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## How Woke Media Is Undermining Democracy – Encounters

### **Publish Date:**

March 2022

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On 22 March, IPA Executive Director John Roskam sat down with American journalist and author Batya Ungar-Sargon to discuss what has gone wrong with our media and why for our monthly show IPA Encounters.

Batya is the author of the recent best-seller *Bad News: How Woke Media is Undermining Democracy*.

Below is a transcript of the interview.

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### **John Roskam:**

Welcome. My name is John Roskam, I'm the Executive Director of the Institute of Public Affairs, and hello on this edition of IPA Encounters with Batya Ungar-Sargon. I'm speaking to you from the Baillieu Myer Media Studio in the IPA offices in Melbourne and Batya is speaking to us from Brooklyn, New York. This event is live and exclusive for IPA members. Batya's book, 'Bad News: How Woke Media is Undermining Democracy' is a worldwide success. And while she discusses the media in the United States, her discussion about the media is very relevant for here in Australia for us.

As you know, the IPA has long had an interest in the media because of course the media is one of the ways we talk to ourselves, and one of the ways we talk about ideas and how we express our freedom of speech and freedom of religion. For example, last year the IPA launched a very successful podcast, Their ABC. Last year on IPA Encounters I spoke with Peta Credlin about the role of the media during COVID and a number of years ago, the IPA was at the forefront of the efforts to overcome the then Labor government's proposals to actively censor the mainstream media.

'Bad News: How Woke Media is Undermining Democracy' is available in bookshops here in Australia, available online and is also available for purchase from Encounter books in the United States. It's a wonderful book, it's an important book, it's a significant book and I'm so pleased to discussing this with Batya today. Let me say a few words about Batya and then we'll begin. Batya is the Deputy Opinion Editor of Newsweek. Before that she was the opinion editor of The Forward, the largest Jewish media outlet in the United States. She's written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, Foreign Policy, Newsweek, the New York Review of Books, and many other publications. She has appeared extensively on the media in the US and throughout the world, and she has a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. Welcome Batya.



**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Thank you so much for having me. I am truly honored and humbled to be here with you.

**John Roskam:**

I'm delighted to be talking about your book, about the media, and importantly, what do we do next? But before I start, you describe yourself as of the left, as a left-winger. Can you talk a little bit about your political journey and how you came to write a book like this?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Absolutely. I am of the left, I still consider myself a lefty. You know, the left, as it exists in America right now wants nothing to do with me but I say, "Okay, then you leave, I'm not leaving the left. You abandoned the working class, you abandoned labor, not me, I'm staying right here." So I do still consider myself to be a lefty, I consider myself even a Marxist in that I think right now currently the most salient analysis of the United States is a class analysis.

So from that point of view, I do see myself as a Marxist and when they say critical race theory is sort of Marxism, I always sort of chuckle because to me the main problem with critical race theory is the insufficiency of Marxism in the analysis, it focuses on race instead of on class. So I would say that I'm still on the left. To me what makes a person a lefty is wanting labor to have a voice, to have a strong voice, wanting the government to be involved in making sure that the dignity of labor is protected, and I hereby support all of that. So I would still say that I'm a lefty, although the book is very critical of the people who pass as the left in America today, the progressives, and I feel that they have really abandoned the values that one should use to guide what leftism is.

**John Roskam:**

How did you come to write *Bad News*? Because I've heard you talk about how this was originally not the first conception of a book like this.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

You know, I was doing a lot of reporting in the South during the Trump years and what I found there really surprised me. I had been led to believe that I would go down to the South and find this bastion of racism. I had Trump derangement syndrome, I thought that everybody who voted for him must have been a racist but what I found was very, very surprising, which is that a lot of the nation had moved past the racial binaries that we lefties, we New Yorkers, we overeducated elites like to believe still exist across the nation. And I wanted to write a book called 'A More Perfect Union' based on my experiences reporting from the South and also all of the polling that backs up the idea that Americans are just not that divided over the great values that this nation was founded on.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**



And I couldn't sell it, I couldn't get a single editor to buy it. They kept saying to me, "There's no market for a book about how Americans are not divided. Everybody believes that we're so polarized, that we've never been this polarized since the Civil War." And finally, a very kind editor sat me down and she said, "Look, you keep telling me we're not that polarized, why do I think we are then? Maybe you should write that book." And I think that's really what bad news is. It's my attempt to understand how Americans came to believe this version of ourselves that we're so divided when the truth is we've never been more united around issues like equality and fighting racism and fighting white supremacy and really making good on our ugly history in some ways. And that's really what Bad News is, it's really an attempt to understand where our false view of America came from and I think that the answer is it came from the media.

