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[00:00:25] **Speaker 1** Doctor Michael Wagner, University of Wisconsin journalism professor. Thanks for joining.

[00:00:29] **Speaker 2** Us. It's my pleasure.

[00:00:30] **Speaker 1** I want to get started by just, you know, giving into you a little bit here. Give us a sense of why journalism? Why did you get into journalism?

[00:00:37] **Speaker 2** I've always loved the news and in the media and culture on television and the radio and books and magazines. And so I would go to the library and pour through old rolling Stone magazines to learn about bands I liked. I would constantly be practicing doing play by play for video games that my friends and I would play. And then when I was 14, I got a job as a country music deejay at my hometown radio station in Marshall, Minnesota, a 1400 on your Am dial. And we would this summer of Achy Breaky Heart. And so I basically would do, play an hour of music, and then I would run church programs on Sunday mornings. I was in high school, so I wasn't working during the day. I was just doing weekend kind of stuff. Running the board during Minnesota Twins baseball games and that kind of thing. But eventually I got to start to do more stuff on air. I became the assistant news director when I was a junior because I really loved, reading the news and then going out and covering stories. Went to school for broadcast journalism, was a journalist for a while, and then went to graduate school.

[00:01:34] **Speaker 1** Where you've got great pipes. I wish I had a.

[00:01:37] **Speaker 2** Face for radio.

[00:01:38] **Speaker 1** I'm curious to know, how did you get involved with education and how did you become so passionate about education?

[00:01:44] **Speaker 2** So one thing I loved about being a reporter was sharing things that are verifiably true with an audience. And one of the things I didn't like about being a reporter was the daily grind of hitting deadlines all the time. And there would be times where I thought, God, if I if I had two more days to put this together, this would be a really thorough and complete story. But instead the news starts at five and I've got to be done by five. And I started to get sick of that. And I was asking my old mentors, you know, here are things I like about my job. Here are things I don't like. And they said, well, you should think about graduate school where you can teach classes and communicate with people, but you can also do research where you spend as long as it takes to learn the answers to the questions you're interested in. And that really just turned out to be a great fit for me.

[00:02:24] **Speaker 1** Yeah, I'd love to get your sense of, what you think of the current climate of journalism is right now, across these, United States and I guess the rest of the world.

[00:02:35] **Speaker 2** Your climate is a good word, right? Because on the one hand, there's a systematic climate change where there's increasing attacks on journalists, both physical and metaphorical and financial. There are, increasing struggles journalists face, to do their work. They have fewer resources. Newsrooms closing down around the country, for newspapers, you have television stations making money hand over fist during election cycles, but not using that to hire reporters to cover politics and civic issues and those sorts of things. And so there's this trend to less attention to stuff that provides our citizens the critical information they need to make good decisions in a democracy. So there's one trend that's happening in that way. But climate varies a lot. Right? And there are some places that are doing amazing journalism, really great investigative work, long form detailed stories in print, on digital, on television, as documentaries. There is more information available than there ever has been to more people than it's ever been available to. And there's a lot of stuff that covers politics, like a game doesn't have much concern for what's true and what's not, and all of these things are happening in the same environment. So, you know, it strikes. And here's some some of the journalism is amazing and some is, poor and some would be better if the resources in the environment, they were working in, had could be improved in some way.

[00:03:59] **Speaker 1** Now, I know you and I might be biased, in the answer to, I'm sure to this next question. But why is it important? Why is journalism important?

[00:04:08] **Speaker 2** We have so few opportunities to learn things that are true about issues that are fundamentally central to how we live our lives and how we govern ourselves. And so if in a, in a democracy, a lot of research about the American public comes to conclusions that that tell us things like, the American public doesn't know a whole lot about different issues in American politics. And so, like, their political knowledge scores maybe aren't that great. But in a in an environment where journalists are regularly reporting the verifiable truth, people can make what, what political scientists and others call reason to choices, which is to say they can make a choice with limited information that would be the same as the choice they might make with full information. And so the way I explain this to students is maybe you see somebody at a party, they're wearing a Taylor Swift shirt, you like Taylor Swift, you strike up a conversation, you start dating. If after five years you find out we have similar values, similar ideas about raising kids, about work life balance, all those things, maybe you can start a partnership and start a family. And maybe if you don't have those things, you break up and haven't made a recent choice. In a democracy, the news media is one of the only places that can provide us the information we need to make those choices. They tell us what our leaders stand for and what they do and. Whether they're lying, they tell us how strong the economy is or how weak it is. They tell us who's getting advantages and who's not getting advantages. They tell us who's being treated fairly and not. And we have so little access in the day to day to most of our leaders. Most of the time, we have to have a place that we can trust, where we can learn about what's happening. And that's that's the news media. It's not social media.

