

## **Democracy in Danger**

### **S4 E13: Broken News**

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:10] Today, we're bringing you an episode about a subject that's near and dear to me, the central nervous system of American democracy, the culture and practice of journalism.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:21] Siva, you became a media scholar after working in the newspaper industry, and I am sure it's hard to see what's happened to the news business in the 21st century. Just the last 15 years, about a quarter of American newspapers have gone bust and about half of them are controlled by financial interests. This is probably, I think we can agree, been bad for journalism. It's been bad for communities. I think it's been bad for democracy, too, hasn't it?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:45] Yeah, it really has. And that's not all there is to the story, right? There's a lot more going on about how we practice journalism, what we assume about journalism, all of our systems that pull us to share and comment and click incessantly. That has fundamentally changed the role of journalism in our media ecosystem and created a cacophony of voices.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:08] Yeah, I mean, one thing that we have done I think a lot on this show is we have shined a bright light on the faults of our democracy. But we do have one really important founding ideal, and that is a free press. And America has some of the most robust protections for journalists in the world. Now, lately, Americans have lost faith in the value of an independent press as a referee in our democracy.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:01:33] That's right, you can't be a check if the people don't believe you're a check, and that faith is really what's at stake here. So we have invited two guests, both of them well-known media critics and scholars. They've written deeply about this crisis of faith and the crisis in the economy of journalism.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:51] Yeah, let's get right to it. Nicky Usher joins us from the University of Illinois. Nikki has done extensive field work in newsrooms and writes widely on the industry. Jay Rosen has been on the journalism faculty at New York University since 1986. He's the author of the blog Press Think and a champion of civic journalism. Jay, Nikki, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Nikki Usher** [00:02:13] Thanks for having us.

**Jay Rosen** [00:02:13] Thank you very much.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:02:15] Nikki, last year you published a provocative book called News for the Rich, White and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism. There are a number of powerful arguments in the book. I just want to start with the longer history that you write about. You challenge the conventional mythology that there was ever a kind

of idyllic past for journalism when truth-hunting local reporters gave us the hard hitting news about our towns and our cities and the big bosses that were running everything. And they were the champions of democracy. The history of journalism is a little rockier, a little bumpier than that, isn't it? I mean, what are the features of the history of American journalism that you think our listeners should know now?

**Nikki Usher** [00:02:58] So I think you've nailed it, right? We've got this mythos of what we hope journalism has done in American life to nurture democracy. And then we have the reality. And I think you just need to look at none other than Horace Greeley and his "go west, young man," as you know, a call for manifest destiny and genocide. And yet he is one of the most esteemed journalists. This is publishing news to take America into a more progressive democratic future. So, you know, Henry Grady, who was publisher of The Atlanta Journal, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, now is what we we call it, was somebody who advocated for the rebirth of Jim Crow and the New South. And I think, you know, the larger macro trends suggest that journalists are often embedded and complicit in power structures, particularly at the community level. You know, I think we just need to look to the civil rights-era editorials by the Chicago Tribune, The Boston Globe, you name it, that advocated against the civil rights movement. And then these are real markers of staying on the side of the status quo, which is one that reflects white supremacy in most of the institutions in American social life. And I think the continued portrayal of stereotypes relating to black criminality, the way that we cover protests, the way that we fail to center equity and justice, is a reflection of this long, enduring, blasé democracy that can be found in American journalism.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:04:38] So so, Jay, speaking of the status quo and speaking of, let's say your local small-town paper, The New York Times, what we've seen just in the past few weeks have been two rather remarkable moments, one maybe not so remarkable, a changing of the top leadership at the times that doesn't seem to indicate any change in its orientation toward this central question, the current threat to democracy in America and around the world. And at the same time, a really remarkable lengthy series about Tucker Carlson using many of the methods of social science to expose him and call him, very bluntly, the host of the most racist television program ever. So what do you make of these two events happening basically at the same time in the paper that continues to set the agenda and in many ways the limits for American journalism?

