

**John Sullivan, Investigative Reporter
The Washington Post, American University, Investigative Reporting
Workshop**

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

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name is Michael O'Connell. Joining me today is a recent guest, Julia O'Donoghue. She's a Medill grad and recently came back from South Africa. The reason she is joining me as a guest today is our other guest, who was one of Julie's instructors at Medill.

John Sullivan is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter, who was part of [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#)'s team that won the Pulitzer Prize for public service for a [series of articles](#) in 2011 about the underreported school violence in the Philly school system.

Recently John moved to Washington D.C., where he was jointly hired by [The Washington Post](#), [American University](#) and the [Investigative Reporting Workshop](#). Welcome John. Thanks for joining us.

[John Sullivan, Investigative Reporter, The Washington Post, American University, Investigative Reporting Workshop:](#)

Thanks. It's a pleasure to be here.

Michael O'Connell

So tell us, you're jointly hired by these three different organizations. Could you tell us what that means and what the significance of that is?

[John Sullivan](#)

It means that nobody is happy. We have three bosses right?

No, what we tried to do here was try to develop a journalism program that would allow students to do high-level, high-quality investigative work at a working publication, The Post, and to also take a class at the same time at American University, to get credit for this. And so we have developed essentially a practicum, like an internship program, where graduate working on the investigative team at The Post several days a week and they work with me on my stories, or with any of the other investigative reporters on their stories, and they get credit for that.

Michael O'Connell:

Is there any particular overall semester project that they're working on, an investigative piece? Or is it day in, day out whatever comes up?

John Sullivan:

No. I mean, we try to focus on the process. And so, for them, what they are getting is they are getting a chance to work in a 10-person investigative team, where they get to watch all the other stories develop, talk to the reporters about how they're doing their stories, and then work on stories that we're working on.

We don't guarantee them that a story will be completed by the time the semester's over, and we don't guarantee them that they will get bylines, although we hope that they do and we want them to. And we want them to contribute significant reporting, but we try to teach them the process, and we try not to put a — create some sort of artificial structure because we think it is more important for them to just learn how it's done and how it's done at a very high level. We want them to be professional. We want them to learn from the best.

Michael O'Connell:

So, let's sort of set a baseline here. I mean, when people talk about journalists, you know, a journalist investigates a story, interviews sources, etc. What, for you, defines or makes it a separate distinction for an investigative journalist?

John Sullivan:

Well, I mean, I don't know if there is a proper distinction. I mean I think we say it because it's easier to let people know the scope of your work, but the reality is that many reporters do a lot of the things investigative reporters do every day. I think probably one of the keys is that we look for wrong doing. We look for harm. We don't typically — we're analyzing a problem. We're trying to determine what is the true state of this agency. So, we're usually trying to determine, 'Is there something wrong here?' And I think a lot of reporters do that, but I think a lot of reporters also do lots of other types of stories too. Investigative reporters focus mainly on those things.

Michael O'Connell:

Is it sort of the scope or the subject that you're actually analyzing? I don't maybe like government reporting? Or Crime?

John Sullivan:

I think it can be really more kind of the framework. So, we want to try and find out the things about subjects that people don't want us to know. We're analyzing them in a framework of, 'Is this system functioning the

way that it was designed to function? Is it performing up to its own ascribed values?' You know, whatever, and I think to determine, "Is there anybody here in this system that is getting shortchanged? Harmed?"

So most of the stuff I write about I'm trying to determine – are people being harmed? That's mostly what I'm interested in.

Julia O'Donoghue, producer, It's All Journalism

So are you going to be looking at, sort of, "local" stories? Or national stories?

John Sullivan:

We can do anything. We can do national or local. I mean my particular interest is in local stories, just because I've always been a metro reporter. I mean I shouldn't say that. I've done national stories and I've done national investigative stories and I think I've done them at a high level, but my heart really lies with urban, metropolitan reporting.

Michael O'Connell:

It was kind of interesting as we were sort of setting up the mics and everything we got involved in this conversation about immigration in the D.C. area and the way that's covered or not covered or how that it could be better covered, and I got kind of a peek into the way you think or see things is that, you know, obviously you commented that that's a really complex story that has multiple levels that you have to address. So, you're not just necessarily covering one aspect of it. You're sort of thinking, I don't want to say globally, but what the impact of a system that's working or not working, and how it affects people.

John Sullivan

Yeah, I mean I think what we try to do is we try to recognize that most problems are fairly complex and that it's easy to have a knee jerk reaction that "This is bad." But we try to understand, kind of, why is it not working this way? Is it incompetence? Is it corruption? Or is it just basically good people working hard to try and figure something out that's really hard to figure out?

