

The Objective



Q&A: Johana Bhuiyan

Bhuiyan on the urgency of her work in today's technological gilded era and how she weighs questions of objectivity in her reporting.

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Today's technological advances are mired in the shadow of ethical concerns — and [Johana Bhuiyan](#) is taking Big Tech to task with her accountability reporting.

A New Yorker born and raised, Bhuiyan first started as a Politico reporter covering media. She moved on to cover transportation for BuzzFeed News in 2014, before taking a position as a senior transportation editor at Recode, and then, as a technology reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*. Now, as the senior tech reporter and editor at the *Guardian*, she's continued to focus her investigative work on the surveillance and privacy of marginalized groups. Over the tenure of her decade-long journalism career, she's reported on [the surveillance data that the U.S. collects on migrants](#) to the cozy relationship that [Ring developed with LAPD officers](#).

Bhuiyan spoke to [Jireh Deng](#) about the urgency of her vocation in today's technological gilded era and how she weighs questions of objectivity in her reporting.

This interview is edited for length and clarity.

Your work as an investigative journalist has been essential to holding tech companies and other institutions accountable. What drew you to do this type of tech accountability work? Was this something you set out to do at the start of your journalism career?

I did not have any intentions of covering tech when I went into journalism, it was not on my radar at all. I became a journalist because I wanted to hold the powers that be accountable. That was my main goal.

I grew up as a child of color in New York City – I'm multi-ethnic and I'm Muslim. I lived in Queens where I was surrounded by people of all sorts of cultures and walks of life. I was exposed to a lot of stories that weren't being told in the media. And I also saw the unique obstacles that people of color

and Muslims and a lot of other folks faced. That is a big part of why I wanted to become a journalist. I let that childlike ambition carry me through college, when I was studying journalism, but also when I was searching for jobs.

When I started, I didn't have any connections in the journalism industry. It's still very much this way, but back then, it helped to know people because it didn't feel like there were a ton of opportunities to get your foot in the door without having some sort of connection. So I went into all of the job application processes and internship application processes with a very open mind. I thought to myself, "I will do any kind of journalism. It doesn't need to, right now, be the frontline war reporting that I thought I would be doing. I will just literally do anything."

The first job I ever got was at Politico NY covering the media industry. I hated it, I did not enjoy it — I thought it was super navel-gazing. But what it did do for me was connect me with a lot of other folks in the media industry that I didn't know. And in the process of me reporting on media companies — digital media companies, specifically — I got to know the people at BuzzFeed News. When an opportunity came up to be a tech reporter, they reached out to me and it was an easy transition from media [reporting] to tech. I was still really early in my career. And again, thought, "I will do any kind of tech reporting. Whatever I need to do to get my foot in the door and just do good reporting."

At Politico, I was doing a lot of accountability work along with corporate coverage. But it was at BuzzFeed News that I started honing my focus on things that I wanted to cover, like the intersection of tech and society and how it impacts vulnerable people. Those topics started shaping a lot of my coverage. Even though I was just a tech reporter back then, I started to do a lot of accountability and investigative work organically.

When I moved through my career doing business coverage, it would be a mix of investigative work and company product launches. I wanted to do less of the consumer tech reporting that I was doing at that time and, when I went to the *LA Times*, I had this job description that I had made up. I told them, "I want to be a tech accountability reporter and I want to specifically focus on civil liberties and the way that tech companies impact people of color and marginalized groups." Luckily, the *LA Times* said, "Sure, you can come here and do that job." When I was working at these other companies, I was finding opportunities to get more investigative stories in between the other obligations or responsibilities I had.

Your investigative work reminds me a lot of the muckraking era when journalists were writing during the gilded era about wealth inequality and corporate greed. Culturally, at this moment, we're reaching a similar space of ultra-rich companies and this growing wealth divide. How do you see your role as a journalist in the context of this?

I think that is the ultimate function of journalism to be the fourth estate and to hold the powers that be accountable. And, certainly, the government is one of the powers, but it also includes the companies that are making billions of dollars a year and have a role in practically every aspect of the lives of the people in this country.

As a tech reporter, I'm trying to get back to balancing the cultural stories to tell about tech — it is still a binding force that still connects people. However, I don't think that that means I should not cover the ways that tech companies exploit people, contribute to the expanding wealth gap, or create an inescapable surveillance state.

I will say as a human being, it's mentally taxing to always be covering stuff like that. So I think it'd be great to be able to sprinkle in a little bit more of how tech helps a particular community. But I don't know, is there ethical consumption in surveillance capitalism?

Have your experiences being Muslim living in the wake of 9/11 informed your reporting? How does your identity shape your sensitivity around covering subjects when it pertains to your community? Or does it make you privy to stories that other journalists aren't paying attention to?

Yes, it's informed my journalism. I know that there are people who would argue that journalism is supposed to be this "neutral" thing that is just presenting the facts. But in my mind, facts don't mean truth without context. You can put up a list of facts, but if you're not acknowledging the context that it's happening within or the power dynamics involved, you're not doing journalism. You're not getting the truth across.