**Jay Rosen** [00:05:39] Well, it shows us it's a complex picture. On the one hand, the lesson that The New York Times took from the shattering election of 2016 was that it was out of touch with Trump voters and needed to listen to them more carefully and that they had lost a sense of touch with the country; is the way that Dean Baquet repeatedly phrased it. And that's how you get the Rustbelt diner, story that has become a kind of myth in itself. And this conclusion that what was wrong with 2016 coverage was that the cosmopolitan press was out of touch is true in one sense. Nikki's book is a long disquisition on on that theme. And so it's it's true that the Beltway media and the cosmopolitan press and the coastal fraternity of journalists are out of touch with a lot of things in American life, and certainly rural America is one of them. But at the same time, it's a very impoverished view of what was wrong with American journalism and left it unprepared for the onslaught of Donald Trump in 2016. And such things as decades of horse-race reporting, the the way in which journalists in Washington, D.C. function as an elite themselves, the insider perspective that they are encouraged to have, the way that they treat politics as sport. All of those things are hugely involved and their weakness for entertainment and for ratings-driven programing, all of that came to a head with the 2016 campaign and the reign of Donald Trump for four years. So it's a mixed picture now. The thing about The New York Times, is

that's it is a huge institution. Now has 2,000 editorial employees. And one of the achievements of Dean Baquet has been to really increase the investigative capacity of that newsroom. So when they want to do something in-depth and take a long look at a subject like Tucker Carlson, they can do that. They have the people, they have the budgets, and they can do extraordinary journalism when they set their mind to it. It's just that they don't always set their mind to it.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:13] Jay, just to follow up on the Tucker Carlson piece, pieces, the investigation. You know, I found that revealing and interesting. But I just wonder, do you feel that there is a risk when newspapers make other journalists, if you want to call Tucker Carlson a journalist – figures in the in the media ecosystem – make them the story? Does this become an echo chamber in which the media is talking about the media? Or is this fundamentally what they should be doing?

**Jay Rosen** [00:08:38] No, I don't think in this case, I think it's a little different because right now, Tucker Carlson, is the Trump movement writ large and Carlson is sort of taken over from Trump as demagogue-in-chief. I don't think this is sort of an inside baseball story. This is not a navel gazing story. It's, it's really at the center of our politics right now.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:09:03] Nikki, let me follow up with you on this. Jay talked a little bit about the sort of built in biases or proclivities of mainstream journalism and the size and scale of some of these these platforms. You know, you write that journalists are more affluent, more white, more liberal than the American public is, and also that newsrooms themselves are increasingly owned by major corporate interests. I mean, you don't have to look further than The Washington Post owned by Jeff Bezos. Just talk a little bit about what wealth and corporate ownership has done to the news industry, but also maybe remind us of the history here, too. I mean, there have been titans of industry that have owned or invested in newspapers in the past, right?

**Nikki Usher** [00:09:41] Oh, absolutely. The whole history of the Chicago Tribune, I mean, there were company towns where like paper was milled that were owned by the Chicago Tribune. And then there were like railroad lines that were owned and this was not uncommon. But I want to go back to what Jay was talking about for a second, because I think it's really important to think about the role that The New York Times plays in setting the tone for what is acceptable to agree and disagree with from the starting point of critiquing democracy. And it's that disingenuousness of putting together a remarkable piece that raises alarm about the decay of democracy. And then at the same time, the selection choices about who is now leading the times and people who are very much stalwarts of neutrality, stalwarts of we are upholding, you know, a vision of democracy that is about instilling civilized debate and not making presumptions about whether people are lying or racist. And, you know, we can talk about corporate owners all we like. There are lots of problems and not everybody gets to control their corporate owner or how much pension for loss a corporate owner happens to have. But I think the real thing that we need to be thinking about is what happens when the understanding of liberal democracy that is happening at the most influential news organization in the English-speaking world is out of step with its own journalism.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:11:16] Now, Jay, you know, one thing I know about you and I've watched you over the years is that you haven't been content with just writing, thinking and talking about this stuff. You've been an active participant in trying to experiment with new models, new models of funding, new models of reporting, new models of civic engagement. You know, I'm struck by your immersion, your stake in The Correspondent,

an online newspaper based in the Netherlands. You know, it was supposed to pioneer a low-cost subscription model. It was supposed to provide deeply reported news and context rather than just the horse race coverage and soundbites, as you said. But what did you learn from it? And what is left to try, right? I mean, your colleague Clay Shirky says we need to try all of the above to save journalism. What's left out of all of the above?

