

So, What is Columbia Global Reports Anyway?

SEASON 1
episode one

Nicholas Lemann

Hi, I'm Nicholas Lemann and welcome to Underreported, which is a new podcast from Columbia Global Reports. Let me tell you a little bit about myself and then I'll introduce my colleagues. I'm a veteran journalist. It's getting to the point where I don't want to even say how many years I've been a journalist, but it's a lot. I guess about 15 years ago, I was the Washington correspondent for the New Yorker, which I still write for. And I came to Columbia University to be the dean of the journalism school here. I did that for ten years. And when I ended that, one of the things I started was Columbia Global Reports, which is a book publisher that publishes short books based on original reporting about various aspects of globalization that aren't getting the attention they deserve elsewhere. So that's what we're trying to do. I want to introduce my colleagues. First, our editor, Jimmy So, who is a former student of mine, among other things. Jimmy, welcome.

Jimmy So

Hi. Happy to be here.

Nicholas Lemann

Jimmy came to us as a founding member of our team, along with our publisher, Camille McDuffie, who couldn't join us in the studio today. And he's personally edited with his bare hands every single book we've published so far. Where can people find you, Jimmy?

Jimmy So

I'm on Twitter at JimmySo.

Nicholas Lemann

And this is Miranda Sita, who's our digital guru. She manages our social media, helps to get our books out there, and produces content for our website and blog. Miranda, where are you online?

Miranda Sita

Hello. I'm on Twitter and Instagram and at MirandaSita.

Nicholas Lemann

Great. Thank you both for being here. When we started, our start-up funding came from Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia University. And he gave us a very broad general charge, which was: There's all this stuff going on in the world, the world is changing very rapidly and the press in the US and elsewhere, particularly the press that covers the world, is shrinking at the same time.

So there's a real deficit in news coverage, and we at Columbia University need to step into the breach and figure out how to provide some of the missing coverage ourselves. He was completely unspecific with me about what form the coverage would take. So then, you know, we together pick this format of short books. And the reason we did that was, first of all, it gives us a truly unique niche. Nobody else does exactly what we do. The format, the design, and the structure of the books is distinctive and uniform.

And each book really has to meet the test in our minds of nobody else is doing this. We're the people calling attention to something for the first time. In other words, we're not going to be the 15th news organization covering, you know, UN week, which just happened in New York last week. We want to be out in front of everybody else and have other people follow us. And over the time that we've been doing this, you know, we've been able to get a large number of books, by book publishing standards, out relatively quickly because of the short format and because we're, you know, a small, flexible organization. We've developed a little stable of writers who are adept at covering international issues. And it's been, you know, a lot of fun and we've gotten a lot of attention for our work.

Jimmy So

I would agree that we aren't going to be covering a lot of the things that are going to be on the front page of newspapers every day. But the exception would be when we are, as Nick said, in front of what other publications are doing.

An example would be *The Populist Explosion* by John Judas, which came out a month or so before Election Day last year. Our mission was to introduce the idea and ideology of Populism – if you can call it an ideology – before it really became a household word, and really, people understood what it meant. And I would argue still lots of people don't understand what it means. But they do see it now every day, multiple times on the front pages of newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Nicholas Lemann

It should be said that we try to cover global phenomena and our books tend to be located in specific places, but multiple specific places. So *The Populist Explosion*, John Judas argues, isn't just happening in the United States with the election of Trump and the popularity in last year's presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. It's also very apparent in Europe, and it has both left-wing and right-wing versions. So you'd understand, you know, Jeremy Corbyn in Britain as part of the populist explosion, but you'd also understand the far-right party in Germany, which had a successful Election Day recently as part of the populist explosion. So we're trying to come up with a kind of all-encompassing explanation for a series of events that haven't been fit into a pattern before.

