

# S. Mitra Kalita

## Changing Newsrooms, One Story at a Time

**Paromita Pain**

Mitra Kalita is perhaps best known for her leadership as the senior vice president at CNN Digital (from 2018 to 2020). In that capacity she supervised breaking news and national news programming as well as the features and opinion teams; she managed nearly two hundred journalists, coordinated digital distribution on social media platforms, and set up efforts to diversify content. She was also in charge of the Live Story tool designed to help CNN audiences track news in real time. Her newsroom experiences include the *Los Angeles Times*, where she was the managing editor of the digital site; and the *Washington Post*, *Newsday*, and the Associated Press. At Quartz, an online news site covering business and the global economy that primarily serves business leaders, she served as the executive editor. Internationally, she supervised the launches of Quartz India and Quartz Africa. In a recent essay for the Aspen Institute, Kalita, who has been the president of the South Asian Journalists Association, explained, “I spent most of my career in mainstream media. I come from a background of moving from one local market to the next bigger market and on and on. I have truly worked everywhere.”<sup>1</sup>

Each move helped to deepen her understanding of how the media worked in different landscapes, both nationally and internationally, and prepared her for new ventures. Today the veteran journalist is the cofounder and CEO of URL Media, a for-profit corporate network of Black and Brown community news outlets that share content and revenue with different mainstream newsrooms. In 2020,

Kalita became CEO/publisher of Kalita Mukul Creative Inc., which publishes three niche newsletters: *Epicenter*, *Unmuted*, and *Escape Home*. During the pandemic, she cofounded and published *Epicenter-NYC*, a newsletter designed to help New Yorkers navigate COVID-19, which was particularly devastating for New York City; for example, it helped more than five thousand people navigate the complexities of registering for vaccines. *Epicenter-NYC* works across a variety of platforms including flyers and podcasts. Artists, small businesses, culture, and civic life are highlighted by a team of reporters, known as ambassadors. And in 2024, the Mellon Foundation awarded *Epicenter-NYC* \$250,000 to establish a multipurpose community hub in Queens, where it will serve as a space for video content creation, art exhibits and programming (including a podcast studio and studio space for artists), and civic engagement. In accepting the award Kalita said, “*Epicenter’s* model reframes newsgathering toward partnering with, rather than reporting on, people and places whose heritage and stories have not always been told on their own terms.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Unmuted* newsletter focuses on schooling, originally, on schooling during the pandemic. The *Escape Home*, for homeowners, regularly shares content with MarketWatch, a subsidiary of Dow Jones & Company that is a financial website providing analysis, business news, and stock market data. Shifting from major mainstream newspapers to newsletters has not meant abandoning mainstream journalism. Rather, Kalita channels her years of experience as an entrepreneur and business journalist as a weekly columnist for *Fortune* and *Time* magazine.

This case study of Kalita’s leadership uses an interview with her as well as what she has written or said in essays and public presentations to explain how she navigates complexities in her own community while serving varied audiences and enhancing diversity in the newsroom. Rather than focusing on a particular crisis or juncture, it centers on how a woman of color raised by immigrant parents created her own opportunities to innovate digital storytelling and improve newsroom management and diversity. In so doing she managed to augment opportunity and innovation in U.S. media. During an interview with *Ms.* magazine, she emphasized that the push to

diversify journalism was an important reason for her to get into the profession. She “intentionally” applies this to her career and sees her role as a change agent, “to change journalism as we know it.”<sup>3</sup>

Kalita’s concept of leadership offers important lessons about how journalists need and respond to management, and how management involves understanding and responding to these needs; for her, management does not involve traditional notions of power centered on prestige and being an all-commanding presence. That said, she is not convinced leadership can be taught: “I’ve been in leadership roles at this point, for more of my career than not, and I don’t really know that anything adequately prepares you for it. You know, certainly, people talk about coaching and like leadership academies, executive education, but the reality of management is that you kind of have to just do it to see what everybody’s talking about.”<sup>4</sup>

Described as “wonderfully blunt” by CNN anchor Brian Stelter, Kalita seeks to change journalists’ attitude about engagement.<sup>5</sup> In a lecture at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, she acknowledged the difficulty of getting newsrooms “to think about engagement . . . but we must see this as core to everyone’s job and not as a separate function.”<sup>6</sup> Kalita emphasizes that while the Internet expects interaction, going out to meet newspaper readers is essential since journalists are members of the community as well.

