

Engage360 Episode 122 | Navigating News Media; Bonnie Kristian

Intro Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Don Payne Hi friends, welcome to Engage360. Coming to you from Denver Seminary. We are very grateful that you've chosen to spend a little bit of time with us. And for our conversation in this episode, we are privileged to have as our guest, Bonnie Kristian. Bonnie is the editorial director of ideas and books at Christianity Today. She is a longtime journalist who has written for a long time for Christianity Today. She's also written for USA Today and Time and other periodicals as well. She is the author of *A Flexible Faith: Rethinking What it Means to Follow Jesus Today*. But her 2022 book, *Untrustworthy*, is the subject of our conversation today. Bonnie, welcome. We're glad to have you with us.

Bonnie Kristian Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

Don Payne We're also joined by our president again, Dr. Mark Young. Mark, good to have you here.

Mark Young Thanks, Don.

Don Payne Bonnie's basic concern in this book, *Untrustworthy*, is a crisis that affects, I think, just about everybody, even if they don't have language for it or don't know how much it's affecting them. But it's what we might call academically and what Bonnie calls an epistemic crisis. That is, it's a knowledge crisis that's undermining our ability to gain knowledge, to discern knowledge claims, and to act well on the basis of those knowledge claims. And this is really not just an academic or a philosophical conversation. It's in the face of every person who listens to messages about what's going on in the world, what we should think about that and how we should act on that. Now, you may already have intuited that the notion of fake news would be at the heart of a conversation like this, and Bonnie tackles that notion head on. But Bonnie, again, thanks for being with us. And I'd love for you first, maybe to give us a bit of a flyover of this knowledge crisis and how you think it's impacting us and then we can kind of branch out from there.

Bonnie Kristian Sure. Yeah. So, as you said, I think many people may not have the words for this, but it's a very common experience. As I've been, you know, promoting this book in various venues, I've never described it and have someone say, oh, that doesn't really happen to me. I don't know what you're talking about. And so, it's that experience that I think we increasingly feel of being just unsure of feeling unmoored, being uncertain about what is trustworthy, what is knowable. And this is an experience that I think we encounter, especially but not exclusively online and especially but again, not exclusively with political media. And so, it's just that question where you're being deluged with content, most of us are, especially those of us who have smartphones, which increasingly all of us, being deluged with information all day long, day in and day out. There is so much of it. You do not have the knowledge or expertise to evaluate it on a case-by-case basis because no one could. And so, you're just sort of left with, do I believe this? Do I accept this? What is happening and how am I to sort through all this and come to, you know, reliable conclusions, come to believe true things and not false things?

Mark Young Yeah. I really appreciate the fact that in your book you tell stories about friends and others who have faced crises of knowing and sometimes made decisions that seemed almost irrational based on what they had come to believe. As you wrote the book, did you find yourself attempting to address them, or was your desire to reach more of us? In other words, those of us, to prevent us from falling into that trap?

Bonnie Kristian Some of both. I mean, I think there's an extent to which often in writing this kind of book, I think you're always sort of writing to your loved ones, right, that you think would be perhaps helped by what you have to say, though, of course, whether you can actually say these things in the context of the real relationship is another question. So, it's not that I didn't have them in mind, but I do think that there's a sense in which, the subtitle of the book is "The Knowledge Crisis Breaking Our Brains, Polluting Our

Politics, and Corrupting Christian Community." And on that first piece, the idea of having a brain that's been broken by our media consumption habits and by the way we encounter information. In some cases, if your brain is really broken and my brain's a little broken, I think anyone who's engaging in this world, our brains are a little bit broken. But if your brain gets really broken, you might be in a space, at least for a while, where reading a book like this would not be very helpful to you because you're not willing to consider that there's something wrong with how you're consuming media. And so in that sense, you know, while I certainly wouldn't object to someone in that space reading it, I think for a lot of us it is more of a, or hopefully should be a more preventive activity where, before we get into deep, we are deliberately thinking about how we engage in this world and hopefully, you know, don't get a completely broken brain.