**Jay Rosen** [00:12:04] Well, one thing I learned in the experiment with The Correspondent, is that global but in English, which was one of their ideas – meaning they would seek support from English-reading English-speaking people around the world – ran into a problem this very smartly treated in Nikki's book, the problem of place. Meaning, when you are informed about problems on a global scale, you quickly realize that the only way to really address those problems is at the level of the nation-state. But if your publication is supposed to address all nations where English speaking and English reading people are, there is no one government that's responsible for solving those problems. And this disconnect between the opportunities for active choice and the information that was being given to people was an unforeseen problem. That's one problem. A second problem was that we miscommunicated about what The Correspondent would end up being. There was a big controversy about that. Lots of people thought it would be an American news source when the vision of the founders was, as I said, global but in English. But they didn't quite make that clear because America was the biggest market for drawing such support. A third, you use the term subscription, and one of the points of doing this was to illuminate the distinction between subscription and membership. The correspondent is not a subscription-based product, it's membership based. The difference is that you in this case could pay what you can to be a member. And the the journalism of the correspondent was never going to be behind a paywall for non-members. And so the principle there was not pay-to-play. It was if you support this kind of journalism, become a member and it will be available to non-members as well. And it be able to circulate through the magic of the web and the link to anywhere that needs it, which is sort of the bargain at NPR. In NPR people give to their local station to become members because they believe in the importance of public service broadcasting. But they don't resent the fact that you can listen to your local NPR station without being a member. So that's very different logic from subscription. And one of the reasons that I spent three years studying membership models in news was I think there would be a huge loss if we eliminate this possibility that people could support journalism that's free to other people. I still think that's an important part of the financing mix.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:14:58] So, Jay, you titled the book What are Journalists For? Right? So clearly you think journalists should be for something. I happen to think, and I think you agree, that journalists should be for democracy. So if so, how should journalists do their job differently in the 21st century than the 20th century? And how can they address the emergency of the moment?

**Jay Rosen** [00:15:25] Well, I think they have to first try and understand the people they are trying to inform. And identify who those people are. Be realistic about who they are and who they aren't, who they don't reach. And begin their journalism with an understanding of what the publics they're trying to reach actually need. So I can probably illustrate this best with one of the reforms that I've pushed for a long time, the citizen's agenda style of election coverage, which begins not with the candidates and their tactics and their plans for winning or with the inside game of how the race is going to play out or with tips from professional handlers about what a smart approach to campaigning this candidate and their candidate is taking, but instead begins by asking the people you're trying to inform, what do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes? And if you

can ask that question enough to enough people, you start to get answers back that fall into patterns. And the question, what do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes? invites people to start not with journalism or with politics, but with their own lives. And then if you can find out what people want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes, you can then press the candidates to address those subjects. And also the resulting agenda becomes a kind of priority list for the journalism that you do during the campaign. So that's the approach that I've been pushing for a long time. It's not a new idea. That model comes from the mid-nineties pre-web, but lots of times many really good ideas and penetrating insights and improvements in journalism from the past get discarded in the belief that they failed or that they didn't solve the problem. And sometimes the best way to improve journalism is to go backwards in time and find things that were discarded at the time and that make a lot of sense now.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:17:37] Nikki, just to jump on that, is there anything in the past that you look back to as a practice or a particular skill set that you too would like to bring up to the present? An update for the present, or do you see things differently?

**Nikki Usher** [00:17:50] I, so, I'm going way back. And I go way back. But mostly because when I think about the party press that we had from like the 1790s to the 1830s. It was an elite press, right? So there are some real problems. But we do have a partisan media system in the United States. It's just that institutional news media, particularly text-based news media, fails to acknowledge that, right? The journalism that we are talking about with a capital J journalism, most people would say is sort of the mainstream media. But within the mainstream media, there's plenty of partisanship and plenty of partisan sources. And for me, leaning hard into actually being explicit about what your political ideology allows you to do and how it centers your journalism, is that most intellectually honest thing that a news organization can do? I also think that if we go back to that party model, I sort of see most news as a commercial failure, especially the kind of news that we're talking about. There's so much money in politics, and I would love to see big Democrat donors starting to invest in local news and the kind of rural community that I'm living in. And so I think there's a lot that we can pick and choose from. I think we need to be really careful to avoid false nostalgia. But I think, as Jay points out, just because something was too early or didn't work at first doesn't mean there aren't morsels that, given our contemporary political system and our contemporary fractured public, make a lot more sense now if we care about the survival of democracy.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:19:25] Jay Your view from Nowhere idea, which has had tremendous influence on how journalists think about themselves and how people think about journalism, is about acknowledging one's commitments, experiences, perspectives, and just being straight about it, right? Being completely honest with yourself and others about it and not pretending that you are, you know, Emerson's eyeball wandering through the world, right? And yet Nicky wants to add a somewhere to that place Nowhere. That somewhere might be Champagne, Illinois. That somewhere might be Los Angeles, California. That somewhere might be Kyiv, right? That somewhere has to be a place where one takes seriously the local concerns, the local histories, the local issues. And yet we have this community, the strata of highly professionalized journalists who are from everywhere, right? And they're expected to be migrant workers in the newspaper world and, what used to be the newspaper world, the newsgathering world, and are expected to have universal professional commitments, right? Are we doing journalism education wrong by imagining a universal view from nowhere?

