



## AN INTERVIEW WITH

# Nik Usher

## “What journalism means in a democracy”

### PRESENTATION

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Nik Usher, PhD (they/them) is an associate professor in communication studies at University of San Diego. They are currently Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellow. Their research focuses on new technology, politics, and the news media, with a particular focus on how power, inequality, and economics impact our news and information environment.

In this interview, Nik Usher takes a reflective look at the various forms that commitment has taken throughout their career. They explain how the political situation in their country has influenced the evolution of their research questions, gradually steering them away from the daily activities of newsrooms and toward exploring the role of journalism in democracy. They also reflect on the mid-career training they have undertaken and how this choice has enriched their research work. Usher further shares their thoughts on teaching and the role scholars can play in the classroom.

Their main books are *News for the Rich, White, and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism*; *Making News at the New York Times*, and *Interactive Journalism: Hackers, Data, and Code*.

### SLJ: Journalism was the foundation of your early research interests.

Nik Usher: I can just say that I started my career when things were exciting. Journalism was going online. Nobody knew what was going to happen: it was not yet clear that journalists would ever do “web-first” journalism... The internet had not yet dominated work production routines, but all of a sudden, the potential to publish more quickly and more responsively to news events grew. These organizations were realizing that was what people wanted or what they thought people wanted. I came in at this like perfect time to really do old research in a new context, which is a big cheat because somebody’s already validated that the question is interesting.

Before I even went to graduate school, I was reading Herbert J. Gans<sup>1</sup>, Gaye Tuchman<sup>2</sup>, Mark Fishman<sup>3</sup>, Michael Schudson<sup>4</sup> and Pablo Boczkowski<sup>5</sup>. I was just reading their work because I thought it was interesting—I had no idea just how prestigious and influential their work was in Journalism Studies at the time of “first encounter.” When I began my academic career,

I had just come from working as a journalist. My early work was very much embedded as an ethnographer in newsrooms—I think my work on the *New York Times*<sup>6</sup> is probably the best known. But I also spent time in several other newsrooms prior to this project watching them navigate the challenges of moving to an online-first environment: NPR, Marketplace Public Media, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. This work began in the middle of the Great Recession, when newspapers and public radio stations were really starting to experience that first crunch of serious economic pressure and really starting to play around with the potential of multimedia and interactives and beyond. I went to one digital-first site (*The Street*) and I thought at that time “these folks know what they’re doing”, but they were just ahead of the game with search engine optimization<sup>7</sup>. My scholarly commitments gradually grew a little bit more sophisticated, I think, concerned with materialism and space<sup>8</sup> and place. I hope this work became more theoretically rich as I gained the confidence to use the theory that I enjoyed thinking about and reading<sup>9</sup>, not just the theory that was popular in the field of Journalism Studies. And then, in 2015-2016, I felt the rise of Trump and then I lived through Trump, and I was in Washington, DC at George Washington University during his first two years in office. I realized that my research really needed to pivot around what journalism means in a democracy in an actual empirical, felt, grounded way rather than raw pronouncements of journalistic values. And so that is where my research is right now. I was asked yesterday what I do, and I said: “I study democratic backlash, backsliding in the context of the mainstream media”. This would be a very good way to explain what I do right now<sup>10</sup>.

**SLJ:** We suspected a shift from a grassroots commitment with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of everyday journalistic practices (during your observation at the New York Times) to a more political commitment for the importance of news in society and democracy in your latest research. Do you relate this to the evolution of the political context in the US or is it rather because when we grow up as a researcher, we try to see our objects differently?

**Nik Usher:** I think it’s a little bit of both. I think it’s quite a luxury in the United States to be worrying about the fate of democracy and to be worrying about decay and trust in institutions when in many places there is such low trust in institutions, and journalism is far more under threat and compromised by political pressure. Just recently, the weekend after the US Presidential Election, in a feat of defiance, the BINACOM communication association, a bilateral US-Mexico Communication association, held a conference in Mexico across the border. We walked across the border and met with our colleagues, and we heard about the real threats that Mexican journalists face every day to their life and well-being. In Mexico, a middle-income democracy where institutions are modestly trusted, journalists have to change their route on the way home every day. And it was quite a reality check that we have this luxury in the United States. It doesn’t mean that threats to journalism are not serious in the US, because they are. But I want to recognize how fortunate we are to believe in the political context as being different than it is currently, and to believe in an ideal that is possible. I think that’s very uniquely American.

