

Andy Alexander, bureau chief, Cox Newspapers, and former ombudsman, The Washington Post

Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name is Michael O'Connell. Today, I've got a one-on-one interview with Andy Alexander, an award-winning journalist and former ombudsman at The Washington Post. Andy has been an investigative journalist around the world, heading up foreign bureaus in London, Jerusalem, Beijing and Moscow, to name a few. He was the chief of Cox Newspapers' Washington bureau when it shared in the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting. Besides serving on numerous media related boards, Andy helped launch the National Sunshine in Government Week initiative, promoting greater openness in government. I'm glad you're here Andy, welcome.

Andy Alexander, bureau chief Cox Newspapers, former ombudsman, The Washington Post.

Nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

Michael O'Connell

So, first of all, I read a little bit of your resume, what are you working on these days?

Andy Alexander

My quick life in journalism. I spent 38 years with Cox Newspapers, which is part of the [Cox Enterprises Company](#), fabulous company. And then I became the ombudsman for [The Washington Post](#), which is a two-year term. So, you know when you take it, you know you're going to be out in two years —

Michael O'Connell

Two and out.

Andy Alexander

Unless you decide to extend. And after that, I started getting involved with my alma mater at Ohio University, which has the [Scripps College of Communication](#), which is one of the largest in the country. And, they got me involved mainly in media innovation. They had received a \$3 million grant from the [Scripps Howard Foundation](#) to develop media innovation programs. They needed someone to sort of lead that. And so, I started doing that almost on a part-time basis, but I've gotten sucked deeper and deeper into it, because it's so darn interesting. I mean, you're at that time in journalism. I'm based in Washington. I go to Ohio University every few weeks. I teach one class in media ethics, but my focus is really on media innovation.

Michael O'Connell

So, how would you define media innovation? What does that cover?

Andy Alexander

Well, it covers a lot, because of what's going on in journalism. What may be the best way to explain it is sort of the benchmark program we came up with that is helping orient students toward media innovation. Most colleges of communications have some form of a media innovation competition, and the vast majority of them simply say to students, 'Come up with a fascinating, groundbreaking, interesting, media-innovation idea.' It might be an app for something or a new way of using GPS [Global Positioning System] to track things, whatever.

Our starting point was different. We went out to media companies, mainly in Ohio and in the region. And we said, 'What are your specific media innovation needs?' And then, the students competed for that. So media innovation needs, we call this competition the [Scripps Innovation Challenge](#), so there are challenges. It might be as simple as [The Columbus Dispatch](#) has 60,000 Twitter followers and they said, 'We don't know how to monetize this.' Or, it was television stations that were saying, 'Look, we look at millennials, which is basically students, and we see that they do not watch appointment TV, so-called appointment TV. They don't like ads. Many of them don't even own a television set. And so, we are going to create apps to try to connect with them, but we don't even know how to do that. We don't know what will appeal to them. We don't even know how to reach them.' So they turn to our students and said, 'Can you help us?'

Michael O'Connell

'Yeah, we're content creators. Help us try to get that content to an audience that's going to help sustain us.'

Andy Alexander

That's exactly it. So these are the types of things. And so, we had a competition that was open to not just to journalism students. It's open to anyone in the university.

Michael O'Connell

Business, technical students would be helpful.

Andy Alexander

Exactly. Engineering students. Media innovation may come from any place these days. And then we offered substantial cash prizes. We gave out \$20,000 in prizes. So, this came to a climax on April 11, when we had a series of finalists who actually did a live pitch competition before industry judges and we gave a \$10,000 first prize and a lot of other money and we're going to grow it next year.

Michael O'Connell

So, what was the top prize?

Andy Alexander

The top prize was a really interesting app idea, which the students called an alarm clock app and it was in response to a challenge by a media company, [Ogden Newspapers](#). It owns a lot of smaller community newspapers, and they were trying to find ways to engage people with their online product. So the students came up with this way that your iPhone would actually serve as an alarm clock, which is, of course, not new. But, what you got instantly was an aggregated, highly tailored news report for you. So, you woke up and you knew exactly the ball scores you wanted. You knew this and that. And they had mechanisms for updating throughout the day and sending alerts.

Michael O'Connell

Now, you're a little older than I am. It's funny. When I was in journalism school at Indiana University in the early 1980s and there was this thought, you know, 'One day, there will be these computers. We'll be getting our news on computers and we'll have a thing where we'll be able to print off our newspaper every morning and that's how we're going to get it.' And on one sense, it's like, yeah, we're kind of there. But in the other, we're really kind of dealing with the reality of how consume news now.

