# POLICY ON PURPOSE

## Episode 21: Yamiche Alcindor, White House Correspondent, PBS *NewsHour*

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**ANGELA EVANS:** Hello everyone, this is Angela Evans, I'm the dean of the LBJ School, and this is our podcast, "Policy on Purpose," and I am so pleased today to welcome Yamiche Alcindor, who is the White House correspondent for PBS. I watch her, and she's been here at the school at the Race Summit, and now I have her all to myself for a few minutes before she's going to give our commencement address at our 2019 graduation. So welcome, Yamiche.

**YAMICHE ALCINDOR:** Yes, thanks so much for having me. I'm really, really excited to be here.

**EVANS:** Good. Well, Yamiche — you have quite a career for such a young person. I keep thinking about — and it seems like very early on, you had this passion for news. You were 16 when you went to *The Miami Herald*, and then you were at *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Seattle Times*. You did a lot in terms of thinking about your journalistic background in a lot of different areas of the country, covering a lot of different stories — some of them very emotional stories. We can get into that a little bit, but what I wanted to talk about is: We use this podcast basically for our students or people who are thinking of getting into public policy, so they can hear people who have chosen to go into a public sector. Yours is public television, and also yours is thinking about how to hold policy people accountable.

So [what] I want you to think about is our students go into public policy, and as they try to get ahead in there and get into lead positions where their voices are heard, what do you want them to know about the role of the free press in their world?

**ALCINDOR:** What I want people to know about the free press and about the media is that we're really supposed to be a tool to hold people accountable. I always remind people that my job is in the Constitution — that it really is, in my mind, a fourth branch of government, because the founders of this country understood that a free media, free press, was going to be critical to holding our democracy accountable, and to really our democracy flourishing. So I think that when I talk to policymakers, it's good to me to talk to people who are open, who talk to me about how they're making these decisions that aren't really trying to, in some ways, hide from the media — that really are trying to put the challenges and the successes of their public policy on the table.

I love interviewing people that can say, "Look, we did this right, we did this wrong. We tried this policy, it didn't work. We had this intention going in, it didn't work." We can think about the 1994 crime bill. There are people who went into that crime bill thinking, "This is going to really solve the issues of the crack epidemic, and these communities are being ravaged." And that was African-American lawmakers and white lawmakers. And I think now, of course, we're doing this 2019 thing, where we're looking at the 1994 crime bill and there's some people who are saying, "Yeah, that was still great, I'm happy with it." And then there are people that are saying, "You know what? We had unintended consequences. We didn't realize that we were going to end up with mass incarceration and a disproportionate number of African-Americans in prison." So I think those are the kind of people that I like to interview. People who can be introspective and talk about the intention and the consequence.

**EVANS:** Well, this is great that you're saying that, because those are the voices we need to hear. But many times, in the media it's the loudest voice, and sometimes it's not the most informed voice, and sometimes it's the voice [saying] “We did everything right and you're wrong.” So the idea that you can bring people who are critical about what's going on and evaluate decisions and then recast those decisions, redo those decisions, amend them — that's really important. So how do you stay in touch with those people? Because I'm sure there's a lot of folks who want your attention and want you to come and talk to them just because of your visibility and position. But how do you select those folks that you really want to talk to and that are your trusted sources?

**ALCINDOR:** Well, one, I have a really big spreadsheet of a lot of different sources that really goes back from the very beginning of my career. So I pretty much have almost every single number of every person that I've interacted with. And it really comes down to what's going on at that moment — what story am I working on. I want to say I really don't discard sources, because there're people who might call you up and say, "OK, this is a story" and you realize, actually, that's not really a story right now. But let's look down the line. So there's so many instances where people have called me up and said, "You should be writing about this," and I end up writing what that subject, in a different way, six months later.

So I think I really, in most cases, I don't really weed people out because I'm always putting people in a spreadsheet and thinking, "OK, how can I get to this issue?" So it's really, to me, about keeping in contact with people but also keeping in contact with people on the ground. There's the people that want your attention that are obviously going to be emailing you and calling you, but I'm also very interested in the people on the ground that aren't calling you. The communities that don't have the fancy offices and the PR team to speak with you there. The people that are — someone who's running a homeless shelter. Or someone who is working on domestic violence issues. Or someone who's working with sex workers.

