

Santa: Broadcasting from the University of British Columbia, this is *Blue and Goldcast*. I'm Santa Ono, the president and vice chancellor of UBC. On this season of the Blue and Goldcast, I'm speaking with the people who are leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses. My guest today is Peter Klein. Peter is an Emmy Award-winning journalist and a professor at UBC's School of Journalism, Writing, and Media. He is the executive director of the Global Reporting Centre at UBC. He also runs the global reporting program where he works with master's students at UBC and around the world. Peter, welcome to *Blue and Goldcast*. Thank you for coming on the show. How did you come to your current role at UBC?

Peter Klein: I have a fairly unorthodox approach to my role at UBC and just being at a university. When I was at university as an undergrad, I was on an academic track. I was going to pursue a PhD possibly in math or philosophy, I wasn't quite sure. The truth is I just couldn't really come up with a particular topic that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. It occurred to me that journalism may be a good first step. At least it allows you to learn different things about different aspects of the world. You could be a science reporter for a period of time, and you could look at politics, you could look at music, whatever it might be.

I pursued journalism, not necessarily as a long-term career path but as a first step and possibly a stepping stone towards pursuing a higher ed career. I ended up really liking journalism. I loved working in it, I loved producing long-form works of journalism, I worked at New York Times and at 60 Minutes and at ABC news, but I always still miss the academy. When I was living in New York, for a variety of reasons I sought out opportunities to teach.

Initially, I was teaching at NYU and then at Columbia School of Journalism. When I was at university, I really felt at home, I felt like we could raise the questions that often in a traditional newsroom, it was sometimes uncomfortable to raise. I had one of those moments of epiphany where I walked into class, I just had a piece on with Mike Wallace on Sunday night, my class was on Monday, I walked into class and I was waiting for the students to say, "Hey, nice piece last night, Professor Klein."

Nobody said anything. I was like, "Hey, did you guys see my piece last night?" It was silence and they're like, "Yes, we saw it." I said, "What did you all think?" One of the students was brave enough to raise their hand and say-- This was in the late '90s, I guess, early 2000s. They said, "Do you know that every single person in your piece was like a middle-aged or older white male?" It was one of those moments like, "You're absolutely right, I never thought about it, and neither did my executive producer, neither did the vice president of news who watched this piece who's a woman, neither did tons of people who've vetted my piece."

Not a single person raised it, but here's this 25-year-old master's student who noticed this, and a whole class noticed it because of course they had been talking about diversity and representation and all these things in an academic setting, which often in a newsroom they don't talk about. It was one of those moments where I realized, maybe this is where I belong, maybe I belong in an academic environment where you can comfortably critique how journalism is being done, but not do it only in a theoretical way, but then apply those critiques to actually improving the practice.

I'm very fortunate to have this home. I was welcomed at UBC initially as a visiting professor and eventually as a tenure-track professor and had been given this space to not just teach, but research journalism, and then run this center where we're actually putting our theory into practice. I was at the time, it was called the Canwest Visiting Professor. Now, we call it the Asper Visiting Professor where they bring in working journalist professionals for a semester-long or year-long stints at the school.

I initially started as that. Then I was offered these opportunities to grow in that, and at the same time, I got some funding to create this course, which you mentioned the introduction, the global reporting program. Got a million-dollar grant to create this course where we gave students the opportunity to actually practice, not just critique the global journalism landscape, but actually practice innovation. That matched really nicely with me pulling further and further away from doing work like 60 Minutes and the New York Times and spending more of my time focusing on my actual journalism output out of the university.

Santa: Absolutely. We're very, very happy that you're here. What are you working on right now? What are you most excited about right now?

Peter: We have a project that frankly, I'm not all that hands on on which is great. I love the fact that we've gotten to the point where I don't personally have to be involved in every single project. We have this wonderful team of people, many alumni actually who work for the Global Reporting Centre, and we've recruited some top level journalists from different parts of the world to work with us.

We have a project looking at the role of subsidies in the plastics industry. Really, it's the subsidies in petrochemical industry and the petrochemicals are then used to make plastic. They found a new way of supporting this very politically powerful industry as the demand for oil and gas are starting to reduce. They realize, hey, we want to stay alive and we can use this stuff for making plastics.

There's still a lot of interest in making plastics, particularly. In many parts of Asia, they want the components for making plastics. That industry is burgeoning often with government subsidies, public subsidies. That's about as all I'll tell you until it's out there, but keep an eye out for it. It's a really wonderful project that's going to be on *NBC News*, and we have a multimedia project that we've built with some data visualization that's coming out. We have this supply chain initiative, this long-term seven-year long, SSHRC-funded. We have a SSHRC partnership grant and we have funding from VPRI at UBC, and from faculty of arts to support all sorts of reporting on supply chains.

