

# Writing to be Read, Speaking to be Heard: Advice from the Gatekeepers

April 25, 2019

Panelists:

**Iris Adler**, Executive Director for Programming, Podcasts and Special Projects, WBUR

**Jill Kneerim**, Literary Agent, Kneerim & Williams

**Marie Lee**, Executive Editor for Computer Science, MIT Press

**Sharmila Sen**, Editorial Director, Harvard University Press

Moderator:

**Elizabeth Knoll**, Assistant Provost for Faculty Appointments, Harvard University

---

## [Introductions]

JUDITH D. SINGER: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Judy Singer. I'm the Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity, and I want to welcome you all to this professional development and event for Harvard faculty titled Writing to be Read, Speaking to be Heard-- that's something we all want to do-- and advice from the gatekeepers.

So this is a chance for us to all hear from the other side of the people who are-- the people to whom we try to pitch our ideas to get a sense of how they think about what is worth being read and what is worth being heard and how to help you frame your ideas in a way that are true to the work you're doing. I think that's the most important thing is to keep true to what it is that you want to say but also to help you learn how the other side might see it and how to present your ideas in a cogent framework.

I am actually going to turn this entire event over to my colleague, Elizabeth Knoll, Assistant Provost for Faculty Appointments at Harvard, who for many years before she joined the provost's office was with Harvard University Press and, in fact, was an executive editor? Executive editor at Harvard University Press. So although she is, quote, moderating this panel,

she used to actually be on this panel before she took the role in the provost office, and so she has a lot to offer as well. So let me turn it over to Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: I want to thank all of you for coming, and I also want to promise not to say too much myself. The temptation to leap in will be great, because as Judy said, once upon a time I had a job that was not completely unlike the job of our panelists. But it's been five years, and a lot can change. As we all know, five years can be a very long time, and five years has been a long and eventful period in our national life and our international life.

So I am very delighted and actually very grateful to be able to learn from our colleagues who are still in the thick of things here. Each one of our colleagues who is speaking here has something special to offer. Iris Adler, who is to my left, is the Executive Director for Programming Podcasts and Special Projects at BUR

She has had a long career in radio and television, and I imagine there was some print media in there sometime-- somewhere along the way as well. So Iris has the great gifts of thinking about the second part of our title, which is speaking to be heard, how to get your voice out, and what you have to say cross clearly and briefly and tersely to an audience that you can't see. And we'll be very grateful to hear from her.

Next to Iris is Jill Kneerim long time literary agent, graduate of this esteemed university who has just remarked that all of her Pulitzer Prize winning authors were Harvard faculty authors. Jill has much to say about writing for an audience that's not only an audience within the academic world but far flung. And as that little biographical observation of hers can attest, she's had great success.

Next to Jill, Marie Lee, the Executive Editor for Computer Science and Engineering at MIT Press. Marie has had a long career working in, as her title suggests, in science, engineering and in technical subjects and has the gift and the experience for bringing those technical subjects not only to technical audiences but also to more general readers outside the professional and academic world. She, I think, can help us a lot in thinking about what people need to do when they're taking their professional specialty out of the professional world in which they usually live.

So I'm asked each of them to say something briefly about what they're looking for, what their experience often is, and then we'll have a sort of a question and answer session. Many people have been kind enough to submit some questions before this. So if the conversation lags, I will jump in with some of the questions that have been asked in advance from some among your number so that we can enjoy what other people have had to ask in advance and find out what the answers will be right here today. Thank you for being here.

## **IRIS ADLER:**

Thank you, Elizabeth, for having me. Pleasure to be back and nice to meet all of you. I'd be interested to hear what you all do at some point afterwards. I want to pick up Elizabeth on something that you said about how much has changed in five years, because I think it's important to provide the context at least in the audio world about how much has, in fact, changed.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this moment in time the media has been more disruptive than probably any prior time. And when I look at radio and I work in the Public Radio world, I'm here to share certain things with you. One is that very few people over the age of 45 have heavier radios anymore.

They certainly if you have children or you know people in their 20s, 30s, 40s, they don't have radios in their homes and now as cars are becoming connected they don't really have them in their cars either. So when you look at radio merely as a platform, not a content provider, it's really beginning to go the way of the newspapers.

So for us about five years ago, we began to really get very, very concerned about how our very good audio quality content would continue to exist. And of course, it quickly became clear that everybody wants audio on demand, in other words, the content you want when you want it, which means podcasts. And we are in a podcast moment right now.

There's a very-- the Edison report just came out a few weeks ago. You might have seen some articles about it. For the first time, over 50%-- it's 51% of Americans, something like over a certain age of about 120 million people-- had listened to a podcast in the last month. So there are

some cynical people who say, well, this will go the way of blogs, and that podcast bubble's going to burst.

No, it's not going to burst. What's going to happen, right now there are about 700,000 podcasts carried on iTunes. A lot of them will go away, because they will not be able to monetize themselves. But the notion that we will ever go back to appointment listening is just not going to happen, and we're seeing, of course, the analogous dynamic happening in television. Nobody really watches television by appointment anymore.

So what does this all mean? Well, for me personally-- not that this is about me-- my job has completely changed. I thought overseeing podcasts would be about a third of my job as it was five years ago. It is entirely my job now, because this is where the future is. And we need-- for several reasons, we need to reach people on the platforms that are utilizing particularly young audiences and particularly diverse audiences.