**John Roskam:**

And one of the things I enjoyed so much about the book was your discussion about how the media has changed over the last a hundred years and particularly over the last 20 years with the rise of the internet. Can you describe that argument? And then what does it do to the political position of the media?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Journalism underwent a status revolution over the course of the 20th century. It used to be a really working class trade, journalists lived in working class neighborhoods and they made maybe a little bit more than their neighbor or the factory worker or the linemen, but they really lived very embedded in working class communities. Today, journalists are part of the American elite. It underwent this status revolution, so it went from being a blue collar trade to being an elite cast, a profession almost. Even though you can't really teach journalism, it is a trade, you can only learn it by doing it. And that status revolution from where journalists started out working class and then became part of the elites, it really, really changed the nature of the profession because journalists really abandoned the working class as they ascended to the elites. They now see things from that position of top down instead of from that position of bottom up.

So where they used to see themselves as outside of the hallways of power demanding justice on behalf of the little guy, today they are insiders, they are part of power, their kids go to school with billionaires, their kids go to school with politicians. They are in the same communities as corporate lawyers. And so the whole industry really shifted from this little guy point of view to this position of elites. And I argue in the book that a lot of the woke moral panic that we're in around race is essentially to distract from that status revolution and from the ways in which journalists have really benefited from economic inequality.

**John Roskam:**

You talked about race which we'll come back to, and you mentioned how the media no longer talks and thinks about the working class. There's a wonderful discussion of this, and I'll read you a passage and then I'd like your comments about it because you make this point so well. You



write, “So type the words Trump and Russia into the New York Times search bar, and you’ll get over 15,000 results. At the Washington Post, this search will bring up 27,000 entries since 2005.” And then you say, “Compare this to the phrase opioid crisis over the same period, which would turn just 1,047 results at the Times and 2,639 results at the Washington Post.” And you go on, “Homelessness gets some year 4,818 results and income inequality gets just under 3,000.” What does that describe to you?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

So sociologists have gone back and trolled the archives of the New York Times to teach us what they are focused on and what they’re not. I just did this little search to show that gap, but I think the point I was trying to make is they... You know, Trump and Russia, I mean, of course now we know that so much of that Russiagate story was wrong. It was completely false. But even at the time, the idea that somehow Trump and Russia was more important than homelessness, was more important than opioid addiction, which was robbing working class Americans of their lives like the deaths of despair, just committing suicide out of despair. I mean, the idea that Trump and whatever had to do with Russia, that was five times more important than what was happening in our inner cities, you know?

It’s obviously false, it’s obviously wrong, and what it shows is that this is not being driven by any kind of journalistic value or ethic it’s being driven by something completely different, which is what the appetite of affluent liberals is for the news. So the media is reflecting what they want to read about and what they want to read about are the things that make them feel very passionate and very emotional. And the things that make them passionate and emotional are not, unfortunately, the things that they’re implicated in, the economic inequality, the opioid addiction, all of this stuff, it’s the things that sort of let them off the hook like hating on Trump, a moral panic about race, a moral panic about gender and transgender issues. These are all distractions from the actual divides in America, the actual moral emergencies in America that affluent liberals are implicated in and could solve and could fix and could help with, but it would involve sacrificing something as opposed to the things they love talking about.

**John Roskam:**

You use the phrase letting off the hook, is that what this is about? Is it easier to talk about Russia than jobs, education attainment, the opioid crisis? Is that what this is to some extent?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

It’s complex. On the one hand, I do think these people are very sincere. They sincerely believe that they are the compassionate ones, that they are on the right side of history, that they are the good guys. On the other hand, every issue that they have tried as a crusade is undoubtedly in their economic interests, and I believe that they would not have made such a mistake about what our problems are in America if the mistake wasn’t literally putting money in their pockets. So it’s complex, it’s complex. I don’t want to say that they’re sort of Evel Knievels, but their belief in this meritocratic belief that your talents and your brilliance entitles you to such a better life than



someone whose job involves working with their hands, you know? That's sort of the bread and butter of liberalism today, it really underlies so much of it.

And it really is in attention with a more just world, which is why you see liberal elites often, their number one concern is why are the elites not more racially diverse, as opposed to the question of like why are elites so much richer than everybody else? Of course, the elites should be more diverse, of course, everybody wants that, everyone should have access to the American dream whatever that means for them. But you can ask that question in two ways, you can ask that question in a way that does not disrupt the gap between the elites and everyone else, or you can ask it in a way that says, "What about everybody else?"

**John Roskam:**

What's been the reaction when you apply this traditional Marxist analysis to the elites.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Well, amazingly, I'm very popular with conservatives.

**John Roskam:**

You are!

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

I am. And that's despite being upfront, I'm a Marxist, I'm not going to sugarcoat that. So that to me is hilarious. You know, I'll have liberal say to me, "How dare you speak to conservatives? Why would you go talk to conservatives?" And I would say like, "I'm bringing Marxism to conservatives. Shouldn't that be goal number one for anyone on the left? Isn't that obviously something we should all want?" But no, they're like, "No, you're not supposed to talk to them." But I will say that it has been taken as an intervention of the left even by a lot of people on the left, and I've been very gratified by that. Of course, a lot of people are very dug to this woke worldview, but I think even at the New York Times now you're seeing a little bit of a shift. I think liberals are terrified of the midterms that are coming, they sense that something has gone wrong and that they've sort of enabled that... And I think that we're starting to see a little bit of a shift.

