

Scene on Radio

More Truth (Season 4, Episode 11) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e11-more-truth/>

John Biewen: Hey Chenjerai, I'm gonna read you a quote from Thomas Jefferson. Okay?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Do we have to?

John Biewen: Just one more. Probably the last one. (Laughs.) This is from a letter he wrote in 1789. Quote: "...wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government." Was he right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, so basically, what he's saying is democracy is a good idea, and it's a good way for society to govern itself, as long as people get good information.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, I would agree with that statement. And I understand why you brought up Jefferson on that topic because you almost

have to if you're considering the American context. But you know, he's not really the person I would look to for guidance on democracy, for lots of reasons that we've covered both in this season and previous ones.

John Biewen: I hear you. TJ's pro-democracy credentials are, uh, shaky overall.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, you know, and I think we can probably both think of some people who've been more consistent proponents of democracy who've thought more deeply about it. One great place to start is the research of Courtney Thompson, who has written about black women's struggles and democracy. But I'm thinking about activists like Dorothy Height who pointed out that one of Jefferson's legacies is that he kind of taught white people that full democracy only belongs to them. Or the brilliant Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins who has basically pointed out that when faced with struggles to make democracy live up to its promise, people in the political center see that endangering the United States.

John Biewen: Hmm. So thinkers like the women you've mentioned would challenge Jefferson, among other things, on what it really means to be a well-informed citizen. That what's needed in a fully-functioning democracy is a deeper kind of understanding than what he may have had in mind.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah.

John Biewen: And real democracy requires other things besides that informed citizenry. All season we've been laying out other problems in the U.S.—the structural checks on the will of the people in the Constitution, the way the system lets corporations and the wealthy have way more than their share of power. The way white supremacy, patriarchy, and other hierarchies have baked inequality into the nation's systems.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right. I mean, voter suppression, gerrymandering, on and on. But I do think that a well-informed citizenry is a key piece of the puzzle. The thing is it's not just about being informed. Like, you look at some of those scholars I was citing, right, I think what they reveal is it's how you're informed. What standpoint or experiences or

messages are actually forming your understanding of the world that we're gonna help to govern.

John Biewen: Last episode we talked about public education. This time we're gonna get into journalism, the news media – and this is your area of expertise, Dr. Kumanyika. (**Chenjerai:** Finally!) You're a journalism and media scholar, your PhD is in Mass Communication. There are problems with the American media that are very familiar, that people even in the mainstream talk about all the time.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. For example our sources of information are very fragmented. People live in media bubbles, which are really alternative realities, depending on their ideology, so Americans don't have a shared set of facts to work from. And when it comes to political coverage, scholars and media critics have said for decades that there's just too much horse-race reporting and not enough about the issues that people need to understand to cast an informed vote. So that's all real. But there's also this other aspect of journalism, as it's practiced in the U.S. today, that I think people are just really confused about – and I would say that includes people who are *doing* journalism, not just people consuming it. And that is

the whole notion of objectivity, and some of the other concepts that surround it, like “bias.”

John Biewen: Yes. And the thing that you probably hear most is that there’s just too much “biased” reporting out there, not enough “objectivity.” And, understood in a certain way, I think you and I would agree with that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. I do think that for those interested in justice, we have to figure out what’s real. Like what’s objectively real. Sometimes people come to me who’ve listened to our series and they’re like, oh, it’s so nice to hear, you know, you’re kind of history from a different perspective. And I’m like, naw, to me, what we’re all about is telling factual stories about the United States and its history that are true. And that will actually stand up to the available evidence more than the standard stories that Americans hear about the country, including the standard stories we get from the mainstream media, so it’s not just like this is true from one perspective, I think this history we’re teaching is objectively true.

John Biewen: I agree. But there’s another use of the word “objectivity” that we’re gonna look at more closely. And that is, the idea that you or I, as

journalists, should be, or even *can* be, “objective” – like, as a state of being.

“I, John Biewen, journalist, am approaching this story *objectively*.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Ah yes. That we can make ourselves into these neutral instruments. Totally detached like we don’t have any dog in the fight.

John Biewen: I asked Lewis Raven Wallace to come back to *Scene on Radio* and make us an episode exploring this version of journalistic objectivity, and the role it plays in our democracy. Lewis has been on the show before – they produced a beautiful, personal episode for our MEN series, the one called *Be Like You*. For several years now Lewis has been taking a critical look at journalistic objectivity – the kind we’re talking about here, this objectivity as a posture. This, um, neutrality.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. I can’t wait to hear from Lewis, I think he’s gonna help this all make a lot more sense. It’s kinda confusing -- I think at some level people want real facts even if they don’t always love it, when those facts challenge their preconceived views. But that desire to hear the *real* story has made it easier for this kind of surface myth of journalistic

objectivity to become institutionalized in a lot of newsrooms - for a long time now. But the fact is that a lot of violence has been done to the truth in the name of objectivity.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, it's *Scene on Radio* Season 4, Episode 11 of our series exploring democracy in America, past and present. We call the series "The Land That Never Has Been Yet." I'm John Biewen, host and producer. That was my collaborator Chenjerai Kumanyika, a professor of Media Studies at Rutgers and an organizer, podcaster, and artist. As always in this season, he and I will meet up later in the episode to talk more. This time, the news. How well do the news media serve us as citizens, and what role does journalism play in our failures as a functioning democracy—especially in a time when some political leaders don't just stretch the truth, but brazenly lie?