[00:05:40] **Speaker 1** I'm wondering, what do you think the consumer should be doing, to do their part to make sure they're getting, you know, information that is, truthful information that is. You know, vetted that sort of thing. What should they be doing?

[00:05:55] **Speaker 2** Well, I think one thing they should do is try to get information from a variety of sources. And so in our research that we do at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, we find that people who have more varied news, diet tend to be less rabidly partizan in their decision making. They tend to be a little bit more likely to split their ticket when they vote. They might vote for some candidates of both parties under some circumstances, especially at the local level. And so, you know, people with a diverse media diet tend to make better decisions. I would also say one thing that that we can just do is people who are interested in the news is not be so quick to believe stuff that's good for our side and bad for the other side, and be a little bit skeptical of things that we might want to believe. It's like when you see, a sideline pass to, green Bay Packer. And the question is, did he have two feet in bounds and control of the ball before he went out of bounds? When we see the Packer catch the ball and do that, we're biased to say yeah he caught it. If it was a Viking or Kansas City chief doing that, well we didn't have it. But if we're watching a game where the Packers are playing, where we were willing to be honest about those things, and so we should try to approach newsgathering in that same way where we're not trying to be motivated to confirm our ideas, but be motivated to be accurate. I think journalists be biased toward the verifiable truth. Like I think that's a bias, right? Other people can be oriented toward other ways of thinking. I think journalists should be biased toward pushing and reporting the verifiable truth and telling us if the verifiable truth changes. We thought this was true. Here's why we learned this new thing was true. Here's why that's what journalists should do, in my view. And I think they need to be they need to be fearless, because telling the verifiable truth opens you up to attack from powerful forces, and it opens you up to some percentage off and half of an audience not liking what it is that you're reporting. And so knowing that vegetables are good is something parents have to push on their kids, even if kids don't like it. Journalists know the verifiable truth is, good sunshine is a good disinfectant. We should be sharing that with people. Even even in the face of attack, which is really, really hard. Easier to say than to do, I think.

[00:08:03] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And you brought up, misinformation and, I think back to I heard this phrase. I'm not sure where I heard it, but someone said, the truth is no longer what the truth is. It's what you can get people to believe. Sure. In terms of misinformation, disinformation, what is in the the truth and a lie? What is the difference in all these things?

[00:08:24] **Speaker 2** I think there's a lot of really fascinating ways to think about misinformation and disinformation. So we might first just say disinformation is when someone knows they're lying to you and is trying to spread that lie as far and wide as they can. Misinformation is information that's not true. But people might think they're being a dutiful citizen. They saw this on Facebook and think, oh, this might be true, I'll share it, but it may not be true. So, so mis and disinformation are both things that aren't true. Disinformation is misinformation with the intent to distribute. Yeah. And so from the perspective of people, our research finds this is a work I've done with one of my former students, John Lee, who's now a professor at Rutgers. One were about to be a professor at Rutgers. One thing that we found is really important for people is to admit it when they don't know something, when people are willing to say, I don't know, they benefit way more from the news when it comes to learning things that are true. So people can say, I don't know when I don't know, that's really important. The other thing, though, is it the the kind of the structural level with our political leaders and their research that other folks have done, that they haven't done, but others have done have found that when leaders get fact checked aggressively by news organizations, they become more likely over time to, say, a higher percentage of things that are verifiably true. So when they know someone's watching, when there's a penalty for lying, people lie less. And so journalists can can be the referee there and call those penalties. And I think that's something that is critically important. And again, this is really hard to do.

[00:09:57] **Speaker 1** Let's shift into talking about, politics, Wisconsin politics, national politics. How would you describe the overall climate, in terms of politics right now.