## Background

Kalita (whose legal name is Sangha Mitra) was born in Brooklyn; her family moved to Long Island when she was two. Her kindergarten teachers called her Mitra and the name stuck. Her family moved to Puerto Rico when she was eight years old. When she was twelve she moved to central New Jersey, where she finished middle and high school. Wherever the family was, every few years her parents would take her to Assam, their home state in India. She says, “It was quite idyllic in terms of being very remote, with lots of cousins, dozens of cousins. So, it was a really fun experience. But then we would come back to the U.S., which was, really just my immediate family.” She majored in history and journalism with a minor in

Spanish at Rutgers University. After graduating in 1998, she earned an MS in new media at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Her earliest memory of “media” exemplifies, she says, nontraditional media and communication: as a child, she helped record cassette tapes that went back and forth among the extended family in India. “We might record our voices there and leave it, and they would listen to us. Or we would all gather and sing songs, or my grandfather would say a few words, and then we would have these cassettes, and we would listen to them back in the U.S.,” she says. Kalita’s first journalism experience was creating a newspaper called the *Kalita Times* to protest the move from Puerto Rico to New Jersey. She says of this, “I think in that way, media chose me, because I clearly saw putting things in the format of a newspaper and equated that to them having to listen to me.”

After internships at the *Wall Street Journal*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Patriot Ledger*, and the WSJ Classroom Edition, Kalita worked for the Associated Press in Trenton, New Jersey. She has also worked at *Newsday*, in New York, and at the *Washington Post* as a business reporter. She joined the *Wall Street Journal* in 2010. There she led the coverage of the Great Recession, oversaw the launch of a local news section for New York City, and contributed in-depth reporting on the housing crisis. As the ideas editor at Quartz, Kalita contributed to its most popular sites and wrote viral stories on a wide variety of topics, from baby blankets to monetary policies. She was a member of the senior leadership determining content and direction for *Mint*, a startup business-oriented publication of the *Hindustan Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* in New Delhi. From May 2015 to June 2016, as managing editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, her leadership with new forms of digital storytelling and audience engagement saw latimes.com traffic touch nearly sixty million unique visitors monthly.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, she helped the *Times* to connect to new communities and enhance its community outreach by establishing new beats and partnerships. She formed new partnerships with Apple News and Google, revitalized headlines and the framing of news stories, and formulated a new audience strategy, including translating general stories and videos into Spanish. During her tenure,

the number of journalists of color at the *Times* grew from 23 percent to 35 percent. She ensured more constructive partnerships with advertisers and sales teams to promote content. Under her leadership, the general graphics department developed a data visualization team that produced interactives, 360 videos, and virtual reality content about space, including the planet Mars. The *LA Times* found a robust presence on Snapchat, Medium, and Tumblr, and its brand got new life through strategies like Reddit’s “Ask Me Anything” (AMA).

Kalita is a board member and visiting faculty at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, teaching in its women’s academy, program for journalists of color, and a seminar for new managers; she also teaches in the accelerator program of the Online News Association. She has taught as an adjunct at Columbia Journalism School, St. John’s University, CUNY Journalism School, and UMass Amherst, and was a visiting fellow at Harvard University. Besides being a board member of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Mitra extensively consults and speaks on newsroom management and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Innovating new, deeply audience-centered forms of storytelling that are designed to help the public understand issues, follow news, and develop a nuanced understanding of issues is key. For example, many newsrooms across the United States follow Kalita’s theory highlighting the “arc of a story”: each new experiment has stemmed from the awareness that “we need to do news better.”<sup>8</sup> This was brought home forcefully when, during her time at CNN, the George Floyd murder and the global pandemic saw audiences raise important questions about the purpose, service notion, and objectivity of news organizations.<sup>9</sup>

In a recent essay for the Aspen Institute, Kalita showed how her understanding of participation is informed by a serious critique of the journalism profession and education: “Many journalists come from a trajectory that has you starting out covering the school board or city council and steadily progressing with the end goal being covering Congress or the White House. Meanwhile, the trajectory of life has most of us articulating a foreign policy in college and only learning to care about schools, garbage pick-up and other

day-in-day-out local issues in our 30s and 40s. These two trajectories of journalism talent and the lives of our communities are at odds with each other.”<sup>10</sup>

Meeting journalists where they come from and then helping them explore and understand different contexts is an extension of her many attempts to encourage greater diversity in newsrooms and news narratives, even when this wasn’t part of her official title or responsibility. “There’s a diversity theme that runs through my career. It’s not a strategy. It’s not just a thing I talk about at conferences, but it really is how I live my life and how I commit journalism.”<sup>11</sup>

Her first management role was in India, having moved there in 2006 to launch a paper called *Mint*. She went from supervising three people to supervising twelve. Starting with a small team proved to be an important advantage. But little prepared her for how needy journalists can be. She also realized that the best journalists actually need more management, not less. Later she looked back on her career and herself as an individual and came to understand that everybody needs management. Being global and going global were critical in the various strands of her career. She has often been immersed in new situations, which forced her to see multiple perspectives and taught her how to lead people who are older than her, from different cultures, and/or who are skeptical. Indeed, Kalita says if one can work in India, given the inevitable uncertainties of everyday life there, one can work anywhere in the world.