Santa: That's pretty cool. Certainly, everybody understands the importance of the supply chain during the pandemic and just monitoring PPE and the shortage of that and the geopolitics of that. What's your experience been like working with student journalists? Is it helpful? Is it sometimes frustrating? What's that dimension like for you?

Peter: The student journalists are the best aspect of this to some extent. I gave you my little anecdote about Columbia and being challenged by a student journalist in a way that a senior journalist like me and much more senior journalists like my bosses weren't thinking. They ask really smart questions, they sometimes come in with

approaches, whether it's conceptual approaches or even technological approaches to journalism that we may not be steeped in as older journalists.

We've also tried to recruit specifically for this initiative. We have a supply chain reporting fellowship. We're in the third year of that now. We've been able to send out the message, "Hey, if you're interested in reporting on an aspect of supply chains and you have some skills or you want to develop some skills, this could be a good fellowship. It could fund part of your studies and it gives you opportunity to work with major news organizations, major scholars."

I think it's been a gratifying experience for the students. I can say for sure it's been a very gratifying experience for us to have students in those roles, particularly when we've been able to recruit them specifically for this. More broadly, we have lots of Work Learn opportunities. UBC subsidizes the Work Learns, which is amazing. It's an additional funding that we have to hire students and give them these opportunities to actually work on projects, whether they're academic research projects or applied research projects like what we do mostly at the center.

We've had close to 30 Mitac interns at the center and previously with my own work. These are incredible internships that offer \$10,000 to a master's level student to work on a project in partnership with an outside sponsor organization, whether a for-profit or nonprofit Canadian organization. The students get an opportunity to work with those organizations to get some mentorship, develop professional experiences as a federal program that UBC is very supportive of. We've had lots of opportunities to support students and they almost to a person have contributed very, very significantly to the output of what we do.

Santa: It's something that we have to do as an institution. With the threats on truthful news and the growth of fake news, it's I think paramount importance for us to support student journalists. I was talking to a prospective student the other day and they were thinking about different careers and we started talking about journalism. I think you'd probably agree that the landscape has changed quite significantly in terms of media, journalism, and certainly newspapers. What can universities and society do to support student journalists even more and help them think about destinations in terms of their career?

Peter: One thing is, universities have become labs for innovation in journalism. Obviously, I love to tell what we do here at UBC, but you see that at the investigative reporting program at Berkeley, the investigative reporting workshop at American University, there's a new global focused investigative organization out of Columbia, as well as the Stabile Center at Columbia. I can go on, there's in the UK and elsewhere where there're labs for innovation, there're labs for creation, there're homes for producing high-level journalism, independent journalism, oftentimes in partnership with major media.

Again, it's always on our terms. Especially if we're bringing funding to the table, we can dictate the methodology. We were just concluding with a project that was funded by the Peter Wall Institute that we've done with PBS News Hour, where we were able to completely dictate the methodology of doing journalism. That number one is as a place to actually produce journalism. That's a huge and underappreciated role that universities have played. As you know, universities have been critical in both the

innovation in medicine as well as the practice in medicine, teaching young doctors and nurses to learn the skills and then apply them.

In the journalism world, we actually call it the teaching hospital approach. We use the analogy of the teaching hospital for what we do now in journalism using that similar approach. The truth is that the journalism landscape is growing. Just today, I posted either three or four jobs on our job board, jobs that came through across my transom. I shared them with our students at Alumni. There's a lot of work out there. It used to be there were a handful of organizations. There was Time, there was Newsweek, there was US News and World Report, there was Maclean's, there was CBC, and CTV, and ABC News.

You could count on certainly your hands and toes all the major media organizations that were the gatekeepers. Now, there are so many other organizations out there that are offering opportunities to do journalism, often relatively well-paid opportunities. I think in some ways, it's a golden age for journalism because there's lots of openness to different approaches, to innovative approaches, to challenging some of the norms and practices. There was a rough patch for sure. That transition period 10, 15 years ago was difficult. A lot of people were talking about social media destroying journalism and the internet and all that.

There is still challenges for sure. Advertising has gone away, Craigslist and other places have taken over advertising, so that revenue has gone away. A lot of the successful news organizations have found ways of staying alive and oftentimes even thriving in this new media landscape. I encourage people to pursue journalism, not necessarily through journalism schools. You can study political science, you can study statistics, you can study economics policy. There's a lot of ways to get into journalism.