Michael O'Connell

And how important is that element on the other side of that, which is that you're writing this to expose something to make things better?

John Sullivan

Well, I mean I think it's like an issue of fairness. I mean I think that most of the time it's really how you write that story. Obviously, investigative reporters look for people who are doing wrong. And so, most of the time, that's primarily what we're interested in. We're not really writing issue stories.

But in the process of evaluating something, you really want to determine — is this basically, kind of a — it's not that you wouldn't write this story, but you wouldn't spend as much time on it, you would write it much sooner. You probably, it's more of a "he said, she said." We look for stories that we can prove that something is the way that it is because of a series of circumstances. Our job is not to say "Oh, there's a lot of smoke here." Our job is to say, "There is smoke here and it's coming from this fire right here, and this is how that fire got started."

Michael O'Connell

So is the tendency with stories like that then that, by their nature, they are going to be a little bit deeper? Maybe require more reporting?

John Sullivan

You mean, where we are looking to prove that there is fire? Yeah. I mean it could take a year, two years.

Julia O'Donoghue

I feel like we're talking really in the abstract. Can you maybe give us some examples, or talk about some of the stories that you've done?

Michael O'Connell

Maybe the story you worked on, or the project that you worked on, at The Inquirer about the Philadelphia schools? Can you sort of describe that and what went into that?

John Sullivan

So, that project, like a lot of projects, grew out of a different project.

So I had been writing about child protective services in Philadelphia for many years, and I did a big project with a guy named Ken Dilanian who now covers national security for the L.A. Times. We did a project about children getting beaten to death in Philadelphia after their families had come to the attention of child protective services, and that prompted a very large overhaul of the system, the firing of two of the top officials, a criminal indictment of 18 people and the conviction of 18 people for the death of this one girl, [Danieal Kelly](#). You know they were convicted of

fraud and all sorts of other things. They were supposed to be visiting this child and they weren't. These were contractors.

So, I got a really good view into that system and I realized that children in Philadelphia, all the time, were basically in one of three systems and seldom did one system know about what the other system was doing.

Then, later on, about a year later, I spent the summer in the emergency room at the hospital at the University of Pennsylvania. I was a medical writer at the time, and I was writing about how doctors repair gunshot wounds. And so I was seeing these kids come in, they were very young and they were, you know, dying there in the ER after being shot. I started talking to the people involved in these cases, and came to understand that these kids often were suspended 30, 40, 50 times from school. They had multiple interventions. So I started trying to figure out how can I describe all the intervention that goes into turning around a child who's now 15, who's lying on this table or who's shot this kid?

So, I went to the only place where those records are available. When juveniles are charged as adults, they are called direct file cases. They are all over the country. Every jurisdiction has them. When the prosecutor wants to charge a child as an adult, they file that case directly to adult court and then a judge has to determine, "Is that child fit to be tried as an adult? Are they amenable to rehabilitation in the juvenile system? Should they be an adjudicated delinquent instead and placed in some kind of facility? Or have they been through the system for so long and committed so many crimes they really are deserving of being tried as an adult?"

So when you do those cases, I know this is a very long answer but, when you do those cases, all those records become public — school records, psychological evaluations...

Michael O'Connell

Things that wouldn't necessarily be ...

Julia O'Donoghue

Wow. Even for a child?

Michael O'Connell

Wow.

John Sullivan

Even for a child. Things that would be illegal to get in any other way.

So the judge that runs that court is a guy named Ben Lerner, and Ben Lerner had instrumental in the DHS series, because he allowed into the courtroom. He allowed us a window in these DHS cases, and he did the same for me. You know, he said, "You should come over here and look at this. It's really important," when I asked him about it.

When I was in there doing that, I started seeing these pretty remarkable cases of kids who had been suspended many, many times. I went to Vernon Loeb, who was my editor at the time, and I said I really want to do this story. He said great.

Julia O'Donoghue

Who's now at The Washington Post.

John Sullivan

He's now the Metro editor.

A couple of weeks later however, we had this incident in South Philly High, where 30 students, Asian students, were beaten in this very large melee. So we began writing about that, and when I began to see the district's response to that incident, where they essentially said, "Yes, we know it's a problem and we know violence is an issue, but we do not want young African American boys to be arrested for assault in our schools because we're afraid that, once they are in that system, they may never get out of it."

And that was a legitimate and real fear, and I thought, you know what, I think that's probably true. But if you're not going to do that, you must be doing something else. What are you doing?

Michael O'Connell

Right.

