Ivor Shapiro 0:00

Look, here's what I think is important. The job doesn't get easy. The job stays difficult.

Christina Apa 0:14

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 Christina Apa,

Hannah Mercanti 0:24

I'm Hannah Mercanti.

Yezua Ho 0:25

And I'm Yezua Ho. For this episode, I talked to emeritus professor and former chair of the ethics advisory committee of the Canadian Association of Journalists, Ivor Shapiro.

Christina Apa 0:35

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

Hannah Mercanti 0:40

Here's Yezua's interview with Ivor Shapiro on Dear Journalist.

Yezua Ho 0:44

Very nice to be talking to you, Ivor. How are you feeling?

Ivor Shapiro 0:46

I'm feeling great. It's great to be back here in a radio suite where I haven't been for, for several years, it's lovely to meet you, Yezua.

Yezua Ho 0:55

As an emeritus professor, what's the one piece of advice you can give to any student journalist who is struggling to figure out what field to specialize in?

Ivor Shapiro 1:04

The one piece of advice would be not to take too seriously. The decision you make about specialization because chances are, by the time you graduate, by the time you've been working in the field for enough time to kind of know who you are and what you actually want to do with your journalism or with your life. Things will have changed so rapidly on the ground that specializations have themselves changed. I'm not suggesting that specializations will go away. They may. But but the kinds of things that seem very important, this year will probably be less important three years from now,

Yezua Ho 1:48

what are the constant and essential qualities or aspects you must have when you're working in the field of journalism, then? Well,

Ivor Shapiro 1:56

it seems to me that the definitive thing, there are many, many things that that are required by any profession, okay. But it's helpful to sort out which of those things are pragmatic skills that you must have, in order to do the work such as you know, right now, clearly, you are demonstrating Yazoo or some command of audio and an audio recording and, and audio editing, right, that's a useful skill, indeed, probably will go on being a useful skill. But it's not the fundamental skill of being journalism, as important as it may be. Right. So what is fundamental? Well, a good place to start is what is definitive about journalism? What actually separates it from other professions or occupations in the world. And, you know, my research over the years has led me to the conclusion that the number of things that are truly definitive in journalism is quite small. And the most obvious of all these small things, sorry, the most obvious of the small number of definitive things, is an absolute commitment to finding and speaking truth, facts. And that has become a very controversial, a surprisingly, perhaps controversial statement to make in our day. But I still believe that if you're going to be calling yourself a journalist, you have to show that your prime value is, is a commitment to finding out what's factual. And, and, and conveying that in the realm of current events.

Yezua Ho 3:44

What, at the start of your career, is that the one thing you wish you learned at the start of your career, or is there another lesson?

Ivor Shapiro 3:49

No, I think that the the factual reporting of events of current interest current public interest is so it was so obvious at the time that that I don't think there was there was any questioning of it, the question of it has come come much, much, much later in time. What is the one thing that I wish I had learned at the beginning of my career? You know, to be honest, I don't know. I don't know what the answer is. I think there have been recent questions and mistakes I've made in my career, that that I wish I'd reflected harder on at the time. And that's rather different from at the beginning of a career.

Yezua Ho 4:41

Could you go into detail but one of those mistakes and how much? I mean, what you learn from that mistake?

Ivor Shapiro 4:49

Sure. Well, to come to mind, so I'll just give you the headlines on both. And if you want me to expand I'll, I'll, I'll do so with pleasure. Alright. The one and the one is something I've written about I wrote about about 15 years ago. And it was the telling of a lie in a in a travel article, where I was persuaded by an editor, a respected, reputable editor, that the lie was so minor and was something of purely narrative intent made no difference to the actual substance of the article. And after all, it was a travel story and travel stories had, I was told their own logic, their own sort of room for ethical, messing around I was, as I would say, right now, the point is, I never realized how much I would regret having written something that was published, there wasn't true, it didn't matter that was minor, it was a minor minor thing didn't matter. I wish I had just simply said, You know what, sorry, I don't do that. As a journalist. I don't think journalists do that, even if you're telling me they sometimes do. The other one is much, much more recent, as recent as. So we're talking now at the very end of October. At the beginning of this month, there was of course, the, the the, the opening up of a new round of, of hostilities, violence in, in Israel Palestine. And I wrote a column about that, that I made a mistake. And it wasn't a factual error, but it was a mistake of language. And I've only just learned just in the last couple of days, that the the, the whole point that I was trying to get to in that article, was misunderstood by people, I was some a few people that I really respect and, and I am, you know, kind of mortified to find out that, you know, at my advanced age, and with my experience as a writer, it was possible for me to forget something pretty basic about language and communication,

Yezua Ho 7:20

considering there's so many responsibilities and duties journalists have to fulfill in terms of ethical reporting, and also truthful reporting. How can they remember that even if they make a mistake, it is it isn't going to be the end of the world?

