on *The Apprentice*, which reached however many millions of homes. Dwindles over time in almost immediately but still, a drastically larger audience than he had even in the '80s when he was starting to become a bit of a pop culture phenomenon but not in that way. *The Apprentice* pitched him as a certain type of character that appealed to a certain portion of the population once he shifted more squarely toward electoral politics in 2015.

Chris Martin: So returning to journalism, in what ways do you feel like journalism is more difficult now? Like are there some stories that illustrate how in some ways it is more difficult now than it was 20 years ago?

Michael Kruse: Logistically, it's more difficult. It's more difficult to be a reporter right now because it's more difficult to be a person right now. Specifically, I haven't been out on the road reporting since March 2nd when I went to the Trump rally in Charlotte. That's a long time and highly unusual part of my job at Politico is to be out and about around the country. I'm not on the road as much as some of our reporters but certainly, depending on what I'm working on, two to three times a month.

It's more difficult to report when you can't meet people and have conversations face to face and even shake hands, which creates or did create a certain sharedness which is to say lay groundwork for reproductive conversation in all the best interviews are, first and foremost, conversations between two people. So logistically, it's more difficult.

A little bit more broadly, psychologically and emotionally, it's for years now, it has been a more difficult task to be a reporter just because you are dealing with in your inbox and in your Twitter mentions and even sometimes in person a certain level of distrust or even betrayal and vile directed at you because you are a stand-in for "them media." It has obviously gotten worst over the last four years with the presidential election and with the current administration. But that is not – it's not super difficult for at least me to scream that kind of stuff and dismiss it as sad, angry trolls who have bones to pick. They are not coming at me personally, right? So that's not too difficult.

I think what is harder to stomach over the last handful years and really, in some sense the entirety of my career, and I've been doing this – I've never done anything else for work, I've never done anything else to pay my bills since we graduated from the date, so 20 years. And in the course of those 20 years, this industry, it has been harder and harder to one, make a living as a reporter and two, just keep a job. There are just tons fewer of me out there doing this kind of work. I've been some combination of good and very, very fortunate to be able to keep doing this and doing it the way that I do.

But it's hard to see friends, colleagues, not be able to continue working in this industry that they loved and found valuable and worthwhile. And it's hard even in a bigger way to see the consequences of literally that many fewer sets of eyes and ears at city council meetings, at community events, making public records requests. I mean that has very real consequences that we are seeing on a daily basis.

I mean to try to wrap this around to the idea of truth, if in an accepted truth, in a shared sense of what's real and what's not, the terrain on which this can happen, the disintegration of accepted truth is made more fertile the fewer reporters you have. The vacuum gets filled and it's not being filled by responsible reporters. It's being filled by purveyors of useful information weaponry which is to say propaganda.

So just in the broadest possible sense, it is just emotionally and psychologically de-spiriting sometimes more than others to see this trend line not only continue but in some ways accelerate over the last handful of years.

Chris Martin: So when you are interviewing people for stories, does it make that more difficult?

Michael Kruse: Sometimes I recall certain conversations over the last few years. I remember talking to a woman in a bar in Wisconsin having to just sort of pluck through the – I find myself in a position here and there having to like listen to somebody who clearly lives in a different information universe. I'm not there to be sort of a real-time fact-checker and I don't want to get into an argument. That is not my role. My role is to hear out that person.

But I have found myself going here and there going back to the hotel at night and having to Google, like figure out where is this stuff coming from. And again, I generally need to be like aware of what people like that woman in the bar in Wisconsin ...

Chris Martin: I mean do you recall what she was telling you?

Michael Kruse: Some precursor to Obama Gate, whatever that is. This was probably three or four years ago by now. I should have thought harder about the specifics. A stew of conspiracy theories over the last 10, 15 years in the political – arena of political informational warfare.

Chris Martin: I mean I guess it does all blur together.

Michael Kruse: At some point, everything sort of always comes back to, I don't know, Barack Obama. But that instance with that woman that just popped into my head at that bar in Wisconsin. More recently, I was at a Trump rally in Minneapolis and was working the line waiting to get into the rally that afternoon and found myself having a conversation with a woman who was very excited about QAnon. I just asked her, "What is that to you?" And at the risk of oversimplifying, she basically said, "It's everything to me. It's what's real and it's my life."

And so you want to listen to that person but you sort of – you leave – and by the way, in other ways, we have shared experience. We talked about where she is from and her kids. But you leave those interactions like that thinking, how are we going to ever get back if that's even a thing, get back to a place where that woman from Minnesota and somebody like me are having a conversation with some semblance of a shared reality? I mean that is a – I guess that is a question that leaves me pretty pessimistic on that front. I don't know how you undo that. I don't know that that's possible.

So in that respect, it has made some conversations – I mean little conversations I have with little human beings in a variety of places around the country more difficult. And it makes it more difficult for – I mean just from a time standpoint, it takes time to hear somebody out. And these are things that I feel like I need to understand but there are also things that I'm not going to dwell on in the stories that I eventually write, if that makes any sense.