John Sullivan

And so, I knew, from seeing these other stories, that they weren't doing much. I mean I knew that these kids – that they were just suspending these kids over and over again. They weren't really intervening. So I said to Vernon, and actually to Vernon's credit, we should look at this and Vernon said yeah, we should look at it and you should work with the metro desk and the education reporters to do a deeper and more substantial story about this problem. So it was kind of where our interests really intersected.

And we had done the story two years earlier, and that was a little bit of an issue, but Bill Marimow and I met for lunch, and I had just come off being a finalist for national reporting for a story on the EPA. And Bill said, "You can do whatever you want. You've earned the right to do this story."

So Sue Snyder, a colleague of mine on the education desk who had covered Philly schools for 10 years, I set out on this story. We spent about a year on it together alone. We wrote the first five parts. Kristen Graham also helped on those first five parts. She was the current education reporter. And then she wrote part six and Jeff Gammage, a really beautiful feature writer, did this narrative story about what it's like to turn around a Philly school. That was part seven.

So that's how it all happened.

Michael O'Connell

So how was that package all put together? Was it just text and photos or ... ?

John Sullivan

Texts, photos, video. We did a lot of our interviews on camera. We really tried to – I think the problem I had with the previous series is I felt it didn't really let people know what it was like to be a kid in those schools. I felt like they let you know what it was like to be a teacher getting punched out by a student, but it wasn't what are the 19 kids in this class who really want an education doing when these two kids are fighting? And that's really what we wanted. Or what's it like to be the victim of violence as a student? How does it weigh on your ability to get an education?

And that's, I think, the perspective that comes from reporting on that system for a long time. I mean I just knew I didn't want to do it, "these just all are a bunch of city kids beating each other up", because that's not really the story.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

John Sullivan

That's not the truth of the matter.

Michael O'Connell

It's real easy to simplify it down to that so that people can move on to the next story on the page, but you're really not telling the truth of the story, which has all these other nuances to it that you, as an investigative reporter, because you are in the trench for so long, and are able to able to pull these different pieces together, it would present in a different way.

John Sullivan

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

One of the concerns that a lot of people talk about with the state of journalism right now is, as newsrooms are cutting their staffs and they are moving their resources around, being able to do this type of investigative reporting on something. How difficult is that becoming do you think? Is it getting better?

John Sullivan

Well for example, during the course of this project, Bill Marimow got fired. Vernon Loeb quit and came to The Washington Post. Mike Leary, who was the managing editor had been bumped down to investigations editor. He became the editor on this project.

The paper went bankrupt. It got sold and purchased, I think twice, during the course of this series. I tried to find another job frankly. You know it was a really difficult time to do that. The paper was losing massive amounts of money probably. I think at one point they said publicly that they were losing \$17 million a year. It could have been even more.

So I think that's a big challenge. The good news is that most papers recognize that investigative reporting is the thing that they can offer that most other places can't. So, for example, at The Post, the special investigative team, which is the one that I am on that is run by Jeff Leen, now has 10 reporters on it. There are national investigative reporters. There are Metro investigative reporters. There are investigative reporters all over that place. I think there are more than 20 investigative reporters at The Post.

So I think papers are making an investment in investigative reporting. I also think this whole rise of the nonprofit, you know, universities, nonprofits and newspapers are working so well together — I think I am a prime example of that — to find creative ways to fund the work.

So that's what I think is kind of exciting about this job is that I get to be one of the early shared reporters.

Julia O'Donoghue

John can you talk a little bit about your background and how you got interested in journalism?

John Sullivan

Well, I came to reporting late. I mean I started, I think my first full time job as a journalist was when I was 31. I'm 46 now. I know I don't look it. It's so ...

Michael O'Connell

You're so boyish.

John Sullivan

Exactly. Thank you.

So I was not a great high school student. I was not going to go to college, so I worked in a upholstery shop for almost five years.

Julia O'Donoghue

Really?

John Sullivan

Yes.

Julia O'Donoghue

Where?

John Sullivan

In Highland Park, Ill., for two brothers. Great guys.

There was a lot of drinking in our upholstery shop. So after about five years — and I began working at a gas station on the weekends — after about five years of that, I decided that this wasn't going to be a great life for me. One of the guys at the gas station had just fallen off a stool in the bar and cracked his head open. I thought, well, that's probably where I am headed if I don't change some things.

So I went to community college, and I happened to get this great professor at Oakton Community College in Illinois named Dr. Margaret Lee, who had taught at the University of Chicago and she taught

literature. So I took this honors class with her and really got interested in writing and how powerful it was and philosophy. I really was awakened to this world.

So then I went to college and studied philosophy and politics and I had a minor in classical languages. I was going to go into classical political thought I thought, but my brother was a journalist.

I couldn't get a job. I got a job selling title insurance. So basically I went from bank to bank talking to loan officers about buying title insurance, which is its own kind of hell.