Andy Alexander

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

The fact that what you said about your students. They're not getting appointment TV. They're relying on their mobile platforms, their phones, to get a lot of the content they want to get. We've had several different people in here who are connected with journalism education and all of them are very optimistic, very excited and very interested in what the students are bringing to the discussion. What's your takeaway from the students that you see?

Andy Alexander

The first takeaway is that I'm envious of them. I think this is a fabulous time to be getting into journalism because so much is happening. There is a tremendous disconnect between when I talk to my older friends in my age cohort. I'm in my 60s now. People who I worked with at Cox or with the Washington Post and, by and large, they are very depressed about the future of journalism. Then I go to Ohio University and these kids are so jazzed, correctly, enthusiastic about the future of journalism. They see six or seven different ways to tell a story. They understand the concepts or the importance of data visualization, digital storytelling. They understand the way that gaming could be used to tell a complex story like the federal budget. What I worry about is that they get the proper grounding in the basics of journalism. Ethical grounding. The basic concepts of the importance of getting it right first. One of the things that I found, frankly, at The Washington Post when I went there, was you had a divide of younger, digitally oriented, online folks, who, they were upset when they made errors online, but they were not mortified in the way that I was.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

And they had a term, which is quite common. It's called, 'Not wrong for long.' Which means, 'We can correct it quickly. We don't have to wait for the next day's paper.' But of course, my mindset is, 'Get it right the first time.' Because news travels so quickly in the digital age, it's cached so quickly. It's spread so quickly. That it's a really challenge catch up with an error. That's what I'm talking about giving them those fundamentals.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, it's getting a little too caught up in the bells and whistles and not necessarily thinking of the groundwork of, again, conversations we've had with other people. My own experience is that you'll get people who can see the possibilities of various technical aspects of journalism, of 'Oh, we'll be able to deliver the news quicker through Twitter alerts or through online platforms. We'll be able to do all different types of things.' But they're not always thinking of the lessons that came out of print journalism. The lessons of sourcing and all the ethical steps that we have to make sure that we take to qualify us as journalists and not just somebody who's posting something online.

Andy Alexander

That's all true and there's something else that I think that younger journalists need to focus on and that is the who pays for journalism part of it.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

This is something when I started out, let's face it, newspapers were making so damn much money they never thought about it. In my first 20 years in journalism, I don't think I ever once thought about the business side. Now we have to. That doesn't mean you have to subvert your values as a journalist. But one of the things when I deal with students and with this Scripps Innovation Challenge competition, we require them to have a business element to their presentation. That did not mean a full ROI or return on investment.

Michael O'Connell

Sure.

Andy Alexander

But it did mean a full business plan. But it meant that they address, at a minimum, the fact that if you have a newsroom of 20 reporters and you're going to take one of them to develop an innovative idea, simply taking that staff time is a cost. Or, ideally, we want to know what is the potential revenue stream. In the world today, I don't think we have a journalism problem. We have more journalism, good and bad, than we've ever had. We

have as revenue model problem. And we have to be thinking that way of who pays for it. Doesn't mean we have to end up like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, but it does mean that we have enough money to pay for our journalism.

Michael O'Connell

Are we putting enough emphasis on the business side of journalism?

Andy Alexander

Clearly not. Clearly not. And we found this in our Scripps Innovation Challenge that students, I would put this in the category of 'They don't know what they don't know about the business side of journalism.' And there's a cost.

I have at Ohio University, at Scripps College, occasionally, brought in people who are recent grads who have started their own little media startup company. Maybe they had an innovative idea. And it's surprising when you ask them, maybe they're one year out from graduation, 'What do you know now that you didn't know?' And typically it goes this way, 'Well, I hired somebody. I didn't realize I had to take out withholding taxes. I decided to patent this. I didn't realize I needed a lawyer. I didn't realize that I needed insurance. I didn't realize that I needed to hire a lawyer for this or I needed to do, that there was a real cost associated with marketing and all those things.' They simply don't know what they don't know. So, I think we have to instill that.

It's interesting to me, talking to, I talk to a lot of media companies now. Oddly, in my career, I am now almost more engaged with a broad spectrum of media companies than I was during my career working for one very large one or whatever.

Michael O'Connell

Right. Well, your focus was on gathering news —

Andy Alexander

I was running newsrooms.