I think it's becoming clear that working class and middle class liberals have been abandoned by the democratic party and by the woke intelligentsia that likes to speak on their behalf. But working class and middle class liberals, of all races are looking at this woke malarkey and saying, "this is not for us. This is for you." And that's becoming more and more apparent, I believe.

**John Roskam:** And that's one of the things you say very strongly in the book, which is when you look at the concerns of minorities, of blacks and Hispanic communities, they are nowhere near as concerned about race as are privileged white elites.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**



Yes.

**John Roskam:**

You make a powerful point, at the beginning of the book, where you talk about the consensus model of the media. And it's certainly been argued for a long time that a progressive mainstream media is necessary to mediate community debate and build consensus. But you make the point that, in fact, this notion of consensus was very short lived, and that it was not the media creating that consensus, it was the media reflecting a consensus that existed in society.

I'll just read out a few comments, because what you say is very powerful and it's new to the debate. You say, "the consensus that allowed Americans with different values and political orientations to get their news from a shared source was, in fact, kept alive, not so much by a political agreement as by an economic reality. The two decades between the mid-forties and the mid-sixties were a time of buoyant social mobility, working class wages rose steadily and significantly, so much so," and this is a lovely phrase, "so much so, that the very idea of working class was almost an anachronism, given how little distinguished the working class from the middle class were from even the rich." And you talk about how class interests were the same, passions were the same, values were the same. People drove the same sorts of cars and engaged in the same sorts of pastimes. That's now changed. Can you talk about that consensus model that we once aspired to, and the fact that it didn't even exist?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

We like to look back fondly on the Walter Cronkite era as like, oh, conservatives and liberals got their news from the same place. But it wasn't because he was speaking to the middle politically, it's because there was so much economic mobility in the United States, at the time, that people did not see themselves as part of different strata. And so, they could get their news from the same source because he was speaking to people from all economic strata. And it was not insane to you think that a guy who drove a pickup truck and was a plumber would have the same interests as a lawyer living in maybe a much nicer neighborhood. But they were just not so astronomically different, whereas, you look at America today, and the top 10% owns over 50% of all of the wealth of the country. We focus so much on the 1%, but it's really the 10%, right? That see themselves as the good guys. They see themselves as, on the side of the little guy, when actually, they are living lives that are unimaginable to the vast majority of Americans who are downwardly mobile because of things like globalization, things that were agreed upon by both parties. By this handshake agreement by both parties.

I think that is a really important point. A partisan media, we often act like the thing that distinguishes our media is like, there's the liberal echo chamber and the conservative echo chamber, but as somebody who, as part of my job as a Newsweek opinion editor is to watch Fox news all day long, I can tell you the thing that distinguishes them is not politics, it's class. That's the number one thing that distinguishes them. The CNN host is imagining a viewer with a college education and the Fox news host is not. That's it.



And that distinction is growing and it has so many ramifications at this point. If you don't have a college degree, not only are you not going to make as much money, not only are you not going to increasingly be able to afford a house, your health outcomes are worse, your likelihood to be obese is much higher, your likelihood to die of COVID is much higher, your likelihood to die of an opioid addiction is much higher. I mean, your children's downward mobility is a foregone conclusion. And so that, to me, is the thing that we're missing. We use race, and we use partisanship and politics, to distract from the real divide, because it lets us off the hook.

**John Roskam:**

You mentioned partisanship, and again, there's another wonderful discussion in the book where you talk about the problem with today's media is not that it is partisan, but who it is partisan for, and who has been left without a partisan press, or anyone else for that matter, pushing their interests. Who is the media for the working class, for the middle class, for anyone that's not elite?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

So talk radio is for people who work with their hands, people who drive long haul, right? Joe Rogan, three hour interviews. Who has time to listen to that? People whose jobs involve driving or working with their hands. Fox News, only 25% of their audience has a college degree. Fox news is now watched by more Democrats than MSNBC and CNN combined. So over the last 10 years, working class liberals have migrated to Fox News, because they no longer see their values reflected at CNN and MSNBC, which work very hard to show that they're not for them. Podcasts, YouTube TV shows, there's increasingly a lot of ways for working class people to get their news outside of the mainstream that long ago abandoned them.

**John Roskam:**

What is the role now of the mainstream media? Because one of the interesting things in the book is the discussion of the outsize influence of the New York Times and the Washington Post, and to some extent other newspapers and other media. What was their role now?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

The New York Times has always been a reflection of ruling class norms, but the ruling class used to think of itself as above partisanship. It was considered parochial and kind of lame to get your news from a place that your neighbor, the Republican, would never be able to really get their news from. That was considered not the way that the aspiration elite, and the elites, like to think of themselves. That's really changed, so now, 91% of New York Times readers are Democrats. 91%. I mean, it takes a lot of work to squander away your legacy to that degree, right? Essentially what the New York Times and the Washington Post and NPR and the Atlantic and the New Republic, all these outlets that used to be distinct, they now are all going for the same eight, 10 million Americans who are progressive and upper middle class and elite.