In 2016 she became CNN Digital’s senior vice president for news, opinion and programming. In introducing Kalita before she spoke at the opening session of the 2017 conference of the Online News Association, the ONA Executive Director Irving Washington described her leadership style at CNN as “very inclusive”; moreover, she has “the knowledge to think in a different way and the way she thinks is like a breath of fresh air.”<sup>12</sup> He commended Kalita for bringing an international outlook to global issues and that she is “a great listener even if it doesn’t fit with her point of view.”<sup>13</sup> Kalita has often reflected on the advantages of shared leadership since that can provide “more opportunity for a company to infuse its top ranks with diversity in all aspects, including age, race, gender, and skillset, as well as more

experience with management, communications, and digital prowess.”<sup>14</sup> That is, diversity is key to newsroom modernization.

## Team-Centric Management

In her 2017 keynote for the Online News Association, Kalita emphasized that newsroom change and innovation occur one story at a time; she takes solace in small victories: “I think at conferences we focus on such vast change . . . and it’s just so big, it feels like I can’t take that on. . . . You can’t start writing a book until you write one word on a page. And then one word becomes one paragraph, and then one paragraph becomes one page. And then you have a chapter. And, again, that sounds so basic, but in many ways change in a newsroom is really similar. It’s one story at a time. . . . There is of course a broader strategy but in the short term, there’s what can I do today, and sometimes I actually find that liberating because the best I can do is with the story I’m trying to tell right now.”<sup>15</sup>

Kalita explicitly acknowledges that mistakes are inevitable. She believes in being upfront and transparent about vulnerabilities and insecurities: “Right now, for example, I’m really grappling with bandwidth. I don’t have enough time to manage the teams that we’ve built. And I think my teams, if you were to ask them, ‘what’s her number one issue or concern right now,’ they would be able to identify that. So really being transparent about your shortcomings feels an important part of this.” This transparency also helps Kalita be clear about her mission and make that clear to people around her. She keeps a document listing what attracted her to the job in the first place and refers to it when she needs a refresher to keep her optimism and idealism alive.

Kalita is committed to creating and maintaining connections with her team through lots of team and individual meetings and random phone calls—just to get a pulse. She remembers details about their lives and needs, knowing how these things matter to people. She sends people food. One time, a political reporter who had to work through Easter weekend told her that she really missed her mother’s Easter baskets. So, Kalita sent her an Easter basket.

Even during a crisis, having committed herself to a “career of crisis,” Kalita rarely forgets the importance of focusing on her team. She has learned to assess the crisis, figure out a response, and then go into execution mode. She describes several aggressive mergers and acquisitions as particularly challenging: she has been through five or six major changes of corporate media ownership and management. She believes that being honest with teams about changes and challenges gets her much further and helps minimize backlash. “A line that I turn to a lot is that nobody buys you to leave you alone,” she says. “And it sort of preps teams for the reality of what’s to come. I think a lot of leaders will say, ‘We’re just going to act like everything’s normal, we’ll just keep going, when it’s literally impossible to do that during such times of change.’”

Writing two acclaimed books taught her valuable lessons that inform her leadership. Writing her 2003 book *Suburban Sahibs: Three Immigrant Families and Their Passage from India to America*, about how immigrants redefined New Jersey, was transformative. As she says, “When you’re trained as a journalist, you’re just listening for like a good quote. You’re not really going underneath the story. And so, writing a book helped me go underneath a story; I had to get details.” She needed to understand the context and consistently consider what was happening around people and their lives rather than merely noting what people said explicitly. This has also proven to be an effective management tactic: “We manage teams; they’ll often respond to things with emotion or outrage or . . . feeling a certain way; but so many times that emotion or that reaction is more a function of the stuff around them, versus you.”

