S8E5 Transcript

[00:00] **Astrid Lange:** I mean, the resources are there. There is a lot of day-to-day coverage that the journalists have to cover now. So, they have to take time to kind of dig into longer stories. Ryan Wedding, the snowboarder turned drug trafficker. I did have to use the archives for that because of his snowboarding career. They owned a ski hill in Ontario.

[0:21] I'm always using- we're always using the archives. People think it's old history. We never need to look at that, but want to dig into who this man is, gotta use the archives, right?

[00:33] **Dylan Kulcher:** Some stories are not killed. They are never allowed to exist. This is Pull quotes. I'm your host Dylan Kulcher. Today we're asking who gets silenced? In my previous episode I delved in a conversation with Aaron Hagey-MacKay bringing emphasis to how media figures can curtail the algorithm to achieve prominence online with stories that receive decreasing coverage in the modern media machine.

[01:01] Taking that a step further, it's important to look at how online systems of news preservation are essential to keeping the record straight. What falls between the cracks may seem inconsequential, but if we're to not risk history repeating itself, it's important to keep checks and balances on what had already been written and what hasn't already been written.

[01:23] Astrid Lange at the Toronto Star Library Archives has been something of an industry insider for the past two decades.

[01:28] **Astrid Lange:** There's actually two of us. So we're two librarians. ~ I've been working there since 2000 when there were 10 of us and now there's only two, but yes. I provide the newsroom with editorial research.

[01:42] We always worry about as technology changes even our own website. ~When the website goes through various upgrades, sometimes we lose stories that have been on the web, that you can't find them on the web again. But we can find them in our in-house archive, because we do archive our web stories in a text version, just so we can have the content. Because sometimes when the ~ website goes through an upgrade, sometimes it can only handle so many stories.

[02:17] So maybe something from 2011 disappears. And we do come across that quite often. But in the library, we can still access it. And our content is also provided to a lot of aggregate databases.

[02:33] **Dylan Kulcher:** Astrid has been behind the scenes at the Toronto Star and has seen firsthand how new technologies have been implemented then removed while not accounting for archival preservation. Going back to the publication's beginnings, there are certain years that were not preserved for the record. Microfilming became the solution as the Canadian news entered the 20th century.

[02:56] **Astrid Lange:** We can find stories for the Toronto Star going back to 1892. Like that's when we started. that's very important. So, I don't know what happened. People always ask why are there no news? We have a few stories accessible from 1892, because that was the year the Star began. But then I don't know what happened, and people ask me this all the time. And no one wrote it down.

[03:22] No one thought to archive any papers from 1893. 1894, I assume, again, I don't know because nothing was ever written down. And I always get these questions and my typical response is, how old do you think I am? I don't know what happened in 1894. I think in 1894, they did start to collect newspapers and microfilm them. That was the important thing because you're right, the newspapers do start to deteriorate after a while

[03:55] And plus they take up a lot of space. So, the Star and many other news publications microfilm their content. And now there is a process of digitizing that microfilm. So that's when I say I can access Toronto Star stories from the 1890s, it's generally our digitized microfilm.

[04:17] **Dylan Kulcher:** The early stages of online archives being implemented had seemed like a boon to the news industry, but it was wrapped in the silver lining of the dot-com bubble. A mere choosing of a wrong startup application would revert news preservable back to the analog era of rummaging through film roles.

[04:36] **Astrid Lange:** Atlantic magazine piece about how microfilm will probably outlast us all. That is a shame because I was thinking about that article quite recently because in the early 2000s at the Star, we started digitizing our photographs on a certain platform called Scrounger. Except, the way to access Scrounger, company collapsed, it folded and now our IT department can't figure out how to access those photos.

[05:08] And I think about, my God, I can still get photos off these negatives from 1955, right? But we can't access Scrounger because that technology doesn't exist anymore and no one sort of kept it up and no one can access it. I thought, wow, microfilming, that seems to always last. Though there, Microfilm does have an issue called vinegar syndrome.

[05:34] It can deteriorate after a while, but you can work with it and touch it up. I know the Toronto Public Library has had a problem with some of their microfilm, but they fixed it now.

