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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with James Plath, August 4, 2017

Charlie Schlenker: The New York Times and other mainstream media carried fired White House Communications Director Anthony Scaramucci's expletive laced tirade against his White House colleagues' verbatim. In other years, that language would've been too vulgar to print or broadcast. Should journalist report everything the president or other public officials say even if it's rude, crude or untrue? Illinois Wesleyan University Journalism Professor James Plath is critical of both the media and news consumers. He tells GLT's Julie Valante the way the reporters cover the Scaramucci incident reflects American journalism at a turning point.

James Plath: I do think that in this case, the New York Times probably made a mistake in publishing that particular four-letter word. We've seen language creep into newspapers over the years, but the f-bomb, I mean, you can't even see more than one of those in a movie—in a PG-13 movie and now suddenly you're getting it in a ... in a newspaper. And this is a mainstream newspaper.

Judith Valente: It wasn't just the f-word, it was also a very vulgar expression for the male anatomy, as well.

Plath: -oh, yeah – yeah. I was shocked to see it, to tell you the truth. But what's driving this is in- is I – I think the fact that now mainstream media have to compete with the kind of blaring headlines that we're seeing from non-traditional news sources that are online and I think we've seen this kind of language from non-traditional news sources over the last year. This is no surprise for them. It is a surprise for the New York Times. We're seeing our profession being kind of pushed into a new phase of what I would call another phase of yellow journalism.

Valente: We should know that not all mainstream media organizations did print these words and MPR chose not to use audio on that. For instance, however have we crossed a line now that we can't go back on?

Plath: I – I don't know that that's the case. I think you can always go back. You could always roll it back but – but they have regularized it. I think the problem- the one – I'm – I'm trying to get at the root of this whole problem and I think it's pretty complicated but I do think that ... look at the case of Lavard Ball. Here's a guy who's a obsolete athlete and he's only gotten media attention for saying outrageous things because he's the father of a NBA draft pick, and the media are just following him around the same way as they did with Trump, in the same way that they've done with other people. My point is, I think the media has become too personality driven. And whether they're giving the public what the public wants, and the public is driving this or whether it's the media that's chasing after personalities—that's a hard one to call.

Valente: Well, I'm glad you mentioned that case because I wanna broaden it beyond the expletives of Anthony Scaramucci, who is no longer with the administration, who lasted ten days after that expletive-laced tirade. To talk about just what the media covers—they cover every single tweet

that comes from the president and one could argue that a good number of them are very nasty. Is the media right to have to cover this? Do they have a responsibility to ignore some of this stuff?

Plath: Well, if they cover it, then you're going to continue to feel the public's fascination with this type of language. What began really as a public reaction to over-political correctness. That's one of the things that led to or contributed to Trump's rise, the refreshing way that he seemed to be able—to be able to just speak his mind and say whatever. Other people wanted to be able to say but couldn't. But what began as this kind of "speak your mind" thing has now gotten into speaking way more than anybody really needs to hear, and maybe, wants to hear. So what you're going to end up with is a breakpoint where people are going to say as with Scaramucci-enough! Now is it the media's obligation to keep feeding the public until they gorge? On this, or is it the media's responsibility to cut it off long before that saturation point? I'm inclined to think the latter.

Valente: We're talking with James Plath who is the R. Forest Colwell Chair and Professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan. He also has taught Journalism at Illinois Wesleyan for the past thirty years. I wanna go back to something you said earlier about yellow journalism. To me, yellow journalism was when newspapers, I mean it was largely in the late 19th century... mid-19th century to late 19th century-

Plath: -Mostly around 1900-

Valente: -early 20th century. Were newspapers really exaggerating things? And, and sometimes even printing false things? That doesn't seem to be the case. The case seems to be of news/medias being accused of fake news if people don't like what they write. That's something different.

Plath: I do think that the similarity though is in the degree of sensationalism. And I think that whether it's this coverage of, you know, foul language or whether it's the covering LaVar Ball and his antics criticizing female refs or – or whatever- saying he could beat Michael Jordan or he could – he's a better tight end than Gronk – I mean, none of these things deserve to be said, but they're – they're said because the media now is pursuing the call to personality. They're personality driven as opposed to news driven and I do think that – that tendency towards sensationalism does feel to me like a – another phase of yellow journalism- same with the exaggerated headlines. How often have you seen a click bait headline – only to click on a story-

Valente: -What do you mean by click bait headline?

Plath: Well, let's say that a – a – story where the headline is provocative and the headline gets you to click on the story because it sounds like it's really racy, it's really shocking – shocking news and then you get to it and you realize it's taken out of context or it's not as severe as that, any way. And that – that type of headline writing was typical of the period of yellow journalism.

Valente: What do you want organizations like the New York Times, the Washington Post, NPR, CNN to do? If all this information is out there any way on all of these other news media sites and so called “news media sites”, can you have some empathy as to the position that they’re in?

Plath: Oh, yeah, of course. I think they’re between a rock and a hard place here to use the cliché, but I still think the only way out for journalism these days is to – to rely on the society for professional journalism ethics, to go back to those, to stick to them –

Valente:-and they would be?

