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Transcript

Batya Ungar-Sargon

Journalists used to see themselves as the little guy outside of power, demanding justice on behalf of the other little guys. Today, they are part of power. They go to the same elite universities as people who become politicians, who they are then charged with covering, as people who become tech billionaires. They are swimming in that milieu and that sort of meritocratic, elite, lives in these very expensive American cities, they have a very high income.

Zach Rausch

Batya Ungar-Sargon. This is Heterodox Out Loud, I'm Zach Rausch. Today, a special episode recorded in-person at Heterodox Academy's 2022 conference in Denver. Stay with us.

Our guest is the well-known journalist Batya Ungar-Sargon, Deputy Opinion Editor of Newsweek Magazine. Batya is the author of "Bad News: How Woke Media is Undermining Democracy." In her book, she says that mainstream journalism has abandoned the working class, given into financial incentives and a culture war that prioritizes coastal elites over everyday Americans. Batya argues that the media's shift from holding the powerful to account to actually working on their behalf is undermining American democracy and driving much of the rising distrust in American institutions. In our interview in Denver, we talked about the declining trust in American journalism, whether trust is warranted at all, and how higher education may be contributing to this growing problem.

Zach Rausch

So glad to have you on Heterodox Out Loud.

Batya Ungar-Sargon

Thank you so much for having me.

Zach Rausch

Many people have lost trust in journalists, maybe even more than academics, which is saying a lot.

Batya Ungar-Sargon

It's definitely tight race.

Zach Rausch

So, can you give us a little history of what has happened? Why is there such low trust in journalism today?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

I think the story we're used to hearing is that journalism has become extremely politically partisan. And so people don't trust that what they're getting is factual. They believe that everything is coming from a political point of view, and so they're finding it increasingly difficult to trust in the truthfulness of our journalists. Now, of course, there is some truth to that. It is clearly the case that our media is increasingly politically polarized. But the argument that I make in my book, "Bad News: How Woke Media Is Undermining Democracy" is that this is much more a story about class. There were times in American history where the media was even more partisan than it is today. So, in one of the sort of eras of American journalism that was really robust was the early 20th century New York, there were so many communist newspapers that you could be a Communist and have five Communist newspapers that you would never dream of reading because they've got communism wrong. Right? It was very partisan, but it was partisan very much on behalf of the masses, and that has been what's changed. So journalism used to be a working class trade.

It was a very low status job. The person who used to go into journalism would have been the kid at the back of the classroom, who couldn't shut up and couldn't stop talking wise and cracking wise and who the teacher was always yelling at, who had away with words but hated authority. And so he could never join the factory, the line in the factory, because he was so anti-authoritarian and questioned everything and nobody could work with him. That was the kind of guy who went into journalism, you know, someone who is extremely annoying to people in power and that was his job and he would then go and pester the people in power and on behalf of his friends who worked in the line in the factories.

Zach Rausch

And what's different now?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

Today the people who become journalists are the people who from first grade are sitting in the front row. Every time the teacher asks a question, they're the first ones to raise their hand. They have done all the homework. The people who are so used to performing in that academic setting, who come from a very privileged background, who get very far in their academics. The majority of journalists now have a graduate degree. Think about the fact that in 1930 less than a third of journalists had been to college. Right? Now, they have a graduate degree when only a third of Americans have a college degree. There's been this status revolution. They're much more educated than average Americans. If you can make it as a journalist, you're going to end up being much wealthier than the average American. And that status revolution, that class revolution, means that what we have is a journalism that, yes, is polarized politically, but only on behalf of the elites of both sides. You have conservative media that's very free market oriented and so it's not catering at all to the needs of the working class and the middle class from an economic point of view, although it represents them socially.

And then you have a liberal media that's really geared towards the 6% of Americans who are progressive, who have a college degree and a graduate degree and live in the cities. That is who the target audience is of the vast majority of the elite and even now not-so-elite liberal media. And I think it is that sort of these people who are so clearly economically privileged but who see themselves as having earned the status to moralize at you, to tell you what values you should have and who look down their noses at people who don't have that same education and don't share their values. I think that's where the real disgust has started to seep in.

Zach Rausch

I want to hone in on just like one very particular point that you made, which was the shift of journalists being the kids from the back of the class to the kids in the front of the class. And I think that's interesting because the anti-conformist to the conformist almost and do you see that as like...