Michael O'Connell

You were not thinking about trying to save the industry.

Andy Alexander

No. Or as an ombudsman, I was dealing with what was going on in the newsroom. But talking to news organizations and media companies that are hiring, they not only want young people to have the basics, the journalistic grounding, they want people who think innovatively and think entrepreneurally. And again, they're not asking them to develop something and then make it work in a financial sense, but they want them attuned to that so that they can bring it to their business people, their marketing people and say, 'We think it has potential. Now you develop it and we'll get back to the business of journalism.'

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, I think for a long time there was a lot of people easily gravitating towards the news delivery end of it and not really sort of thinking about how this new digital technology could actually make money for a company.

Andy Alexander

You're absolutely right.

Michael O'Connell

That wasn't part of the consideration. I know my own personal story. I was at a dot-bomb that went the way of many websites in 2000 and I went back to print. I went back to print going, 'Well, I'll come back to online in a few years once the business model's all been figured out.' And I came back to the online world and it hasn't been figured out yet.

Andy Alexander

It has not been figured out.

Michael O'Connell

And I was a little surprised. But there were a lot of, big minds were working on it and, yeah, I agree with you very much, that we need to instill in the people who are coming into the industry, especially the people who are coming out of journalism schools, that to understand the entrepreneurial and the business side of it, because if they want a future in journalism, they're going to have to be part of coming up with the solution to what's going on in journalism.

Do we need to bring in some other type of education? Does there need to be business schools? Does there need to be some sort of entrepreneurial media classes or something that could somehow be crossed over so that you're coming at it from that angle as opposed to, 'Here, you're journalists, this is your semester of business or here's your semester of entrepreneurial?'

Andy Alexander

We do in several respects and I think in the more progressive schools, and I would count Scripps among them, they are thinking that way. They are altering curricula. They are thinking of certificate programs. But more to your original point, I think what you're seeing is a very healthy and robust debate among colleges of communications and journalism schools on the value of people like me. I'm not saying me, but people like me who have spent their life in industry and are coming right in and they are not as theory-based, but they are able to bring a connection to what's happening in the industry right now and force students to be even aware of what's out there. I mean, almost any of my dealings in a classroom with students, which are limited, I only teach this one course, but you know I'm basically pushing them constantly to be on the industry websites and discuss the things that are in the news. Not just the ethical dilemmas, but what's happening on the business side. What are we learning about paywalls. What are we learn-

ing about the decline of print advertising or the resurgence in some areas. We tend to forget that newspapers are still a \$36 billion industry. That's nothing to sniff at.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no. There's still money being made in print and I don't think necessarily print's going to go away. I think a lot of people sort of threw their hands up when a number of big papers folded and they said, 'Oh my God, this is the end.' Well, this is the transition and we're still in the transition.

Andy Alexander

It's not a good trend.

Michael O'Connell

No it's not.

Andy Alexander

But I think that we'll have a mix. I think that what we may end up with, I mean, here we are in Washington, you look at The Washington Post.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

Its circulation has continued to decline. Advertising, print advertising is declining. They have significant challenges. It may be that five years from now that we pay for home delivery a lot more, or to get it delivered to your office a lot more. Or it may be a tailored publication in different ways. But I think we're starting to find our way.

Michael O'Connell

For example, I know a lot of people always talk about, 'Oh, the Sunday Times. I love getting the Sunday Times.' Well, maybe that's an experience that you're going to have to pay a little bit extra for, if they're still going to print it. Or you're just going to get it on your iPad.

Andy Alexander

Actually, you're raising a very good point, because you do pay a lot for more for the Sunday Times.

Michael O'Connell

Oh yeah.

Andy Alexander

And one of the trends at The Times, particularly, is that their circulation revenue is demonstrably higher as a percentage of total revenues than it was even two or three years ago. We just can't make it on advertising alone.

You know, when I give talks on this, it's interesting, I get people in my age cohort who just say, 'I can't imagine life without the printed newspaper and I don't understand why young people don't get this?'

Michael O'Connell

Because it's not where they're at.

Andy Alexander

I tell them to envision a teenager. Let's say Johnny, who is 14, who has never seen a newspaper in the household. All he's done is he's gotten his information online and through mobile and try to explain to little Johnny that we're going to be have a newspaper coming in. And you'd have to explain these big sheets of paper that doesn't have any video, may not even have all color pictures. The news will be sometimes eight or nine hours old. The way we're going to print it is that we're going to cut down forests and mash up the trees. Then we have these things called presses that cost about \$150 million. And then what we'll do is we'll hire these people to come around before dawn and throw it on your lawn and if it rains, we'll put a bag over it. It's inconceivable. It's so stupid when you think of it in digital context.

