

Special Conversation

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※ This is an answer received from Martin Barron in advance for the Special Conversation.

Q1.

The Washington Post is a unique news organization owned by a big tech entrepreneur. I want to ask what has changed in the newsroom of the Post since Jeff Bezos took over. Did the Washington Post get any financial or technical help from Amazon (CMS, cloud, etc.), and did it have any major problems maintaining the independence of the newsroom?

A1.

The Post is owned entirely by Jeff Bezos as a personal investment of his. The Post has no relationship with Amazon. It receives no financial or technical help from Amazon. The Post has entered into business relationships with Amazon, however. It uses its cloud services, and it was featured on the Amazon Fire tablet. The Post developed its own CMS and other advertising and editorial technological products that it markets through a business unit known as ARC.

There was no problem maintaining our journalistic independence. Bezos never interfered in our journalism. He never suggested stories, suppressed stories, criticized stories, critiqued stories. We said at the beginning that we should cover Amazon and himself as we would any other corporation and its CEO, and that is what we did.

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Q2.

In Korea, more and more construction companies are taking over newspaper companies. There are concerns about the independence of the newsroom, what do you think about it? Or, based on the Washington Post's experience, is there any way to ensure the newsroom's independence from the parent company? I think the role of a leader of the newsroom is significant. What do you think?

A2.

I'm not familiar with what's happening in Korea. However, any company that does not permit its newsroom to have its journalistic independence represents a problem. In the long run, that will undermine its credibility as a reliable, independent source of information.

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Q3.

It is also because of your work that the Boston Globe's "Spotlight" team was able to uncover the child molestation scandal. In other words, I understand that you encouraged reporters to continue reporting without succumbing to external pressure and criticism to keep the essence of journalism. What does 'the essence of journalism' mean to you, and how is such leadership possible?

A3.

To me, the essence of journalism is providing the public the information it needs and deserves to know in order to be engaged citizens in a democracy. That means not only gathering facts but putting them in context. Central to journalism's mission is holding power institutions and individuals to account.

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Q4.

The collapse of business models, changes in the journalism work environment, and the shrinking of the journalism profession have made numerous journalists leave in many countries. However, I know that the number of reporters for the Washington Post has increased tremendously since you took office. I wonder how that was possible.

A4.

It was possible because Bezos changed our strategy from an unsuccessful one to a successful one. We went from being a newspaper primarily for our geographic region to becoming a national and even international news organization. We were ideally positioned to adopt that ambitious strategy because we were in the nation's capital (ideal for a national/international newspaper), because we had the name "The Washington Post" (which could be leveraged to a national/international scale), and because we had a history that established our identity nationwide even among people who had never read us before (because of our reputation for investigative reporting going back to the Watergate scandal). In order to become a national and international publication, we needed to become a genuinely digital news organization. There are many elements to that.

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Q5.

The disintegration of the role of a gatekeeper in journalism, fake news, the age of clicks... What do you think the role of journalism is in these times? And what kind of leadership do you think is needed in our changing media environment?

A5.

I've explained above what I think the role of journalism. The leadership should be faithful to the core values of journalism even as it embraces the digital means of disseminating information. That requires someone to embrace innovation, be able to persuade others to make adaptations necessary for digital success, and yet remain dedicated to journalism of high quality.

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Q6.

It is the issue of 'false information' that has emerged as a global problem for several years. It can be regarded as a more serious problem in this field in that it is undermining trust in the media and even journalism. Is there any way to deal with false information? What was the Washington Post's response to disinformation or misinformation?

A6.

Our approach was to give the readers as much of the evidence behind our stories as possible. If we are referring to court documents, provide readers with the full document (and annotate the relevant portions). If we are reconstructing events, supplement text with video and audio from the scene. Don't just ask readers to accept on faith that what we're reporting is true. Tell them that we're providing the evidence so that they can see or read it for themselves.

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Q7.

With the digital mobile revolution, readers are increasingly moving to digital media rather than newspapers. To keep pace with this change, more and more established media companies are adopting a digital first strategy, but most of them do not seem to have achieved any groundbreaking results. The Washington Post, on the other hand, had 89.7 million total digital audiences in 2018. What factors made it possible?

A7.

The Washington Post well exceeded 100 million digital readers per month in more recent years. I think we have to understand what it means to be digital. It's not just putting traditional stories on our websites. It's recognizing that the Internet is a different medium and requires new forms of storytelling – often more informal and accessible and skillfully using the tools now available to us, including video, audio, animation, annotation, interactive graphics. The forms of communicating a story should change. A single story can incorporate elements of all these different tools.

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Q8.

Online news information is monetized through readers' clicks. Many media companies are competing for the clicks. The quality of journalism inevitably deteriorates if it is driven into the click-bait. Is it possible to find a balance between the principles of journalism and the demands of a click? Is there anything you would like to say to young journalists who are thinking about these issues?

A8.

I don't think the quality of journalism has to suffer. However, the nature of journalism and the composition of stories will change. Most U.S. news organizations with a legacy in print newspapers are now moving to a subscription model anyway. Subscribers value journalism that offers strong investigations, deep explanatory stories, varied opinions, etc. It's not just a matter of clicks. That's a myth.

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Q9.

In the digital age, 'culture change' is necessary. In order to increase the credibility of the press while maintaining the principles of journalism, it seems that the organizational culture needs to be changed so that journalists can voluntarily try new things. How do you think the newsroom culture should change in the digital age? What kind of leadership do you think is needed to change this culture?

A9.

We need cultures that embrace change in the form of storytelling. Can we tell stories more visually? Will stories be helped through the accessible presentation of data through interactive graphics? Is our journalism meeting the needs of readers – not just in content but in the means by which we distribute it. The leadership needs to encourage new forms of storytelling that can be more powerful, more engaging and that, of course, work extremely well on a mobile device.

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Q10.

Many media companies in Korea are struggling to strengthen their digital capabilities. If you have the leadership you need in the digital field, tell me about your experiences.

A10.

Not sure I understand the question. But I believe I already answered with respect to the kind of leadership that is needed.

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Q11.

With the rise of the MZ generation and the importance of gender issues, interest in an organizational culture that embraces diversity and grows together seems to be growing in the media industry. In fact, as in Korean society, there are differences or conflicts between genders and generations within the media organization. Did such a conflict exist within the Washington Post, and if so, how did you resolve it? I wonder what kind of attempt the Washington Post has made to realize diversity in its organizational culture.

A11.

Yes, there were – and are – generational differences. The Washington Post has energetically sought for a long period to diversify its staff. This is done through active recruitment. We believed it's both right and smart to have a diverse staff. A diverse staff ensures that we can detect stories that we wouldn't otherwise recognize and that we can write them with proper context and sensitivity.

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Q12.

Lastly, is there a future for serious journalism, quality journalism? What do you think is the role of a leader for this purpose, and what qualities and personalities do you think a leader should have?

A12.

Yes, I believe there is a future for serious journalism. In fact, I believe that is the future. With regard to leadership, I believe I answered this a few times.