



A PRIZE-WINNING EDITORIAL CARTOONIST NAVIGATES TURBULENT POLITICAL TIMES

BY ETHAN POWERS

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 prepped 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.

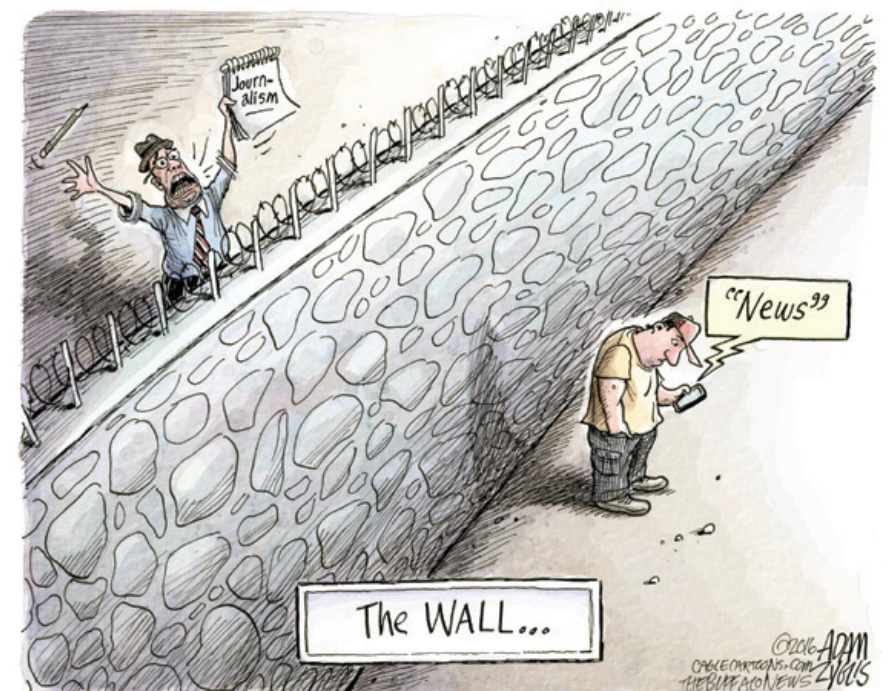
He developed his first concept for a continuing story, which revolved around a group of Madagascar monkeys, when he was seven. His parents quickly realized his talents and put him into a summer art program at the University at Buffalo. In eighth grade, Zyglis experienced his first cartooning success when