Michael O'Connell

No, it was the way we could deliver the news in an effective, efficient way 100 years ago.

Andy Alexander

Yep.

Michael O'Connell

And things change.

Andy Alexander

It worked then.

Michael O'Connell

And the technology has certainly made the whole environment different for media. And just to touch on something you were talking about before. About the fact that, to sort of edge out of the business end of it, but just talk about the news production end of it. You said that we have is a pretty big smorgasbord — my word — that we have a lot of things that we didn't have. That the quality of the news I think has improved —

Andy Alexander

In some cases.

Michael O'Connell

In some cases. Well, maybe quality isn't the word I want to use. Certainly, the mass of the news —

Andy Alexander

The availability of the news.

Michael O'Connell

The availability and the delivery system and the speed of it, but, again, we go back to things like the ethics and accuracy of what we're producing and that forever remains a challenge.

Let me talk to you a little bit about your time at The Washington Post as the ombudsman. What did you see are your role there as the ombudsman?

Andy Alexander

I was the reader's representative. What was beautiful about what The Post had and what The Times, The New York Times still has is a truly independent ombudsman who represented just basically readers, not the newsroom. It's an extraordinary construction of the job in the sense that, my wife's a lawyer and when I was hired they gave me a one-page contract that it was not clear that I even had a boss. In fact, I was there two years, I don't know who I reported to.

Michael O'Connell

As long as the check showed up.

Andy Alexander

My column went through the editorial page, but only because that's where it appeared. But I had no one who reviewed me, to the great credit of The Washington Post, tried talk me out of a column. There were people who 'worked the refs,' but basically, your job is to try to hold the newsroom to its own high standards and to represent the interests of readers, who, let's be honest, sometimes they would complain about stories to reporters and reporters either wouldn't take their phone call, wouldn't answer their emails or simply blew them off, tried to talk them out of corrections or whatever. And that's when the ombudsman gets involved, when a reader wants a sense of satisfaction. They won't correct this error. And I think what's been lost by the elimination is that the readers do not have an independent voice.

Now to give you some idea of the volume of what we deal with as ombudsmen, and I'm pretty sure my successor, Pat Pexton, was in the same category because we talked about this. During my two years there, I received just north of 141,000 emails.

Michael O'Connell

Wow.

Andy Alexander

Now, three-quarters of those are from crazy people or homophobes or racists and I didn't even respond to them. But when I handed off to Patrick, I did a little study. And I had offered a meaningful response to more than 40,000 of them. Meaningful response might be simply an explanation of how the paper functioned. For instance, why is there this fact in this editorial and this fact in the story about this issue in the Metro section? Don't they talk to each other? Well, no they don't. They're completely separate.

But a more meaningful and common thing is, somebody says, 'They made a mistake. They won't respond to me.' That requires the ombudsman to go to the newsroom to sit on someone's desk and say, 'Hey Helen, this person said you screwed up. What do you say?' And what can come of that is either I can render a judgment in an email back to the reader or I might blog about it or, worst case, or best case, I would write a column about it. But the point of all this is when people look at the ombudsman's job they see this Sunday column and they think, 'Well, that's a pretty cushy job.' You are moving at an unbelievable pace when you're dealing with that many things. And it also speaks to the need. There are that many people that feel they need a voice.

Michael O'Connell

So, you wouldn't say that in an environment where you have a place where people can make comments, where people can tweet or just send emails directly to the reporter and the reporter tweets out and retweets things that there isn't enough dialogue?

Andy Alexander

No. I applaud that. I think that's a wonderful trend. I believe in online commenting. I even believe in anonymous online commenting. But nothing takes the place of an independent ombudsman who can go into the newsroom and demand answers. And if you don't get those answers, it can appear in print for every reader of The Washington Post to read. And, the ombudsman carries weight. I think in the industry, you don't want to be zinged by the ombudsman. It's just not a good thing.

Michael O'Connell

So what happens then as, certainly, newspapers are cutting staffs, newspapers are going under, they're trying to become leaner, smarter about the way they use their resources, what then is the future for the ombudsman? Is it something that's going to go away? Is it going to reemerge in a different form?

