

**Katherine Schulte: Regarding your interview with Richard Spencer, why did you choose to interview the leader of a white supremacist group? How would you respond to the claim that you are elevating his status, providing legitimacy or potentially spreading his message?**

Graeme Wood: I decided to interview Spencer because I thought that the coverage of him had been inadequate. There are some people who think that any coverage of him is excessive -- I disagree. I think that you have to have good coverage, coverage that is proportionate to his importance in the world. The coverage that had previously existed of him didn't do that. It had treated him either as more or as less than what he actually was.

The essence of good journalism is finding the gap in the coverage. The gap that I found was sitting down with him and really describing who he was, where he'd come from, in the clearest possible way what he believed. To my great surprise, by the time I'd interviewed him, nobody else had done so. There had been no one who had really figured out and tried to describe his view of the world in terms that he would recognize. I think it's really important to do that.

Those who say there really should be no coverage of him because he's a white supremacist, because he has odious opinions, simply don't understand what journalism is. Journalism always requires you to talk to people who are not you, who have opinions that are very frequently very different from your own.

It would not be abnormal at all for me in my reporting to find someone who has opinions that are even worse than Richard Spencer's. For me, that's the essence of what I do, and I think people need to have more of it rather than less. The idea that we should have heard less about Richard Spencer strikes me as misguided, even crazy. What we really needed to know was more about Richard Spencer. We needed to know where he was coming from and exactly the danger that was posed to us.

In the middle of 2016, Hillary Clinton mentioned Richard Spencer's movement, by name. Very very few people understood what it was. They were blindsided by it. She was saying that it had been behind the winning campaign of Donald Trump. So the idea that we should have heard less about Richard Spencer rather than being better acquainted does strike me as profoundly mistaken.

**KS: What is your policy for speaking to sources who have ideologies advocating potentially harming or excluding you? Do you attempt to portray yourself as neutral or do allow your views to show?**

GW: I never conceal my views. I don't think there was a moment when I was talking to any ISIS person who thought I was sympathetic to them. That never ever happened. When I spoke to Richard Spencer, he was under no illusion that I agreed or was part of his movement. I didn't have to tell him that.

Now, if they were actually trying to injure me in that moment, that would of course be something that I'd have to deal with. But that's usually not how violence happens. It's not, "I invite you to a cup of coffee and then attack you once you're taking your first sip of it." That's not how ISIS violence works. That's not typically how violence from the alt-right works.

Conversations with journalists are supposed to be freely given. The source makes the choice to talk to the journalist. It can be motivated, but it's still their choice. It'd be a weird scenario where a source attacked a journalist. I've had sources be very displeased with what I'm saying, but the entire premise of the conversation is that I'm learning from him or her.

**KS: How did you get Richard Spencer to speak to you after you had spoken out along with your school alumni very clearly against him?**

GW: I asked. That's pretty much it. Richard Spencer is not shy. He's not unfamiliar with what it's like to talk to someone who disagrees with him, and I think he likes attention. I told him in the first minutes of our conversation that I was part of the joint alumni effort to repudiate his views. It speaks well of him that that wasn't something that scared him away.

**KS: Do you feel like that affected your interview at all?**

GW: It didn't seem to affect the interview at all. If I can remember his words, I think he said he had been somewhat hurt to find that some of his former classmates, even some of his friends, had reacted so harshly to him. But look, he's had worse. People have hurt his feelings more deeply than that before. I don't think that it changed the interview very much at all, no.

**KS: You've mentioned before that "racists relish debate." How do you engage in a debate with racists, especially as a non-white man yourself?**

GW: Some racists relish debate, some do not. Richard Spencer definitely relishes debate. My job as a reporter is not to vanquish him in debate. It's not to record the proceedings and be in them the champion of all that is good and decent. You can't do both.

What I'm there to do is mostly to record the proceedings and to elicit the comments from him that I can. That can sometimes mean challenging him, which I did frequently, through a lot of the comments that I give. Even his comments in my story that aren't preceded by me saying that I've challenged him are from challenging him. That's conversation. The kind of debate that a journalist typically takes part in includes saying, "Well, what would you say to this?"

Now, there are some types of debate that are just beneath me. I don't care what certain people's views on race are if they have views so odious that it lowers myself even to contemplate them. I don't engage too much in trying to pick through the filth of their minds in that way.

With Spencer, it's partly a matter of what I consider odious but factual views about race, and partly a political philosophy that is not my own but might be phrased in a way that could be respectable. I spent most of my time with that. You'll notice I didn't spend that much time on Richard Spencer's beliefs about the natural limits of Africans, not because I think they're correct but because I think they're obviously wrong. The rest of it, that's something I spent plenty of time with because I thought that further discussion could profit from.

**KS: Are you referring to his view of the need for a white nationalist homeland united by Judeo-Christian values?**

GW: That's the conclusion that he eventually reaches, and I did want to know more about how he comes up with that. I mean more things like his skepticism of liberalism born of early 20th century German philosophy, his view that liberalism has a fundamental philosophical flaw in it, in that it assumes that there will be a confluence of interests that eventually allows the ship of state to sail smoothly. Whereas he seems to think that no, eventually there has to be one hand on the tiller. I disagree with that, but it's a matter of philosophical debate. That's all.

