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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2360 words.

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On being a journalist in 2018

Editor and writer Chris Lehmann discusses his ever-shifting role at *The Baffler*, the complicated job of covering politics in the current media landscape, and why we need good journalism now more than ever.

A lot of people, particularly young journalism students, have a weird idea of what they imagine editors do all day. How do you break down what your job entails?

It's kind of a moving target. We operate both the print publication—now every other month—and daily online publication. We're kind of between web editors right now, so everyone on the print side is pitching in to keep the web tight while we are putting the print issue to bed. So, right now it feels like I am doing everything all at once.

We are a small-staff nonprofit and it's a very collaborative enterprise. So you're not simply a web editor or whatever your defined role may be. In my case, I write a column for the website, I edit a number of regular columnists, and when there's breaking political news—which sadly there often is these days—I often end up being the editor assigning whatever that piece will be.

So the day-to-day stuff is a bit of a weird split-screen experience. At the same time that I'm doing all of that stuff, I'm also trying to plan ahead for the next issues of the magazine, and assign things for that. Thankfully I love my work, otherwise I think I'd be going totally crazy. It's about functioning at different metabolisms all at once—you're trying to get a thousand words about, say, the Michigan governor race up on the web, and at the same time you are editing a whole issue of print material devoted to a big theme. For example, the theme of our pending issue is "Therapy," so there are all these very strong essays on that topic, but they exist in a very different kind of mental space than the quick-reaction stuff that we tend to have on the web.

For the print publication I want cold takes. I don't want anything that is not thoughtful and well-considered. The mission of the magazine is right there in the title. We want people to stop and consider the way that the world is presented to them. I think that is one respect in which my job is different from that of most editors and journalists: I'm not trying to present a consensus view of anything. I feel if I do that, I have failed.

I want people to encounter ideas and opinions and reported material that is outside of what's still considered the standard comfort zone for news consumers. It's not only my mission to keep the reader off balance—I also want to be surprised myself. I want to be editing something that allows me to experience a new mental construct. The worst curse of any job, whether you're editing a magazine or assembling carburetor parts or whatever, is boredom and knowing exactly what is going to happen through the course of your work day and feeling like you're living in a Samuel Beckett play.

I feel enormously fortunate to be doing the work I'm doing in today's media environment, because I'm not reproducing hot topics and I'm not required to be part of the mainstream D.C. political establishment. I get to run what I regard as the best magazine in the country and one of the best websites. That keeps me intellectually engaged and excited by the work I'm doing, even as the news gets cosmically depressing. Even though the world is going to hell, that also means there are so many reasons to try to get analytically on top of things and find solutions that actually will make things less hellish.

It's interesting that you get to balance the demands of a daily website with the demands of a print magazine. The frustration with magazines—especially if you're writing about politics—is that magazines have a long lead time. By the time the issue comes out, the content can already feel stale.

It's true. We call ourselves a quarterly, but we've actually doubled our printing now, so we're doing more issues every year. On the outside it obviously seems like we're at a very leisurely pace, but on the inside it doesn't feel that way. We are always thinking into the future, trying to assign pieces that will make sense months from now.

The next issue will be out right before the 2018 midterm elections, so we have to organize that around more intellectual, political themes obviously not knowing what's going to happen. That is always a weird cognitive balancing act: working far ahead into the future and acting as though you are right on top of the news. Fortunately, again, *The Baffler* specializes in longer essays that are historically informed, so we don't necessarily face the same kinds of pressures that a lot of other publications do.

Knowing how difficult it is for a lot of print publications to continue to exist, why do you think it's important that the print version of *The Baffler* continue? Or print publications in general?

Part of the reason our print version continues to exist is, by doing so, we are firmly standing up for all our friends in journalism. Look at the conditions of political collapse that we are now living through. We have a news environment dominated either by unscrupulous propaganda like Fox News, or just aggravators of sketchy, false, and controversial content like Facebook. That is how most people are now entering the news environment and those are, frankly, toxic forces of disinformation.

I think it's more important than ever to have stuff that is considered, heavily researched, and that is driven by strong arguments. The goal is to approach the task of journalism not so much as we are going to pounce on whatever the latest story on the wire is, but were going to help you, the reader, to understand how the world became what it is today.

And that is a very different mission than what most magazines and websites currently pursue. I think so much of what allows something like Fox News to thrive in this environment is people's attention spans are so fragmented. They are constantly glued to a screen and will click on something that looks like news and it turns out to be Alex Jones—who, thankfully, I don't think you can find on Facebook anymore. Perhaps it doesn't matter what form your work takes—whether it's online or in printed form—but print demands a certain kind of attention, connotes a certain kind of permanence or authority. It doesn't feel as ephemeral somehow.

I think about A.J. Liebling, the great writer at *the New Yorker*, who said that "the press is the loose slat under the bed of democracy." He was writing in the fifties, which almost seems like a golden age compared to now, but even then there were all of these unscrupulous press lords and media moguls who were making the Joe McCarthy thing happen. Over time, you realize that the media environment is not always advancing the cause of simply making and sustaining an informed citizenry, which is what I think a publication like *The Baffler* is doing. Obviously I say that because I love the magazine and it's my work in life, but it's often true that without this kind of voice—the kind that gives the reader a way of understanding world that we live in—everyone is just prey for the kind of race-to-the-bottom mentality of most news coverage.