Andy Alexander

I think the jury's out. Clearly, the trends among American newspapers is that they are being phased out, in part, for money reasons. The Washington Post, I thought, had a poor explanation of why they eliminated it. They said money was 'a' factor. I don't doubt

that. But they also said that there are more avenues. But, as I've just said, I think nothing replaces the independent inquiry.

But I think what you may see is that there are different configurations for ombudsmen. So, let's just talk generically about news organizations. Maybe what you have is you can come up with a formulation where you have maybe retired journalists who have a specialization in an area, let's say the Middle East or foreign policy, and they get the complaints routed to them and they have this authority for very little money, and I bet you there'd be a lot of people who'd do this for free. That they would investigate those complaints and render judgments. We may be able to play around with that.

Clearly, the trend is to do it more digitally. Now I was blogging several times a week, which is not sufficient. But, as I say, 141,000 emails, you have very little time to push out a reported blog every day. But I think that's where we're headed. I don't think we should be wedded necessarily to the Sunday column in the print paper. I think we should be writing as things come up and as quickly as possible.

Michael O'Connell

Right. Again, the sooner that you can, especially in an online environment, the sooner you can correct something, the sooner it's not going to be retweeted and shared a million different places.

Andy Alexander

To follow up on your point here, the role of the ombudsman is growing in certain parts of the world, though. And it's because people see it as means of building your credibility. I believe The Post has lost some standing with readers. Is it going to put The Post out of business because they don't have an ombudsman? Of course not. But, I think it's one of those small things that's lost. Readers feel, 'I don't have a voice anymore.'

Michael O'Connell

I see The Post as a big bear in a cave trying to turn around. Little pieces fall off here and there. And whenever or wherever it's going to stop, it's probably going to be very different than what we've always thought of it as. And, again, the value of these pieces that fall off, when they cut staff, when they say, 'We need to re-prioritize this way.' I don't want to jump all over The Post. A lot of newspapers are having to deal with this issue. I mean, if you cut and you cut and you cut, when do you not become what you were a value for?

Andy Alexander

You're absolutely right. Then the question is, a value to whom?

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

Because what the added burden, and let me just say it was an honor for me to work for The Post and I think it's a fabulous newspaper, but they have a challenge that many others don't face. In print, which still supplies most of their revenue, they have to be a great paper. And they have, in my opinion, I wrote this, I think they need to do a better job of local coverage. But, they're trying to do that while they're developing digitally.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

And the challenge is that the digital audience is almost all outside of Washington.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

So, they don't care about local. So, if in a management sense you're asking a staff to much more with fewer resources and say, 'Make a great local paper in print and online, and, by the way, your future is with this audience that's outside Washington. Do even a better job there.' That's a very, very difficult thing.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, we had [Tom Jackman](#) in a couple of months ago and he talked about this —

Andy Alexander

Good reporter.

Michael O'Connell

Excellent reporter. This very problem you speak of. The fact that it is, it's almost like two companies. It's The Washington Post that covers the City of Washington and The Washington Post that everybody recognizes internationally as a leading newspaper. People are coming at it from two different areas. Can they sustain in that form? Let's wait and see. It's certainly has been an interesting, ongoing drama for the last 10 or 15 years to watch them sort of morph.

Andy Alexander

It's very tough. I think they're developing a strategy which I actually applaud. Digitally, they've sort of adopted the Google, 'Fail fast approach.' They are trying a lot of things and hoping that enough of them hit that they will collectively produce revenue to offset these very substantial print revenue losses. So far, it is insufficient. I'm not saying the effort is wrong. I applaud the effort. But it's a big challenge.

Michael O'Connell

Any media outlet has to find some success in the digital realm, if it's going to survive in the next 10 to 20 years. I mean, that's where everything's going. Unless there's something that's coming down the pike, like the Internet was 10 or 15 years ago that we're not aware of that's suddenly going to change everything again.

Andy Alexander

And you know, some consolation for, we've talked about newspapers, but let's not forget about what's happening with broadcast and specifically television. I mean, it was interesting to me being in Ohio working on this Innovation Challenge because I was talking to a lot of GMs of TV stations. And this is in the period right after the election and Ohio, of course, was a battleground state. And I would say, 'How's your year going?' And they would say, 'Fabulous. We had the best year ever. Advertising, we couldn't fit more advertising on.' So, I'd say, 'You're pretty optimistic about the future, right?' And they'd say, 'No, we're absolutely terrified because we see it as a cliff and we don't know how to reach those new people.' I think we're not far from millennials, the younger people, and a lot of older people getting their TV through an app. How do you monetize it?