I think it's really valuable that I am someone who is a part of a group that has been targeted by surveillance systems created by corporations and government-sanctioned surveillance systems. Living in that reality, especially being from New York and living at the Ground Zero of the surveillance state, is a perspective that helps me better understand the impacts of surveillance systems. It helps me see stories that other folks aren't seeing. It also helps me better connect with sources who are being harmed by these systems because they understand that I also come from a group that is being harmed. It makes me a better journalist.

You say that facts have to be contextualized. In your experience, who gets to dictate standards around bias in the newsroom? What do you feel is a better standard of fairness and accuracy that you apply in your stories?

Neutrality certainly can be and should be, but the way that we talk about it is fundamentally flawed and should just be reconsidered. Objectivity is a journalistic standard, but we should talk about what that means. When it comes to bias, I have the same question as you: Who gets to decide what is biased? My perspective is not what is standard in the media industry. As it is with many industries, the standard voices are your average white male. If my perspective does not reflect that, then it's

seen as bias and I am seen as a bad journalist. When, in reality, what it does is inform a story giving it more dimension and accuracy to what is happening.

Nobody said that we're not supposed to bring in our perspective. We live in the real world — there is no way for us to ignore the reality of the world. If I'm just listing the facts from both sides as if they're exactly equal, how are readers supposed to come away with what happened in that situation?

Being objective means reporting truthfully, fairly, and accurately. Let's say, for instance, a really big person who is strong and works out and has a weapon attacks a person who is weaker and unarmed. The neutral way to cover that is to say, "There was a fight. The attackee defended themselves; therefore, it was a clash." The truthful and fair way of covering that is to say this person was attacked. The accurate way of covering that would be to include their relative sizes and talk about the attackee's vulnerable position. Pretending all of that information is not pertinent to the truth is in reality showing bias toward the powerful. You're obscuring the facts to make it seem like it's a fair fight.

When you try to take on a voice of complete neutrality without talking about which of those two sides is more powerful, then you are showing bias to the more powerful ones. It's the same thing when people use the term "officer-involved shooting", for instance. Journalists use that language because they feel it is neutral and fair in their mind, to use the language that the police are using. But it's co-opting the language of the powerful entity and in doing so, giving them a pass for their involvement in that shooting.

When I was looking at your work at Recode, you had a whole section where you talk about how your dad is a religious leader and how a public figure gifted him a plant once. I thought this is very humanizing, in a way, that we get to understand how you exist in the world. Do you think this is something standard that journalists should do to disclose their leanings and ethics? How is this an important part of making sure that we hold ourselves accountable in the ways we might be susceptible to not being completely fair and accurate?

The disclosure was company standard at Recode. I thought the bamboo plant thing was funny. At that point, you can't tell me that I'm not being completely transparent with you, because I laid out all my cards. I don't know that I would say that's something that everyone should do, but transparency is always important.

Full disclosure, my husband works at a big tech company. But it's never come up because I don't focus on his company in my work. But every publication I go to, I immediately let them know where my partner works and what he does. It's also to make clear that there are going to be lines that I draw and things that I won't participate in. I'm very protective of my partner and it's sort of the same way with all my family, even when it comes to my reporting.

But I think journalists, again, are people allowed to live full, multi-dimensional, multifaceted lives. And if it comes up in a story, they should disclose it. I don't know that journalists need to say things like, "I take Ubers," because I cover Uber and I take Uber, it's a part of how people get around. Are transportation reporters not allowed to take subways? You're allowed to continue to live the other parts of your life without it being assumed it's somehow affecting your ability to be objective when it comes to a story. I think that is the point of being a journalist. You're able to sort of look at things fairly with all of the context and be accurate, even if you have some sort of connection to a part of the story.

I love that you track the impact of your stories on your website. When you're writing stories, do you ever get that itch at the back of your neck that could have a really big impact? Who are you thinking of as the audience for your stories? And how does that shape the way that you write the story and how you frame the issues?

My goal with every story is impact. I am covering surveillance of disenfranchised groups who are often disproportionately targeted by surveillance systems and being incredibly and uniquely harmed by them. The impact would mean helping them in some sort of way. My goal is to make sure that any investigation that I'm publishing has some sort of positive impact.

When I'm thinking about my audience, I'm thinking about a lot of different people. I'm thinking about folks within this community that is being affected by this surveillance system who might benefit from this knowledge, or who might be able to say, "Oh my god. I'm dealing with something similar. I didn't realize it because of X, Y, and Z." I'm trying to equip people who are affected with the proper knowledge and tools and resources.

But I'm also thinking of folks who can affect change. Oftentimes, I will send my articles directly to regulators. I hope that they will look at that story and it will give them new information or bring attention to something they weren't aware of. In the past, it's resulted in some sort of action, whether it's an inquiry or some sort of settlement.