And one of the most interesting things – a couple of interesting points that John Judas makes in this book. One is that Populism really began in the United States. It's not a European phenomenon that came to the U.S. It's the reverse. And the second is that there's a real difference between right-wing and left-wing Populism, because left-wing Populism tends to posit the people versus the elite, however you define the elite. Right-wing Populism has three characters in the drama the people, the elite, and the other. There's some set of bad guys, like in the US, undocumented immigrants, who get woven into the tapestry.

Judas also says Populism – and this was true back in the invention days of Populism in the late 19th century. Populism doesn't really have a policy program. It's an emotion, but it's powerful at the polls. And what tends to happen after Populism is the translation into an actual program. So in the US, you had, you know, William Jennings Bryan, who was our most famous Populist of our history, four-time unsuccessful Democratic nominee for president. You know, he lit the fire, but he didn't get to do much in terms of governing. But his success led to the Progressive movement a little later, which completely remade American government.

Jimmy So

And you also see that scapegoating happening in Germany and the German elections that we're recording the podcast now on the day after the elections. You see not only the policy, you see it not only in the election manifesto of the AfD party, Alternative for Deutschland party, which won a shockingly large number of seats in the Parliament. They are a far-right nationalist, some would say, you know, very far-right, almost almost, you know, racist or a neo-Nazi like party, although not quite that far.

There are actual parties in Germany that do stand for neo-Naziism. However, they have, even after the election, have ratcheted up their scapegoating of Muslims. Even though they won a disproportionately, some say, amount of power in Parliament, they are still saying today in election victory speeches and interviews of warning against a Muslim invasion, and warning that the Germans need to be able to take back their country. And this is after an election that, you know, the Muslims did not gain any power. And, you know, ironically, it was the AfD that that had gained the power.

Nicholas Lemann

Let me talk about a couple of our other books, I'll skew toward recent and upcoming books. This fall, we're publishing two books. One, which isn't out yet but will be very soon, is called *Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire*, by Emily Witt. It's a book about the Nigerian film industry. I find, you know, most people I know have heard of Bollywood, the Indian film industry, but not so much Nollywood, which produces an enormous amount of films, more than Hollywood in a year, which they're able to do by virtue of having a very, very low budget per film.

And Emily Witt, who's a very talented young journalist, went to Nigeria and gives you a really joyful picture of an industry that's come up out of nothing and is able to establish itself as an important cultural voice in sub-Saharan Africa, and to some extent, around the world. One of the things that, a couple of things I'd note about that book. One thing that's very interesting about it is she takes you through the entire supply chain. And so you understand not only how these movies are made, because she goes on set, but also how they're financed, how they're distributed, everything being done under very difficult circumstances. That's all extremely interesting.

And then the other is the content. Nollywood movies, as described by Emily, are not Hollywood movies on a lower budget. They're actually quite different because they're dealing with themes that are at this point in history, much more interesting and up close and personal to Nigerians than they would be to traditional American audiences. Themes like what it's like to live inside a really tyrannical, extended family; what it's like to make a transition from a traditional village environment to living in a big mega-city; the role of religion and magic in people's lives. These are things that you don't often see at the American multiplex, but they're, you know, the stuff of Nollywood.

Our other fall book is a book with a much more un-cheerful message, also set in

Africa. Another Fine Mess: America, Uganda and the War on Terror, by Helen Epstein. Helen is a long-time Africa watcher and public health expert and human rights expert. This book is a searing indictment of Yoweri Museveni, who is the long-serving president of Uganda. He's been president for over 30 years now, and it looks like he'll be president for life because, as Helen Epstein points out, he's been relentlessly reducing, on the way to abolishing, any trace of democratic institutions and processes in Uganda.

So part of the book is telling that story. And then another part of the book is telling the equally upsetting story of United States support of him consistently through Democratic and Republican administrations, probably because he has been willing to be a reliable ally in the global war on terror, including being willing to raise armies and dispatched troops around eastern Africa to perform missions that, military missions that the United States finds useful, but presidents of the United States don't want to send American soldiers to do. So Helen is very negative on Museveni and equally negative on the United States for putting up with him. And all of us hope that this book will kind of wake people up. This is a story like most of those stories we cover that isn't covered very often by the American press, and we want to bring this to public attention.