Mark Young Yeah, you use the phrase consuming media. I want us just to jump there if we can, because that tends to be the center of play, the place where a lot of this conversation occurs. What are some healthy habits of consuming media that you would recommend? I know at the end of the book you have some very practical suggestions. Which ones would you highlight for us and for those who are consuming media regularly?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, I mean, a lot of it and, I understand this is strange for a journalist, but a lot of it comes down to consuming less. The reality is that most of us, especially those who do not perhaps have the wisdom to not do this for a living, do not need to be as informed about the news as we think that we do. The idea that you would always be up on everything that's happening in the world, that it would be a virtue. I would question that and say that for most of us, that's not something that we need to do and that it's, well, it's not necessarily a bad thing. There's a very real chance that it is distracting us from other better ways that we could be using our time. And so, to that end, I think that the number one thing that I go to is if the news is of interest of you, if this is something that you actually like doing, and for many people it's not. And so, for those people, I would say, you know, consider just not reading the news. If you don't like it, why are you doing this? It's probably not improving anything in your life or making any positive difference in the world. But if it's something you like doing and you want to continue engaging here, consider very deliberately selecting, maybe at most, half a dozen topics about which you are going to read and watch and to some extent actually study, something that you're going to learn about in real detail, so that when you come to read things on those topics, you do have that background knowledge that allows you to evaluate the truth claims and the fact claims that you're encountering. And this not only makes us better positioned to evaluate what we're reading, it's also going to have a limiting effect with our time, right? If you're only reading, you're only following six things, you're not following everything. That's going to limit your time and it will tend to trickle out and effect a lot of our other habits, because you're not going to just sort of mindlessly scroll through whatever's popping up on your phone, whatever, you know, news notifications come through because that could be anything. And you're not reading about just anything. You're reading about the things that you have chosen to know well. And so that kind of, you know, it sounds very simple, but that kind of topical limitation and similar constraints on our time use and our habits, I think are crucial for sort of the average person to be engaged in news and consume it responsibly, but in a way that doesn't have such deleterious effects on other parts in our lives.

Mark Young When you think about consuming media and limiting the consumption around topics, it also seems to come to the fore what outlets do you choose? Right? And that's where a lot of the breakdown in relationship occurs. You have folks consuming one outlet and another consuming another outlet. And they really have a different view of the world. Is it your recommendation that we attempt to read news from outlets that come from perhaps different points of view?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, I mean, I think in general that is good advice. I also think though, that depending on, you know, depending on the relational circumstances, that by itself is not going to be sort of the cure all that it's sometimes made out to be. You know, you'll hear people talk about if we just diversify our news feeds, we'll understand each other's perspectives. There's actually a fair bit of research that shows that if you plop content that people disagree with into their news feed, it entrenches them further in their own beliefs because they see this thing that they hate and they react against it. And so, they become more convinced of their own rightness and more opposed to that thing. So, it matters not just that we do it. I

wouldn't say it's a bad idea, but how we do it, and particularly thinking about relationally, I would say if you have a close friend or family member who is of a very different political and media ilk than you, trying to say, send them links from your preferred sources is probably not going to get you very far. If anything, it will probably bring you closer to like a relational rift than mend it. And so, in those cases, I would not advise that. I mean, think about how you feel when someone keeps texting you links that you think are from some crazy outlet. You don't like it; you don't want to read them. You don't want to watch that. They don't either. And so, in cases like those, I would again counsel more of a step away from it than a, you know, trying to expand it in some way, like talk about your kids or your dog instead. Don't talk about these different news outlets that you disagree on.

Mark Young What characterizes trustworthy news reporting?