Michael O'Connell

Right. If there's a TV show that you like on HBO, do I need to pay that enormous cable bill or do I wait for it to come out on Netflix or just digitally download it off of iTunes? I mean, you know, darn this capitalistic system. It drives so much. People's pocketbooks make quite a lot of decisions when they get down to it. They say, 'Well, this is cheaper. This is better for me. I'll adjust to that.'

Andy Alexander

Let's go back to the starting point. Would you not like to be a young person who's jazzed about journalism. I think it's a fabulous time to be part of figuring this out.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no. I had this, I may have told this on the podcast before, but I'm going to tell it anyway because it's one of my favorite stories.

When I was a managing editor and I was really, this is when I was taking classes at American University and I was really full of vim and vigor about the possibilities that digital journalism presented and the future and everything. We got a new batch of interns in and they were high school interns, so they were probably a little too young for me to make this speech. But I looked at them very emphatically and said, 'I am envious of you. You came in at a perfect time in journalism. Everything's changing.' And they had this look of horror their face. They're like, 'What do you mean it's all changing?' Cause they want to write the story. They want it on the front page. They want to see their picture next to their byline.

But, it is and one of the reasons I'm still in journalism, one of the reasons doing this stupid podcast is because I'm really kind of excited about what's going on that there's so much possibilities, just in news reporting and doing it in different platforms. These are

problems that we're faced with. That gives us an opportunity to try to solve them. That's exciting stuff.

Andy Alexander

It does and you know, one thing I think we need to place more emphasis on, and here we are in Washington. I'm a Washington journalist. You've spent your career here. But if I had it to do over with again, I would be very intrigued by going to a place like Des Moines or Keokuk and try to serve in a community. This goes back to the basics of journalism. We've talked about fairness, accuracy, ethics. But I think another thing I try to instill in young journalists is less where you do journalism or for whom as opposed to why you do it.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah.

Andy Alexander

I am continually impressed, I'll give you an example. Last weekend, I was with a friend of mine, Marty Kaiser, who is the editor of the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#). He's an unbelievably gifted editor. This is a metro paper that has won three Pulitzer Prizes for news, more than The Washington Post has won since 2008. I think that's probably accurate, but he produces a high quality product that is not in Washington. It's not in Los Angeles. It serves a big community, but it really has captured its community. He knows what is important to those people. And I think even if he did that in a small place like Warrenton, Va., or whatever, I think there's tremendous value in that and enormous satisfaction in serving a community that way.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no. I was at [The Connection Newspapers](#) for 10 years and one of the reasons was because people really valued the stuff that you were doing. Yeah, you did the Girl Scout bake sale, sometimes. But you also did some really important stories about the environment, about local government and schools and things that just, you know, had a lot of value. And one of the great things about in the strata of journalism, we got a lot of people straight out of journalism school, caught them early on. Obviously, they had dreams of going elsewhere and they did go elsewhere, but they saw the value of being the reporter on the ground.

We used to joke all the time that the local TV stations or The Washington Post would pick up a story that we had written about two or three weeks later, because they had seen that we had done the initial reporting on it. And then they would cover it big and it would be a big thing and it would be on TV and everybody was really happy about it. But, you know, there is something nice, a certain amount of pride about going out and finding a story and talking to the people that it affects one-on-one and seeing something positive come out of it.

Andy Alexander

That's the key I think.

Michael O'Connell

When you're able to have that human element and make change with just the work that you do, the words that you write, the story that you tell, I mean that's really the value of journalism at its core. I mean we get kind of caught up in all of the, again, the bells and the whistles of, you know, 'I've got to go to Washington to cover Congress or the White House.' But really, to tell the story of the human heart and the human experience and illicit change in the world, I mean, that's a real valuable thing for what we do.

Andy Alexander

I agree.

Michael O'Connell

And we don't always talk about it.

Andy Alexander

I agree 100 percent. And also, you know this, starting outside of Washington, you acquire skills that if you are going to make it in Washington and make it big, you'll need those skills.

When I was a bureau chief in Washington for Cox Newspapers, we had a very good internship program and a number of those interns would jump right out of college to Washington. They all got jobs. They were very bright. It was a selective internship. But in most cases, they only went so high. And I think one of the reasons was they didn't learn about mill rates or they didn't ride with the cops to know how wickedly clever they can be as interviewers and getting information. Those are all things that really serve you well at the start.