Julia O'Donoghue

Is your brother still a journalist?

John Sullivan

He is still a journalist. His name is Drew Sullivan. He runs an NGO [non-governmental organization] in Bosnia that investigates organized crime and corruption.

So he was a reporter and he was working at [IRE/NICAR](#) [Investigative Reporters & Editors/National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting] as a graduate student at Missouri. Then he got a job at the AP in New York on the special assignment team.

So I went to this Investigative Reporters and Editors conference that was held at my brother-in-law's brewery in Chicago. It was like a big party my brother was throwing, and I met these people and I thought, God, these people are crazy. They are irreverent. They're so much fun. They're doing important work. What am I doing selling title insurance?

So I called Laura Washington, who was the editor of [The Chicago Reporter](#) and the publisher, actually, at the time. And I said I'll file your files, I'll sweep your floors, I'll do whatever it takes to learn how to do this. And she said sure, come down, and that's how I started. So I spent a year at The Chicago Reporter.

Julia O'Donoghue

Can you explain what The Chicago Reporter is?

John Sullivan

So The Chicago Reporter is a monthly investigative newspaper. It's actually a magazine. It was started in the 1970s. It focuses on issues on

race and poverty in Chicago. Actually, one of the former publishers just joined The Post before I did, Kimbriell Kelly, pretty remarkable reporter and editor at The Chicago Reporter. For eight years, she was there.

So it's got a great investigative tradition and, at the time, Tom Corfman, Laura Washington and Jim Wasilla, who's an instructor at Medill, ran it. So I worked there for a year and broke a pretty big story about the state police spending a lot of money on a new computer system that didn't track hate crimes, which was required in the law. I got on the Maura Tap Show, which was the local NPR affiliate, for an hour on the show. I just thought, Oh my God, this is incredible you can just write a story and people would respond to it and that it would cause some change. This is a great profession.

So then I went to Missouri, worked for IRE/NICAR, and then wound up at The News & Observer in Raleigh. My mentor there was Pat Stith, a legendary investigative reporter who taught me basically most of everything I know about investigative reporting.

Michael O'Connell

How did you, from that sort of path and then going to The Inquirer, how did you end up becoming an instructor at Northwestern?

John Sullivan

So what happened was, after about nine years at The Inquirer, a lot of the editors were telling me at the time that the prospects for the paper were not good and that I should probably try to move along when I could.

Michael O'Connell

Back to selling title ...

John Sullivan

Yeah back to selling title insurance.

My wife was also a reporter at The Inquirer at the time. So I was looking for something new and, you know, the market was pretty tight at the time. I had applied for a Nieman fellowship. I was a finalist. So I was interviewing for the Nieman and I got a call from Rick Tulsy, who was a long time investigative reporter who won a Pulitzer at The Inquirer in the 80s. He is a tremendous character, very well known.

He was starting this thing at Medill, where he was going to try to do investigative reporting with about 10 students a quarter. He was looking

for somebody who had different strengths than he did and I was referred by Bill Marimow. Actually, Bill didn't recommend me because Bill is a very ethical man and he would not — since we both worked at The Inquirer — even though he had just been fired, he would not refer me to Rick because I think he felt like that would be disloyal to The Inquirer. But Rick called me anyways. Rick actually asked Bill, "Is there any young reporter there who know of young reporters who doing investigative work?" And Rick called me.

After talking to Rick for about a half hour about the job, I said, "It sounds like you're looking for someone like me." And he said, "Oh, I was hoping you would say that." So I went out there and we started [Medill Watchdog](#). I mean he had it running for a little while there.

Michael O'Connell

So what type of things did Medill Watchdog work on?

John Sullivan

So the first story we did, which was in the works when I arrived, was a story about how lawmakers and public officials in Illinois can moonlight as lobbyists. Although it's not something that was widely abused, there were individuals who did take advantage of that fact.

We found, for example, a city official who was a paid lobbyist for a company while at the same time he was introducing ordinances that would grant contracts to that same company. We found other lawmakers who had lobbied on behalf of agencies that they were being paid for at different levels. So, in other words, they were paid to be a lobbyist in Chicago for an association and they were introducing and supporting bills in the state legislature, where they were lawmakers that supported that same association.

That ran in the Chicago pages of The New York Times.

Michael O'Connell

Wow. So how do you teach something like that? You get a new semester of students in. What's your starting point? You are going to say, OK, we are going to cover something or the other. Do you bring in ideas? Do you guys already have a project you are working on?

John Sullivan

Well it depends. I mean I think it's done a variety of different ways. I mean I know instructors come in with ideas that we are going to do this and then the students do all the work and all the writing.

