

## 'Journalism in a Fragmented World'

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Thank you for the great honor of opening this important Journalism Fellowship Program and for the opportunity to participate with you. Even with the time shift – it is 5 am here in Austin, Texas! – I am hoping I can keep pace with you over the next few weeks.

The topic, “Journalism in a Fragmented World,” is important not only for freedom of the press, for democracy, but also for freedom of religion.

I have worked in Catholic media and for Catholic organizations most of my adult life; and I received my education in secular institutions. Even as a student, I found the standards and ethics of journalism that I was being taught to be very much in alignment with my own beliefs and values.

Over the years, however, I struggled with how some media outlets and journalists represented the value of objectivity in reporting. I believe journalists must recognize it is impossible to be an agnostic channel for the news. We must abide by the standards and ethics of journalism, but we must also realize that we consider those standards and ethics through the framework of our own values and belief perspectives. Does that make us biased? Or honest in our supposed objectivity? I believe it makes us more self-aware and better journalists. Allow me to offer some further reflection on this idea.

Oscar Romero<sup>2</sup> is the patron saint of SIGNIS. He was assassinated while he was celebrating Mass in 1980, martyred because of his work to speak truth to power, to be a voice for the voiceless. He challenged others to join him in being a “microphone of God,” and he used modern media to amplify his voice. His Sunday sermons were broadcast live, from the altar, on radio stations throughout El Salvador, and he spoke strongly against those who were abusing their political and economic power.

Oscar Romero’s witness is a powerful one for journalists. How do you and I choose to be a “microphone of God,” a “voice for the voiceless?” For me, as a Catholic, it is an important question for those of us who embrace the vocation of communication, whether as a journalist, a public relation specialist, a producer or other communication professions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/archbishop-oscar-romero-becomes-a-saint-but-his-death-still-haunts-el-salvador>

The obvious answer is that as journalists we strive to tell the Truth. Sometimes the truth is not so obvious, however. Today, when propaganda (i.e., “fake news”) is so prevalent and rancorous, truth often gets trumped by lies and misinformation.

Professional journalists hold up impartiality as a standard. But exactly what does it mean to be impartial? The dictionary defines it as “not being biased or prejudiced. Detachment. Disinterest. Fair-mindedness.”

Sometimes that appears to be translated as offering the two opposing sides equal time, as in a debate. But is that really impartiality?

Sometimes it seems – and there appears to be evidence to support this theory – that some media outlets create division and foment controversy by providing only two, diametrically opposite, points of view. Readers/viewers feel as if they must take sides: I’m either for or against. I’m with you, or I’m against you.

Last week, The Reuters Institute published their 2021 Digital News Report<sup>3</sup>. According to their research, “most people agree that news organizations and journalists should reflect all sides of an issue and not push a particular agenda.”

Yet, they note that committed partisans believe traditional media coverage is not impartial. This is obvious in countries where polarization has accelerated, such as here in the United States. This belief is being reinforced by the spread of partisan sources, whether that is someone with a website, a YouTube channel, a Twitter account or other digital platform.

Journalists in traditional, or legacy, media find it increasingly difficult to counter propaganda from highly partisan sources with what has traditionally been called “balanced reporting.”

For legacy media, at least in the United States, this has contributed to a decline in readership and viewership. Without a strong tradition of public media, this decline is striking at these media’s lifeblood, advertising revenue.

A conversation is beginning – a conversation to which I believe this seminar will contribute – on the question: In a fragmented world, how relevant is impartial and objective journalism to audiences today? As I reflect on this question, I would like to offer some highlights from the Reuters study, but also leave you with my thoughts on how I see this as a challenge specific to journalists who work in both Catholic and secular media.

For the report<sup>4</sup> they published last week, The Reuters Institute conducted qualitative research in four countries: Brazil, Germany, the UK and the US. I wish they had been a little more global, but we’ll start with this. (You can find the full report [here](#) ).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/how-to-rethink-impartiality-digital-age>

These are four key findings of the report, and I am quoting directly from the executive summary:

1. People really do value what impartiality stands for, despite the complexity of the concept. Most people want to be exposed to a range of views, especially around politics and other serious and important topics. They recognize the risk of giving exposure to extreme views or one side in the name of balance. However, evidence from this group of engaged users is that they are even more concerned about the suppression and silencing of viewpoints.
2. There are some differences across countries, especially in expectations of traditional sources between countries like the US on the one hand and the UK and Germany on the other. And younger people, who have grown up using more informal and digital sources, also tend to have different expectations, although their underlying attitudes and desires are remarkably similar to older people's.
3. News – where balance and fairness within a story is particularly important – and analysis – which people also value but recognize carries greater risk – is distinguished from opinion, which people also want as part of the mix but which is partial by definition. Audiences have very different expectations of these layers of news.
4. In the analog world, differences between news, analysis and opinion were much clearer, with special labelling and clear sections, but in digital the divisions have blurred. For journalists, dilemmas around impartiality have also been tested by more informal formats such as social media, especially where news has become more emotive or controversial. Many fear that opinion and advocacy have become increasingly entwined with the news itself in a way that is often not transparent.

