

Episode 4:

Justice Journalism (with Professor Janice Tibbetts)



Guide

Learning objectives

- To introduce students to the concept of justice journalism, using the personal and professional experiences of Professor Janice Tibbetts
- To provide students with an understanding of the importance of justice journalism in shaping Canadian society and the role it plays in covering key legal cases
- To explore the ethical challenges and responsibilities of justice journalists, including the need for accessibility in the field, and how they strive to balance fairness and bias in their work
- To encourage students to critically assess the evolving nature of journalism in the digital age, including how social media and AI affect the consumption and production of news
- To help students identify strategies for developing their interests in post-secondary education and their professional careers, with an emphasis on journalism, legal reporting, and related fields

Materials

- Copies of this student handout for Episode 4: Justice Journalism
- Copies of the “Unveiling Stories” exercise
- Device to listen to the [“Law Syrup” podcast episode](#)

Teaching and learning strategies

- **Group discussion:** Take the students through the episode handout and have them complete the discussion questions as a class or in small groups. Discuss their answers and explore students’ thoughts on the role of justice journalism in shaping Canadian society.
- **Reflective exercise:** Have students complete the **Unveiling Legal Stories** exercise individually. Students should choose a recent news story related to law or justice, identify its various layers (human, world, new, and untold stories), and reflect on how these dimensions connect to justice journalism. Encourage students to think about how a complex story can be told by uncovering different perspectives and exploring deeper meanings, especially in the context of legal issues.

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Handout

Janice's path to a career in journalism

Janice Tibbetts¹ is an accomplished journalist with over 20 years of experience working for major news outlets across Canada. Over the course of her career, she has covered diverse and critical topics, including the Supreme Court of Canada, federal and provincial politics, justice issues, and Indigenous affairs. Today, Janice is an Associate Professor at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication in Ottawa.

Interestingly, Janice didn't always know she wanted to become a journalist. Growing up, she loved writing and connecting with people, but journalism wasn't an obvious path for her. After earning a degree in English, she pursued a journalism degree at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Even then, financial constraints led her to explore other options, like business courses. Ultimately, however, Janice found her passion in journalism, a field that aligned with her skills and values. It was only later in her career that she fully realized the critical role journalism plays in upholding democracy and seeking the truth.

¹ For more information on Professor Janice Tibbetts' career, see her [profile](#) on the Carleton University website.

Discussion questions

- **Career journeys:** Janice shared that it took her some time to discover that journalism was the right career for her. Were you surprised to learn this? Are there any parts of her journey that resonate with your own experiences or thoughts about the future?
- **The role of journalists in society:** Janice emphasized how important journalists are in a democratic society like Canada. Why do you think journalism is essential to democracy? How do journalists and their work impact your life, whether directly or indirectly?

Janice and Herman's experiences in journalism school

Janice and Herman both highlighted the unique blend of academic and practical learning offered in journalism programs. These programs typically include courses such as Introduction to Reporting, Media Law, In-Depth Reporting, Specialized Reporting, Diversity and Inclusive Journalism, and Journalistic Writing.² In addition to coursework, students often have the opportunity to participate in work placements, applying their skills in real-world settings.

Herman shared that his passion for reading and writing drew him to journalism school, where he found himself in fascinating situations, fulfilling the critical responsibility of informing the public on current events.

Janice's journey highlights how quickly journalism school can prepare students for professional work. Just four days after graduating from her program, she started a full-time position at

² For an example of the academic curriculum in a Bachelor of Journalism program, see: <https://admissions.carleton.ca/programs/journalism>

the *Halifax Daily News*. Due to the small size of the publication, she worked on a wide variety of assignments. Her very first story was the arraignment for a murder case, where she experienced the energy of a packed courtroom filled with reporters and lawyers. This moment confirmed for her that she had chosen the right career.³

Applying to journalism school

Janice and Herman's paths to journalism school reflect the diverse ways students can pursue this field. Herman followed a traditional route, applying directly to a four-year Bachelor of Journalism program at Carleton University from high school. In contrast, Janice completed an accelerated one-year journalism program at the University of King's College after earning an undergraduate degree in English.

Additional information:

For students interested in pursuing journalism, it's important to note that admission requirements vary between programs. Prospective students should research programs carefully to find the one that best fits their needs.

For a traditional Bachelor of Journalism program, like the one Herman attended, typical admission requirements include:

- An Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) or equivalent, including a grade 12 English credit
- Additional requirements such as a grammar assessment and submission or completion of a writing assignment

Some schools may require a certain grade average during high school to be competitive in the admissions process.

