Joan Kjaer: Hello, this is WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. Tonight our topic is journalism, and the free press in the age of fake news. I'm Joan Kjaer and we're happy to have you with us here at Merge in Downtown Iowa City. It's a new location for us this year, and it's lovely I think. We invite anybody who's listening to join us here on our monthly programs. Tonight we're tackling a topic that is on everybody's minds these days. What's the role of journalism, and the free press, and providing a check on government, on public and private institutions, and on individuals who wield power in our society? What does the first amendment protect, and do we as Americans still believe in it? Is a challenged press freedom the first step toward authoritarianism? Finally, how do we find the truth in an age of fake news?

We have a stellar group of guests tonight. Journalists and writers from all over the world whose varied experiences and perspectives will give us a lot to think about I'm sure. My first guests are members are University of Iowa faculty. Just next to me is David Ryfe, director of University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Thank you.

David Ryfe: Yeah, thanks.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Next to him is Christopher Merrill, the Director of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. Thank you Chris.

Christopher M.: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). David, I'd like to start with you with a very big, very general question, but what can you say about the state of journalism in America today?

David Ryfe: Well, that's a big question.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David Ryfe: When I think about that question, the first thing I think about is it's important for people to understand that the problems of American journalism didn't start with the internet. American journalism began to lose audiences in the 1960s and the 1970s. If you've been a journalist in a daily newsroom, you knew that because they did everything they could to stop the diminishment of their audiences, but they were facing some structural forces, which really they couldn't take account of. Things like the fact that both parents and families began to work, and therefore no one had time to read the newspaper. Things like suburbanization, and the fact that paper was mostly in the city, and more, and more people were living out in the suburbs, and it became very costly.

Suburbanites didn't see that they had a lot in common with the local newspaper. Things like the incredible explosion of information. If you're given between the choice of playing Call of Duty all day and reading a newspaper, Call
of Duty is much more engaging than reading the newspaper. Your kids have 50,000 things to do with information, and only one of them is news. These are the sort of things that they could ... Were not in their control, and it's slowly diminished their audience. All of this happened before the internet. What the internet did is accelerate the escape of the audience from the news, and then also took the business model out from underneath the news industry, and that's when you began to see the enormous numbers of layoffs.

Daily working journalists at one time, at their height, were somewhere around 63,000, 65,000-- daily journalists working in daily newsrooms. Today that number is somewhere around 30,000. The number of journalists working in the United States has essentially almost been halved in about 10 years. It happened in a very short time. We have the same number of journalists today working as we did in the 1950s at a time when the population of the United States was much smaller, right? The revenue stream for journalism today in newspapers, which used to hire more journalists than any other, are down below newspapers in the 1950s when our economy has doubled in size. That doesn't seem to be coming back. The internet digital platforms don't seem to be able to sustain a newsroom of any size in and of themselves.

That doesn't concern me for the national press. You don't have to worry, there's going to be a New York Times, there's going to be a BBC, there's going to be a Reuters, there's going to be at least one major television network news channel, probably NBC because it has a connection with Microsoft. The national press is probably going to be okay. What we're really seeing a loss in is local and regional news. Places like the Des Moines Register, which at one time was as good a newspaper as the New York Times. The New York Times was a regional newspaper like the Des Moines Register, and the Des Moines Register was a very strong newspaper. That's no longer true.

Places like the Dallas Morning News, the Des Moines Register, the Boston Globe, the Sacramento Bee, the San Francisco Chronicle. These are the institutions that are crumbling, and after 10 years of this happening, we have no good way of fixing it, and we have no good solution. My feeling is if you haven't come up with something in about 15 years there may not be a good solution. It may be that the newspaper is going the way of the dry cleaning business. Your local dry cleaner is a mom-and-pop organization, owned by typically a family. Two or three people working very hard to sustain it, and when they get tired the dry cleaning business goes away, and that's essentially what news in these communities looks like.

That's the state of journalism before the Trump Administration came into office. Now, journalism has been a talking point of the Republican Party as you probably know for 40 or 50 years. But what Trump hit upon, and so the Republican Party kind of sowed the seeds of this. What Trump hit upon was the fact that whenever he needed to rally his supporters, all he had to do was call out the word journalist or journalism. They become a boogeyman for his most passionate supporters. You place all the issues I just described, and then you put
on top of it this kind of political hostility at the top, and that's what's producing this great worry about journalism today, and where it's going.

Joan Kjaer: Well, then in addition to the newspapers we have the coming of cable news, we have talk radio, which really hits virtually every corner of the US, and some of those people who've lived in more rural areas where they don't have a local newspaper. What do you think about that form of media?