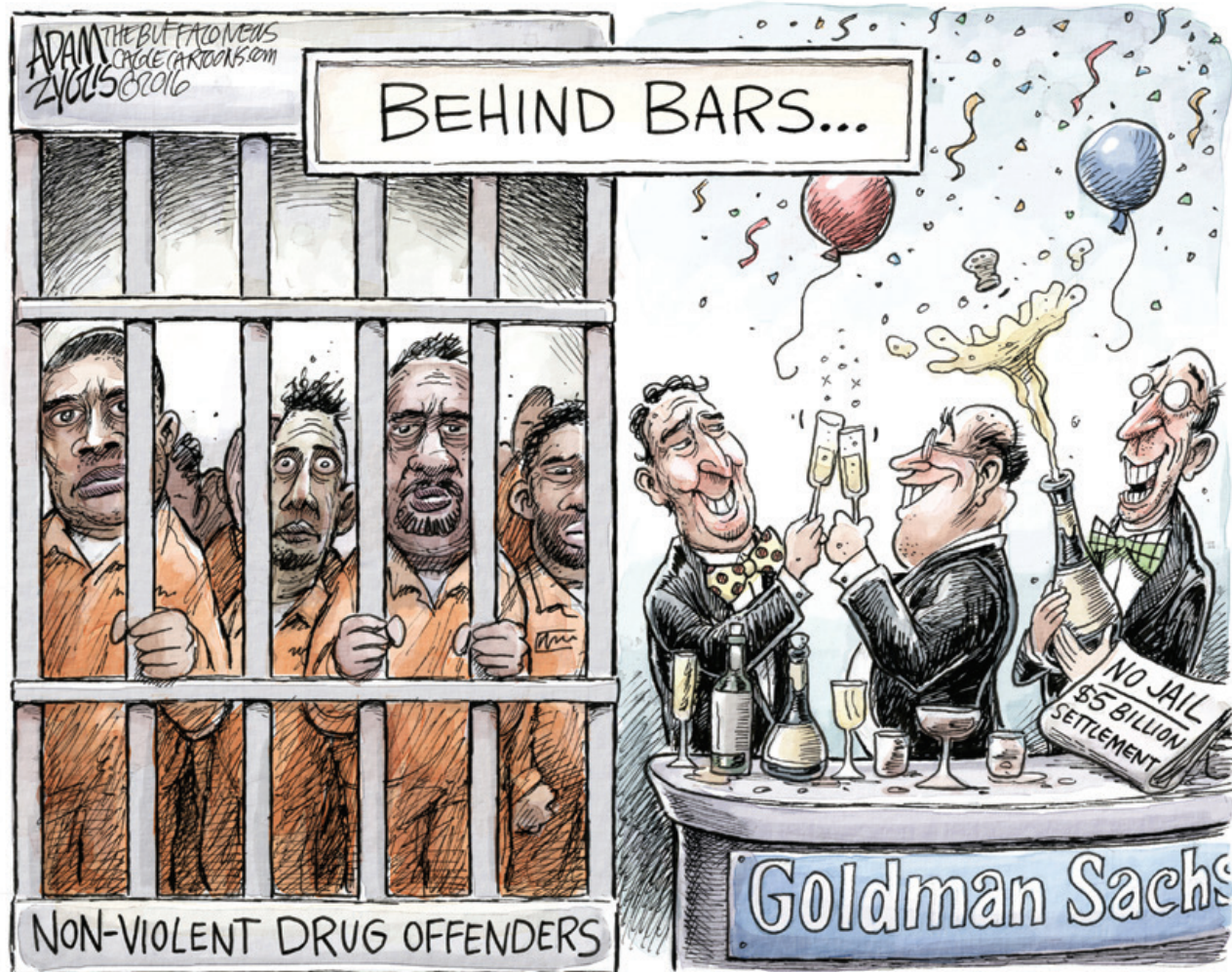
he placed second in the *Buffalo News* Editorial Cartoon Contest. He chose to study computer graphics/animation at Canisius College after he heard that one of the program’s students, who had been hired by LucasArts, went on to win an Oscar for technical design work on *Yoda* (of *The Empire Strikes Back* 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

Zyglis portrait by kc kratt; Post-truth world - December 3, 2016, Adam Zyglis, the *Buffalo News*





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 sideline that ultimately became his designated career path.

After completing his senior thesis on the deconstruction of political cartoons, he landed a freelance gig with *Artvoice*. Zyglis submitted a cartoon a week and was given a small stipend. 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 *News* in 2004. Three years earlier, another *News* Pulitzer-winning cartoonist, Tom Toles, had left for the *Washington Post*. The *News* left the position unfilled as it considered following a similar model that other papers across the county were adopting—using syndicated services rather than paying a full-time editorial cartoonist.

Toward the end of his internship,

Zyglis learned that the *News* 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 Talnaes 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 *News* higher-ups. Zyglis recalls constant clashes with Jerry Goldberg, then editor of the editorial page, whom he describes as a character 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 it 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. His 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 acerbic 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 Western 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



Goldman Sachs settlement - April 17, 2016, Complete streets - May 13, 2016, Adam Zyglis, Buffalo News

murder investigation did not sit well with local law enforcement.

"The police chief demanded I apologize," says Zyglis. "Cops were calling me all day saying, 'If you call 911, you think we're going to help you? We know you're a city resident.' It was just insane."