Michael O'Connell

Standing outside in the rain outside a church or something.

Andy Alexander

Exactly.

Michael O'Connell

Just waiting for somebody to talk to.

Andy Alexander

Or dealing with these very difficult emotional issues.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Andy Alexander

Somebody's kid is killed in a shooting and you have to go talk to the family. How do you do that? But it's important. Those are very important things.

Michael O'Connell

No. I cannot disagree. Before we wrap up, I did want to talk to you a little bit about your involvement in the open government initiative. You were one of the founders of the [Sunshine Week Initiative](#). Tell me how that came about and what your sort of interest is in the whole open government/transparency [issue].

Andy Alexander

Well, it really started for me long before I got involved organizationally in that, because with Cox Newspapers and our bureau, we were doing a lot of good project journalism that required open records and we were doing a lot of database stuff. And, so I had that sort of practical orientation of the importance of it. But then it was through the [American Society of News Editors](#) that I started to get involved and I became the chair of their FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] committee. And this would be, boy, maybe about 2002, 2003. And we became very, very concerned about trends at the federal level.

Michael O'Connell

2002, 2003? Hmmm, I wonder what was going on then?

Andy Alexander

Yeah. Right. So there was a clamp down and it even started, well, it actually started and my involvement even before that. But after 9/11, there was this visceral, 'We've got to shut down everything.'

Michael O'Connell

Close all the doors.

Andy Alexander

And the Bush administration was pretty tough on this. I think, clearly, not the worst in history. There have been a lot worse times, a lot worse administrations. But there were bad trend lines. And the effect of that was it was going down to the state and local levels. So, we gathered people together. [The Knight Foundation](#) funded a summit of people who were involved in Freedom of Information. It was held at the old [Newseum](#) or Freedom Forum. And, basically, people focused on something that had happened in Florida. They had had something called Sunshine Sunday. They started it because Florida, which is a great open records state, admirable history.

Michael O'Connell

You get all your police records, photos and everything online.

Andy Alexander

Fabulous. But they noticed that lawmakers were really trying to enact a whole bunch of exemptions. So, they picked a Sunday in March that coincided with the opening of the legislative session, and they asked newspapers, television stations, to on that Sunday, try to bring importance, visibility to this issue. So, at a minimum, newspapers wrote editorials. There were some newspapers that were very clever. Every story in that day's paper that relied on an open records law, they would highlight that just to tell readers, 'You wouldn't have gotten this information without it.' Some did audits of agencies and all that.

So, we looked at the success of that, and it was very successful in raising public awareness of the importance of it, and we thought, 'Well, could we do this on a national level and could we have a week?'

So, we started it in 2005 with a grant from the Knight Foundation, very generous. And we essentially tried to replicate what they had done in Florida. We thought that first year, 'Well gosh, maybe if we get 50 or 60 papers to do something, that'd be great.' It was hundreds. And it has grown over the years to involve all types of media companies, civic organization, Rotary Clubs, libraries, different associations.

And the whole point is not to make it a press week. It's really about public discussion on the importance of transparency in government, which we all know leads to more efficient government, less corrupt government. The number of stories produced every year relying on open records that find people who are double dipping on public payrolls or looking at bids on public contracts and realizing it went to the highest bidder because he had a connection rather than the lowest connection. The fact that we see stories all the time, if you can look into the driving records of school bus drivers and you find out, 'My gosh, somebody's driving a school bus and they've had 16 moving violations or whatever. Those are the types of stories that bring public awareness and pressure and just make communities better.

Michael O'Connell

It's funny. I sort of connected two things. What you were talking about, having newspapers sort of talk about where the public records are that informed a particular story. I mean, it sort of goes back to what you were talking about before about the role of the ombudsman is the fact that, and this was my experience of being an editor, there are a lot of people that don't understand what a newspaper is or a newspaper functions. And I think maybe that has a lot to do with our bad PR with a lot of people is that we're doing all these machinations. We've got these secret things. Man, if we had the time to do these secret things, it would be great, but we don't.

Transparency in our process. We talk about open government a lot in press because that's where our bread and butter is. We're reporting the stuff, but this is everybody. FOIA is for everybody. It's not just a 'press thing.' The public needs to be able to get this information and that's kind of our role in it. So, what can we do beyond the Sunshine Week to get the news out, to get people more aware of this?