Lewis Raven Wallace is a journalist who got kinda famous in 2017 for being fired by the public radio show, *Marketplace*, after they wrote a personal

blog post titled, “Objectivity is Dead and I’m OK with it.” Among other things, Lewis argued that as a trans person, they shouldn’t be expected to be neutral on whether trans people are, you know, people, deserving of human and civil rights. Lewis is now a freelance journalist based here in Durham, North Carolina. After their firing, they went on to create a book and podcast, both titled *The View from Somewhere*. Which explore journalistic “objectivity,” who invented it and why, and how it all relates to democracy and social change. Here’s Lewis Raven Wallace.

Lewis Wallace: I started with sooooo many questions...I wanted to know where this ideal of “objectivity” even came from in the first place. And I wanted to know about other journalists who had gone against the grain—queer and trans folks and people of color who had said NO to this same framework, and stood up for their communities AS journalists.

One of the first big figures I came across—who’s key to my understanding of all this now—was Ida B. Wells.

Lewis Wallace: So picture this. A 21-year-old Black woman, riding in a train car, 1883. The white conductor comes by taking tickets...and tells her

she has to move, to the Black car up front. This is the ladies car, he says, which means, *white* ladies. When she refuses, the conductor grabs her.

Ida B. Wells, voiceover: He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth to the back of his hand. I had braced my feet against the seat in front, and as he had already been badly bitten he didn't try it again by himself. He went forward and got the baggageman and another man to help him and of course they succeeded in dragging me out.

Lewis Wallace: Wells describes all this in her autobiography...as she was dragged out of the train car, the white ladies watched and applauded. She got off the train, found a lawyer, sued, and won.

Ida B. Wells, voiceover: I can see to this day the headlines in the Memphis Appeal announcing *Darky Damsel Gets Damages*.

Lewis Wallace: Though the railroad appealed and she had to give those damages *back*. Anyhow, point being, Ida B. Wells was amazing.

Mia Bay: She is a tremendously energetic, strong minded young woman.

Lewis Wallace: This is Professor Mia Bay, author of *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells*. Wells was born into slavery in 1862, and spent her teens taking care of her five younger siblings. In her 20s, she moved to Memphis and became part owner and editor of a black newspaper, the *Memphis Free Speech*. Then in 1892, something happened.

Mia Bay: She had been traveling to promote her newspaper but when she came back she found Memphis...Black Memphis completely terrorized...

Lewis Wallace: A conflict between a white man and a Black man had escalated for a few days, and ended in a gnarly street fight. After that, a white mob had lynched three Black men. The three men, Will Stewart, Calvin McDowell, and Thomas Moss, were co-owners of the People's Grocery, and Moss was one of Wells' close friends. Something stood out to

her about *why* her friends had been lynched...See, at the time, there was a standard story told in the white-run media about lynching.

Mia Bay: ...that lynchings were necessary to keep Black men in line, that they were often about disciplining men who had been criminals, or men who had raped women.

Lewis Wallace: There was this idea that Black men were succumbing to their supposedly primitive nature with white women. They were criminals...and so lynching might have been uncouth and technically illegal, but it was painted as a form of justice, says Bay.

Mia Bay: The local white newspapers, wrote in support of lynchings and kind of talked the sort of standard line about how Black people had to be disciplined and Black men you know were rapists.

Lewis Wallace: Even Wells had assumed that people who were lynched elsewhere had generally done something illegal first. But it was super clear that all this didn't apply to what had happened to her friends. As co-owners

of a grocery store they were successfully competing with local white grocers. And it was the white grocer led the charge against them.

Mia Bay: So she began to research why lynchings actually took place.

Lewis Wallace: She went to places where lynchings happened, and talked to people. Wells compiled data from newspapers. Not only did she count lynchings, but she counted how many had happened in response to an accusation, how many of those accusations may have been fabricated, and how many were in response to no crime at all. She even hired white private investigators in some cases. In her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, Wells wrote about her findings...

Ida B Wells, voiceover: They had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. ...

Lewis Wallace: It was economic terrorism, she said, a way to keep Black people down. As she was learning all this, in 1892, Wells wrote an editorial that said in part...

Ida B. Wells, voiceover: Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.

Lewis Wallace: She was traveling when this particular editorial came out, but she got word that her implication that white women might be seducing Black men had gotten white people in Memphis so mad, if she went back, *she* would be lynched. After a mob in Memphis trashed her newspaper office, friends in New York implored her not to go back...