Plath: -Well, you know, to – to first of all, report the news accurately, to seek the truth and report it, to act independently, be accountable and transparent. I think those are all very important things as is minimize harm.

Valente: You bring up a good point there because the public somehow doesn’t distinguish between those who are trained professional journalists and those who have some of a political background, political axe to grind, who portray themselves as journalists.

Plath: Right? That’s where we start to get accusations of fake news, because you do have a heavily biased slant, and according to the Society of Professional Journalist Codes of Ethics, you are supposed to declare when you are biased and when you are in – in some ways filtering a story through something that’s other than the objective.

Valente: You’re listening to Sound Ideas. I’m Judie Valente. I’m here with James Plath who is a Professor of Journalism at Illinois Wesleyan University. We’re talking about the ethical struggles facing the news media. How can the public distinguish between who is a legitimate journalist writing an article and someone who is really writing from some sort of agenda?

Plath: That’s a good question. And these days I think the – the safest answer is to stick with the mainstream newspapers, is to stick with the Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor and the New York Times, and even though the Trump people might disagree with me, CNN is not that far off the mark, I’m sorry. NPR is always right there and when in doubt, BBC. I mean-

Valente: -Go to another country to get your news, yeah-

Plath: -yeah, especially about America these days. It’s actually a refreshing thing to do. And I mean, one of the things I’ll do if I see a story and I just-it seems outrageous to me and I look at the source and the source is, let’s say, okay slightly leaning left, Huffington Post. I’ll look at that and I won’t trust it immediately, simply because I do know it leans a little bit left. What I’ll do then is I’ll just look around. I’ll go online and see if I can see the same story somewhere else. And if I see it on NPR, now I look at it, now it’s coming out of the New York Times, now I’m gonna start to read all those stories and look for some sort of overlap.

Valente: One thing that you see increasingly is, for example, the Washington Post, the New York Times covering something that comes out of the administration or comes out of the Congress and then they'll debunk it in the same article. Well, if it needs debunking, should it be covered any way-

Plath: -at all, I know!

Valente: -at all-

Plath: -Again, this gets into the whole issue that I – I have- I take issue with now, it used to be that if someone made a claim, it didn't matter if it was a public official, it could be a senator, it could be a Congressman—if that person made a claim that was unsubstantiated—unless a newspaper could substantiate that claim, it wouldn't be published. It wouldn't make it into a newspaper. These days though, all anybody has to do is just claim something. Hillary did this! Hillary did that! And it's published, right? And so that's my contention with where – where journalism right now really has to fix itself.

Valente: But it is incumbent on the journalist to check that and to check-

Plath: - yeah, but we don't do it anymore-

Valente: -out whether it's true.

Plath: Journalists don't do that anymore-

Valente: -is it a time thing?

Plath: - they just run with – here's – here's the deal. They run with a claim and now, for balanced reporting, now here's what new journalists think that they're doing. Now they're gonna get someone to counter it. You know, it's almost like watching a speech from the president and then you get the-

Valente:-the fact checkers – the minority-

Plath: – the minority- minority report and then you get a 20-minute speech from the president and then two hours of commentary of people going back and forth—tell me what you've heard or what you didn't hear.

Valente: Are we getting to the point where whenever we see a public official, do we have to have a fact-checking column underneath – running underneath what they say, or you know if it's in print that we have to have a column along -side where we debunk or not?

Plath: You would think that would help but it wouldn't – and it hasn't. I mean, right before the election, there was a graphic that a third party- independent party, put together about truthisms, and I – I think it was Barney Sanders score the highest in terms of truthfulness and followed by Hillary and among the republicans-

Valente: -Hillary Clinton?

Plath: -among the republicans, it was John Kasich-

Valente: -the republican candidate-

Plath: -who is the most truthful, and Trump rank very low, but that didn't matter to the public and again, it's because of this claim of false news. Trump was even challenging the fact checkers, the third-party fact checkers. So, that leaves the public in a situation where they don't know what to believe.

Valente: How long do you think it will take to rebuild some sort of confidence in the press among people who have bought into this narrative that press is biased?

Plath: I think the trust will be rebuilt not by the political reporting. I think the trust will be rebuilt by the press reminding the public that it doesn't just cover politics, it covers and protects consumers. You know, it covers corporations, it covers environment, it covers science, it covers education...it covers all aspects of our lives and when there is a problem, whether it's local or whether it's national or whether it's state, the newspapers are the ones that are the watchdogs and I think it will be reminding the public, it will be through reminding the public that newspapers reclaim their- their place as a trusted source again, but I don't think it's gonna happen if they just stay in this political arena. I think they're gonna have to put a lot more resources into investigative reporting and in other areas.

Valente: James Plath is the past president of the Illinois College Press Association. He teaches Journalism at Illinois Wesleyan University and he is the R. Forest Colwell Chair and Professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan. Jim, thanks so much for coming in and talking about this.

Plath: My pleasure!

Valente: I'm Judy Valente.