[00:10:06] **Speaker 2** When Wisconsin politics is relatively contentious and has been kind of getting increasingly contentious, in, in lots of different ways over time. And so one way we've kind of measured that, in the work that we do here at the UW is to ask people questions about their tolerance for political disagreement. And so we found that back in 2012, this is the height of act ten. You know, we found that about 1 in 3 Wisconsinites had said they'd stop talking about politics with a friend of theirs or someone they knew because of political disagreements. They might still talk about the weather or their kids or school, or the Packers or the Badgers, but not politics. That's now well over 50%, and in some places, 60 to 65%, where they've stopped talking politics in Wisconsin. And in 2022, the last time we did a state. Wide survey, we found that 20% of Wisconsinites had just cut somebody out of their lives altogether because of political disagreements. Wow. Now, some of that is because people are sometimes awful to each other. And if if you're a schoolteacher and and an uncle or a neighbor or someone says to you, school teachers are evil and they're a bunch of Marxist indoctrinated and a bunch of other kind of things that turn out to be nonsense, you might say, I'm not talking to you anymore. You're out of my life. But there are other times when we just don't even have the stomach to talk with people with whom we disagree. And when we cloister ourselves in echo chambers, we tend to get more extreme in our attitudes and more sure of ourselves. And if we're thinking about what we were just talking about a few minutes ago about misinformation, one thing that helps us make good decisions is admitting what we don't know. And the more sure of ourselves we become, and the more extreme we become, the less likely we become to want to compromise with the other side. And if we're telling our lawmakers, hey, that other side is evil, and they're telling us, yes, we know that other side is evil. There's no real, real room to compromise. And so in the public, there's this kind of growing dissension and there's a growing news fatigue. People tell us when we look at our surveys over time, they're just more overwhelmed. They're more tired of the cacophony of information and the political battles than they used to be. And at the elite level, I mean, you see gavel in gavel outs of special sessions, the governor calls where the majority party in the legislature doesn't even take time to debate the issue. They call each other names. They can't seem to agree on much. We see a lot of that happening, you know, in our state government. And so the contentiousness is not something that's bottom up. It's really it's really more top down.

[00:12:26] **Speaker 1** And when you say people are talking and they're losing friendships, I mean, it doesn't. I can feel that. And I think back to, you know, technology in terms of how people are communicating and the way that we can be unsocial and, and kind of hide behind, you know, screen names and those sorts of things. Do we know how we got here in terms of that kind of, polarization?

[00:12:46] **Speaker 2** We know some of how we got here. Right? So when when I was growing up, you know, when if you wanted the TV on in your house at 5:30 p.m. Central time in Minnesota, the news was on all three channels, and that's all there was. We had a limited amount of information. We had a morning paper, afternoon paper and three TV stations that had the news on at the same time, and after that the local news was on. Then after that it was a rerun of cheers or something. Right. And so we all saw the same kinds of things, and that news was much more modest, but pitched more toward moderates because they wanted as wide of an audience as possible, enter the late 80s, early 90s and cable television, and now you want narrower audiences and enter Fox News in the mid 1990s. And not only do you want a narrower audience, you want an audience where you're saying, this side is right and this side is wrong. And then MSNBC says, well, we're going to go in the other direction and say, you know, that's it. That's the other side. That's right. And the other side that's wrong. And so we've had increasingly kind of narrow casted news. All of this happens in the environment where the internet takes off and then takes off at a speed where people can get a lot of information on it very quickly. And so now we have the traditional organizations offering this news on the web, the cable news organizations offering us stuff on the web and digital only or digital first sources that are having even more niche markets. So there's increasing narrow casting. Social media makes that easier to find. People who are like you and attack people who are different than you, people you'll never see, as you're saying, maybe behind the screen name and sending threatening messages or those sorts of things. So all of this is happening at the same time that our leaders are getting more divided. The voting behavior amongst our members of Congress is more different than at any time in our history, including the Civil War, which was a time where half the country split off from the other half and spent four years killing each other. And so there's a big difference in how our lawmakers are behaving. It's trickling down into how we behave, and it interacts with the information environment that we all live in.

[00:14:40] **Speaker 1** I mean, is there a reset button on this? Can it be reset?

[00:14:43] **Speaker 2** I don't know that you could hit the reset button and start over, in the way that I do when I'm failing at a video game, right? Yeah. Know I'm playing a football game and I'm losing. Nobody's hit reset. And this time the my my home state Vikings will finally win a game. Right. That's not how we get to do it. Because we hit reset and we come back to the same information environment we're in with ideological talk radio, ideological cable news, digital news, traditional outlets, increasing animus amongst us, human beings talking to each other on the street. All these things are still with us when we hit reset, and we haven't found a good way to kind of navigate through all of those issues in a way that is productive more often.

[00:15:22] **Speaker 1** I've heard before, too, that, people do not like to admit that they're wrong about something.

[00:15:27] **Speaker 2** And so meet me more.