**ALCINDOR:** There're all these different people that maybe don't have, say, machines to get in touch with national media that we as reporters should be seeking out.

**EVANS:** Well I've noticed too in your career, you've done that. So when you were talking about family separation, you actually went to the border and you wanted to talk to the people that were affected. You made that time to have the human story. That's what's so remarkable about you. You have the human element of a lot of your stories and how those intersect with politics in the policy scene. You have to also be in a place where you're supported to do that type of work. They do give you time to go and actually get the human story. You've covered things like Sandy Hook and Trayvon Martin. I mean it's just really, really — you get down and you've got to talk to the people.

So, in all of the different arenas that you've been in, have you felt that you've landed in places that've give you that flexibility to go and explore the human side of the story and just let it go until they see what you come up with?

**ALCINDOR:** I feel very fortunate, very blessed, as a Catholic I'll say, to really feel like I've landed at places where people have said, "We're hiring you because we understand that you want to give a voice to people. We hired you because we understand if we put on the congressional beat, you're still going to want to be talking to people on the ground. That if you're at the White House, you're still going to want to go to the border and talk to people."

So I think that out of all the places I've worked, including at PBS, I've been working with teams who say, "This is the way that we should cover this story." So I've been fortunate in that regard.

**EVANS:** That's amazing, because some people don't see that. And when you go back to history — and a lot of times in history, it's the journalist who brought up all the problems that people haven't really had time to think about or actually authenticate. And the journalists are often the ones who are identifying those problems early on and also bringing us enough of the story that people who really need to get in depth and experts to try to fix it do that. People don't always have that, I guess you say, blessing to do that.

I want to talk to you a little bit about this — if you're comfortable talking about this. You covered Bernie Sanders in the last presidential election. You've also been covering President Trump. Can you tell us how you're feeling now? If you look at '16, 2016, and you look at 2019 — it's only three years, but as you're going into the 2020 year, where people are trying to make a decision and really consider things about all the candidates, do you see any differences going into this election year that you didn't see in 2015, for example?

**ALCINDOR:** I mean, I think the key difference is that people are not really underestimating people that maybe they don't know about, and especially of course President Trump. When I came in in 2015 to cover Bernie Sanders, he was seen as a candidate that was a long shot. He was someone that was, I was a *[inaudible]* reporter on politics, so I could cover Bernie Sanders. As a result, what we saw was Bernie Sanders obviously became this phenomenon where he was very successful. Still got less votes than Hillary Clinton, but was someone who was a star, an unexpected star.

And of course on the Republican side, out of 17 people running, no one thought — most people, including the president, President Trump — didn't think he was going to be the one to win. So I think this time, people are really recognizing that there could be a Pete Buttigieg, there could be some other person — the mayor of Miramar is running. There could be so many other people that could come out of nowhere. So I think that people are getting a little bit smarter about that and people are getting out of the prediction game. I think most of the reporters that I know aren't trying to predict, "Oh, Joe Biden's definitely going to be the front-runner," because we now know that Jeb Bush was supposed to be the front-runner, and we all saw what happened there.

So I think that people are thinking more critically about this. I also want to say that I think, as a reporter, when President Obama got elected, we talked a lot and wrote a lot as reporters about — some people said the post-racial America, which was never something I ever used. But I think there's this idea that we did all as a country think, "If an African-American's in the White House, an African-American family is there, we have come somewhere. We've moved forward." And I think that over the 2016 election, and now in the 2020 election, I think we're more apt to look at, "What are still the racial divisions that are really holding our country hostage? What are the things that people are really fearful of for the future of America?"

So I think that question of what we want to be as Americans is even more central in 2020 than it was in 2016.

**EVANS:** Do you find the electorate is more informed? Like if you go and you cover and there's a town hall meeting or there's a big rally, do you see people really listening critically? And are they prepared to ask more substantive questions than they did? Because part of what we hear

is that people are more engaged now. Or they're more aware, anyway, of what's going on simply because of the political environment.

Do you find that when you're covering stories? When you're covering candidates?