They're all sort of leaning into whatever it is that they can do to get that readership, which is why



you have the same types of content in all of these outlets, and why it's impossible now for working class people and for conservatives to even read them for news and for information. So, in that sense, that's what the New York Times tells you right now, it tells you what the ruling class is looking for, and what they're looking for is a product that... it looks like social justice, but actually what it is, is it is a defense of the economic interests of highly educated, overeducated, liberal coastal elites.

**John Roskam:**

And how has the internet exacerbated that trend, and how have paywalls and the subscriber model changed that notion of what the media is?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

It used to be that we had a very robust local news media. We had a lot of towns in America that were 40% Republican and 60% Democrat, a lot of Independents, and so publishers, they sort of had a choice, right? They could lean left or right, and get 50-60% of the town's readership, or they could report the news straight, have a kind of even balance editorial page, and get 100% of the town's readership. And a lot of them did that. What happened with the internet was, with the rise of the internet, you had sort of the death of the local newspaper industry. Now 75% of journalism jobs are internet digital jobs, and they exist primarily on the coasts. And they're very national in nature. They don't do anything really local. It's very much about the national picture. And what they have done is, because they're online, they have given their journalists a window into the readership. So, you know exactly what makes people click. You know what makes them close the browser. You know what words will make them show up, will make them read longer. And all of that information has allowed publications to tailor their content to the very zip codes that they are trying to attract, which of course is the elite liberal zip codes.

And so, it really exacerbated this. It used to be that journalists, they were always kind of a little bit to the left, they were more liberal than Americans at large, but their bosses were the owners of a corporation or Republicans or both. And they wanted the whole town to be able to read this paper, and so the journalists were pulling to the left and their bosses were sort of pulling to the right, and they ended up in the center.

What happened with the internet was, you no longer measure your success based on the diversity of your readership, the reach of your readership, you're measuring success in terms of what's called engagement. That thing about having more people click, having more people comment on Facebook, share on Twitter. And we know that the most extreme readers and viewers are always the most engaged. So journalists, still pulling to the left because they've always been more liberal, but now the corporate profit motive is pulling in this direction too, because the more extreme you go to the left, the more extreme your readership is going to become, the happier your extreme readers will be, and the more engagement you'll get. And that's kind of what you're selling. So, it really shifted the model and erased the profit motive in being balanced.

**John Roskam:**



Can you see that model changing back?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

I do think we're seeing a little bit of a kind of a shift. I do think we're seeing the New York Times very slowly, carefully, while pretending it's not doing it, trying a little bit to get a little bit of its credibility back. I think it's very tied to the political situation. I think if and when the Democrats get slaughtered in the midterms, there's going to be... Like right after Glenn Youngkin won, I don't know if you know who that is-

**John Roskam:**

We do, but please talk about him.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Glenn Youngkin is this very moderate Republican, not very affiliated with Trump at all, sort of kept Trump very much at arm's length, and he won an election in Virginia, which is a state that went to Joe Biden by 20 points. So six months after Joe Biden won that estate, that was plus 20 for the Democrats, flipped Republican in a gubernatorial race, in a governor's race. And in the lead up to the election, they were all saying, oh, this is about white supremacy. This is about white supremacy. All of these people are voting because it's white there, the white supremacists, when it turned out that the people who showed up for him were black moms, Hispanics, working class people, a lot of Democrats who were just sort of sick of the culture wars that are being waged by elites.

And there was one week where CNN sort of was like, well, we clearly got this wrong, let's talk a little bit about the excesses of wokeness. And then of course went right back. And I managed to slip in and get my little appearance on CNN in that week. And they let me talk about the book, which was really nice of them. So I think that if the political situation is as dire as it seems like it is, we might get a little bit of genuflection, hopefully.

**John Roskam:**

So it might be as a few years ago when the New York Times spent five minutes trying to understand what motivated a Trump voter and then turned off again?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Exactly. I mean, the problem is that every generation of journalists that comes in is younger, more overeducated at increasingly stupidly fancy schools, where the number one thing they teach them is critical race theory and to have contempt for people without a college degree, and they're bringing all of that energy into the newsrooms with them, and anybody older than them, you wonder, where is gen X? Why aren't they standing up to them?



So as one New York Times editor once said to me, he was like, “look, imagine that the younger generation is not only much better than you at these digital skills that they need, but if you disagree with them, they call you racist.” And we know how the New York Times responds when younger generation of employees calls an older journalist racist, they fire them. So in that sort of an atmosphere, it’s very hard to imagine this ship turning around, sadly.

