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5 Answers with Shazia Iftkhar, University of Michigan

By [Kirsten Ballard](#) September 20, 2017



Teaching journalism in 2017 presents a new stack of challenges: a 24/7 news cycle, ever-changing social media and now, Trump tweets. We caught up with Shazia Iftkhar, assistant professor at the University of Michigan Department of Communications, to talk about the new school year and teaching Trump in introductory journalism classes.

How do you plan to address the new political climate with your journalism students? President Trump frequently attacks the press—do you plan on adapting your lesson plan to tackle his tweets?

I incorporate current events frequently, as my teaching and research are focused on media, culture and society, including current events. As new events and political moments arise, we discuss them as examples and case studies for analysis.

One of the units I teach is about the press; we take a historical view to understand the institution of the press. When we talk about attacks on the press, I note that the duty of the press is to hold those in power accountable. Despite press failures at times, that is an important role of the press. So, my lesson plan handles the current moment as it does with any political moment — I don't necessarily need to change it, as it is designed to adapt. More generally, any class on media needs to be nimble.

What lesson do you want each student to take away from your class?

In addition to knowledge about media systems, I want them to learn a set of critical thinking and writing skills that they can use in any discipline and any field. Most importantly, I want my students to think for themselves, and to think well. I don't impose a point of view, but I do ask students to examine their assumptions, no matter where on the political spectrum they reside.

Since beginning your career in journalism and teaching, what are some of the largest changes and obstacles you've noted?

In journalism, we've seen the consequences of profit pressures and concentration, along with the challenge of monetizing new technologies. Of course, the technological changes are very rapid, and in the classroom, I have to stay on top of the new modes of expression and publication in journalism and the public sphere. Fortunately, my students are wonderful informants!

What is the most useful piece of advice you give to budding journalists?

I think the most important thing a journalist can do is to think and to question. Specific technology skills can be learned, and various forms of data can be gathered, but critical thinking transcends those, as does looking for a story in a new way — this goes back to critiquing assumptions and refusing to accept received wisdom. Journalists should always be asking how and why (in addition to the other Ws!) things are the way they are or some event or phenomenon is happening.

Where do you see the future of news media going in the next five years?

Broad question! The financial challenges continue, but we see new ventures appearing, and news isn't going away anytime soon — we need it more than ever. I think news media have to do good work, and also must build their voice and their audience carefully to carve out their niche.



Kirsten Ballard

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