Bonnie Kristian Well, that's a big question. And I've realized recently that when I say the media, I'm mostly thinking about print media. And what other people are often hearing is like cable news. And those are very different media and it's hard to speak across, that's not even all of the media that we have. But some broad themes that I would point to is, one, the ideal that we should be looking for is not necessarily unbiased. I think you can have a bias and be very open about what that bias is and still have a very real concern for truth. So, there are very ideological outlets. For instance, Christianity Today is a great example. We have a very clear bias, if you want to use that term. Right. It is an evangelical Christian outlet. We are not just trying to present sort of a blank slate view of what's going on in the world. That doesn't mean that we don't have a concern for truth at the same time, and the same is true of many outlets. There are outlets that have a strong ideological perspective and yet a real concern for truth. And so, at the same time, there are outlets that have a strong ideological perspective and no concern for truth. So, the idea of bias by itself, I think, is not very useful for how we're evaluating outlets. So, then you say, okay, well, how do you know if an outlet has a concern for truth, whether they're taking a strong perspective or sort of a middle ground trying to be more neutral, and one big tell is if they issue corrections and how they issue corrections. Do they only do it when a lawsuit forces them to do it or do, they do it whenever they realize they've gotten something wrong? Do they try to make sure that the correction travels as far as the initial error? That kind of sort of basic accountability. Are you transparent with how you're doing your reporting? Are you very clear when you've been wrong? Are you trying to conceal your perspective or are you up front about it and saying like, you know, this is my view in a way that allows your audience to sort of parse out, okay, here's where their perspective may be shaping what they're choosing to cover. Here's where they're presenting sort of unvarnished facts. I think it's less sort of a, you know, you should only read outlets from this political perspective so much as how are they handling facts and truth claims as they present them to the public?

Don Payne Okay. I wonder, Bonnie, whether that connects with some comments you make in the book about two types of fake news. You talk about technically accurate stories that are still unfair or misleading, and then you talk about fair or true stories that we simply don't like. And you say that the first of those is trickier. Do you have any guidance on how to detect when that is happening?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, that's a tricky one. And this is where part of my recommendation about knowing a specific topic well comes in. Because if you are on really familiar territory, you're more likely to have alarm bells go off when you come across a story that, you know, again, is not actually lying, but is maybe telling you half the story or framing it in a way that is misleading. If it's something you don't know anything about, that'll slip right past you. But if it's something you've studied, you might catch it and be able to look up other sources and figure out what that other half of the story is. It is more difficult, though, and it is something that I think is very common. And it's the way we talk about fake news, we tend to conflate these different things. Right. The term is used so broadly. It's used to mean those two things, stories we dislike that are true, stories that are technically true, but actually misleading, and also just pure fabrications. And that makes it very difficult to understand even what it is we're talking about, let alone to identify it anyway.

Mark Young Why do people hold on to ideas in the face of overwhelming evidence, overwhelming questions about whether those ideas are true? And let's think in terms, you have a chapter where you talk about conspiracy theories, for example. We were just talking earlier about certain eschatological schemes

where Jesus is going to come back and then he doesn't come back. But somehow the prophet doesn't lose any credibility. Why do people hold on to ideas that are important to them in the face of evidence that's seemingly rather compelling to others?

Bonnie Kristian I think a lot of it is less about the ideas themselves and about how they make us feel and what they do for us in terms of our self-conception and our relationships. So, I mean, this is also true of the kind of fake news we were just talking about. A big indicator is if something is very inflammatory, if it makes you very sad, very angry, if you think this is too good to be true or like it's unbelievable how bad they are, that's probably a good signal that something might be off there. And I think with conspiracist thinking, it's very similar, you know, a conspiracy theory lets us imagine ourselves sort of as heroes, right? Like knowing about this bad thing and telling other people about this bad thing, that gives us a way to feel like we are fixing a bad thing in a way that we probably really can't affect or fix that bad thing. Right? Like most of the time, there's a lot of evil out in the world that we can't do anything about. And so, we have this idea that being aware of it, spreading awareness, and this goes beyond just sort of like conspiracist mindsets and people who are into conspiracies, conspiracy theories. The idea that being aware and raising awareness is somehow, that that's really doing concrete good when very often it's not. But we feel quite good about it. And I think particularly what you see with the Internet now is it allows people who are into particular conspiracy theories to find each other in a way that would have been much harder in previous eras. And so, you begin to build a community around it. You have real friends; you have a purpose together. In many ways, it's sort of like a pale imitation of church, right, you're in this grand storyline. You're in it with your friends, you're opposing evil. You are spreading the truth. I mean, why wouldn't you cling to that?

Don Payne You know, that sounds eerily reminiscent of just some basic human values or some basic human needs that it touches, the need for control, the need for clarity in our lives, that need to feel like we matter, and we make a difference and the need to be connected. I mean, the way you've outlined that, Bonnie, it sounds like those appeals are, in fact, appeals because of what they connect to at an extremely visceral human level.