**Jay Rosen** [00:20:43] I think we've been doing journalism education wrong for a long time because in general, and this might offend some people, but I don't really care.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:20:53] Yeah, it's never stopped you.

**Jay Rosen** [00:20:54] Yeah. Journalism education trails behind professional practice. It doesn't try and lead professional practice or test new possibilities or persuade the press of different approaches. That's not how it operates. And the pact that created the modern J-school is the employers said to the university, send us people we can plug into our production routine tomorrow, literally. Meaning if you graduate from the University of Maryland or as a journalism student, you get a job at a local newspaper in the state of Maryland, they expect you to be able to write a news story the first day you're there. And what that really is, is offloading your training costs on to another institution, which you can do if you have an institution that a lot of people want to join. And so that's really been the main function of the journalism school to produce camera-ready employees who can jump immediately into the news flow and be, frankly, docile.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:22:00] Right.

**Jay Rosen** [00:22:01] I should add that it is changing. Journalism school is getting much better. I think new disciplines like audience engagement, solutions-journalism, these things now have a life within journalism schools. And I think a lot of the faculty are aware that there's much more room to experiment now. The cost to try things is lower, that it's not the end of the world if you have an experiment and it fails, some of the the initiatives of the tech industry where you start and you do something cheap and you revise and you iterate and you learn as you go, those kinds of values are coming into the journalism school as well. So it's it is changing. It's just that for a very long time, this was a extremely static institution whose job was to provide employees who can be plugged into the production routine tomorrow.

**Nikki Usher** [00:22:54] I mean, I think that I sort of view my role as counterprogramming, and I often find myself shocked that my students aren't aware of some of the most amazing, most exciting parts of journalism today, which is very much a view from somewhere. Non-profit journalism, some for-profit efforts that put community first or put justice first, that are explicit about the intellectual and ideological commitments. And it's like that world is like it's like they've never heard about it. And I think that the hegemony of news norms in the American news media is a way of reinforcing the status quo of this is what news is, this is the way we decide what news is, and to push otherwise would be to challenge how we do journalism. And that's not how we do journalism. And there's still this this loud voice and every newsroom and every journalism department that refuses to sort of believe that journalism itself isn't sacrosanct and can't be challenged. And that is, like, maddening to me. And I cannot believe that that you and Jay have been talking this talk and fighting this fight for so long, because I'm...

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:14] Yeah, remind us how old we are, why don't you?

**Nikki Usher** [00:24:18] Just like I mean, my wall has a lot of dents. Like, how are you at home standing at this point, you know?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:24] So. So, you know, we're look, we're living in a world right now where everyone's angry, everyone's divided. And we've had this amazing process of what political scientists are calling asymmetric polarization, where our political views are

being pulled apart more from the right than from the left. But the result is a breakdown in civic trust, a breakdown in faith in each other, a breakdown in a sense that if one loses an election, it might actually be legitimate. How can journalists operate in such an environment, and what can journalists do to cope with such an environment?

**Nikki Usher** [00:25:03] So the question about how journalism can deal with this incredibly fractured polity and this incredible loss of institutional trust, I really think that the kind of journalism we're talking about, we need to be honest that some people are never coming back, that 78% of the Republican Party will not come back to become regular member-donors to their local public media. It's just not happening. And with that perspective going forward, it's freeing. It's freeing because it allows journalists to do the journalism that is more reflective of the values that journalism should be about, which is about democracy and justice and equity, and forget about all the detractors. And I think that until journalists are able to really understand that nobody is bringing back people who really, really hate journalists. You know, I mean, like this is a reality that journalists need to accept. And what that means for coping with it is we need to make sure journalists are kept safe. This is not a safe environment for journalists. Personal safety, psychological safety. This is our reality. And I don't think we pay enough attention to what it means for individual journalists to be the targets of this massive assault on democratic life.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:30] Jay, do you, are you optimistic about the future? Do you think there's an opportunity here for journalism to get better? Or do you think that the way it is that's pulling it under is just going to drown out eventually?