So although we repurpose all the content we do on the radio programs, like, all things considered and on point, here and now, we repurpose those as podcasts. We also do have a slate of original podcasts as well. So we need to do this for smart strategic reasons, because as you know so much of the model of Public Radio is going to our listeners and saying support us. If we don't have the radio platform to do that, how do we keep that economic model going? So we're doing all sorts of experimentation now with reaching out to people online on digital platforms and asking them to support us.

But it also is a really important way-- and for this, I'm very grateful as disruptive as the moment is-- is that we are being able to offer way more content, because we're not confined to a 24 hour day schedule. There's only really 10, 12 good programming hours on the radio side. So there is whole swaths of areas you can't cover because your primary focus is the news.

It also allows us to reach younger and more diverse audiences who are not, quite frankly, Public Radio listeners. So it's a great opportunity, and it's a long way of saying what it means for all of you who are thought leaders, who are experts, who are advocates is there are many, many, many, many more opportunities. Because at least in the radio world, you don't have to fight your way on to try and get on to an important show like Morning Edition or Here and Now.

There are many podcasts there are many digital efforts that offer opportunities for audio, and that should be something that's absolutely on your radio screen-- on your radar screen. That's a slip of the tongue. And I'm happy to talk more about all of that and traditional ways to get on the radio, but I think it's more important at this moment in time to think audio versus radio and think platforms versus just one platform. Thank you.

**JILL KNEERIM:**

So Iris I'm horrified to hear your report, because I just wasn't thinking. I think those of us as I-- I'm a literary agent. Literary agents are in business to find those of you who are writing books that are really appropriate for broad general readerships. And as you've all seen, newspapers are a shrinking island and far faster shrinking are the segments of newspapers that used to be devoted to books.

So trying to get news about your work out to the public is really very challenging. And we all think of public radio and write larger and larger checks every year to support it. And I'm just old enough not to really be sure that podcasts are going to save me. So anyway, for your purposes, I imagine that you're all here to think about whether what you'd like to write or say is for a particular audience namely your field basically or for a broader audience.

And the bad news I bring is that many people think they're writing for a broader audience, and it's really challenging to capture that audience. And I'm here, like the others, to give you some advice about first how to decide whether to try that and second how to move toward accomplishing it. So I think the greatest confusion I often run into among academics is that you are not always aware that the audience you're used to writing for has to pay attention, because they're either students who need to know what you're telling them in order to pass the course and graduate or they're colleagues who need to know the piece of the field that you're unearthing for them.

But when you write for a general reader, the general reader is there for only one reason. That is because you are fascinating and irresistible, and the minute you are not fascinating and irresistible to your great aunt Gertrude and your great nephew Tom, they'll leave. End of your

book. So a good way to think about whether your topic is going to be good for a broad readership is to imagine-- try and do a thought experiment.

Imagine yourself, what books attract you that are way, way out of your field? Think of a realm, nonfiction, that is way out of your field. What is the kind of book that actually attracts you to read? You're not reading it for any professional reasons? You're just reading the thing for fun or for edification.

Maybe you're just-- Maybe your great aunt Gertrude came through a hellish time in Europe and you want to know more about the history of that time, but so do a lot of other people want to know that. But what is it that makes stir you to invest \$30 and several days worth of your time to read a book, and then try and ask yourself the same question about your book and whether, in fact, it might pass that test. And we'll hear, sort of-- I hope we'll hear from you guys during the course of this conversation as to the kinds of things you are thinking about writing or are writing, because I don't mean in any way to knock down any book that anyone is writing.

I'm greatly in favor of people writing books, and I think every book has an appropriate life and place to go and don't try and make it what it isn't. Save the different book for another time. And I'm sure that we'll be hearing shortly from Marie about what passes muster in the academic publishing realm. And by the way, she runs a program or she's part of a program that is famously wonderful, beautiful books, important books. So I think anybody here could be very proud to be published by MIT Press. We'll settle up later.

And rather than go into it at great length, people often ask me how do I find an agent and how do I write a book proposal? And I've brought handouts on both those subjects in case you want to know. But I'll just summarize in case somebody forgets to-- forget the book proposal part for a moment, but the way to find an agent is to go into a bookstore and browse in the books that feel to you like the book you think you want to write.

And in the back of those books, there's usually a section on acknowledgments and the author usually thanks his agent. And that would give you a list of agents to whom you might write. And you could write that agent and say, I teach at Harvard. That would be a good opening. I teach at Harvard, and I'm on NPR all the time. That would be an even better opening.

So anyway take the sheet, and don't be discouraged if the book-- if you want to write a book for the general public and the book you're writing now is on the molecular behavior of something in very small context so it's probably not for the general public, then just make that your next book. So remember what the general reader wants is basically summarized in it was a dark and stormy night stories.

## **MARIE LEE:**

Great. So yes, I'm Marie Lee, and I'm with the MIT Press. So many moons ago, MIT president, Jerry Reasoner, said that getting an MIT education was like trying to drink from a fire hose. And the reason I say that is that, as it was kind of insinuated by both Jill and Iris, is the fact that we're all drinking from fire hose. There is just so much information out there. We all have access to it on our fingertips.

And while that's a wonderful thing for most of us on a daily basis, if you're a scholar or an author or creative person trying to find an audience, that could be a problem. So I want to leave you with the idea that writing a book is a great way to become a public scholar. Why? Because it's the job of a publisher-- forget about writing the book and editing and design and all of that's incredibly important-- but the most important thing that a publisher gets is to connect audiences and scholars, authors with readers. That's ultimately our job.

