

The Responsibility of Journalists

An Interview with Jeff Goodell, Author and Contributing Editor, *Rolling Stone*

EDITORS' NOTE Jeff Goodell (jeffgoodellwriter.com) is a New York Times bestselling author and a Contributing Editor for *Rolling Stone*. Goodell was a fellow at *New America* in 2016 and 2017 and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. As a commentator on energy and environmental issues, he has appeared on NPR, MSNBC, CNN, CNBC, ABC, NBC, Fox and The Oprah Winfrey Show. He was awarded a 2020 Guggenheim Fellowship in General Nonfiction. Goodell has a BA from the University of California, Berkeley, and an MFA from Columbia University in New York.



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What interested you in a career in journalism?

My mom says that when I was four years old, every time I asked her a question and she answered, I'd follow up with, "Why?" and when she answered that, I'd ask again, "Why?" This could go on, my mom tells me, for hours. So I guess I was born curious. Journalism doesn't feel like a job to me, even when it's brain-numbingly hard work. It feels like an extension of who I am. Plus, I'm a bit of an adrenaline junkie. I had a very brief career as a professional motorcycle racer so the endless deadlines that are part of life as a journalist were a thrill to me.

What do you see as the state of journalism today?

To paraphrase the old line from Charles Dickens, "It is the best of times, it is the worst of times." The old business models for newspapers

and TV have been undermined by the rise of the Internet, especially sites like Facebook and Twitter, which basically turns anyone with a phone or a computer into a journalist. That is a wonderful thing in some ways because it elevates the voices of people who have been shut out by traditional media outlets. But it is also a big problem because it means there is no such thing as "journalistic standards" for these new voices. In the past, journalists were, in some sense, arbiters of truth and reality. They were

authors of the first draft of history. No longer. Truth and reality are up for grabs now, which is both exciting and terrifying, but it also makes the role of a professional journalist all the more important. It's no longer just about reporting great stories and telling them with accuracy and style. It's also about figuring ways to break through the noise so that those stories can be heard.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

As a print journalist, the only people I really have to lead are my readers. To do that effectively, I'm hyperconscious of the fragile pact that exists between writer and reader – as a writer, I have to gain your trust and your attention and hold it. I have to give you something of value for the time you spend on the page with me. Some writers do it with verbal tricks and pyrotechnics, others with salacious gossip, and still others by providing vital, life or career-saving information. Myself, I think of the books

and articles I write as the beginning of an intelligent conversation that we will have together over the years. As a journalist, it's my job to venture out into the world and then to report back to you what I have found and how I have made sense of things. You might agree or disagree, you might find some of what I have to say ridiculous or imprudent, but hopefully it will provoke you to think about things in new and unexpected ways.

You are writing a book on extreme heat. What interested you in writing the book and what are the key messages of the book?

Extreme heat is one of the most obvious consequences of how we are changing the Earth's atmosphere by burning fossil fuels. Burning oil, gas, and coal creates CO², and CO² traps heat in our atmosphere. The science of this is beyond dispute, it is as real as gravity. And yet, even among scientists and political and business leaders who are well-aware of the climate crisis, the impacts of heat itself has not gotten much attention until very recently. I think there are several reasons for this: first, unlike, say, coastal flooding, heat is not as easy to visualize, so it doesn't get much media attention. Second, the people who are hit hardest by extreme heat are also the most out-of-sight in our society: the poor, the elderly, the vulnerable. But as temperatures continue to rise, that's changing (it's 130 degrees in Death Valley as I write this, the highest temperature ever recorded on Earth). Extreme heat is emerging as one of the most deadly aspects of the climate crisis, a profound physical force that will literally shape where and how we live on Earth, and it will not shape all lives equally – extreme heat is an engine of environmental and racial injustice.

As for key messages of the book, it comes down to this: modern humans have evolved over the past 12,000 years or so in a relatively cool, stable climate. Scientists call it "the Goldilocks climate" – not too hot, not too cold. Thanks to the accumulation of CO² in the atmosphere, that is changing. We are moving out of the human niche we have evolved in and into a radically hotter world, with rapidly melting ice sheets, changing disease vectors, and extreme heat waves both on land and sea. In my book, I want to explore the implication of this extreme heat on our cities, our bodies, our minds, and on the natural world around us. It's not just a

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question of how we will survive and thrive, but who will survive and thrive.