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you hear many, many people, and I think the media is especially guilty of this, talking about the phrase conspiracy theory is used just to automatically mean like a false thing that dumb people believe. And I am extremely not a conspiracy theorist myself. But it's not just an automatically false thing that dumb people believe, like they're very sympathetic and intelligible reasons why people get into this stuff. And writing it off as like, you know, only some lesser person can believe that it's just like a gross misunderstanding of human nature.

Mark Young Yeah, I think we have to also think pretty carefully about kind of the elephant in the room right now. And that is the belief that the elections of 2020 were stolen. Right. That idea has persisted and gained credence and led to some behaviors that go beyond what many of us would be comfortable with. Why do those lies persist?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, I mean, I think it goes back to these deeper needs because you could have someone, not me, because I have not memorized all this stuff, but you could have someone more knowledgeable than I sit down and say, like, look, here are the 50 or so lawsuits that the Trump campaign lost when they were trying to win this election. Here are all the recounts that have happened, here are all the transparency measures that have happened, here is all the process. You could go through all that detail. And for many people, I don't think that they would actually come away with their minds changed if they were already firmly convinced that this election was stolen. Because I really don't think that it's, when we think about conspiracy theories, typically it's like the X-Files model of the guy with the classified documents and he's building this intricate case. But most of the time I don't think it works that way. It's not really about those specific facts. It's not about building a careful, logical case. It's about your sense of sort of how the world should be and your place in it and what people that you know and care about believe. And so, you know, a dry run through 50 lawsuits does not really stand up to a deep emotional conviction that Donald Trump should have won, and America would be better if he had won, and I would be more certain of my place in the world if he had won. And all of that is probably not even articulable in many cases. Right. But again, I

don't think it's like they looked at the lawsuits and thought, well, those legal arguments just don't hold water. It's about something more basic than that.

Mark Young Is that what you were getting at in the chapter where you talk about the new emotionalism as a part of the epistemic crisis?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, it's definitely part of it, that frequently we imagine ourselves as these very logical creatures and we're just not. And if we're not, our emotions, just in reality, they are part of how we make decisions, they are part of how we think through things. And that's not a bad thing. It's not a negative thing to say that your emotions played into how you came to believe something, how you made a choice. But it can be dangerous when it happens subconsciously, when we don't realize that emotions are in play, and we think we're making just this purely reasoned decision. And that's not it. When we don't understand how emotions are involved, it makes us very vulnerable to manipulation, to misunderstanding, to, yeah, holding on to things even after the evidence has been presented, that what we think is not true.

Don Payne I was intrigued as well, Bonnie, by your comments on the role of emotion, the role of feeling, the role of experience in the way we process our knowledge claims. And I wonder whether there's a connection between that reality and the parallel reality of skepticism. The disillusionment, the jadedness, a person, I guess I shouldn't speak abstractly. We can all react in a couple of different ways to investing ourselves in certain beliefs and then finding out that, oh, that's not what I thought it was. We can either kind of double down and deny reality, deny facts that are presented to us, or we just become very jaded. And it's that skepticism part that I'm curious about, the skepticism that's kind of a natural result or reaction to this knowledge crisis, for lack of a better way to put it. What's really at the root of that skepticism, do you think, and how does that impact our capacities for knowledge and for faith, for that matter?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, I think a certain amount of skepticism is healthy, right. And I would say that that's one of the best things about America's political culture, that we do have some healthy skepticism built in. Where it becomes sort of perverse is when it becomes very convenient, where we are just sort of automatically cynically rejecting anything that we don't particularly want to believe. And it's often attended by almost a level of gullibility, but like instant trust of people we like and people making claims that we want to be true. And I think a big thing that some of that is just sort of how people are, you know, how we, you know, we all engage in motivated reasoning, and we all want to hear things that we like and not hear things that we dislike. But I do think it's exacerbated by just the sheer quantity of information that is available to us now. Right. So, it used to be that if you wanted to reject some expert opinion and actually sort of mount a case against it, you might have to go to the library, you might have to read a book. Now you can just Google and find a thousand people who have already come to whatever conclusion you want to come to, and they've typed it all up online for you. And now you've done your research, quote unquote, and have your evidence, quote unquote, and you can set yourself up as an alternative authority. And so, I mean, this is a sense in which I think some of the conversation and where we focus on fake news or misinformation and disinformation, something that is out there, a problem that is out there and separate from us, is a little bit misguided. Because while it's true that that volume of information really does matter and does make a difference, the problem is more in us and how we're encountering and using and misusing that information. There is another journalist, I want to say I quoted in the book, who said the problem is not the belief but the believers, which is an awkward turn of phrase for Christian context. So, I would say not the knowledge, but the knowers, that it's not just like the information is out there and I don't think absent like nuclear apocalypse, I don't think we're going to stop having the Internet and this sheer quantity of information available to us. So, then the question becomes, we can't change that, but we can change how we are as we're encountering and processing and believing or rejecting it.

