

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

BIPOC PRESS FOR THE PEOPLE: BURSTING THE CORPORATE MEDIA BUBBLE

LAURA FLANDERS: It's a cliché to say that the richest corporate media operate in a bubble in their own specific reality and out of touch with the majority of the country. A lot of the journalists went to the same schools and live in the same neighborhoods as the politicians and profiteers on whom they report. It's a cliché, but it's also largely true, and it's barely changed in the last 50 years. Still, there is hope. Today's guests are breathing new life into the world of commentary and journalism. Chenjerai Kumanyika is a professor at NYU and prolific audio journalist, with podcasts, including "Uncivil" and "Seeing White," and a forthcoming series about the New York Police Department. From Georgia, we're joined by Neesha Powell-Ingabire, a journalist and organizer, Director of Popular Education at Press On, which is a Southern media collective dedicated to movement journalism. She's also the author of a memoir coming out this September called "Come By Here." Finally, coming to us from New Orleans. Mary Annaïse Heglar is an essayist and podcaster who covers climate with two new books, one a novel titled "Troubled Waters" and the other a children's book that, just now, moved me to tears. Welcome Mary, Neesha, Chenjerai. It is a pleasure to have you all with me. I have to start with you, I think, Chenjerai. With student protests happening all around the US, we got a lot of generational shift in conversation going on. You are in New York, what are you seeing on campus, and what are you seeing amongst your peers?

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: This has become a national movement. We've seen students across the country not only speaking out against the country's support of Israel's... Biden's support of Israel's war on Gaza and on Palestine, but also questioning their university's investments and demanding divestment, and specifically using an encampment strategy. And so we've seen that not only on our campus here at NYU, but also... Columbia, obviously, has been very much in the headlines about this, but CUNY, Fashion Institute of Technology, I think one thing that makes this a little bit different from some other movements is the degree to which faculty have become involved. At our campus, we decided that as faculty, we weren't going to simply let the NYPD come onto our campus and arrest our students, that they would have to also engage with us. And we felt that while the students are in the lead, it was our role to share their vulnerability.

LAURA FLANDERS: The bubble effect has been super obvious. I think if you look at your commercial media coverage, you might think that the protests are only happening in New York, and maybe LA, and maybe a few other places, but as you point out, Chenjerai, they are happening everywhere. Turn to social media and local media, and you get a very different story. Mary, I know that you've been conscious of what's happening there in New Orleans. Tulane has seen its own encampment protests, right?

MARY ANNAÏSE HEGLAR: They have. It was cleared out pretty quickly before I was able to get down there. I'm not teaching this semester, but I did hear from a few of my students from last year about the repressive way that the university handled it. And so there was a quick moment here in New Orleans, where there was a... What we, as far as we know, was the first encampment that was not at a university, down at Jackson Square in the French Quarter. So the movement for Free Palestine in New Orleans has been extraordinarily, extraordinarily strong. And I think that has to do with the fact that there's a pretty big Palestinian community here. So yeah, it's definitely not all contained in New York and California and not all contained on university campuses. I think it's important we keep that in mind.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Neesha, this is, I'm imagining, where Press On really comes into its own. I mean, you've got a lot of stories you're looking at. How are you prioritizing, and where are you seeing the biggest contrast between what you are doing and what you're seeing in the commercial press?

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: Yeah, so it's so exciting to see what the student journalists are doing down South. We've seen at Emory University in Atlanta, University of Georgia, the student encampments happening there. And at Press On, we've been talking about the differences between how the students are treated by the police and faculty. It seemed like they cracked down super, super hard. Students everywhere are being brutalized, but it only took a matter of hours for the students at Emory to be cracked down on, pepper sprayed violence. At UGA, my own alma mater, I've seen that students of color were targeted by police more than other groups of students. And that's what we're seeing. We're not seeing a lot of negotiations and things like that, like the schools up North. And so that's a marked difference that we've seen and we're just really impressed by what the student journalists are doing. This is movement journalism in action.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, as you say that, for people that aren't familiar with the term, when you say movement journalism, how would you define it? How do you define it there at Press On?

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: Yeah, so movement journalism is journalism that is in service of liberation. I often say that we're almost the exact opposite of traditional journalism because we are pushing back against the tradition of extraction and exploitation that mainstream media has been so, that's what we know about mainstream media, right? We see them coming into communities of color and oppressed communities and parachuting into these communities and causing harm, even if it's not intentional, right? And so we are very intentional about historically-oppressed communities. Folks from those communities should be doing reporting on those communities and building authentic, genuine relationships. So that is what movement

journalism means to us. It is engaging with communities and making sure that folks from oppressed communities are able to become journalists.