**John Roskam:**

Can we talk about the subtitle to your book, How Woke Media is Undermining Democracy? Can you talk a bit about what you regard as woke? It’s now an all-encompassing term from a positive or a negative perspective, how do you conceive of it?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Yeah, to me, the word woke comes from black slang from the seventies, and it was used to refer to something.

And it was used to refer to something very important, which is being aware of systemic racism. And we do still struggle with that in a limited way, we still have a problem with mass incarceration against Black and Hispanic men, we still have a problem with police brutality, not police shootings, but police insult Black people more, they lay hands on them more, they pull them over more, they arrest them more, they beat them up more, national emergency, I mean, this is very important stuff. Our public school systems are segregated, more so in liberal cities, actually, and then there’s intergenerational poverty in about 20-30% of Americans descended from slaves. So these are four very limited areas, but very important areas where we’re still struggling with systemic racism, and I would say in the seventies if you would say to someone stay woke, it meant be aware of this stuff, of the ways in which America has failed us descendants of slaves, and continues to. And that, I think, is very important.

When I use it in my book I’m using it the way it’s colloquially used today, which is the way sociologists use it. Now sociologists have noticed something very interesting, and they call this phenomenon the great ‘awakening’. So I use it in that sense, and what they’re referring to there is not being aware of these four issues that I think are very important, and by the way, that Republicans now are also very engaged with, so there’s no partisan divide over that anymore. They are using it to refer to something that happened around 2015, which is that white liberals became more extreme and academic in their view on race than Black and Latino Americans.

They outstripped Black and Hispanics in how they think about how crazy they view race, and that view comes straight from critical race theory, it comes straight from the university. It’s totally academic, it’s a binary that describes all power and all agency to white people, and a unique evil to whiteness and powerlessness and lack of agency and no esteem, nothing, to people of color. It takes a worldview that used to be based on right versus wrong and replaces it with one based on who has power and who does not, and then all virtue is ascribed to the powerless, and all evil to the powerful. That’s the woke worldview that white liberals have that most Black and Latino



people, it's totally foreign to how they think about themselves, because it's embarrassing and humiliating and gross. It's just gross to think about people that way, people don't think about themselves that way, but white liberals think about them that way. That's the great awakening, and the numbers on this are just staggering.

Pew did a study and they found that just 6% of Americans call themselves progressive and have this woke worldview. So for example, they asked the question, the proposition they posed was, America's institutions are so deeply racist that they all need to be razed and rebuilt from the ground up. So of the 6% who call themselves progressives, over 90% believe that, but only 6% of Black Americans are in that group of progressives. Most of them are much more moderate, two thirds of Black Americans call themselves either conservative or moderate, so the community itself does not see itself as liberal. And so all of these views, the defund the police, the critical race theory, the idea that these institutions all have to be rebuilt from the ground up, none of these reflect where the Black community is at, they're woke because they reflect how white liberals have outpaced the people that they're alleging to be representing.

**John Roskam:**

This rise of race as the defining characteristic of our community and society seems to have happened both in the US and here in Australia relatively recently. Is that the case, and why do you think it's happened when it has? And why do you think it's taken hold, it seems to have taken hold so quickly and so firmly.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

So you'll tell me if this explains what's happening in Australia, I'm not qualified to say. In my view it's taken hold in America at exactly the time when the intelligentsia got rich. That's what happened over the last 20 years. 30 years ago college professors, journalists, writers, they were not rich, they were solidly middle class. Over the last 30 years, 20 years, knowledge industry jobs have started to pay a lot of money. That meritocratic rise based on talent, intelligence, what have you, has taken people who see themselves as on the side of the little guy and just catapulted them into the elites. That's a very uncomfortable place to be if you think that you're so much more moral than your neighbor who's slightly less liberal than you, your whole self-esteem is built in being more liberal than that guy.

And I think it's a big distraction exercise. They want to talk about race because they don't want to talk about economic inequality because they're benefiting from it. Like I said, unconsciously probably, because these people, I think they're sincere. But I'm not qualified to say whether you have the same class divide in Australia, the same economic divide, and whether your intelligentsia, your knowledge industry workers are on this rise while there's downward mobility for the working class. But I argue that the whole woke phenomenon happened specifically, actually, with journalists, it started around 2011 really in earnest when the New York Times and the Washington Post and NPR and The Atlantic started to use woke language with exponential frequency, just all the time talking about marginalized and oppressed, and then the words people of color next to the word oppressed in the same sentences.



This is sociologists again, I mean, we've all noticed it, but it's not impressionistic, they have data backing this up. Why are they suddenly talking about slavery all the time? There's not more slavery now in America than there was 10 years ago, 20 years ago, and I argue that it's that combination of wanting to distract from the economic piece, plus that business motive of corporations just making so much money. You brought up subscriptions, the New York Times, and a lot of these places, switched from a model based on ads to a model based on subscriptions, and the New York Times explicitly called for having what it called a two-way street between journalists and readers. They wanted journalists giving readers what they wanted, and what those readers wanted was to get high on a sense of their own virtue, of course without touching their bank accounts, while feeling like everybody around them is a white supremacist who doesn't get it, and they're a white supremacist, but a little bit of a less bad one because they get it.