Mark Young I appreciated the way you used the COVID experience to talk about skepticism toward expertise, and you quote that book, the depth of expertise, Tom Nichols book. But, you know, the truth is there was a lot of skepticism toward medical science even before COVID. Certainly, around the question of vaccines. And, you know, I think the death of expertise for those of us in the academy or skepticism toward expertise for those of us in academia, is a very serious challenge for us. Right. And it has been a part of the

Christian experience as well, where you have hundreds, if not thousands of churches where there isn't really any value placed upon doing the kind of research you talked about proceeding through academia. In fact, where I grew up, if you had a degree, you were considered likely not to be depending on the Holy Spirit. Just spinning your mind. So how do we rebuild trust in something like academia, something where there is a skepticism toward expertise, and even a more of a sense of trust toward some of the institutions where this kind of research is either worked out or is made policy or brought into our lives.

Bonnie Kristian I don't know that I have a super easy answer, especially if we're I mean, Mark Noll wrote the scandal of the evangelical mind 30 years ago. Right. And I read it for the first time while writing this book and it's like, oh, nothing's changed. This is all still too relevant. So, yeah, it's a difficult thing. The two things that are sort of my go to here is one, to point out that that kind of academic expertise or elite expertise is not the only kind of expertise and that most of us have no problem trusting other more familiar kinds of expertise all the time. You're trusting expertise every time you call an electrician, every time you drive across a bridge. We are all trusting expertise that we have no capacity to evaluate on a daily basis. You know, I have no engineering knowledge. I can't tell if that bridge was safe. A lot of the bridges here in Pittsburgh look extremely rusty. I still drive on them. So far, I'm okay. And you have to just sort of trust that expertise to live in the society that we have. And so once you recognize that actually, as much as you may think of yourself as a skeptic, you do trust a lot of experts all the time and experts that you can't evaluate, then I think that can be useful for thinking, okay, well, maybe some of these more academic or, quote unquote, elite experts, maybe there's some reason to give them some credence as well. But I also think, and I wrote about this in that chapter, I also think, you know, experts behaving themselves is a big part of it and dealing with non-experts in a trustworthy manner, both in terms of being open about their feelings, admitting their own wrongs, being transparent when their own knowledge is growing and changing. And also, you know, trusting the public, treating people like adults, not telling them, and this was a big thing during the pandemic, not telling people noble lies. Not sort of withholding information because you don't think the public can handle it. And it's true. I mean, sometimes the public probably can't handle it. But I don't think that I think we end up in somewhere worse when we go with dishonesty, because especially now, people will find out that they've been lied to, and they will find out in public, and they will see no reason to trust you ever again. So as much as there are risks of telling the truth, sometimes the risks of telling lies are worse.

Mark Young That's really a good word. I remember in my doctoral program, my primary professor said, true scholars have more questions than answers. And what he was basically saying is, every time you learn something, it should spawn a lot more questions about both the validity of what you've learned as well as the meaning of it in different arenas. You talk about virtues at the end of the book that are necessary for us in this arena of knowing and evaluating. What do you think are the primary virtues we need to cultivate and practice in order to consume information well and engage with others around truthful ideas?