And the reason we're all still in business is that books were actually, believe it or not, still alive and well, OK. But remember this point about the vehicle, OK. So at this beginning of the process, you work with someone like me. My job is called acquisitions. So you've heard of editor, that term, and you associate that with someone who line edits the manuscript. And that's very worthy calling, but I would last about five minutes in that job.

My role is to go out and find the brilliant scholars who want to write books. I speak with people of various places, often at conferences. I read a lot. I send a lot of unsolicited email introducing myself to people who I think are doing very interesting things. I also work with literary agents when the books are for a broad general audience, but I also accept proposals directly.

That's one of the things that's quite different about university presses is that acquisitions editors at University Press actually go out soliciting and accept manuscripts over the transom. Now we're very busy people because of this. Gazillions of emails, a lot of manuscripts to read. So how did we sort out the wheat from the chaff, OK.

First of all, a person's credentials speak loudly. So it helps to know where someone comes from, what kind of work they've done, et cetera. We use peer review extensively. So both at the proposal stage, the front end, and this is more a feature of university presses. But textbook publishers and professional houses do as well, perhaps, less thoroughly than MIT or Harvard would do.

So we get expert feedback that is really primarily meant to be helpful to the editor and the author. We get great suggestions from people, both on the proposal on the table of contents as well as eventually when we get the full manuscript in. My role once we decide to accept your book is to be your champion throughout the process.

I'm still in touch with authors several years later. Because if it's a textbook, I'm going to be knocking on their door that book's successful about doing a new edition or even with certain types of trade books, hey, how about updating this, OK. So we maintain that relationship throughout, and I act as the champion them.

But the reason that I want to get you to this notion of writing and publishing a book as a way to become a public scholar is that some of the best work that publishers do is in the marketing and publicity. So for textbooks, we do a lot of very targeted direct marketing to instructors offering copies of books, showing the value, pointing them to the ancillaries, et cetera. I'm sure you've all been exposed to that.

We attend over 100 conferences a year where we showcase the books for the narrow audiences. But for the broad generalist market, we rely on paid advertising. Increasingly, we rely heavily on social media marketing, through building up lists of followers of the presses, sort of, fans, on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. We also do a lot of paid placement about you and your book in those venues.



But most importantly for the broad general readership, we have a fantastic team of publicists. Their job is to pitch you and your book to the media for podcasts, for interviews, for reviews, to get you to write op-eds. A tremendous job is done by these folks, and that's really the crux of why you should select a reputable press.

So in the case of MIT, yeah, we do a great job on design. Our books look terrific, because we publish an architecture as well as healthy science subjects. And we're all great editors, and we're very serious about what we do but we also have a fantastic marketing and publicity team, and we invest heavily in.

### **[Panel Discussion]**

ELIZABETH KNOLL:

Marie, could I suggest that you say something about the difference between the marketing-- the marketing and the editing and the publishing work for the academic books that MIT press does as opposed to the more general reader books. Because the questions that have come up often are how-- are thinking about how do you think about writing for those two broadly speaking different worlds.

Because the kind of way that you talk to your colleagues and your students in your particular discipline in your expertise is often a little bit different or maybe a lot different from the way you talk to aunt Gertrude at Thanksgiving dinner. Can you say something about how at a place like MIT Press that does both academic books and trade books you think about those solving those problems?

MARIE LEE: In terms of the marketing?

ELIZABETH KNOLL: Well, in terms of the editing too. I mean, this is really a question-- this is really a question for people who are thinking about whom they're writing for, whom they're writing for, what their audience is going to be and what the needs and trade-offs are for different kinds of audiences.

MARIE LEE: So as Jill mentioned, there are a lot of people out there who are interested in science and who are very excited by it. And the truth is many people buy books that they are not able to finish. I'm serious.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: None of you, though.

MARIE LEE: And there are some very, very famous scientific writers for whom maybe the people who actually read their books cover to cover-- I've been in a cab with them on the way to their next awards ceremony, but they sell many, many, many copies. Because there's a large-- there's a very large aspirational audience out there, people who are very excited about these things but don't really have the wherewithal.

So what I say to my author is, gosh darn it, can you please get those first five chapters to be really, really readable and interesting. And the way you do that is to give a lot of examples. Tell it as a story if you can. Generalize. Stay out of too much detail.

But the most important question is really what Elizabeth kept saying, and you have to ask yourself right from the get go and that's who do you want to reach? And you have to keep asking yourself as you're writing is this person-- think about a friend of yours. I often say to my authors, think about me. I'm not a computer scientist. I'm very interested in this stuff and it excites me, but I'm not you.

So think about people you go to dinner with your friends, your neighbors who probably are very smart people but they're not in your field, and they might be excited. So the challenge is bringing something to life for that person. And I find that the successful science writers are people who are able to tell a good story, to use the concrete to describe the abstract. So give me an example that will help me visualize this, this abstract item. Try to make it concrete if you can and give me a lot of description and examples that will keep me going.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: Iris, I would really like to hear you say something about handling this challenge given the brevity that in the few cases where radio interviews still exist and people like the people over 45 who still have radios in their car are listening to an interview on NPR. What's

the particular challenge for academics-- scientists in speaking on newsy subjects that they sometimes-- challenges that, perhaps, they sometimes don't meet?

IRIS ADLER: Yeah, in the radio business we actually have categories of people we just call good sound, which means they know how to talk in a way that is compelling and that is accessible and that is riveting even if they're talking basically about a dry medical study. So how do you do that? I mean, I was struck with what you said Marie. We are at a moment now at least in audio, both in radio and in podcasts, where people are very interested in storytelling and it's the endless discussions ad nauseum about what's the narrative arc and how do we tell that story and all the good elements of storytelling that you all know about, about building to climactic moment, et cetera are really operational right now.

