Five questions for Christine Larson[1]
[2]

Christine Larson's journalism career had a somewhat colorful beginning. During her first job at Cosmopolitan, the magazine redecorated the apartment where she lived with two roommates and repainted it Pepto-Bismol pink. She also wrote graphic novel comic books about celebrities, including Metallica and Prince.

"That was fun, but it also taught me a lot about what it takes to be a person trying to make a living in a creative field," said Larson, an assistant professor of journalism in the College of Media, Communication and Information (CMCI) at CU Boulder.

Larson went on to work as a freelance journalist for 15 years, writing award-winning articles and essays for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, U.S. News & World Report and other publications, as well as co-authoring books on women and the workplace.

While she was a John S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University, she realized that she wanted to delve more deeply into the impact of digital technology on media workers and cultural industries. She stayed at Stanford, where she earned her Ph.D. in communication and came to CU in the fall of 2017.

Her studies include journalism, the book publishing industry, and ways to advance social justice and more democratic representation of voices in the public discourse.

1. Why did you leave a career in journalism for one in academics?

A couple of reasons. I had co-authored a couple of books, including, "Influence: How Women's Soaring Economic Power Will Change Our World for the Better." As I was co-writing those, I realized I liked being able to write longer, more thoughtful pieces – book-length pieces. Journalism, in general, was moving to shorter and shorter pieces and the book publishing industry was changing. Really, academia is the only place where you can reliably get paid to write books and long, thoughtful pieces.

There were also intellectual questions about how digital tech was changing media that I really wouldn't be able to explore except in an academic context.

Journalism is very similar to some kinds of scholarship in that you are interviewing people and making observations. Sometimes I say that my scholarship is sort of "old wine in a new bottle." In many ways, I do a lot of the same things I used to do as a journalist in a more systematic way. And I crunch numbers now.

2. In what ways has digital technology affected media?

I study the industries formerly known as print. I have studied journalism, but lately I've been looking at books and how the technology of publishing changes the stories we hear in the world and changes who tells those stories. Sometimes that depends on who gets paid to write what, and that depends very much on the business model.

In journalism, the internet undermined the longstanding advertising model, and newspapers no longer had a monopoly on the ability to reach large numbers of people. Advertisers wouldn't pay as much as they used to for ads, so there are fewer jobs, fewer reporters covering important things now, and newspapers had to find different ways to make money.

Book publishing is somewhat different. Over the past 30 years, the book industry has become more consolidated, and now five large companies dominate it. Most people don't read very many books, which means these companies have to depend on massive best-sellers to fund their businesses. That has shut so many would-be writers out of the market, and those writers have been looking for alternatives. One of those alternatives has been self-publishing. Unfortunately, there's only one group of authors that has thrived in self-publishing and that is romance writers.

3. You discuss the dependence on massive best-sellers in an essay[3] you recently wrote for The Conversation about the controversy surrounding the novel "American Dirt." Are there other reasons why the industry has

become a high-stakes poker game, as you call it? For instance, are books too expensive? Is the industry publishing too many books or taking too many chances? Are publishing houses manipulating readers to sell big books, as an example, with the continuous teases regarding John Bolton's upcoming book about the Trump administration?

Amazon has exerted enormous downward pressure on the value of books. When Amazon first came out, they would sell books at below their cost; you could get books on Amazon cheaper than anywhere else. In self-publishing, Amazon incents you to price books between $2.99 and $9.99, and that makes consumers a little resentful when they have to pay $30 for a hardcover because consumers think books should be less expensive.

Book discovery also is a major problem in the industry. Amazon would say book discovery has always been a problem because there always have been more books out there than you can read. Honestly, most Americans don't read that many books in a year, and almost half of Americans don't read for pleasure.

In some ways, it is harder to find the book that you want because of the decline of local news and local newspapers. That decline has hurt authors and readers and made it more difficult to find books. Regional and local newspapers used to have their staffs review books, and magazines also employed people just to read and review books. In fact, one of my first jobs was with Glamour magazine, and I was in the book department where we had three people whose job was to know what books were coming out. Today, many local newspapers and magazines have gone out of business, and those that remain use syndicated reviews from The New York Times, for instance. So the same review runs in all these different papers and that means there is less opportunity for an army of reviewers around the country to say, "Hey, I like this book, or I like that book."