My work also pivoted as I began to have more of an awareness of marginalized audiences and how institutional journalism had created distance between the profession (as an elite institution) and ordinary people. I realized how much there was to say about the role that the mainstream news media *did not play* in reaching people; that it was not representative of the democracy it purported to serve. And then on some level as the shift in the

field became more and more about technological change, I grew less and less interested in this aspect of the field. I think the big shift already happened – the recentring of journalism around a digital culture. Now, at least to me, some questions, even around AI, are not fundamentally as interesting as the question of journalism and its role in democratic life. We're in a very different world where corporations have more power than governments. I mean, maybe that's always been a little bit true, but they've usually been based in the US and done whatever they wanted to do in coalition with the US government. We're in a very different situation now where multinational platform and tech companies are beyond governance – and a world where globally, autocracy is back on the rise.

So, what does that mean for journalism's role in public life when people are – or we assume people are – fundamentally divided, and we assume people don't want to pay attention to anything they disagree with? And I don't know if all those assumptions about political divisions and the refusal to engage with difference are as certain as some social science would have us believe from experimental work. And I'm not sure all of journalism's assumptions about what it does in society have ever been true. And so... It's a tremendously exciting time. But while it's "good for business" in terms of this being a generative time for our research, it's not a good moment for society.

**SLJ: Your public commitment seems at least twofold. First, you write outside of academia, online in different spaces to talk about your research and to talk about your worries also, if we may say that. How is this important to you? How is sharing what you think important to you?**

Nik Usher: Most of the research that we publish in English that counts for academic work is published behind gated paywalls. That's changing, but it's also written in a way that I wish I didn't have to write anymore. There's a formula. It's hard to read. It's not interesting. To me, it's interesting work, but it's hard to read. And if we're coming up with things that are relevant, if we're finding things that are relevant to the public, we need to communicate it to the public instead of expecting the public to come to us. And I suppose that the ethic I am living with my work is the ethic I wish journalists would live more in their daily practice. Don't assume that the audience is there. Don't assume the audience even knows to be interested. Do your best to have your work heard. It's so hard to be heard in contemporary internet discourse, fighting to just get some arguments out in the open and prompt discussion in any way. It feels to me like the most powerful form of resistance I have... I'm not particularly a politically active person in a direct, applied way, so my work and my scholarship is my way to be active and to push back.

**SLJ: And second, is your latest book, *News for the Rich, White, and Blue*<sup>11</sup>, a way to criticize the world of journalism and/or to take a stand in defense of the public?**

Nik Usher: I think that *News for the Rich, White, and Blue* is very much a defense of the public – all too often journalists malign a public that doesn't want to engage with their work – but there is a reason for this disengagement. People who live in rural places deserve to be treated with respect and deserve to not be talked down to. Journalists should not be abandoning poor people and not abandoning people who won't buy a news subscription. We need to remember that people of color in the United States have long been ignored by the mainstream media, which has not seen them as valid audiences because they don't "produce revenue". Not including these people inside newsrooms themselves is also a real way to separate the country even

further into elites and non-elites. Who gets to become a journalist really reflects a broken meritocracy. And so, I believe that journalism can matter, but it also has to reach people for it to matter. We need to represent in our most powerful institutions something that looks like the world that we're hoping to serve, and our most powerful institutions do not mirror those worlds. And so that's my way to "stick it to power". It's not a partisan argument. It's really not. If we care about having a democracy that's engaged, we need to be thinking about everybody in it. And not assume that they're stupid. I think that that's the biggest problem that we have as academics and as journalist.