LAURA FLANDERS: Chenjerai, coming to you, how are you using this moment with your students to teach about these questions? I mean, this objectivity idea has never, in my view, been true or accurate, has always been deployed with certain particular political motivation. And now you've got, as Neesha was just saying, students reporting on what is happening on their very own campuses, and sometimes being the only people with the access to do so. I imagine it's bringing up some really interesting teaching and learning moments there among the students.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: Absolutely. And I just want to co-sign what Neesha said about movement journalism. One thing about... You look at the history of the Black press, we didn't have the luxury of being able to report and to sort of somehow separate that from advocacy. When you have people reporting while slavery is still legal in the country, while all kinds of Black people are being targeted in various kinds of violence. So that's a... We have a long tradition of advocacy journalism. And what I teach my students is that the... I say objectivity is important. And the reason why I say it's important is because we, when we say that someone has been killed by police, that been sexual assault, that there's climate emergency, we're saying that as facts, we're not saying that as somebody's opinion. So in that respect, objectivity is important. But what I tell them is that the definitions of objectivity we've been getting, there's been so much violence done under the claim of objectivity. Somehow that means that you can't have an analysis. That if your government is endorsing a war, you can't say that somehow. You have to kind of walk the middle line. And to me, that's not objectivity, that's just poor analysis and poor journalism.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, I mean, I should be more careful with my speech. I mean, obviously, we want to be fair and we want to be accurate as much as possible. We want to avoid, though, I think, the sense of objectivity, the way that objectivity has been used as a kind of stick to beat activist-journalists with. And also that the way that it shows up as kind of two-sidesism. For and against the slaughter of 34,000 people, lost count, among Palestinians in Gaza? I think that that is pushing it. Also with respect to climate, and I'm coming to you, Mary. I mean, your book is... Your book, "Troubled Waters," is all about this kind of generational shift between the civil rights generation and the climate generation. It features a young person who is motivated and mobilized and takes very personally both the death of a relative and the sphere of a dying planet. How do you think about objectivity as an essayist, as a writer, as the polemicist, perhaps?

MARY ANNAÏSE HEGLAR: The way I would best describe the novel, I think, is about the climate change generation and the civil rights generation and the things that go unsaid between them. And I think... So writing this novel is based a lot on... The civil rights narrative is based a lot on my family's history with school desegregation in Nashville, Tennessee. And to do that, I

had to do a great deal of research, going into the archives and learning what that story really was because the members of my family who participated are too traumatized to actually tell me the stories. I had to go learn them on my own. And in doing that, I found so many parallels to the way that we talk about climate change, or fail to talk about climate change, rather. So I would see people saying like, "Well, this is what the segregationists say, this is what the Black people say, and this is what the moderate says." And nobody's there to say like, "But that's crazy, though." Right? Like... So you have segregationists saying like, "It's a mental disorder that Black people want integration or want equal rights, right?" Like, that was an actual argument that was treated as though it was valid. And it looks just as insane as somebody says, "There is no climate change." And then here's all these scientists saying that there is, let's just put them on TV and let them argue it out, right? And kind of similar to, "So-and-so says it's not a genocide." And then all of these genocide experts say that it is a genocide. And like you were saying with Palestine, that we've lost count, we've literally lost count, we've lost the counters in Palestine. And so I don't know what more evidence these folks need. And the truth is that they actually don't need or want evidence. People want to believe what they want to believe sometimes. And so this sort of arguing toward the lowest denominator does not serve us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Neesha, coming to you, unfortunately, your hometown became the subject of a lot of national news a few years back, 2020, with the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, the jogger out on the streets in Georgia, in that part where you grew up. You must have felt that. Clearly, you do. In your memoir, you talk about it. What would be your reflections to journalists today who covered that story about the way that they covered it, and how does it inform the work that you do today?

