In 2004, Buffalo News editor Margaret Sullivan (now Washington Post media columnist) pulled illustration intern Adam Zyglis into her office and informed him that he was to become the News’s editorial cartoonist. Baffled, Zyglis waited for some type of directive from his new editor. She had just five words for him: “Now go win a Pulitzer.”

Eleven years later, Zyglis, now thirty-two, sits at his desk in 1 News Plaza on a Monday afternoon in April. He is behind on his 3 p.m. deadline, and scribbles furiously in order to get a cartoon prepared for print. On his computer streams the press conference announcing the Pulitzer Prize winners for 2015. Zyglis, a nominee, pays only a passing attention to the words emanating from the screen, as he considers the odds of his name being called to be astronomical. He also notices that the stream on his computer is experiencing a slight delay.

Engaged in his work, Zyglis hears a collection of screams from the newsroom. His phone begins to buzz with congratulatory texts. He looks out toward the rows of desks to see a group of fellow employees marching toward him, cheering and clapping.

And then he hears his name announced as the winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning.

“It was days of just exhilarating adrenaline. I couldn’t sleep. I was trying to get back to everyone who was reaching out to me,” Zyglis says. In the immediate aftermath of what was surely a pinnacle of his career, the cartoonist remained in his chair for three hours, finishing the cartoon he had been working on prior to hearing the announcement.

The weeks that followed, he recalls, were filled with TV and radio interviews and requests for speaking engagements. “Buffalo shines in moments like this,” says Zyglis. “Regardless of their political slant or whether they agree with my work, everyone was just really proud. I got congratulations even from the critics. It was just a humbling moment that I’ll never forget.”

Before he won the Pulitzer, which was preceded by the Clifford K. and James T. Berryman Award for Editorial Cartooning in 2013 and the presidency of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC), among other honors, Zyglis was a Buffalo kid who liked to draw.

He developed his first concept for a continuing story, which revolved around a group of Madagascar monkeys, when he was seven. His parents quickly realized his talents and put him into a summer art program at the University at Buffalo. In eighth grade, Zyglis experienced his first cartooning success when he placed second in the Buffalo News Editorial Cartoon Contest. He chose to study computer graphics/animation at Canisius College after he heard that one of the program’s students, who had been hired by LucasArts, went on to win an Oscar for technical design work on Yoda (of The Empire Strikes Back and other Star Wars series films).

But while Zyglis appreciated the meticulous craftsmanship necessary to turn sketch art into full-motion animation, the process remained, for him, too reliant on the collective. “In animation, you’re sort of this small cog that’s part of a much larger machine,” the cartoonist says. “I’m very much a loner in life in many ways. I have strong opinions and like being my own boss, so I realized the work I was doing wasn’t really fitting my personality.”

Zyglis’s first class at Canisius was...
taught by Tom Joyce, the well-regarded literature professor who passed away in 2013. Joyce was also moderator of the college's student newspaper, The Griffin, and talked Zyglis into joining the staff. Zyglis began publishing two cartoons a week: a political cartoon and a student life comic strip. It was a side line that ultimately became his designated career path.

After completing his senior thesis on the decommoditization of political cartoons, he landed a freelance gig with The Bugle. Zyglis submitted a cartoon a week and was given a small budget. It was his first experience receiving monetary compensation for a hobby that he hadn’t believed had professional potential.

That notion changed when Zyglis became an art department intern at the Neues in 2004. Three years earlier, another Neues Pulitzer-winning cartoonist, Tom Toles, had left for the Washington Post. The Neues left the position unfilled as it considered following a similar model that other papers across the country were adopting—using syndicated services rather than paying a full-time editorial cartoonist.

Toward the end of his internship, Zyglis learned that the Neues was beginning to rethink that perspective, but his excitement dissipated when he found out that management was interviewing other Pulitzer winners for the job, including Clay Bennett (then at the Christian Science Monitor) and Ann Tahueas of the Washington Post.

Nonetheless, Zyglis formally applied for the job, and to his amazement, he was chosen. Zyglis chalks his hiring up to the fact that he was “local, cheaper, and nowhere near as good,” but Margaret Sullivan saw potential in him.

It was a potential that was not immediately recognized by Neues higher-ups. Zyglis recalls constant clashes with Jerry Goldberg, then editor of the editorial page, whom he describes as a character out cut and pasted from Spider-Man’s Daily Bugle—complete with suspenders and rapid speaking.

“It just seemed like, at the time, he was fighting every idea I gave him, because he would disagree with the editorial board,” says Zyglis. However, Sullivan made it known that his ideas should be treated like a separate column, not necessarily in tune with those displayed by the board.

Zyglis believes he has finally developed a distinctive visual style, but even a Pulitzer winner does not create without a degree of self-doubt. Early in his career, Zyglis noticed that when he found he had a lot of time to develop a single cartoon, he would often diminish the idea by overthinking it.

Such an addiction to precision can be ubiquitous across any and all creative platforms. In South Park’s behind the scenes documentary, 6 Days to Air, co-creator Trey Parker comments on the significance of the unalterable deadline. Without it, he says, he and his team would spend weeks on one show, constantly revising comedic content, changing animations, or reworking the narrative, only to arrive at a marginally better product. It’s a notion that is not lost on Zyglis, who says that while he’s rarely fully satisfied with a cartoon upon completion, he’s perfected a system that allows him to complete each work with some degree of accomplishment. The process includes three main factors: a message that he wants to convey, a concept or idea for the drawing, and the drawing itself, which acts as a conduit in portraying the cartoon’s overlying themes.

