



BOOK REVIEWS:

An Everyday Guide to Journalism

Reviewed by Jeff Inman

Alan Rusbridger, *News and How to Use it: What to Believe in a Fake News World*. (Paperback, Hardcover and Electronic Versions). Canongate Books LTD, 2020. 1838851615; ISBN-13: 9781838851613

Journalism is in a state these days. While the pandemic has been raging across the globe, an “infodemic” has been spreading from screen to screen. Fake news is infecting newsfeeds at a blistering pace, pushed by controversy loving algorithms and a conspiracy primed populace. At the same time, “real journalism” has been doggedly attacked by politicians and pundits, pecked at for occasional inaccuracies and potential biases. It’s no wonder that, in a March 2020 survey, Edelman found that journalists are trusted by less than half of respondents—43 percent to be exact—while 63 percent had no problem trusting a “person like yourself.”

Alan Rusbridger wants to boost people’s confidence in journalism. The former editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* and current chair of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Rusbridger understands the trust gap journalists are working desperately close. Over his 20 years running *The Guardian*, launching its US and Australian divisions, as well as its now powerhouse website, Rusbridger had a front row seat to the rise of the internet age—and the corresponding erosion in the public’s trust in journalists.

In the six years since he left *The Guardian*, things have only gotten worse. Misinformation and disinformation are now both a profitable business and a political tactic. Citizen journalists are both essential—see Darnella Frazier’s 2021 Pulitzer Prize Special Citation for filming the murder of George Floyd—and potentially detrimental to our very democracy—see half of YouTube. The general populations’ understanding of the difference between professional journalism

and outright hackery is minimal at best.

It’s the latter point that Rusbridger is particularly worried about. “Somehow we expect the public to be able to distinguish the good from the bad and to recognize it’s not at all the same, even if we give it the same name,” he writes in the preface to *News and How to Use It*. Yes, journalism is an “imperfect trade,” as Rusbridger calls it. And yes, journalism has struggled to both describe itself correctly to the public, as well as police itself when things go wrong. But it’s still essential to the success of modern society.

News and How to Use It is Rusbridger’s attempt to pull back the veil on what exactly he considers professional journalism, the skills and tactics its practitioners employ, and the many missteps of those who represent themselves as journalists but are in fact partisans, blowhards, and imposters masquerading as the real deal. The book is formatted as a sort of encyclopedia of journalism, starting with A and ending with Z. In between, Rusbridger defines terms like impartiality, bias and accuracy. He tackles modern essentials like clickbait, metrics, and hot takes. And he digs into topics like sourcing, explaining the difference (and necessity) of anonymous sources versus those who speak on the record, as well as the various motives behind both.

Rusbridger also spends time talking about some of the recent struggles and failings of journalism. He repeatedly visits the perils of covering climate change and why traditional models of allowing equal time to both sides of the issue should be ignored. He also

discusses how echo chambers are far from a modern phenomenon, particularly in his native England, where the print press is as biased as US cable news. And as a Brit, he picks apart all the issues surrounding the coverage of Brexit and why it was terribly wrong.

It's the latter bit that makes *News and How to Use It* an imperfect book for American readers. At times, it can be very British. Young American journalists might know about some of the failings of Rupert Murdoch and his news empire, but they won't understand why Rusbridger gives so much attention of columnist Christopher Booker or writer Robert Fisk. And there are enough differences between the terms

and practices of British and American journalists that it might raise the occasional alarm bell.

Even so, this is a great, albeit imperfect, guide to journalism in the modern age. It can help both budding reporters and those who are struggling to understand what goes into writing a well-sourced story—if the very people who need that better understanding of journalism actually read it.

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***News for Rich, White, and Blue* asks tough questions for journalism and democracy**

Reviewed by Carol Zuegner

Nikki Usher, *News for the Rich, White, and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism* (Paperback, Hardcover and Electronic Versions). Columbia University Press, July 2021. ISBN: 9780231184670, ISBN: 9780231184663, ISBN: 9780231545600.

In *News for the Rich, White, and Blue*, Nikki Usher weaves an impressive array of social science research, both qualitative and quantitative, to connect broad themes of the impact of place, power and inequality on journalism and the consequences for democracy. The macro and micro views of the news ecosystem from the broad strokes of complex data sets to the qualitative interviews in newsrooms like the *New York Times*, with regional reporters based in Washington, D.C., and two nonprofit startups result in a readable book with a couple of denser chapters on the complex data analysis. Her focus on place, power and inequality paints an accurate and thought-provoking reflection of newspaper journalism and what could be next.

She contends that journalism and local news do play a role in democracy, but she also shows how critical and comprehensive news is a more recent invention, and how journalism perpetuates inequities and the status quo. The ideal form of journalism connects people to places and gives them a sense of shared commitment and empowers democracy is still worth striving for but may be out of reach.

The case she makes for the rich, white, and blue future is compelling: The newspapers that will survive the financial, social and technological challenges will be the ones who serve elite, educated audiences who can and will pay for news. The chapter called “Place and the Limits of Digital Revenue” offers a complex and sobering history of newspaper advertising revenue and the challenges of that digitally-derived income. It’s not a good outlook. Her concept of place plays out here in that the financial success of print newspapers came because of the dominance of local advertising in a geographically specific market. That can’t be replicated with digital. She uses the *New York Times* as an outlier as the paper strives for a global and placeless audience.

The *Times* and perhaps *Washington Post* can survive, but she fears for the future of Goldilocks newspapers—those metropolitan and regional daily newspapers that aren’t big enough to claim national audiences but are still big enough to serve a vital role in the national news ecology.

For those who think philanthropy and nonprofit news might be the answer, Usher cautions that similar place-based inequities and partisan dimensions can bring about unintended consequences of mistrust. The chapter on philanthropy raises great points, but the data work is a bit much. Case studies of two startup efforts offer a more accessible view.

Usher ends with five bold and provocative solutions including moving to a post-newspaper consciousness, unbundling journalism’s core functions, prioritizing authenticity, diversity and inclusivity, considering partisan news a feature instead of a flaw and understanding news resilience. There aren’t easy answers, but well worth considering and talking about with the next generation of journalists.

News for the Rich, White, and Blue offers a nuanced and important examination of where newspaper journalism is today and how it got there. Well-written and researched, the book or portions of it, could easily work in either an undergraduate or graduate class.

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