**ALCINDOR:** I think people have... I think people have been knowledgeable. I think in 2016, I can remember going to Pennsylvania, going to a Trump rally, and this woman in Pennsylvania was talking to me in detail about the Iran nuclear deal. So I think there are people who have been really knowledgeable. The issue, of course, is that of course more people are definitely more engaged I think in 2020 because of — I really think my beat, the White House beat, being something that's on their front pages and their local news or on their TVs and national news all the time.

But there's this polarizing issue where people pick the news that they want to watch. So if you're watching one network that is showing frankly misleading information, then you might be someone who watches the news, thinks you're informed, but actually isn't correctly informed of the facts. We obviously have a president has said there's fake news out there and has said, "Listen to what I'm telling you." And [at] times, he's been misleading and frankly lying.

So there are, I think, more people that are definitely engaged. I don't know if people are more knowledgeable, because if you're picking and choosing your news or going to other news that is not portraying things accurately, then maybe you're not any more knowledgeable.

**EVANS:** Right. That's a very good point. Well, how do you grab those then? How do you think, "That's the group we need to grab" in a sense and at least try to talk to them about it? And he had them look for PBS. Let's say, "OK, how can we get them to watch PBS, or listen to PBS?" That's supposed to be a place where we're talking about isn't objective and is neutral as you can be or as bipartisan as you can be, and working with information that's authoritative information. Trying to get a different perspective than experts.

How do we get people to look at places like that? To go to those places? To double-check what they're thinking? I think that's a big challenge.

**ALCINDOR:** I think it's a big challenge. I have to say, as a reporter, I don't spend that much time thinking about, "How am I going to get people to read this story? Or how am I going to get people to click on this tweet? Or how am I going to get people to watch PBS?" Because I think then you start getting into you're serving up what you think people want to watch. Instead for me, it's, "How do I report on things in a way with integrity that, no matter what party you are, you think, 'OK, this person really set out to just tell a story.'" I've interviewed Republicans and Democrats who were nervous about what I was asking them during the Kavanaugh hearings or during some other controversy. People would be very, very wary of talking about those topics.

And then when they watch my pieces, most of the time people say, "Oh, actually, we were very fair. And even if you were critical, or even if there was a tough look up there, and you're putting tough questions to me, you're still someone who I think is, you're doing your job fairly."

**ALCINDOR:** So I've interviewed the president, or I should say I've talked to the president and asked him questions, rather than interviewing him. In my interactions with him, I've kept it very professional, and I've said, "Here's what it is. What about middle-class tax cuts?" Because to me, what I think is important is to really bring people to information and not have such a personal investment in it. As reporters, my job is to be a professional witness. It's not to insert myself, insert my opinions, and try to get clickbait, try to be flashy and get people to follow and all about my ego. I think that gets you into muddy waters, and frankly [doesn't] service to anyone in this country.

**EVANS:** That's exactly what we try to, and I was going to say, raise our students to do. Because that's the world they're in. We want them to have — we don't have them to have an opinion. We don't want them to be advocates that are not informed advocates. We want them to be able to talk [to] both sides of an issue, use authoritative information. And what you say, sometimes is just takes time for people to see you, to work with you, and to establish this kind of foundational relationship that they have that, "I can trust Yamiche. I know we may disagree, but I know she's going to be fair." That just takes time. That's not something you walk in the first day and just because you're either a journalist for a paper or you're on PBS *NewsHour*, that people assume that. They have to have that personal relationship. And that takes time. And that's really important.

**ALCINDOR:** That's very important. And I think that I've been lucky at PBS to have really good role models to do that. I mean, Gwen Ifill — the late Gwen Ifill — was a mentor to me. She was so about the facts and about really giving viewers a — doing a service to viewers. And now we have Judy Woodruff, of course, who's now solo anchoring this show on PBS *NewsHour*. And she's someone who is also setting an example, watching her interviews. And luckily I'm someone who Judy can, if I'm doing a big interview, she'll look at my questions with me and talk through, "How do you want to get this interview? What do you want to get out of this interview?"

And I think that that's critical to really be learning from the generation that came before you. Because there have been a lot of journalists who have been really doing this well for a while. And you shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel because there are really good and accurate journalists out there.

