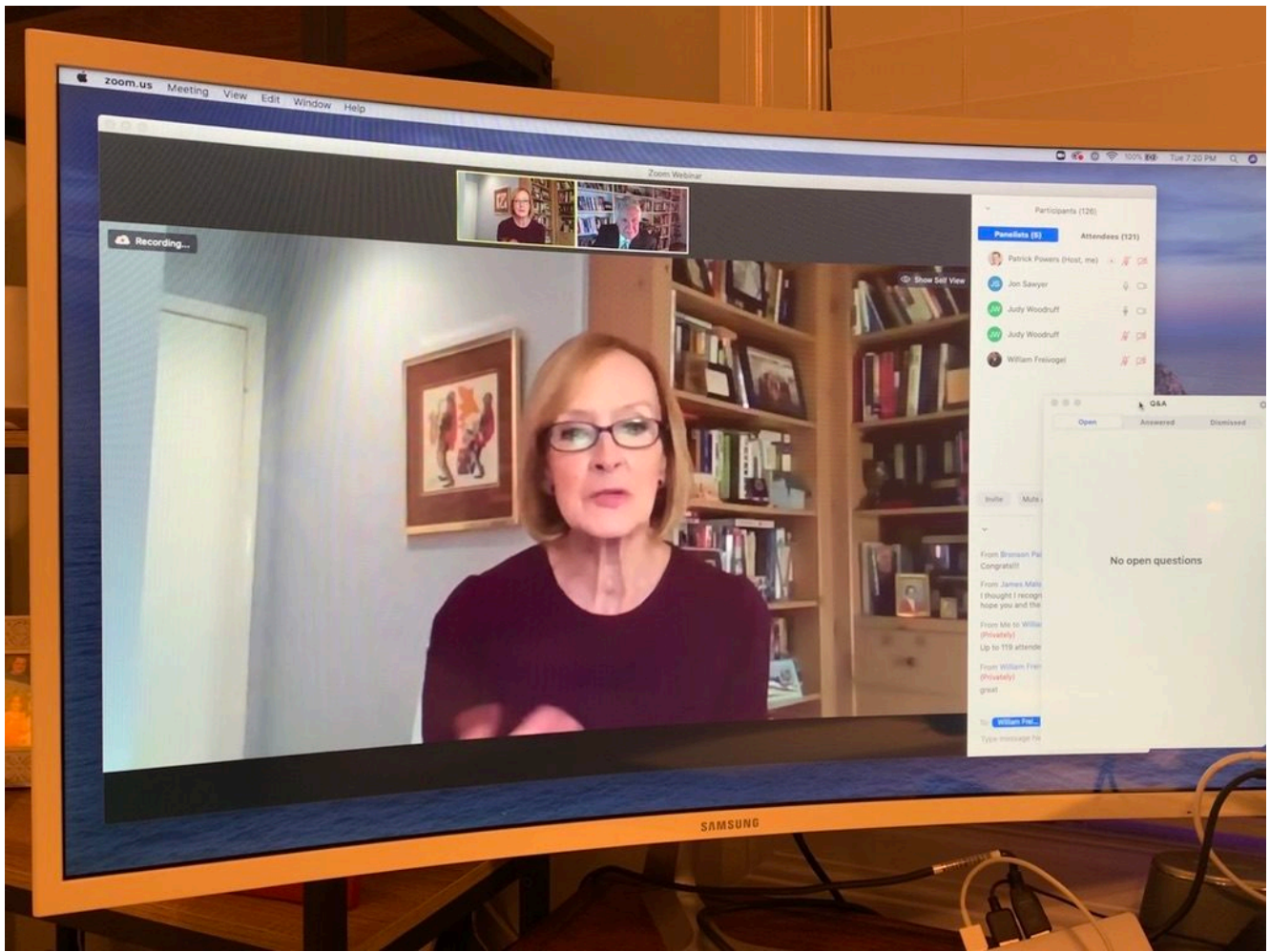


Judy Woodruff of PBS NewsHour speaks on objectivity, polarized media landscape during GJR's 50th virtual anniversary celebration

Before she was considered a “beacon of professionalism and civility” in the journalism industry, [PBS NewsHour Anchor Judy Woodruff](#) was starting out at a local television station in Atlanta in an era where women were lucky to be hired in broadcast journalism.

