

It is an honor to be with you today to deliver the McGill Lecture.

When Pat and Diane first approached me about giving this talk, I will admit to some hesitancy in accepting.

To state the obvious, this is a tumultuous time in journalism. The invitation to speak today included the offer for me to come and inspire – or possibly horrify – the next generation of reporters.

Conventional wisdom is a somber one when it comes to the future of investigative journalism. Today, I will share some visions of investigative journalism past, present and future – and provide you with an alternative narrative for the fate of investigative journalism that I hope is convincing.

It is certainly a privilege to speak at an event associated with Ralph McGill, who remains an inspiration for investigative reporters decades after he wrote his last story. He was a relentless critic of the failures of segregation in the 1930's south. He wrote about the inequity between the educations provided at white and black schools – a subject that *incredibly* remains an issue in this country today. One of the very best pieces of investigative journalism last year came from the Tampa Bay Times. It was a stunning expose of racial segregation in Pinellas County schools, and the shockingly inadequate education received by students at overwhelmingly black elementary schools. If you need inspiration as you consider a career in investigative journalism, or seek evidence that this kind of reporting is still desperately needed in this country....read that series.

Ralph McGill was a man of guts and integrity, willing to make readers uncomfortable and angry. When he became editor of the Constitution, the Atlanta chapter of the KKK paraded around the newspaper building in protest. I often ask student journalists and younger colleagues about the reaction their stories are getting. I hear responses like, “Well, no one is complaining.” Well, *damn* I respond, I am sorry to hear that. Ralph McGill was inundated with obscene phone calls to his home and others would make the effort to dump loads of garbage on his front lawn. If you wake up after running a story and find piles of garbage on your lawn, you’ve done something right.

Surely, Ralph McGill’s courage cost his newspaper some readers. But there is a lesson for us today. Ralph McGill’s provocative and fearless writings attracted new readers and a national audience. His column was syndicated and widely read. He had the courage of his conviction, and ultimately that was good for business.

I am also humbled to follow the journalists who have delivered this lecture in the past, so many of whom are courageous figures in their own right. I had the privilege of working for Paul Steiger when he was the editor of the Wall Street Journal. And then there is Katherine Graham, who as publisher of the Washington Post helped define the meaning of journalistic courage when she both spurred on and backed her editor, Ben Bradlee, and his reporters as they tackled Watergate. I was fortunate to have Ben Bradlee’s son, Ben Jr. , as my editor at the Boston Globe, who was a terrific investigative editor in his own right.

In the journalism world, I was a Watergate baby. I grew up in a house where multiple newspapers were delivered each day, the newsweeklies came by mail each week and the nightly network news was required viewing. As a young boy I was transfixed by the Watergate scandal. I was enthralled by the notion that two journalists could change the course of history – simply by doing their job and revealing the truth. And it looked like so much fun. There is a reason journalism is romanticized in film and in television. I was hooked and I never wanted to do anything else. My first real job was delivering The Boston Globe and it was a thrill years later to work there as a reporter.

So I fixed from an early age on becoming a journalist, and not only that but an investigative journalist. I got my first real taste of what that meant when I was an intern in college at the Syracuse Herald-Journal. It was an afternoon paper – yes, we used to have those. In fact, it had a bigger circulation than the morning paper. And even though the papers were jointly owned, they had independent newsrooms that waged war every day. And the city was better for it.

I mostly worked nights and would be sent off to a school board meeting in the suburbs or a shooting somewhere. It was at one of those meetings that I met a union official. We had a nice conversation and a few days later I received a call in the newsroom. We didn't have cell phones back then either. It was the union guy and he said to me you seem like a pretty sharp kid. How would you like a scoop on a big scandal involving no show jobs at the city public works department? I said that sounded great. We made a plan to meet later to discuss the details. I hung up the phone and sat at my desk for a minute. I

realized I had no idea what a no show job was. I just knew by the way this guy said those words that it had to be something really bad.