So it's difficult too emotionally as a citizen and it's difficult logistically because I am having to listen to conversations and then filter them into whatever I end up writing out of those places.

Chris Martin: And when you interview people in politics or political actors whether they work for a politician or are politicians, do you feel like there have been instances where they've tried to deceive you in ways that make your job – I mean obviously, they've never always told the truth, but today, are there ways in which they try to deceive you that seem to make your job more difficult?

Michael Kruse: Not really. I mean most elected officials or aspiring elected officials operate most, operate within a more accepted realm of information than the women I just described. They are better at shading. They are better at – if they are being selectively truthful, which frankly, we all do in our various ways, but they're not so far off typically. Typically. I mean I suppose there are exceptions. But I mean look, most politicians that I'm writing about and that I'm dealing with I think are, I don't know, for the most part, operating within the realm of accepted reality.

I don't even – I mean that sounds ridiculous to even have to say but no, I think my job with Politico is to first and foremost profile presidential candidates. When one of them becomes president, continue to write about him as it turns out. And also profile other interesting and illuminating political notables whether that's a member of Congress or anybody else. And for the most part, I feel like I have – they have intellectually honest conversations with me and I appreciate that.

Chris Martin: Okay. And I'll close with this. There is an element of both-siderism. I have an episode about maybe six months ago specifically about that or false equivalence. Do you feel like as a journalist, some people put pressure on you to be “even-handed” and report both sides? So you touched on this earlier. But do you feel like there is some pressure to engage in that sort of false equivalence?

Michael Kruse: I suppose the pressure from home, pressure from ...

Chris Martin: Advertisers, leaders ...

Michael Kruse: No, not advertisers. I don't think I ever feel pressure from advertisers even indirectly. I mean advertisers help pay the bills. But that doesn't filter down and never has to somebody in my position. That has never been a feeling of mine in two decades of being a reporter.

I suppose there is some pressure that you might – some indirect pressure you might feel from people in your inbox or people in your Twitter mentions or people in comments which I do not read. But to me, it's part of the job to be able to withstand that pressure, whatever that looks like and whoever it's coming from and to not engage in what you are talking about both siderisms or false equivalence.

My job as a reporter, anybody's job as a reporter is not necessarily to even be objective, whatever that means. It's to be fair. It's to try to the best of your ability to try to identify what is real, what is true. And to – using the preponderance of your reporting, you're talking to all kinds of people who say all kinds of things. That is the obligation. That is the job. The job is not to give equal weight to all those voices. There is an element of choice. It's not just an element of choice. The job demands that somebody who is in the position that I am in, the job demands that I make certain choices about what – who deserves to be heard, who is making a verifiable argument and who is not.

And it's not an easy thing. It's not a black and white thing. It is something that I and many others in this industry struggle with on a daily basis. But that's the job. But I guess to answer your question more specifically, I don't feel undue pressure to give 50% of the text of a piece I write to this person on this side of this thing and 50% to this other person on this other side of thing. It's just not how it works and it's now how it has ever worked. It's not how I've ever done it.

Chris Martin: Right. I mean the reason I asked that is I read both in New York Times and the Washington Post and I feel like the Washington Post does better here, but sometimes the New York Times craft a headline in a way that's both-siderist and there's usually a chain of people on Twitter I think legitimately complaining about the way the headline was framed. And so I wonder if there is – I just wonder why that happens like the New York Times.

Michael Kruse: Yeah. I mean I'm hesitant to play media critic. It's hard enough to do my job and to try to satisfactorily live well. It's hard, and particularly for I think headline writers who have less space in which to work. This is part of the conversation that has always existed and it will be on going and it's a valid conversation. But I think readers too need to acknowledge that how they see the body text of a story or the text of a headline is a function of where they sit as well. So the way you look at a headline is not the way that somebody obviously on the other end of the political spectrum or the totally different political ideology looks at that headline.

So it's – I guess what I'm saying is it's not an easy thing. It's not a simple thing. And it's a conversation. It's a series of conversations that happens every single day and a series of decisions. Sometimes reporters make the exact right decisions. Sometimes not just reporters, journalists of all kinds, and sometimes they don't I suppose like everybody.

Chris Martin: Well, Michael, thanks for joining us on the show. It has been good having you.

Michael Kruse: Thanks, Chris. I appreciate your questions and all this and an opportunity to sort of continue to grapple with these difficult and sometimes distressing ideas. But if we don't do it, it's even worse so let's keep doing it.

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Chris Martin: I mentioned a couple of other episodes during the show. If you're interested in listening to those, the episode with Lara Schwartz on both-siderism is episode 65 from

September 2019 and the episode with TV critic James Poniewozik is episode 77 and it's from January 2 2020.

You can follow Michael Kruse @MichaelKruse on Twitter and you can find his articles on POLITICO. His last name is spelled K R U S E.

If you have any comments about today's episode, you can contact me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter @Chrimartin76.

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