Ida B. Wells, voiceover: Because I saw the chance to be more of service to the cause by staying in New York than by returning to Memphis, I accepted their advice, took a position on the *New York Age*, and continued my fight against lynching and lynchers. They had destroyed my paper, in which every dollar I had in the world was invested. They had made me an exile and threatened my life for

hinting at the truth. I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth.

Lewis Wallace: Wells took *huge* risks by telling the whole truth as a young Black woman, while the white press *didn't* even bother to ask these same questions.

[Music]

And this is where the problem of “objectivity” comes in. Already in the 1890s, there was this idea that newspapers, if they were going to be authoritative, should be quote neutral and impartial on questions of race. But what that actually meant was that *they were racist*. For example, the *New York Times* had an apologetic take on lynching. It was bad, yes. But so was rape.

David Mindich: What we saw in the 1880s, and 1890s, was that the white mainstream newspapers were using all the trappings of objectivity, all the elements of objectivity, to paint a picture of lynching.

Lewis: This is David Mindich, a journalism professor at Temple University. Mindich says this chasm between the white story about lynching, and the *real* story about lynching gets shielded by the notion of “objectivity.” People weren’t actually using that word yet, but starting in the mid-1800s, lots of white papers were trying to be nonpartisan and balanced.

David Mindich: However, they were also using their racist baggage, right? They were also bringing their racist lens, their racist goggles, to the question of lynching...and there was no accuracy about the story in the 1880s and 90s.

Lewis Wallace: He says white writers at the time just couldn’t imagine Black men as innocent, or imagine that white women might have *consensual* relationships with them.

David Mindich: So there were a whole bunch of racist elements that were getting in the way of telling a truthful story.

Lewis Wallace: Racist elements getting in the way of telling the truth. That felt so familiar to me, from watching everything unfold with Donald Trump,

obviously, but also even from before that. In 2014, I had covered the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and saw how much young Black people had to do to PROVE “their side” of the story. Like thousands of Black people could testify that the cops were racist, or cops were violent, and all that could be “balanced” by one statement from a police chief. And I remember participating in it, doing these supposedly “balanced” news reports.

[Music]

So, okay, “objective” journalism, at least when it pretends to be neutral, can reinforce racist ideas and always has. But that still didn’t answer my question of why we even HAD objective journalism in the first place.

[Break]

Lewis Wallace: David Mindich’s book, *Just the Facts*, explains that in Ida B. Wells time the whole *idea* of balance in journalism was still pretty new—and changing fast.

David Mindich: Journalists were among the most partisan people in America in the 1820s and early 1830s.

Lewis Wallace: For a lot of the 1800s, a journalist slash activist, or an editor slash political candidate, was relatively normal.

David Mindich: There were people who were newspaper editors but there were also planning riots. And they were also encouraging election violence and election fraud.

Lewis Wallace: And many newspapers were straight-up funded by political parties. But from the 1830s on, boatloads of immigrants were coming to the U.S., literacy was on the rise. And the newspaper industry responded by creating a new kind of urban publication, the penny paper—not funded by political parties but by sales and advertising.

David Mindich: And to do so they had to shed their partisan baggage and try to sell as many papers as possible, and sell advertisements. And to do so they had to become politically

independent and rely on trying to reach a broad audience rather than just one political party or another.

[Music]

Lewis Wallace: So he says what we now call “objectivity” developed partly because of this new business model. Journalists were trying to be more detached, non-partisan, balanced, and also more factual. Which reflected cultural shifts too...

David Mindich: Instead of relying on, let's say, a religious world view, or superstitions, or beliefs, journalists began to care more and more about empiricism, the, the first hand investigation of the world around them.

Lewis Wallace: But all this happened gradually. Some journalists tried to be factual, but weren't at all nonpartisan or balanced. And just like today, these values meant something really different depending on whom you asked. Which is what brought Mindich to study lynching and Ida B. Wells.

David Mindich: The process of professionalization and objectivity that was occurring through the white press in many cases was inappropriate in the African-American press because the African-American press needed to tell a story and be advocates for a perspective that wasn't being told at all in the mainstream press.

Lewis Wallace: Led by Ida B Wells, the Black press was trying to get the word out.

David Mindich: ...that African-Americans were being lynched as part of economic terrorism as a way to intimidate business people and perpetrated through a great lie that African-Americans were somehow culpable when in fact they were innocent victims.

Lewis Wallace: So then, a lot like now, complicity with white supremacy in the white press was purportedly just “being neutral,” while telling the truth, what Wells and other Black journalists did, was considered activism. In 1893 the *New York Times* editorial page called Wells a quote “slanderous and nasty-minded mulatress,” and suggested *she* was fabricating facts.

Ramona Martinez: Objectivity is the ideology of the status quo. It is!