I went running to my editor to tell him the great news, not letting on that I had no idea what I was talking about. They paired me with a senior reporter, who became a mentor. I learned a no show job was one where you got paid for a job you never had to show up at....thus no show. We spent weeks following these no-show job holders around to confirm they were not working, coordinating our actions over walkie-talkies. It was a blast, even when I had to get up at 5 a.m. to start our surveillance. We ended up with a story splashed across the top of the front page. People were fired, reforms were put in place, older colleagues patted me on the back. It was intoxicating.

It's easy to be nostalgic for earlier days. Journalism jobs have been in decline; there is uncertainty and a fair amount of desperation among legacy media and even shiny, new entities that are trying to figure out how to make money in this environment of the internet, smart phones, social media and a general expectation that what we produce should be delivered instantly and for free.

And while newspapers of the past were certainly flawed, they were also magical places. Flush with cash from monopolistic strangleholds over classified, auto, and real estate ads as well as huge and lucrative full page display ads from department stores, banks and others – these newsrooms were places of almost unlimited possibilities. Even mid-size city dailies had Washington and foreign bureaus; there were full-time critics

for the theater, movies, restaurants, television, art, architecture and on and on. There were national reporters and dedicated sections for science, health, business, the arts, opinions, books and more. And the best newspapers devoted significant resources to investigative reporting, often in the form of well-staffed teams.

So then, what about the future of investigative journalism?

Well, for what it's worth, here's what Wikipedia thinks courtesy of an entry for investigative journalism:

“Because of its high costs and inherently confrontational nature, this kind of reporting is often the first to suffer from budget cutbacks or interference from outside the news department. Investigative reporting done poorly can also expose journalists and media organizations to negative reaction from the subjects of investigations and the public, and accusations of gotcha journalism.”

Not very encouraging. But hey it's Wikipedia, so we have that going for us.

Some have gone as far as imagining the future of investigative journalism for us. I'd like to show you one such vision – and although some of you may have already seen what I am about to show you, for the rest of you I am giving you fair warning: it's scary.

CLIP HERE OF SPOTLIGHT SPOOF

<https://vimeo.com/185061128> password: oliver

Also can be found here -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIFP0gAMQxI>

Well that was depressing, brilliant and hilarious. Thanks to John Oliver for that. And by the way, there are few greater

champions of investigative reporting than John Oliver. We could use more of his passion in promoting the work we do.

So is this the future?

I am here to tell you the answer is No.

Because, guess what?

Investigative journalism is valued. And any time a product is valued, there is almost always a way to monetize it. We are figuring that last part out, and hopefully will get to the answers we need sooner rather than later. But I believe it will happen -- I just don't know exactly when and precisely what those business models will look like.

It also may not be universal. Figuring out how to fund this kind of work in smaller cities and urban and rural areas will likely be more difficult, just as those areas have been disproportionately hit by the overall loss of journalism jobs.

I am also not naïve or Pollyannaish about this. It will be challenging to sustain and pay for investigative journalism in the future and there have already been plenty of failed ideas, business models and strategies.

Last year, after two decades at large media organizations like the Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg, I decided to work for a start-up media organization called STAT. We are a digital publication focused on medicine, health and science.

For me, it's a chance to experience this new media ecosystem at a granular level. At STAT, we measure everything. We know what people read, how long they read it, how they find our

stories. We do this not to determine what to write about, but to understand our audience. In fact, reporters do not even have access to metrics (and by the way let me apologize in advance here for the repeated use of the word metrics. I hate the term but couldn't come up with a suitable alternative). We only hear about these numbers indirectly at times from editors who are thrilled by the reception a story is receiving or when we have companywide meetings to get updates on the business. Not one editor has ever said to me we should think about a particular story or topic because of some belief it will boost metrics. At the same time, our goal is to build an audience and have a relationship with that audience.