Bonnie Kristian Yeah, well, the three that I talk about, and these are not original to me. It's from a scholar formerly at Wheaton. But the three that that he highlights and that I talk about as well are studiousness, intellectual honesty, and wisdom. And in that order, specifically because that sort of follows, the pattern of studious answers is about how we are inquiring and finding knowledge. Intellectual honesty is about how we engage it once we've found it, and then wisdom is how we put it into practice. And studiousness in particular always makes me chuckle a little because it sounds like, I don't know, it sounds like something you told the high school student, like you need to be studious, but it's quite a serious and real thing and a way that we should be applying ourselves if we are seeking to find knowledge and evaluate truth claims in a given arena. And the media environment in which we live, the information environment we have, makes it very easy to skip all of that because it all takes time. It takes a certain deliberation and slowness and a willingness to focus on one thing and give it a fair shake and follow the inquiry where it leads and everything in our media environment and militates against that. We have not lived in a world that is conducive to that anymore. I don't know that there was ever very many people who lived in a world that was conducive to it, but we don't. And so, it does require deliberate cultivation, deliberate reshaping of our habits to create a space for those virtues to develop.

Mark Young Some of our listeners are pastors or mentors or engaged in leading others in their walk of faith. What kind of advice would you give them as they try to help their friends and their mentees, and their church members navigate this volatile world of truth and trust and information?

Bonnie Kristian Hmm. I do not, I never envy pastors, I don't think. But especially in this context. I think the biggest advice I go to is to take something of an indirect approach. So again, it's not typically going to be sort of arguing people out of their bad ideas. It's not typically going to be bombarding them with links to better media they can consume instead of the garbage that they're reading right now. Right. Because you have better taste than they do. They're probably going to find that pretty condescending and not listen to you. And that really gets at the heart of it, which is that I think there has to be a certain foundation and relationship there, which is built on other things, you know, sort of ordinary things and also things of faith that make you a person worth listening to and a voice that, when the right opportunity comes, can actually cut through the noise with which we've all surrounded ourselves. And so more than, not that there will never be a place for addressing this head on, because I think sometimes there will and should be. But more often I think you're going to do much better with, I don't know, like having someone over for dinner and going on a walk, talking about things that have nothing to do with any of this to establish that basis of trust, because it is significantly about who we trust. And then once that happens, once that is in place, then maybe and it may not come quickly. You know, I'm reminded of that verse about one plants, another waters, but God gives the growth. You may not actually be the one who ever sees someone in your life make progress in this area. Right? They may move and you may never know about it, but maybe the day will come, or you will have a relationship built where they trust you and you trust them, right? Because this can't just be sort of a paternalistic, I'm going to fix you sort of plot where the opportunity comes to say, are these things that you're getting into, the way you're consuming media, what kind of fruit is that producing in your life? That was a question that a pastor I spoke with who said that he had found to be asked at the right time, what kind of fruit is this producing in your life, could really make people think. And because the answer very often, as we probably know from our own lives, is anger and frustration and sadness and worry and fear. And I think in the right place and in the right relational context, people can recognize that and then perhaps have a desire of their own to reevaluate how they're engaging here, as opposed to having you sort of swoop in and try to fix it for them.

Don Payne I really appreciated that, when you mentioned that toward the end of your book, as a way of wrapping or wrapping this back around the fruits of the spirit, as Paul talked about in Galatians, is do the ways we consume and validate and act upon and maybe argue about or get spun up about things we think we know, are those leading to the fruit of the spirit. I appreciate you putting a bow on it with that. It's a fitting word. Bonnie, thank you very much for spending time with us. We appreciate this time, your comments, your insights, and appreciate the work you've done in the book. And want to highly, highly commend your work to our listeners. The book is *Untrustworthy*, a 2022 publication by Brazos Press. And we hope this gets out into lots of hands and into lots of minds and into lots of communities.

Bonnie Kristian Thank you.

Don Payne Thank you for spending time with us. Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with this. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts. And please send any questions or comments to us at our email address, which is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. Our website DenverSeminary.Edu has plenty of other resources you can explore, such as events, degree programs, and also more episodes of Engage360, including full episode transcripts. We're really grateful for your interest, for your support, and for your prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you. Take care, friends.