Jimmy So

And I would say that Helen is very good at making the point that this should be and must be covered more by the American press. And you can sort of look at the Vietnam War even, as a way to argue that Americans do not look at its foreign policy in deep scrutiny enough. If you've been watching the Ken Burns documentary, The Vietnam War, one sort of major central criticism of the American policymakers at that time was they did not look at Vietnam as a story of Vietnamese independence or Vietnam in Southeast Asia post-colonial era. They looked at it chiefly and only as a story of the Cold War, and therefore containing Communism in Vietnam was all that mattered.

Nicholas Lemann

And in this case, it's about containing radical Islam.

Jimmy So

Right. And Helen makes the case that Americans were blind to any other consideration in west Africa and only looked at Museveni as the kind of only remaining knight in shining armor of the region, because he was not very Islamic or,

you know, hardly Islamic, and used him as a proxy army to contain the other powers who might be more Islamist, in let's say, in Somalia and Ethiopia, in Sudan, in the Congo or wherever. And therefore, us giving him carte blanche to conduct his affairs was detrimental and really spelled the chaos of the region for many years to come.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's talk a little bit about what it's like to go into the book business for the first time. It's been an adventure. Jimmy and I both have been kind of around the book business professionally. I as a book writer and reviewer. Jimmy as a book review editor prior to doing this. But we weren't publishers. So what have you found that surprised you? What was easier? What was harder than you expected in going to the other side and being a publisher and originator of books?

Jimmy So

What surprised me, I would say two things. One was that we, you know, we began this project three years ago. I was hired three years ago. And at that time it was not apparent that the future was, or we should say it seemed apparent that the future of publishing was digital only, even then. Now it seems that that picture is not quite accurate. And we see ebook sales have plateaued, in some ways even decreased a little bit. And back then, there were all these digital-only publishers, Kindle Singles, or ByLineBooks, and a lot more others, who were only publishing digitally.

We came in, and Nick came in at the very beginning, you know, gambling, or we should say, you know, just investing very much on selling physical books that would be designed beautifully, and you can hold in your hands, and you can put it in your back pocket for a train ride or airplane flight. And we have seen sort of that model has been very important. We've seen digital-only publishers either unsuccessful or folding, or they have gone to this physical books model. How did you, Nick, sort of decide on investing in, you know, publishing physical books?

Nicholas Lemann

Well, first of all, I should say that we do both. All of our books are published as ebooks, as well as physical printed books. But I've been skeptical for a long time about digital being the future, a sustainable future, digital-only being a sustainable future for anybody who makes editorial content, particularly printed editorial content. And we've seen this happen in the newspaper business, in the magazine business, in the book business. Audiences are so habituated to getting things in short bursts for free online that it's just very hard to get the attention and the

economic attention that you need to sustain an enterprise.

We're part of a new world that, you know, is growing rapidly and is wonderful, though it's still very small, of not-for-profit news organizations that have sprung up to fill some of these gaps that have been left by the downsizing of journalism. Each one is slightly different. We're the only one that I know of that charges for its editorial product. And that is a very good discipline to have.

The other thing I'd say about book publishing at this moment at least, and for us, is you know, we're kind of beneficiaries of the downsizing of the traditional trade publishing industry, which has happened because of Amazon and other things. At least here in New York, and to some extent around the country, there's an incredibly rich community of people who came up in, and were trained in, the big-name book publishing companies, and now are out on their own operating boutique kind of niche service provider firms. So we're able to punch way above our weight as a company with a full-time staff of three people, you know, to do full dress publishing because we can draw on this whole community of people.

At the very top of the list, I would put our book designers, a firm called Strick&Williams, Charlotte Strick and Claire Williams, who design the covers for our books and the uniform look of our books. And they're very close partners of ours and are a big part of what makes Columbia Global Reports work. This goes back to physical books. People see the books, which are beautiful and distinctive in shape and size and so on, and say, "now I get this, now I get what you're doing." They instantly get it because we have this uniform format and we pay a lot of attention to design.