**Jay Rosen** [00:26:40] Well, I think no one is worried about whether people with power and standing and affluence are going to have the information they need in the future. Everybody knows that they'll be able to pay for quality news and they'll be able to inform themselves. And the people who lead empires are going to have information systems that allow them to know what's going on if they want to. What we're worried about is whether there will be news for the public, and that is what is in huge doubt in the 21st century. And that's why I keep working at these problems.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:27:29] Jay Rosen is a journalism professor at New York University and the author of a 1999 classic called *What Our Journalists For?* he writes about the business of news and its dilemmas in a blog called *Press Think*. He's also a frequent contributor to the popular press.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:27:46] Nikki Usher is an associate professor in the College of Media at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Nikki is the author of three books, including *Making News* at the New York Times and most recently, *News for the Rich, White and Blue*.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:28:00] *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [DemocracyGroup.org](http://DemocracyGroup.org) to find all of our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

**Mark Simon** [00:28:12] Hi, I'm Mark Simon and my podcast, *The Journalism Salute*, we spotlight important and interesting journalism organizations and people. The goal of our show is to introduce you to different perspectives and different careers in the field. We talk to reporters, editors, publishers and professors. There are so many great groups to learn about. We're also here to show you that journalists are not the enemy of the people. That's the journalism salute available wherever you get your podcasts.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:28:50] Siva, I got a question for you. Let me let me paint a picture. When I was a kid, my father and in fact, my grandmother used to watch news programs like the McNeil air show or anchors like Peter Jennings deliver the news in a mellifluous baritone. And you had this sense like, golly, these people are sort of trustworthy narrators. They're going to guide me along the path that I really need to know in order to make sense of the world. But a lot of that behavior, a lot of that styling was male. It was white. It was consensus driven. And it probably wasn't particularly truthful about the changes that were going on in the world. At least I think that's what I'm hearing from Nikki and Jay.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:29:32] Yeah, right. I mean, that notion that we all agreed on what was going on in the world and, you know, they weren't completely off or wrong, but they were incomplete. And there were all kinds of Americans and people beyond America who looked at that and said, this isn't the whole story. This isn't my story. For many people, it came up short.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:29:52] Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I remember as a young person being reared on this stuff was that it assumed that there were two basically thoughtful points of view that could be reasonably argued and that reasonable people could agree to disagree on them. That picture has completely changed. We do not have a polity that shares common foundational values. There were so many people that were excluded from that kind of journalism, right?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:30:18] Right. They were on the right and the left in the hills and the valleys and in suburbs and small towns. And so, you know, this is a big, diverse country. It always has been. And that consensus view, while it had its virtues, never really told the story of America. We might have a chance now in the 21st century, given the fact that we do acknowledge a wide array of voices, and given the fact that we have many more ways to get our voices out to have a richer, more diverse public sphere. I don't think that's the whole story, though. I think what we've got, because we haven't figured out how to manage that diversity and that proliferation of voices is cacophony that prevents us from making sense of the world. It just all seems like a big barrel of angry noise right now.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:31:03] Okay, but are you saying then that the situation that we're in with a plethora of voices entirely across the spectrum from left and right, is basically more democratic, in some ways more inclusive, because more voices are being heard and are being projected back to the polity. I'm not by any means suggesting that there was an ideal back in the 1950s and sixties of centrist news organizations that were somehow giving us the glue that held our society together. On the contrary, they were papering over the gigantic fractures and fissures in our society. But now the fractures and fissures are all we've got. Is this fundamentally healthy for democracy?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:31:38] It's not. It's not. And it's because we can't deliberate, right? Deliberation is a crucial part of any democratic-republic, a functional democratic-republic. We can't agree on our problems, let alone get to the point where we agree on how we might address them. And so, you know, I would say that more voices are being expressed. They're not necessarily being heard, right? So when women say out loud on Twitter or almost anywhere else, there are some issues that are crucial to my life. There are some issues that are crucial to my health. There are some issues that are crucial to having a future that is viable for myself, for my children. And they get shouted down and threatened and harassed and have to pay a psychological tax every time they want to stand up in public and express their needs. Well, then we are basically robbing ourselves

of a fully voiced, deliberative republic. That again, should be our goal, and we should start with that as a first principle. What kind of media system, what kind of education system, what kind of civic institutions can support that kind of rich, diverse deliberation without devolving into cacophony? That we have not taken seriously yet. That's all for this episode of Democracy in Danger. Next week we're headed back to Ukraine with journalist Peter Pomeranz, who's been covering the war.

**Peter Pomeranz** [00:33:03] Russia has to stop being a threat to its neighbors, to the wider world and ultimately to its own people. That has to be our baseline.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:33:13] In the meantime, stay in touch on Twitter. Our handle is at @DinDpodcast. That's D-i-n-D podcast. And visit our web page, DinDanger.org, for show notes and much, much more.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:33:26] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol and Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:33:37] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. This show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:33:53] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you soon.