

# Yamiche Alcindor's Haitian heritage shapes her journalism

Yamiche Alcindor, White House [correspondent](#) for the PBS Newshour, was enjoying her day off from a grueling beat last year when her aunt called in tears. President Donald Trump had [called](#) her ancestral homeland of Haiti a “shithole.”

“It reminded me, I don’t have the luxury to check out sometimes,” said the Miami-born Alcindor whose parents immigrated from Haiti. “There will be people who will remind me that, ‘hey we sent you to the White House to ask questions for everybody.’”

Later that night [Alcindor broke the story that the Haitian government](#) was looking to the U.S. government for an explanation of Trump’s comments.



PBS NewsHour White House Correspondent Yamiche Alcindor, greets friends before making her remarks at the Gateway Journalism Review Awards in Des Peres, Missouri on April 25, 2019. (Photo by Bill Greenblatt/UPI)

“My purpose at my core comes from people loving me before I had a name and even more the foundation of who I am is one of immigrants who believed in America when it said to give up your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” Alcindor said told an audience at Gateway Journalism Review’s 8th annual First Amendment dinner. The celebration drew about 100 people to Edward Jones Headquarters in Des Peres, Missouri. GJR also honored two journalists with its Freedom Fighter award.

That wasn’t the only day Alcindor found her personal life upended by Trump. She recalled she got engaged the day the Access Hollywood tape was released. And she has her Apple Watch set to flash every Trump tweet. That means she wakes up to a presidential tweet about four mornings a week.

### **Beginnings in Miami**

Alcindor said before she was a reporter, she worked at McDonald's, as a telemarketer and as a helper at class reunions in south Florida. She referred to her first jobs as a reminder of the humble beginnings people come from and how their stories play into their job.

The story of Emmett Till and his mother's openness to journalists telling the story of her murdered son was Alcindor's introduction to journalism, she said.

"This mother said, 'I'm going to use journalism and I'm going to use photojournalism to show people what they did to my child,'" Alcindor said.

She said once she began researching the transformative effects of the photos of Emmett Till in his open casket had on the country, she knew she wanted to become a journalist to share the hard truths of America with its people.

### **Ferguson was transformational**

In 2014 Alcindor was working for USA Today during the unrest in Ferguson. For almost a year she was living off and on in St. Louis [reporting](#) on Ferguson story—a story that changed her as a journalist, she said.

One lesson Ferguson taught Alcindor was the importance of newsroom diversity, she said. In her reporting, she was sharing stories of "lived experience" that she valued because of her background.

"Martin Luther King said, 'At times rioting can be the language of the unheard,'" Alcindor said.

She said it's easy as a journalist to take the position that riots lack value or meaning, but St. Louis taught Alcindor that what was happening in Ferguson required a deeper explanation. A protester told her that throwing a rock at a police officer relieved his sense of powerlessness.

Following Ferguson, Alcindor began [reporting](#) for the New York Times on Bernie Sanders's presidential run. She felt compelled to report on his "rockstar status," his primarily white crowd, and the fact his campaign wasn't spending money to attract African Americans, a large swath of the Democratic party.

"Long before you saw me smiling on national television at Donald Trump, I was smiling at Bernie Sanders," Alcindor said.

### **The Trump campaign**

From Sanders, Alcindor began reporting on then-candidate Trump.

While interviewing his supporters she learned journalism is about letting people have the space to say their opinions without her interfering with personal reactions – even when it meant letting a Trump supporter say over and over he wasn't racist but didn't think black people worked.

"The journalist's job is to think about it not in a personal way, but to be as professional as you can be in the circumstances that you're working under," Alcindor said.

Alcindor gets comments from listeners about her natural hair, her race and her weight. One suggested she change her hair and go with a more Hispanic look.

### **Trump didn't come out of nowhere**

One of Alcindor's favorite things to write or talk about is how Trump and his racial rhetoric was always apart of American culture, she said.

"There's a lot of reporting that needs to go on to make the case that President Trump did not come out of nowhere," she said.

Journalists in the current political time owe their readers, viewers, and listeners to do their job and not take comments

personally, she said. Reporters shouldn't be biased but they should be realistic in what they bring to the table, which includes their background.

"My journalism hopefully challenges people to not think they're right about every single thing but rather they have a lot to learn," Alcindor said.

Alcindor said she didn't anticipate Trump would turn the tables on her during his post-midterms press conference last November. When she asked about white nationalism he interrupted and said her question was "so racist." She said she just concentrated on finishing the question so that the record would be clear what she was asking.

## **Protecting Journalism**

Alcindor said as the president denies honest and independent reporting about his administration and the presidential campaign she realizes it is not enough to simply report; journalists must protect their profession too.

"As someone who started in south Florida, it makes me very nervous if you have a weakened St. Louis Post-Dispatch," Alcindor said. "What I realized as a local reporter is just writing about city council meetings or school boards, you can catch so much corruption and so much drama."

Alcindor said if local news continues to shrink, she thinks the lacking investment chips away at democracy almost as fast as the president's denial of real news does.

In the upcoming 2020 election, national and local journalism will be critical, she said.

Alcindor said she thinks this time is strengthening journalism as more students are enrolling in journalism schools and more people are tuning into national news. She hopes that interest trickles down to the local level because local journalism will

be the first place where impactful stories about people's lives will be broken.

"There are going to be so many stories we have to look at and take seriously," Alcindor said. "If I have a message, it's to support local journalism as much as you can."

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