³ An arraignment involves the accused being identified and called to the bar. The charge is then read to the accused, and they are asked for their plea. The accused then either pleads 'guilty' or 'not guilty':
<https://ojen.ca/en/resources/videos/mock-trial-how-to-arraignment-and-plea/>

Janice's transition to justice journalism

Janice's path to becoming a legal journalist was far from straightforward. For over a decade, she reported on labour, social, and Indigenous issues before taking on a justice beat (regular assignments) with the Canadian Press on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Drawn to stories of social justice and inequality, Janice quickly became captivated by the courtroom environment, which offered her the opportunity to see humanity at its most vulnerable and to share compelling stories from within the justice system.

One of Janice's key responsibilities in this role was covering the Supreme Court of Canada. This was a significant challenge compared to her earlier experiences with trial courts. While trial courts typically focus on recounting events in a way that's easier to follow, Supreme Court proceedings often involve abstract and highly complex legal arguments.⁴ Additionally, unlike trial courts, a decision at the Supreme Court of Canada does not involve witnesses or examinations but focuses on legal interpretations. For Janice, adapting to this new environment required considerable effort, including extensive preparation and research before reporting on cases. Over time, she developed expertise in the area, and her impactful stories earned recognition, with several featured in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Interestingly, Janice did not receive formal legal training before becoming a legal journalist. She learned on the job, primarily by asking questions and seeking explanations from legal experts. Janice emphasized that not having a legal background actually worked to her advantage, as it required her to translate complex legal concepts into plain, accessible language—making them understandable to the public. This highlights the crucial role of

⁴ As the highest court in Canada, decisions at the Supreme Court of Canada cannot be appealed further once it has been made. Further, "leave to appeal" (i.e., permission to appeal a case originating from a lower Court of Appeal) must be granted before a case is heard before the Supreme Court of Canada to ensure only the most pressing cases to Canadian society are heard by the Court.

legal journalists as intermediaries between the legal world and the public. Their ability to distill complicated issues into clear, unbiased narratives ensures accessibility and transparency.

Through her work, Janice demonstrated the unique skill set required for justice reporting: identifying key issues in intricate legal documents, working under tight deadlines, asking probing questions, sourcing credible information, and telling stories with accuracy and fairness.

Discussion questions

- Janice discussed the steep learning curve she faced when transitioning to justice journalism and how she overcame challenges by asking the right questions. Have you ever faced a situation where you had limited knowledge but needed to learn quickly? What strategies or tools did you use to overcome this challenge?
- A career in legal journalism requires a commitment to both the journalist's publication and to society as a whole. Do you think it would be challenging to cover pressing legal issues in an understandable and fair manner? What do you think are some ways journalists manage their personal biases when reporting on stories they feel strongly about?
- After hearing about Janice's journey to becoming a journalist, do you think a career in journalism—particularly legal journalism—would interest you? Why or why not?

The importance of justice journalism

In the episode, Janice and Herman discussed several important Supreme Court of Canada cases that they had worked on as part of their journalism careers. Here's a brief overview of the cases mentioned:

Vriend v Alberta (1998): Delwin Vriend, fired from his job for being gay, challenged Alberta's laws that didn't protect sexual orientation from discrimination. The Supreme Court ruled in his favor, marking a key moment for 2SLGBTQ+ rights in Canada.

British Columbia (Public Service Employee Relations Commission) v BCGSEU (1999): Tawney Meiorin, a firefighter, was fired after failing a new fitness test. The Supreme Court ruled that the provincial government's fitness requirements were discriminatory against women, establishing a precedent for human rights in employment contexts.

R v Latimer (2001): Robert Latimer, who killed his disabled daughter, appealed his conviction, claiming necessity. The Supreme Court rejected this defence, and the case sparked national debates about ethical and moral issues in the justice system.

R v Malmo-Levine (2003): David Malmo-Levine was charged for advocating and selling cannabis, and he argued that the law criminalizing cannabis use was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court rejected this argument, but the case led to the legalization of cannabis in 2017.

Reference re Same-Sex Marriage (2004): Unlike the previous cases discussed, the Supreme Court of Canada addressed a reference question⁵ from the federal government regarding the constitutional validity of same-sex marriage in Canada. The Court ruled that the federal government could legalize same-sex marriage, paving the way for the Civil Marriage Act and speeding up the acceptance of same-sex marriage in Canadian society.