Lewis Wallace: This is my collaborator, the producer of *The View from Somewhere* podcast, Ramona Martinez. When we met, she had also been researching the story of Ida B. Wells. And she had also left public radio—she used to work for NPR producing the newscast, you know: “Live from NPR news in Washington, I’m so and so...”. And she had thought a LOT about the problems of “objectivity.” When we first met, she said this thing to me about objectivity being the ideology of the status quo. I kept thinking about it, so...I followed up with her later.

Lewis Wallace: And so unpack it a little. What do you mean when you say ‘objectivity is the ideology of the status quo’?

Ramona Martinez: I'm starting out from the understanding that an objective viewpoint is impossible, because we all have something called ideology, like, a system of ideas and values that we interpret the world through. And like no matter who you are, the way you're going to see the world and form opinions and even things that you think are true, or are factual, are based on your background right? So

if you can never escape ideology, therefore what is considered objective or neutral is like really only a matter of social agreement, or like the ideological consensus of the majority or the status quo.

Lewis Wallace: Which is easy to go along with if you agree with the social agreement, like, objectivity as the ideology of the status quo is easy to accept if the status quo reflects your experience and your identity.

Ramona Martinez: Exactly. So to give a concrete example, if I were living in, you know, the turn of the century and I were a suffragette I'd be like hey women are just as smart as men and we deserve to be in politics. But that viewpoint would have been considered, like, extreme and non-objective.

Lewis Wallace: Right. And you Ramona have a lot of experience with this because you worked at sort of the mothership of quote unquote objective news journalism, the NPR Newscast Desk for quite a while. Right? So how did that play out, like how did you come to all of this while you were working in that environment?

Ramona Martinez: Most stories would kind of come and go without too much thought because you know we edit, gosh, we intake so many stories an hour. But in 2014 I remember after the Supreme Court ruled on the Hobby Lobby decision. Just to recap really quick, they ruled that businesses were allowed to use sort of their religious freedom, or their religious values to not provide employees with birth control, which was mandated under Obamacare. And I was so upset by this decision that I posted on my Facebook, SCOTUS you mother f***ers.

Ramona Martinez: I said that on my Facebook NPR has a very strict ethics policy that makes it so that you cannot express political views on any kind of social media including Facebook. Luckily, I was a first time offender. So I only got a wrist slap and a talking to. And I guess like I felt like I couldn't as a woman publicly hold the view that I should have bodily autonomy *and* work for NPR.

Lewis Martinez: And so at what point does your role as a reporter, or in your case a producer, of news conflict with just your own

humanity? If you're one of the people who's being targeted or whose body is being controlled in a certain way?

Ramona Martinez: Absolutely and that's what I said to the person I was speaking to was, well what happens when they overturn *Roe v. Wade*? Am I going to have to choose between you know going to lie in the street versus having a job, and he was like yeah I guess we're all going to have to make those choices. But what I realized was like, no you're *never* going to have to make that choice, man, you're never going to have to make that choice.

Lewis Wallace: Right, you're never gonna have to make that choice...if your ideas, your identity and experiences, fit neatly into the mainstream idea of what's acceptable. Which is all about who has power, whose stories get told and believed...which is all about race, and gender, and class, and ability.

Lewis Wallace: Ramona and I came across a really useful framework for talking about that range of acceptable debate. It's called Hallin's spheres of consensus.

David Mindich: Yeah! I love Hallin's spheres.

Lewis Wallace: This is David Mindich again. The journalism professor from Temple.

David Mindich: So Daniel Hallin, who wrote a book called *The Uncensored War*, which is about the Vietnam War, looked at objective journalism through painting three concentric spheres.

Lewis Wallace: So picture an inner circle, a middle circle, and a big outer circle.

David Mindich: The innermost sphere, it was called the sphere of consensus. And it's the area that we all agree on. So from the American perspective, we all agree that apple pie is a good thing, and baseball is a good thing. (Laughs)

Lewis: Well I dunno if we *all* agree, but the sphere of consensus can also be summed up as dominant ideology. Things like, capitalism is good,

patriotism is good...opinions you could probably say on the news and not get reprimanded or fired. The middle circle is called the sphere of legitimate controversy.

David Mindich: The sphere of legitimate controversy is the area in which things are debated. So if you look at a typical news story about let's say tax policy or abortion rights. There are a bunch of different competing ideas that get put in the sphere of legitimate controversy. That's the sphere that the news story is reflected in.

Lewis Wallace: So that includes stuff like, Democrats vs. Republicans, debates over constitutional rights, how much taxation, these days gay rights. Then there's my personal favorite sphere.

David Mindich: The outer sphere, the third sphere, is called the sphere of deviance. And Hallin says those are the ideas that really don't make it into a news story. So if you did a story about a murder case, you wouldn't say we really need a pro-murder view.