The existence of these metrics can be unsettling for someone like me. I assumed -- inaccurately it turns out -- that every subscriber to the publication I was writing for at that particular moment took the time and maintained the interest to read each of my stories from top to bottom. I was so thrilled to land a job at the Wall Street Journal, where 2 million readers a day would soak in my every word. Thanks to technology, I now know, with absolute certainty, that some readers don't even read the first word of my stories. Some don't even take the time to click on the link to my stories.

But here's what we do know after just under a year of publishing STAT: Readers love investigative reporting--- they thirst for original explanatory and long-form stories---They have a huge appetite for the stories we do that challenge convention wisdom---including deconstructing high profile studies and exposing truths about them.

And that melds nicely with our journalistic mission – which is to differentiate ourselves from much of the other reporting in these subject areas. A big part of this is investigative reporting. One of the first significant decisions we had to make was whether or not to engage in an expensive legal fight to try and unseal secret court records in Kentucky. We pitched the idea to our owner, who didn't hesitate. That is exactly the kind of journalism we should be doing, he told us. So we launched the legal fight – and won – with a judge ordering the release of sealed records related to the marketing of the painkiller OxyContin. The documents to be unsealed also contain the only known deposition of a member of the family that owns the company that makes the drug, and of course reaps the profits from its sale. We are still waiting for the documents as the company that makes OxyContin has appealed, but we have already been rewarded for our decision by intense reader interest and support for our effort.

In our first nine months, starting from a blank slate and zero readers we hit nearly 3 million page views for the month of August. A million and a half of those are unique visits. Now, there is only so much you learn from numbers like those and you can also read plenty of critiques about measuring Web traffic. But remember I told you we can measure more than that.

In August, we published an 8,000 word story on two friends from Ohio became hooked on opioids and accidentally found their way to fentanyl – with devastating and unexpected results. Readers not only opened the story in large numbers, they actually read it. The average reader spent 7 minutes with the story, and many of them returned to it later to finish it. That

is an extraordinary amount of time spent on a single story. Even for many high-trafficked stories, readers click in for the first paragraph or two, spending 15 seconds on a piece. *When you engage readers, you create value.*

Another one of our most read stories was an investigation by my colleague Charlie Piller, who spent weeks looking at the secretive Google healthcare start-up Verily. He uncovered the fact that many of the top talents at the company were leaving the promising start up and detailed the divisive leadership of the CEO. For another story, Charlie worked for months with our in-house data expert who wrote custom code to scrub the National Institutes of Health Web site to find out if federal agencies, universities, hospitals and others were reporting the results of clinical trials as required. Most were not it turned out. The worst offenders were among the biggest recipients of N.I.H funding. Among those reacting to that report were Joe Biden and the N.I.H itself, which has now put in place much stronger rules about the reporting of those results. Both of those stories were heavily read.

What we are witnessing at STAT is not unique.

In a recent report based on original research, the American Press Institute said the single biggest change publishers can make in general is to produce MORE high-value major enterprise journalism. The API found that major enterprise stories score 48 percent better than others in its measure of overall engagement. These major enterprise stories also generate more page views, more sharing and more time spent reading.

They also found that people like long stories. They concluded that “the conventional wisdom that writing for the web needs to be short and fast simply is not true.” “Long form” stories, those averaging 1,200 words, drove 23 percent more engagement and lifted other metrics such as page views.

Now with all this talk of metrics, let me offer you someone who puts all of this in to plainer language, more in sync with the vernacular of a newsroom.

Josh Topolsky, who has been involved in the founding of several digital news entities, explains what we are seeing with reader interest in investigative and long-form journalism this way:

“Audiences don’t want your cheap shit. They want the good shit. And they will go to find it somewhere. Hell, they’ll even pay for it.... What will save the media industry—or at least the part worth saving—is when we start making Real Things for people again, instead of programming for algorithms or New Things.”

Does that mean great investigative work will attract more readers than news of Angelina and Brad’s split? Probably not. But might it attract enough of the right readers, ones who will pay for and engage with what we do? There is ample evidence it will.