I know our model at Medill was that Northwestern wanted Rick and I to write the stories. So they wanted highly professional work done. They didn't want student-written projects. That was their decision.

I think that can be a good model too, but students don't tend to get bylines then. The kind of acclaim of the work doesn't fall to the university as much as it does to their instructors.

So the way that we did it there was that we came up with the ideas and we basically tried to teach them how to undertake the process. I mean the reality is you probably are, I think, I would be safe in saying – like Jeff Leen would say that it's probably difficult to make an investigative reporter. They really are, kind of, they come out that way. I think that's largely true. I do think that there are reporters who have this incredible desire to get to the truth no matter what the personal cost is, as far as time and effort and energy. Certainly, they're not crusaders, but they just have this unquenchable curiosity about what is really going on here. They are very smart about how they see the world and these problems. I mean they have this kind of instinct about how the world works and how people relate to each other.

But, I think you can take people, you can make people who are not born investigators excellent reporters. They will be excellent reporters in the beats that they cover. You can teach them about records. You can teach them about what's good practice for how often they check records, what records they check, how do you look at your beat, how do you master your beat? And then, for the investigators, they really do excel in these kinds of programs and they basically, they just start running and you guide them. It's like a little kid. You really just try not to get in their way.

Michael O'Connell

You say they come out that way. When they start working into it, do they begin to feel that about themselves?

John Sullivan

Oh yeah. Definitely. You can see it. It begins to really start to awaken this kind of side of them that they probably suspected they had, but never really exercised. And once they begin to exercise that muscle, they just don't stop.

Julia O'Donoghue

I mean I went through the program so I can talk a little bit about it.

I think the value, at least of Watchdog, I don't know much about what John's doing now, is that you get a little bit of guidance in what the best process is or looking for information that would lead to a good investigative story. That's what I gleaned from it and I thought it was really valuable.

John Sullivan

Yeah, and I think, the project Julie worked on, we were doing something for The Tribune where we were looking at certain types of facilities and we were trying to determine, are these facilities good operators or not? So we put together a checklist of about 16 documents and the students went out and gathered all this information.

Then, during the course of it, we began to determine how good are they at evaluating the information, how good are they at finding what is below the surface. Julie was actually on a very good team. Her and young lady named Alex Chachkevitch, who now works at The Tribune as a reporter, were a team and you could really see that they had some experience, but, more importantly, that they really tried to understand what's beneath the records. The records only show you a little bit of what is there.

Julia O'Donoghue

For me, it was valuable because you got to look at – First of all, you kind of had someone there who had more of an idea of what they were doing. But you could look at a 990 or a police report or, I guess, we went into Pacer, some court documents, and you had someone there to tell you whether this was like usual, unusual. You know, some of this stuff is a little bit difficult to figure out on your own. I would have found it hard to figure out on my own.

And John and Rick sent us around the state to look at documents in courthouses, so I saw a lot of Southern Illinois I wouldn't have otherwise seen.

Michael O'Connell

Very flat.

John Sullivan

Very flat.

Michael O'Connell

I'm from Indiana so I know that's, yeah, you start in Ohio and you just keep walking until you run into the Rockies

In my own personal experience as an editor, I agree with you. You know I saw a lot of reporters, but I can think of two off the top of my head that there was something about them that they wouldn't necessarily go home at the end of the day. They had to go and do the extra work because they needed to solve this problem or they needed to tell this story.

John Sullivan

Right.

Michael O'Connell

So again it's – I don't know if it's a calling or however you want to put it – but it's just the way they come out and the way they view the types of stories that they're telling. It's not just a matter of this is my job. It's, you know, I'm trying to do something here to make a difference and to change things.

John Sullivan

Just because you have that skill and ability doesn't mean you're going to be, in my opinion, a great investigative reporter because I think there are other things that go into it.

I think the best investigative reporters have a sense of what's important. They're not going to spend, I know reporters that have been obsessed with and gotten onto stories that they spent years on that, in the end, just weren't that important. I think having a sense of, if you are going to expend this amount of energy, are you cognizant of what you are spending it on? Is the pay off is going to be there?

That's why I like to look for harm. Any time I come to a new area I try to figure out what is the most important story to the people living in this area? A lot of time that relates to, "Are they losing something that they have? Are they being harmed in some way?" I usually look at vulnerable populations because, frankly, they're the ones who need our voice more than anything.

Michael O'Connell

And they are somebody that tends to not to have representation in some way.

John Sullivan

There is also a huge, I mean it can be the general population when it's somebody who's a company or something that's putting out a product that they're aware can be harmful, but the regular guy on the street doesn't know. So I think there is a lot varieties of that. It could be the denial of the right to a good government. I mean so there's a lot of different ways to frame that up. A lot of those things, you know, not every story you are going to do is going to life and death, but that just tends to be where I like to spend my time.