**EVANS:** Exactly. And finding good mentors and good team people, people you can work with. Very essential. So choosing wisely the next step in your career is also very important. You've just done such an incredible job when looking at your history.

So I wanted to talk to you about the press corps. The White House press corps. Because people will be interested in that. So you're there in the White House with the press corps. Tell me, if you can just give the people that are listening to this, sort of a bird's eye view of what the environment is like there. And you work within that environment.

**ALCINDOR:** Well the environment is — kind of at this point, it's sometimes chaotic. Because as people are watching the news, they know that the things. The White House beat, I think, used to have a rhythm to it. There were briefings and then the president would come out sometimes and there was the front row where these networks sit and then we could kind of have this sort of formal back-and-forth with the administration.

What we have now is really a lot of chaotic, kind of one-off conversations with administration officials. So Sarah Sanders hasn't briefed in months — Sarah Sanders of course being the White House press secretary. So instead, we have officials that are talking on the driveway who might take five or six minutes to talk to the press.

Then we have the president, who is actually taking a lot of questions from reporters, even though he hasn't done a formal briefing. What he has done is have a lot of pool sprays. Pool sprays are when the media comes in and they take pictures of the president meeting with someone and then you can shout questions. He often uses those times to become mini press conferences. He also, when he's walking out on the lawn. Before, from my understanding — I didn't cover President Obama — but most times, people said President Obama never stopped to talk to the reporters in that setting, in that lawn setting, because he had just had a scheduled sit-down press conference with someone.

In this case, the president often talks when he's walking to the helicopter to go to a trip. So there's the chaotic side of it, but then I think there's really a fellowship and a community with White House reporters. Because we really realize that — and I think it's been a realization that's become clearer and clearer as the time has gone on — we have to stick together. Not so much that we have to be having some sort of shared agenda, but it's — really, we all want to be asking questions to the administration. We all think that this administration owes the American people answers. We are the representatives of the American people asking these questions.

So I think that there's a camaraderie there where people, I think, as much as we're still competing with each other, [try] to get the best stories. There's also a real sense of community that we're all in this together. That we're all trying to get the best stories. And that we could all just be a little bit more gentle with each other.

And you've also probably, if you've watched the president be questioned, there are a lot of times where one reporter from one outlet will ask a follow up questions from another outlet. That's been really critical, and I think that in the beginning, people would say, "Well, why are

they switching subjects? He didn't even answer the first question." So I think a lot of reporters have also done that — where I've, if I get a question, I'll say, "OK, but what about this question from ABC. You didn't quite give us an answer there."

So I think that that's really also been very critical.

**EVANS:** I've noticed that because I've — because at first when you were saying, when you're really answering questions on the fly, either you're in the beginning of another meeting that there's all these microphones and people are just in a room that's about to meet on something else. Or when the president's walking out to the helicopter or to a car or something, it's like a quick question, and then he answers, and he moves on. But I've noticed lately that people are probing more because in a press conference, you have the give-and-take, you can do follow-up. People are in a room that's more of an intimate setting.

I was going to ask you about that, you just answered it. Having a cadre of people who together say, "There's something that we need to get to. And if you can't get to it, I'm going to try to get to it as well." So it's a very different way of operating in the White House. My guess is as the press corps.

**ALCINDOR:** Well, I think that people — I mean there are also obvious questions of the day that — if the president is sending hundreds, or thinking of sending hundreds of thousands of troops to Iran, and the first person asks about it, that's probably also on three or four other people's lists. I think most White House reporters, we all write down our questions. And sometimes, our questions are very similar. The shooting in New Zealand happened and in the manifesto the president was named. Everyone wanted to know, "What did the president think about being named in a manifesto where someone went and killed people at a mosque?" How does the administration feel about that?

So I think we have to, as reporters — there are very obvious questions. So I think it is very important to be asking follow-up questions. But the key thing that I think people, and sometimes I want to make sure people understand, the press corps is asking for briefings not because it's great to just sit down and it's easier to do our job. It's because it's so much harder to dodge questions when you're sitting in a formal briefing. Instead of the president saying, "You know what? I don't like that question. I'm going to move on." Or "I'm going to act like I didn't hear that." Or "I really didn't really hear that questions because of the choppers." The president is often saying, "Speak up because I can't hear you over the helicopter."