So I would say that sometimes I find-- and forgive me for saying this but I find it on the radio and in our opinion site called Cognoscenti, which is written opinion pieces, a lot of academics seem to be writing to impress their peers as opposed to trying to speak to the rest of us. And I can't tell you how many academic's pieces for Cognoscenti, our opinion page, that we've rejected for that very reason. And we've implored people to speak in language-- we don't want to dumb it down, but there is a way to use language that is powerful and is accessible and still sophisticated.

And we ask people to do exactly what you were saying too, to build it around a story and then get to whatever the issue is through the telling of that story.

For example, a lot of the criminal justice pieces you hear either on radio or in podcasts now and they're having a moment, they're all told. You've all heard of Serial, which is the sort of preeminent podcast of all time, it gets at a lot of, for example, very serious criminal justice issues through the telling of a story. And I know you can't do that with every field, but as much as you could find an interesting story arc, I do think it does make a difference.

And I do want to speak to the issue you mentioned when you only have a little amount of time, which is why I encourage you to listen to podcasts, because a lot of podcasts offer what documentaries used to offer and that is a lot of time. NPR, for example, does two science-- brain science podcasts. One's called Invisibility and one's called Hidden Brain, and they will take 45 minutes to explore a really interesting issue with a neuroscientist. They will do it through

people's stories, but they will also incorporate, of course, the expert in that area as well. So I think there are more opportunities now to go to do the deep dives as well as the shorter 3 and 1/2 minute interviews.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: I would be grateful, Jill, if you would say something about trade-offs in the writing between say writing-- the kinds of ways that you talk about a subject when writing for academics and the ways you talk about it in writing for a non-academic audience. The storytelling has been emphasized. The use of examples has been emphasized. What else would you say?

JILL KNEERIM: So I'm not going to be able to speak to the academic publishing, because I don't do that. I don't work in that realm. But I mean, Iris is so right. Maria is right that a story is a wonderful way to organize something for the lay reader. It's just compelling. The Bible was written in stories for a good reason. It's how we think in a way.

But if your book is an argument, that's OK too if it's on a compelling subject. It just has to have a compelling development, sort of, a plot as it were in the argument so it rises and falls, kind of, leads. It's like a sermon. It's leads to the great moment at the end when everything comes to a conclusion.

I think since-- I'm going to give you a story. Shall I tell you a story? One of the Harvard faculty whom I've worked with for a long time is a Renaissance literary scholar, and that is something certainly of interest to the general reader. General readers, including all of you, go to museums, know enough about the history of the Western world to have a lot of thoughts about that. But I bet there's a very wide swath, which certainly included me when I began work on that, who really couldn't exactly beautifully define what happened in the Renaissance.

So Stephen Greenblatt is the scholar I'm thinking of, and he took a slender little story-- this is one of the rare examples of a story that's so small and it carried a whole book. And the story was a story of a completely unknown, not very distinguished Italian named Poggio Bracciolini, who was working as a scribe at the Vatican the start of the 15th century. And the year that this little anecdote really concerns is early 1400s, 1410 or 12 or something.

And Poggio is taking a break from a forum where sinners are being convicted and burned, and he travels in Germany and Switzerland. It's a period when the dark ages haven't really ended. So there's not nearly the freedom that we imagine. It's hard even to travel. And he makes his way into a monastery. I'm sure getting even admission to the monastery wasn't that simple, and then he talked his way into the monasteries library.

And in the library, he was a humanist, part of a humanist circle in Rome looking for the little traces of classical culture that were starting to come up. And Poggio went to that library and he pulled a book off the shelf, which happened to be the only surviving copy of a classical masterpiece called *On the Nature of Things* by a great philosopher. And I'm sure the magnificent Harvard scholar would never say it this way, but I'm an agent and I can say it this way. So what I would say in describing that book to people is the moment that Poggio pulled that book off the shelf could be described as the moment when the Renaissance began.

And Greenblatt used that moment and that book by Lucretius to go way backward in time to the time of Lucretius and before that to the Greek origins of his thinking and then slowly come forward to the loss of culture and the closing of libraries and the burning of libraries and books and the period we all know as the dark ages and then to move forward past Poggio to look at how the Renaissance exploded and how that work meant a great deal to many subsequent thinkers and writers.

So he was loading an enormous amount of history on that slender little tail but made it so easy for a reader, for me to follow what the dynamic was that's being described that whole time. So that's sort of a wild gift if you can find a story anything like as effective as that one at telling what you want to tell.

But in any way-- Marie was describing it so well-- that you can relate whatever you're doing to the normal life all around us, to the way the birds fly and the way that water boils so that it all happens in ways that we can see, touch, and feel, then I think you've got a good [INAUDIBLE].

ELIZABETH KNOLL: One of our guests who's not here-- who was not able to be here today is Sharmila Sen, who is the Editorial Director at Harvard Press. And I left her-- I left her card there partly because Sharmila had a family illness and couldn't get here and was sort of late breaking

news. Partly because I wanted you to know that she's there, that she is down the street, that she is the editor in chief at Harvard Press, which does in the world of humanities and social sciences what MIT press does in the world of science and engineering.

The former director of Harvard Press used to say often at meetings when the editors would bring books to the table, who needs this book? And that was a good question to ask about a lot of academic books, because the question of what's the perfect what's the professional audience for this book in classics or developmental biology or American history. But it's also a question to ask for trade books is who needs this book? Who really wants this book?