The task of journalism is to promote thinking. It is not to provide a continuous Pavlovian response of, "Oh this looks like news and I feel warm inside for having consumed it." No. For us it's important not only that we are a print publication, but that we're a nonprofit publication. The fact of the matter is, you are not going to get critical, unbiased information from certain media, like Fox News, which involves an explicit business model authenticated by propaganda.

I think you always have this fictional idea of the impartial American citizen who is seeking out places where you can find trustworthy information and political arguments. *The Baffler* obviously wears its political worldview on its sleeve, but we also operate under the idea that our readers are thinking, informed adults. We trust that. We are saying, "This is how American politics look if you don't think capitalism is the way to organize society." And we are going to give it to you unvarnished. A print publication allows us to do that.

Making a magazine—even under the best circumstances—is hard work, but I think it should be reassuring to aspiring journalists and editors that something like *The Baffler* continues to exist. It reminds me that there are also other people out there who want this.

There are always going to be stories that need to be told, and facts that need to be reported and understood. One of the few things that makes me feel hopeful right now is that even before we started publishing more issues, which is something that happened in the wake of the election, our subscriptions had basically doubled. While the realities of our current political moment don't make me happy, it does seem to be a moment where people clearly feel the need for a voice like ours.

This is a time when the conventional narratives around how politics work—as a civil exchange of power between two major parties—is breaking down. You can't look at the political moment we're in now and just assume that we need to carry on in the status-quo mode, and that eventually things will right themselves without us having to rethink anything. I think the opposite is true: we need to rethink *everything* at this moment.

There is a real crisis in this country, and it's about more than Donald Trump. It's about feeling like people have lost control of their economic lives while journalistic institutions and political institutions are being run as shake-down operations and monopolies. I'm sorry, but I don't think Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi have a model for addressing that. So you have to look elsewhere. And we're trying—we're a scrappy nonprofit and very short-staffed but we are committed to trying to do this. Again, this is my long-winded way of trying to explain why journalism—not to mention deep, thoughtful, creative ways of thinking—is so important right now.

Trying to explain to students and aspiring journalists how to write, how to be a successful journalist, is tricky. You can have the sharpest mind in the world and have the tightest grasp of facts, but if you are not also an interesting, lively writer with good people skills, then it sort of doesn't matter.

Yes. Absolutely. And that is one of those things that is hard to teach or explain. We are often conveying political information, yes, but we also want the reading experience to be pleasurable. We want to use humor. We want people to feel like we are addressing them as adults. We have this rare gift and

opportunity of someone's time and attention, and we don't want to waste it. We don't want to swamp them with disorganized, programmatic ideas about the world. We want them to feel like, "Okay, I have a stake in all these things they are talking about, and they are addressing me as such."

What drives me crazy about Washington journalism is the self-seriousness of pundits who think of themselves as junior legislators who are talking down to the public and always positioning themselves as insiders in how the world *really* works, all while parceling out their ideas in sort of baby food spoonfuls. We are saying no, that's obviously bullshit, and it's the toxic kind of bullshit that is destroying our world and we need to think about things in a fundamentally different way.

Also, if I were talking to students, I would say that I'm the last person who is fundamentally and intellectually inclined to say "follow your bliss"... but that is kind of what you need to do. I've had many, many crappy jobs I did not believe in and I always kept doing *The Baffler* on the side. It's not a guarantee by any means, but things eventually shook out in such a way that my passion project, *The Baffler*—which I originally started working on basically for free—has now become my livelihood. It *can* happen.

Part of it is just trusting the inner voice that tells you when you are pandering. Honor that voice. I think where I have gone most astray in my life—whether it be for financial reasons or pressure in my personal relationships—was when I took on work that I knew was not making the world smarter. When I feel best about journalism, particularly the journalism I do, is when I feel like we are not making the world dumber. That is a chaotic task in our current environment, but it's very, very worth it.

Genuinely following your interests sounds like such a common sense thing, but for kids in school or just entering the workforce as young writers, that can feel hard. They often want to know how the path to a career lies, as if it's an A to B to C to D sort of thing.

Oh, my! A conventional career path? There's no such thing, at least not anymore. You have to go where life takes you. I find that experience to be true all the time with people contributing to *The Baffler*. Our contributors come from all walks of life—some are immigration attorneys, some are musicians, and some have no formal background in journalism. What they do have are ideas, and they're able to communicate them interestingly and passionately and my job is to bring that process to a published conclusion. It's a job I feel very lucky to be able to do.

Chris Lehmann recommends:

Amber A'Lee Frost

Sarah Smarsh

Thomas Frank, founder of *The Baffler*

Anthony Trollope

Edmund Wilson

Name

Chris Lehmann

Vocation


Writer, Editor


Fact




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