That's also a real issue, so I think there's a problem when you're not doing it in a formal setting, which is why we have a briefing room and why presidents in the past and administrations in the past have put that briefing room to use.

**EVANS:** Yes. Yeah. I have another questions. You've covered a lot of defining moments. Moments where we can recall when we were hearing very hard news. For example, tragedies like Sandy Hook school shooting. So tell me about what goes on in your head when you have a responsibility to tell these stories in their *[inaudible]*. It's the intersection of human emotion and a policy perspective or a public problem. How do you try to parse that out?

**ALCINDOR:** I really try to take the personal out of it. Newtown was probably one of the hardest stories I ever covered — the shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. And I think it's because — I don't have kids, I'm not someone — it's not like I was seeing my children. It was just a human emotion to see 6-year-olds and elementary school children going to funerals in these little small suits. I think that it was just a really, really tough thing. So I remember doing those stories and writing those stories, but also taking the time to cry in my car, frankly. Taking time to feel those emotions. I think you have to let yourself feel sorrow and feel sadness.

And for me, that's part of, hopefully, the humanity that I bring to reporting. I'm not someone who's just going to say, "Oh, I'm cold," and I don't know. I remember when I first started reporting, I had to really get a hold of myself, because I would go to press conferences and cry if some person was missing or if some person had been murdered. And I hadn't really realized you can't do that in public. You have to kind of hold it together, do the story. You owe it to that family and to people all across the country, to tell the stories with a clear mind. And then afterward, let yourself feel those emotions.

So that's how I've been able to balance it, and I'm lucky — I just got married a year and a half ago. I think having my husband to talk to and vent to and to come home to has been a really critical part of covering these stories but also covering this administration. When I feel like things are feeling personal, I can go home and talk to my husband about that. So I think that that's been critical to allow yourself to feel some of the things that are going on.

**EVANS:** Yeah, and I think that's what comes out in a lot of your stories, that human side. But it comes in a context of a very balanced narrative, which is what I really wanted to try to get with you today, is to understand how you do that. And a lot of times, physicians do the same thing. They're there saving lives and they're seeing things and they're trying to keep that human connection, but at the same time, step back and do their craft. And I see this is the same thing journalists need to be doing, too.

So I have a final question. And it's this: You said that sometimes you have to will yourself through your own talent. You have to kind of talk about yourself in your own skin and get people to see you. What advice do you have for our graduates on getting into an arena where they have to appeal to a lot of different people, but yet they have to be true to their core and who they are?

**ALCINDOR:** I think that — and this probably hopefully will be a little bit of what I say in commencement — it's so critical to first know what your purpose is. To really try to take time to understand what you think you were put on this earth to do. And then once you figure that out, or even as you're figuring that out, because that's a lifelong journey in a lot of ways. Your purpose can change maybe at different times, but I think to figure out what your purpose is, and then walk into those spaces knowing that the universe is working things out for you. I really believe in telling yourself that — that "The universe is on my side. That I'm in this space because I belong in this space. That I'm in this moment because this is where I should be."

And don't let anyone push you aside. I think as a woman, as a person of color, I've had to push people aside at times. I've had to say, "You know, this person thinks I'm not qualified. This person thinks I'm not confident enough. Guess what? I can do this job because I know that this is my purpose." And I think that that's critical and that's going to be what hopefully people around this country should be thinking about as they walk into their purpose and they walk into these spaces.

**EVANS:** I am so pleased because we were talking when we talked together at the commencement; I'm saying the same thing. Not the way you're saying it, but it's about purpose and it's about your drive and being courageous. And we talk about the school, we talk about being in the arena like the Teddy Roosevelt speech that says, "You step in, and you step in, you make a commitment, and you're not worried about what people say. You're going to get bloodied, you're going to fall down. You have to get up." And what I loved about that speech is people who don't get in the arena don't matter.

Thank you so much, Yamiche. I really, really enjoyed speaking with you and I hope our audience and listeners do the same. Thank you. Thank you so much.

**ALCINDOR:** Thank you so much for having me.

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