[05:45] **Dylan Kulcher:** As the early 2000s progressed, the publication of the Toronto Star's offshoot Eye Weekly and its successor, The Grid, presented continued challenges to news archive inventorying. Astrid recalled the paper as keeping a track record of the hubbub in Toronto during her early studies, but as the University of Pennsylvania Serial Archive indicates, "not all issues were fully captured by the Wayback Machine Harvester."

[06:11] **Astrid Lange:** You have to archive it, but some of our sister publications like The Grid, for instance, we had some difficulty trying to get them to archive their content because they just said to us, oh it's on the web, we don't have to worry about it. And then The Grid closed, and then we worried about it because their stories disappeared. And so, we've had to go back and almost recreate, find print editions, find cached versions of their stories to kind of recreate an archive.

[06:44] **Dylan Kulcher:** A preliminary look at the archives registry online leaves much to be desired. Wanting to exhibit the use of language and minutiae of T.O. subculture, the Wayback Archive merely retains the homepage as is often the case with earlier hypertext documents. Meaning, in order to peruse the lifestyle leanings of Toronto from the early 90s to the mid-2000s, it has to be done through physical microfilms on-site at the Library Archive.

[07:14] The crawl to conserve information hit a wall of corporate arbitration when faced with the impasse of safeguarding output to the tablet format Star Touch, an iPad news publication that published content intended for subscribers that differed from traditional Star print or webpage.

[07:31] **Astrid Lange:** We don't talk about Star Touch. And I will say a lot of people did like the platform, but not the audience they were going for. Our management team thought it might appeal to a younger demographic, and it did

appeal to a demographic, but it was an older demographic. And so, it wasn't quite where they wanted it to be.

[07:55] But I thought Star Touch was actually a beautiful, beautiful platform, it showcased stories in a unique way, but it was the medium. People weren't using iPads or tablets to read the news. They were using their phones or their desktop. So unfortunately, it kind of fell by the wayside.

[08:21] The content was different because of the platform. They could use the tablet format to showcase photos. There was more interactivity permitted on the tablet. So, they kind of changed the formatting of the stories that way. Originally, they weren't going to archive the stories. And I fought for that. I said there's got to be a way to save these stories because they're unique. They're different from what we have on thestar.com. They are different from what we have in the newspaper, please let me archive.

[09:03] And I was told, I'm now telling tales out of school I think, I was told by management that there was no way to archive it. And I spoke to our IT department and she said, there's gotta be a way. And the platform came from La Press. La Press was the first publication that designed a tablet like this. So, our IT department contacted people at La Press and they told her, how we, how they archived it.

[09:29] So we now do have an archive of those stories. And funny, it just came up two weeks ago. ~ A former staff writer on the tablet wanted to locate a couple of stories that he wrote. And they're not on thestar.com, so I located them for him and I sent them to him. Just text only. We couldn't capture the tablet format, unfortunately, but the content.

[09:56] You know, the meat, the meat of the story was there.

[09:59] **Dylan Kulcher:** Silence can take many forms in the digital news environment, whether it be with stories disappearing from the record, and other times news outlets outsourcing their reporting to wire services giving the pretense of presenting a new or contrary roundup. But that disparity can be a simple choice of wording in the headline, and a minimal disclaimer that it's actually the same source as other organizations with access to the wires such as the Canadian Press.

[10:27] Is there a right way or a wrong way to do this? And who is omitted from the story when an attention-grabbing headline is prioritized more than balanced news values?

[10:36] **Astrid Lange:** You do see it in the way publications handle wire stories. So those are stories that come to us that are not written by our staff. And it's covered in many different publications. And you can see slightly how publications bias comes through in that headline. Because it's the same story from the wire that everybody is running, yet the headline is always a little different and tells a little different story.

[11:07] That is crucial because often people are drawn to a story based on a headline. So, they might choose to read the National Post's story on this particular topic because the headline grabs them in a certain way, even though our headline might be more objective or maybe not so or maybe follows a political position that they are not in line with.