**John Roskam:**

I think what you've described in the US parallels to a large extent what's happened here in Australia. If I can then go to questions from IPA members of which we've received dozens. We don't have time for me to ask you all of those questions so what I've done is I've taken a selection that are representative, and one of the first questions is from Michelle, and it touches on what you were talking about. 'If we are becoming less racist on most indicators, why is race now so important?' And does that touch on what you've just been speaking about?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Absolutely. I think it's because we don't want to talk about class. We just don't want to talk about it, and so we're talking about something else. Thomas Frank wrote this book, 'What's The Matter With Kansas' in 2004, and my book is really a response to that. And he was trying to figure out why the white working class was voting for Republicans instead of for Democrats, which he said was less in their economic interest, but what he uncovered was this thing called backlash culture, he said that they were being whipped up into a frenzy by these Republican talk radio hosts, and Fox News, and politicians who had created this boogiemanager for them to be enraged about so that they would feel like they were involved in this very just fight against this boogiemanager and then vote for Republicans.

Sound familiar? I mean, it's very similar. The New York Times and the Washington Post and all of these outlets, they're looking at what makes their readers emotional, because that makes them engaged, and that makes them click, and that makes them come back, and that's how they create revenue. You can tell exactly what makes affluent white liberals very emotional because those are the words that appear the most in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and NPR, and MSNBC, and CNN, and it's the words Donald Trump and white supremacy. I mean case closed, right?

**John Roskam:**

Well, you mentioned Trump, and this is a question from Ben – 'Is the media angry with Trump



because they didn't see him coming and he talked about things they should be talking about?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Totally, 100%. I mean, a lot of it was just aesthetic, they just thought he was gross because he was what a liberal's worst nightmare of what a working person's fantasy is. They think, oh, if a working class person got money he would get a golden toilet, he would buy himself a model for a wife, he would put his name on everything, that's their nightmare of this projection. He was so crass, and I think that in that sense a lot of it was just aesthetic, a lot of it was that he knew how to force them to keep talking about him, because they couldn't resist it, they couldn't resist hating on him.

It was a Kabuki theater. So I think definitely Ben's right, and I do think Trump exposed something really important about America. And he did, the working class, increasingly, of all races saw him as a tribune. It doesn't matter what was in his heart, it doesn't matter if he's a good person or not, it doesn't matter what he said, they saw him that way, and that was important for us to recognize.

**John Roskam:**

Can I then ask you to elaborate on that question. In your view, Trump talking about the working class, about the opioid crisis, for example, has that made the situation better or worse?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

It was the first time that it was curbed. When he was in office they were fewer opioid deaths. The number one predictor for if whether a county would go to Trump or not was how many deaths of despair it had seen, from opioids, from alcoholism, and from suicide. I mean, once you heard that, there's no unknowing that, and yet everybody acted like they don't know that. That is just so important, and it's just so funny. I was watching a segment in 2015 after, I can't remember which, it was in one of the debates with Hillary Clinton, and he was saying, I guess someone had just told him about inner city violence if he was out there being like, "My God, it's terrible what's happening there. You can't be a Black person who walks outside of your house, you get shot, it's so awful," and they just excoriated him, the elites, like oh, this is so terrible.

The summer of 2020, that's what they were all saying, that to be Black in America is to be the object of a genocide. It's just so cynical, and Shelby Steele, who's a great black conservative thinker, he has this great line where he says, "America's original sin was not slavery, it was the use of race to gain power." And that's it, that's the whole thing, they're using race to hide their contempt and disgust for the working class. They have disgust for the poor, disgust for the working class, they hate everything about them, they hate their pickup trucks, they hate that they enjoy going on cruises, they hate that they like watching network television, the elites have disgust for this on a visceral taste level because they are in a different class, and they hide that by obsessing over race and being in a moral panic about race at a time when we have never been less racist.



**John Roskam:**

I have a question from Trevor – ‘Woke came quickly, will it disappear as quickly?’

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

I think it will not. The economic situation is terrible, the divide between the classes is just disgusting. I mean, the difference in compensation for what journalists make versus what the people who bring them every morsel of food they put in their mouth and drop it off at their door so they don't have to risk getting COVID, it's just disgusting and it just seems to me like it's getting worse. It is interesting to see that there are Republicans who are picking up the call of the working class, that will be very interesting to see how the left reacts to that, so far they've just ignored it, but we'll see what happens.

**John Roskam:**

A couple of different themes, question from Damian – ‘Can you ask Batya what has been the role of the media during COVID?’

