

# **'We live in an era of bombasity because there's no political upside to acting with humility'**

When I reflect on all that has happened, there are certainly reasons to be discouraged. For six years, I've watched politicians foment hatred and mistrust of the press, demonizing us with the label "enemy of the people." The stream of lies and disinformation has become a flood. And now our democracy has reached a new low, with a former U.S. president this week calling for the termination of the Constitution.

This torrent of undemocratic words and deeds has swept others along, emboldening them to persecute the press in unprecedented ways. That's why I'm standing before you tonight.

When the governor of Missouri learned of my discovery that a state website was publicly exposing the private information of hundreds of thousands of teachers, he had a choice in how to respond. He could have owned up to the state's failures, taken responsibility, and pledged to fix the state's web infrastructure. He could have apologized unequivocally to Missouri's teachers. If he was feeling generous, maybe he could have thrown in a thank-you to the Post-Dispatch for our ethical and entirely lawful handling of this discovery.

But that doesn't happen anymore. We live in an era of bombasity, because there's no political upside to acting with humility.



The 2022 Fourth Estate Award Gala honored Clarissa Ward, CNN's multi-award winning chief international correspondent, with National Press Club's highest honor during a dinner and award's ceremony in Washington, DC. on December 7, 2022. Ward is the 50th recipient of the Fourth Estate Award, which recognizes journalists who have made significant contributions to the field. The evening also will honor the winners of the John Aubuchon Press Freedom Awards, Rana Ayyub and Josh Renaud. Ayyub is an investigative journalist living in India and a Washington Post Global Opinions contributor. Her journalistic work and criticism of the Indian government has been met with an assault on her rights and freedom of expression. Renaud is a Missouri reporter who designs interactive journalism projects for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He was threatened by the Missouri governor with criminal charges for uncovering a security flaw in a state database. PBS Frontline will be recognized as the 2022 Neil and Susan Sheehan Award for Investigative Journalism. (Photo by Melissa Lyttle)

And so the governor was persuaded to attack me, to falsely accuse me of committing crimes. He ordered the state Highway Patrol to investigate me, and then he repeated his false

accusations again and again in interviews, in letters sent to teachers across the state, and even in a bizarre internet attack ad.

Our political climate gave him room to act this way, and insulated him from any consequences. In fact, Missourians learned recently that the governor is rewarding the deputy counsel who advised him to attack me, by promoting him to attorney general.

So, yes, it's discouraging. And I worry that there may be worse to come.

Yet, I'm encouraged, too. In my situation, I saw glimmers of hope. The governor wanted to deflect attention from the state's failures. Instead he drew attention – and scrutiny. Teachers were not fooled. They understood that I had done them a service. That my work was helpful and good, within both the spirit and the letter of the law. People of all kinds across Missouri, the nation, and the world, saw through the smokescreen and spoke in my defense. Even some Republican state legislators gently chastised the governor publicly.

And that tells me that the truth isn't dead. People can still recognize the truth among a torrent of lies. Our work, the important work of journalism, still matters.

Six years ago, I never would have dreamed I would one day get caught up in all this. At that time, most of my shifts were spent toiling behind the scenes with the night desk, designing the front page of the Post-Dispatch. It was highly visible work, seen by thousands of people each day, and yet it was anonymous. Designers don't get bylines.

At that time, like many of you, I recognized dangerous trends in the presidential campaign. I wanted my friends and family to understand the importance of our free press. And I wanted to remind them that they had at least one journalist in their lives – me. So I wrote an essay. "What can men do against such

reckless hate?" I asked, borrowing a question from The Lord of the Rings. My answer? Pray. Show love. Open your ears to hear.

That's the way I've tried to live, and I believe it helped me come through all of this unscathed.

*Editor's Note: St. Louis Post-Dispatch Data Journalist Josh Renaud was awarded the [2022 Domestic John Aubuchon Award](#) by the National Press Club for his watchdog reporting [exposing vulnerabilities](#) on a website belonging to the State of Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Missouri Gov. Mike Parson responded by attacking him and his work. This is an excerpt of the speech he delivered in accepting the award.*