Andy Alexander

Well, a couple of things, and it sort of melds one of the thoughts you had. The first thing is I think news organizations should not generally focus on it one week out of the year. This is an ongoing issue.

Michael O'Connell

It's like the people who go to church on Christmas only.

Andy Alexander

Yeah. And the second thing that I think we can do is explain why we want sensitive information. This is sort of in the news now with the AP subpoenas and all that. There's an opportunity for media organizations to explain how we handle sensitive stories. One of the interesting things, I wrote a column about this as ombudsman. I wrote a column at The Post about the perception that you'll print anything in The Post.

Michael O'Connell

We don't want to get sued.

Andy Alexander

And the point of the column was to detail as best I could all the things The Post does not print. And I went to editors who had handled these highly sensitive national security stories and they told me on background in many cases because these were conversations that in one case had gone on in the Oval Office. But, it is amazing how sensitive the media are to important stories like that and how much we are willing, as we should, to step back from publishing certain information that might enhance the story but is not critical to it, but could cause harm. So, things like you certainly don't want to finger a CIA agent. But you do want to write about abuses and there are ways to do that.

I think to your point about transparency in the news organization. It builds credibility to explain generally how we do our jobs but specifically in relation to Freedom of Information, we could do a much better job of saying, 'Why do we need this information?' And, frankly, there are some times I don't think we need it. I've been intrigued by the debates over people, news organizations that get the ...

Michael O'Connell

Like the gun records?

Andy Alexander

Yeah, the gun things. The concealed weapons registries and publish them. Well, yeah, we have a legal right to it. And in some cases, let's be honest, it's a public document. Anybody can go online. But the question is: why? Did we provide proper context? Did we go through the list and find out that there are certain people that maybe have a criminal record that have gotten through? That's a good story. But simply taking the information just cause we have it and printing it, not always the smartest way.

Michael O'Connell

It becomes more of a stunt and less of an act of journalism.

Andy Alexander

And there you lose credibility.

Michael O'Connell

On no, yeah. That's for sure. You mentioned in the news and everything about the AP. This is a few days after that story sort of broke. What's your takeaway at this point? How concerned are you about the Justice Department's actions?

Andy Alexander

Very concerned and I was troubled by Attorney General Holder's comments yesterday. Now we're taping this at a time when the story just broke yesterday and he had initial comments today. I haven't kept up with his testimony before the House. His initial comment was that he had recused himself. That the decision had been made by the deputy attorney general. But let me tell you, it was a serious breach and all that. But you know, we've heard all that before.

What typically plays out here is that when you get into how they reached the decision to go after a reporter, they didn't truly exhaust all the other avenues, as the guidelines require. They did not in this case, as the guidelines require, allow going to the news organization and saying, 'We have a concern. Let's negotiate here.' I think it was a rush to judgment, a rushed decision, and it's hard for people not in the news business to understand the chilling effect that that has on people. Not everybody does national security reporting. Let's grant that. But the way it filters down, when people think that your government is basically monitoring the activities of journalists, it has a chilling effect on everyone who might be willing to talk to those journalists about legitimate abuses of government. And I think it's very damaging. If anything good comes out of it, it will revive the discussion about a federal shield law, which I think has already started.

Michael O'Connell

Well, that's good. You know, again, these things always, they appear. It's good that we get stories like this, but it's unfortunate that this event happened, but it brings these issues back in the public debates. Again, so that people understand what our roles are as journalists and why we do things the way we do them and why certain freedoms that we really embrace are so important to the work that we do and to the public. Because we're trying to provide information to the public about whatever, a corrupt official or some other story that could have a serious impact.

Andy Alexander

It also gets into the, I hate to be cynical about this, but who's doing the leaking. I've been amazed over the years about Republican administrations or Democratic administrations that just get so exhortised when a leak has come from the administration. But

we know when they have something to leak, they leak it. It's the same people that complain when it's a leak that damages them.

Michael O'Connell

Now it all depends on who has the ball and that's how things work out. Well, this has been really entertaining, Andy. How can people find out about you? Are you blogging currently?

Andy Alexander

I'm not blogging currently, but I'm not hard to find. I'm at Ohio University You can find me on their website there or you can find me through Facebook or whatever.

Michael O'Connell

All right. Well, thank you very much for coming in, this has been a great discussion.

Andy Alexander

Great. Thank you very much.