Kalita’s 2010 book *My Two Indias* tells the story of how her exasperation at India’s inefficiency turns to appreciation of Indians’ hustle and innovation, lessons that became woven into daily professional decisions. More recently, she described a media atmosphere rife with misinformation: “If we keep saying this information is the problem, we get to blame other people instead of asking the fundamental question, which is, Why am I not trusted? Why am I not turned to? And why am I not the solution, the provider of news and information? . . . Information is the ultimate power in our ability

to uplift people . . . but . . . we know that the essence of providing that information equals power.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Kalita’s concept of community and what constitutes the local is equally broad: “But how do we define local? It’s a word that is bordered and closed off, defined by geography or zip code. Of course, most people do not live, work, or worship all in the same place. How do we capture families like mine that spent every weekend driving hours and hours across state lines to create community with people from a remote region with a distinct language—what place does local news make for these overlapping communities?”<sup>17</sup>

Several of her career decisions and professional arrangements were agonizing. In any event, strong mentorship keeps her motivated, she says. Kalita’s much-trusted mentors, many from outside the organizations she is a part of, have been extremely helpful. They have made her feel like she has a kitchen cabinet looking out for her. She can consult with her mentors about mistakes or professional issues that have not quite worked out the way they were meant to.

## Addressing Ethical Questions

Kalita often faces difficult choices around the ethical collisions between public service, professionalism, personal ethics, and commercial orientations. Tensions over the roles and responsibilities of news media have arisen most prominently because of ownership issues, such as when Rupert Murdoch took over the *Wall Street Journal*, and at the *LA Times*, when Michael Ferro came in as a new investor. Kalita always tries to find the middle ground and maintains that she has never needed to make major sacrifices to achieve this.

But sometimes, she sticks to her guns. This general tendency to try to make the best of situations but also be able to hold one’s own has been very helpful in her current work at *Epicenter-NYC*, the newsletter originally intended to help New Yorkers get through the pandemic and an inaugural member of her URL Media network. Kalita is the publisher, but she wears all hats at *Epicenter*: she sells advertisements and creates and edits content. It requires her to be out in the community, address questions as they arise, and

deal with ethical issues. Many people questioned why *Epicenter* was helping people register for vaccines; critics apparently said this is not within the purview of a media organization. Kalita told a *Vice* interviewer that she launched *Epicenter* given the problems of the vaccine rollout: “The folks who should be at the front of the line, elderly, and essential workers, don’t have the tools or digital savvy to play. The state needs to talk to people in terms that are concrete and accessible—there’s so much confusion within the categories. Again, to circumvent the system, you must know the system.”<sup>18</sup> Kalita does know the system well, whether related to vaccines or the media.

Understanding the importance of strengthening media produced by and for traditionally marginalized voices, Kalita and another media executive and entrepreneur, Sara Lomax-Reese, cofounded URL Media as a network for sharing resources—money and power—with Black- and Brown-owned media outlets. Lomax-Reese is the president and CEO of WURD Radio, an African American-owned talk radio station. Funding for this project initially came from advertising, partnerships, sponsorships, and grants, including the Archewell Foundation, the nonprofit of the former Duke (Prince Harry) and Duchess of Sussex. Here, too, Kalita emphasizes serving otherwise underserved communities. Kalita told the president of the News Media Alliance, “From a mission perspective, we did not want Black and Brown audiences to be only charitable endeavors. We see our people as a very important, vital, necessary market.”<sup>19</sup>

Kalita emphasizes the importance of ethics in terms of how and why media organizations make money. She appreciates advertising being a part of *Epicenter*’s journalistic strategy, for example. Unlike the so-called Chinese wall between editorial and advertising at traditional media, she says, “For me, uplifting these businesses is as important as uplifting our communities because they are a part of the community.” Dealing with such ethical landmines has helped her navigate this world where the media must redefine themselves to find relevance to audiences and build trust in communities. She is convinced that media need to be community focused and to tell stories from the point of view of communities.

### **Resolution: Moving Beyond Ideal Notions of Feminism**

Maintaining a balance also extends to life beyond the professional sphere. Kalita describes herself: “I am a journalist, but I’m also . . . a mother, daughter, wife, neighbor, friend, Assamese, Indian, South Asian, Asian, American.”<sup>20</sup> Her immigrant roots are reflected deeply in the Indian and Assamese aspects of her identity, but clearly they extend into the community where being an integral part of her locality as a neighbor and friend is also important. Kalita is very proud of being a mother and having “been there” for her two children, often going to great lengths to make it to their functions so that her children realize she is still a part of their lives. Much of her career has been shaped by her children. One of the best tips a mentor gave her was to be as involved as possible in their lives—because then things could happen on her schedule. Her home is always open to her children and their friends, and teenagers enjoy gathering there. She has had two long-term nannies for her children and considers both “extremely important parts of our life.” Every time she got promoted or something good happened personally or professionally, her mother would remind her to raise their wages as hers were increasing. Kalita sees this as a way to balance work and family life and ensure that her children and the nannies see her success as their success and vice versa.