The idea of manipulation goes back to the fact that big publishers need big blockbusters. They might pay millions of dollars in an advance to an author they think is going to do really well. This comes down to the poker metaphor. Once you have put a whole lot of money down – made a big bet – you want to keep that bet going. If you fold, you are going to lose a whole lot. If you throw more resources behind that book in your marketing budget and your promotion, then no matter how good or bad the book is, it is going to do better, and you are going to win that bluff. All the company resources are going to get channeled behind these anointed books.

4. Why does self-publishing only work well, in essence, for romance writers?

We thought the internet and self-publishing would undermine the gatekeepers and that suddenly many voices and many stories would be promoted. That happens to a certain degree in self-publishing, except, for a number of reasons, it is hard to sell enough books to create a sustainable career as an author unless you are a romance writer.

With the consolidation of publishers, those gatekeepers have more power than ever and almost all of those gatekeepers are white, generally are straight and are not physically disabled. They are a very homogenous group: They have blind spots and that is what we saw with "American Dirt." They increasingly do not resemble America.

Romance writers have succeeded in self-publishing for reasons that aren't obvious. People think they succeed because they are just these fluffy, easy to write stories, or that everyone just wants to read smut. That is not the case at all. For my research, I surveyed 4,000 romance writers, and I found that their incomes have gone up while all other authors' incomes have gone down. Part of that is because over 40 years, these authors were the most stigmatized of writers. Especially in the '80s, people liked to make fun of Fabio and covers of these romance novels. There is a lack of respect for these authors because they are writing books about women for women that are by women. In the face of industry sexism, they banded together and created very close networks where they could help each other succeed.

They also formed close relationships with their readers, and that meant when digital publishing came along, they already had a fan base. Romance writers never had to create one single best-seller because romance readers read so much, they know who the authors are, and they are always looking for more. These authors shared their information with each other and were able succeed in self-publishing.

The sad thing is that the largest romance writers' organization has had an implosion in the last couple of months that is driven by racism, social media and the difficulty of organizational change. But I have faith that they will form new

networks or repair the old one.

5. You also study media equality and public discourse. What type of work are you doing in this arena?

I'm an activist in the media and equality-of-voice area, and I work with a group called the OpEd Project. The group leads workshop and seminars to help get under-represented voices into the media. In fact, I will be hosting an OpEd Project event at CU for under-represented faculty, probably in the fall.

The problem we are trying to address is that most opinion and commentary writers are men – mostly white men. Recently, The New York Times pointed out that in their letters section, something like 43% of the letters they publish are from women, and only about 25% to 35% percent of all submissions are from women.

The project feels this might be a numbers problem driven by some large cultural issues, and we are trying to correct for that by getting more qualified women and under-represented people to submit their ideas.

We are headquartered in New York City and there are about 20 of us around the country doing this work with major universities and the public. During our events, we talk about the barriers you encounter when you are under-represented in a certain area. For instance, you may be less likely to speak up because you don't see people that look like you, or you might not feel entitled to speak up. In addition, women literally have less time than men because of the second shift and the beauty shift and all that extra work we have to do. We also get down into the nitty-gritty of how to make an argument, how to write a good piece and how to place it in the media.

CU selects Marks as next chancellor of Denver campus[4]

President Kennedy reaffirms university's commitment to diversity and inclusion[5]

CU President Mark Kennedy today published a statement[6] that reiterated the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion, citing recent "issues and incidents" that offered an opportunity to address the topic. Those include DACA, a pending U.S. Supreme Court decision (related to federal legal protections against discrimination in various settings based on sexual orientation and transgender status), and harassment directed at Asian (particularly Chinese) and Asian American students, faculty and staff.

"There is a lot of anxiety and stress brought on by rapid and substantial changes due to COVID-19, particularly among certain segments of the CU community," Kennedy said. "It's a good time to reinforce some of our fundamental values and guiding principles."

Opinion: It's pandemic work, not 'work from home'[7]

Three CU campuses partner to host engineering conference [8]

Join us for Virtual CWA Week April 6-10 [9]

New scholarship fund to support students who made quick transition to remote learning [10]

Outbreak uptake: Amazing positives from pandemic history [11]

Watch: School of Medicine Match Day goes virtual [12]

Johnson begins three-year appointment as CU associate vice president [13]

Magin receives NSF CAREER award [14]

Callan elected to Women's Basketball Hall of Fame[15]

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