Ivor Shapiro 7:35

Look, here's what I think is important. The job doesn't get easy. The job stays difficult. So, you know, let me tell you a little bit more about this thing recently, because because it has humbled me, at the age of, dare I say 70, after a Korea full of writing with care ran to realize that I could be dramatically misunderstood. So I wrote a piece that was printed, that the sorry, that was published on a digital website, and was republished in newspapers and other digital websites around the world. And my purpose in writing this piece was to explain why I still believe it is useful for journalists to prefer a neutral language unloaded language when reporting about things that people have deep and very divided and polarized feelings about in this case, there's been a lot of criticism of the word terrorist when used in bime. media such as you know, CBC, BBC, The Globe and Mail bah, bah, bah, blah, blah, blah. A lot of main media. And pro Israel advocates have said no, you know, called terrorism terrorism, what was what what could this event have been that sparked the current round of hostilities, on October 7? What could it have been other than an act of terrorism isn't a definitively terrorist? And there is some logic to that position. I started with that position in my article, thinking, Okay, let's start with the question and then work one's way from the logic behind the question through to the logic of journalism, and come to my conclusion, which was, in fact that journalists, neutral news organization should avoid loaded words wherever possible words like terrorist, for example, with respect to attacks of this kind, whatever the journalist himself individually might think. So you know, if you want to, if people want to find out more than my argument, they can read that. My point being that it was a mistake, was a really quite serious mistake. To begin with that Beginning because there were people who read that beginning and felt that that was my premise. And that colored their perception of everything that followed. And they felt that I was basically basically making an argument for the very opposite of what I was arguing for. Which is very sobering to me to realize that I had made some pretty basic rhetorical error. That, that if I just thought about it, from various points of view, I think I could have avoided that so easily. So my point is, it doesn't get easier. It keeps on being hard because the discipline is hard. And why is that encouraging? I think it's encouraging. Because that perspective, that lens of this is hard to do. It isn't easy, it isn't easy, regardless of how much experience one has, it is something to be careful about. And that I will make mistakes in that perspective can ease that kind of impostor syndrome, or I'm so young, how can I possibly be expected to do this? And, you know, I, you know, I, it's just too hard for me because I, I because of who I am, or what or what I bring or whatever, don't bring, check. The truth is, it's hard, just because it's hard, not because of who you are, or you who you want. It's hard, because it's hard to get the help you need, as much as possible. Allow yourself to make mistakes, because it's hard.

Yezua Ho 11:35

Can you provide some guidance as to how journalists can get help regarding these ethical challenges?

Ivor Shapiro 11:41

Well, I think there's, there's this friends. And the wonderful thing about journalism school is making friends who are in more or less the same, if not the same business, then at least come with more or less similar ideals, to the work that you do. And those friends, and you should talk about your work, because no one else can possibly help you brainstorm it as effectively as your friends can. But then in the workplace, there will also be people And and frankly, what I'm about to say applies to any kind of work anywhere to find mentors, people who exhibit some kind of appreciation for you as a person, what you bring, and who are well. decent human beings who are kind, and who you think might be willing to spend your time from time to time to give you advice. You don't they might not be right. But thinking about things can be helpful. The job involves quick, quick, quick decision making at times not all times. But sometimes the example I gave you didn't require quick decision making, I could have easily spent another hour on the piece just devoted to thinking it through again, from variety of perspectives of readers, right. But sometimes, yep, there are quick decisions that need to be made. Well, quick decisions are made quickly. And forgive yourself. If you make one that's not so good. And see if you can remedy it in follow up.

Yezua Ho 13:17

That was my conversation with Ivor. Hannah. Christina, what did you both take away from it?

Christina Apa 13:21

Yeah, I thought it was a really great conversation. He said so many amazing things. But one thing that really stuck out to me is that what he talked about making friends and having friends in the journalism program will really help you. Not only in your career, but also with your experience with it overall, like let's say you make a mistake, you can go to a friend and be like, Oh, I made this mistake. Can you give me some advice? I think for me, there's no way that I would be able to be in the program if I didn't make friends because I think having that support with people who know exactly what you're going through, because they're also a student is really helpful. And just someone to lean on whenever you need them.