David Ryfe: Well... somewhere in the 1950s to the 1970s that journalist could pretty much patrol the boundaries of their profession. They get to decide who was in and who was out. They got to decide what was news, and what was newsworthy, and what was worth circulating through the public culture. As newspapers diminished, these new forms of media began to be produced like talk radio, like cable news, and it simply fragmented the field that journalists occupied. The internet has just again accelerated that trend, so now a fewer number of journalists find themselves in a media space kind of cheek to jowl with all these other people producing news, none of them are journalists, and they have very little interest in journalism, yet they're producing news.

That's caused an existential crisis in the field. They don't know how to respond to that.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It might be helpful to just step back for a second.

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: And define what a journalist is and what a journalist’s expectations are-- the non-commentator journalist--and a journalist who's just trying to report a straight story.

David Ryfe: Well, one thing you should know is that the profession of journalism is relatively new. It was invented in the 1910s and 1920s. Before that time there were journalists, people producing news, but they came from all walks of life. Your minister may be a primary source of news for you in 19th century America. It wasn't until the 20th century that journalism became an occupational category of any distinction, right? As it developed its own professional habits of mind and practices, it isolated itself from the community to the extent that most journalists tended to write for one another rather than to write for their communities, right? They tended to want to impress other journalists more than they wanted to integrate themselves into their communities. That's part of the issue there they're facing these days, and they tended to be located in commercial news organizations, which had other varied interests.

I would make a distinction between journalism as with the profession, and you're not a professional journalist unless others recognize you as a professional journalist. Just because I went into a newsroom one day and decided to write for the newspaper doesn't mean I'm a professional journalist. Journalism is an
occupational category. Then there are a lot of other people producing news that looks more and less like journalism, but certainly doesn't come from the profession.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think many people imagine that to be a journalist you have to sort of somehow take a dispassionate look... we know about the term Advocacy Journalism now....

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Points of view are taken, or are expressed openly by someone who is a serious journalist. Help us understand whether ... Are there rules and regulations in this world?

David Ryfe: Well, it's a peculiar thing about American journalism that it's a profession, but not like the medical profession, or the legal profession where you have to get a certification to do it. You simply ... In the law, you simply have to work for a commercial news organization. That's how it's been defined in courts. You adopt the habits of mind, then the practices of journalism, inside the profession, and you go through a socialization process that kind of turns you into a journalist. So many people today are producing news who haven't gone through that experience.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David Ryfe: Right?

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Well, as you know one of the things we want to talk about tonight is fake news.

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: A friend from the IWP sent a new article from PEN America to me today and they describe fake news as, "Fraudulent news defined as demonstrably false information that's being presented as factual news with the intention to deceive the public, and the related erosion of public faith in traditional journalism."

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Sounds about right?

David Ryfe: It sounds about right, although that last little part seems to be something peculiar to fake news today. We've always had fake news, there's always been people out there who want to produce information that isn't accurate, but they want to sell you on it. I mean that's just ... It's an American tradition. It goes back to the colonies, and there's always been people who want to believe in this news. I think the important thing you have to understand is that people don't
process information in a vacuum. We tend to imagine that individuals who are at home reading their newspapers, and processing it through their own individual rationality, right? That’s not how people process news. We process information through our social identities. In other words, we look for news that tends to confirm things we already believe, or that our groups already believe, right? And we tend to dismiss news that doesn’t conform to that.

We’re looking for news that tends to privilege ways of thinking that we tend to appreciate, and we tend to dismiss news that isn’t part of our social identities. Now, that’s just a fact of human nature. It’s a fact of human psychology, and that’s always been true. What’s happened is that the mediating institutions that used to take account of that weakness in ourselves have been severely diminished, like journalism. You’re seeing those social identities become much more visible today, so that it looks like we’re much more tribal than we were in the past. We’ve always been tribal, it’s just that we had institutions that we created to take account of that, which we’ve always done. I mean that’s what people do. You say, "Well, we have this weakness. We’re going to work against it by creating an institution that helps guard against it," and those ... The 20th century solutions to those issues, have been disintegrated, and as you know it’s much faster to destroy something than it is to build something new.

That’s the moment we’re in where the things that we used to hold as stable have deteriorated so quickly, and we haven’t built the new things to put in their place, and it creates a lot of anxiety, and instability.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, in a commentary you published in the Press Citizen over the weekend, you said that three of those institutions are in your mind primarily....

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: ... And getting us to where we are just now. As you mentioned, journalism as an institution having been diminished, strong partisanship and weak parties and leadership, and the forces of globalism.