Virtually, Woodruff was honored by Gateway Journalism Review, formerly the St. Louis Journalism Review, on Oct. 13 with its Lifetime Achievement Award for her contributions to journalism over decades as a journalist.

The journalism review also celebrated 50 years while hosting a conversation between Woodruff and [Jon Sawyer, the Executive Director](#) of the [Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting](#).



(Photo by Patrick Powers)

Since 2011 Woodruff has anchored the Newshour. In 2016, after the death of her co-anchor Gwen Ifill, Woodruff became the sole anchor of the news program. She is also the Managing Editor.

Woodruff started in national journalism in 1977 when she became a White House reporter for NBC. She later anchored CNN during the Challenger space shuttle disaster, the 9/11 attacks, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. She also co-anchored a seven-hour series, Democracy in America, that highlighted some of the anxieties that dominate today's news cycle.

Throughout, she's been setting the standard for excellence in the journalism industry, Sawyer said.

In spite of the idealized version of the objective news broadcaster that is publicly revered, Woodruff there is no such thing as objectivity.

“I am the sum total of all of my life experiences. I’m a woman, I’m a mother, I’m even a grandmother. I am somebody who grew up as an army brat in Oklahoma, lived in the South, lived overseas. All of that comes together,” she said.

Although her life experiences inform her reporting perspective she also considers herself an “old-school” journalist taught how to keep personal opinions out of her reporting.

Fact, Analysis, and Opinion

In today’s media landscape viewers have trouble distinguishing between opinion, analysis, and reporting. Journalists should be more mindful about expressing their personal thoughts, Woodruff said.

“There is great reporting going on, but on television news, there is a trend of celebrating and driving opinion.

Reinforcing people’s views,” Woodruff said. “It takes a strong reporter to be put in some of those situations though because depending on which program you’re on or which host is asking you questions you can find yourself in a corner being asked to give your opinion.”

Opinion-driven journalism that grabs so much of the public’s attention also drives polarization in the

political climate,
Woodruff said.

Unconventional Debate Approach

The contentious first presidential debate between Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and President Donald Trump exemplified the divided climate as Trump interrupted Biden and the moderator, successfully derailing the traditional event.

“In the first debate, it was almost impossible to control that. I don’t know what else could’ve been done, other than maybe saying to the candidates, ‘we’re going to take a pause and take a breath. We’re going to stop this debate and come back in 60 seconds to two minutes’,” Woodruff said.

Woodruff said another component influencing people’s beliefs and actions is social media because so many people find their news on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube.

News organizations and social media may both be informational platforms, but their missions are different, she said.

“They changed how journalism works for better and worse,” Woodruff said. “It’s a bloodbath and a lot of it has to do with what has happened with these big social media sites.”

Democracy Depends on Great Journalism

American journalism outlets will have to figure out how to make journalism marketable to compete with the new informational market that social media sites dominate, she said. The solution will need to be clever and a tenacious approach to keep journalistic enterprises afloat because our country's democracy depends on it, Woodruff said.

A savior, like a billionaire who buys papers and stations like Warren Buffett or Jeff Bezos, is not coming to save news, she said.

"People want to be entertained. Not everyone has an interest in following news and information," she said.

The NewsHour, being funded publicly through the Corporation of Public Broadcasting and donors big and small, is one model that is successful. Woodruff said that model in combination with others could make a difference in the industry.

Woodruff credited her team of journalists at the NewsHour for adapting and producing critical journalism during the pandemic when about 95% of the staff is working from home.

What used to be Woodruff's home library is now her in-home studio filled with lights, cameras, computers, and wires, she said.

"It was put together by really smart journalists who learned how to do all of this," Woodruff said. "I marvel at what my colleagues have been able to do."

With the upcoming election, the PBS Newshour team will be focusing on how long it will take for the election results to come in after large sections of the public use mail-in ballots to cast their vote.

“We have to have good information. People that we can call and be in touch with immediately,” she said.

Woodruff said the NewsHour is not concerned with being the first news program to declare a winner, but the one that is right.

Amelia Blakely reported from Nashville, Tennessee. She recently graduated from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and is now a 2020-2021 Campus Consortium Fellow with the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting in Washington D.C. You can find her on Twitter @AmeilaBlakely