Hannah Mercanti 13:55

He said like, it's hard, because it's hard. It doesn't get easier. There was like, half a pit in my stomach. And half. I was like, that's kind of nice. Because like, Yeah, you don't want to, I mean, I don't know, I can't speak for everyone. But personally, I don't want a job that gets kind of boring right after I figure it out. You know, like, it's good to know that. It's not that it's good to know, it's never gonna get easier. But it's like, good to know that it's always gonna be challenging because it's a challenging field, and you just need to work hard. Like it's not because of you. It's not like, because we suck because we're students and we're young. And we don't have the experience. Like it's just because it's a hard profession. It's good to have people that understand what you're going through. And like he said, kind of aligned with your own belief systems. Like I'm a freak about truth and about research. Like I'm the head of research. So when he was like, truth is one of the most important things like, yeah, that has to be an important value to a journalist. I was like, Yeah, it's nice to know that like your friends would be on the same level with you and stuff like that. Right? And

Yezua Ho 14:56

it doesn't have to be like you have to just you have to make a friends as long as you Find someone to have a camaraderie and solidarity with just understand like, oh, man, this sucks. And someone was like, Oh, I think it sucks too. It's so nice and relieving to know like, okay, it's not just to me. And that's another bring. That's another good point you brought up it never gets easier. And like you said like, like, if I was in first year if I heard that, oh my god, where's the careers career? Yeah, I want to choose my major to like psychology or something like that because

Hannah Mercanti 15:23

that's gonna get

Yezua Ho 15:27

ya but like, it's, it's still relieving now that you think about it because that means mistakes are bound to happen. And we're always going to be learning and I kind of harkens back to what Kevin, which Kevin was, uh, Kevin O'Keefe said in the last episode about that, like when he was talking to you, I forgot who it was he did like a really good impersonation of her. It was near the end, he was I don't know, he was talking to someone. It was like one of his close colleagues. And he told her, I didn't make as many mistakes this year. And she said you shouldn't say that. And it was and the reason why you shouldn't say that is because you're never going to learn if you don't make a lot of mistakes,

Christina Apa 16:03

your first interview with a source, how did that go? I remember mine wasn't. I mean, because our first year was everything was online. So it was crazy. And it was with somebody from this company. And it was a phone interview. And I was like sweating before I had to do my god, like sweating. And then I didn't it was fine. But I think if I could if I would never listen to it, but if I were to listen to it, I think a lot of what I was doing was just reading the questions like one after the other and not like actually engaging in any kind of conversation like I do now when I do interviews. So I think that's kind of what I've learned is to just be more comfortable with the person you're talking to.

Hannah Mercanti 16:37

Yeah, I Oh, my God, my first interview, I didn't record it. I forgot to record it. I guess I just didn't know how zoom worked. And I wasn't I didn't have experience. And until I'd be like, oh, you should always have a backup recording. So I didn't record it. And I hated Magnus. It was not published anywhere. And I don't do this anymore. But I did just kind of use it from memory. I was like I I remember. Yeah, I was there. Like I just kind of quick wrote down everything. Yeah. I would never do that. Now. reading that story would be like actual torture, I think. But you know, it's something I'll never do. Again. I'll always I always have backup recordings now. Like, you will not catch me without at least two recordings of every interview. I do. Because that was traumatizing.

Yezua Ho 17:24

That's funny because I when I did one of my first interviews, I chose not to record it like oh, I can write it. I had good handwriting in high school. But that was months after like the pandemic started. And we I've been doing nothing but typing. So I was like, Oh, that was a good interview. Let me look at my notes. And look at it. It looks like chicken scratch and look at my around my room because I thought someone came in and wrote it for me. It was that bad. Then my first interview was with Fiverr actually, and he was super nice about you could tell how nervous I was because I was very stilted. And I did the exact same thing where it's just telling the questions and not really trying to I tried my best to like link one to the other or try to be how do you say it? Like engaging, engaging and making sure conversation right and make it flow? Well, that's the key word here. Yeah, flow. And afterwards, he was like you did a great job. Here's some good points. And I was like, Oh my God, thank you so much. So it was about I think the story was about the Rubik's event that happened. This was like one of my favorite stories for story they.

Hannah Mercanti 18:17

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 reviewed. It's a celebration of 40 years the review of journalism with conversations from feature writers and emerging journalists.

Christina Apa 18:31

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 review of journalism.ca To find out more. For extra online content. You can also connect with the review on x and Tik Tok. Until next time, I'm Christina Apa.

Yezua Ho 18:50

I'm Yezua Ho.

Hannah Mercanti 18:51

And I'm Hannah Mercenti. Thank you again to Ivor Shapiro for talking with us. And thank you, dear journalist for listening

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