Kevin Newman 0:00

To be a good journalist, you have to have your own code of ethics and you have to have your own code of behavior that ultimately you can live with if it doesn't get you the results that you need for your work.

Hannah Mercanti 0:10

Welcome to Dear Journalist. This is a show where we talk with longtime Canadian journalists about their careers. They'll share with us some of the lessons they've learned from their years in the field. I'm Hannah Mercanti.

Yezua Ho 0:23

I'm Yezua Ho,

Mark Henick 0:24

and I'm Mark Henick. In just a minute, you're gonna hear my conversation with former global news anchor and W5 host, Kevin Newman,

Yezua Ho 0:31

We want to get right to that. So make sure you stick around after because we're going to come back and chat about what we heard.

Hannah Mercanti 0:37

Here's Mark's interview with Kevin Newman on Dear Journalist.

Mark Henick 0:42

I'm here with Kevin Newman. Kevin is best known as the chief anchor and executive editor of Global National and as host and managing editor of CTV's W5 He's also the co-author of All Out, a memoir written with his son, Alex. And Kevin joins us today from I was gonna say Toronto, but it looks, yeah, like you're at the cottage, Kevin. Hi.

Kevin Newman 1:01

Hi, Mark. Yeah, this is where I happily get to spend most of my time in retirement now.

Mark Henick 1:06

Very nice, when you're not at the news desk anymore, you're in, you're, at your cottage. I want to jump right in here, because you've had such a remarkable career in journalism spanning decades. So, since this is a podcast that, you know, it's directed towards journalists at any stage in their career, but especially emerging, or aspiring journalists, what's a lesson that you've learned out in the field that's remained constant with you throughout all of those years in journalism?

Kevin Newman 1:33

Well, it was actually very, very early in my career I had, I had just been hired by Global News in Toronto, when it was just a local station. And I wasn't actually a reporter at the time, I was sort of a desk assistant, I was the one who got the coffee. I, you know, I was obviously ambitious, I wanted to be a reporter, but I wasn't yet a reporter. So, one of the hazing rituals of journalism, is that, at least at the time, was that when something awful happened, they'd send the most junior person in the newsroom out to try to, get a picture of the victim.

Remember, this is like way before any social media and way before there was a way to take a look at people's profiles. So the unenviable job was to knock on the door of a grieving person and say, "Could you please supply me a picture of the person you just lost?" The worst part of this business. So they sent me out, this person had lost their son in the flipping of the Ocean Ranger, which was an oil rig off of Canada's east coast, that flipped at one point, and everybody aboard practically was killed, including this man's son. So I sat there in the car, and I was with a cameraman, and I just said, "Fuck, I don't know how to do this." And he said, "Well, there's no good way." So I sat there, and I tried to get my guts up. And then someone from another news organization, it was the Toronto Star at the time, sort of pulled up beside me. He got out of the car. He goes racing up to the door, and I think, "Okay, well, maybe I'll learn about an approach from a pro." So I rolled down the window, and I listened. And the guy basically, the reporter basically said, "Hi, I'm with the Toronto Sun. I'm sorry for your loss. But at a time like this, you're required to provide us some pictures."

And the father was very upset. He slammed the door on the guy. So the guy walked away. And so I thought, "Okay, I still have to try because I got, this is my first break as a journalist, and if I haven't knocked on the door, what are my editors gonna say, so I walked up. I knocked on the door after about half an hour. And, and I just said, "I, I'd like to apologize for what just happened to you. You don't have to do anything for me. I just want to say how sorry I am that I lost- that you lost your son." And and that's all. And then I went back to my car, and I thought I'd failed. I thought that was, you know, I thought I'd never go anywhere in journalism, because I wasn't tough enough. Then a couple of minutes later, the father came out. And he gave me the picture of his son and he said, never forget: how you treat people matters. And I took that forever. Like, I went back, I got the picture.

I was okay with how I got the picture. But mostly I thought to myself, you know, it's not being an asshole... that works. It's not being the most aggressive or the most, you know, whatever, but it's doing what you have to do for your job, but doing it as humanely as possible. And I thought "Well, maybe, maybe I can be okay in this profession if if I continue to conduct myself that way," and, and I've tried to, I'm sure, there have been people harmed by some of the stories I've done not intentionally by me, but just because that's sometimes the way it goes when you're dealing with tragedy and, and accountability and stuff but you don't, you don't have to be a jerk, I think was my takeaway.