Michael O'Connell

One of the things we talk about on this podcast is digital journalism and how that changed journalism in general. How has it changed? Has it helped investigative journalists in the way they tell their stories but in the way they gather their information?

John Sullivan

What do you mean by digital journalism?

Michael O'Connell

Well, being able to tap into data and records. Being able to, you know, something you talked about before with your project in Philadelphia, being able to incorporate video and other aspects of it. So you're not just writing a text story, but you're actually able to bring in other ways to sort of fill in and tell the story and then present, for example, data that you've been able to bring into it.

John Sullivan

Well I think it's helped and hurt. So I mean I started out as a data reporter. I mean I was at NICAR and I did data analysis, and basically took these large databases, and what you learn is that databases are a starting point. There can be part of notion that something is going on there, but they don't necessarily prove your story. They don't necessarily describe what is going on in the street because records can be, they're complicated.

Somebody checking the box is making a decision and you don't know how they're making that decision. I think that, in one sense, records are great once you know that there's a story there and that you've gone out there and you've been able to figure out on the street that this is really something that is having a consequence. Then you can go back and the

records can allow you to prove it in a systemic way, whereas, you know, just understanding something anecdotally, for example, if you heard of something happening to somebody, you might not be able to, say it's a police shooting, you could go through the clips and you round that up. You could try to FOIA from the local department all the police involved shootings, but the FBI has a database and they keep a database of every time somebody in the police force uses force or discharges their weapon in the line of duty. So maybe that number is going to be a lot higher than you might have suspected. So, in that sense, it helps.

It hurts in this sense. I think a lot of people and reporters feel like, and I think they are probably quickly disabused of this notion, but I think they probably feel like the data is enough. That once you find that golden database, you're going to be able to divine from all these records what is really going on. And most of the times, those records don't really describe very accurately the true heart of a problem. They can only really be used in combination, and should only be used in combination.

Michael O'Connell

It doesn't take the place of reporting and fact checking.

John Sullivan

Right.

A lot of times, you know, with fewer resources and fewer reporters, a lot of times big papers who don't have the staff of a place like The Post, and have to rely on one reporter covering a county, who may spend most of their time looking at agendas or things like that.

I can't tell you how many stories I've looked at over my career where the records just gave no indication at all of the problem, either because they were poorly kept or the agency that was keeping them didn't really want to draw attention to what was going on or for a variety of factors.

So I mean you got to get in there and talk to people because they're the ones who, it saves you so much time when you are in there talking to people at an agency because they're people. And they are not a database. A database can't recognize when something outrageous happens and they're not talking about it around the water cooler. They're not remarking on it. They're not making that human observation that says there is some discordant about this. There is a difference between what is and what ought to be, which is this essential human trait that we all have

that makes us laugh at things and surprise us. It makes us say that's odd, and writers and comedians use it all the time to trick us.

So we have this essential quality that a database doesn't have. You can't program visibility and so that interaction with a human being making this observation is the whole ball game in my view.

Michael O'Connell

It helps you make those connections to tell the bigger story because the data is just going to be what the data is.

John Sullivan

Yeah and they are feeling something and what they are feeling is important to them. And you can tell that and it makes you pay attention to it.

Michael O'Connell

Right and just from a writing standpoint, that's what people are going to respond to. They are not going to respond to just numbers. They want to know what the emotional impact and connection is.

John Sullivan

I used to write the big mega turds. I mean the four part series that nobody read but some official somewhere buried in a basement. I thought I was doing great work, but I had this editor at The Inquirer and also at The News & Observer, Trish Wilson, who really kind of emphasized for me, "Tell me what this means to people. I want people. I want to meet them. I want to know them. I want to understand them. I want to know what they're wearing." That really kind of awakened me to that.

I'm not going to be a writer like Kate Boo is. If you read her 1999 [investigation](#) into the mentally disabled in D.C., it's one of the most beautifully written, powerful investigations that's ever been done.

Julia O'Donoghue

Or her [book](#) a slum in India. It makes you want to cry.

John Sullivan

Yeah that's the kind of human connection and reporting that is a gift. I mean it's rare to have both of those qualities I think. I still make all my students, if they will, read that series. I've given it out to, I don't know, 50 students because I think it is such an important part of our job is to capture the humanity of people and really help people understand what

they're feeling and facing. That this is a problem that's not just an abstract.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah and that's part of your formula. You have to move people. You're doing all this reporting to invoke change. That's the point where you need to make your case, the prosecutor making his case to the jury. You have to motivate those people, convince those people, that this is a bad thing, that this is something that needs to change and this is why it's important. Get inside their head or their heart and make them feel, OK, I see why this is important. I see why I need to write my congressman. I see why I need to get involved with the school system or whatever.