Feminism in the South Asian context doesn’t always fit a singular or defined framework;<sup>21</sup> as the daughter of Indian immigrants raised in Puerto Rico, Kalita’s version of feminism is highly flexible, pragmatic, and inclusive, such that practices expected of Indian women also find space. Kalita’s mother-in-law used to fast once a year on the holiday Karwa Chauth, celebrated in northern and western India for the well-being and health of one’s husband. Kalita acknowledges that this holiday would not be seen as exemplifying feminist ideals. However, it was important to her mother-in-law. Moreover, she needed to have her mother and her mother-in-law basically ready to come in and watch her children if she needed to go on a business trip or work late or got particularly busy. Therefore, Kalita would also observe the Karwa Chauth fast. Her feminism is based on deeply

thought-out aspects of what it takes for women to raise children and maintain family well-being, along with achieving career success.

Kalita acknowledges that the challenges of maintaining the fragile work-life balance are largely gendered. Nevertheless, she does not always see the world through a gendered lens, nor does she embrace or resist some particular version of feminism. She underscores that she does not define herself in the same ways that men do, but she acknowledges that she had to learn how to be more “masculine” in order to ascend the career ladder. Indeed, she asks rhetorically, “Why don’t men have to be more like women in order to ascend in their career?” She elaborates on what it means to be “like women”: “It’s the ability to multitask, the ability to show compassion in management and leadership, the ability to have a holistic view on how information lands, and then importantly, the ability to not be so single-minded and think about community. And this idea of, you know, ‘my success is your success; your success is my success,’ and to not be so individualistic.”

Put more broadly, part of Kalita’s feminism is a matter of recognizing that her success depends on help from her mother, mother-in-law, and nanny. Again, keeping her mother-in-law happy enables her to embrace feminist ideals and achieve other life and work goals, such as becoming a corporate senior vice president. She says this support has proved to be a strong propeller: “Rarely do we focus on the complexity of what it really takes for women to get to where they are and the kind of sacrifices made along the way.” Kalita insists that feminism should not require her to sacrifice her individuality. Meanwhile, she emphasizes her commitment to providing ongoing support and assistance to the women around her, both at home and at work.

Her accomplishments and recognition have established her as a major thinker regarding news innovation. Part of her leadership has been the conceptualization of modernization as requiring inclusivity and diversity, with communities at the center. As the Rockefeller Foundation Global Strategy group concluded, “The only way to address and overcome preconceptions and barriers is to have more women in positions of leadership; providing the support and role models women desperately need to advance in their careers and

bringing about much-needed changes in the workplace benefitting both genders.”<sup>22</sup> Kalita’s leadership, centered on service to her community, indicates precisely that inclusive way forward.

## Notes

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- 2 During that same interview, Kalita emphasized how important it was to her to ensure that collaboration and community were valued for enhancing traditionally marginalized voices. Carolina V. Valencia, “Epicenter-NYC Secures \$250,000 Mellon Foundation Grant to Establish Community Hub in Queens,” *Epicenter-NYC*, January 30, 2024, [www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/epicenter-nyc-secures-250000-mellon-foundation-grant-to-establish-community-hub-in-queens,247923](http://www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/epicenter-nyc-secures-250000-mellon-foundation-grant-to-establish-community-hub-in-queens,247923).
- 3 International Women’s Media Foundation, “The Story Behind Her: For Journalist S. Mitra Kalita, Community Is Everything,” *Ms.*, March 18, 2021, <https://msmagazine.com/2021/03/18/the-story-behind-her-journalist-s-mitra-kalita/>. During that interview for Women’s History Month, she emphasized the importance of the Kerner Commission Report and the civil rights movement.
- 4 All direct quotes attributed to S. Mitra Kalita, unless stated otherwise, are from interview responses she provided specifically for this chapter.
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- 6 Reynolds Journalism, S. Mitra Kalita, *Quartz—How to Integrate Audience into Every Workflow*, YouTube, April 3, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gneg3aZTMDg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gneg3aZTMDg).
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- 12 Irving Washington, “Introduction,” *Opening Keynote: Managing for Innovation and Culture Change in News*, Online News Association, May 19, 2017, <https://journalists.org/resources/opening-keynote-managing-for-innovation-and-culture-change-in-news/>.

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- 14 David Chavern, *News Take: Encouraging and Sustaining Diversity in News Media*, News/Media Alliance, September 13, 2022, [www.newsmediaalliance.org/news-take-episode-104-encouraging-and-sustaining-diversity-in-news-media/](http://www.newsmediaalliance.org/news-take-episode-104-encouraging-and-sustaining-diversity-in-news-media/).
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- 20 International Women's Media Foundation, "Story Behind."
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