Some of the best journalists study journalism. It's not like medicine where you have to go to medical school, or law where you have to go to law school to get certified. You can do this kind of work with lots of different backgrounds. Sanjay Gupta is a neurosurgeon. I think he's one of the best health journalists out there. He never studied journalism. He literally does surgeries on people's spines, but he picked it up. He's a smart guy.

Santa: If you're with a journalist just about to leave your program and you could say something that you were limited in what you could say, what would be the most important thing that you would give them as a takeaway as they launch into their career?

Peter: One thing we spend two years here doing is trying to build confidence in the journalists so that they can go out there and be the kind of journalist they want to be. I'll actually default for a moment to an amazing moment when I was teaching at Columbia and I had the wonderful opportunity to bring one of my own mentors to class. Tom Bettag who was the executive producer of *Nightline*, ABC News' *Nightline* back when Ted Koppel was the host. He had run CBS Evening News. He had been a producer at 60 Minutes. He had given me really my first shot to do this kind of work early on when I was doing a big project about doctor-assisted suicide.

I brought him to class and I introduced him to the class. I was like, "Here's this guy who opened the door for me and having a mentor like that is really important." It was just a free-for-all Q&A. Of course, one of the students raised their hands and they said pretty much the question you just asked like, "What's one piece of advice you can give us as we're graduating, as we embark on our careers?" Everyone's sitting there waiting for the wisdom from Tom Bettag, and we're waiting on like speak truth to power, always be ethical, whatever he was going to say.

He said, "Open a bank account." They're like, "What?" "Yes, just open a savings account, a no-fee savings account. This is your I'm going to call it the FU account, put a nickel in there, put \$10 in whatever, start building up that bank account, because someday an editor is going to ask you to do something that you think is morally wrong, that you don't want to do, that you think might cause harm, that you think goes against journalistic ethics. It will happen.

It's probably not gonna happen next month. It'll happen maybe 10 years from now when you have two kids and you have a mortgage and you have commitments and a parent in nursing home and you have all of these commitments, and someone's going to push you to do something and you're like, 'Oh my gosh, what am I gonna do? Am I going to go against what my boss says and lose my job and have financial ruin, or am I going to stand up and I'm going to quit?' That FU savings account will save you and you'll never use it. The great thing is you'll never use it because you'll always feel you have the confidence to stand up and you'll develop a reputation as someone who stands up for what they believe in, rather than someone who rolls over."

Not to plagiarize because we don't believe in plagiarism and journalism, but I am largely plagiarizing from my mentor, Tom Bettag, because that's really what I try out of foster. The students is like you spent two years developing an identity as a journalist, don't lose that identity. Don't let outside forces, whether it's corporate pressure or sensationalism or tabloid or whatever it might be, compromise you.

You could go into PR, you can go into communication. You can go into government. We've had lots of students leave our program. Most of them work in various forms of media, but some of them have gone into government. Some have gone into all sorts of other fields. It's interesting when I talk to them. I've stayed in touch with so many of our alumni, I've been here for 15 years now. Many of our alumni are now leaders of various industries and government, et cetera. Even the ones who have left traditional journalism report that they use these skills that they learned here.

In terms of communication, in terms of rigorous research, fact-checking, as well as just really believing in a certain ethos. I think we have a very ethical framework to our program. Obviously, I love our program. I really believe in it. I used to be the director of it. We have amazing faculty. It's a great group of people who try to foster that sort of confidence in young journalists. It would break my heart to know that they would lose that confidence and that belief in doing high-level journalism.

Santa: I want to end with one question for you. We are as an institution incredibly proud of the Global Reporting Centre. That's why I reached out to you for this interview and for everything that you've done to make it what it is today. In your dreams, thinking about the Global Reporting Centre and the program itself, if you

look into the future, where would you like to see it go? What would you like to see it do that it currently isn't doing?

Peter: I take inspiration from other parts of the university. If you look at what's going on, particularly in applied areas, in engineering, in pharmaceutical science, in medicine, even in nursing, we're training innovation. We're fostering innovation in all of those fields and many others, in fisheries, in forestry. You have these incredible pods of creativity and innovation throughout this university.

I want the Global Reporting Centre to be that for journalism. I want it to be a safe space to experiment, to fail. Failure is critical. Unfortunately in the corporate media landscape, you can't fail. If they've spent a whole bunch of money on you to go out and report on something and it turns out that story is wrong, you're screwed. You're like, "I just spent all this money. I thought this story was right, but it turns out to be wrong. I'm coming back empty-handed."