**SLJ: And when you write or publish publicly, do you have any reaction? Do you have any discussion with the public who is reading?**

Nik Usher: I'm always surprised because sometimes it feels like you're talking against a wall and then suddenly you hear people using your arguments. And they don't necessarily mention your name. But it feels like there's just been me and enough other people who have made this argument, that the argument is starting a breakthrough that wasn't there before. And that's extremely validating. My work tends to reach journalists more than it necessarily reaches the public *per se*. But every so often I'll get to do something that's in a really large media outlet. I was once on C-SPAN Book TV and I was getting notes from the guy who owned the pizza shop in my hometown. I had been seen on Book TV and ... wow ! And every so often I'll get a letter from somebody in prison and that's always just a moment of stepping back. Somebody in prison manages to come across me somewhere. And what a privilege to have been able to have that person spend time thinking about what I had to say when they had so many other things going on in their lives. Like immediate survival concerns, literally. And so you never really know. There are only so many things we can do to feel like we're in control of a crazy world and our individual actions are those things. And this is my way of feeling like I am making a difference in the fight every day. It sounds so silly, but this is the only thing I can control. The only thing I really feel like I do well so... This is my contribution. Even if it doesn't matter, it feels like it does.

**SLJ: Your book had a very good media coverage, but at the end you said that it did not change anything. Could you further explain your position?**

Nik Usher: I don't want to spend as much time talking to journalists about why what they do is so important and trying to change them, trying to change the institutions. I feel like on some level the institutions are really immovable. There's a paper I really want to write about how The New York Times is too big to fail at this point. Because I really believe that it is, the way it has structured itself economically and globally. So, I'm kind of just sick of journalists assuming that they deserve to be listened to. And you see this in the post-Trump reaction. There are journalists saying "journalism doesn't matter anymore", "nobody's listening to journalism", "why do we do what we do if we didn't make a difference?". My response would be: "Be forthright about the difference you wanted to make". And I believe the difference these journalists wanted to make was ... They wanted to see a different electoral outcome. I believe they are hiding behind the veil of objective journalism but somehow are also annoyed that people didn't choose Harris. Journalists believe that they have put the choice between autocracy and democracy, but really, this was also a partisan perspective, too – democrats were campaigning on saving democracy. And journalists are now stepping back trying to defend their work as "oh, that's not partisan".

Well, they clearly wanted the election to go a certain way and they're pretending that they didn't. That's what's really started to bother me. I don't have any patience for journalism self-delusion anymore. I don't.

I do want these institutions to survive. And I want to understand the plight of the challenges journalists faced every day. But in reality, what's on the line are these systemic practices that journalists think are really good journalism, but fundamentally may be contributing to the very unraveling of democratic processes. Just like the politicians can use democratic norms to subvert democracy, journalists, too, accidentally amplify autocrats, bad arguments and hate just through the acts of daily news coverage.

A recent example – which we can see right now – is the way transgender people are being blamed on both sides of US politics for allegedly being “too much of the message”. Some people are saying, “We focused too much on that”. And journalists are piling on by adding more coverage and featuring more left-leaning folks who are saying, “Oh, we shouldn't have embraced trans folks so directly as part of our campaign”, when it was really a small part of the Democrats' campaign. So, there is a way that journalists create a space for anti-democratic discourse. And they can't see it, or at least won't recognize that this is happening. And it's the rare voices, generally those folks who are marginalized but able to work within mainstream media who have a chance of shouting back. But this critique doesn't move the needle. Trying to make journalism better is like an abusive relationship: you want to keep being empathetic, you want to keep giving journalism a chance to do better, and yet, journalism never gets better, no matter what you do. Maybe you can change the argument for a little bit, but the argument doesn't change the institution.

**SLJ: Do you think that as scholars we are at the right moment researching the right object?**

Nik Usher: I think I've probably got two answers to that. The first is I think Nietzsche sold 500 copies of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, maybe, during his lifetime. What I mean by this is there are these people who have these tremendous contributions that aren't recognized in the moment, because what they're saying is too on point, and then unfortunately, they're misread. That's never good. Or there are great thinkers who die too early, like Camus, and don't fulfill the promise of what more they had to say. I don't want to pretend our work, or certainly my work is even close to comparable in any way, except to say that even the greatest thinkers were not always listened to at the time they were working – but their legacies live on.