Lewis Wallace: But this deviant outside sphere could include *all kinds* of things. For example when I came out as queer and transgender in the late 1990s, the idea that there were more than two genders was very much in the sphere of deviance. Which meant, in mainstream media it just wasn't talked about or debated. And what's really important is that what is IN these spheres changes over time.

David Mindich: So if you look back at the 19th century, the sphere of consensus included for many the idea that slavery was a positive good. Then slavery moved into the sphere of legitimate controversy. And finally now to get a pro-slavery view, you wouldn't really find that in a current news story because pro-slavery has slipped into the sphere of deviance for the last hundred years.

Lewis Wallace: It has been deplatformed, you might say.

David Mindich: Yes, deplatformed is a good way of phrasing it.

Lewis Wallace: So Hallin's spheres are a way of looking at what's considered acceptable discourse. Key here is that journalists collaborate

with the public on moving questions from deviance to legitimate controversy to consensus. What we decide to cover, what debates we give air time...these determine what's in these spheres. And that does not always shift in the direction of justice.

[Music]

This really really helped me think about the idea that we as journalists are responsible not just for describing the world or our democracy, but for *shaping it*. So it matters whether we give air time, for example, to Trump's "alternative facts." Being a journalist can't be about just standing outside looking in. We're PARTICIPANTS, in democracy and whether it succeeds or fails, and what it looks like. Whether we like it or not, journalism IS activism.

So if objectivity is a myth, and journalism is always about making change, or upholding the status quo, what does that kind of activist-journalism or participant-journalism mean in practice today? There's no better person to ask than Nikole Hannah-Jones. Who we heard from in the last episode. She's open about her mission as a journalist.

Nikole Hannah-Jones: My goals as a journalist right now are to really expose the inner architecture of racial inequality. To show that it's not merely a legacy of the past, though the past is clearly very important in my work, that it's not merely coincidence.

Lewis Wallace: And she works at the New York Times...kind of the standard bearer for supposedly objective journalism. But she says she doesn't believe in acting like she's outside the story.

Nikole Hannah-Jones: So, when I report on school segregation it's very clear that I think the segregation of Black children is immoral. And that it's unjust. I don't find it useful to pretend that we have no thoughts on the things that we cover. I always say, the only things you don't have opinions on are things that you don't know enough about to form an opinion.

Lewis Wallace: She does hold onto some of the facets of traditional objective journalism—like fact-checking, and being rigorous, and using multiple sources to verify—

Nikole Hannah-Jones: Is your reporting accurate? Can anyone dispute the facts of your reporting, and is your reporting fair? Have you fairly represented the views of the various sides that you're reporting on?

Lewis Wallace: Still, today in journalism many people *do* want to draw a clear line between reporting and activism. Not Hannah-Jones.

Nikole Hannah-Jones: I am no more an activist than anyone who is a journalist is an activist. So when we say that our role as journalists is to speak truth to power to expose the way the powerful work against the vulnerable to safeguard the First Amendment. That is all activism.

Lewis Wallace: And she points out that to not see your work as activism is, in a way, a reflection of privilege...

Nikole Hannah-Jones: I think white journalists' obsession with objectivity comes from being a white person in a white dominated country in which all of the laws were in the favor of whiteness.

[Music]

Lewis Wallace: So I think instead of “objectivity” or balance, we really need more of the kind of thing Hannah-Jones does, that Ida B. Wells did. Rigorous journalism that is biased toward racial and social justice.

Lewis Wallace: This is the point in this story where a lot of people say to me, Lewis, that’s all fine and good but what about all the misinformation and disinformation and “alternative facts”? Can we really fight that with....openly biased journalism?

And I get it. It can seem like “objective journalism” would be the best way to oppose all that other stuff.

But let’s go back to Ida B. Wells for a minute. She actually stood up against an earlier form of alternative facts—all the lies that were told about lynching and its causes. And we’re *still* dealing with the fake news that is white supremacy. Our president, Donald Trump, rose to power in part on the

hoax of Birtherism, the idea that President Barack Obama was secretly a foreigner.

In doing so, Trump has been part of this really insidious process in U.S. culture. That I argue is not *just* about lying, or drumming up misinformation. It's a process the poet Kevin Young calls, the colonization of doubt...and I've found this really useful in thinking about these questions of fake news and spin.

Kevin Young: And I think right now, you know, it's not an accident that we have all these deep divisions around race, around questions of immigration and who belongs and who's a citizen. And we also have all this fakery.

Lewis Wallace: Kevin Young is the director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, poetry editor at the *New Yorker*, and author of the 2017 book *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News*. Foundational to his argument in *Bunk* is this idea that race itself—is a sort of hoax, that justifies systems of inequality.

Kevin Young: Well, it's a strange thing where race is, we know not a scientific concept, it's a construction. It too is something fake pretending to be real like the hoax is. But it doesn't mean that racism is fake. Racism is very real. And I think it's--we see even now it can be hard to combat exactly because it's built on this falsehood.