If you did that a couple times, you're not going to keep your job for very long. Then take it one step further and you want to start challenging how journalism is done, things will fall apart quickly in your career in corporate media. In a university environment, that's the whole point. No one else does what we do. No one else has a safe space to try new things, to experiment, as I say, to fail.

We have this project, I alluded to it earlier. It's just finishing up right now on PBS NewsHour. One of the rules in journalism is you don't hand over storytelling power to the interview subject. You can imagine that if a mayor of a city is accused of doing some corrupt stuff, you don't want to say to the mayor, "Hey, why don't you write this script for me?" They'd be like, "Oh, sure. I'll tell the city what a great mayor I am." Well, it turns out he or she is a terrible mayor, but if you hand over storytelling power to them, the audience is not going to get the real story.

You can see why it's literally a fireable offense. You're not even allowed to, in many cases, read quotes back to people. After you've done the interview, now it's mine. I've taken the story from you. I'm going to process it. I'm going to do the best I can to present what I consider the most accurate view of this story. Well, that doesn't always work. First of all, we often get that wrong. As you, I'm sure and you're too kind to admit it, but you and many and virtually everybody else listening here, when you've ever heard a story or watched a story or read a story about something you know a lot about, I am sure that you have said, "What was that journalist thinking?"

They got it wrong. Journalists sometimes get it wrong or they don't get the full story. Then there's also issues of misrepresenting people. Indigenous communities in Canada, for instance. Your option is to try to report on it in a hostile environment because communities have been so misrepresented for so long and they're very resistant to having outsiders come in, or you don't report on it.

Well, in a lab environment like we have at the Global Reporting Centre, we could throw it against the wall and say, "Well, how could we do it differently?" Forget about the rules. There's no rules, let's experiment. We've experimented and we've really pioneered this technique of empowerment journalism, where we've said marginalized communities are often misrepresented.

Maybe they've earned the right to be afforded some more agency in the storytelling and so we went up to Yellowknife with support from Movember Foundation and from Peter Wall Institute and we partnered with an all-indigenous community advisory board, and came up with a methodology that we call empowerment journalism, where we went to local people, regular folks, not storytellers, not journalists, not filmmakers, not writers. For the most part, just regular people who have some relationship with alcohol, either through their family, through overcoming addiction, whatever it might be, and they have an important story to tell.

We said, "Okay, if you feel like there's an important story to tell, it's your story to tell it. You tell it however you want to tell it. If you want to kill the project, you want to stop the project at any point, you can. We are here purely to facilitate you to tell your story, and you own it. You actually own it financially. You own it editorially in every way." As I say, that's a fireable offense at a mainstream news organization, but we had proof of concept, we have this incredible nine-part series called *Turning Points* of stories about resilience and recovery, and just incredible stories that are told by and owned by people in the community.

Not a single person pulled out, we had an initial screening of it in Yellowknife. We were like, "Before the rest of the world sees it, this is your story and your community. We'll have a public screening for you." People were crying, there was real strong emotional connections to these stories. Every step of the way, we worked with UBC Ethics to make sure that we're not doing anything that's exploitative in any way because at any point you could pull out even when the piece is done. Everybody wanted the world to see these stories, all of the storytellers.

It's been rolling out as a series on PBS NewsHour seen by millions of people. If they had commissioned it, we couldn't have done it this way because we would have had to follow their needs and standards. Since we already did it, and we were transparent with the audience, and that's one of the things I talk about with students, it's all about transparency.

If you're clear with the audience how you did it, if you're breaking the rules, that's fine, as long as they know that you've broken the "rules." Why are these rules here in the first place?

It's been an amazing project. I think, to me, it's one of the great examples of what you can do in this kind of environment where you can experiment, you can fail. In fact, we wrote an academic paper about empowerment, and one of the projects we did in Somalia in empowerment journalism failed miserably, never saw the light of day. That's okay. That's what labs are meant to do. You've worked in labs, experiments fail, but if you don't have failed experiments, you're never going to have successful ones. That's what we're trying to do. With continued support from the Peter Wall Institute, we're able to continue to advance this and try to replicate it and improve it in the future.

Santa: Well, Peter Klein, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to be part of *Blue and Goldcast* today. It's been fantastic. Every time I speak to you, I'm invigorated, so thank you so much.

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Santa: Peter Klein is a journalist professor at UBC School of Journalism, Writing, and Media. That does it for this episode. You can find links to our guests' work as well as previous editions of this show at blueandgoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app, like Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, or Stitcher. You can tweet at me @ubcpres, that's prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thank you for listening.