

The Objective



Q&A: Caitlin Dickerson

The Atlantic writer shares advice for immigration reporting.

BY JIREH DENG • Q&A • SEPTEMBER 2, 2022



THE FRONT PAGE

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Sometimes you find yourself in the right moment and time to make a difference.

Caitlin Dickerson started at NPR as an intern and moved on to report for the newsroom, where she won numerous awards for her investigative work, including a Peabody for her [series on mustard gas testing in World War II](#).

In the summer of 2016, Dickerson was hired as an immigration reporter at the *New York Times*. She couldn't have predicted the national debates around immigration to rise to a fever pitch during that fall's election season and push her beat to an essential part of the newsroom over the next four years.

While at the *Times*, her reporting became a cornerstone in shaping the national conversation about immigration. She wrote stories with rigor and attention to detail that humanized migrants and contextualized the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border as a result of years of immigration policy that had failed to create pathways for asylum and citizenship.

She's continued her immigration reporting as a staff writer at the *Atlantic*, where she recently wrote one of their longest pieces, [an investigation exposing how family separation became U.S. immigration policy](#) during the Trump administration.

In an interview with **Jireh Deng**, Dickerson reflects on the past ten years of her career throughout the ups and downs of reporting on immigration during and after Trump's administration. She leaves us

with some important thoughts on how she outlines boundaries in her role as a journalist while she's reporting on emotionally heavy stories.

This interview is edited for length and clarity.

Can you talk about how you got your start in journalism and the differences between the mediums of print, radio, and video?

My path to journalism was windy. Throughout college, I wanted to become a lawyer, but I graduated in 2011 which was a terrible time for the economy to go into law. I studied International Studies at Cal State Long Beach, reading the news and talking about what was happening in the world. At a certain point, I started to realize that I actually loved storytelling. I loved in particular dissecting how writers found ways to make dense topics or esoteric topics feel accessible. And I really wanted to spend all my time focused on that, rather than thinking at the academic perspective on these things.

I started applying for internships in journalism and was rejected for many of them because I didn't have any experience until I finally got one on NPR. Initially, my first job at NPR was as an intern in the development department, which is the fundraising department. But at the time, all NPR interns got to work on their own stories to create their own news magazine called *Intern Edition*. In doing my project for that, I met people in the newsroom. I started shadowing producers on weekends and using all my spare time to learn the craft. I eventually got the attention of editors who then offered me opportunities to stick around and work in news where I really wanted to be.

I was definitely an NPR kid growing up, listening to the radio in the backseat of the car, so that was probably my preferred medium when I started out. I still love working in audio a lot, but when I got into investigative reporting I started to feel like there were some limitations to how ambitious my work could be. Print writers were able to provide much greater depth because you have more space for a story. But you also have different elements that you can bring into a piece — photos, obviously, and data.

I gained a great respect for each medium individually and came to the conclusion that each story has a perfect medium. I really appreciate having enough fluency to be able to find a story and then decide, "Do I want to do this for audio? Do I want to do this for print? Do I want to do this for video?"

Audio and video open up a whole other audience that you don't always have in print. As much as I love the written word, I know that there are a lot of people who just simply don't have time to sit down and read a magazine article or a newspaper article. It's not that they don't want to, but they're busy. They might have time to sit on the couch and watch TV for half an hour at the end of the day and I don't want to not be able to reach them because I'm only working in print.

You cover, nationally and internationally, immigration — can you describe some of the challenges of trying to familiarize yourself with issues in a region you've never visited before?

Going into those stories humble and not cutting yourself off when you think you've reached an easy quick conclusion is really important to do the best possible version of those stories. They have to be stories that acknowledge, "This is what I was able to learn in two weeks or three weeks or a month," and not overstate your expertise.

Having covered immigration for several years now, there are certain things that I can figure out pretty quickly. I can figure out if somebody has legal status; if they do, what type of legal status is it? What are the benefits that come with that? That's stuff you can research in a few hours and you can call up a couple of experts to make sure that you've interpreted everything that you've read correctly. But far more vast, complicated and important than the legal aspects of the immigration experience are the social aspects, the cultural aspects and the religious aspects. These things take a lot longer to figure out.

When it comes to trying to get there, I just ask people. [Going to Poland to write about Ukrainian refugees](#) for only a few weeks was very daunting. But it ended up being a successful reporting trip because I just did interviews non-stop and asked them these very questions.

What you find is that for a lot of people, being an immigrant is the defining experience of their life or a defining experience of their life. A lot of times people are really eager to be asked about it and reflect on all the ways in which it impacts their economic opportunities or educational opportunities or their children's opportunities.

