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Johnson Practices, Teaches the Art of Journalism

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“While studying abroad in Tanzania, I was fascinated by wildlife, but I realized that I don’t really have the temperament to be a scientist. So I decided to come back to the U.S. and become a journalist.” That’s how Emily Johnson settled on what her profession would be.

Johnson is a native of Providence, Rhode Island. She received her bachelor’s degree in English and animal behavior from Bucknell University in Pennsylvania and a master’s in arts and international reporting from the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism. Today she is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, Baruch College/CUNY.

Did her experience working with scientists and then becoming a journalist give her insights into the communication skills of researchers? “I found that many scientific articles were extremely dry in the way they were written. It was probably a dead giveaway that I was meant to be a journalist instead. I was always, like, ‘Where is the narrative?’” says Johnson.

To be sure, despite her youth, she has had incredible international experience, which includes countries such as Somalia, Kenya, Burma, Indonesia, and India. One wonders why she chose those places. “As soon as I finished graduate school, I had the opportunity to work for an English language newspaper in Indonesia, ‘The Jakarta Globe.’ I was able to report on my own stories and work on my own projects. Then I moved to Nairobi.”

When asked what she learned from those experiences, she is clear. “I got a very interesting glimpse into all the different issues that can come up in terms of journalism and journalistic ethics in different media landscapes. I’ve worked in a fair number of countries where there is quite a bit of corruption, and Indonesia was a good introduction to that problem. I ended up



Emily Johnson.

Picture courtesy of Emily Johnson.

actually leaving the newspaper over some disagreements about their choices in coverage, which I found to be unethical.”

Johnson has also covered big stories in the U.S., such as the shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. “I don’t know if you can capture what it was like in that town in the few days after the attack. It was one of the hardest stories that I have ever reported on, in terms of the sheer grief that you felt. It’s a very tiny town, and it was overrun by journalists. It felt like there were more reporters than people who actually lived there. This was extremely traumatizing for the local people and for the kids who had survived.”

But how do you balance emotions with fair reporting? “You need to be empathetic and get people to open up to you, so you need to be emotionally involved a little bit, because if

you’re just very detached they won’t respond to you, and they won’t trust you,” says she.

From the technical viewpoint, Johnson is part of the new breed of journalists who not only write but also use videos, pictures, and audio to do their work. “I think it’s good for everyone to be introduced to the various media, because there are so many opportunities now in things like podcasting. If you do have those skills, they will always help you in terms of selling yourself and finding work.”

But how about journalism as a career when so many newspapers are closing down? “There is still a lot to be said for doing journalism right. A lot of people have been able to self-publish. And there will always be a need for people who have had training and know how to report responsibly and ethically.”

This last comment brings up the issue of journalistic ethics. “I talk a fair amount about it

with the students in my classes. It’s definitely a big question of media literacy, of people being able to recognize reputable sources when they see them. So I’m hoping that, through some of the discussions in my classes, students will recognize what’s a reputable source and what isn’t. A lot of stuff that has been called ‘fake news’ is actually good reporting. I think that most of the people in journalism right now are in fact driven by a desire to tell the truth and ultimately to have it reflected in society,” says Johnson.

The question is how good journalism can survive in an era of ratings and celebrities. “It can. I have a lot of concerns about cable news and the sort of 24-hour news-cycle and the constant pitting of various pundits against each other. It does feel more like entertainment than journalism. Still, there is really a lot of great reporting out there, but you do have to be careful about your sources. One thing that I have concerns about in terms of objectivity is that often news networks that want to appear objective end up being inaccurate in their efforts to seem fair. Reality isn’t fair, and things are not always equal; both sides aren’t always equal. But, in the effort to present them as if they were, networks often let truth suffer in the process. You see that a lot in election seasons.”

And Johnson recognizes the limitations of humans as reporters. “No one is truly objective, but all you have to do is let the facts speak for themselves. Sometimes that’s more easily said than done, because certainly you can present facts in a way that lead to a certain conclusion. You have to be mindful of the sources you’re talking to and present things in a fair way as possible.”

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