Despite the backlash, Zyglis says he also began to see the focus of the conversation fundamentally shift because of the cartoon's impact. Questions began to arise as to whether Buffalo police could have done more to connect the dots. To Zyglis, the cartoon stands as a testament to the power of editorial cartooning in influencing dialogue on an issue. "That's the one time I can say a cartoon was really instrumental in moving the needle on a local level," he says.

On an international level, the debate surrounding what constitutes an acceptable elasticity of "free speech" came to a head in January 2015, when two Islamic radicals stormed the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, killing eleven in the building and injuring eleven others. PEN America, an organization of writers and creatives, announced that it would honor the satirical magazine at its literary gala that May with the Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award. As a result, 204 members of the organization signed a letter condemning the award on the basis that *Hebdo*, through their depictions of Prophet Muhammad, "intended to cause further humiliation and suffering" to an already marginalized population.

Defenders of *Hebdo* contended that the magazine has historically been an equal opportunity offender, mercilessly satirizing every major religion and politician without exception, and that what *Hebdo* was mocking was not Islam, but fundamentalism. They also questioned the concept of artists having to precalibrate their speech based on the comparative societal status of their subjects—an argument that further opens

itself to scrutiny and subjectivity.

Zyglis believes the answer is somewhere in the middle. He supports the decision to give *Hebdo* the award, and while he comprehends the indispensability of free speech operating outside of some selective vacuum, he believes those who exercise such rights also

if it would get in the way of the message," he says. "I'm not the type of person to start a fire just to burn people."

Zyglis inadvertently became the face of the *Buffalo News's* union strike last summer after winning the Pulitzer. Contract talks between the union and the *News's* corporate management stalled,

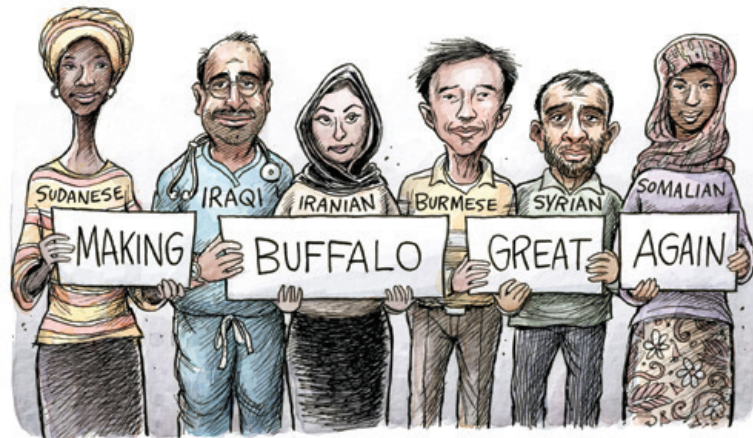
as the staff objected to the *News's* \$55 million in profits over five years while neglecting to provide the staff with a pay increase during that period. In July 2015, a tentative agreement was reached, due in no small part to the impact of Zyglis's award and the prestige it carries. As that two-year agreement expires, the staff is negotiating a new contract for 2017 and beyond, and it's even more of a battle this time around.

In addition, in what is now known as "the age of Trump," Zyglis feels that cartooning has taken on a new import, given that the president has declared the media his enemy and regularly demonstrates disdain for satire and dissent. As the outgoing president of the AAEC, Zyglis has been discussing a possible legal defense fund and renewing his focus on free speech.