And that's part of what Jill is, if I may say so, is getting at. Because there are a lot of people who, sort of, feel like they need to know more history, but they don't want to go take a course or they don't want a text book. They want a story, and that book fills that need. I've been asking a lot of the questions that some of you asked in advance, but I think we should open this up to the questions that people have right now. So I would like to ask to hear from you.

### **[Audience Q&A]**

AUDIENCE: So early on, Jill, you said you should often-- sorry, thank you-- you said you should open up with I work at Harvard. And I'm just curious in general, like, open queries and pitches, how much of it should be I'm awesome. I work at Harvard. I'm a media darling, and how much of it should be this is the nugget of my awesome idea?

JILL KNEERIM: Well, obviously, that needs to come in too. So maybe your cover letter would say I teach at Harvard and my subject is x, but then any engaging way you can get into it is going to be fun. But it should be true to the nature of the book you want to write.

So if the book that you want to write is going to have some shocking new idea that it, sort of, explodes, then it wouldn't be a bad idea to shock that reader, the sort of jaded editor. I don't mean to say editors are personally jaded, but they get so many submissions that it takes some electricity to get them to pay attention. But I always say if the reader is going-- if I am going to cry reading your book, I would like to cry reading your proposal.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. Thank you for this panel. I have a question for Iris. I wanted to get your sense of-- so when the media comes and contacts you and says, OK, can you comment on this case or this issue, to an extent what is a good way to be able to shape that conversation or can we shape that conversation?

And there's often that like, OK, there's the call before the actual thing, and I think I'm not quite sure how to prepare for that. And is that a moment where you can say, OK, well, here's what I think about this. Here's the questions I think you should be asking, or here's how I think you should frame it. Or is it really like we're going to do it this way? And so maybe you could say a little bit about that.

IRIS ADLER: Yeah. No, that's a very good question. You shouldn't say here are the questions you should be asking. Because that'll everybody's editorial backs up, like, don't tell us how to do our jobs. But here's how you-- but here's how you get at it. You say-- what is your area of expertise?

AUDIENCE: Education and race.

IRIS ADLER: OK, so I think you introduce yourself, your emphasis, the stuff you feel passionate about, the stuff you feel comfortable talking about. And here's the stuff where I'm not really an expert, and I don't really want to go there because it'll be boring and I'm not the knowledgeable expert on that. But here's what I really care about, and here's what's really interesting.

And I have-- I've been used being a reporter. And usually I'll go into one of those pre-interviews with a preconceived notion of, like, I think, yeah, I know everything I'm going to ask them, but I'm going to do the pre-interview. And then I have the pre-interview, and those subjects steer me to areas that are way more interesting than I talked about from my cursory reading of three articles. You are the expert in the field and you know what's interesting and you know what you want to talk about and you know what you want to emphasize.

So it's your job to educate that producer or reporter who's calling you and saying this is what's interesting. This is what's seminal. This is what people need to know.

This is where I could get really, really passionate about a particular area. And don't even go there, because that's outdated or you should speak to that person about that. So I think you educate them about what you want to talk about and what you think is important to talk about.

AUDIENCE: That sounds like you're saying you're almost prepare more for that conversation.

IRIS ADLER: That is right. That preliminary conversation will guarantee most producers will go, oh, I didn't know that, and they will take that to let's say the host who's then going to do it or if it's a reporter they will then engage you on that. Because I think journalists know a little about a lot of things. You know a lot about fewer things.

So we really do need to defer to you, because we want to sound smarter than we are really on the topic as a reporter or a host. And I know that when the producer brings those pre-interview notes to a host, they're incredibly appreciative if they've sort of broken some new ground or changed the way we thought about it or allowed the real expert in the field to shape the conversation. Now if it's something really controversial, then it's a whole other ballgame. Because controversies in loaded areas that have both sides have to be explored, then of course, one has to be journalistic. But even then tell them the points that you want to make and that you can make and why they're important to make.

AUDIENCE: This relates to a question somebody raised beforehand and I don't know-- that I think is one of the most interesting and difficult questions that was asked, and I'll just throw this in and then. And that's the question of how do you handle highly contentious subjects. If you are-- if you were writing on a subject and the example given was white supremacy and similar issues that tend to ignite a readership, how do you do that and how do you deal with the-- and how do you deal with the blowback?

How do you do how do you talk about tough subjects, contentious subjects in a way that gets them heard? This, I thought, was one of the hardest questions that was asked. And I'd be very interested in knowing-- I think we might all be interested in knowing what you would recommend?

JILL KNEERIM: I don't have any particular wisdom on this, so I'll start.



ELIZABETH KNOLL: I picked that-- that was the example given, but there are honestly-- controversy is--

JILL KNEERIM: I mean, I think most books, the realm I work in, surely take a side in one since. I don't think I have seen a book that was trying to be reasonable about white supremacy. So it just-- a lot of people making very forceful arguments sometimes over argue it, and that's going to put the readers defenses up. So I would mention that.

But I don't think probably your goal should be to go in and do it super balanced work. You just want it to be reasonable. But you're making an argument, essentially. I believe that's what most books do. So it's going to have a point-of-view, and you just don't want to be inflammatory in the way you presented or I think you'll turn off many readers so I'm sure all of us have experience with people who might tend toward being inflammatory so to speak, and then our job is to kind of try and hold them by the coattails and get them to calm down.

