



**Interview with  
Ariana Tobin, ProPublica**

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**KENNEALLY:** What if one day the news just stopped? If all the reports of horror and disasters and political and business corruption streaming endlessly from Washington and London and Hollywood and Moscow and Damascus somehow became trapped and were no longer to reach any of us, would you be relieved?

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for *Beyond the Book*.

In the human body, fatigue can lead to physical weaknesses as well as to mental decline. Fatigue makes us angry and fickle, it lowers our capacity for good judgment, and it can leave us vulnerable to making poor or improper decisions. News fatigue may be having similar effects on the body politic, argues Ariana Tobin, an engagement reporter at *Pro Publica*, an independent, non-profit newsroom that produce investigative journalism on a range of topics including government and politics, business and the environment. In a recent post, Tobin boldly predicted that 2018 could see the news audience choose to turn away from the firehose of news pouring out at them. The impact that would have on news organizations would be profound.

Ariana Tobin joins me now. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, Ariana.

**TOBIN:** Hi, Chris, thanks for having me.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, we're really looking forward to chatting with you because this post caught my eye and made me stop and think maybe I'm not the only one who feels tired out by everything that's happened in the last year or so. Let me ask you first of all, is that a sentiment shared around the *Pro Publica* news room?

**TOBIN:** Yeah, you called this a bold prediction, but honestly, as I was writing it, I really just feel it was a statement of fact. It's such an obvious sense of fatigue and exhaustion from, I feel, everyone around me, whether or not they're a journalist, that not putting words to it would almost be like ignoring an elephant in the room, rather than saying something that nobody knows.

**KENNEALLY:** What's interesting about it, though, is that the news audience could really choose to turn away from the news, you'd be losing an audience. What would be the result from the perspective of the newsroom?



TOBIN: Yeah, I think if we believe that an informed public is valuable, and that the way to inform the public is to have a strong, independent news media, then part of the equation there has to be that people are going to pay attention to what that strong independent news media is saying. For those of us who work in the business, that means that needs to be how we think about our larger publishing structure. So we need to be able to say, I think that exact question you just asked, of what's the result of someone not reading the story, what happens if this story gets lost in the mess, what happens if people ignore this particular headline, and really actually force ourselves to answer that question every time. Because if they start ignoring the really important news of the day, that's going to shape how someone votes, or that's going to change the way that an HR department fields harassment complaints at an office, that has a huge effect. If they start to ignore the 12<sup>th</sup> listicle that we make on the same type of post about some bizarre holiday trend in one part of town that isn't necessarily going to be relevant for anyone, but might surface on your Facebook feed, maybe there is no consequence. I think that's really what's at the heart of having this whole conversation.

KENNEALLY: Right. But as far as you see it, Ariana, this isn't a question of if the audience will turn away, it's really a matter of when. You're expecting this to happen, and probably happen sooner than some people think.

TOBIN: I think it may have already started happening, honestly. I used to work in audience analytics. I had a job where every day my responsibility was to take a look at what was happening on terms of page views, where audiences were coming from, what they were clicking on, what topics they gravitated toward. Honestly, sometimes things surprise you, but really if you take any look at the numbers, you can already see it happening. We know that people are getting tired. We know certain stories surface. We know that last January certain stories were gaining more traction than they were in August. I would be very, very, very curious to see analytics across newsrooms from *The New York Times* to *The Washington Post* to Breitbart, about all the coverage of the tax bill and how that perhaps compared to all of the conversations about the healthcare bill. I think that as journalists, that's part of our responsibility to our audiences, to figure out how the news is resonating, whether what we are producing is actually making it into the hands of the people who could use it.

KENNEALLY: Right. And your concern is about informing your readers, your audience, but if they do turn away, this has an impact on the business in the newsroom, as well.

TOBIN: Absolutely. Absolutely because theoretically our business is supposed to be about our readers. The business models – this is a really hard question, too – but our business models are all about if it's a subscription, then it's getting someone to pay for the journalism that we're producing for them over and over and over again. If you're a nonprofit like we are at *Pro Publica*, it's about donating to support the causes, about being



able to make the case to the larger foundations and organizations that are supporting our work that our work is really impactful and working for a larger audience. I think it's in having some of these difficult conversations that our industry has been forced to have for years now about where the money's going to come from, what you're funding, what you're supporting, about being able to make that case using actual data and analytics that are also rooted in strong editorial judgment and sense.