[11:33] **Dylan Kulcher:** Looking retroactively at the news depictions of the past, who may have been silenced in the way of traditional news coverage always warrants careful reconsideration. After all, if the digital era is all about accountability, then people who had been silenced in the past can be given their due, and wrongs can be righted.

[11:53] **Astrid Lange:** Of course, we're always looking back and see what could we have done. We can't really say what could we have done at the time, but we can kind of rectify the perception now. I'm just thinking of a story we ran. For many years, the Toronto Star used to run a column called Today's Child, and it was essentially an advertisement for a child that needed to be adopted.

Unfortunately, the writing was a little paternalistic. And so, this woman who was actually adopted because her photo and a column about her appeared in this series, wrote about this series that the Star used to run and the Toronto Telegram before us ran and how it was an odd way to get children to be adopted.

[12:47] And she looks back and thinks that you know, she was portrayed as such a poorly child that needed assistance and then. So yeah, it was so… The star doesn't shy away from looking back on how we portrayed something or use of certain words in our headlines and we'll call it out, right?

[13:13] Yeah, we have an editor at work who's essentially our style guru and he will call people out on use of certain phrases that are antiquated or outdated.

Things that you might have grown up hearing all the time. And actually, at the Star, we have television screens around all over the place and sometimes his notes will just pop up as reminders. Like, please don't use the phrase falling on deaf ears or something like that.

[13:45] We were very disparaging to redheads at some point. Like the UK media actually is terrible to redheads. The only reason I figured that out is that ~ I watched a documentary about a redheaded guy who was trying to find a community of redheads. he discovered the Brits tend to use ginger despairingly.

[14:11] Like they, oh that ginger! That ginger! Definitely the Canadian North American media is not as bad, but the Brits are on a other level sometimes with use of their headlines and use of their turns of phrases.

[14:25] **Dylan Kulcher:** With the proliferation of newly developed deep fake AI photo technology, another concern is raised of what is or was real and risks posthumously silencing the legitimacy of the legacy media narrative, even the one that the newsrooms such as the Toronto Star are intent on archiving, rectifying and revisiting through a critical lens.

[14:47] As Astrid illuminates, the threat posed by this technology isn't just that it can mislead viewers into believing something that didn't happen, it can also diminish legitimate findings even to the insiders who are versed in the news media.

[14:59] **Astrid Lange:** Years ago in the 70s, there was a hurricane in Barrie and a young boy submitted a photograph to the star ~ of, from Barrie and he had taken a photo of this hurricane and it ran on our front page. And then a week later, a week or so later, we discovered that that kid had taken a photograph of a hurricane from a book and submitted it.

[15:23] AI generation of photos now is pretty good and like people are now starting to question our photographers whether they're using AI. Recently one of our photographers Steve Russell showed on his social media the music store Steve's Music on Queen Street is closing. So, Steve remembered that he had a great photo from the G… G20, is it G20? Yeah, it was the G20.

[15:52] So that was in Toronto in 2010 and there was a lot of demonstrations, a lot of protests going on. For whatever reason, there were quite a few on Queen Street and ~ in front of Steve's music for some reason. Steve captured this amazing photo of a ~ guy being dragged away from a burning car. This guy had gone close to a car

trying to put out a car fire and he was just getting too close. And so, someone was dragging him away from the car.

[16:23] And Steve, because Steve's music was closing, Steve Russell, our photographer thought, you know what, I'm gonna showcase that photo again. And he put it up on his social media and he said about half of the commenters said that looks like AI. And I think that's going to be a problem now when photographers do manage to capture something in an amazing way, like using light perfectly, using the environment when they do capture something great, people are now gonna question, Oh that's AI. I bet that's AI.

[16:57] Two years ago or so, the Star actually did poll the newsroom and they went around and showed journalists and photographers two photos and they were asked to determine which was AI, which was real. The results weren't great. Photographers and generally photographers were pretty good, but journalists and editors, they had trouble distinguishing between AI and real photography.

[17:27] Or they were trying too hard sometimes to look for AI everywhere. You know, and then they didn't recognize, no, this is just a great photograph.