I'll just mention since I've been in business a long time, not always as an agent. I once was a publisher. That one very subdued person I once helped edit was Ralph Nader on his first book, and you can imagine that he wasn't trying to present both sides. And his argument was exciting and fascinating, and in many ways I think the job was partly just to tone him down sometimes so that the reader would stay with him.

IRIS ADLER: So it's such a big, big question. Of course, we deal with this every day. And it depends when you say white supremacy, I'm not--

ELIZABETH KNOLL: This is the example that was given, but there are obviously other topics that are difficult topic.

IRIS ADLER: Right, so in the public radio world if it was a segment on white supremacy, it would likely be a scholar who has study let's say the rise of white supremacy or it would be a particular community that was suffering the consequences of the increased manifestation of white supremacist actions. There'd never be a-- like, there'd never be like a let's just talk about science. But you point to something interesting, because there's so many issues now.

Climate change is one of them, and I'm working on a big four part series with one of our podcast right now on the anti-vaccers or vaccine movement, a history of vaccines and anti-vaccers and the moment we're in now. And there is-- and we really struggle. There's no other legitimate side, but there are these very prominent voices, and one of our contentions is what we're looking at is how the internet and the digital world has really amplified the voice of the anti-vaccers.

So we're trying to talk about how to present their views and how they think of it without giving it credibility. And so it's a lot of language around saying directly to our listeners after we've presented to the legitimate scientific people, like, OK but you know we're at a moment now. And the voice of the anti-vaccers are rising because of the internet, and here's what they're saying. And we're just-- you just have to put it in context so that people understand that you're not presenting this as the other side of the argument but you're presenting it as representational of a movement that seems to be gaining momentum now.

But look, it's a struggle every day. Other issues are-- there's the, of course, simple maxim of journalism you present both sides. But there's-- we don't live in that moment anymore. I know, for example, certain things now we just call out at NPR and say we label when we hear the sound bites of that's a lie. That's not true. But we're in disagreement quite frankly-- I know this is being recorded, but sort of off the record-- with NPR.

NPR for years did not let their journalists label Donald Trump's statements as a lie, and they had a very-- they had a sound argument. We disagreed, but their argument was we don't know what his intention was. I mean, if he believes what he's saying, could we call that a lie? No, we can't. We can only call it a lie if we know that he is intentionally distorting the truth.

That seemed to me a big stretch, and you'll hear at NPR they just don't qualify people's comments that way. We and most other organizations do. So that's just a whole new thing of dealing with controversy in medias is how do you put things in context in a way where your viewers and listeners still think you're being fair and that you're not coming down on one side.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: What would you advise authors who are taking on subjects that are potent-- in this climate, are difficult subjects that they may feel then they are making arguments

that they may feel need to be said but they are, perhaps, legitimately fearful of repercussions? It's too big a subject for a publishing panel.

IRIS ADLER: Yeah, I mean I just think people need to authentically say in voice what they feel, and this is a moment where everybody is getting pushback everywhere. No matter what your point-of-view is if you read the comments section of anything that gets published, you're just going to get ugly pushback because we're in an ugly moment I don't think that should inhibit people from saying what they want.

JILL KNEERIM: And from the point-of-view of your book, it creates more conversation. I wanted to say something a little off this topic, but of thinking of iris and her world that a lot of you who are thinking of writing a book but aren't you know deep into it yet maybe might think about putting forward the core idea or one of your core ideas in a much shorter form.

I know a lot of you were asking questions in advance about op ed pieces. And if you could write an op ed piece or be on public radio making a statement and some explanation about what interests you and it's timely topical, it's about something that's being discussed right now, you'll get a lot of air on your subject.

People will hear you. They'll become interested. Some may come to you and want more, and you'll get a feel for what's exciting people and they'll get a feel for you as an expert on the subject. So it's not such a bad idea to try out an idea in that form.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: There was a question here from someone who's been very patient.

AUDIENCE: Well, actually, Jill just began to answer my question. So you guys were reading my mind, but I wanted to ask a question from the point-of-view of those of us here-- and I assume there are many who are both writers and are also mentors to younger students and younger colleagues who are dealing with some of the same issues at different career stages and who often are directed that they have to focus their publications to a narrow tenure-oriented audience. So then how do you help people to make that transition?

And one of the questions that Jill just started to answer for me is we can all imagine writing a book for a general audience, but should the book be the first thing that you aim at a general audience? And where should we be directing academics? What kinds of opportunities are there for short form that's something between an op ed and a scholarly journal, which is not going to-- which is that's the kind of length that we often want to write for, but is there is there a market or a readership for longer form pieces short of a book.

JILL KNEERIM: You've raised quite a lot of fascinating questions. I think, in general-- broadly speaking, I think faculty without tenure should be careful to get tenure. Because the few people-- I've had some very exciting faculty writers who didn't have tenure yet who've just said the devil take the hindmost, and I'm just going to write what I want to say regardless of the much more scrupulous and focused and usually narrower demands of my field. And it's not helpful toward tenure usually.

You may have a faculty person who's so skillful at the politics of it that they can still manage to get through and get tenure. But just to be safe, see if you can get tenure first and that will leave you then freer to say and write what you want. I see the struggles especially of young faculty, and I've had young faculty who didn't get tenure even though they got a lot of attention for the work. And some who haven't published the work yet, because it has to be perfect and they're still working on it, so.