You can really learn a lot by just asking and then recognizing that one person's experience is not going to be monolithically representative of everybody. You've got to make sure you're talking to people from different ethnic backgrounds, from different gender backgrounds, from different parts of the world and from different religions. All these factors play a huge role in the experience of an immigrant. It's just trying to be a sponge and soak up as much information as you can, while also recognizing the limitations in a short reporting trip.

Amongst these difficulties, there's a lot of baggage to unpack with immigration reporting. Can you talk a bit about the history of immigration coverage in the U.S. and how it's looked in years past?

Historically, coverage of immigration in the news, when you go back decades and centuries, has unfortunately played a role in playing into stereotypes about immigrants and sometimes fear-mongering around immigration. Knowing that history, I think, is really important for doing a good job in covering the subject today.

There are a lot of immigration reporters today who do amazing work and who've built up a real depth of knowledge. They know that history, they know the laws and they understand and write about immigrants as full, complex people as they should.

One challenge I've noticed recently is that, when Trump was president, immigration was viewed as somehow being more important than in the past because it was a topic that the administration was so active on. You had a lot of people jump onto the beat or write stories about immigration from other beats without a whole lot of historical knowledge or context.

The main factors that influence immigration trends are long-range factors, economic factors, cultural factors, and factors having to do with international development and conflict. When you don't realize that and attribute a sudden fluctuation, up or down in the movement of people across borders, to what's just happened in the White House, you're getting the story wrong.

That kind of goldfish memory can also be really dangerous on this subject because a lot of times you're talking about something that has life and death consequences for people. It's really important to understand the historical role that journalists have played in covering immigration and understand that immigration is not something that changes overnight to avoid misleading readers. It's important when you're talking about an issue where many people already lack a strong foundation of knowledge.

Immigration hasn't always been a hot button topic. Was immigration something you were always looking to cover?

Immigration coverage kind of fell into my lap because it was a topic that I knew a lot about when I started out in journalism. I ended up pitching a lot of stories having to do with immigration, which then led to more stories on immigration.

I pursued this work because I believe strongly in a free and fair press and functioning democracy that has to exist with transparency to help people understand how their country really works and what it's really doing. Not just what you hear from the official channels, from press secretaries and from press releases. Because I know about immigration, I'm best equipped to play that role in this space.

A historical norm that is changing is that immigration has often been treated as a niche issue. In a time when our newsrooms feel so overwhelmed by countless intractable social issues, political issues and economic issues, there's a tendency to dismiss immigration as something not having to do with the core of our audience.

And of course, that just doesn't hold up. One in four American children has at least one parent who was born outside the United States. Immigration is an issue that impacts all of us and reflects all of us. Rightly, editors are starting to recognize it as the mainstream issue that it always has been.

Another historical norm that is shifting is the minimization of beats that primarily affect people of color. You see this in coverage of poverty, police violence or marginalized communities in general. In decades past, they did not have the same cache as covering politics or covering business. That has to do with systemic inequality in our society which extends to newsrooms. Thankfully, I've seen that change over the course of my career.

Finally, another norm is getting better. There is this idea that anybody who wants to cover immigration is somehow inherently biased, which is not true. In a way, strangely enough, Trump's focus on immigration highlighted how immigration policy is central to the everyday functioning of our country. All of that is helping to normalize interest in the beat and is elevating the importance of it being seen just as critical as other mainstream issues.

What are newsrooms currently getting wrong or right in their immigration coverage, and what can folks do better?

It's critical to be aware of the history and the actual push and pull factors that influence immigration trends, and the actual impacts immigration policy has on broader society. All those things seem obvious, but sometimes they're missing.

It's really important when you're talking to a community that feels imposed upon by immigrants, that you take time to dig into the facts beyond the emotional reaction people are having. What are the actual economic differences that have occurred? What are the differences in the schooling system or infrastructure?

I've seen studies about how anti-immigrant sentiment rises alongside wait times at the DMV. People are talking about this emotional issue in a way that isn't always factual. Our responsibility as journalists is to make sure we don't perpetuate things that aren't true.

Who are some immigration reporters we should be reading right now?

There is a critical mass of people doing really good work that is skeptical of stereotypes — skeptical of what they hear from official Washington across the political spectrum. They understand the history of the issue and then understand the euphemisms around immigration versus reality.

A lot of times, immigration serves as a proxy for a conversation that's really about race, language, economics, and culture. There are a lot of people doing a good job of taking all those factors into account, even when it comes to writing a daily news story, which is difficult. You can't bog stories down and you don't want to bore people, but that goldfish memory can be really dangerous.