Consider the experience of Blendle, a new online news platform that offers articles from a variety of newspapers and magazines and sells them on a pay-per-article basis. What are people buying? The head of the company’s U.S. curation team says the most popular articles tend to be longer feature writing and analysis, as opposed to straight news. Every one of the top 10

most bought stories were some element of analysis, investigation, opinion, or unique feature writing. Blendle's curator put it this way: "Users are putting their hands in their virtual pockets one story at a time to support original, probing, insightful journalism."

There's something else going on at the same time: We have never had more tools available to us as investigative reporters, both in terms of how we report the stories and how we tell them.

For many of our investigative stories at STAT we create trailers for social media, helping create interest in an upcoming piece. The most successful one we did was viewed over 1 million times on Facebook. It was a story about how college football players medically disqualified from playing at one school because of repeat concussions were being recruited to play at other universities – something the NCAA does not prohibit, believe it or not.

The trailer was just 29 seconds long, but prompted many of those who watched it to turn to our story when it was published. Here's that trailer -

<https://www.facebook.com/statnews/videos/1547581258897873/>

For the story of the two Ohio friends I mentioned earlier, which we called DOPE SICK, we did several video promotions. They were also highly viewed and helped generate interest in our project. And all of these were created by a super talented journalist named Matt Orr.

Here is just one of the ones from Dope Sick -

<https://www.facebook.com/statnews/videos/1668380953484569/>

Dope Sick was exciting to those of us who worked on it because it blended the best of traditional investigative reporting with many of the new tools at our disposal. We came to the story after the most pivotal event occurred – the death of DJ Shanks. Yet we were able to vividly describe his heart-breaking and dramatic death, thanks to a combination of these tools. We obtained surveillance footage of the fateful drug transaction that led to DJ dying at his job at Tim Horton’s, as well as the haunting footage of his actual death when he slowly passes out on top of a glaze machine at his workplace; we were able to get ahold of DJ’s diary and add his voice to the story ; we acquired the police body camera and dash cam video of a pivotal moment in the story when DJ is arrested at the behest of his family, and this included audio of DJ talking to the officer about his desperate desire to stop using opioids; and we collected hundreds of text messages between several of the main characters that were exchanged during a pivotal two-day period in the story. We used all of this to enrich and enhance our storytelling and the way in which the audience consumed it.

All of these emerging technologies as it relates to journalism are not things to be feared, but embraced. Just look at the work being done with data journalism, and the ability we have to analyze large databases in unique and exciting ways. The story I mentioned earlier about the failed and segregated schools in Florida made use of statistical analysis and linear regression of data to show how all students in these schools were impacted.

This kind of data work adds power and authority to investigative pieces – and avoids the criticism leveled at stories based solely on anecdotes. Similarly last year, Reuters analyzed more than 14,000 Supreme Court records to show how just a few dozen lawyers with strong personal connections to the justices were stunningly successful in winning court review of their cases.

I believe that today, the quality and quantity of investigative and long-form journalism is better than ever – and the promise of even greater and more impactful work is real. Powerful investigative reporting is coming from a plethora of sources, both new and traditional. There is outstanding investigative work every week in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe and many others. We have new models, like the non-profit ProPublica, the Marshall Project and regional sites like the New England Center for Investigative Reporting and the Texas Tribune delivering powerful work at the international, national and regional level. And there are newer for-profit ventures doing excellent investigative work like BuzzFeed, the Huffington Post and others. And that is just in the U.S. There is an abundance of terrific investigative reporting occurring around the world right now.

So I will end with this. For those of you considering a career in journalism --- particularly some form of investigative journalism --- I urge you to go for it. There are few jobs that offer the excitement, the challenge and the satisfaction of the work we do. You can be part of a future that continues to enhance the value and popularity of investigative journalism – -

---and also one that makes certain that investigative reporting does not suffer at the expense of stories about racoon cats.

Thank you.