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## Dangerous Times and Safe Spaces

The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences.

RUTH BENEDICT

When I joined the photography staff of the *St. Petersburg Times* in 1997, we had forty-nine full-time employees in our department.<sup>1</sup> As I write this, there are eleven of us.

It is Monday, and my boss just let me know there will be one less by Friday.

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This book begins in 2016, during a historic presidential primary, and ends in 2021. Those years were challenging for me, my family, and my friends. As journalism became more unstable, complicated, and confusing, I started taking anthropology classes at the local university to try to make sense of it all. Those classes led to a master's degree, and now I am a PhD student.

That anthropological journey took me back 40,000 years, to the dawn of human culture and the first emergence of storytelling. I wondered how storytelling may have helped *Homo sapiens* evolve from struggling primates into Earth's apex species.

I learned how the stories people tell are remarkably and mysteriously universal. Unrelated cultures separated by vast oceans of space and time tell amazingly similar stories, for similar purposes. It seemed like human brains were wired for storytelling a long, long time ago, but how is that ancient and powerful wiring working out for us today?

For millennia, communal storytelling built cooperative human cultures by creating the myths we live by. For most of that history, stories were an oral tradition. Storytellers lived among us. Their stories were filled with

life lessons that brought small communities together in ways that helped people survive and thrive collectively.

But modern storytelling tools have become so much more powerful. Does the song remain the same? Or has the primal need for stories become weaponized by global interests in the digital age? Why did humans begin telling stories in the first place, and why do people tell them today? What calls storytellers to become storytellers? As the waves of layoffs kept coming, I wondered why we were losing so many local storytellers.

### Safe Spaces

Many years ago, when I was an anthropology undergraduate wondering how I might seek my fortune, I read a quote from anthropologist Ruth Benedict that helped solidify my path: “The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences.”<sup>2</sup>

I believed anthropology and journalism shared that common value and that a career in photojournalism could be a rewarding way to practice that sense of purpose. Both fields felt like a call to public service. But it all feels so much more difficult in today’s media world. Over the past fifteen years or so, I watched public belief in those humanizing media spaces slowly die. I wondered why.

So many of my journalist friends’ career identities are getting lost in that shrinking space. There are economic explanations, and there are technological explanations. In this book I seek deeper roots. I explore the universality of human stories and the possibility that greedy and power-hungry people are abusing our ancient human need for culture-building storytelling for their own selfish gain. I wonder if attacks, intentional and unintentional, on spaces designed to make the world safe for human differences are the real and most fundamental root of today’s media challenges.

I weave my personal newsroom journey into anthropological perspectives on media, power, myth, and magic in troubled times. My training and growth as an anthropologist took place in a local newsroom during an information apocalypse, a pandemic, a racialized cultural-political revolution, the slow bleeding away of a 137-year-old newspaper, and the erosion of my own very cherished career identity.

I cared, very much, every step of the way. I struggled hard to find concrete solutions that might be helpful to a dying industry.

## Dark Times

Community journalists are living in dark times. One-fourth of newspapers across the country, more than 2,100 in total, have closed since 2004. More than half of all newspaper journalists have lost their jobs. Many Americans now live in news deserts, communities that are no longer served by a newspaper or other news outlet – and studies show those communities have fewer voters, less informed and more polarized voters, an increase in local corruption, and rising municipal costs.<sup>3</sup> Harsh staffing cuts have created thousands more “ghost papers,” newsrooms that have managed to keep the doors open but just can’t cover communities like they used to.

The statistics are grim. According to the Pew Research Center, newsroom employment at US newspapers dropped by 57 percent between 2008 and 2020.<sup>4</sup> As I write this, the economic impact of Covid-19 is still being assessed. Kristen Hare, who covers the people and business of local news at the Poynter Institute, struggles to keep up with all the newsroom layoffs. Some of them made the news, and some are underreported. Kristen keeps an exhaustive list of all the layoffs, furloughs, and closures, but she just can’t keep up with what she describes as “all the bad news about the news right now.” When I asked her for a ballpark figure of job losses in 2020 she shook her head, looked downward, and said “thousands.” The pandemic was being described as an extinction event for local media and may well have pushed fragile media companies from hospice care to the grave.