Lewis Wallace: So birtherism for example is a continuation of that deep American hoax—the lie of race itself. Young shows popular falsehoods, fake news in the U.S. are *often* tied to white supremacy. The story that people of color are in some way inferior to white people was originally *presented* as scientific and objective--to justify slavery. But Young argues, and this is key, that the problem now isn't *just* that some people are out there telling these lies.

Kevin Young: It's not just that people are hoaxing more. It's also that people are accusing other people of things that are true to be hoaxes and labeling things that are provably true as fake news. And that is really troubling because the news cycle has developed slower than that happens. So as soon as people come back and say, well,

actually, let me show you how it's true. There's another thing that is being called fake.

Lewis Wallace: Pundits, particularly but not *only* on the right, are fomenting *doubt* and cynicism, about whether we can *trust* anyone else. And that right there is the Colonization of Doubt.

Kevin Young: In a weird way, there, there's this kind of doubt that is almost, as I quote, the poet Mary Karr saying is like the American religion. And doubt is something that we take great pride in, you know, and instead of believing, it's like, well, you know, let's just doubt each other constantly. And that mistrust, I think, leads to misinformation. And its colonization that it's kind of been weaponized now.

Lewis Wallace: So, doubt has become the exercise not of curiosity, but of mistrust...habitual *deep* mistrust of one another.

Kevin Young: Doubt is I think, you know, so different than skepticism, if that makes sense. I think skepticism is huh, I want to

believe that, trust but verify or, you know, a kind of examination of not only is someone saying something true, but what I really think. And I think that doubt doesn't do that. It is only one way. It's like you have to impress me with the truth. And in fact, if it doesn't fit what I believe, then, you know, not only do I doubt it. I can't believe it.

Lewis Wallace: Young says the problem with these hoaxes—with Birtherism or pizzagate or the so-called migrant caravan—the problem isn't that they're subjective. Or even just that they are false. *It's that they are designed to undermine truth, to sow mistrust in ALL of our truths.* The problem is that it's BS, it's BUNK—and BS begets BS. Because suddenly nothing at all can be even provisionally true. Anything we don't like? FAKE NEWS!

We've had fake news for as long as we've had news—white supremacy was based entirely on it. And maybe there's no way to stop the fakers. The bigger problem is the spin that says we can't believe *anything* or trust anyone. The colonization of doubt itself.

[Music]

That said. Kevin Young talks in Bunk about this idea that truth isn't an absolute *or* a relative, but a muscle. It's a *skill*, like sailing or even more like swimming. So I asked him...how do we build that muscle, relearn that truth skill, as a culture?

Kevin Young: I think we have to listen to each other in many ways. Rebuilding that muscle, that is truth, I think it really takes time, but it also takes oddly, it takes a bit of a leap of faith, but also engaging in each other, honestly. And I think that's really hard right now. You know, think places we're at online or don't reward long thought and, you know, self-examination.

Lewis Wallace: Ugh, tell me about it. I think about Twitter, watching people deliver decisive statements, attacks, clickbait...vulnerable subjectivity and close listening don't necessarily sell or get the retweets. But they still matter, because along with truth, *trust* still matters.

Kevin Young: I think that in terms of how we can rebuild that is going back to our own personal truths, but also the ways we can connect to

each other's truths. And I'm saying truths, because I think in some ways these are about our own perspectives. But I also do think there – it isn't something relative. You know, slavery happened. You know, the events that we sometimes are arguing over, they happened. So we have to kind of get past the arguing over if, and into like how and what and what does it mean.

Lewis Wallace: So even though there's not just *one* authoritative way of seeing, or objective way of seeing—journalists still *should* seek truth and facts, plural, cobbled together from various viewpoints. With time, and resources, and an honest devotion to the craft, that can make a difference. And this process is SO DIFFERENT than punditry and superficial both sides-ism...it's Nikole Hannah-Jones, right, as opposed to Fox News or CNN's "Crossfire" or whatever.

I want to leave you with a quote. You know the *Washington Post's* tagline, "Democracy Dies in Darkness?"

Well, I disagree. Or at least I partially disagree. Shedding light is only part of the struggle, right? Just like Ida B. Wells showed us, and Nikole Hannah-Jones shows us, it matters *how* we shine that light. You can tell about a

lynching, or a police killing, or something that Trump said, and that telling can reinforce the status quo or challenge it, depending on the framing. The idea that “Democracy Dies in Darkness” (and therefore thrives in light) for me calls to mind the opening lines from Audre Lorde’s 1985 essay, “Poetry is not a Luxury.”

*“The **quality of light** by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.”*

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives. *That* will define not just the stories we tell, but what those stories *mean* and what they make possible. Democracy thrives not just in any light. But in a light that allows us to be critical, to see the ways it has failed.

In the Black press and the anti-slavery press, and the LGBT press, there are wonderful traditions to draw on as we go forward. But the myth of objective news journalism must be left behind if we are to shine the light that we need, in this moment.