I'm always nervous about naming names because it's hard to be comprehensive and I hate to leave anyone out. There are a lot of people doing great immigration coverage, which falls into a few

different categories. Several of the big national outlets have “OG” immigration reporters who know the history of the beat and fold that context into their stories about current events. One of the reporters whose work I look out for most frequently today is [Camilo Montoya-Galvez](#) at CBS; he’s really owning the beat.

Beyond those big legacy outlets though, I love to read anyone who’s approaching immigration stories, not as immigration stories— they’re just stories, which have to do with criminal justice and education and business arts and culture and inequality. Unfortunately, drawing the immigration box around coverage can have the effect of other-ing the story itself, and leaving readers with the impression that the stakes are somehow diminished, which is obviously not true. So I really appreciate it when authors like [Karla Cornejo Villavicencio](#) make those connections clear.

I also devour work by organizations like [Futuro Media](#), which unapologetically covers topics related to immigration on its own terms, without trying to filter it or turn it into something that a *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* reader wants to read. They yield work that just feels a lot more real.

Smaller newsrooms tend to have a closer relationship with the communities that they cover. You’re a lot less likely to see work that’s based on stereotypes or assumptions. It’s genuinely hard to come up with a story about a small community when you’re sitting in an office in New York. That’s an inherent challenge to the work and the trade-off is that you’re able to reach a lot more people working for a big national outlet — I love partnerships between local outlets and national outlets.

It’s also important for me to maintain a close relationship with the small town where I grew up. I try to spend time in the country, not just in an office doing reporting, so I can pop that bubble.

What are the ways in which you are mindful of your footprint and try to make clear boundaries with your sources who might be experiencing deportation or other immigration action?

In managing relationships with sources, I lay out boundaries for them explicitly and frequently, always reminding people of my role. I don’t expect somebody who doesn’t have a lot of exposure to the media to always remember that. What they tell me can end up in a story unless they ask you that it doesn’t. I also, of course, go over stories thoroughly with sources before anything is published, to make sure that someone doesn’t accidentally share something too vulnerable because they relaxed at the moment and opened up.

That’s my responsibility to be clear and upfront with people about the potential implications of appearing in a big national news story. The story may pop up for years to come when their name is Googled. I don’t have control over what might be written around it. Their photo could appear in an article about an article on a totally another outlet, it could pop up in a TV segment. I try to constantly remind people what it means to engage with a journalist, especially in interviews with people who don’t have much experience.

The work is definitely heavy. I had an editor who said, “Our jobs are to call people up on the best day of their lives or the worst day of their lives and ask them to tell us all about it.” I am cognizant of the generosity and bravery that it takes to open up to a journalist and I try to acknowledge that frequently. I let people know that they can set boundaries if there are certain things they don’t want to talk about and that’s okay. I allow people to set those terms so my work doesn’t feel extractive.

Do you ever feel like you have to hold back or censor yourself as you’re reporting on some stories that are especially heartbreaking? How do you hold yourself to the standards of fairness and accuracy if you feel emotional?

I’ve talked to a lot of young journalists who feel really inhibited by the structures of traditional reporting. What I usually tell them is, “If you want to write essays and you want to write opinion work, you should absolutely go and do that.” You shouldn’t try to force yourself into a mold, where you feel uncomfortable, where you feel you’re not able to do your best work. The difference is that, for me, I really believe in the straight ahead, deeply-reported story and its ability to inform people so they can come up with their own opinion.

Not every story should be a traditional straight-ahead piece of reporting, nor should every story be an opinion essay – both have their roles in informing our audiences. When stories are really high stakes, I don’t feel inhibited in those moments. I feel almost the opposite, that when a lot of people are paying attention, it becomes that much more important that my reporting is exact and thorough.

My work needs to have the perspectives of all kinds of people, not just one side or the other. People are really looking to reporters to ask what’s going on, “I want to know how I feel about this, but I need the basic facts where I can make a decision.”

A journalist’s work is more important than ever. I honestly never feel like I’m having to hold anything back because I feel a real sense of mission in those moments. I know I’m different from a lot of other writers. I’m not writing a diary entry or writing an essay. I don’t think the country needs to know how Caitlin Dickerson feels about X, Y, or Z.

What they need to know is what policy has changed. Who’s responsible for it? What are its implications for it? Who’s supporting it? Who opposes it? Who’s being impacted by it? How are they impacted by it? How significant are the impacts? How does that differ from what politicians are telling us?

All those things my readers need to know and that’s my job. To me, that feels more important than talking about my emotional reaction to something, but that’s because of the vocation I’ve chosen.

This piece was edited by [Holly Rosewood](#).