Batya Ungar-Sargon

Totally. Journalists used to see themselves as the little guy outside of power demanding justice on behalf of the other little guys. Today, they are part of power. They go to the same elite universities as people who become politicians, who they are then charged with covering, as people who become tech billionaires. They are swimming in that milieu and that sort of meritocratic, elite lives in these very expensive American cities. They have very high income. The conformity comes from that class solidarity that they have with other people who are in power. Of course, I don't want to overstate it. There are still people from working class backgrounds who make it through. The starting salary of a journalist is extremely low, \$35,000 a year. And you have to live in New York City or D.C. or Seattle, where 75% of the jobs are on the coast. But really what it tells you is that these are the scions of economic elites who go to these very elite universities, and then they get these internships, which they can take because they're unpaid and they're not working, unlike kids who have to work through college. It's a self-perpetuating system where it's becoming ever narrower and narrower.

And they brought with them from the university all of these sort of this woke ideology and all of these phrases. And unfortunately, the leadership of these publications have gone along with it because it's very much within the business model to cater to this.

Zach Rausch

Right. So journalists are catering to a very small sliver of our population and the loss of trust among the majority of Americans, you're saying, it's justified? Is it a problem?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

I don't think it's a problem. I mean, I don't think there's anything you can learn in the New York Times and on CNN that you can't learn from going to church or volunteering or walking down to your local bodega, talking to people. The news media has gotten so nationalized at this point. You don't really have very much local news anymore. And national news is just not relevant to the lives of the average American. Who asked us if we should be giving \$40 billion in aid to Ukraine and weapons to Ukraine. Nobody asked us. We're not relevant to the national conversations and the local conversations. You can get involved in those without opening a newspaper.

Zach Rausch

Trust in many of our institutions, not just journalism and government and law, has been declining and higher ed as well. What role do you think that the academy has played in the loss of trust in journalism?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

Yeah, I mean, for a long time, like all of these woke ideas, like that America is a white supremacy, or that there's no difference between men and women, or all of these ideas that we now associate with the woke movement, the critical race theory movement for a long time, these were relegated to the academic ivory tower. When I was coming up and getting my PhD, you had to take critical theory classes. You had to study this nonsense, whatever, it's malarkey, as I call it, academic malarkey, but it stayed there. It wasn't the kind of thing that you can bring into your newsroom with you because it was meaningless to normal Americans. But what happened was, as these outlets have started to cater to exclusively the very people who have that same education and speak in that same language, and they created a business model for digital media that reinforces the use of those phrases and those words and that ideology, so that they created an appetite within the very people that they were trying to cater to for this kind of story. That was the research question I went into my book with. I was like, I know that most Americans, 94% of Americans, think this is hogwash.

They think this is baloney. Anybody who has relationships in the black community knows that wokeness is just completely anathema to how people think about themselves. It's how rich white liberals who are over educated think about people of color. Like everybody knows that. And I was like, but then, if that is the case, why is 95% of the liberal media speaking like this now? Why is the marketplace there instead of with the 94%? And the answer to that is, digital media works on engagement, and the most engaged readers and viewers are the most extreme, right? So if we used to measure success in journalism based on the breadth of your reach, how many people of different orientations could buy this newspaper in this one town? Now they measure based on engagement, how many people retweeted it, how many people commented on it, how many people posted it to Facebook, how many people sent it to their aunt and uncle, how many people engaged with it? When that is your measure of success, you have outsourced your success to the craziest people in your coalition. And that is what happened with the New York Times and the Washington Post and all of these other outlets.

Zach Rausch

So, are you referring mostly to the rise of social media or more?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

I'm referring to, obviously, yes. So a quarter of traffic for a lot of digital news sites comes from Facebook, from social media, right? So that's a big part of it. But it's also things like SEO traffic, google search optimization. There's all these tricks of the trade. If you mention a certain word ten times throughout the article and you put it in the headline and in the social description, google will prioritize it. If you have a question buried into the article that people type into a Google search, google will push your article up in its search results, which of course is very important, right? If your story is the first story on Google, you're going to get immediately 100,000 page views, right? So if that's what you're chasing is those clicks, you're going to start to create your content and match your content to the ways that the Internet thinks, right? As opposed to the ways that journalists used to think.

Zach Rausch

So what's the path forward? I think at two levels. One is for the average person, and then at the institutional level.