[Music]

John Biewen: That's Lewis Raven Wallace, author of *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, and host and creator of a podcast by the same name, the *View from Somewhere*. Chenj?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I wanna just take a second and clarify one thing. We said at the beginning of the episode, the word "objective" gets used in a lot of different ways, so it's very easy to misunderstand. But when Lewis says the myth of objective news journalism must be left behind, he's *not* saying journalists should stop caring about facts. And so I think what's so powerful about his story is that he's actually saying the opposite.

John Biewen: Exactly. Go back to the Ida B. Wells example. Newspapers in the 1890s were purportedly were reporting objectively on lynching. Because their work reflected the prevailing assumption in white America was that lynchings were, you know, not very classy but probably justified. Because Black men do have a thing about rape, especially when it comes to white women. So it took somebody like Ida B. Wells, a black woman, able *and willing* to see things from a more accurate angle, to cut through

this racist assumption and see what was true, why lynchings were really happening.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. So, Ida B. Wells is part of this long tradition of advocacy in Black and feminist thought, and it's actually that advocacy that helps her to get to the truth, right. And so, one reason why I think it's important to challenge these ideas about objectivity is that they don't only apply in journalism. The myth of neutral journalist actually teaches the public at large a really bad kind of critical thinking. It allows not just journalists but all of us to imagine that it's possible to stand outside of history and that pretending to somehow gives you more access to the truth. I see this sometimes with my students who somewhere along the line got this message that not having an analysis makes them smarter.

John Biewen: Yes, I am free of ideology. I just look at the bare facts. But yeah, the history of the notion of objectivity is really illuminating, isn't it, like with so many things. The story that David Mindich and these other folks tell about the origins of so-called objectivity as the prevailing convention in journalism.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, it was presented as a business strategy—to reach a wide audience by saying you’re not taking sides, you’re just reporting the facts. We’re a newspaper for everybody. But you already know, whenever someone says “everybody” or all “people,” Of course that’s a code for an imagined audience, which in this case is predominantly white, male.

John Biewen: Yeah. And objectivity, or neutrality, came to mean *not* a strict commitment to unvarnished facts, which is what it kinda sounds like, and I think that’s what people think it means, but it came to mean a kind of political and ideological middle ground that the target audience was comfortable with. And to the extent that there are contested questions and controversies, that’s what the news deals with after all, right, those things are handled with “balance.” On the one hand, this, on the other hand, that. So here in our time, among other problems, this means that if a high-ranking public official does something patently stupid or outrageous, a reporter can’t just say that, because then you’ll be accused of being biased. You’re taking sides.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And so what I think that actually does is prop up objectively inferior information to create the impression of balance. But it's a false balance. So you get things like the *New York Times*, after Trump said maybe people should drink or inject detergent to fight Covid-19. The *Times* tweeted that this suggestion was dangerous, quote, "in the view of some experts." No, not in the view of some experts. In the view of *all* experts and anyone with common sense. You shouldn't inject detergent.

John Biewen: So that's a great example of so-called objectivity leading you to report nonsense. And then on the other hand you have the *Times* reprimanding its own highly respected science reporter, Donald McNeil, for saying in a TV interview, talking about the federal handling of the pandemic, quote, "We completely blew it for the first two months of the response." His editors clutched their pearls and made a public statement that "his job is to report the facts and not to offer his own opinions."

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I just want to point out that McNeil also said in that same interview that Mike Pence is a "sycophant," and he was criticized for that, too. I mean.... You say Mike Pence is a sycophant, I feel like that's a fact, right? I mean come on.

John Biewen: There's a great quote by the legendary Vietnam War reporter, David Halberstam. He said these conventions around so-called objectivity – including the tendency to find a middle ground on every controversial issue – he said it requires journalists to appear as if they're "much dumber and more innocent" than they actually are.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know, NPR reporter Tanya Mosele said it differently, she said "Objectivity is not the same thing as neutrality," right? So she, so what she said is, reporters actually can't be objective if they're neutral. But I think a lot of the damage caused by so-called journalistic objectivity comes from the false assumption that there's only two ways we can engage in reality: fact and opinion. And you maintain objectivity in the pursuit of truth by sticking to facts. But that's a really impoverished binary, right, and leaves out at least one thing beyond fact and opinion, and that's analysis. Analysis is a way of studying the available information enough to make the best possible statement about what the truth of the situation is. It's what scientists do, historians do it.

John Biewen: Yeah. And the fact is, journalists do it all day long. For every story, even the most straightforward hard news piece. Starting with, is this a story? Where should I look for information? Who are the right people to interview? How do I frame the story, what context does the reader or listener need? I always got a kick out of the Fox News slogan “We Report, You Decide.” You know? And just, even, forget about the irony of that coming from Fox News of all places, but for any news organization to say that. To do journalism IS to decide, and decide, and decide. Which means, as you say, to do analysis.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So in that example we were just talking about, Donald McNeil is an extremely experienced science and health reporter, basically an expert himself on epidemics. He looked at the facts, the information that was available to the Trump Administration about the coronavirus, when they knew it, how they responded compared to other countries. He talked to a whole bunch of scientists who could say with authority what could and should have been done and how the outcome might have been different. And then he stated the obvious, what everybody with a shred of independence already knows. That the administration blew it.