[00:15:29] **Speaker 1** Yeah. So I'm wondering if, what how does that play into, moving things forward in terms of people being able to admit that, you know, hey, I thought this person was, a good person on this issue, and it turns out they're not, are people is there research out there that shows that people are willing to do that? And are they doing those kind of things?

[00:15:47] **Speaker 2** People are willing to change, but only when there's no other option available to them. And so a lot of what happens is what, political psychologists called motivated reasoning, where you believe something, you get information that trustworthy information that says that's not true. And what you do is you're motivated to find other information to keep believing what you wanted to believe. And it turns out that the biggest offenders are the educated, because we've taught the educated how to use evidence to make arguments. And so when you say, the climate is changing and getting systematically warmer, people can say, oh, well, it snowed a foot last week. What are you talking about? And so they'll always look for something to make that argument back. And but it's a non-ideological human trait. It's not that conservatives do this and liberals don't. Liberals and conservatives do this in equal measure where they kind of engage in motivated reasoning. There are tipping points. There are circumstances where there's so much information that people can no longer keep believing a phony thing that they have been believing. And sometimes it's also the case that the presentation of information can help. So maybe when someone engages in what, economists call costly talk. So when a Democrat says something negative about other Democrats, right, whether if they say something negative about Republicans, well, that's what we expect from a Democrat. And so that's not so novel. But if a Democrat says, hey, we're wrong on this, that sometimes can lead people who are also Democrats to say, okay, maybe, you know, someone on my team is telling me we should do some introspection so that can work. And also visual presentation of information. Seeing is often believing. And so if we show if we tell people the plan is getting warmer and they don't want to believe it, they might fight back with us. And if we say, here's seven different countries measuring the temperature over the last 100 years. And. And they all go in the same direction and they're all going up. People say, oh, I can't really deny that evidence that I see. And so visual matters, talking to people who are different than you matters. Being open as you, as you say to, to the chance that you might not be right about something else that really matters.

[00:17:44] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And what is it about Wisconsin, Wisconsin politics that has all eyes centered on this state? Because we know this is one of the critical states in the upcoming election.

[00:17:54] **Speaker 2** Yeah. I mean, we are a state where we've elected one of the more liberal and one of the more conservative U.S. senators. We're a state that had a majority of citizens, voters picked Donald Trump in 2016, and a majority of voters not pick him and pick Joe Biden in 2020. So we're a state where the outcome at the state level is in play. Governor Walker, Republican. Governor Evers, Democrat. Not very many states are this close this often in the way that that our state is. And so that's one reason we get a lot of attention. Another reason we get a lot of attention is that we're we're a microcosm of the country in a lot of ways. We have a couple of urban centers. We have lots of rural, we have some manufacturing, we have farming, we have outdoor activities. We have lots of different, cultural kinds of things. We have lots of different sports. And it's it's something that you can find almost anywhere around the country. There's a little bit of almost all of that sort of oceans, you know, here in Wisconsin. And so we get a lot of attention because we have citizens who have particular needs to speak to all these different kinds of groups, but also to cultural interests, you know, civic interests.

[00:19:02] **Speaker 1** I want to get a little reflective on the field of journalism now, in terms of, thinking about how some of our, I say old school, but some of the folks that aren't in the journalism field anymore retired, moved on, passed on, etc., people like Sam Donaldson, Mike Wallace, like, how would those journalists cover today's politics, you think? And would it be different than what? And now it's covered today.

[00:19:30] **Speaker 2** I think folks like that had a reputation for. Letting the person they're talking to know that their question hasn't been answered and continuing to ask it. And I think too many journalists today are willing to ask a hard question. Have it dodged to kind of a mealy mouthed return to it, have that dodged and then move on. And Wallace Donaldson, Helen Thomas, they did not do that. They they kept asking a hard question and, and either, you know, demanded an answer or got the person to say, look, I'm not answering that question. Right. And so which, you know, is something to do, I think right now, you know, a lot of television journalism is about asking questions. They think that the audience wants to know, or that they think the kind of D.C. elite wants to know. So it's a lot of, are you going to run for president? Questions for a bunch of different U.S. senators and these kinds of questions that they interpret as hard hitting, but that is not a hard hitting question, right? Hard hitting questions are about campaign promises and delivering on them, or backing up things that you said. How do you know those things are true? Those are hard hitting questions, and we don't ask enough of those. And when we do ask them, we we aren't journalists aren't relentless enough always to get them answered. Again, like I said before, there are a lot of good journalists out there doing a lot of great work. But I think amongst our most watched, most popular, most famous, hard hitting and relentless is not the words that most people who watch them would, would use to describe them.