I think your question is an enduring question of intellectual life. Are we in the right place? Are we at the right moment? Hopefully this doesn't sound too self-serving but I hope it offers some perspective to add some personal notes about what shapes my perspective. I think I'm very lucky in that I've had a lot of disruption in my life, with lots of different jobs, and my hobbies and activities bring me to places with people that I feel like are very different from me on a regular basis. I have friends in Republican elite media, and I have friends that live in rural Appalachia who had their homes washed out just recently in a major hurricane. I've been to 48 of 50 US states by car; I've been housing insecure; and at least in terms of being LGBTQ, I am a marginalized person myself. I think despite having access to very elite institutions and coming from a place of privilege, I don't mind a monster truck rally, and I love state fairs (classic Americana with cows statues made of butter and every food deep-fried). I have a real love for this kind of Americana.

But as far as perspective checking, there is something really alarming when you get to a part of West Virginia where the meat is a week and a half old and that's the meat you're going to buy because that's the only meat that's been through there because national highways and limited demand simply means West Virginia has less nutritious food available. I've said maybe too much about my personal experiences, but there is something in being open to experiences that are just really different and believing that people have value even if you disagree with them. I feel it's really easy for people in academia to have very narrow understandings of what a good life is.

I feel really lucky to have had enough exposure to different realities. I'm like a sensory experience seeker and that means that I try to really push myself to be uncomfortable. And that sometimes means being with people who really don't like me based on what I look like or don't like my family. In the past three years or so, I've identified as non-binary/transgender, and I am now obviously gender-nonconforming. I have been out as gay for my entire career and I am in a same-sex marriage. You'd be surprised: fundamentally, people are not terrible people – people aren't intentionally trying to be nasty or hurtful – they really believe what they do is making the world a better place. And that restores for me a little bit of faith that the world is united around the common ground that things can be better – even if we disagree how.

But I was not surprised about Trump #1 at all because I had been in upstate New York, and I had been like, "I know this area is like a blue working-class kind of 'blue' area". Just before November 2016, I had been to the county fair in Frederick, Maryland, which is an hour and a half away from DC. And I'd seen all these Trump signs. Sadly, this is the kind of place that Confederate flags are very present – but the Trump signs were just so dominant – even more so than these flags. I thought, "This is too close to DC". Just before the election, I'd been to the DC airport, I saw that all of the Clinton books were still there while all the Trump books were sold out. I felt like I was just shouting into a void when I tried to point this out. I was living in DC and I was like, "Friends, people in the Democratic Party, don't you see, don't you feel that there's this thing happening?"

This time around, Trump #2, it was harder being in California, a lot harder, to gain perspective. My dean challenged us in a community faculty conversation: "What do we do with all these Trump people in terms of civil discourse, and where are they?", assuming a default Blue California. And I went literally 30 feet outside the university to my car and I started taking pictures and sent them to the dean: "See this sign? This is an iron cross from World War I, you don't just put up an iron cross as your auto shop. This has a meaning here". And by the way, just a few feet from where I park my car, there was a "stay off my lawn or I'll shoot you with my gun if your car's still here" sign (that's not the exact wording). And I took photos of Trump bumper stickers. And this was literally like down the hill from our university. People who disagree with us are not hidden. They're 30 feet away. We don't have to go into some rural place to find them. It was a lot harder to gauge the pulse in California because there was this "oh, it's going to be okay" discourse around me – that California can stand up to anyone. So, it was a lot harder to get outside, to get a real feel of what was happening.