As I read the report, I see parallels between media organizations and other organizations which attempt to speak truth to power. This would be not only the Catholic Church, but other religious organizations, advocacy groups, NGOs, etc. An organization can only serve society well if people trust them. As an institution, the Catholic Church has done terrible harm to our ability to be positive contributors to society by our lack of transparency. How we navigate today's divisiveness and fragmentation will determine our effectiveness and impact, as journalists and as citizens.

The Reuters report also notes there are expectations that journalists will show greater empathy and connection in their reporting than perhaps traditional interpretations of impartiality have allowed in the past. Is there a possible opening here for those who wish to offer a new perspective on Truth? Who defines impartiality and objective Truth? And who explains that to others?

This reminds me of how another Catholic priest, Junipero Serra, is making headlines here in the US. Serra was a Franciscan who was revered even in the public schools as a founding father of

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<sup>4</sup> [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Vir the relevance of impartial news in a polarised world FINAL 0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Vir%20the%20relevance%20of%20impartial%20news%20in%20a%20polarised%20world%20FINAL%200.pdf)

the US state of California. Now, his role in the genocide of indigenous people at the hands of Spanish colonizers has resulted in the removal of his statue from government buildings and his name struck from schoolbooks. However, his legacy is more complicated than being either a holy missionary or an unholy conqueror.<sup>5</sup>

Pope Francis has recognized several times the Church's complicity with "many grave sins committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God." Yet he also canonized St. Junipero, the first Hispanic pope for the Catholic Church to canonize the first Hispanic saint for the US.

Juniper Serra is both/and, not either/or. Like most of us, he is both a saint and a sinner. Perhaps his story – and how journalists report that story – offers a case study as you consider the role of journalism in a fragmented world.

Let me conclude with a challenge to each of us. I would like to suggest that, as journalists, we hold two truths in balance.

One truth is that each of us is a unique person. From my perspective, as a Catholic, I explain that as saying each of us is a reflection of God's grace and love that is not duplicated anywhere. Each of us has an innate dignity as a human being, to be respected and honored, to have a voice.

A second truth is that no person is complete unto himself or herself. We are only able to build a more just society, where each person's humanity is respected, by working together. Progress and the well-being of individuals only happens when a group of people become a community, people working for the common good in a united effort.

Today, these two truths are often twisted and presented as being in destructive tension. Individual rights vs. the common good: which is more important?

This destructive twisting of these truths harms our own dignity and the dignity of others. It happens most often when we think that our understanding of the truth is what others must accept as truth, and we refuse to consider others might also have the truth, from a different perspective.

In this destructive approach, communion means uniformity, not real unity. My dignity as a human person is less than or greater than that of others. It's a "zero sum" game: if you get more of something, that must mean I get less.

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[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/10/19/california\\_and\\_the\\_erasure\\_of\\_junipero\\_serras\\_legacy\\_146582.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/10/19/california_and_the_erasure_of_junipero_serras_legacy_146582.html)

Polarization and fragmentation happen because we harden ourselves into self-focused individuals, intent upon protecting our own. We create a fragmented world, where there are a few “winners” and everyone else loses out.

But we know there is another way to encounter others: by recognizing that our very uniqueness is what creates a community with the common good as its core value.

We don’t abandon our true identities to become a member of a community. Instead, our perspective enriches and builds up the common good. My individuality is not a stumbling block, or in opposition to, but absolutely necessary for communion to happen.

In this way, we become those microphones of God, voices for the voiceless and truth-tellers to a world desperately needing to heal and come together.

On our computers, there is a function that is called “defragmenting.” If your computer is running slow, or causing errors and shutting down unexpectedly, sometimes you are told to “defragment” your files. The process reorganizes the ones and zeros in the bowels of the computer so that all the pieces of files are put back together and organized in a manner that speeds up your computer and stops the crashes. Every byte is required to realign so that the whole can be optimized.

If we live in a fragmented world, how can we, as Catholic and like-minded journalists, realign these truths – the dignity of each person and the common good – in our reporting and storytelling so that we are made whole again? Can we be the defragmenting function for our world?

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