It's also the public. The issue with surveillance is that the public has not cared as much as they probably should and there's like a lot of reasons why that happens. Part of it is a sort of complacency around privacy and surveillance. Folks just think, "Well, yeah, every tech company has all our data and information, what are we going to do about it?" There's also a little bit of disinterest in surveillance coverage that focuses on the technology. Whereas I think one of the ways to write compelling surveillance stories is to tell the human stories of people who are being impacted by it.

For the greater public, they might feel, "If I'm not doing anything wrong, why does it matter if someone's tracking me?" Or there's a lot of, "Well, it doesn't affect me. So why does it matter?" And so, you know, that's changed a little bit just in [the aftermath of the Dobbs v. Jackson Supreme Court](#)

decision. People suddenly realize, “Oh, surveillance does affect me.” But also, your behavior that was once protected can quickly become criminalized.

So, to the people who say, “I’m not doing anything wrong, why does it matter if someone’s surveilling me?” It’s important to consider who’s getting to decide what is right and wrong. How can your behaviors, which may feel innocuous or standard online behavior, be used to criminalize you? I want people to care more about the data that they’re giving to apps and what the tech companies do with the data they collect. Tech companies can give it to law enforcement in response to subpoenas and warrants. Without knowledge of it, there’s no public outcry, so there’s a lack of pressure on regulators to create privacy regulations that protect consumers. Unfortunately, that’s the way it works, it should just be on regulators to do that on their own. But it is very helpful if the public says, “Hey, this is a bad thing. Please fix this.”

A lot of journalists, especially women of color, face a lot of harassment and a higher potential for doxxing and stalking. As a journalist who’s doing these investigative work that is holding these powerful institutions accountable, you ruffle a lot of feathers. How do you practice safety for yourself in those situations where you could be compromised online or in real life?

The answer is not nearly enough. There’s certainly much more that I can do, especially knowing all the ways that my data is and can be used against me. In terms of having a public platform, there are a lot of different services that will help if you’re being attacked or harassed. One that the *Guardian* gets for us is **Delete Me**, which goes through all of your Google search results and makes sure that you’re able to opt-out of particular listings that have your personal information.

But even then, like if you Google my name, you’ll find very random inaccurate links to random sites like famouslibras.com. Yes, I’m a Libra and it’s largely inaccurate — but it’s just accurate enough that it does give a little bit more information. There are questions about my height and my net worth that are, for the most part, wrong. But then it’ll also be questions of, “Where is she from? Where has she worked before?” This information exists on the internet in places where I’ve put it, but for it to exist together in one place for anyone to easily consume and use against me is quite scary and risky.

If you are being targeted by trolls on Twitter, there’s **Block Party**. That will let you automatically block people who are harassing you and then block everyone who is liking the tweets harassing you. It’s genius. I love it. Those are the very small ways I protect myself. And I think I should be posting less. I just have a posting disease. I didn’t need to post, I need the dopamine hit.

You’ve transitioned between different newsrooms as you’ve worked at relatively new startup media companies and older legacy newsrooms. Can you describe your experiences of working at a new media place versus an older established newsroom?

In some ways, there are very few differences. I've moved around quite a bit in my career, over 10 years I've been at four or five different publications. When I make the jump to another publication, it's always a big risk. Sometimes I'm leaving a place that I love for what seems like could be a better opportunity for me.

I weigh it, "Even if it ends up being a bad experience, will I be able to do good journalism? Genuinely, at all of the places that I've been, whether our motivations or desires aligned, our mission to do good journalism was always in sync. The starkest difference going from Recode to the *LA Times*, for instance, is size. There are just so many more systems in place at the *LA Times*, because it's been around for so much longer. Systems I didn't feel like I had that easy visibility or access to at previous publications.

There are positives to that, but it also meant that there were layers and layers of editing systems and processes in place, which is great but when it comes to breaking news stories, you do want to be faster. I did find digital media publications at startups were much faster — sometimes we're publishing directly to the site. That was not happening at the traditional publications that I've been at.

One of the other big differences, the people who worked at the startups by and large were also quite young. Whereas at the *LA Times* and the *Guardian*, I'm working with people who have been doing this for years, even those who came out of retirement to do more reporting. So there's a lot more institutional knowledge at these more traditional publications, than maybe at the startups.

One of the things that I remember you telling me was, "If an organization is over 100 years old, it means their problems are over 100 years old too."

If you're talking culturally, that was one of the big differences. At the startups, there were certainly organizational problems but those issues didn't feel as deeply entrenched as the publications that have been around forever. There are pros and cons if you're trying to agitate internally for changes. If these problems have been around forever, maybe those who have dealt with them long enough decide, "Okay, change needs to happen." Or maybe it's just such a big part of what that publication is fighting against, it feels like an uphill losing battle. There's a little push and pull when it comes to what those problems are and how it affects individual reporters.

This piece was edited by [Omar S. Rashad](#).