⁵ A reference question involves the federal or provincial government asking the Court for an advisory opinion on a major legal issue, typically to assess whether a proposed law is legal under the Canadian Constitution.

Discussion questions

- As seen in these cases, being a justice reporter at the Supreme Court allowed Janice to cover stories that significantly impacted Canadian society. Have any recent legal cases caught your attention?
- Janice spoke about thinking critically about societal issues before they become national discussions. What issues in Canada do you think could be addressed by the Supreme Court in the future?
- After reviewing these cases, why do you think it's important for journalists to cover legal cases as they unfold? Who do you think is the most important audience to keep in mind when telling these stories fairly?

Becoming a journalism professor

After 20 years of daily reporting, Janice decided to pursue a Master's degree in journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa, where she later began teaching. She also taught at Concordia University in Montreal for two years. Today, Janice teaches six courses annually at Carleton, including a specialized course on covering the Supreme Court of Canada, the only one of its kind in the country.

Janice's course focuses on translating complex legal documents and ideas into plain, accessible language. Students in this course cover high-profile cases while learning how to make complex legal proceedings understandable to the public. To enhance their learning, students visit the Supreme Court of Canada for field trips and engage with guest lecturers, including lawyers. For example, when Herman took the course, he had the opportunity to speak one-on-one with lawyers for the first time.

As Janice noted, Canadians know surprisingly little about the Supreme Court compared to the U.S., where people are generally more familiar with the judges' names. Through her course, Janice

seeks to bridge this gap and empower students to navigate the Canadian legal system.

The world of journalism today

In the episode, Janice and Herman discussed how the world of journalism is changing, largely due to technological advancements and shifting patterns in how people access information. One important issue that has emerged in recent years is the role of artificial intelligence in journalism. As Janice pointed out, some news applications use algorithms to guide readers to certain articles, often limiting the diversity of sources. Herman noted that many young people now get their news from social media platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), or podcasts. Reflecting this shift, Janice has created assignments where students make TikTok videos, a departure from the traditional focus on writing stories.

It's important to distinguish between the news industry and journalism. While the news industry has faced challenges due to technological changes, journalism itself has remained crucial. The skills involved in gathering and sharing information truthfully and responsibly have never been more important.

Discussion questions

- Janice mentioned that journalism and the news industry are separate. Does this surprise you? What do you think each of these terms means?
- People today can access news through social media, websites, podcasts, and print. How do you typically access your news? How do you think this will evolve in the future?
- Janice raised concerns about algorithm-based news, where platforms decide what content readers see. Have you experienced this in your own news consumption? How could this be problematic?

Exercise

 Unveiling Stories⁶

Instructions: Students should navigate to their preferred platform for accessing news and choose a recent story (article, video, podcast episode, etc.) related to law or justice. Once each student has chosen a story, they should complete the following prompts:

1. What's the story?
 - Briefly describe the main facts and issues at the heart of the legal or justice-related story.
2. What is the human story?
 - Who are the individuals or communities involved, and what personal or societal struggles are at the center of the story?
3. What is the world story?
 - How does this legal or justice issue connect to broader societal themes, global issues, or historical context?
4. What is the new story?
 - What new perspective can be gained from this story that we may not have thought about before?
5. What is the untold story?
 - What perspectives, voices, or aspects of the issue might not be getting attention? What might be missing from the conversation?

Purpose: What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

- This routine helps students explore the multi-layered nature of legal and justice-related issues. It encourages critical

⁶ Note: adapted from Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education:
<https://pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Unveiling%20Stories.pdf>.

thinking about the human, social, and systemic elements in stories, while also promoting media literacy by examining how news is framed and who controls the narrative.

Application: When and where can I use it?

- This routine is ideal for analyzing current legal cases, landmark decisions, or justice-related issues. It can be used in law-related courses, social studies, civics, and media literacy programs. It's also useful for understanding how news affects public perception of legal matters and influences societal outcomes.

Launch: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

- Encourage students to choose stories that are recent or ongoing to connect with current events. If needed, guide them toward specific legal or justice-related topics—such as Supreme Court cases, human rights issues, or legal reforms. You can also modify the questions to focus more on particular angles (e.g., legal precedents or ethical debates) depending on the learning objectives.

Further information and resources

If you'd like to learn more about studying journalism or your career options thereafter, head on over to these sites for some more information:

Ontario colleges: Journalism

University of Toronto: Career Options After Journalism

University of Toronto Mississauga: Careers in Journalism

Concordia University: What can I do with my degree in Journalism?