**KS: Does the alt-right resemble or share any characteristics with terrorist organizations like ISIS to you? Do you think the alt-right will ever be classified as a terrorist organization?**

GW: I think that they have some things in common. It's never fair just to say, "These are the things they have in common," without also saying the things that are different. So yes, they're similar in that they consider themselves vanguard organizations that are working on behalf of a much larger population that gives them latent obedience. They also have very narrow views of who is right, who is wrong, who could be right and who could be wrong. So that's similar.

But, I hate to add, the alt-right, for all of its menace, has not been killing tens of thousands of people. They've been, compared to, say, ISIS, rather well-behaved.

**KS: Can you elaborate on "well-behaved"?**

GW: Not actively engaging in genocide. This is a low bar, but I have to point out that the alt-right has met it. They haven't actually said what ISIS has said, which is, "We would like to kill all of the following people." Now, you might think, well, if the alt-right were in power, then they would do that, but I don't think that that's a fair assumption. You can hate the alt-right, but they haven't left evidence that they would actually kill an entire class of people based on their beliefs. So I think that's an unfair comparison.

**KS: What determines at what point someone becomes a terrorist to you, especially when you're writing? How do you decide a criminal versus a terrorist, or alt-right versus neo-Nazi?**

GW: Terrorist is actually a word that I don't use too much because of its politicization, and I don't think it adds very much. When I do use it, I simply mean people who are systematically and intentionally targeting civilians for political end. That's it. It can be religious political ends or other types. But if you're trying to kill a bunch of people who are clearly noncombatants and you know that, then you're a terrorist. ISIS has been doing that. In fact, they have been saying they've been doing that. The alt-right has not, in general. Of course there have been individuals who have done this, but if we're going to speak of movements, then the National Policy Institute, Richard Spencer's think tank, has done no such thing. Other people that like them may have done it, but they haven't done it.

Now, criminal? People who commit crimes. That's pretty simple. That's a term that I use. ISIS has openly committed crimes. They think that the only law that applies to them is non-state law, religious law, so they don't think they've committed crimes. I think they have, and I don't think there's any point in arguing about that.

And then alt-right versus neo-Nazi, that's a little bit tougher. Spencer is the one who's popularized this term, and I partly just go with him on this one. The group that he calls the alt-right, I'm happy to say, that's just the alt-right. There are people who identify as alt-right who disagree vehemently with Spencer on specifics and general things, and personally, sometimes I don't mind using the word alt-right for them — that's for them to figure out.

Neo-Nazi? That's also a slightly weird one, which I tend not to use too much except for people who identify themselves as neo-Nazis. I think Spencer's political beliefs derive a great deal from the Nazi period and early 20th-century fascism. I use "neo" in the sense that what he derives is being implemented today, not then. I prefer to say though that he's a fascist, and that his fascism is heavily influenced by the Third Reich.

**KS: What do you think of the term "lone-wolf" terrorist? Do you find that term applicable?**

GW: I don't mind the term "lone wolf," but the term is a cliché, and it is enough not to use it just for that reason alone. But the fact that it's an individual who's doing it really doesn't bother me; still a terrorist. The motivations for that individual, as far as we know them, are to scare civilians by killing them into accepting some political end. That person's a terrorist.

**KS: Have you ever heard a terrorist organization contact you?**

GW: I've never had an organization contact me, no. I've had individuals contact me who were very sympathetic to a group like say ISIS. That's not a uncommon experience for people who write about these subjects.

**KS: How do you respond? Do you meet with them?**

It would depend on who it was. I've had people write to me and say: "Hey, I am or used to be in this group. I think it'd be interesting to talk." Usually if I try to do it, they very rarely, and never in my case, would just show up to you at your office door. Instead, they'd write to you by email, then you can cultivate the relationship over whatever medium they've chosen; that's what I've done.

Occasionally, it's gotten to the point where I've felt, "Oh, it's time for me to meet this person in-person," and I've done that. It's always best, of course, to talk in real life. Usually when I've done that, it's been at my instigation rather than theirs.

**KS: So they'll reach out to you through some mode of communication and you'll eventually meet in person?**

GW: Well, that's one way it can happen. But more often, it's that I am aware of their existence, I learn about them and then I write to them, saying: "Hey, I want to meet you. I want to learn more about what you're saying." Then it's their decision to say yes or no, and if I'm lucky, they say yes.

**KS: If you experience any, does grief or shock over say, the ISIS beheadings, affect your quality of reporting or writing?**

GW: Not really. I have the same human reactions that any human would have in seeing a horrible thing done. Part of the job is to work through those reactions and report competently anyway. In that way, I guess I am professionally better trained to deal with some of these things, but it doesn't have a direct relationship to how I report.

**KS: Is terrorism an emotionally draining subject to cover? If so, why did you choose to cover such a difficult topic?**

GW: I don't think terrorism needs to be a more emotionally draining topic than other topics that people cover. By nature, news is often bad news. So covering homelessness, more traditional types of crime, you're probably going to be exposed to things that are more difficult to be around, and terrorism is maybe not much worse or better than that.