KENNEALLY: Right, it's that last part that I think you're really arguing for to have prominence within this discussion because it's difficult to resist the temptation to do the kinds of things you know from looking at the analytics will drive traffic, will bring in subscriptions, will do all the kinds of things that the business cares about. What you're concerned about is the impact on the readers and how, as I think you put it, people begin to train themselves to ignore the news.

TOBIN: Exactly. Exactly. If we keep giving people something that they don't necessarily have to pay attention to, and we're sending them push notification after push notification and tweet after Facebook post after rebranded podcast over and over and over again, they're going to stop trusting that what we're giving them we actually believe is important ourselves.

KENNEALLY: So what's the answer, Ariana Tobin, there, at *Pro Publica*? Is it slowing down the amount of reporting? Are you trying to throttle down the work you're doing?

TOBIN: At *Pro Publica* it's a little bit different because we rarely post more than one or two stories a day. In general the model of our newsroom is just fundamentally different than a lot of others in that we really only publish things that are new because that's our larger business model. It's not to say that we're exempt from those questions because of course we are, and I'm not saying every single story on our website – not every single story that I've written on our website – is a valuable piece of investigative journalism. But I think that where I was coming from, I've been thinking about more the industry at large, some of the other places that I've worked, places that are more of a function of volume, where you're making the decision to send out a push notification. For us, here at *Pro Publica*, and, I think, for journalists in many other kinds of organizations, depending on what their mission is, what the expectation of their particular set of readers is, is just to stop and actually ask the question, what would someone gain from clicking on this? To actually have to articulate that value proposition, of this is the role that the story's going to play in someone's life, this is the value that they're going to take away from it. However they come to this story, here's the thing that it could do for them at that moment in time.

That's not always going to be exactly the same answer. It could be if someone Googles something, and our headline surfaces first, have we written the headline in a way that articulates that this is the question at hand that we're answering. Does this answer that question? Does it answer it in a way that's going to be more or less valuable than what



somebody else could provide? And honestly being honest with ourselves about that, so being able to say, this is the value that we can offer, making promises that we can fulfill, and then only saying that that's what we're trying to achieve here.

KENNEALLY: It certainly sounds ideal, but what's going to be the reality, do you think? There will be some organizations that will probably work in that direction to make that connection be one of mutual respect, as you put it, but they're up against a tidal wave, really, of other sources of so-called news – information, put it broadly – that really are just about pummeling the audience.

TOBIN: Yeah, I think we're going to have to learn the hard way, if history is any guide. I think it does not come naturally for us, as publishers, to set aside our egos and to be able to say this thing that we're producing, these huge audience numbers of people who come and go quickly, we're willing to get rid of those. Or we're willing to admit to ourselves that perhaps our pet project is not going to be the most valuable thing to an audience. I think it's going to have to be over and over again of things just not doing as well as we want them to do. I think it's going to be probably a much longer process than our readers deserve. I wish I were more optimistic.

KENNEALLY: Journalism and newsrooms make for pessimists, I would have to imagine, Ariana. But let me ask you, finally, what you assess the state of journalism to be? At the same time that there is this flood of information, broadly speaking, pouring at everyone, inside that flood, within that flood, are really fabulous stories, impressive feats, as you call it, of whistleblowing and accountability, and doing all the kinds of things that journalism has meant to do for over a century. So it's not just that you're tiring out the audience, but you may be obscuring really important stories in the process.

TOBIN: Absolutely. I think you got at exactly what's important here, that there's so much that needs to be reported out, there is so much journalism that would be valuable for people. It is also part of our job. It's part of our civic responsibility, as the news media, to help people sift through and figure out what those important stories are.

KENNEALLY: We're going to take to mind what you've just said, Ariana Tobin, and as we go through our own news gathering that we all do on our phones and our laptops and even in print, we'll keep them in mind and make sure that we continue to have a direct path to real news and to sort out those things that we don't need. But not to turn away. It's a question of curation, I suppose, to use a word that had currency a few years ago.

TOBIN: Yeah, it's balance.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. Well, we appreciate you joining us. Ariana Tobin is an engagement reporter at the independent nonprofit, *Pro Publica*. Thank you for joining us today on *Beyond the Book*.



TOBIN: Thank you so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: *Beyond the Book* is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global leader in content management, discovery, and document delivery solutions. Through its relationships with those who use and create content, CCC, and its subsidiaries, RightsDirect and Ixxus, drive market-based solutions that accelerate knowledge, power publishing, and advance copyright.

*Beyond the Book* co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on *Beyond the Book*.

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