MARIE LEE: Yeah, in the sciences, it is definitely not encouraged to start thinking about book writing pre-tenure.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: When I was in-- when I was a science book editor a long time ago, I used to laugh because all of my authors were old, whereas with my colleagues who were acquiring in say history or literature all of their authors were young because they had to write books to get tenure. And with my authors, it was as much as their life was worth to write a book before tenure. So they couldn't even talk to me until they were really safely on the far side of tenure and on the far side of a full professorship and, perhaps, membership in the National Academy. And then they could write.

JILL KNEERIM: No, no, it's not that bad.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: It's not that bad. But it was noted that the generational difference between the academic press authors in the humanities and social sciences and the academic press authors in the sciences was quite striking.

JILL KNEERIM: But I don't want to go on record at all in saying be careful and don't publish anything until you have tenure. If you really want to write something and say it, you're going to do it. And God bless and just be aware that it may create complications.

AUDIENCE: I just have a-- I just want to point this a little bit more towards the humanities where we are often hearing even from university presses that they want books to be focused towards a more general audience. And so the person who's trying to get their tenure book is then being told by the university press that you have to go wider. So do you-- maybe I need Sharmila to comment on--

ELIZABETH KNOLL: Part of the problem is that a book-- speaking as someone temporarily pretending to be an editor because Sharmila is not here, part of the difficulty is that a book is something that has to be sold. And many-- while many university presses are subsidized in some way or supported in some way by their home institutions, not all are.

And there is a significant difference between being a non-profit institution and being an institution that is deep in the red all the time. A University Press has to break even. And unfortunately the market for academic books in-- well, for many academic books, but certainly the market for academic books in the humanities is not very large. If they're really academic.

So I think that's part of the pressure that the younger faculty, younger scholars run up against. On one hand, the demand for more publishing is increasing over the last generation or so, while at exactly the same time the market for those books has decreased, either a personal market or a library market. And I can't tell you what the answer to that is.

It is still in many departments and in many universities regarded as necessary to have the book, qua book, a printed book, not an electronic book as part of your-- as part of your accomplishment. And it's a very unfortunate position for them to be in. So you are pointing to a

tough problem, but that is part of the reason why the publishers ask the scholars to try to be a little more accessible in hopes of enlarging the audience and enlarging the market.

AUDIENCE: No, go ahead.

AUDIENCE: It was just the follow up to this question. What strategy, if any, would you recommend to more junior people just starting out along these lines of just kind of refraining from spending a lot of time on a book if you're uncertain or something in that vein?

JILL KNEERIM: I just think you have to sort it out and be aware. I don't really feel able to give you good advice on that. I give you good advice once you decide you want to write a trade book, but I want to caution you to just be aware of what it entails. In my experience, if you're untenured writing a trade book-- and I'm very committed to making the trade books that I take on very, very successful. So I usually do lots of work with the author in advance of even the proposal. The proposal itself might take a year to write a good proposal, and that's obviously a big investment.

I think the best summary for me to say is it won't help your tenure probably. And the more successful it is, the dicier it could be for your tenure. So there's that, sort of, tension, because every book-- anybody involved in publishing a trade book wants to make it super successful. It won't-- I doubt that it would kill your chances, but it just-- it's not going to move your chess piece down the board I think. And maybe you'd be well advised to make a lot of close friends in the senior faculty.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: Now to speak as a university administrator, the reason I would say-- and this is something I was trying to say also as an editor part of the trade-offs is that there are ways-- there are things that you need to do as scholar to show this-- to show the scholarly and scientific routes you have taken into your subject and into your data or into your sources and whatever form of evidence you use in your field, and how you construct the argument, and that needs to be very methodical, very careful, very step by step, very detailed with a lot of references to previous people who have gone before you down those roads or down other roads that you consider to be not very fruitful, perhaps. You need to do that as a scholar. That's just part of the scholarly work to show, as I used to say in 7th grade math class, to show your work.

The general reader doesn't care and doesn't want that. They don't want your data. They don't want your methodological overview. They certainly don't want your literature review.

JILL KNEERIM: They do like to know you've done it.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: Yeah, they really want to know you've done it, which is why I teach at Harvard is a very good thing to say. But you got to leave all that out if you're going to write a trade book. And yet if you come-- if you are talking to fellow scholars and they see a book that may be very well-written and delightful and, perhaps, have done well as sold well out in the world, but it doesn't-- but it takes some leaps in the argument or it takes some cross shortcuts or it leaves out the references to other nuances in the argument, they're going to get impatient with it because they're going to feel it's not scholarly.

And that's the kind of trade-off that authors almost at any stage in their lives, in their professional lives I need to think about is which audience are you willing-- which audience you're trying to satisfy and which audience are you're willing to not to-- which audience are you willing to have unhappy with you? Who do you want to bore, and who do you want to love you? Because unfortunately, you can't make everybody love your book. You could possibly make everybody be bored by your book, but that's not what you want-- that's not what you want to do.

MARIE LEE: I just want to say too that I would look around, do some research to find the books that you want yours to be similar to and check and see who published those and what kind of grant funding they may have received. And I would start with the university presses that publish in your discipline. Because if anyone is open to good scholarly writing that might advance a humanities scholars credentials forward, that would be a university press. And many have sources of grant funding to get certain books over the edge.

And now there are things moving in a totally new direction, and that's open access, which MIT is very actively involved. So what that means is in the case of some books that we feel have excellent academic merit and need to be out there but where the mark is so small that it may not be financially feasible, then we make those available digitally online.