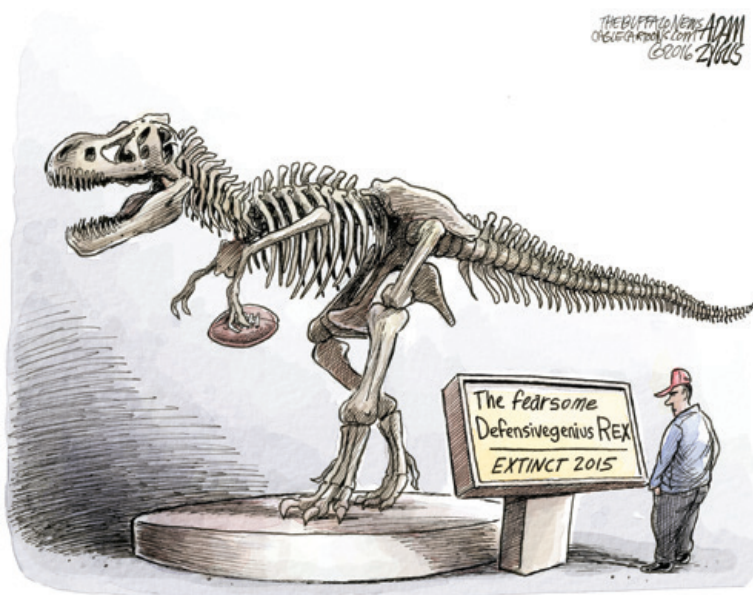
Zyglis has placed the chaotic ecstasy of winning a Pulitzer firmly behind him. For him, the award is not the apex of his craft; rather, it's a manifestation of the quality of his work as well as the influence enacted—the tangible result of the hours spent laboring over a paper-filled desk, pencil in hand. "The motivation was never to

win anything," he says. "It's just been to produce the best work possible, to be respected by your peers, and to make an impact. The award is just the biggest form of encouragement that you're on the right track."

Ethan Powers is an editor for *Bee News* and freelance writer who has published in local and national outlets.



CITY OF GOOD NEIGHBORS...



have a responsibility to use them with a certain amount of reverence. "As a satirist, I try to be very empathetic to the situations of others," he says. "When you do that, a lot of stuff they were doing that would offend the Muslim community was over the line. I'll defend their right to do it, but I would never do anything like that personally."

Would Zyglis himself draw the Prophet Muhammad if given the proper pretext? "Would it help the point I'm trying to make? Is it worth it? I feel as

EDITORIAL CARTOONING IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

You mentioned that as the outgoing president of the AAEC, you've been discussing a possible legal defense fund and renewing our focus on free speech. I was wondering if you could elaborate on how this decision came about.

We are exploring the idea of a legal defense fund for cartoonists. The idea, which is only in concept form at the moment, came from Ann Telnaes, the current president of the AAEC. This will likely remain a concept right now as we wait and see just how hostile Trump will be to the press. It came about by looking to other countries with strongman leaders where cartoonists get sued and even imprisoned for defamation and libel. Additionally, statements from Trump and his advisors have given free speech advocates cause for alarm, to say the least. Aside from referring to journalists as "scum," he's promised to open libel laws on the campaign trail and has been notoriously thin skinned to his *SNL* treatment. Plus, he has a highly litigious history.

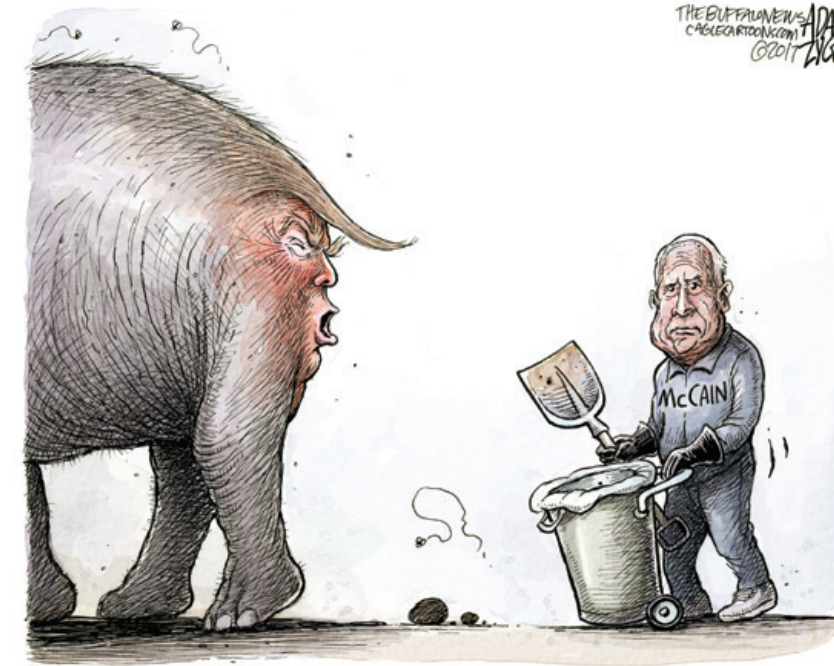
Steve Bannon, the president's chief strategist, proclaimed the media to be "the opposition party." Do you find yourself emboldened by this kind of rhetoric?