John Biewen: Yes, as opposed to some objective-ese from the *Times* news pages, which might have said “Some public health experts say the president failed to move quickly enough.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And so that just reduces the point to an opinion held by some people, who we may or may not trust, and that’s really kind of deceptive and murky for the reader. When in fact, “They blew it” is a plain fact. My point here is that in some cases, analysis based on verifiable facts offers the news consumer *more truth*.

John Biewen: More truth. Yeah. As Lewis’s piece pointed out, it isn’t just the way that individual issues are reported, it’s also in the subject matter that reporters feel they can address in the first place, right? Those “Hallin’s spheres” are a good way of expressing that. There’s the stuff that everybody supposedly agrees on, the stuff that the mainstream sort of agrees that we disagree about, and then that outer zone, the “sphere of deviance.” Ideas that journalism considers fringe, just not worth discussing. And here’s a pretty big example from this very project of ours, Chenjerai. We’ve used the word “capitalism” quite a few times here in Season 4.

Probably more than I ever used that word over many years reporting for allegedly left-leaning public radio news organizations.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes John, it's true. You're committing the journalistic sin of questioning capitalism itself. But really. To point out that capitalism is not the same thing as democracy, that lo and behold it may actually conflict with democracy, as we've been discovering all season long. Or even to explore the possibility that capitalism is inherently unethical because it's defined by certain kinds of exploitation? It's very rare to see ideas like that expressed in the corporate media, and even at places like NPR.

John Biewen: It is true that mainstream outlets have done pieces in the last few years that basically say, wow, look at these surveys showing a lot of young people are really critical of capitalism and sympathetic to socialism. And some of that reporting has looked at inequality and lack of opportunity under capitalism, especially the current American brand of "low-road capitalism," as sociologist Joel Rogers calls it. So I imagine, maybe in these cases reporters felt they could get away with addressing real

problems with capitalism in the U.S. so long as the overall article is framed as a cultural trend story: the kids don't like capitalism these days.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. But in general you see very little reporting that directly challenges the capitalist orthodoxy. I mean if you try it in the mainstream and you'll be branded as an advocate or activist journalist, someone with an ax to grind. Even in public radio, I've been told that capitalism is too ideological or too abstract to name. Meanwhile a huge capacious metaphor like "the market" - which encourages us to imagine all of these vastly complicated processes as like one coherent thing - that's fine and it gets referred to several hundred times a day in mainstream news. So if you're writing stories day after day that just assume the capitalist status quo is the only plausible, desirable option, maybe with some tweaks here and there, *that's* not advocacy. That's objective.

John Biewen: So, think about what we've just said in connection with this whole series of ours. We've seen this recurring theme, based on facts and expert analysis, that the most powerful people in America have chosen capitalist growth and exploitation over robust democracy time and time again, from the founding of the country up to the present. And we have

news media that don't question capitalism as a kind of eternal, fixed foundation of this society.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. So, in terms of accountability, what does that create? Despite many smart and courageous journalists who are trying to push back, the dominant professional standards and job requirements of journalism often reinforce and protect an antidemocratic status quo. Whether that's conscious or unconscious, there's tremendous pressure on journalists to internalize or perform a pro-capitalist ideology if they want to succeed in corporate mainstream media.

John Biewen: Brings to mind the Upton Sinclair quote, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, for real. But you know, this pandemic that we're kind of reporting in should really make some things clear to folks. When I see all of these people that are dying and suffering and, you know, I see who is dying, That's not made up or biased news. That's reality. Brutal and unacceptable reality - but its reality.

And as long as exploitation and the lack of access to resources is real, as long as violent ecological destruction is real, as long as voter suppression and the corporate capture of our democratic institutions and processes is real, then a journalistic bias toward social justice will get all of us closer to the truth.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: That's Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. Next time: Our season finale. What to do. How can we build a more democratic U.S.A.?

Thanks again, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Ramona Martinez, who produces the *View from Somewhere* Podcast. You can, and should, find the podcast and the book at [view from somewhere dot com](http://viewfromsomewhere.com). Loretta Williams is our script editor. Thanks to Joli Milner for voiceover acting, and NBC Universal for archival tape. Music this season by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. Our theme song is "The Underside of Power" by Algiers. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our website is sceneonradio.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter,

@sceneonradio. Chenjerai, on Twitter, is @catchatweetdown. And hey, Lewis Raven Wallace is on Twitter, @lewispants – that’s l-e-w-i-s pants. *Scene on Radio* is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.