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

I think as knowledge industry people who were very easily able to work from home, I mean, to me the COVID is not blue versus red, it's working class versus elites. You had these elites sitting at home typing, “Stay home, slow the spread,” while relying on the labor of people who are working class who they forced to go out there and bring them their food. And it was COVID Calvinism, they took a marker of their economic privilege and misinterpreted it as a sign of virtue, as a sign that they deserved that economic privilege, while increasing the gap between the elites and the working class. At no moment did they think to themselves, my God, we will starve to death if we don't force these people to work. I'm not willing to live so high above the people who I depend on not to starve. Put my lot with them, I'm going to be out there with them. At no point, did they say that. They said, “Leave the groceries on the doorstep because I don't want to catch what you have.” It was disgusting and it's still going on, and you look for example at the latest data, there's no gap between liberals, moderates, conservatives, and very conservative people. They all more or less are over COVID. The only people who still think COVID poses a serious threat to them are very liberal. The people are very liberal. That's not a political ideology, that is class ideology.

**John Roskam:**

Were the media during COVID barracking for a side? And if so, which side?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

I mean, the Fauci worship, they would get things wrong and then they would move the goal post. They would never admit it, you know what I mean? They would just change the topic, and so all of these average Americans are like, wait, but yesterday you said this thing. Are we just going to act



like that never happened? We're just going to act like that never happened. Never one admission that they got it wrong, always just pushing the latest, whatever it is, the most restrictive. It's really, really terrible.

**John Roskam:**

Is that one of the reasons why, so for example, in the latest Edelman survey of trust, decline in the media, in English speaking countries has declined. Do you think COVID and the media's reaction to the crisis has permanently changed attitudes to the media or will they come back?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

No, and they don't deserve to come back. I mean, don't watch, don't read things. It's useless, it's all just useless. There's nothing you can learn from these people that you can't learn from walking down to the local bodega or by going to church. I just think they've lost it and it's good. There's a mass consumer boycott underway and I'm so glad about it.

**John Roskam:**

And then there's two questions that follow from what you've just said. 'Where does one go for news? Is there such a thing as news now or is it simply fact and opinion?'

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

There is news. I do often just say, just consume less of it and you'll be so much better off. But I will say, I've never seen anything in the Wall Street Journal that I don't think is true, although it is very weighted and it's very pro-business, but it's so obviously catering to the rich in a way that feels much more honest. I never feel hoodwinked or anything. I know I'm not rich, I know I'm not the intended readership so I can take it with that grain of salt. I also watch a show called Breaking Points on YouTube, which is a really good show. One side is a right-wing populist, the other side is a left-wing populist. I don't agree with them about everything thing but I believe that they're making an honest effort to accurately represent things.

Who else do I listen to? I have to listen to all of it, but I'll tell you, interestingly, at times of war, there's no difference between Fox News and CNN. So during the withdrawal from Afghanistan, there was no difference between them. They were both excoriating Biden, even though I thought what he was doing was very brave. And now, with the war in Ukraine, there's nobody saying, hey, how come we're not pushing for negotiations? Why are we pushing escalation? No, it's all escalation, escalation, escalation. Any politician who says, "Why is there no fly zone?" Immediately, they'll go first to CNN, then to Fox News.

**John Roskam:**

Let's talk about that, and people like Glenn Greenwald have spoken about that too, that for all the tragedy in Ukraine, there's not, or there doesn't seem to be, a lot of debate about the various options the US or the EU or NATO might undertake. Is that just a function as he describes of the



power of ‘the war party’ or is it something else?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

No, I think he’s right. Obviously for journalists, the more dramatic it is, the better. They’re obviously looking at their numbers. People, I guess, are responding to this and watching and staying and not changing the channel but it’s appalling. It’s utterly appalling the degree to which they will sell out their own working class, their own neighbors, and I believe the civilians in Ukraine just to get the story that they want, just to get the story that’s the clear agenda of so many in the American elites.

**John Roskam:**

Have world events in your view led to the decline of woke ideology? So, many IPA members have said to me, can you please ask Batya about the fact that now, that the international situation is a lot more grave, it does seem to change the debate around the relatively trivial things we seem to have been engaged in over the last decade.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

What it’s done is there’s a new enemy so people are not quite as at each other’s throats, that’s true. But I think that’s part of the problem. America is acting like, the media is acting like we’re at war and we are not at war. We’re not at war with Russia. What Russia did was very bad but they have bought into Zelensky’s narrative that we are at war with Russia and we’re not – and that I think is very dangerous and very bad. Your members are correct that a lot of our stuff is on hold right now, but it’s because we’re doing a woke analysis of what’s happening in Ukraine and in Russia. So I’ll give you an example. A month ago, there was a big truckers protest in Canada, and it was a working class labor strike. It was the biggest labor strike I can remember in my life. They said, “Vaccine mandates? We’re not working.” And they were tarred as fascists and Nazis from the get go.