Mark Henick 5:05

Well, on that idea of, you know, people getting harmed even just in the, in the crossfire, do you think that journalists learn enough about the responsibility that they bear and doing their job that is not always just about getting the story? Is that, is that a takeaway that maybe you took from this experience or other stories you've worked on?

Kevin Newman 5:23

Yeah, I mean, here's the dirty little secret of journalism. I mean, I didn't go to journalism school. So, I didn't have the opportunity to explore a lot of these themes, if they occur in an academic environment. So I was, sort of learned on the job. And, and ultimately, it came down to how can I, how can I sleep at night, and there have been a couple of places where, because of my experience, I, I made people angry, and it was my fault. And I'll never forget it, I still don't forget, it still bothers me. And that's 40 years later.

So, in an active newsroom, there's almost no way to... Well, I mean, I guess after work, maybe, but there's not much professional development in newsrooms now. They're just too small. And, and, and there wasn't that either when they were bigger. So, you know, it comes down to to be a good journalist, you have to have your own code of ethics. And you have to have your own code of behavior that ultimately you can live with, if it doesn't get you the results that you need for your work.

But you do need to think about that, because you're creating a limited bond of trust with whoever you're reporting on. And trust is hard to earn and easy to lose. I like to think that, you know, my secret sauce was I wanted, I generally wanted people to trust me. And so I took it as a sort of a sacred obligation on my part, not to abuse that trust.

Mark Henick 6:48

Can you talk a little bit maybe about an experience that you've had, where that more patient approach really paid off? Whether it was cultivating a source or watching an evolving story? Where has your patience really paid off as a journalist? Well, it's

Kevin Newman 7:02

Well, it's always in investigative stuff, because, it's like, it's, it's the old cliche of unwrapping an onion. That you take one layer off, and the next layer is juicier. And then the next one is even juicier. And sometimes when those layers get stripped off, it's just a matter of time spent looking at it.

So, patience is hard to find in this climate, because, you know, newsroom resources are, in Canada, are at a critical stage. You know, I don't need to tell you that if you look at the staffing of the Montreal Gazette, it's five people. The National Newscast at CTV, where I most recently worked on weekends has two reporters, in the world, on weekends.

There isn't the capacity for for that kind of patience and long thought except in a few islands, like W5, Fifth Estate and some of what Global did with The New Reality. So, it's hard and and as a journalist, you have to, you have to occasionally be willing to fight for time.

Cultivating sources is a hobby project off the side, you you, again, are trying to build a trust relationship that can easily be broken, but hard to build. So, you have to be patient. And, you can push too hard and scare people away pretty damn fast.

Patience, in some places is baked into the process still, but in most places, is that thing off to the side that you have to cultivate for stories that you find exceptional. And maybe it's just one or two a year, break through and make news, but they are undoubtedly the most satisfying reporting you'll ever do.

Mark Henick 8:38

You know, with all of that experience that you've accumulated over the years, if you could distill it down into one piece of advice, well, you know the most important takeaway for aspiring journalists, particularly given today's media landscape? What would it be?

Kevin Newman 8:52

...Do I have to do one? Can I do two or three?

Mark Henick 8:56

Let's do three.

Kevin Newman 8:58

Here's the, here's the one. And then I'll do- Okay, so here's the one: learn how to be an entrepreneur. And by that I mean, take a business course. Figure out how to run your own freelance business. Learn how to pitch. All those things that entrepreneurs have to learn how to do, are skills that journalists need now. It's not enough to just, you know, show the- show the work, show the writing, show your on-air presentation. You know, if you started up a business off the side, that's to me a big, a big thumbs up because you need to have you need to have the drive, not just for story, but for entrepreneurship.

When I was going through journalism, you know, I fed my family, I bought a cottage, I could do things, but I think those kinds of jobs are disappearing quickly. And you have to be prepared to return journalism to little more of a trade as opposed to a profession. So that's my one.