John Sullivan

By the way, this is where digital journalism has really helped because we can put together, we can put together a Web presentation that will allow us to show a video of a, we had this remarkable video of a little girl reading a poem about how she felt after someone in her class reached under her shirt and grabbed her breast.

She wrote this poem and watching this 11- or 10-year-old girl with the little picture she drew of herself crying and realizing that, as a reporter sometimes, we were uncovering really shocking examples of violence in the schools, some of which we didn't report because it happened on the way. It wasn't really clear that the school could have prevented it, but just really, really, really kind of heart wrenching, horrible stuff.

So you might come across this and say, you know what, it's not as violent or as serious as some of these other incidents, but that's just not true to this 10-year-old girl. That's what makes people understand it and makes it impossible for them to dismiss. That's why we were so adamant about getting people to understand these children because I think there could be a tendency to read the series and say, well that's an urban problem. It's a city school and this is a problem that is their problem.

But I think when you introduce people to these children and you let them see what they're going through and what they really want, and it's clear to you as a reader that they want what you want, which is a good education, a way out, a way up. That just makes it so much more powerful.

Michael O'Connell

When you become empathetic and you begin to see the human effect of something.

John Sullivan

Yeah, I think that's why that story did well.

Julia O'Donoghue

John do you think when people report on kids, or issues like that, the tendency is to try and write it as if you're the adult, from the adult perspective. Like you were saying in that series, the first time they did the series on school violence, that you felt like maybe the voice was like, what it's like to be a teacher in the classroom.

John Sullivan

That story was about a teacher who had been punched during a break and fell down and broke his neck. So that story was really about, this kid had a history of violence and that story was kind of like — there are really violent kids in school and the school district doesn't do a lot to get them out and they end up perpetrating these crimes.

I think that's part of the story, but I think, if you notice, if you read the series that we did not talk about discipline at all. It's never mentioned. I mean, maybe it's mentioned once in that series, but I said early on this is not a story about discipline because this is not a story about — you know part of the intervention can be discipline, part of the intervention can be removal — but I think most schools recognize that a lot of these kids really need a different kind of help. And if they can get them to that kind of help, and that could mean removing them and putting them in a special school or whatever it is, you're not going to have this problem.

But if you leave a kid in school, even though they are punishing them, you know they suspend these kids 50 times. Well, where do they end up? They end up at home, on the street, hanging out, getting shot, shooting their friends, you know what I mean? It's just not, it's basically just pushing the problem off.

So we really just felt like, this is not something, we really would much rather tell what it's like to be a student in these schools and to really look at what is their interventional model? What is the thing that's really proven probably to have an affect on a school's climate? Not just how many kids did they send home when they're acting bad?

Michael O'Connell

Is it enough to just investigate and shine a light on this and humanize it or do you, is part of the job of investigative journalists to focus on solutions? Or to show where there is some sort of success in dealing with this?

John Sullivan

I'm kind of mixed on this. I feel like, you know, we do kind of become experts in a way, but we're really more experts at describing the problem. I think I always felt a little presumptuous in trying to offer a solution and part of the reason, I mean I think it's smart and it's a good idea to say, other places have looked at this problem and they found ways that they say work. But I think we, as reporters, have to recognize that we are not public policy experts and that, a lot of times, circumstances are different for different schools.

Maybe you don't have the same quality of instruction and therefore it's more difficult to implement a program. Maybe you have a higher turnover. Maybe you have this or that.

So I think we try to say that there are other proven methods. I think what we pointed out to the district and where we were on safe ground is to say the district has never really consistently implemented a plan to deal with this problem. They have implemented a plan for a year and gone back to something else. I mean they've never really followed through on anything they said they were going to do. I think you are always kind of safe when you hold an institution to its own commitments.

Michael O'Connell

Sure.

Not so much offering a solution, but just saying look, they've done nothing so maybe doing something would be a good thing.

John Sullivan

Yeah. Anything.

Michael O'Connell

This is what you get when you do nothing.

John Sullivan

Yeah and what does this say about their commitment to solving the problem? So I think sometimes an investigative series, like for the DHS series, I mean we didn't really offer any solution about child protective

services because we recognized it is a really complex and difficult problem. We didn't know how to solve it really.

I mean you could say they need lower case loads, you could say they ought to do this, they ought to do that, but think about it. You're a reporter. They've been doing this for 50 years. Some of these people have been case workers for 25 years and you're going to come in there and you're going to say: you should do it like Florida's doing it. Well, who knows if that is going to work? Don't you think they may have thought of that?