**SLJ: It's always a way of learning, isn't it? Like the new studies you've undertaken?**



Nik Usher: I don't think we can keep doing the same research or keep asking questions the same way, so I keep pushing myself to learn more. I have this amazing fellowship that really is designed for mid-career retraining. I think we all have our various midlife crises. It's something that endures across race and class and national origin. And I think it's fascinating. For me, I'm sick of asking the same questions to the same people in the same places. I've reached personal saturation, not just saturation for my research questions. For this fellowship, I'm taking an econ class. It's legit. I am in a Master of Business Administration Economics class and I am sitting in the room with America's next corporate leaders. I've always resented the hegemony of the quantitative positivism in the United States and always felt like it was a little suspect. In a way it seems that it's easier to put public interest behind numbers. Which is why in a lot of the work that we do, getting coverage of it is much easier when there's a qualitative angle to it, rather than saying, "We found these things with these 40 people we talked to", or whatever it might be. In public discourse, for better or worse, numbers can be more convincing. And I was sick of the mystique, and I knew that the questions I had were on some level very simple assumptions that people just assumed normatively even though they would say they haven't. And I think probably the start of this in my research was in *News for the Rich, White, and Blue* where I looked at the flow of philanthropic dollars. My question was: is money going to places where journalists actually weren't? And the answer was, not really. Money was going to places where journalists *were*, not where they weren't. And you can make an argument about whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, but if you're trying to correct for a lack of journalism, maybe you need to send money to places where there isn't enough journalism.

And just a very basic question that I'm learning about is, what does *enough* mean? How many journalists are enough to sustain democracy? To inform a community? What's our outcome variable? There's just a way of thinking quantitatively that is problematic, but it also provides a certain level of discipline because it forces you to ask what is the question and how would I actually measure it, in a way where I'm going to have an end goal or an end outcome. But I just want to peel off the mystique of math and... It turns out that I actually really like math and I think it's super fun. The more I learn, the more I realize that I very much enjoy seeing the mathematical proofs and you can do these proofs in a variety of ways: via linear algebra, via geometry and visualizations, and via equations. I'm a lot less suspicious of the math, I more suspect of the theory that we apply on to the math. We think of a normal curve as the most basic way to critique stats – not everything is normal! – but there are so many other ways to think about the world mathematically. But there are a number of distributions that really do reoccur throughout nature and across human behavior. Math is beautiful because it's everywhere. And I know that sounds so nerdy, but it's easier to believe in the underlying logic when you see that it actually exists in the built environment – just think about broccoli and fractals, or the way that some books on Amazon get all the purchases but some books get just a handful – a logarithmic distribution! I'm much more convinced that our best efforts to solve things through math really do check out mathematically.

Again, math captures the subtext of the human experience. So, there's still a huge gap between the felt material and body and experience of life. But marrying these two things... There are some small questions for which we assume that normative answers exist. But we might realize they might not have been asked before. You don't have to do a giant field experiment. Sometimes that little question that the field experiment hinges on has been considered too simple by political science scholars and economists. I think it's really interesting because these are still questions worth asking.

We can get really narrowminded in our thinking. I think it is really important to learn more, to be pushed and to realize what we don't know. I feel that I might come as obnoxious to say so. At least now, I feel like I have just enough knowledge to do damage with people who are not used to the kind of questions that I like to ask about their work. I feel I can be taken more seriously among those people who would dismiss my work as overly qualitative or not scalable. And I would dismiss their work as overly generalizable and looking at the wrong outcome. I mean, are we really just going to assess things based on newspaper closures up and down because it's a binary variable? That's literally why people look at those because it's a yes/no, it's a tangible thing. And you can apply it to every country and every county in the US because it's the same consistent thing.

And now that I know that, I am more dissatisfied. We also don't know how much journalism is going to fix democracy or keep people maximally informed. We don't know. Is there a number? And even just basic assumptions about how the news industry works commercially are problematic. That is what I'm learning with economics. Journalism has operated outside the normal structure of economic theory since its origin in the modern world, it doesn't make any sense.

If you were to ask a journalist today at a news organization, what is their Q (quantity, a basic economics measure): how many stories have you produced today? I would guarantee you that the vast majority of news organizations would not be able to tell you how many stories they published that day (this is also because stories are published multiple times across the day). They might not know how many posts they put out that day. And did this quantity actually meet audience demand? There are some really basic questions we never thought to consider. When a hedge fund or the stock market logics come in to overtake journalism, we have no defense: we don't actually have the data to argue back because we've been operating outside of marketplace logics for so long. We can't talk to the business people seeking to profit from journalism because we don't even have the insights for the basic formulas of economics when it comes to the news industry.