[17:36] **Dylan Kulcher:** Speaking of great photography, I had asked Astrid about a photo collection that she had pulled from the Toronto Star repository for a retrospective in 2020 entitled, “This is what Toronto looked like exactly 34 years ago”. The photographs serve as a time capsule into 1986 when a team of 26 photographers embarked on a mission to catalog the daily happening of the city over 24 hours in early January.

[18:02] Often verging on the surreal, the assemblage stands as a reminder of the power of a stunning snapshot and raises the brow on how the Toronto Star can reemphasize its hyper-local focus to parse the silence, even if today people may question the legitimacy of pictures.

[18:18] **Astrid Lange:** Yeah, so that was essentially the Star in the 1980s wanted to look at a day in the life of Toronto. ~ They had a photographer. They, again, we had more photographers at that time. So, they had photographers cover like, you know, midnight to 4 a.m. just go around the city capturing stuff and see what came back. And it's it was amazing, right? It's, you know, we want to capture the major things that are happening all the time.

[18:45] But the major events. Mark Carney is speaking. This trial is going on. But an important part of the Toronto Star is capturing the day-to-day lives of people. What is important to people ~ on a day-to-day level, right? So sometimes it's what's happening at the local high school. I think the Star is really looking at that. We've undertaken a new project called Toronto the Better. So, they're trying to figure out what can Toronto do to make life better for its citizens.

[19:19] **Dylan Kulcher:** Looking beyond the scope of regular coverage is a good start for ensuring who gets silenced doesn't remain sequestrated in the silence of algorithmically determined news prominence. The possibilities of news coverage should not be limited to governmental findings, be that publicly available or be that disclosed by an FOI. Sometimes, unfortunately, newsrooms have to do that work for them.

[19:41] An award-winning analysis Astrid had helped research for was the basis for a paper that the Toronto Star released in accompaniment to its news story called Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women in Canada.

[19:51] **Astrid Lange:** Yeah, that was a lot of work because ~ the Star newsroom was getting feedback from indigenous communities saying that the lists of missing and murdered indigenous women that the government or the police were providing them with, they thought that was incomplete. So, we went and started to create our own. And we used ~ a lot of new sources.

[20:18] We used lists that other people had put together and created our own database, which had more names than anything that the RCMP had had or that the government had provided. And yet we were still able to, you know, fact check these names, that these people were real and there'd been no follow up on them.

[20:40] It was a shame that often these stories were relegated, often these incidents with a woman that had gone missing, it might have been relegated to one story and then never any follow-up and just kind of left to history. And so, we found those initial stories, added their names to these databases and the RCMP said, well, you know, they don't have the time to scour the news to figure out where things are missing.

[21:11] If there was never any follow-up, if no one ever did any further reporting on that individual, they, you know, they just left it aside. So, we tried to dig into history to figure out who were these women that weren't captured by government

sources, so. Like over the years we have done, we've built databases on ~ doctors that ~ have gone through misconduct or even malpractice situations in Ontario,

[21:47] that have fled Ontario and went to different jurisdictions because what our reporters wanted to show was that there was kind of no sharing of information between physician's associations. So, if someone was charged with something as a physician in Ontario, they could just leave Ontario and go to New York, and no one questioned anything. They just, you know, they might've been charged with sex assault, they might've been charged with fraud, but.

[22:17] But this was all within the physician's associations. It was never criminal. So, because the physicians just kind of took it upon themselves to discipline these people, these people then just left Ontario. So, we created an entire database of these physicians that were, I use charged in air quotes because they were never criminally charged but found guilty of something by their professional association and then just went to another jurisdiction to work. So, we uncovered a huge database like that.

[22:52] **Dylan Kulcher:** If silence is structured, then accountability has to be structural too. Using data analysis to create alternative news frameworks may be the free-thinking journalist's prerogative to subvert this flow of information that tends to minimize or silence. In the second part of Who Gets Silenced, I will interview with Tai Huen for Toronto's premier independent online magazine, The Local.

[23:20] This has been your host Dylan Kulcher signing off from Pull Quotes, a podcast about the forces shaping journalism.