As any journalist will readily admit, an essential part of the job is the consumption of information, and Zyglis researches as many topics as possible, including those he isn’t interested in or hadn’t previously considered as sources of inspiration. Sometimes, ideas for cartoons will manifest in the shower or while driving, forcing Zyglis to scramble for a pen and paper to jot down the concept.

While most would assume that news that dominates the national headlines is welcome ammunition for a daily cartoonist, Zyglis cautions that big events come with added pressure. “When it’s huge news, it’s a double-edged sword; you’re expected to comment in some way, so you feel obligated to,” he says. “You also know that every other cartoonist is doing the same thing, so you want to stand out in the discussion.”

Zyglis has made a habit out of being unique to that discussion. His cartoons run the gamut from sarcastic barbs to passionate statements. Following the Newtown, Connecticut, shooting in 2012, Zyglis portrayed an outstretched arm, branded “NRA,” holding the top of the Capitol building as a candle snuffer.

Extinguishing a candle with the words, “Sandy Hook legacy.” It was a poignant protest of the NRA’s disturbingly long reach in the American political sphere.

Such blunt assertions are bound to draw both applause and criticism, and Zyglis gets a significant amount of both. He tries to respond to everyone “unless they’re swearing” at him, and he fully comprehends that dialogue with readers is an integral part of his job. “As a political cartoonist, my responsibility is to ignite some kind of discussion or debate,” Zyglis states. “With that in mind, I should have an opinion. Not just an observation.” The cartoonist opposes being referred to as a “pundit,” however, because his opinions can and do change.

When readers actually speak with him, he says, it’s as if they’re surprised that he’s not “a crazy socialist screaming at everyone in the editorial room.” While Zyglis admits that his beliefs tend to be progressive on issues such as social justice, human rights, and the environment, he firmly resists being categorized as a liberal, believing that thoughtful people should not have preconceived notions going into any particular issue. He has previously criticized the leadership of President Obama for example, which he says at times has been “problematic.”

“Sometimes, you really need several cartoons to really round out an issue,” he says. “People will just see the one and assume they know everything about me based on one cartoon.” Zyglis felt that kind of gross misperception when he tackled the Altemio Sanchez murders in 2007. Now known infamously as the “Bike Path Rapist,” Sanchez murdered at least three women and raped several others around Wayne, New York during a twenty-five-year span. Following Sanchez’s arrest, Zyglis published a cartoon depicting a panicked woman telling a Buffalo police officer, “A man driving this car raped me while holding a license plate number. An arrow labeled. “Twenty-six years, eight rapes, and three years later” points to a second frame in which the officer is telling the woman, “We caught the man who drove that car” as he holds the same license plate number that the woman was holding in the first frame. The implication that the Buffalo Police Department made oversights on such a high-profile...
muder investigation did not sit well with local law enforcement. “The police chief demanded I apologised,” says Zyglis recalling the fracas that led to his being fired. “I told him I was leaving and I was never going to say anything like that personally.”

You only have a heap of material in which facts are no longer final, and the external factors that led to their perspectives. Yet, if you could elaborate on how this “response” has devolved — especially since the rise of Trump, is there even a so-
tion to resist? Is there something you do, or not. If Bannon’s goal was to create “the opposition party.” Do you have such a daunting array of statistics that are de-
"fake news" are a disease on our na-
It’s incredibly anti-democrac-
ic for the second most powerful
ning the course, and doing so
It’s incredibly anti-democratic
by creating a false equivalence. It’s
racy as actual
strategies for what they are. Cartoon
influencing discourse and subjectivity.
You mentioned that as the outgoing
Zyglis has placed the
The idea, which is only in concept
the media must weather the
healthy, and to make an impact. The
The media must weather the
The media must weather the
Edwar
itor Marty
Zyglis believes the answer is some-
Zyglis feels that cartooning has taken
the outgoing president of the AECG, Zyglis has been discussing a pos-
Zyglis gives an example of the
Defenders of Hebdo contended that
the magazine has historically been an equal
ter, he has a highly litiga-
Now do we handle this alternative fact con-
by creating a false equivalence.
This has been trickier for report-
The media must weather the
The media must weather the
The media must weather the

Ethan Powers is an editor for the New Move and
n this or that, but I would never
ded to produce the best possible, to be re-
ded to produce the best possible, to be re-
and “fake news” are a disease on our na-
strategies for what they are. Cartoon
influencing discourse and subjectivity.
You mentioned that as the outgoing
Zyglis has placed the
The idea, which is only in concept
the media must weather the
Healthy, and to make an impact. The
The media must weather the
The media must weather the
Edwar
itor Marty
Zyglis believes the answer is some-
Zyglis feels that cartooning has taken
the outgoing president of the AECG, Zyglis has been discussing a pos-
Zyglis gives an example of the
Defenders of Hebdo contended that
the magazine has historically been an equal
102
April 2017
www.buffalospree.com

April 2017
www.buffalospree.com

EDITORIAL CARTOONING IN THE AGE OF TRUMP