The reason I started to cover terrorism wasn't because it was more or less draining, but because it was mattering in the lives of a lot of people and seemed to be undercover and misunderstood. I thought I could fill a role in helping people understand it better.

**KS: Is part of filling that role being an expert on terrorism?**

GW: I think any journalist has to start off trying to become acquainted with the subject that he or she is covering. If you spend enough time in anything, you're going to gain some measure of expertise. Whether I myself am an expert is for other people to say, not me.

**KS: So you wouldn't necessarily view being an expert on terrorism as a separate role from being a journalist?**

GW: Well, I mean, journalism is a funny thing. Journalists don't start off when they're covering something knowing everything about it. They're helping people who don't know anything about it, the average reader, their reader, learn things about it.

Part of a journalist's role, if he spends enough time in the subject, is sometimes getting to a point where he knows as much as some of the sources. That's a strange territory that I have sometimes occupied. Eventually, it became the case where people would come to me for information as much as I would go to them.

**KS: Do you consciously try to act as a journalist first and as someone knowledgeable about the subject second?**

GW: I am a journalist and I'm always a journalist -- no matter what -- in the sense that I make my living by writing things for a general audience, things that anybody can read and will tell them about whatever the subject is. That is always what I do.

I don't see that there is a necessary distinction between journalists and other people in the knowledge economy. There's professors up there, there's journalists, there's researchers and there's think tank people. These people all have greater or lesser degrees of knowledge about things, and journalists sometimes, because of the nature of their work and going from subject to subject, get a great deal of knowledge about one subject. But unlike the others, because of their movement from subject to subject, they're often at a loss.

**KS: Critics from law enforcement or security studies say that media coverage tends to sensationalize terrorism. How would you respond to them?**

GW: I guess it's difficult to know which media coverage they're talking about. The word "sensationalize" itself is a bit mysterious. I would have to hear what exactly they mean by that and which coverage they're talking about.

If you're just describing someone doing a terrible act, an act of terrorism, that strikes me as simply reporting. It doesn't strike me as sensationalizing at all. If you're sticking to what the facts are, then you're probably doing the job right.

**KS: What would you say to the average Joe who claims that the media only talks about the bad news, shows the same clip of an attack over and over again, and has no respect for the victims?**

GW: The critique that the media show only the bad news is deeply misguided. Most news is bad news because if it's not bad news, then it isn't news. I could write a story every day about all the earthquakes that didn't happen. It would be intensely boring, and that average Joe on the street would stop reading anything I wrote because it was so boring. I think it is very reasonable to write about what's most important in the world, and often that includes war. It includes things that the person on the street wish weren't the case, wish would go away, wish that he wouldn't have to see in the morning when reading the newspaper. But part of what I do is also having to write about what's important whether or not my audience likes it. Whether the facts are pleasant or unpleasant doesn't determine whether they should be reported or not.

Now, I'm not a TV journalist, so it's not like I'm showing any images ever, so I can't really defend showing the same images over and over again. But the standards of journalism always apply. You are looking for ways to report on what's news, not what's old, so if you're showing the same things over and over again when it's long ceased to be news, I guess that is a problem. That's a reasonable thing to object to, but it's different from objecting that it's only covering bad news.

**KS: Do you see news media playing a role in fighting terrorism? Do you think you should be giving concessions to law enforcement and helping capture terrorists, or do you view your role more as an outsider?**

GW: I'm neither an outsider nor an agent of law enforcement. I am as inside as I could possibly be. I try to be inside, and I try to then tell stories to the public about what I've found by being inside.

I have no role whatsoever in helping law enforcement. I've been asked by law enforcement — and they're perfectly entitled to ask me to help them convict someone — to testify against a source, and I always say no because that's not my job. My job is to report, and if you want any reporting done at all, then you have to preserve that independence.

**KS: So the role of the news media should just be to tell the story and give the information?**

GW: The job of the news media is to be the news media. It is not to be law enforcement, it is not to be something else. It's not to be advocates. It's not to be activists. It is to be the news media. That is it.

**KS: If an event, such as a bombing, had just happened, what would be your first step to gather reliable information?**

GW: It would depend on the bombing. I suppose I would go and look for reliable sources on the bombing. Raw footage would be helpful, but I don't typically report on things as they're happening, unless I happen to be there. I don't see much advantage in my trying to do that from far away when there's usually someone closer.

**KS: What role does social media play in your reporting?**

GW: Social media has been useful. I'm on Twitter and Facebook. Now and then, I let people know what I've been reading, and I interact with readers. It's also been a resource in reporting. That is, I can find people more easily now. I can track people down, so I use it pretty aggressively in my reporting.

**KS: When you're writing about acts of terrorism, are there rules that you have to abide by that are set by The Atlantic or the government? If so, what are those rules and how do you feel about them?**

GW: There are no rules set by the government. Rules set by The Atlantic are similar to rules that apply to all pieces, which is that the piece must undergo rigorous editing, fact-checking and standards of all types. I don't think that there are any that specifically apply to the realm of terrorism. It's a matter of getting the right facts correctly in the right order. That's it.