Batya Ungar-Sargon

For the average person, the answer is, I'm sorry, I'm religious, but the answer is to love your neighbor. That is the answer. Literally, every time you are on the Internet and you read something a stranger wrote and you feel rage, you feel angry, somebody just made a million dollars. And I am not exaggerating. Like, literally, the whole business model is built on making you hate your fellow American. So every minute of every day, you can train yourself not to feel that feeling. Every time you have that feeling is an amazing opportunity. To say, someone just made a million bucks on my heart off of my feelings by making me hate my fellow American. Literally, love thy neighbor. It's like everything else is commentary, as it says in the Talmud. That is the most important thing. So much more unites us than divides us. That is the most important thing that you can remember and that you can do to combat all this. At the institutional level, I don't have a lot of hope because it has been very economically beneficial. I think culturally, we're in a woke lash. I think people are turning against this right now.

I think you see journalists trying to hiccup, like, social media mobs the way they used to in 2020, but it's like, sort of falling flat now. So I think that we are in the beginning of a sort of turnaround.

Although, if you think about The New York Times, for example, 91% of New York Times readers now are Democrats. The Democrats and the media that caters to them have very much abandoned the working class for an elite, college educated, suburban, affluent base, that's their new base.

Zach Rausch

So starting at the individual level, and maybe that will cause some larger shifts.

Batya Ungar-Sargon

I think so, yeah.

Zach Rausch

What was your trajectory to feeling so passionate about this issue?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

I feel very passionately about everything. People ask me, like, why are you so passionate about this? I'm passionate about everything, I think, but I think it's very important. I don't hold any of my views very tightly. I mean, I hold them very closely, but I'm very open to being wrong. And I ask myself a lot, okay, what is the piece of evidence that would disprove this attachment or that attachment? I used to be woke, and someone recently said to me, like, you now are, like, on the side of the working class the way you used to be woke. Like, you see yourself as an advocate. And I was like, no, that's not true. But is that true? That's something I need to ask myself. They don't want an advocate. The point should be for them to be able to tell us what they want and what they need. I think this issue I have become convinced that the class divide in America is the most pressing issue right now. Without a strong working class that has dignity, we're all screwed. So that seems really important to me in terms of, like a future that I'm imagining for myself.

But my trajectory was like I tell people a lot, the first inkling that I had that my world view when I was woke was wrong was there was a 2018 Yale study. And I remember reading it, and it was so shocking to me that I actually had to put it away because I wasn't ready to deal with what it said. And I knew that it was going to be a big problem for me. They found that there was a difference in how white liberals and white conservatives talk to people of color. And they found that white liberals, when they talk to black and Hispanic Americans, they dumb down their vocabulary, and white

conservatives don't do that. And I remember looking at that and thinking, and we call them the racists? But I realized immediately this is an indictment not just of my milieu, but my whole worldview. And I put it away. I was not ready to deal with it because I knew that I was going to lose all my friends because I was like, I'll come back in three months, I put it in the drawer and closed the drawer. I remember exactly where I was sitting.

And I came back to it three months later and I was like, "Okay, I need to rethink some things." And I remember I called my friend Danisha, I was like, "Danisha, I just read this study. It says that white liberals dumb down their speech when they talk to black people." And she was like, "Yeah, we all know that. They know that was the beginning of my understanding that this is not for them, this is for us. That there's some sort of psychological class economic thing happening here that is for us. And we are using them and abandoning them so we can feel a certain way about ourselves, namely high on our own virtue and righteousness. And I'm more virtuous than my neighbor, who's also a lefty, but slightly less lefty, believes maybe private property should be defended in a riot or something, right? So that for me, I think was really the beginning of the end.

Zach Rausch

What do you think is the takeaway that you would want our audience to have from your work and for everything that you do here?

Batya Ungar-Sargon

I can't help but feel that the number one thing people come out of a university degree in the humanities, especially with, is contempt for people who don't have a college degree. And I would like to see us get back to a place where the economy is working somewhere equitably for people who don't have that degree as it does for people who do have that degree. So anything you can do to inculcate, we used to call it like noblesse oblige, which is just like being aware of your privilege, basically, and thinking about how you can give back to the community, like anything you can do in the way that you approach information and its dissemination and our nation, America, whatever you can do to make your students come out of the university with a strong feeling about how important is that we are connected as Americans, as a body politic, and to be part of the forces that are stitching back together the fabric of American society. I think that's God's work.

Zach Rausch

Batya Ungar-Sargon at Heterodox Academy's 2022 Conference in Denver. This conversation is one of two special podcast recordings from the conference. Our next will be with John McWhorter and Glenn Loury. Full conference video is being released on our YouTube channel soon at [YouTube.com/HeterodoxAcademy](https://www.youtube.com/HeterodoxAcademy). Thanks to Davies Content for producing this podcast and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch. Until next time.