It's incredibly anti-democratic for the second most powerful man in the White House to say those words publicly. But, honestly, those remarks didn't, and shouldn't, change my approach. *Washington Post* editor Marty Baron summed it up nicely: "We're not at war with the administration. We're at work." We should take the same critical look at those in power, whether we are provoked or not. If Bannon's goal was to create any hesitation in using satire to criticize the president, his words did just the opposite.

Speaking of being emboldened by reactions to your car-

toons, I want to ask you about the online commenters. When you draw something that is critical of a particular point of view—which in turn causes supporters of that viewpoint to lash out at you personally—is there some form of gratification as a result of extracting that kind of evocative reaction, regardless of it being a negative or positive one?

I've always said one of my goals is to provoke thought and spark a



dialogue with the readers. So, yes, getting a strong response, positive or negative, does tell me I am doing something right. But, you'd be mistaken if you thought I purposely try to stir the pot as vigorously as possible, so to speak. To provoke for the sake of provoking would be irresponsible. I aim to express a message that is relevant and important to the public discussion. And if, in the process, I irritate a whole lot of people—and often do—then, so be it. What's troubled me in recent years, especially since the rise of Trump, is how this "response" has devolved into shouting about our basic disagreement on the given "facts." If you gauged our democracy by the content of my inbox, I'd say we are not going in an upward direction. The one positive since the elec-

tion, however, is I'm hearing from my supporters much more often. The frequency of hate mail has remained about the same, though the tone has certainly intensified.

It's only been a few months since Trump has entered the White House, and we have already seen an almost incomprehensible litany of controversy, including the resignation of a top US official and a ban on immigration that wound up in court. You have a heap of material

tions. Journalists and cartoonists will need to remain focused on what's important.

There's the notion that we now live in a "post-truth age," in which facts are no longer a part of the conversation. In order to discern why voters believe what they believe, journalists must begin to understand the context and the external factors that led to their perspectives. Yet, when those perspectives are derived from facts and statistics that are demonstrably false, how do you begin to put that kind of simulated truth under your lens? Is there even a solution to resisting a constituency who believes "alternative facts" have the same veracity as actual facts?

"Alternative facts" and "fake news" are a disease on our nation's social capital. Addressing this is difficult when the leader of the free world is spouting falsehoods on a daily basis and labeling legitimate news organizations as "fake news." How do we

handle this alternative fact constituency, or cult following, as I think of it? What we can't do is legitimize these baseless beliefs by creating a false equivalence. This has been trickier for reporters. The media must weather the storm of subjective truth by staying the course, and doing so forcefully and consistently. That means calling out lies and fabrications for what they are. Cartoonists have greater latitude on what we say, and, as a commentator, I try and attack the deeper forces at play here, like the exploitation of fear, bigotry, and xenophobia. For those in power, lies can be a powerful tool.

—Ethan Powers

Nation of immigrants - February 1, 2017; Fearsome Rex - December 6, 2016; Cleanup duty - February 4, 2017; Adam Zyglis, Buffalo News