We follow, sort of, the specific constraints of the Creative Commons. And that's sort of the new avenue. And these works provided they undergo peer review like everything else and are published by a credible university press that follows the standard practice, I think the academic world recognizes that these have merit and value and humanities departments are well aware of the economic constraints involved.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: The world is changing on this question of the recognition of the economic constraints. Some years ago, perhaps 10 years ago, I was in with other publishers in a meeting with a number of senior faculty in the humanities, and the question was asked by the publishers of the senior faculty would they in their departments ever accept for a promotion or a tenure dossier, a book that had only-- that had been published electronically but not physically. And they all promptly said absolutely not, but that was 10 years ago.

The question is now before many academic departments and universities in a way that it wasn't then. It was-- it's not an open and shut question of absolutely not now. I think my understanding is that it out-- in many other universities, as Marie says, there's increasing acceptance or at least increasing recognition that this is something that has to be dealt with. So there's-- so there's hope.

MARIE LEE: At least it's a way to get your work out there as an initial experiment, because the first book is not always the ultimate gem that will come with the years. So it's a great way to get started. The other thing that came up earlier about how can you get started getting your voice out there, Twitter is a great mechanism. It's very brief, and it's a way to begin.

I would begin by following others, for example, and retweeting. It is a way to build a following and a name for yourself. And be very careful about what you put out there. But that's-- a lot of scientists blog very effectively even though in the wider spears blogging is, sort of, considered done, within certain communities that's not the case at all. People follow certain scientists and thought leaders and so just put it out there

IRIS ADLER: I would just add to that I know nothing about academic publishing, but I do know something about developing a voice as a public intellectual. And I think more than ever now the opportunities, because you don't just-- you're not restricted to an op ed in the Boston Globe or the New York Times. You can put up your own brilliant piece on Medium, which is a digital



platform, or write for things at Cognoscenti, or NPR has at least five different opinion areas people can write about science and politics, et cetera. Getting yourself published in those platforms gives you prominence.

And I know Jill you said earlier something that I want to respond to, and that is your goal is to, of course, get your books out to mass amounts of people. But that's where mass amounts people are now on the internet, on digital platforms. And the bar to get on some of them, I mentioned Medium because like anyone could publish there. And the best stuff, kind of, gets upvoted and gets prominence. And you could really impact a lot of people by engaging in those platforms.

JILL KNEERIM: And practice your short form argument.

MARIE LEE: Yeah, we encourage Medium to a lot of our authors as-- it's kind of a form of op ed in a way.

ELIZABETH KNOLL: It is, and it's also by the way secondarily for Cognoscenti where people write in it's about 750, 800 words, which I would encourage you all to write for. At the end after someone has written that short piece basically putting forth their argument or whatever it is they want to say, it says so-and-so's new book called blah, blah, blah is coming out next month. Watch for it. So it's good promotion.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. So what do you see as the future for regular textbooks now that so many of them are in digital libraries, and plus there's just so much material available online. Is it worth something-- something worth pursuing, or is it becoming of less interest?

MARIE LEE: No, I definitely think it's something worth pursuing. Obviously, situations differ considerably from discipline to discipline, so. And while your standard hardcover textbook may not always-- may not continue and has evolved and will continue to evolve, people need classroom materials. And so if you feel drawn to that, the important thing there is to be clearer about the course that it's for, to be clear about what other resources are out there. And actually, this is something that we should all make clear about books right from the get go.

So one of the things you want to talk about, obviously, is who's this for? Why? What's new? What's relevant? But another very important question is what else is out there, and how does your offering differ from the others?

So often authors will say to me, oh, there's nothing else like my book, right. Sorry, but that's not usually the case. We want to know about similar books. So in the case of textbooks, what other options does an instructor have and what's new and different about what you bring to the table? And textbook publishing is much more transparent than the general trade.

The editors are quite willing to receive proposals over the transom. It's very easy. Look and see what textbooks you've used so far, and those are the publishers. And that's generally true of books, in general, if a publisher published one book on cats and that book did well, they will publish lots of books on cats.

So I don't publish about cats, so we tend to have distinct disciplines. So as Jill mentioned earlier about the agents, that same with publisher. Take a look at your shelf, see who's published the books on your shelf, and go to their website. In the case of textbooks, they list the acquisitions editor and the discipline that they cover. Reach out to them.

AUDIENCE: Can I ask a question about trade publishing? One of the things that when I'm reading those books that are totally out of my field and I'm really interested in, one of the things that tends to put me off and annoy me a bit is when there's half memoir and half topic. It tends to be as much about the writer as it is about the actual subject.

Is that a trend that's, kind of, been and gone, or is that still something that's very popular among other readers, because I know winds me up and tends to make me put them back on the shelf. But I'm always interested in topics out of my field, but when I start to imagine writing about my own field and actually putting myself into it that much, I do flinch.

JILL KNEERIM: So you're just wondering is this trend, as you hope, withering?

AUDIENCE: Yes. As a reader, I would love it to be withering. Is that very much a trend? It seems to be very popular. I mean, I know when I'm a reader I want to know a little bit about

them, why this person is telling me about this subject, why I should listen to them rather than say to somebody else. I want to know a bit, but I don't want it to be all about them.

JILL KNEERIM: You know, I don't have a good across the field answer to that, and it doesn't matter what the others are doing except you as a reader get irritated by it of course. But when you write your own book, you'll hold yourself to the standards that you believe in, and that will make a fine book. I, myself, am more in your camp than otherwise unless somebody is writing a straight memoir, and those can be marvelous. But I usually try to get the author to write the whole book in the third person and making a good set of observations and arguments about the subject.