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: I felt a lot of things when that happened. I actually went to school with the man who actually pulled the trigger and killed Ahmaud Arbery. I actually wasn't surprised because he was one of the kids at our school who wore the Confederate flag and you kind of knew what he was about. So it wasn't super surprising, but it was still disgusting all the same. I think what we saw, and I think the media did a good job in showing the resistance because I think there was a lot of organizing happening after the murder. Ahmaud's family, community members fighting to get justice for Ahmaud. There was also other things happening, like the Confederate monument that was in a public park downtown. There was a long fight to get that taken down because it's symbolic of the racial climate in Brunswick, Georgia, and how it was kind of overlooked. And that Confederate monument did eventually get taken down. And so I think the media did a good job in covering that resistance. What they did not know and what I found out through like researching for my book is there's a long history of Black resistance in Coastal Georgia, and there's a story of in the early 1800s when a group of Igbo, enslaved Africans, drowned themselves after committing mutiny on the captains of their boat that brought them over here. They committed mutiny and then they drowned themselves because they said, "We would rather drown ourselves than become enslaved." That's a huge act of resistance, and

that's something we didn't learn about in school. And I talk about in my book how all of that was kind of intentionally, I feel like, hidden from us because they didn't want us to know about Black resistance. They didn't want us to have pride in that history.

LAURA FLANDERS: Oh, this is such an important point, and Chenjerai, coming to you in your teaching. I mean, whether you're talking, the Geechee Islands; or whether you're talking Black experience in America; or whether you're talking Gaza, October 7th, where you start the clock in your story really matters. And I wonder how you help your students think about this because obviously, our two colleagues here have written book-length books that address these long histories. Journalists are often told, "You just got to cut to the chase."

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: I've made the case that to cover effectively the events of today, you have to have that historical context. And often, in these conversations about diversity and journalism, that kind of thing is like, "Oh, well, yeah, we want to bring different perspectives," and I'm like, "No, this isn't 'different perspectives'. What this is, is if you don't know this history, then you don't know the real facts. If you don't know the feminist history of this country and you don't know the Black history, if you don't know the queer history, then actually you're less informed and ill-equipped to cover those beats in the newsroom." Sadly, a lot of people in power in newsrooms are ill-informed.

LAURA FLANDERS: But so what's your tip to the journalist who very often is being told, "You have 1,800 words." If you are lucky, more like 800.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: We can't sort of tell the time only by what is the minute hand or the second hand. We have to know where we're at in the historical story in the story of struggle. And I think that even... You'd be amazed what you can do with 800 words if you know how to write, and you do have to make choices. But to me, I'm always making an argument to put it back into context because this is part of how we get to the situation we are here. Where, for example, if you take the issue of policing, right, whether it's extrajudicial policing like Ahmaud Arbery, or people who are being killed by police in general. Policing is a thing where we've been seeing the same cycles play out for over 200 years. And part of that is because people aren't telling the story. They're not connecting the dots in the way that we need to.

LAURA FLANDERS: We are coming to hurricane season. And Mary, I want to come to you. You're there in New Orleans, and often, journalists' idea of history is that there was a storm called Katrina. So if we maybe mention that, that will do it. You go way further back in your gorgeous book. How do you recommend we think about this season? Maybe some new questions, some new stories to be told as another hurricane season heads our way?

MARY ANNAÏSE HEGLAR: Well, I think it's important to keep in mind that today's hurricanes are not like yesterday's hurricanes. Now, we face a thing called rapid intensification, where it used to be that if you heard about two or three days out that there was a Category 1 heading your way, you wouldn't leave. Nobody leaves for a Category 1. But now, you can hear that there's a Category 1 when you go to bed, and you wake up and it's a Category 4. So people need to move differently. And we always say that like you can rest on the wisdom of a community, but now... Everything is unpredictable now. What we're losing with climate change, really, is a world in which things are more predictable. There does need to be more understanding of how these storms are different and also more understanding of how these storms intersect with all of these other existing systems of oppression that we already have. And I think Katrina is a really powerful example of how these storms intersect with all of these other issues. If you look at what happened in prisons or what happened in old folks' homes and things like that, then those are things that we need to be more aware of as well.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, I think journalists are getting smarter with what stories may be there beneath the surface. Neesha, coming to you, your book is about not just memory getting lost, but it relates also to people getting lost and the struggle of the Geechee People, the island people there, to survive on their islands, to survive with their language, with their culture.

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: Yes, the Gullah Geechee folks are resilient because they had to be, and climate change is really a threat to their way of life and to their culture, subsistence fishing, living off the water, getting their food from their spiritual practices. Just so much of Gullah Geechee life revolves around water. And a lot of Gullah Geechee territory, which goes from about Jacksonville, North Carolina to St. Augustine, Florida along the coast, it's in danger of being flooded out, right? And there are folks like Maurice Bailey in Sapelo Island, which is one of the last intact Gullah Geechee communities, Sapelo Island, Georgia, he's working with folks to work on living shorelines to help with the erosion. Gullah Geechee folks see it coming, and they're working actively toward solutions.