[00:20:59] **Speaker 1** And we know now, too, that, a lot of what's out there is classified as journalism in terms of, people that, generate content on the various social platforms Tik Tok, right, Facebook and YouTube and that sort of thing. Where do you see the future of journalism? Where is it going? Because we, you know, and we and I can't say that without talking about, you know, some of the news publications that are shutting down and closing up and leaving some, you know, really good sized cities without any kind of, media oversight.

[00:21:31] **Speaker 2** You know, in some ways, we're in in crisis mode in a lot of places that have lost their hometown newspaper or keep hemorrhaging political reporters at television and radio stations. So that that's all problem and still a big problem. We're seeing an increasing number of folks who are entering the industry knowing that what they have to do in the contemporary information environment is just different than what people had to do when I graduated from college in 1998, which was know how to tell stories that were true on the radio or on television. Now they have to do those things, but they also have to tweet about it. They have to post on Facebook about it. They have to have a YouTube video about it. They have to have a TikTok or an Instagram real about it. And so they have to do those things, because that's where a lot of the, especially the younger audience, is. They want to develop news habits in that audience so that they're returning to these folks and trust them for information. And so I don't know that that it's bad that younger journalists are doing these things. I think it's probably necessary, but it also comes at the expense of getting to spend the time doing what you want to do, which is relentlessly pursue the verifiable truth and tell people about it. And so that's all hard. And it comes in this environment where radio is invented in the 20s, 1920s and they say, oh, this is going to kill the newspaper. And there's still newspapers. And then television comes along and they say, oh, this is going to kill radio. And then cable television comes along and, oh, this is going to kill broadcast television. But there's still broadcast television and still radio and still newspapers. Well, the internet comes along. Well, that's going to kill cable television and broadcast television. And we still have all of those things. They have differential power now than they used to have, but they all still exist, and they all interact in this really complex information ecosystem. And so I think it's just I say this to my students all the time, it is unfair and it's harder for you than it was for me, but that is how it is. And so we have to figure out how do we tell true stories in a transparent way to as many audiences as possible?

[00:23:26] **Speaker 1** And as you stand there teaching this next generation of journalists, what do you think? Are we in good hands as this field moves forward?

[00:23:36] **Speaker 2** I'm wowed by most of our students. They are really curious. They are skeptical of things. They are told by people in power, but they also are willing to believe things when you present them. Evidence about about, you know, things that are verifiably true. And so I find them to be really curious, really motivated. But I also find them to be. Curious about things that I wasn't curious about, like they're curious about. Civic change that's outside of party politics, in ways that my generation wasn't as I think it wasn't as interested in. They're interested in new technologies, and they're interested in how things like I are going to contribute to how we learn about things in the future. And they're also concerned about how all of these changing technologies are going to provide them opportunities in the field, but also maybe take away opportunities in the field. You know, it's like when you now go to an airport if you want to, you know, get an egg McMuffin, you can touch a screen and never involve yourself with a human, which just taking away some jobs for the humans you might talk to that those same things can happen in journalism. If a box score can be generated into an AI story. To tell me about the bucks game. What does that mean for a sports reporters? If if you can pull from voting data to tell stories about political elections, what does that mean for the future of political reporters? And so how journalists interact with these changing technologies, I think, is going to be really important for the next ten, 20 years.

[00:25:01] **Speaker 1** Yeah. Final question. I love asking this question to people, especially depending on what their field is. Something that you tend to ask a president. We know it keeps them up at night. What keeps a journalism professor up at night?

[00:25:15] **Speaker 2** I'm worried that the attacks on those whose job it is to share things that are verifiably true, are making it so that we have a really hard time ever deciding what's true at all. And so journalists are a big group that does that, but so are researchers and academics and people whose job it is, is to find evidence about things and share that evidence. And as faculty around the country, we become under attack, even from our own Congress. And as journalists around the country, around the globe are under attack from world leaders, ideological media, groups, you know, white supremacist groups and other kinds of, you know, really anti-social activists who who want chaos of all these things are happening in an environment where the truth is up for grabs and the verifiable truth can't be up for grabs in a functioning society, and that that's what keeps me up.

[00:26:08] **Speaker 1** Doctor Michael Wagner, thank you for joining us.

[00:26:10] **Speaker 2** It was my pleasure.