**SLJ: We've talked about commitment in your research work. How and to what extent does it translate into teaching? Should it even translate into teaching?**

Nik Usher: I think that teaching is the most important thing we do. The only legacy that we really have is the effect we have on our students. Students remember us and we don't remember them always. We are entering their lives at such an important growth stage. On one level, no student does all the reading. We're not brainwashing them. I want to be very clear about that because that's a very big concern: professors DO NOT brainwash their students. No, they would have to really listen to everything we said and believe everything we said. And we know they don't. But on the other hand, we can teach them how to think in a more disciplined way and open their curiosity. Students are always shocked when I do this exercise. I ask, "How many of you have an Apple computer?" And they look around the room and everybody's got one. In the US, everybody has these Apple computers in educational settings. Then I say, "This is hegemony you've never fought or questioned. Why do you have a Mac?" These are the moments when you start to pull back the curtain for them.

I also am stuck on this question of agency – thanks to French existentialist philosophers – that we can only control what we can choose. And if we don't choose freely, even if the choices are limited, then we are living



in a state of false consciousness or living without authenticity. I can help my students realize they're empowered even within a set universe of subscribed choices, to make a choice or to be aware of why they're making a choice. Amazon is terrible. Why is Amazon terrible? When I choose to buy something on Amazon, what are the trade-offs? In a democracy, you're only one vote. You are only one person; all you can do is control how you think fundamentally and we can give students their agency. And help them see it. Could there be anything more important? In the end I don't care if they don't remember anything from my classes. But if they walk away thinking, "I can make a choice about whether I want to spend my time on TikTok watching these videos, or I can go outside because I don't want to be a tool of the attention economy" or, "I can push back against my parent who's reading this source that is just not real news", I don't think we could do anything more important as academics that teach and be present with our students.

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*Interviewed by Florence Le Cam and Catherine Quiroga  
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## NOTES

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**An interview with Nik Usher**

**“What journalism means in a democracy”**

**“Le rôle du journalisme dans une démocratie”**

**“El papel del periodismo en una democracia”**

**“O papel do jornalismo em uma democracia”**

**En** In this interview, Nik Usher, associate professor in communication at the University of San Diego and Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellow, reflects on the evolution of their research on journalism and democracy. Initially focused on the ethnographic study of newsroom practices (notably at The New York Times), Usher gradually shifted their interest toward a critical analysis of journalism’s role in a context of democratic backsliding, confronted with the growing influence of market forces, technological platforms, and new forms of authoritarianism. This evolution is also grounded in a heightened awareness of inequalities in access to information and the marginalization of audiences distant from the dominant journalistic model. Usher emphasizes the importance of sharing research findings beyond the academic sphere, denouncing barriers to knowledge access, and advocates for public engagement by scholars as a form of resistance. Their book *News for the Rich, White, and Blue* exemplifies this critical stance by highlighting structural inequalities in the production of news in the United States. Usher also underlines the need for a continuous reexamination of research methods, particularly through a dialogue with quantitative approaches, in order to rethink what “enough journalism” truly means to sustain a functional democracy. Furthermore, the interview explores how this commitment translates into teaching: Usher sees the education of students as a fundamental act of fostering critical thinking and autonomy.

**Keywords :** Journalism ; Democracy ; Public Engagement ; Structural inequalities ; Critical Thinking

**Fr** Dans cet entretien, Nik Usher, professeur·e associé·e en communication à l’Université de San Diego et Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellow, revient sur l’évolution de ses recherches autour du journalisme et de la démocratie. Initialement centré·e sur l’étude ethnographique des pratiques journalistiques en salle de rédaction (notamment au *New York Times*), Usher a progressivement déplacé son intérêt vers l’analyse critique du rôle du journalisme dans un contexte de régression démocratique, face à l’influence croissante du marché, des plateformes technologiques et des nouvelles formes d’autoritarisme. Cette évolution s’appuie également sur une prise de conscience accrue des inégalités d’accès à l’information et de la marginalisation de publics éloignés du modèle journalistique dominant. Usher insiste sur l’importance de partager les résultats de la recherche au-delà du monde académique, dénonçant les barrières d’accès aux savoirs, et défend un engagement public des chercheur·es comme une forme de résistance. Son ouvrage *News for the Rich, White, and Blue* illustre cette posture critique, en soulignant les inégalités structurelles de la production médiatique aux États-Unis. Enfin, Usher aborde la nécessité d’une remise en question constante des méthodes de recherche, notamment par un dialogue avec les outils quantitatifs, pour repenser ce que signifie “assez de journalisme” pour soutenir une démocratie fonctionnelle. Par ailleurs, l’entretien explore la manière dont cet engagement se traduit dans l’enseignement : Usher considère la formation des étudiant·es comme un acte fondamental d’éveil à la pensée critique et à l’autonomie.