So you try to determine what has their commitment been to solving the problem. Have they denied it? Have they addressed it head on and failed because of whatever, incompetence, corruption, lack of follow through, whatever? That's really what you are looking at. I don't think it is fair to say, well they spent three years trying this program and it's got mixed results. I mean that might be a story that someone would write, but I'm not necessarily interested in that. That's more of a public policy story.

Michael O'Connell

OK. Let's sort of wrap this up. One of the things we try to do with the podcast is to look to the future and I'm not necessarily expecting you to look into the crystal ball and say this is what journalism is going to be, but are your hopes and thoughts about the direction that investigative journalism is heading? Do you feel good about it? Certainly there are going to be challenges ahead, but are you pretty positive about the way things are going? Do you have mixed feelings?

John Sullivan

Well I mean I think that I feel positive about that there seems to be, well not seems to be, that there is among many newspapers, among many newspaper editors, a commitment to continue to try and do the work at the highest level and a desire to do it. I think that I've been impressed with the fact that places, especially like The Times and The Post, are trying and embracing news kind of ideas and models. Many papers across the country have created these partnerships.

So I think you're seeing two really positive things, a way to train students how to do the work at a very high level, which, frankly, students are getting opportunities that we never got when we were young reporters. I mean if I came into a paper, I would never get to intern — to intern on The Post I-team is a pretty rare thing, The Inquirer probably wouldn't allow it.

So it's opening a world to students that they might not have gotten to participate in before. It's going to make them better reporters at least, and some of them it's going to make them turn into investigative reporters and they're going to be very successful.

I think you're seeing that newspapers are willing to hire very young reporters in their 20s, who can do the work. They're not so interested in anymore, "You have to go through this kind of long process of four years in the suburbs." I mean I think that's a good process, but I also think that what you end up doing is discouraging really talented people who don't necessarily need that.

So I think they're moving people up quicker who have the skills and abilities. I think they're looking to new creative partnerships to help fund and help produce great investigative work.

At the same time, we are facing some headwinds. One of them is the beat structure at a paper has to be strong in order to get some great investigative stories. You can't just go in as an investigative reporter and just start looking at every record, and we do it. We read the paper and we do all these things, but the best stories really do bubble up from the beats and you need reporters working those beats to find those stories. So I think we have some work to do there, but I think that's kind of a problem with the economics of the newspaper business right now. I think that will change. Paywalls seem to be working in a lot of places and I think at places like The Post and The Times it will continue to work. I think you are going to see the continuation of work at a pretty high level.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, now, go on.

John Sullivan

I just want to add one more thing. You know, there are these kind of – like at American, the Investigative Reporting Workshop, which Chuck Lewis started after starting Center for Public Integrity, there are these operations that basically seek to try to create these synergies among working reporters and students and publications. I think they are getting more successful. I think [ProPublica](#) has moved more to that model a little bit. The partnerships are hugely important. I think that can't be underestimated. Those workshops and those spaces to do this kind of work are also really important and they're continuing to be funded and

they're continuing to produce good work so I think that's also very positive.

Michael O'Connell

I know when people are looking at the future of journalism and how can journalism make itself viable, certainly investigative journalism is something that we have done very well for a very long time. I think it is something that can contribute to that, and hopefully we can continue to do and help journalism to grow.

John Sullivan

I get the good fortune of getting to see all three of these things. I mean I'm a part of each one of these entities — part of a university, part of a workshop, part of The Post — and I benefit from all of them. And it is just amazing how quickly students can work into an operation like The Post and make important contributions. I mean I just think it's pretty remarkable.

Michael O'Connell

And the benefit is not just to The Post, but also the public who benefits from those stories.

John Sullivan

The great thing about teaching is you see students like Julia and — you like to be called Julie right?

Julia O'Donoghue

Julie.

John Sullivan

You see students like Julie and others who are like very promising and you think to yourself, well, OK, there is a future here for this. These kids are willing to do it and they are willing to work hard at it.

Michael O'Connell

Thanks again for coming in. Now, where can people check out your stories at The Post?

Julia O'Donoghue

Are you on Twitter John?

John Sullivan

I work at The Post full time practically. I mean I am there four days per week. I am one day per week at American and the workshop, but usually I am working on stories that I am working on at The Post. In about a year, they might be able to see something. So I'm working on a story now, but it's probably a couple months away from even a memo. So we'll see.

Michael O'Connell

Well, we'll keep an eye on it and whenever it gets published, we'll make sure we link to it on the website. Thanks again for coming in John, this is really great.

John Sullivan

Thanks Michael, I appreciate it.