LAURA FLANDERS: Not to say that elections are necessarily solutions, but there are some big ones coming up, including, of course, the Presidential Election. Georgia is a swing state. How are you thinking about that, Neesha, and how is Press On going to be reporting on it?

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: At Press On, we are trying to get journalists ready as far as knowing their rights and how to report on elections from a movement journalism perspective. We just did a FOIA 101 training for movement journalists-

LAURA FLANDERS: Freedom of Information Act request.

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: And so that's all around open records requests. And so that's a really important part of reporting on elections. We're about to do a Media Law 101, we are going to do a how to report on elections through a movement journalism lens. And so, of course, we're not going to be lobbying for particular candidates or anything like that, but rather training up movement journalists so they know their rights and they know different frameworks on how to report on these elections because we know that a lot of the reporting is going to come from mainstream outlets. And so we want to make sure that our folks are reporting on it too. And we really encourage, we want people to collaborate on reporting and things like that. So we are really just making sure that folks have the tools to be able to report on these elections effectively, safely, and ethically.

LAURA FLANDERS: And we should say Press On is not just in Georgia, it's all across the South and the Gulf Coast region, right?

NEESHA POWELL-INGABIRE: Yes, that is correct. We are all across the South and also Puerto Rico. We support folks in Puerto Rico as well.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right. Chenjerai, you did a podcast, as you mentioned, on the history of democracy, or lack thereof, in this country. Aspiration, too, as we like to say. How are you approaching election coverage this year and how are you feeling about the coverage so far?

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: There's a sort of deluge of horse race-style journalism that's already underway and headed our way that doesn't really invite us to ask the kind of questions that we want to add, that we need to ask about: Where do people really stand on the issues? What are the issues? Who's impacted by them? So one thing is to kind of cut through that sort of noise of the sort of election journalism machine with real questions. One thing I've really been focused on with younger journalists is they're coming into this information environment, where there's all kinds of disinformation, misinformation. Now, we have the prospect of deepfakes, like you can't... Voice, it's hard to tell: Is this actually someone's voice with AI? So there's all these dangers, and I think that younger journalists might be coming up in a world where some of this stuff is actually quite normal to them to really just get to some basic journalistic values, like: What is the truth? How do you get to it? How do you figure out what... Where's a document that sort of... What are the ways you can verify that something happened, discipline of verification? They may sound like nerdy things, but I think that younger journalists are actually quite excited to realize that there is a way through. And for me, to us to assert, like, yes, it's confusing, but ultimately we've got to figure out what's true.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, I have to say, I have to come up with something better than screaming at my television set as I watch the reporters who have so many resources at their disposal never leave the studio. It does seem, to me, one surefire way to know whether

something actually happened is to be present where it's happening. And that gets to your point about not just covering the horses, racing around the track, but actually looking at the people in the stands. Coming to you, Mary. I have to say, Mary Annaïse, your book, the children's book. That is not the focus of our conversation here today. The novel "Troubled Waters," I know, is the focus, but this book, "The World is Ours to Cherish," is really beautiful. And you made a very clear decision to emphasize the beauty that's still here, not just the horror that may be coming along or hitting some of us already now. And to lift up the beauty and the possibilities of this moment. And that, it seems to me, is your strategy for the next generation, but also an indication of your belief in the next generation. So could you share a little bit about that and about what you think is coming? The good, the bad, the ugly, the people?

MARY ANNAÏSE HEGLAR: I've got to say nothing has made me feel less optimistic about climate change and our ability to stop it, to mitigate it, to deal with it than the genocide in Gaza. Because if we cannot come together to say, "That is wrong and that should stop," then I have so, so little faith in our ability to stop ecocide. I do believe in the next generation, but I also believe in all generations. So part of what I was trying to do with both the novel and the children's book is to dispel this idea of like, "The generations are against one another, and climate change is the fault of the previous generation, and the next generation is going to fix it all, right?" I, very intentionally, wrote the book in such a way that children would be left with a sense of wonder about the world that we have because the world that we have today is very beautiful and the world that we're all mourning, these children have never known that world. And I also, very intentionally, when I have the call to action, as we might call it in a book, to say that they will change the world too, I wanted to make it very clear that they won't do it alone.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, it's beautiful, and I thank you for it. I want to thank you all for the work that you are doing, changemaking, and also I think cultivating love. I mean, as Che Guevara said, "a true revolutionary is motivated by great feelings of love. First, you have a love thing in order to save it." And I think all of your work is helping us have more love in our media. So thank you for joining us. And for those of you at home, thanks for checking out the program. We'll be back again next time with more "Laura Flanders and Friends." Till then, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us.

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