David Ryfe: Yeah. I mean it’s a relatively unusual thing for a presidential candidate to co-op an entire party. Whatever your political persuasions are, I mean it’s just a fact of life that most leaders of the Republican Party did not want candidate Trump to win, and yet he won. How do you do that? They only do that when the parties, and the party elite, the leaders of the party, are so weak they can’t stop it from happening. Now, partially they’re weak because they no longer have journalistic partners who are also institutionally strong, right? Trump can go to Breitbart, he can go to Twitter, he can go to other media outside of the mainstream media to speak to his supporters. The two are not unrelated, but these institutions have become so severely weakened that it’s becoming impossible to patrol the boundaries of our information culture, and in that environment our tribal instincts are showing through.
Joan Kjaer: Hmm, okay.

David Ryfe: That's cheery. I'm sure.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Now we're going to go to the poet, and we're going to talk to Chris Merrill. For those of you who don't know, Christopher Merrill he directs the International Writing Program here at the University of Iowa, and by the way congratulations. 50 years.

Christopher M.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joan Kjaer: This year. Congratulations on that. Yeah. Chris' path has made him a poet, a journalist, a war reporter, a non-fiction author, he's an essayist, a translator, a teacher, and, as you know, the director of the IWP. But I think, above all, those who know him would certainly say that he's an observer of things. Very keen observer of things near and far. Chris, you've reported from war zones, you've traveled to parts of the world most of us will never see. Many afflicted with violence, and fear, hatred. The truth can be so hard to find in these places we know best. How do you go to a location that is struggling, and find the truth among all the confusion?

Christopher M.: You don't. Well, when I was covering the war in the former Yugoslavia, and I was doing everything I could to try to get the truth I learned early on that if I found myself parroting the line of certain people on one side of the conflict or another, that was the signal that I needed to get to the other side to start interviewing different kinds of people so I could get some sense of what the truth might be. Having said that, and I filed a lot of daily pieces, and magazine pieces. Then when it came time to write a book about it all, I was struck by how often I got it wrong, and that part of the writing of a long book, Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars had to do with looking at those pieces of journalism, the first drafts of history if you will, and seeing where I got it wrong, where I hadn't dug deep enough, try to tease out the meanings, and that's where it gave me a larger sense of what the writer's obligations might be.

One thing David was saying just struck me. There's a fantastic Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera who's always saying when he's trying to imagine where we are today, he said in the 19th century you got your news from novels. What grieved him was the development David talked about 1910 when we had the profession of journalism because he said, "We gave it over to journalists." I'm guessing somewhere in his apartment in Paris right now, he's probably thinking, "Good, now the journalists have lost." But he may feel he's too old for whatever the next thing is going to be.

Joan Kjaer: When you're telling a particularly heartbreaking story or trying to crack the shell of most of us as readers or people far away in our safety, as a journalist you want to tell a story that will actually have some kind of impact, and hopefully
you feel strongly about the story. But how do you do that in order to break through?

Christopher M.: Well, first and foremost you listen, and you go into these situations, and you try to listen hard to everybody you're talking to, and in my experience I thought I was always trying to listen for something beyond what they were saying, or something under what they were saying that particularly when you're dealing with a politician who knows how to evade answering questions, but I would be listening for overtones, and those were the places where I thought, "Okay, now that's where I need to dig in." I might not get the answer out of that person, but it would open up the door to the next room I had to enter to take a survey of.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you think that sometimes the only way you can actually get to the truth of the thing is through your poetry?

Christopher M.: Well, I've been thinking I've been wanting to quote this line of William Carlos Williams from late in his life. This beautiful love poem he writes to his wife. At the very end of the poem he writes, "My heart rouses thinking to bring you news of something that concerns you and concerns many men. Look at what passes for the new. You will not find it there, but in despised poems. It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." That's the part where I think that in a way a literary writer who's trying to write something for the ages is hoping to get at that kind of truth that is found in a poem, or what Kundera would find in a novel, and a truth that we hope encompasses many different levels of meaning.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You know writers from really literally every corner of the world, and many of them have no free speech protection where they write, many of them have suffered for it. In many ways journalists and writers are on sort of the front lines of history.

Christopher M.: Yeah. I've been thinking when you were mentioning at the beginning about authoritarian impulses, there was the great Polish journalist writer Ryszard Kapuściński who in one of his later books mentioned that whenever there's a revolution, or a coup, or an authoritarian wants to take over, the first places they go are the radio station, and the TV station. It struck me. One of the smart things he did was he knew he couldn't really write about life in Communist Poland, but if you went and covered revolutions in Africa and in Latin America, the decolonization of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, he might be able to tell truths that had a larger resonance. That's ... When he went to write a book about the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1992, the book came out called Imperium. You can see how canny he was in trying to find the way within the strictures of the system in which he was working to tell the truth.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Christopher M.: It was often from the side.
But those works survived.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Question for both of you. What do we do about the cynicism so many people in our country right now feel about the government, about institutions that were once highly thought of, and thought of as protectors of our great values here in America, and about journalism generally? How do we get ourselves out of this?