**Mots-clés :** Journalism ; Démocratie ; Engagement des publics ; Inégalités structurelles ; Pensée critique

**Es** En esta entrevista, Nik Usher, profesorx asociadx de comunicación en la Universidad de San Diego y becarix de la Mellon Foundation New Directions, reflexiona sobre la evolución de su investigación acerca del periodismo y la democracia. Inicialmente enfocadx en el estudio etnográfico de las prácticas periodísticas en las redacciones (particularmente en el *New York Times*), Usher fue desplazando progresivamente su interés hacia un análisis crítico del papel del periodismo en un contexto de retroceso democrático, enfrentando la creciente influencia del mercado, de las plataformas tecnológicas y de nuevas formas de autoritarismo. Esta evolución también se basa en una mayor conciencia sobre las desigualdades en el acceso a la información y la marginación de audiencias alejadas del modelo periodístico dominante. Usher enfatiza la importancia de compartir los resultados de la investigación más allá del ámbito académico, denunciando las barreras de acceso al conocimiento, y defiende el compromiso público de lxs investigadorxs como forma de resistencia. Su libro *News for the Rich, White, and Blue* ejemplifica esta postura crítica al destacar las desigualdades estructurales en la producción de noticias en Estados Unidos. Usher también subraya la necesidad de un replanteamiento continuo de los métodos de investigación, en particular a través de un diálogo con enfoques cuantitativos, para repensar qué significa realmente “suficiente periodismo” para sostener una democracia funcional. Además, la entrevista explora cómo este compromiso se traduce en la enseñanza: Usher concibe la educación de estudiantes como un acto fundamental para fomentar el pensamiento crítico y la autonomía.

**Palabras clave:** Periodismo ; Democracia ; Compromiso público ; Desigualdades estructurales ; Pensamiento crítico

**Pt** Nesta entrevista, Nik Usher, professor(a) associado(a) de comunicação na Universidade de San Diego e bolsista da Mellon Foundation (New Directions Fellowships), revisita a evolução de suas pesquisas sobre jornalismo e democracia. Centrando-se inicialmente no estudo etnográfico das práticas jornalísticas nas redações (notadamente no *New York Times*), Usher mudou gradualmente seu foco para uma análise crítica do papel do jornalismo em um contexto de retrocesso democrático, diante da crescente influência das forças do mercado, das plataformas tecnológicas e das novas formas de autoritarismo. Tal mudança também está ancorada em uma consciência cada vez maior da desigualdade no acesso à informação e da marginalização de públicos distantes do modelo jornalístico dominante. Usher enfatiza a importância de compartilhar os resultados da pesquisa para além do meio acadêmico, denunciando as barreiras ao acesso ao conhecimento, e defende o engajamento público de pesquisadores(as) como forma de resistência. Sua obra *News for the Rich, White, and Blue* exemplifica essa postura crítica ao destacar as desigualdades estruturais da produção de notícias nos Estados Unidos. Usher também discute a necessidade de questionar constantemente as metodologias de pesquisa, especialmente por meio do diálogo com ferramentas quantitativas, a fim de repensar o que significa ter “jornalismo suficiente” para sustentar uma democracia funcional. Além disso, a entrevista explora como esse engajamento se reflete no ensino: Usher vê a formação dos(as) alunos(as) como um ato fundamental de estímulo ao pensamento crítico e à autonomia.

**Palavras-chave:** Jornalismo; Democracia; Engajamento público; Desigualdades estruturais; Pensamento crítico