How do you define resilience and what do you see as the importance of resilience in addressing the crises the world is facing today?

Resilience is a complicated word, but basically, I take it to mean the opposite of brittle. We live in a rapidly changing world, not just because of the rapid movement of information and the increasing velocity of our economy, but because the climate crisis is destabilizing the very operating system of our planet. The world is getting hotter, the seas are rising, storms are getting more intense. All this will drive more migration (not just of humans, but of all living things, from trees to mosquitoes, as they seek out more hospitable climates), more conflict, more turmoil, more change. To adapt to all this, and more importantly, to thrive in this new era, we will have to build cities and institutions and lives that are flexible, that embrace change, and that look forward to the world as it will be, rather than back toward the world as it was. In this new era, leaders will have to rely on science and data to explore not only how things are changing now, but how they will change five, ten, twenty years into the future. In virtually every endeavor, from career-building to environmental conservation, success today means imagining and preparing for a very different tomorrow.

How critical is it for the media to focus on data and science when addressing the global pandemic and do you worry that partisanship and politics have been driving forces in the coverage?

Well, in my view, it is extremely critical for the media to focus on data and science when addressing not just the pandemic, but also the climate crisis, vaccines, and a whole host of other issues. But “the media” is hardly a monolithic beast these days. Some big cable networks, like Fox News and MSNBC, are obviously driven by partisan politics. But even here, there are differences. MSNBC makes no pretense of its political point of view, but maintains high journalistic standards of accuracy and fact. Fox News is not only partisan, but unabashedly spreads lies and disinformation if it serves their political purposes. And even within these networks, there are big differences: on Fox, Chris Wallace is an excellent journalist; Sean Hannity is a carnival barker who will say whatever it takes to pump up his ratings.

The point of this is two-fold: first, that it’s very difficult to generalize about “the media” in the information swamp we all live in. Second, it’s important for us all to become savvy news consumers. That is, to get outside of our everyday information silos and same diverse news sources, and to ask tough and often uncomfortable questions about where that news is coming from and what the agenda of the news source may be.

What needs to be done to drive true change around the issues of racial inequality and social injustice?

That’s pretty simple. We need to elect leaders who will fight hard for changes in the laws that define and reinforce these inequities and injustices. That is the only way real change will happen. For most of us, that means getting

involved in local politics, raising your voice on issues you care about, and most important of all, voting.

How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?

When I was in college, I took a writing class with a famous writer who would brutally criticize any student’s work he thought was weak, lazy or dishonest. Often students left the class in tears. One day, I asked him why he was so tough on our work – didn’t he think it was his job to encourage us to develop our voices as writers? He shook his head and said, “No, I feel like it’s my job to discourage as many people as I can from becoming a writer. It’s a tough life and if I can discourage you now, it might save you a lot of misery later. Besides, if you have what it takes to make it as a writer, you won’t listen to me anyway.”

I’m not sure exactly what the moral of that story is, but I think about it often. I’ve come to believe that personal resilience is in some way connected with love. If you love what you do, you will stick with it, you will find a way to get it done. Just as if you love your wife or your husband or your partner, you will find a way to stick together in hard times. The real trick, in work and in life, is finding what you love.

Who are some of the resilient leaders you see today?

In the political realm, U.S. House majority leader Nancy Pelosi, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern have all been through tough times and grown stronger because of it. And of course Joe Biden, who has lost too many family members to tragedy and disease, has proven that suffering can indeed make you stronger. I also have huge respect for the grassroots leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as young activists who are making sure that leaders in rich, developed nations around the world don’t neglect their responsibility to take dramatic action to address the climate crisis. But when I think of resilient leaders, I think of Mrs. Inch, my fourth-grade science teacher, who managed, year after year, to herd 30 kids into a classroom and teach them about the wonders of biology and physics. And to do it with such devotion and enthusiasm that, even now, decades later, I can still hear her voice in my head saying, “Every frog is a little miracle of nature.” ●

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