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Some people are calling journalists nasty names. You, dear reader, can judge for yourself whether we are “enemies of the state,” part of a “deep state,” “fake,” “socialist,” “conspiratorial,” and/or “scum.” But before you do, come with me and meet some journalists for yourself.

Journalists who shed tears in bathroom stalls after learning a reporting mistake was published. Journalists who walk out of the building chin-up and dry-eyed after being laid off. Journalists who stay in the business despite pay cuts, lack of job security, uncertainty about retirement, growing public backlash from the left and right, and a shrinking belief in the fair, objective reporting ethics that define their waking hours.

I was waiting on the lobby elevator with Bill Varian, who was an assistant metro editor. I noticed he had bags under his eyes as we began won-

dering how pending layoffs will go. He described how, at 3 o'clock every morning, he bolts awake, heart pounding.

His words startled me. Last night I had the exact same experience. It happens more and more often as layoffs intensify. Somehow, it felt a little better to know I was not the only one.

Of course my colleagues and I worry about ourselves, that we might be next to lose our jobs. But the late-night anxiety is much more than that. This week we will say goodbye to good friends, people who believe as we believe, fight as we fight, and care about community journalism as much as we do. We lie in bed and think about what it means to live in a “post-truth” America. Many of us are plagued by the possibility of journalists losing their place in the world. We are confused about why local storytelling seems like it is dying. It hurts that so many people dislike journalists today.

We worry about the lack of trusted news in the communities where we live. Lying in the dark, we ask ourselves if it is worth all the stress. Then we promise ourselves we will just go find another job in a different field. Then we realize there is nothing else in the world we are called to do. Then we feel a wave of anxiety: if I can't wake up and go to work as a local journalist, if it all ends tomorrow morning, and it could, then what?

Riding up the elevator to the newsroom, Bill dropped his head and said in a soft voice, “I don't know if this is ever going to get any better.”

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A local newsroom is ground zero for the tsunami of social change that came in the digital age. Many people who don't work in newsrooms feel anxiety over today's media environment too. You may feel like trust in institutions is plummeting. You may sense that modern media have become a game for multibillion-dollar companies and cable-tethered politicians. You may feel like, despite all the advances in communication technology, it has become harder and harder to find news you feel comfortable believing.

This book is a story about why local journalists are becoming forgotten storytellers, why trust in media is broken, and how the weight of that world fell onto the shoulders of working journalists.

## **The Anthropology of a Newsroom**

To explore vexing questions about today's media crisis, I applied to an anthropology program, worked through a master's degree, and became a

PhD student. I continued to work full time as a staff journalist. As journalism and anthropology began to fuse together in my life, I became fascinated with the origins of storytelling and curious about why people tell stories. I came to believe the answers to those questions could be key to understanding the state of media and society today.

One idea: *Homo sapiens* evolved uniquely, somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago, to be a storytelling animal. That incredible tool helped humans go from small packs of mammals fighting for survival to the most powerful species on Earth.<sup>5</sup>

I explored how that adaptation first served humans thousands of years ago and how it is working out for us today as dramatic storytelling saturates our lives in ways our early ancestors probably could have never imagined. Stories, shared among cooperative groups during the Pleistocene, would have helped *Homo sapiens* survive and thrive. Charles Darwin observed, “There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection.”<sup>6</sup>

In exploring communal, culture-building storytelling as a survival mechanism, fascinating new possibilities and explanations arise for today’s media crisis. Judging by *Homo sapiens*’ success in the past 40,000 years, stories told to build united, cooperative cultures may well be the most powerful adaptation in Earth’s history. It was not a simple journey, but storytelling animals now rule the planet.