Jimmy So

And I would also say that we are very different from other trade publishers and academic publishers in that we really have a mission, and we have an identity in that we are called Columbia Global Reports for a reason. Whereas, you go out into the bookstore, you would not know by telling from the spine or the front cover necessarily who published that book, and you wouldn't really care. But for us, we have a mission that's given to us to cover globalization.

And I would say, especially now, we are at the crossroads where our where our mission is increasingly important. I see it as, what made this project and this imprint was very attractive to me, was when I was hired, I didn't really understand globalization. And that's the problem.

And that's sort of the other niche that we have been able to find and that we came in, I came in at least, very green. I am a product of globalization. I'm an immigrant, and I am, you know, multilingual. And I buy things from all over the world. And I go all over the world, and I consume information and things from all over the world. But I would say I belong to a huge population in the world and in the United States who did not understand what the forces of globalization really meant, and didn't really bother to investigate.

And we see now that the opposite might be happening, even though America is supposed to be looking inwards and being more protectionist. But I think the opposite is true. There are large percentage of the populace reacting to the forces of globalization, whether in labor, whether in health care, whether in immigration, whether in national security and ideology and religion, reacting to it in a very visceral way. And I think it is in our mission and in the best interest for all of us to understand exactly, and to analyze more deeply how we are reacting to this, and not react in a knee-jerk way to the forces of globalization. Would you say that's true?

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah. We're helping people understand this topic. And then in the aggregate, I think the whole conversation, or at least the current version of it, about globalization started about 20 years ago, 25 years ago, during the Clinton administration, when, you know, NAFTA, the WTO, and so on were created. And it was seen as, you know, inevitable, and an unalloyed good. We're now in the age of revision and rebellion and pushback.

Jimmy So

We're not anymore, in the Thomas Friedman, The World Is Flat era.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, right. And it's very much the way, you know, the Industrial Revolution or revolutions were celebrated, produced a lot of political reaction and then produced revisions. So a lot of our books are sort of taking bites of that big topic in specific locations and subject areas. One other thing that I want to mention about our company is we're Columbia Global Reports. And we're part of an effort by the university and other universities to create more of a connection between universities and the world. The natural connection is, you know, people come to a university to study and get a degree and then go out in the world. So obviously that continues.

But the other part of the life of the university, the research part, is often kind of separate and invisible to the outside world. So we're not explicitly academic. We have not been publishing academic authors, but I hope we feel like we're coming from a university rather than Midtown Manhattan in having a richer, deeper, more long-term perspective. And we're one of a number of efforts going on at Columbia to, you know, take the university spirit out into an untraditional place.

I really admire our authors a lot. It is hard to find people with the set of multiple skills that we need for our books. There's a limited number of them and we are very grateful when we find one, and we try to treat them very well because we're so grateful. These are people who need to be able to write memorably, clearly, and vigorously and vividly for a general audience, who also need to be able to think and put the story they have in the context of the larger story of globalization. And they also need to be able to report, to go on site and talk to people and bring them to life on the page. We're very happy when we find someone who can do all those things, and there aren't that many of them

And that's Columbia Global Reports. I'll just wrap this up by mentioning again that in this season of Underreported, we'll be back with one-to-one talks between myself and the authors of our two books for this fall. Those are *Another Fine Mess*, the book about Uganda by Helen Epstein, and the book about Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry by Emily Witt.

And we'll also be bringing in authors of some of our past books to talk about the current news and to highlight some of our best moments from the events that we staged in live events around the books in New York City and elsewhere. So please subscribe to this feed and I'll give you one more reminder, which is please write a review when you have something to say about our show. And please stay in touch. You'll find all of our social profiles and much more at globalreports.columbia.edu. That's globalreports.columbia.edu. I'm Nick Lemann. This has been Underreported. Thanks for listening.