**John Roskam:**

They were too in Australia. That’s exactly how they were described in the Australian media.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Right. So it immediately tarred them as Nazis, even though there was only one Nazi flag. 100,000 people showed up, one of them had a Nazi flag, everybody’s a Nazi, right? So that’s how they treated the working class. Anybody who gets in the way of this sort of liberal elites economic agenda gets tarred as a bigot or a racist or a Nazi. But now, you look at what’s happening in Ukraine, and Facebook a couple of weeks ago decided that the Azov Battalion, which is an avowedly neo-Nazi battalion fighting on behalf of Ukraine, they’re Ukrainians but Ukraine has an elite battalion that is avowedly neo-Nazi, Facebook decided, you’re now allowed to praise them. You were not allowed to praise them up until now because their neo-Nazis. An internal memo was leaked to the intercept. Now, you’re allowed to praise the Azov Battalion and say, “Oh, look how



brave these soldiers are, these neo-Nazi soldiers.”

It just goes to show you these words, actual Nazis, they’re just taking this woke worldview and applying it to Russia and Ukraine where words have no meanings, it’s just about their agenda and what is their agenda? So during the Black Lives Matter summer of 2020, everybody posted a black square for Black Lives Matter. Now, everybody’s changed their handle to be a Ukrainian flag.

Why? Yeah, Ukraine’s on the right side of this. I have no problem saying that. I totally think Ukraine is on the right side of this, national sovereignty is extremely important, but the fervor with which the wine moms have taken this up as their issue, it makes no sense. It just makes no sense. Why do you care about this issue so much? There’s so many issues in the world that are going on that are as extreme, that are as important that you’ve never thought about before. I have liberal friends who are suddenly telling me about Russian imperialism day in and day out. You’ve never said those words before. What do they even mean to you? What does NATO stand for? Do you know?

So to me, it’s the same thing. It’s very much driven by elites. All of my black friends are saying the same thing to me, by the way. Why am I supposed to care about this? What is this supposed to be to us? Why is everyone talking about this? But that skepticism, you’re not allowed to voice it.

#### **John Roskam:**

In the five minutes that we have, can I talk to you about the future? Towards the end of ‘Bad News’, you talk about what individuals can do themselves to maintain agency, to get information and engage in debate. Can you talk about some of the things that, as individuals, we can do in the world of media that we are in at the moment?

#### **Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Yes. I believe that we have replaced community and spirituality with knowledge and information, it’s the only thing we respect. I would say get back into a community. Go to synagogue, go to church, go volunteer, go meet people that you disagree with. Be part of the force that is stitching back together the fabric of a frayed society after COVID, after polarization. Whatever the divisions in your society are, find people you disagree with who you respect and nurture those relationships. That is so important. And something I talk about a lot is every time you’re on social media and you feel that feeling of rage, like road rage, like, “Oh, I can’t believe somebody thinks this on the internet, I have to tweet about it.” Every time you feel that way, somebody has made a million dollars, and I’m not joking when I say that. It’s like they’ve literally hacked our emotions to make us feel that way, and I write headlines as part of my job, that is what we’re thinking about, is how to create emotion.

I try to avoid that exact trolly feeling because I think it’s bad to make it but you know that if you go with the ‘trolly’ headline, your piece is going to get 100,000 page views, and if you go with the slightly less trolly one, it’ll get 10,000. So every time you do that, someone’s making money, and every day, you can train your heart to not allow itself to be co-opted. It starts just by noticing it.





Just notice every time you feel that way, like, “Oh, huh, I’m feeling really angry at a stranger for thinking something I don’t think.” That’s not a natural feeling for a human to have about someone they’ve never met. And from there, you can train yourself to slowly but surely not have that feeling and remember that a democracy is literally built on the idea that we can disagree.

**John Roskam:**

Two final questions. The second last question is from David, and he asked me to address this to you – ‘Thank you for writing Bad News. It explains so much. What is your next project?’

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Oh, wow. So I’m still promoting this one. I’m actually recording the audio book right now, which is fun and a little bit crazy because I haven’t read the book in a while. My next project, I would like to go back to ‘A More Perfect Union’ and write about how we’re less polarized than we think, but we’ll see.

**John Roskam:**

A final question, Batya – are you optimistic for the future, and if you are, why?

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Yes, very, very, and you should be too because there’s wisdom in crowds and the American people are an amazing people. I’m sure your people are an amazing people too. Everything I’ve heard about Australia, every Australian I’ve ever met, there’s a goodness in us and we have to, have to, have to insist that the way to judge things and judge people is right versus wrong and not powerful versus powerless. We have to get back to a worldview based on virtue, based on good works, based on being good to each other, based on compassion, based on kindness, and I see that everywhere I go that’s not in the media, not in Washington DC. You see that everywhere you go and I would say that gives me so much hope all the time.

**John Roskam:**

Batya, I hope that we might see you in Australia one day soon.

**Batya Ungar-Sargon:**

Me too.

**John Roskam:**

Thank you for writing something as important as this. ‘Bad News: How Woke Media Is Undermining Democracy’. Batya, thank you for being part of a very special IPA Encounters.

*This transcript of IPA Encounters from 22 March 2022 with Batya Ungar-Sargon has been edited for clarity.*