## The Stories People Choose

Survival instincts may help explain why humans often choose personal, life-defining story narratives that lack tangible evidence or scientific facts. Those intimate personal narratives may be chosen primarily because they offer a sense of well-being, spiritual connection, and inclusion into a cultural group, or because they will help increase an individual’s ability to survive and prosper. Social function may trump facts when it comes to the stories people choose to make their own.

People don’t need hard evidence to believe stories. Gallup has been polling Americans about the existence of “God or a higher power” since World War II, and the results are consistent—95 percent of Americans believe.

A 2008 Pew Research Center study found that two-thirds of respondents also believed that angels and demons are at work in the human world today. One-fifth said their prayers are answered directly at least once a week.<sup>7</sup>

But no one can perform a randomized controlled trial for the existence of God. No one can fact check or peer review the power of prayer.

Exploring the wondrous mysteries of religious faith is way beyond this book's purpose. I have my own spiritual beliefs, and they, too, are acts of faith. The point is only that belief in a story does not require tangible evidence. Stories taken on faith have defined societies and cultures in powerful ways that news reports and academic papers never will. Why should modern journalists and media critics be surprised when stories on cable television and social media that are not based on tangible evidence still move millions of people? Why should anyone be surprised that stories today are still, as they have always been, most often about building cooperative communities and creating meaningful connections to a belief system?

### Long-Term Interests versus Short-Term Interests

What happens when core beliefs of different culturally cooperative groups collide? What about conflicting stories that just don't get along with each other?

There is a historically important role for spaces that, as Benedict says, make the world safe for those human differences, spaces that listen to and thoughtfully manage all those opposing narratives with benevolent social intentions. Quality local journalism strives to be that kind of space. But today those institutions are under attack. In the five-year span I cover in this book, 2016–2021, I have felt the humanizing media spaces I believe in shrink around me in very personal and often frightening ways.

When humans first started sharing communal stories those many years ago, the stories were likely filled with morals delivered to help them become better humans. At the dawn of culture, the stories, told orally, wired *Homo sapiens'* brains for mutually beneficial communal living. For tens of thousands of years, stories built and served the *long-term* cultural interests of communities.

Today the most successful storytellers are massive enterprises that mostly care only about their own short-term interests, national political agendas, power, influence, and profit.<sup>8</sup> They are global. They don't know

or care about individuals. They won't be there for Little League championship games. They won't check the honesty or dishonesty of local government representatives. They won't cover the charitable events sponsored by a place of worship or family triumphs and tragedies or neighborhood concerns.

Maybe stories have always been, on some level, manipulative in how they build culturally cooperative groups. But looking from 40,000 years ago to today, it feels like the recent explosion of communication technology has unleashed the power of storytelling in ways that may not yet be fully explored. It feels like the *long-term* communal interests that defined local storytelling as a public good for thousands of years have been hijacked by powerful, *short-term*, self-serving individual and corporate desires. Healthy human cultures thrived on local, trusted storytelling for millennia. Why is the role of local storytelling in the crosshairs now? What is with all the fake news propaganda and vilification of journalists?

As powerful politicians and media giants say one thing, working community journalists are documenting real, lived human experiences that tell another. Those stories have impact—specific stories about a vanishing middle class, discrimination, corrupt policies that affect vulnerable citizens, and counternarratives to racist and selfish agendas. Collectively, those local stories have the power to help shape history. Society benefits when local journalists sit on porch steps and at kitchen tables, listening to often unheard voices in rural America and chronicling discrimination in historically red-lined urban neighborhoods.

Collectively, local journalism can be more powerful than even a relatively small number of seemingly omnipotent global players. Good local journalism makes powerful people nervous. Those local journalists are not enemies of the people. Their work is not fake. Quality journalism presents daily evidence from members of small communities that often counters self-serving narratives from power-hungry politicians and global media corporations. Local reporting puts human faces on the costs and consequences of selfish political policies and financial agendas. Those granular voices and that one-on-one, rigorous professional journalism process stimulate credible, complicated, and often contradictory public debates.

At its best, local journalism makes safe spaces to report on human differences. That time-honored ethos can amplify the voices of citizens in diverse communities through stories that are balanced, vetted, and pro-