David Ryfe: I don’t know if you’re like what I’m going to say about that. If you look historically, we tend to act in times of crisis. The intent to take something pretty bad to happen for us to finally get our act together and build something new to stop at least that from happening again. I would say that’s probably true today. We’re seeing the diminishment of these institutions, everyone can see it, we’re watching it happen, they’re dwindling, we have this feeling of fatalism, and it’s kind of happened that we came to a weakness, we don’t know what to do. Really the only ... The instance when that begins to happen is within a crisis.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Christopher M.: I would add Seth Meyers, Saturday Night Live, Trevor Noah, I mean comedians are truth tellers when they’re really good, and I think they’ve seen a lot of terrific work coming out of Stephen Colbert and John Stewart before that. That’s a way of trying to tell the truth. I’m also conscious of the fact an early print master was Walt Whitman who wrote for all those newspapers in New York, and in the run up to the Civil War he essentially invented a new way of writing poetry, and he wrote Leaves of Grass the first edition came out in 1855. I keep thinking that we’re in a similar situation right now. Poets and writers will be trying to figure out how to make sense of our time. Maybe we’re on our way to cataclysm.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). David, just to wrap up here I know that one of the things you research in particular is presidential communication.

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: This of course could be another three hours on its own, so do you have anything to say about the kind of administration communication that we have going on now?

David Ryfe: Go for it. Well, the easiest thing to say is it’s unconventional. It’s very common for politicians, and particularly presidents, and those who work for them to frame issues in ways that align with their interests. Some journalists would call that lying, but at least have some semblance or connection to a set of facts, which we would all agree upon. It’s rare for a president to ... I mean the New York Times now has an OP ED page that has a running list of lies that are just
factually untrue, and the journalists are fervently fact checking. If you go to the newspaper, for those of you who still read it, you can see the actual fact, and yet there's seem to be no consequences for this president with his base of supporters. That's the easiest example I think of a group of people who have decided that Trump is one of them. He's my guy, and I don't care what you people say. He's my guy.

It doesn't really matter what he does for them. He kind of made a joke of it, but it's not very funny. He can commit a murder of 5th Avenue, and still probably win the nomination, and that was probably true for the Republicans at that point. This is a new president. Now the question is, in terms ... There's lots of worry about the conventions that he's violating. All the political conventions that had been in place at least since World War II, and how sturdy they are. I think that's an open question. I mean they have existed for 50 years, and so they may survive this presidency, I mean we will have another president at some point. But then again, the fact that he's kind of trail blazed this path of being so unconventional that may also be a path forward for us where future presidents see that they no longer have to adhere to these conventions.

It's a troubling moment where with so much else in flux, this president seems to be running the nation like a reality show.

Christopher M.: I'm just going to have to interject here though. When I was covering the war in the Balkans, I and every other journalist was in despair all the time. We would report on these atrocities, and this stalemate, and it seemed ... nothing seemed to change. But when I looked back on that period, I realized that the daily reporting, the truth telling had an accumulated effect so that when the Serbs overran Srebrenica, and there was that photograph on the front page of the New York Times of the woman who hanged herself fearing what was going to come next, that was a moment that you realized that in some ways all the truth telling had laid the groundwork for a groundswell of activity, and in short order we .......... and the war came to a quick end.

I sometimes feel I keep watching Trump every day, and I think, "Okay, now, now he's done it." At some point people are going to say, "Wow, this guy is nuts."

David Ryfe: There may be a time. I mean the mid-term elections I think will be really interesting. Most of the polls I've seen show that the Democrats are running 10 to 1. These are early and lots of things can happen, but maybe this accumulation of coverage is ... It's not detracting from his core supporters. I mean 40% of the Republican Party has consistently supported what he's doing despite anything. But it may have an effect on those people who aren't such strong supporters of him in the first place.

Christopher M.: We really need Alec Baldwin.

David Ryfe: That's funny.
Joan Kjaer: I want to wrap up this segment and say a big thank you to David Ryfe and Chris Merrill for being with us.

David Ryfe: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: I hope you'll stay with us in the next part of our program. The focus will be writing about war and radical social change. Thanks to all of you for joining us here for the live event at Merge. WorldCanvass programs are available as audio podcasts on iTunes, the Public Radio Exchange, and the International Programs website. I'm Joan Kjaer and for UI International Programs, thanks very much for joining us.

David Ryfe: Thanks.

Joan Kjaer: Thank you.