The other second one is recognize your own empathy. Project, but protect your own heart because, you end up absorbing a lot of trauma. And I'm not talking about war in the Middle East or Ukraine, I'm just talking about sitting across from somebody who has lost a child or has been raped, or has had terrible crimes committed in their neighborhood, against friends or family. And so, in order to build that trust, you have to open up your heart. But then you have to also recognize, over time, that there's an accumulation of trauma that isn't yours, but you have adopted some of it.

Mark Henick 10:28

I think it's a good reminder, to be gentle with yourself on that front as well.

Kevin Newman 10:33

Yes. Yeah. Recognize it. I mean, only now, are news organizations beginning a conversation in Canada about this. And, it's not being organized by the newsroom. It's being organized by a few key reporters that are holding, you know, sessions and doing polling and just saying, like, you know, we got to, you got to take care of it yourself, pretty much still.

Mark Henick 10:51

Kevin, thank you for coming on and chatting with us about this today.

Kevin Newman 10:54

Yeah, no, always a pleasure.

Mark Henick 10:58

So you just heard my conversation with Kevin Newman; Hannah, Yezua, what did you take away from this?

Hannah Mercanti 11:04

Well, okay, the main thing I think I took away from it was the importance of having a personal code of ethics and journalism, I think a lot of the times we get caught up in following a set of rules that we think exists, but it's really important to be happy with the work you're doing.

Yezua Ho 11:20

So yeah, the first story was really good, because it reminded me of my first year in journalism, because one of my first reporting jobs was at TheGamer, which is a game- gaming news-oriented site. And what I basically did was take previously written articles, or just written articles, and then convert them into short, one minute to two minute videos. They would give me and like a bunch of other people a bunch of articles to choose from, and one of those articles had to do with Forza Horizon 5, which is a racing video game. And the main plot of that story was that a lot of trans players were referred to- by their dead name, because the game would greet you, but they would take the name from their Microsoft account. And most of the time, for most trans players, it was their dead name.

And something about it, I don't know, it was like, I was so nervous about doing a story like this, because this is my first time dealing with a story like that. And my coworkers were like, "Oh, don't worry, we'll lead you," like the editors and the writer of that article will be like, "we'll give you advice as to what to talk about, really, and make sure you're saying everything correctly,"

But still, I decided not to do it, I decided to do something else, because I was just so nervous that I would mess up and completely... ruin something, I guess is how you would put it. And looking back at it now and listening to Kevin's story about just remembering to be human and that you're not perfect, you're gonna make mistakes sometimes, as long as you know that and just try your best is probably all you need, especially in journalism. And, my biggest regret with the story was not the potential it had, and I just missed it. It was really just the reason why I didn't choose to run with that story, and how it was just this huge disservice to the people who wrote it, and who the article is for.

Mark Henick 12:57

I like this idea that he really pushes back on the idea of the "newsman," which is usually a white guy you know, behind the desk... But he really talks about and he says, "you don't have to be an asshole." Like it's not about going out there and doing the "Gotcha!" journalism. It's about being a good person. I really responded to that.

Hannah Mercanti 13:16

And I think people's, like you said, like the idea of a journalist is like this person trying to like, bang down your door and being really rude like that first journalist in Kevin's story, but that isn't how you get results. This is one of the most human-centric careers; we talk to people for a living so I think there's, there's value and treating people like people.

Yezua Ho 13:41

This has been Dear Journalist for the Review of Journalism. For more episodes, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. While you're there, check out Review-ED. It's a celebration of 40 years of the Review of Journalism, with conversations from feature writers and emerging journalists.

Hannah Mercanti 13:56

Make sure that you also pick up a copy of the 40th anniversary issue of the Review of Journalism, available on newsstands across Canada in April 2024. You can head to reviewofjournalism.ca to find out more. For extra online content, you can also connect with the review on X and Tiktok.

Until next time, I'm Hannah Mercanti.

Yezua Ho 14:16

I'm Yezua Ho,

Mark Henick 14:17

I'm Mark Henick. Many thanks to Kevin Newman for talking with me today. And thank you, dear journalist, for listening.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai