# Independent Political Podcasts: The Band-Aid for the U.S. News Media Industry's Bullet Wound

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**Dedication**

To the passionate, brave, headstrong, and trailblazing independent political podcasters of the hazy digital age;

To the hardworking traditional news reporters who inform the public under increasingly tight deadlines;

To the labor unions that continue their decades-long struggle for equitable reform in the newsroom;

To the news media academics who illuminate the necessary changes to our news media system;

To the disillusioned and skeptical consumers of the news;

And to Granny, the Lois Lane of Grand Chain, IL;

This one's for you.

**Abstract**

Independently produced political podcasts can be an effective tool to inform and engage audiences. Unfortunately, the mass consolidation of the means by which podcasts are shared limits the ability of such podcasts to gain much of a following, with the exception of a few. With a news media industry that dwindles, the main solution to this crisis lies in policy reforms, Until those arrive, however, an examination and articulation of what makes a political podcast independent and what makes them effective can illuminate how podcasters can responsibly and effectively work, in a small way, to provide a temporary solution to the catastrophe until the federal government decides to take action.

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## 1. Introduction

> KYLE KULINSKI: Bruh. Bruh, bruh, bruh, bruh, bruh, bruh, bruh. I—I don't even know what to say, man. I don't even know what to say.
>
> So, I just watched the debate. I was live-tweeting it. Uh, this was not the plan! This was not the plan—the plan was not for me at 11:00 at night, immediately after watching the debate, to hop on camera and start ranting about it. I was going to wait until the morning, do my little breakdown in the morning, go about my day, send it off to the editor—shout out, Peter, you're the man!
>
> But I couldn't help—I said, "Oh my God, I gotta get on, I'm not gonna be able to sleep! I'm not gonna be able to sleep! I gotta get my ass on camera right now! I gotta go talk about this *right now*."
>
> Bro, that was disgraceful. That was literally the single worst debate I've ever seen in my life, and it's not even close—*and it's not even close*. I mean, this makes 2016 Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton look like, you know, Noam Chomsky versus William F. Buckley! *What did I just watch, dog!?* What did I just watch (Kulinski 2024a; italics added)?

Left-leaning political podcaster and YouTuber Kyle Kulinski's June 28, 2024, video reflected my bewilderment from the previous night's disaster: The first and only 2024 presidential debate between former President Donald Trump and the previous Democratic candidate, Joe Biden. My expectations, and many of my leftist peers' expectations, were as low as they could get: All Biden needed to do, in my view, was to brag about his revitalization of the National Labor Relations Board (Rhinehart, McNicholas, and Poydock 2024), hammer Trump on his refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election, and, most importantly, assuage voters' concerns about his age (PRC 2024a). Biden not only failed to meet this incredibly low bar (Danner, Hart, and Stieb 2024), but he managed to deliver a performance that compelled numerous editorial boards of prominent

news outlets to publish articles calling on him to pull out of the 2024 election and let another politician run as the Democratic nominee (NYTEB 2024; WSJEB 2024).

While I was a fervent supporter of Marianne Williamson's bid for the Democratic nomination, I took no pleasure in seeing Joe Biden falter onstage. I understood the threat that a Donald Trump presidency poses: Considering his campaign's involvement in writing the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 manifesto—"a wish list for the first 180 days of the 'next conservative administration,' including to further restrict abortion access and '*dismantle the administrative state*'" (Musgrave 2024; italics added)—I found myself beginning to realize how much danger our democracy faces. The debate overwhelmed me with an uneasy anger that persisted throughout the night and into the following day.

The top officials of the Biden Administration and the Democratic Party surely hold most of the blame for this disaster. Trump's 2017 tax cuts that would have given the top 1% of income earners 83% of the benefits (TPC Staff 2017); his follies in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic (Lipton et al. 2024); and his disdain for democracy itself (Axelrod 2022) make him the easiest punching bag for any Democratic candidate to demolish in an election, yet polls at that time demonstrated that Biden had no chance to beat Trump (Danner, Hart, and Stieb 2024). The most head-scratching fact of this nightmarish scenario is that the Democratic Party at the national and state level failed to provide other options in the primary election. At the national level, despite polls clearly indicating a lack

of support among all Democrats for Biden's re-election bid (Boak and Fingerhut 2023), the Democratic Party pushed ahead into the election cycle as if the 2024 election would be a normal affair for its incumbent candidate, refusing to take any primary challengers seriously by not sponsoring a debate between Biden, Williamson, and Dean Phillips (Bickerton 2023). Further, the Tennessee, North Carolina, and Florida Democratic Party chapters refused to put Williamson and Phillips on the ballot, citing no clear guidelines for the decision-making process (Murray and Shepherd 2023). In the case of Tennessee, its Democratic Party chapter's Chair, Hendrell Remus, claimed that "Biden was the only candidate the committee had 'received interest from and vetted'…as a [*sic*] 'a bona fide democrat'" (2023), not specifying what attempts they made to reach out to the other candidates or what exactly makes a Democratic candidate "bona fide" (2023). The Democratic Party's leaders certainly hold responsibility for its voters' dissatisfaction with their first candidate.

Yet, mainstream news media outlets cannot be let off the hook either. Prominent outlets did provide basic coverage of the candidates themselves, but constant references to them as "longshot" (Shelton 2023; Cameron 2024) candidates essentially echoed the DNC's official stance: The primary challengers are "longshot" candidates because the party's executive leaders support Biden, so it will not let any challengers have a chance at winning. Moreover, while the DNC has used its power to prevent Fox News from hosting Democratic presidential primary debates in 2020 (Taylor 2019), this power has certain limits, as SiriusXM was able to broadcast a Democratic presidential primary debate between

Marianne Williamson and Dean Phillips at New England College this year (NEC 2023), despite the DNC's refusal to officially sponsor a debate. CNN and MSNBC, therefore, could have hosted such a primary debate without the blessing of the DNC, but they bowed to the DNC agenda, acting as its guard dog, rather than its watchdog.

The real watchdogs could be found barking and howling on independently produced political commentary podcasts. Kulinski and his wife, Krystal Ball[1], interviewed all candidates at least once on the *Krystal, Kyle, and Friends* video podcast (2023a; 2023b; 2024). Ball and Saager Enjeti hosted interviews with all Democratic challengers on the *Breaking Points* news commentary video podcast (2023b, 2023c, 2023d). Ryan Grim's *Deconstructed* podcast featured an interview with Marianne Williamson after she quickly amassed a relatively large following on TikTok (2023). David Sirota did the same on his *Lever Time* podcast (2023). While mainstream news outlets were giving only minimal coverage to the primary candidates, independently produced news commentary podcasts were putting out multiple in-depth discussions with these candidates.

The relatively minimal coverage of these candidates within mainstream U.S. outlets speaks to a larger and pervasive issue in the U.S. news media industry—one that independent political news commentary podcasts can temporarily solve. Currently, despite the United States' pride in the First Amendment to its Constitution, its news outlets are failing compared to those in

[1] Yes, that's her real name.

other countries. On May 3 this year, Reporters without Borders (RSF[2]) updated its "World Press Freedom Index," ranking the United States at 55 out of 180 countries—10 marks lower than its 2023 rank (2024a). RSF bases its world rankings on five different scores for "contextual indicators that reflect the press freedom situation in all of its complexity: political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context and safety" (2024b)[3]. The U.S. economic indicator index[4] dropped by nine rankings since last year (2024a), and its sociocultural index ranking[5] plummeted by 11 (2024a). RSF attributes these declines to "massive waves of layoffs [that] swept the US media throughout 2023 and have continued into 2024" (2024a), as well as "the level of distrust in the American media [that] is unprecedented" (2024a).

The masses, however, are not the sole bearers of ignorance in this crisis. The crisis, I argue, is one that was decades in the making—decades of greed, compromise, and outright spinelessness on behalf of the owners of major news

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[2] RSF is the acronym commonly associated with the group. It is based off its French name, Reporters sans Frontières, which was "founded in 1985 in Montpellier by four journalists" (n.d.). While its "Who We Are" page also uses both the "RSF" and the English-name-based "RWB" acronyms, the group uses the former as its logo on its website (n.d.).

[3] RSF calculates each indicator's score from "a quantitative tally of abuses against media and journalists in connection with their work" (2024b), along with "qualitative" (2024b) questionnaires administered to press freedom experts of every country. High scores of 85 to 100 represent a "good" (2024b) status for each contextual indicator; 70 to 85 acknowledges "satisfactory" (2024b) elements; 55 to 70 identifies "problematic" (2024b) areas for the press in each nation; 40 to 55 alerts users about "difficult" (2024b) facets of reporting in a country; and 0 to 40 sounds the alarm on "very serious" (2024b) failings in a nation's news media environment. These scores determine each country's overall score. Countries' contextual indicator and overall scores are then indexed from the highest to the lowest.

[4]For each country, the economic indicator score and index ranking measures the "economic constraints linked to governmental policies…non-state actors…and media owners seeking to promote or defend their business interests" (2024b).

[5] For each country, the sociocultural indicator score and index ranking reflect the "social constraints resulting from denigration and attacks on the press based on such issues as gender, class, ethnicity and religion" (2024b) and "cultural constraints, including pressure on journalists to not question certain bastions of power or influence or not cover certain issues because it would run counter to the prevailing culture in the country or territory" (2024b).

media institutions, along with the politicians and bureaucrats who failed to provide the adequate legislative guardrails for an informed citizenry. And while independently produced political commentary podcasts cannot alone solve this crisis, they can provide a more vibrant and effective alternative to the stale mainstream offerings in the U.S. that can better engage the general public (Ödmark 2021).

Yes, such podcasts have their own harms. *The Joe Rogan Experience* demonstrates these harms alone. The titular host displays a blatantly lacking awareness of his responsibility to the public as the host of the second-most popular podcast globally (Smith 2024). He continually smothers his audience in interviews with COVID-19 vaccine skeptics (Burton 2023; Qiu 2023), which a 2021 *Washington Post* survey found to have a detrimental effect on listeners' willingness to get vaccinated for COVID-19 (Stecula and Motta 2021). Other prominent podcasters like Matt Walsh demonstrate a serious threat to the safety and well-being of trans people and gender-affirming care providers (Drennen 2022; Olivier 2022; January 2020).

But, considering the growing popularity of podcasting (Newman et al. 2023, 109; 2024, 115), the failing performance of mainstream news in the United States (RSF 2024a), and the prospects of this medium to better engage the general public on political matters—especially when it is used to frame the news "thematically with societal relevance" (Ödmark 2021, 1548)—determining how to capitalize on the powerful benefits of political podcasting while mitigating its immense harms is an urgent task that concerns news media scholars.

To this end, I dedicate my thesis.

### 1.1 Thesis Statement

The established news media institutions responsible for informing the public about the critical events happening in their government have lost their trust (Newman et al. 2024, 115; RSF 2024a), leaving a power vacuum for toxic podcasters to fill, when this new medium could actually perform better at engaging audiences in a healthy manner. Therefore, instead of casting the entire podcast medium aside, berating it as nothing but a tool for spewing bigotry and conspiracy theories, I embraced the healthy aspects of podcasting while counteracting its harms. To honor this intention, I produced written and creative portions for my thesis. The written portion constructs and justifies a set of guidelines for political podcasts, taking cues from sociological and political-economy-minded examinations of news media bias like *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008) and *Manufacturing the News* (Fishman 1980), while placing that analysis within the context of the necessary industrial, workplace, and legislative reforms that the news industry desperately requires, such as those suggested in *Democracy without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society* (Pickard 2020), *Hedged: How Private Investment Funds Helped Destroy American Newspapers and Undermine Democracy* (Susca 2024), and *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (Wallace 2019).

The creative portion puts those guidelines into action with *The Honorable Series*, culminating in nine longform podcast interviews that adhere to these guidelines, demonstrating how political podcasters can better inform their audiences on political topics than mainstream news media, and encourage their audiences to organize toward the improvement of their democratic society.

### 1.2 Methodology

The academic component of this project rests in the written portion, in which I establish a set of guidelines for political podcasters to honor. These guidelines can be considered a framework for political podcasts, outlining how political podcasters should fund their productions and structure their organization if producing with other individuals, and how they can maximize listener engagement.

Before delving into the justification of these guidelines, I note that these guidelines do not place the sole burden of solving the woes of today's U.S. news media industry by making podcasts, and review the current workplace, industrial, and legislative reforms from which the industry could benefit. Placing such a burden on podcasters would be, to a certain extent, the same as placing the emphasis on individual consumers to save our worsening global climate by recycling. The mass consolidation of news media stems from a series of policy failures, such as the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act's failure to ensure sustained of public broadcasting (Pickard 2020, 147) and the 1996 Telecommunications Act that "allowed giant corporations to buy up thousands of media outlets across the

country, increasing their monopoly on the flow of information in the United States and around the world" (Corcoran 2016). One must address these necessary reformations to adequately contextualize what exactly independent political podcasters can do to better engage audiences in the current media environment.

The funding and structuring intent is satisfied through incorporation of the findings from *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008) and *Manufacturing the News* (Fishman 1980), which differ in their approaches, yet both come to the same conclusions about the structural flaws of mainstream news media organizations. Herman and Chomsky approach the issue from an external perspective, constructing a "Propaganda Model" made of five filters of information:

> (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism ([1988] 2008, 62).

The writers then test this model by applying it to five case studies, examining quantitative and qualitative data to prove that the structural incentives of mainstream news outlets lead to poor and misleading coverage of current events, usually in a manner that favors the interests of wealthy elites, corporations, and the U.S. federal government ([1988] 2008).

Mark Fishman, on the other hand, collects data from over 600 hours of newsworker observation in the *Purissima Record* over two time periods—in 1964-65, and 1973-74 (1980, 26). His findings demonstrate that the work of

reporting for established news organizations inherently holds an ideology (134), one that demands the normalization of institutional bureaucracy "by disseminating to the public institutional rationales as facts of the world" (138). The first portion of my framework addresses how political podcasts can challenge these structural barriers to adequately informing the public about its government.

The framework also addresses how political podcasters can maximize listener engagement, namely through the embrace of comedic values. Lena Heiselberg and Iben Have's findings of listeners' expectation for podcasts hosts will outline specific tactics that political podcast hosts must utilize to engage their audiences (2023). Sara Ödmark's 2021 study on traditional Swedish news media and podcasts plays a major role in this part of the framework. While the study's results show a clear success from the podcasts in providing a greater amount of information that is more relevant to the public interest, it also demonstrates that the podcasts overwhelmingly surge with personal perspectives and emotions (1550), prompting the examination of a central pillar of journalistic expectations: Objectivity.

Lewis Raven Wallace's *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (2019) demonstrates in the written component that this principle of the journalism profession should be abandoned. The objectivity standard was first adopted by the executives and editors of U.S. news outlets to scare reporters from unionizing (Wallace 2019, 62-4; Vile 2009), and the long record of failures from these organizations to achieve (67-80)—*or even attempt to achieve* (139-59)—this impossible standard would suggest that "objectivity"

should not be a concern for political podcasters or journalists of any medium. Rather, the concern for journalists for all media should be the upholding of existing journalistic principles and normalization of new ones. Wallace suggested a few ideas for these new principles, which I embodied in my creative component:

> I propose hanging on to some basic tenets of traditional journalistic ethics: Verification and fact-checking, editorial independence from political parties and corporations, clarity and transparency about financial and political conflicts of interest, and deep, thorough sourcing. I also join a chorus of journalists who have been gradually replacing objectivity with the practice of radical transparency about both our values and methodologies. Finally, I think defining our values as journalists when journalism is under attack means admitting that we are activists and becoming clear what we are activists for (2019, 211).

Simultaneously, I recorded eight weekly video podcasts and one bonus podcast with a variety of guests, ranging from candidates running for public office, experts specializing in political topics or those relevant to my thesis, and students engaging in prominent political activities or academic work relevant to my thesis. These interviews were recorded over a Zoom video call, except for one, then lightly edited and uploaded to my Substack page, *The Kennel* (Schmidt 2021), typically by the following Friday under a section on the page titled "The Kennel: The Honorable Series." The choice to upload through Substack primarily stems from its convenience: Once the video is published, Substack automatically posts an audio-only version onto Spotify and YouTube. Its platform is also highly flexible, as it can be used for video, audio, and even simple blog posts. Transcripts of these podcasts are included in the appendix. That said, Substack is still a relatively new platform that could shut down any day, so both the video and

audio-only versions of the podcast will be submitted on a USB drive. Websites can shut down any given day, while an Honors Thesis must be permanent.

I used all of my own hardware for production: An ASUS G14 laptop equipped with an AMD Ryzen 7 5800HS CPU, Nvidia Geforce RTX 3060 Mobile GPU, 16 GB RAM, and a 2 TB SSD—meaning it has plenty of computing power for recording and editing video podcasts; A Shure SM7B microphone—the standard microphone used in just about every other podcast, including "The Joe Rogan Experience" (2009); a Focusrite Scarlett Third Generation 2i2 USB Audio Interface for connecting the microphone to my laptop; A Logitech C920 1080p webcam for decent video recording of myself; and a basic onn. 1440p webcam for streaming video and audio to the guests over the Zoom call. The one in-person interview also utilized a RodeMic borrowed from the MTSU School of Journalism and Strategic Media. In terms of software, I used the Open Broadcast Software for capturing all visual footage and the guest's audio during the interview; Audacity for recording my voice during the interview and mixing the audio in post-production; and Shotcut for video editing. Post-recording reflections assess to what degree the interview adhered to my framework and its general quality.

## 2. Combatting the Poisonous Structure of Mainstream News Media in Political Podcast Production

The overwhelming failures of U.S. mainstream news media are not a series of coincidental mishaps that an informed citizenry should simply accept as

an occasional harm with little to no negative effects—these failures are the results of a systemic plague within U.S. mainstream news that must be reformed through federal policy. Such effective action, however, has yet to be taken. Until legislators take these appropriate steps, the efficacy of the general public's utilization of the podcast medium should be explored, considering its growing popularity and its potential to better engage audiences than traditional news media.

Here, I'll examine the factors that political podcasters should consider as they pioneer into the hazy future of delivering news and commentary through a budding medium, while emphasizing that the burden of cultivating a healthier news media ecosystem lies on the shoulders of federal legislators, rather than a randomized coalition of political podcasters.

### 2.1 The Need for a Revitalized U.S. Public News Media

Before arguing how independently produced political podcasts can better engage audiences, and thus, better encourage democratic participation, I must note the policy failures that have led to the decline of our news media ecosystem. Failing to do so would place the burden of fixing our deteriorating news media industry on the shoulders of loudmouthed podcasters like me. Such a failure would be similar to arguing that people should recycle to fight climate change without addressing the larger agency that fossil fuel companies and the federal government hold in that fight as well. Though examining these policy failures will not clearly illuminate the ways in which podcasting should be implemented in a

reformed U.S. public news media system, it will identify areas for future research on the role podcasting should play in a revitalized public media system.

### 2.1.1 The History of U.S. Public News Media

In the mid-20th century, the federal government wrestled with itself, news outlet executives, and scholars to determine its role in ensuring a free press that can effectively aid a thriving democracy. As Dr. Victor Pickard documents in *Democracy without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society* (2020), when rapid technological developments resulted in the ability to disseminate information faster than ever, the federal government understood that, to some extent at least, it needed to regulate news media outlets that were already consolidating their financial and social power (27). One example of this new understanding appeared in the Department of Justice's 1943 lawsuit against the Associated Press, "accusing it of hindering trade by refusing wire services to the liberal *Chicago Sun* while maintaining an exclusive market contract with the conservative *Chicago Tribune*" (28). The AP lost both the initial trial and its appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1945 (28). As Justice Hugo Black wrote in the majority's opinion, "Freedom of the press from governmental interference under the First Amendment does not sanction repression of that freedom by private interests" (29).

Yet, this notion was not publicly shared by certain news media academics at the time. In the mid-1940s, Time, Inc. Co-Founder Henry Luce organized the Hutchins Commission, a group of news media scholars who coalesced to discuss two essential questions: "What is the role of media in a democratic society, and

how should that role be ensured" (32)? While previously hidden documents revealed that the Commission considered a variety of regulatory and funding roles for government at all levels of U.S. society in enshrining access to news as a public good (32–3), "out of fear of sounding like socialists…the Hutchins Commission gradually fell back on calls for self-regulation, while leaving the door open for such government interventions as antitrust proceedings" (33). This conclusion would inspire some of the central arguments in the seminal *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956), which "became required reading in many US journalism schools for generations of students, shaping their thinking about the roles and responsibilities of the press" (Pickard 2020, 33). The book examines four societal models of a press: The authoritarian, libertarian, soviet communist, and social responsibility theories of a nation's news dissemination structure. With three extremely labeled concepts juxtaposed to a modestly named theory, *Four Theories of the Press* naturally promotes the social responsibility theory "as the gold standard for ethical journalism. In many ways, however, 'social responsibility' was merely a rebranding of the libertarian model" (33). Thus, a "lightly regulated commercial" (34) press model has dominated the mainstream U.S. print media industry for over half a century.

Largely, U.S. radio and television networks exist in this fashion too, though there was a fierce bureaucratic fight for a different system. Pickard recounts how Charles Siepmann, who rose to prominence through his boundary-pushing tenure as the BBC's programming director in the 1930s and moved across the Atlantic to advocate for a social democratic vision of U.S. radio,

sparked a political firestorm with commercial broadcasters when he wrote a "Blue Book" report for the Federal Communications Commission in the 1940s, in which he "called for devoting specific amounts of time to local, experimental, and advertising-free programming" (142). Of course, a recommendation to experiment with new programs that might lack profitability—especially without advertisements—did not sit well with executives of commercial radio stations, and thus elicited derisions of the "Blue Book" report as the "pink book" (142) and conspiracy theories "accusing Siepmann and his allies at the FCC of being secret socialists who were trying to 'BBC-ize' US radio" (142).

Siepmann fared relatively well in his advocacy for a social democratic ideal during the growth of the Second Red Scare, compared to another FCC ally dedicated to the same ambitions for U.S. radio. Clifton Durr, a left-leaning FCC commissioner, led a massive effort throughout the 1940s to establish a public radio system, comprised of three main tactics: reserving a twenty-channel FM radio band for educational content, articulating periods of broadcast time exclusively designated for noncommercial content, and forming close relationships with activists and educators—especially Midwest university professors—who would experiment with FM radio on their campuses (143–4). Unfortunately, Durr's campaign came to a halt in 1948 when the Second Red Scare wreaked havoc in Washington D.C. Recognizing the absurdity of President Truman's loyalty oath program, Durr left the FCC (144). His successor, Frieda Hennock, "the first woman to serve as a FCC commissioner" (145), shared a similarly strong belief in the importance of noncommercial and educational

programming, and demonstrated that belief through her "reserving [of] 242 channels for educational television" (144) when the popularity of television exploded in the early 1950s.

The brightest spark of hope for a public broadcasting system, however, appeared in the mid-1960s when the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television formed in 1965, and two years later, "published the report *Public Television: A Program for Action*" (146). The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 put many of the report's social democratic ideals into practice, though "one key detail was different: the funding model" (147). Rather than adopting the Carnegie Commission's recommendation of a 5% excise tax on television manufacturers, the PBA instead left public broadcasting funding up to congressional appropriations, "rendering it vulnerable to constant budget fights and political attacks" (147). President Richard Nixon took advantage of that vulnerability. "In 1972," Lewis Raven Wallace writes in *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (2019), "he vetoed CPB [Corporation for Public Broadcasting] funding entirely and set up a new funding structure that would permanently limit how much CPB could bring in directly from the federal government" (89). Thus, half a decade later, per capita spending on public media in the U.S. rests at $1.40 per person, while "Japan, Britain, and Northern European countries spend anywhere from $50 to well over $100 per capita on public media" (Pickard 2020, 137).

### 2.1.2 The Harmful Effects of U.S. News Outlets' Reliance on the Free Market and the Proposed Solutions

As the wealthiest nation in the world (WBG 1960–2023) fails to adequately fund its public news services, it continues to allow privately-owned news media companies to rapidly merge, which Margot Susca, citing Grame K. Deans, Fritz Kroeger, and Stefan Zeisel's *Winning the Merger Endgame* (2003), characterizes as less of "a blending of two companies" (2024, 66) and more like one company's obliteration of another. Susca notes that "today four top [print media] chains—Gannett, Digital Media First, Lee Enterprises, and Tribune—control as much circulation as two dozen companies did twenty years ago" (2024, 70). Audiovisual news media outlets mirror this pattern as well, thanks to the FCC's history of preferring "to advance corporate rather than public interests" (Pickard 2020, 118), as well as Congress' disastrous 1996 Telecommunications Act, which "replaced structural regulations with market incentives, deregulated cable rates, and removed key broadcast ownership limits, leading to massive consolidation and increased ownership concentration, particularly in broadcast media" (118).

This laissez-faire approach to regulating news media companies has ushered in a cascade of harmful effects to the general public: An implicit invitation for private equity firms and hedge funds to leech off of news outlets' profits, making their survival in a cutthroat market increasingly difficult (Susca 2024, 45–64); "less local, investigative, and international news; less fact-based, critical reporting; and more homogenous formats, trivial content, and slanted

coverage" (Pickard 2020, 118); potentially "a substantial *supply-side* role in the trends toward nationalization and polarization of politics news, with negative implications for accountability of local elected officials and mass polarizations" (119); and more. The current structure of the traditional U.S. news media industry is unsustainable and desperately requires legislative reform.

Susca holds a relatively reserved set of solutions compared to Pickard. Her most radical idea argues that the federal government should subsidize existing private news outlets, referencing a failed 2021 Congressional bill called the Local Journalism Sustainability Act as an adequate starting point. "By revising the IRS code, the act would have offered tax credits to subscribers, advertisers, and owners, including nonprofit newsrooms and current chains" (2024, 133–4). She proposes a rather confusing amendment. The act defined an eligible newspaper employer as one that can "show that 'substantially all of the gross receipts of such employer for such calendar quarter are derived from the trade or business of publishing print or digital publications'" (134). Susca wants a qualifier added that would "treat the hedge funds as the employer rather than the newspaper company" (134). While she is correct in reasoning that such an amendment would explicitly disqualify hedge funds from receiving the subsidies, the definition as it existed already did that effectively, as hedge funds are invested in a multitude of business ventures, which she acknowledges herself (134), and therefore would already be disqualified since "all of the gross receipts of such employer" (134) would not demonstrate an exclusive involvement in print news publication. Further, she proposes designating such investment groups "as the employer *rather*

*than the newspaper company*" (134; italics added). If her amendment would not consider a newspaper company the employer, then it also would not be eligible for the tax credits. Despite the confusing logic behind her suggestion, she does articulate an important provision for future proposals to preserve: "Any legislative solution that involves private investment owners or chains beholden to institutional investors should require more robust disclosures and oversight of how the money is earmarked as well as harsher policies for violations" (134).

Susca also argues that heavier enforcement of the Clayton Act's eighth section would weaken the oligopolistic power of private investment funds. The act was passed into law in 1914, intended to build upon the first set of federal antitrust regulations established by the Sherman Act. One of the Clayton Act's provisions aimed to limit corporations' ability to collude with each other to maximize the power they could exert in a given market. "Section 8 of the Clayton Act prohibits interlocking directorates, which exist when a person on the board of directors or the officer of one company holds the same position for a competitor" (135). Susca turns to the current makeup of print news outlets' and newspaper conglomerates' board of directors, citing a 2021 *Mass Communication and Society* study that "outlined connections between boards—interlocks—at more than a dozen newspaper companies and parent companies, including Alden Global Capital, Digital First, Gannett, and Lee Enterprises" (136). The prohibitions of the Clayton Act bear an uncanny similarity to what is happening in the board rooms of media conglomerates today. Susca posits that this eerie likeliness to the very thing that Congress outlawed over a century ago should be

met with "a definitional expansion [in the Clayton Act] to include financing and industry connections as an expanded view of interlocking directorates in the market" (137).

She concludes *Hedged* with an overview of different types of "news organizations operating in various forms with a public interest mission" (139), asserting that "the power lies" (139) in family-owned newspapers (139–140), nonprofit news (141–3), and "independent for-profit news" (143). The inclusion of for-profit organizations ignores the book's depiction of how the for-profit incentive inherently degraded U.S. news outlets. Pickard emphasizes how "journalism's public service mission and its profit motive have always been in tension" (2020, 174), yet Susca holds that this conflict, overall, can exist within such outlets as they purportedly challenge the status quo.

Pickard, on the other hand, embraces many of the explicit and implicit solutions advanced by Susca, but he brandishes a sharper suspicion against the for-profit motive's role in interfering with news outlets' claim to serving the public. In his conclusion to *Democracy without Journalism?*, Pickard proposes "five general approaches" (168) to "taming and eroding capitalistic relationships to free our media system from commercial logics" (168):

- Establishing "public options" (i.e., noncommercial/nonprofit, supported by public subsidies), such as well-funded public media institutions and municipal broadband networks.
- Breaking up/preventing media monopolies and oligopolies to encourage diversity and to curtail profit-maximizing behavior.
- Regulating news outlets via public interest protections and public service obligations such as ascertainment of society's information needs.
- Enabling worker control by unionizing newsrooms, facilitating employee-owned institutions and cooperatives, and maintaining professional codes that shield journalism from business operations.

- Fostering community ownership, oversight, and governance of newsrooms, and mandating accountability to diverse constituencies (168–9).

Given the heavy presence of public radio among the 30 most popular podcasts (Clark and McLean 2020, 219), such a series of policy-and-workplace-based actions could expand the production and consumption of independently produced political podcasts, but future academic research has yet to demonstrate the extent of that expansion. Further, while public radio outlets tend to produce popular podcasts, policymakers will need to consider whether—and if so, how—the decentralized nature of the podcast medium should be supported through a reinvigorated public news media system. The justification of the following guidelines will underscore the importance of this decentralized quality.

## 2.2 Synthesizing, Updating, and Contextualizing *Manufacturing the News* (1980) and *Manufacturing Consent* ([1988] 2008) in the Digital Age for Political Podcasters

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008).

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* ([1988] 2008), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe how the hyper-capitalist structures within mainstream news outlets define the boundaries of acceptable discourse amongst the public, articulating and justifying a

"Propaganda Model" (61) that addresses the role of "inequality of wealth and power" (61) in establishing these boundaries of political thought and analysis. Its initial publication in the much different pre-internet-revolution of 1988 has, however, left some of its arguments and proposed solutions outdated (Kunelius and Waisbord 2023). That is especially the case with Mark Fishman's *Manufacturing the News* (1980), which arrives at many conclusions like those of Herman and Chomsky, but approaches its justification from an interpersonal presence in a California newsroom, rather than the broader content-focused analysis of *Manufacturing Consent* ([1988] 2008).

Nonetheless, as Risto Kunelius and Silvio Waisboro posit in "The Legacy of the Sociology of News Paradigm: Continuities, Changes, and Ironies" (2023), the core arguments of these pioneering news media analysts should not be tossed aside in the digital era—"rather, they need to be a gravitational center in journalism studies" (12). Thus, I'll draw from these works to establish the considerations that independent political podcasters will need to account for as they move into an increasingly competitive market for attention online.

### 2.2.1 *Manufacturing the News* (1980): Bureaucracy as the Ultimate Source of Truth

*Natural is not in it*
*Your relations are of power*
*We all have good intentions*
*But all with strings attached*
—Gang of Four, "Natural's Not in It"

Fishman embarks on a quest in 1973 and 1974 to understand "how what we read in newspapers today is constructed, how it gets there" (1980, 3), which results in his revelation of a system that encourages "journalists [to] treat bureaucratic accounts (such as case histories) as plain fact" (138), and "ends up legitimating institutions of social control by disseminating to the public institutional rationales as facts of the world" (138).

The sociological lens applied to U.S. news media highlights the minute and interpersonal routes in which such a system functions, though these findings all appear in the distant context of the 1970s—when reporters relied on the archaic "typewriter" (30), and when a print journalist would need to tightly schedule a daily "round" (38) of all the important locations around their community in which the most new information about their beat could be found, where they could also expect to find a "'press room,' reserved for [their] use" (38), featuring "a desk, telephone, and typewriter" (38).

The modern environment for news production operates much differently: Personal computing devices and various pieces of software allow for more efficient content creation, and the "official agencies of social control" (44), which once required visiting in-person to obtain source material for articles, can usually

be accessed digitally, whether through an online database of records or through emails and phone calls to the respective agencies. Such a contextual difference makes Fishman's book seem antiquated, but its overall findings remind journalists, including political podcasters, about the ways in which the relationship between the Fourth Estate and the government can be structured to render the press' adversarial nature less potent.

#### 2.2.1.1 The Setup

Fishman begins his investigation by working his way into a California newspaper—given the pseudonym "the Purissima *Record*"[6] (18)—with "a daily circulation of 45,000" (18) papers, whose extensive coverage of different beats around the "city of Purissima (population 75,000) and its metropolitan environs (population 150,000)" (18) earned its colloquial name as "Purissima's 'newspaper of record'" (19). He first takes a job in 1973 as the city hall and county government reporter with the Purissima *Voice*, "the alternative weekly newspaper" (20) for the area, in which he familiarizes himself with the journalists working the same beat at the *Record* and collects observations for his research from the perspective of a beginning reporter (20). After struggling for seven months to ascertain the sensitive information required for understanding the nuanced and specific reasons behind reporters' choices in their writing, due to the

[6] Fishman only refers to the pseudonymous nature of the newspaper's title in an endnote: "To protect anonymity, all individuals *and organizations* in the 'Purissima community' have been given pseudonyms" (18:158n10; italics added). He does not, however, mention the pseudonymous nature of the town itself, a decision which could swish over the heads of readers unfamiliar with the history or geography of California. Purissima is a real place in California—but it is a ghost town that "lasted all of 70 years" (Myrow 2022), "never was officially incorporated" (2022), and was left desolate by "the late 1930s, sometime before World War II" (2022).

nature of the professional relationships between journalists and the unspoken agreements that support such connections (21–3), Fishman discloses his intentions to conduct sociological research about the production of news to his colleagues at the *Record*, who agree to participate in Fishman's investigations (24). From February to July of 1974, he observes "a total of nine work days" (26), interviewing "the city hall reporter, the county government reporter, the police court reporter, and the city editor" (26) along the way, and using the notes from a colleague who conducted similar research in 1964 and 1965 at the same paper as a guide throughout this portion of his investigations. "In all, the findings presented in this study are based on data which cover over six hundred hours observing six different reporters on the same news organization over two periods: 1964–1965 and 1973–1974" (26).

#### 2.2.1.2 Trapped in the Beat

Fishman's analysis starts with an examination of the beat, describing four characteristics of the news media industry's organizational paradigm that differentiates itself "from, for example, an area of expertise that an individual reporter brings to the job and uses in writing stories" (28): 1. A beat must hold "a history in the news organization that outlives the organizational histories of the individuals who work the beat" (28). In other words, the subject or topic of a beat must have such strong standing among an outlet's audience that it will continue to maintain importance to its consumers after a reporter ceases to cover it, necessitating the news outlet's assignment of another journalist to that beat. "2.

Superiors assign reporters to their beats" (28). While the reporter's coverage of the beat is a key duty of their job, "the reporter does not own that beat" (28), likening it to "an office in [Max] Weber's sense" (28; Weber 1947, 330–2). 3. Any given beat constitutes "a complex *object of reporting* consisting of a domain of activities occurring outside the newsroom" (Fishman 1980, 28). Such an object can be viewed from two different perspectives: One constitutes "a number of sequences of activities" (29) as "part of the same topic" (29), and one identifies itself based on the physical location of the events' occurrences (29). Finally, "4. The beat is a *social setting* to which the reporter belongs" (30), referring to a rather unique quality of the relationship between the reporter and the environment of their beat. In one sense, as the normalized journalistic objectivity standard would idealize in its conceptualization of a journalist's relationship to the subject of their reporting, journalists "inquire into the beat as a 'subject' inquires into an 'object'" (30). Yet, contrary to the objectivity standard, as the reporter develops a more nuanced understanding of their beat and establishes professional relationships with its central sources, they inherently produce content "from 'within' the beat and hence are part of the activities that make the beat what it is" (30).

The beat paradigm, Fishman argues, facilitates a tidy routine that incentivizes reporters to prioritize relying on bureaucratic informational hubs for article sources, thereby encouraging reporters to detect newsworthy events based on the materials found in these hubs. The need for such an organized and dependable system of finding newsworthy events stems not from a journalist's

pure desire to tell important stories, but from an additional desire to satisfy their boss' demand for content. Beat reporters submitted two to six stories per day during Fishman's observation period (34). "The obligation to produce news every day was so strong that even when both the city editor and the reporter agreed that nothing was happening on the beat, the reporter was still responsible for writing something about the beat" (34).

With such intense pressure to produce stories, beat reporters need to efficiently utilize the sources of information on their beat. The justice beat reporter observed by Fishman "narrowed his coverage to three official agencies of social control: the city police, the county sheriffs, and the superior court" (44).

> The reporter's round simply excluded him from all juvenile facilities and adult penal institutions, the FBI branch office, two municipal police department in the Purissima region, the local chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union, National Lawyer's Guild, and American Bar Association, a community legal collective, and all private security and detective agencies. But more important than this, the justice round steered the reporter away from *all* institutions (or "communities of action") relevant to criminality and law enforcement which were not formally constituted or bureaucratically organized. Specifically, the journalist had no regular contact with the underlife of prisons and jails; the unofficially sanctioned practices of law enforcement, judicial, and penal personnel; the entire spectrum of deviant subcultures (from the world of winos to the stable corporate arrangements for price fixing); and the local markets for stolen goods, illegal drugs, and pornography (44–5).

The county beat reporter's round, on the other hand, places him in a purgatory of endless public meetings for roughly 14 different government agencies, racking up and average 3.75 days spent for every five-day work week in public meetings during the period of observation (50). Interestingly, the reporter has an awareness that most of the proceedings that he must sit through are simply clean and organized reframings of the discussions and actions taken by government officials

behind closed doors (50). “Beat reporters eventually develop enough familiarity with the backstage of meetings to know that the organization and staging of business in terms of agenda items is intended to reconstruct the actual work of agency decision making: to reformulate it along the lines of standard procedure, to clean it up, to summarize it, and to disguise it” (50). Whether forced to sit through painfully dry meetings, or to dig through euphemized police reports, beat journalists within mainstream news outlets are restrained to relying on sources from the powerful institutions that make up their turf.

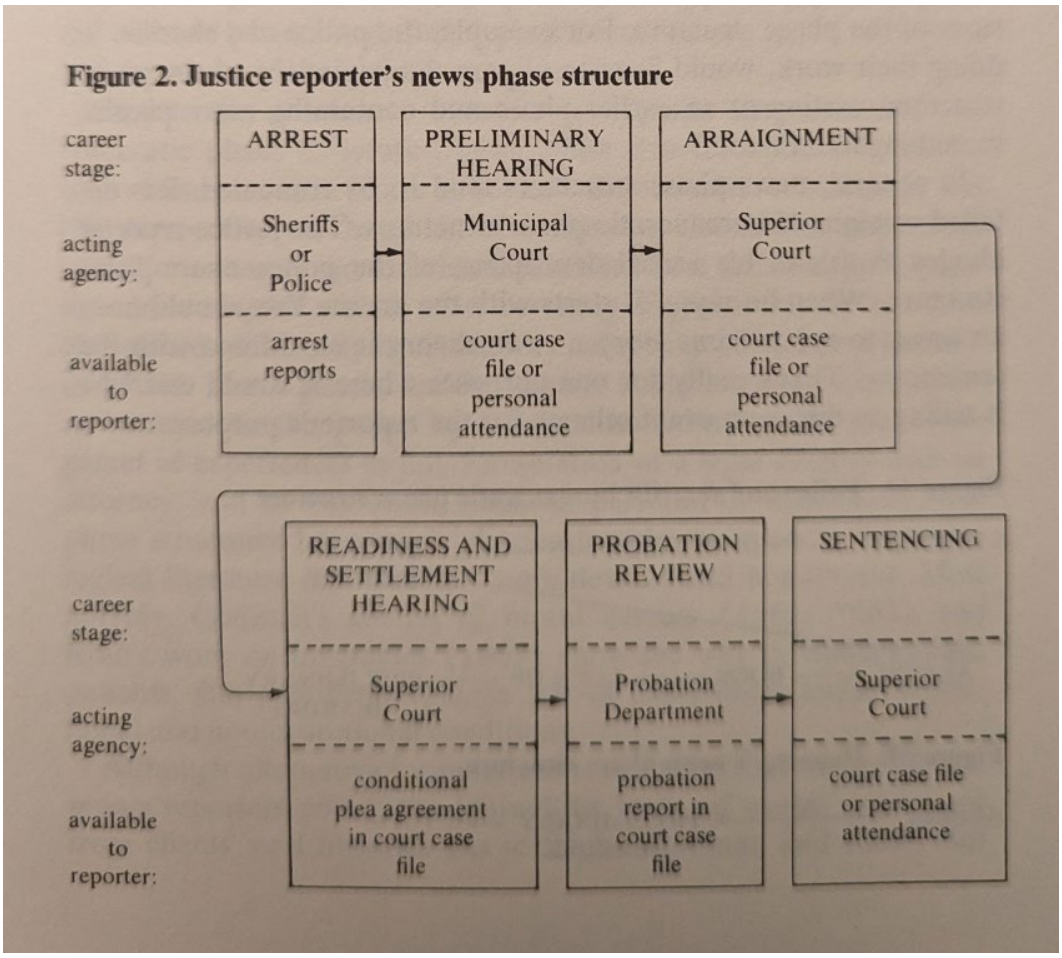
#### 2.2.1.3 Bureaucratic and News Phase Structure: Institutional Control of Event Interpretation

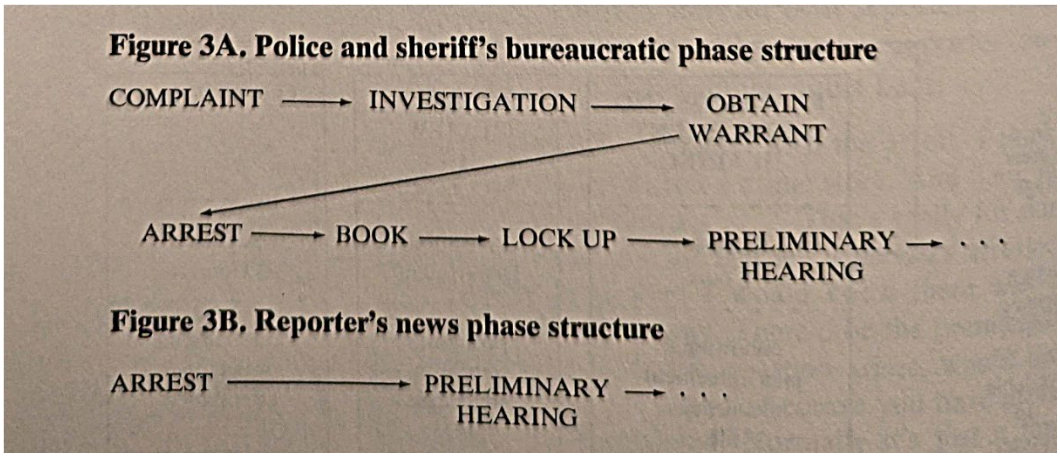
Naturally, being so submerged in the environment of one’s beat, the assigned reporter’s perspective on what events are newsworthy and what details should be included in each story tends to mesh with their beat agencies’ opinions on those decisions.

Fishman introduces his concept of “phase structures” (54) to chart this phenomenon, which he defines as how “complexes of activities are organized into events on the basis of a few specific schemes of interpretation” (54). Essentially, it refers to the infinite ways in which events can be included and organized when retelling them as a story, and such a scheme can be “employed in everyday thought for picturing events in the context of successively developing phases” (55). A general or “common sense phase structure” (56) holds five basic qualities: “1. The specific phases delimiting the structure are somewhat arbitrary” (56); “2.

Each phase in the structure designates an event" (57); "3. Phases occur in sequential order" (57); "4. Phases have typical durations in time" (57); and "5. There is a continuity between phases" (57).

While journalists can rely on such phase structures consciously or subconsciously, Fishman identifies two types that highlight a seemingly benign system of event interpretation that would make George Orwell shudder. "Bureaucratic phase structures describe events as they are formally produced and processed by the bureaucracies the reporter covers. They also represent the reporter's own basic knowledge of typical events on the beat" (58). News phase structures, on the other hand, are "truncated, less detailed versions of bureaucratic phase structures" (60). Unlike common phase structures, the phases of each respective structure "are not arbitrary but are bureaucratically provided and bureaucratically enforced" (61). Drawing upon interviews with and observations of the justice beat reporter, Fishman maps out the phase structure of the justice beat (59, fig. 2), and compares that with how a police officer or sheriff would articulate their experience of a story into a bureaucratic phase structure (60, fig. 3A–3B):




Figures 3A and 3B reveal a noticeable gap. Before the first event of the reporter's phase structure, three events occur on that of the police and sheriff. In between the first and second events of the justice reporter's timeline, the police

and sheriff experience another two. The gap in the reporter's phase structure assumes nothing newsworthy happens during the law enforcement officers' receipt of a complaint, investigation, requesting for an arrest warrant, booking and imprisonment of a suspect. Further, the reporter's news phase structure stems from the bureaucratic phase structure of law enforcement, which "are but one perspective on the chain of events associated with any actual case. For example, an individual taken into the criminal justice system as a suspect would most certainly organize [their] own experiences differently from the way an agency official or a journalist would" (61). The justice beat reporter never interviewed any "suspects, victims, and their families on his round" (62), only relying on the suspect's perspectives presented during their trial (62). The justice beat reporter clings to the legal system's "socially sanctioned schemes of interpretation" (62), narrowing the diversity of voices that they include in their content.

In reviewing the reporting of a court case about a woman, Martha Mungan, standing trial for threatening to shoot random people and police officers, Fishman discovers a glaring omission that demonstrates another minute, yet substantial impact from reporters' reliance on bureaucratic and news phase structures. He notes "that nowhere in the story [on the ruling] was there any mention of the fact that Martha Mungan's plea was negotiated plea" (70), as such a detail is normally deemed unimportant by journalists reporting on cases like Mungan's (71). Yet, by leaving these inner workings of the court system invisible to the *Record*'s audience, the justice beat reporter's choices "implicitly support the status quo by taking for granted these background factors" (71), which

"rendered the procedure of plea bargaining unproblematic by obscuring it" (71) and made "even less visible…the social conditions of Martha Mungan's life (as a ghetto resident) which surrounded the incident which made her into a judicial case in the first place" (71). By adhering strictly to the phase structure articulated by the court's standard procedures, the justice beat reporter affirms the court system in its entirety, and refrains from adopting an adversarial stance that one normally expects from the free press.

Finally, because bureaucratic phase structures ultimately guide journalists in determining what is newsworthy, then they also determine what events are not newsworthy. Fishman refers to the latter type of events as "nonevents" (76), which he defines as "something which cannot be seen under a certain scheme of interpretation but can be seen under a different one" (76). Through two case examples, he demonstrates how nonevents appear in the course of a reporter's work and how they respond to them.

The first case, titled "The Invisible Crank" (78), details the events of a county board's meeting over its budget for the next year, in which a debate broke out among the officials about how many new deputy sheriff positions they should add. When public comment was procedurally invited, one woman gave a rather unique perspective:

> During this debate a young woman stepped up to the podium, introduced herself, and said that she felt any consideration of funding the sheriff's department was shameful. She then recounted an incident involving her and sheriff's deputies in the community of Pacific Point. She had been selling wares from a pushcart in the street when a sheriff's car pulled up to her. Two deputies stepped out and asked what she was doing and if she had a license. She answered that she had no license, but that she didn't know she needed one. At this point in the story the chairman of the board

> of supervisors interrupted, asking the woman to come to her point or to give up the floor. The woman simply continued with her story.
>
> She said the officers told her to get into the patrol car, and when she refused she was handcuffed and pulled in. When she insisted on knowing why she was being accosted, she was subjected to verbal abuse. At the sheriff's station she was bound hand and foot and left in a room for several hours. Once again, the chairman interrupted and asked the woman to leave the podium, but she continued the account. She said that she was finally released with no explanation. On several occasions after this incident she tried to lodge a complaint with the sheriff's department, but it was never accepted. By this point in her presentation the woman was extremely upset. She berated the behavior of the county sheriffs as less than human, as incomprehensible. Again, the chairman broke in, telling the woman that they had heard enough and, if she insisted on remaining at the podium, she would be removed. The woman quietly left (78-9).

And what were the adversarial watchdogs of our virtuous and objective Fourth Estate doing as this woman delivered a harrowing account of police brutality that she experienced, and, I might add, calling for the defunding of the police roughly half a century before such a policy became ingrained in the consciousness of the public?

> At the press table all four reporters acted as if the woman's talk signaled a time out. Reporters put down their pencils and stopped taking notes. One journalist left the room for awhile; others started up conversations about matters other than what was happening in the meeting at that moment. Reporters' attention on the meeting returned as soon as the woman left the podium (79).

Fishman speculates that no Purissima outlet reported on this accusation because her suggestion to defund the sheriff department "was seen as unreasonable" (79). "It was not one among the set of alternatives procedurally prescribed for the board to entertain in budget hearings" (79). Further, she had no institutional claim to legitimacy. "She represented no formally constituted group which fit into the constellation of interests appropriate to the issue" (79). To consider an idea perceived as radical and originating from someone with no perceived legitimacy

would “break the procedural bounds of the budget session in order to take on a wider political perspective from which one could see as problematic the issue of any funding for the sheriff’s department” (80).

“Case 2: The Invisible Controversy” (80) demonstrates how the mundane nature of a break from the usual actions of a city council can easily go over journalists’ heads. During a Purissima city council meeting, the elected officials had to consider a contract recommendation from the Public Works Director for a new diesel street sweeper, which would cost $2,000 more than the current gasoline one (80). Such agenda items “are normally rubber-stamped” (80), yet three council members became suspicious of the director’s motives. Three other council members rushed to the director’s defense, and one stayed out of the argument, resulting in a deadlocked council who ferociously debated for about 20 minutes, then voted to have the director return the following week for further discussion (80). While the debate was ensuing, the four reporters present first “stopped taking notes; then they began showing their disapproval to each other; finally, they were making derisive jokes about the foolishness of the debate. No evidence could be found in their comments that they considered the controversy anything other than a stupid debate over a trivial matter unworthy of the time and energy the council put into it" (81). None of the city’s papers reported on the debate (81). Fishman discloses that even though he was one of the reporters at the meeting who engaged in the snide remarks about the debate, “it occurred to [him] later how this controversy could be seen as an important event in city hall” (81). The debate raised a fundamental question to the process of how the local

government operated: Should the council stick to the status quo of giving department directors the power to decide how much taxpayer money should be spent on their activities and how that money should be allocated, or should the council choose to emphasize their higher power bestowed upon them by the people of Purissima and consider alternative options for a new street sweeper (81-2)? Yet, the reporters saw no value in mentioning this debate through their writing. Fishman reasons that "for the reporter, only bureaucrats are in a position to know, say, and do newsworthy things about administrative matters, and only council members are in a position to know, say, and do newsworthy things about policy matters" (83). Because the council was deliberating specifically about whether that should be the case, and because "newsworkers do not readily part with their familiar methods of event detection—methods which make coverage of the beat territory possible in the first place" (82)—the debate went unreported entirely. "If from a bureaucratic point of view it [an event] is not a legitimate occurrence within the setting, then from a journalistic point of view it cannot be a genuine news event" (84).

#### 2.2.1.4 Exclusive Institutional Power to Justify Investigation

Fishman demonstrates how different agencies on a given beat ultimately set the standards that dictate when a journalist should investigate officials' claims more deeply. This power stems from the news industry's inherent valuation of "bureaucratic 'facts'" (87) as "the hard data of newswork" (87), which Fishman unearths from his consistent observations of journalists only accepting one type of

fact at face value: when they "were bureaucratically organized and produced" (86). The reporters, therefore, deeply trust and rely on the information provided to them by the agencies that they're supposed to share an adversarial relationship with. At the same time, facts and claims sourced from entities outside of these institutions are more likely to require verification, including the reporter's own perspectives and analyses, which tends to lead to rather hard-hitting pieces of journalism being neutered or outright shelved (87-92). Fishman uses this phenomenon to establish a "jornalist's general criterion of facticity" (92): "*Something is so because somebody says it*" (92), and that person must be "in a position to know what they say" (92) or "entitled to know what they say" (93). Such "competent knowers for journalists are bureaucrats and agency officials" (93).

Reporters validate this ideology because they inherently recognize that society at-large esteems such officials as *the* "knowers" (95) and their documents as sacred scripture (98-9), more or less. This perception of officials as the "socially authorized and socially sanctioned knowers" (95) can be described as the combination of three beliefs held by journalists: 1. "that bureaucrats are not only in a position to know certain things but that these officials ought to know what they are in a position to know…and even if officials do not know it, they should know it" (95), 2. "that when officials show that they do not know what they should know, then journalists ought to hold officials responsible to know it" (95), and 3. when such bureaucrats know what they are expected to know, their claims should be accepted as is, "and not merely recognized as offering just

another version of events" (96). All considered, the journalist's position is structured to encourage them to "participate in upholding a normative order of authorized knowers in the society" (96).

> Significantly, the newsworker's participation in this normative order is not simply a matter of belief; it is also a position of convenience. To do their work journalists need competent knowers. The journalist holds officials responsible for knowing what it is their job to know *because* of the newsworker's own need for news. For this reason, reporters notice official incompetence when bureaucrats cannot give them the information they need. Thus, the reporter's perception of bureaucratic incompetence stems not from officials' inability to get their job done but from their inability to make news for the reporter (96).

Reporters also apply this perception to the records produced by such institutions (98-9). While this practice facilitates the same risk of failing to apply adequate pressure to agency officials, it also allows for "the actual interactions which produced the document" (98) to be "obscured or lost" (98).

Also like a religious text, moments of confusion and doubt can arise amidst journalists' interactions with socially sanctioned sources. This doubt arises when they encounter minute mistakes and discrepancies, or when "other (competent) perspectives on some matter may exist" (107). Reporters will then pursue deeper investigation to quell these discrepancies.

#### 2.2.1.5 Investigation Methods: Filling in Information and Finding Facts by Triangulation

When confronted with discrepancies in the claims of agencies' officials, journalists will either fill in missing information based on their understanding of

bureaucratic phase structures (110-6), or they will use those discrepancies as the starting point for a follow-up story, investigated using a method that Fishman dubs the "fact-by-triangulation" (116) method.

The fact-by-triangulation method, used in other investigative fields (120n), has "two prerequisites" (130): All sources used must stem from "competent perspectives" (130) and the interests represented by these sources must be "structurally induced" (130), rather than motivated by simple "personal bias" (130). With these requirements met, the journalist will employ the fact-by-triangulation method of investigation by repeatedly asking two questions: "1. Who would know X? (Or, who would be in a physical location or social structural position to know X?), and 2. What aspects of X would they know, given their positional or interested perspective" (130)? While the first question is "used in practically all investigative work" (121), the second question aims to guide the journalist in synthesizing multiple perspectives, which in some cases, can be easier said than done.

The different perspectives do not need to necessarily agree in every aspect (121), but they do need to share common "schemes of time, distance, and direction" (122), which can be difficult to define sometimes. Fishman exemplifies this with a 1973 *Washington Post* article that features Cambodian villagers struggling to give specific times and distances regarding an air strike (122). While answering these two questions, reporters also must consider how "the social structural positions of sources differ" (123). This quality of a source's perspective can greatly affect their commentary. One reporter describes this phenomenon by

explaining how he would gather information on a school playground fight: He would talk to the kids involved, "who would probably over-blow it" (123); the school principal, who "would probably down-play it" (124); and the police, "whose view he would trust, but it would not be in detail enough" (124).

> The whole matter here is conceived structurally, not only in terms of what perspectives to seek out, but also in terms of what kinds of distortions in which kinds of accounts are expectable given the structurally induced interests and sentiments of each party (124).

Altogether, the two questions get reporters to accomplish four tasks during their investigation:

> (1) Assemble a constellation of positional or interested perspectives around the event; (2) poll (interview or read the documents of) each source for their account; (3) select aspects of each account which can be compared; and (4) merge or balance the selected aspects of the accounts into a single news story (130).

Throughout the process, because the context of each investigation can vary, reporters need to ensure they know the social structure of the environment that they will write about (131); "culturally standard frameworks of time, direction, and distance" (131) to ensure a consistent and coherent depiction of events, as well as a standard topical or perspectival framework for each interview (132); and get their sources to discuss the subject of the investigation through their "particular structurally induced interest" (132), meaning, for instance, to obtain information from a mayor about their new public transportation program, rather than their perspective as a parent or a Buddhist.

### 2.2.1.6. Mainstream News Media: Legitimizer of Institutional Perspectives

Based on his observations, Fishman dictates nine ways in which the structure of reporters' work environments "makes news ideological" (134):

> 1. Their movements through a beat territory
> 2. Their exposure to news sources.
> 3. The meaning and relevance of what they are exposed to (i.e., their sense of something as an event and their sense of its importance).
> 4. What occurrences are not worth seeing (i.e., nonevents),
> 5. The permissible times at which events may be reported (i.e., news pegs).
> 6. What constitutes a factual account and, thus, what constitutes the facts of the case.
> 7. What constitutes a suspicious account and, thus, what constitutes a matter to be investigated.
> 8. What constitutes errors and oversights and, then, what constitutes their correction in news stories.
> 9. What constitutes a controversial matter and, then, what constitutes the sides and terms of the controversy (134).

Because "journalists treat bureaucratic accounts (such as case histories) as plain fact" (138), they overall inherently normalize the worldview of the bureaucratic agencies they cover, rather than challenge them. "Thus, not only does routine news provide ideological accounts of real people and real happenings, it ends up legitimating institutions of social control by disseminating to the public institutional rationales as facts of the world" (138). Fishman adds a careful distinction to this conclusion, which distinguishes his main argument from those of tinfoil-hat-wearing conspiracy theorists:

> Ideological hegemony in the news media can occur without the direct intervention of publishers or editors, without the existence of informal news policies into which reporters are socialized, and without secret programs in news organizations to recruit reporters sharing a particular point of view. The ideological character of news follows from journalists' routine reliance on raw materials which are already ideological (140).

Fishman's analysis ascribes no ill intentions to news workers, but rather shows how the standard operating procedure of newsrooms tends to produce a worldview that upholds the status quo.

He closes his book with a bit of "speculation on the broad social forces which underlie the marriage of newsworkers to bureaucrat" (140), identifying "three dynamics in the American news production system: the bureaucratic logic, the normative logic, and the economic logic of news reporting" (140-1). The bureaucratic logic of news refers to news outlets' need for "reliable, predictable, scheduled quantities of raw materials because [they are] set up to process these in reliable, predictable, scheduled way in order to turn out a standard product (the newspaper) at the same time every day" (143). The normative logic dictates that because reporters must demonstrate their competency to anyone who asks, they prioritize sourcing their articles from the official agencies on their beats (145). This reliance on official bureaucracies for information can especially protect journalists from accusations of bias or even libel (145). The economic logic describes the various restraints that news outlets self-impose to function "in the capitalist economy of news enterprises" (146): "Deadlines, story quotas, and the need for conveniently locatable, expectable, and dependable quantities of raw news" (146). These restraints encourage an unending expansion of story quotas (147-9) and maintaining nothing more than the minimum number of reporters needed to fill the news space (150), which in print publications, is determined after advertisements have been laid out (147). Facing such difficulties, "the invisible bureaucratic subsidy" (150)—manifested through convenient press

releases, open access to officials, and an assortment of documents distilling and simplifying information for reporters—becomes not only a helpful tool for satisfying outlets' cravings for content, but existentially necessary (150-2).

That subsidy is provided with strings attached, however.

> As every politician and terrorist knows, news has an instrumental value. To become a routine source for news is to have tremendous power in defining public knowledge of a world outside the individual's immediate experience. Thus, in exchange for free services, media organizations bestow on routine news sources equally valuable services: publicity and legitimation (152).

Beat agencies ensure that reporters have all they need—sometimes, only what they need (153-4)—to put out favorable coverage, which Fishman calls "routine news promotion" (153), though he admits that researching the extent of this practice is near impossible for him (154). "Whether or not anyone consciously promotes it," Fishman writes, "routine news advances a definite [political] interest: it legitimates the existing political order by disseminating bureaucratic idealizations of the world and by filtering out troublesome perceptions of events" (154).

As I'll demonstrate later, this filtering continues today, and to an extent, the podcast can limit such filtering.

### 2.2.2 *Manufacturing Consent* ([1988] 2008): Mainstream News Media as a System of Propaganda

While Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky approach their examination of mainstream U.S. news media from an outside perspective, as academics who never worked as journalists, their comprehensive analysis of reporting from print

and TV outlets on both major and lesser-known international events provide a compelling argument about how the structure and incentives of the traditional news industry in 1988 ultimately leads to it acting as the United States' hypnotist of the masses rather than its adversarial watchdog. To prove such a claim, Herman and Chomsky establish a "Propaganda Model" (62) that articulates five "filters" (62) of information:

> (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism (62).

The writers procure five case studies that apply the model to U.S. news outlets' reporting on different international events: a comparison of coverage on Polish Catholic priest Jerzy Popieluszko's assassination and reporting on the state-sponsored murders of over 100 Catholics in Latin America (97-149); an examination of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua election coverage from U.S. outlets (150-207); a dissection of U.S. news outlets' reporting on the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981 (208-33); an in-depth look at how coverage of the Vietnam War evolved (234-324); and an equally thorough examination of U.S. news coverage on the bombing campaigns in Laos and Cambodia, as well as news organizations' inconsistent treatment of the ruthless Khmer Rouge/Democratic Kampuchea regime—a confusing narrative that largely reflected the perspective of the United States federal government (325-71).

While the model correctly identifies the systemic barriers that hamper the ability of mainstream U.S. news outlets to produce content that challenge the ruling class, its 1988 publication requires some recontextualization in the 21st century. The concentrated ownership of mass media corporations, unfortunately, has only grown worse since 1988, as the writers note in their 2002 foreword (14-5). Private investment funds' meddling in corporate media outlets fueled this ballooning crisis (Susca 2024). While the relationship between advertisers and news outlets has evolved since 1988, the decline of print advertising revenue (PRC 2023) and the dominance of Big Tech in the digital advertising business—a phenomenon that is "less about technological innovation and more about corporate consolidation" (Buckman, 4:03)—necessitates a re-examination of advertiser influence on 21st century news media outlets. The remaining filters require little modification, as they continue to reinforce news media outlets' subservience to the status quo. An overview of coverage on the plausible genocide in Gaza (South Africa v. Israel, General List 192 (I.C.J. 2024))[7] will demonstrate the continuing relevance of the third, fourth, and fifth filters.

#### 2.2.2.1 The First Filter in the 21st Century: Increased Consolidation and Parasitic Hedge Funds

Herman and Chomsky produce a table listing the "financial data for the twenty-four media giants (or their controlling parent companies) that make up the top tier of media companies in the United States" ([1988] 2008, 65), noting a

[7] https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240524-ord-01-00-en.pdf

characterization of this phenomenon from Ben Bagdikian: “These ‘constitute a new Private Ministry of Information and Culture’ that can set the national agenda” (64).

That power has only increased since 1988. In 2004, Bagdikian sounded the alarm on media outlet consolidation for his seventh time with *The New Media Monopoly*, which examines the detrimental effects of having only five companies control most of our media: Time Warner (now Warner Bros. Discovery), The Walt Disney Company, News Corporation, Viacom (now Paramount Global), and Bertelsmann (3). Today, Pickard argues, that list includes Comcast, AT&T, CBS, Viacom, and Disney (2020, 106), though that list is now down to four since CBS and Viacom merged to form ViacomCBS (Szalai, Bond, and Vlessing 2019), later renamed to Paramount (Littleton 2022).

In that time too, the influence of private investment funds has further constrained print news outlets’ ability to function. While “venture capital and mutual funds had been involved in publicly traded newspaper companies dating back to the 1970s” (Susca 2024, 43), the onset of what Susca calls “the private investment era” (6) occurred in 2003 when the Blackstone Group and Providence Equity Partners snagged a 40 percent stake in Freedom Communications, Inc., which was the twelfth largest media company at the time (25). Since then, a “private investment plutocracy” (49) has dug its grubby fingers into print media companies, neutering the reporting capabilities of outlets owned by Gannett (49-53), Tribune (53-5), and McClatchy (55-9). “For these funds, newspapers have been a very good business” (53), but these same funds do not share any

appreciation to their outlets, as they repeatedly have to lay off employees (53), close entire newsrooms (54), or forgo basic investigative reporting tools like Microsoft Office Excel (57-8).

On top of that, the Big Tech/social media oligopoly formed by Meta, Alphabet, Twitter[8], TikTok, and other corporations represent another group of wealthy elites that news outlets must appease. With roughly half of the U.S. population "at least sometimes" (PRC 2024b) relying on social media platforms for news, and with companies like Alphabet having a near-universal grip on search engine use, news outlets must ensure their content gets recommended to users. However, these recommendation algorithms are either "intransparent… corporate secrets" (Fuchs 2018, 73) or made publicly available in useless manners (Guerkink 2023). Further, this control over algorithms gives companies like Meta the power to determine what content is political and limit it by default, and to give little notice to users when such an optional filter is implemented (De Guzman 2024; Fowler 2024).

When *Manufacturing Consent* ([1988] 2008) first appeared on bookshelves, Herman and Chomsky identified the growing consolidation of news media outlets as a filter of information. Now, as such consolidation increased in the past three decades, news media conglomerates share that power with private investment funds and Big Tech corporations.

[8] I will start calling Twitter by its official "X" name when Elon Musk stops deadnaming his transgender daughter (Klee 2024).

#### 2.2.2.2 21st Century Advertiser Power: Continued Influence on News Outlet and Expansion to Social Media Companies

While print outlets' ad revenue has plummeted since the release of *Manufacturing Consent* (PRC 2023), advertisers still hold sway over the print and TV news content that gets distributed, and now have an indirect—sometimes direct—say in the content that gets promoted or earns ad revenue.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) has extensively documented the influence exerted by advertisers on news outlets in the 21st century. The media watchdog most recently highlighted a complaint submitted to the FDA by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (Hollar 2023), alleging that a CBS *60 Minutes* segment on a Novo Nordisk weight-loss drug "violates the FDA's 'fair balance' requirement for ads" (PCRM 2023). More insidiously, "the only medical experts interviewed by CBS were doctors who had received thousands of dollars in consulting fees and honoraria from Novo Nordisk—a company that just happened to be a sponsor of the broadcast" (Hollar 2023). While reporter Leslie Stahl noted that the "doctors…have been advising companies developing drugs for obesity, including the Danish company Novo Nordisk, an advertiser on this broadcast" (2023), she never directly said that the doctors were paid by the company for those services (2023). Novo Nordisk argued that because it "did not control any of the content or have any role in identifying or selecting the doctors and patients featured" (2023), the FDA rule does not apply. Hollar's refutation of their defense highlights the silent way that advertisers make their voice heard:

> Of course Novo Nordisk didn't control the content of the 60 Minutes report—nor did it have to. Advertisers footing a corporate news outlet's bills generally don't have to tell them how to report, because those outlets understand the perils of biting the hand that feeds them (2023).

The influence of advertisers on news outlets does not necessarily require an explicit conversation between the outlet and advertiser.

Other times, the implications of that relationship do need to be addressed. In their first collective bargaining agreement with Vox Media, The Writers Guild of America East successfully fought to get the online news publisher to institute "enhanced editorial standards that state that editorial content creators will never be forced to work on anything over which advertisers have approval" (Paul 2019). Ari Paul identifies a larger phenomenon within the digital news industry to explain why the newsworkers wanted this provision:

> For those of us who have worked in the world of ink and butcher-paper news writing, this might seem foreign—reporters of a former generation understood that there was supposed to be a wall between the editorial and business sides of a newspaper, and that the work of one side should have no bearing on the work of the other.
>
> But digital media doesn't earn money from subscriptions or newsstand sales, and when it comes to advertising, the money increasingly comes from what's known as "branded content"—advertising that's meant to look and feel like the outlet's own reporting. Yes, such content is usually identified somehow, but such ads earn a premium because in the fast-clicking world of digital media, the lines for readers get blurry—and from a media workers' perspective, that traditional wall between editorial and business work gets blurrier as well, or even eliminated (2019).

Whether overtly or covertly, advertisers influence the news content that gets produced, though the collective bargaining agreement with Vox Media demonstrates that an organized coalition of newsroom workers can combat the influence of advertisers.

The same cannot be said for content creators on social media platforms, to which advertisers have sent clear and public messages about the financial power they wield—for better or for worse. The first YouTube Adpocalypse in 2017 viscerally introduced users to advertiser influence when over 250 brands in the UK, along with other prominent ones in the US, started pulling their ads from the site after a *Times* investigation revealed that ads were playing on various pro-Nazi, pro-ISIS, and pornographic videos (Mostrous and Dean 2017; Mostrous 2017), resulting in these brands "unwittingly funding" (Mostrous 2017) violent extremist content.[9]

While the brands had correct moral concerns about that, the backlash prompted YouTube to take broad and rash actions that also punished the successful, boundary-pushing creators on the platform. Part of YouTube's *mea culpa* arrived "in the form of guidelines for 'advertising friendly' content" (Kumar 2019), listing nine types of videos unsuitable for advertising, including those that deal with "controversial issues and sensitive events" (2019). Though the new rules were initially enforced to such a draconian extent that video titles with the word "strip" would get demonetized—presumably resulting from a rushed implementation of the tech used to detect violations (2019)—fundamentally, they represented a shift in one of YouTube's functions: from a platform that rewarded the production of unique, independent, non-violent, and dissident perspectives on controversial topics, to one that simply hosts the same

[9] Curiously, while *Times*' articles cite specific extremist and pornographic videos that had ads showing on them, with some garnering "more than one million hits" (Mostrous 2017), the articles fail to share the methodology of their investigation or the number of extremist videos with ads that were found (2017).

stale and relatively inoffensive content one would find in mainstream outlets. YouTube CEO Susan Wojicki asserted at the time that "'YouTube is not TV, and we never will be'" (2019) to reassure users' and creators' concerns about the new rules, but prominent political commentators like Kyle Kulinski still saw many of his videos get demonetized, resulting in a cut of over 90% to his ad revenue (Kulinski 2017). Thus, YouTube's current hesitancy towards monetizing videos from independent creators that deal with controversial issues has, in the words of Ethan Klein from the h3h3 YouTube channel, incentivized these voices to become "Disney vloggers: beautiful young people that wouldn't say anything controversial and are always happy" (Hess 2017).

What once promised to be a platform for developing independent newsmakers and commentators now inherently rewards creators for producing the kind of content that appeases advertisers: the kind that excludes "serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the 'buying mood'" (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008, 77), and instead "lightly entertain and thus fit in with the spirit of the primary purpose of [TV advertisers'] program purchases—the dissemination of a selling message" (77).

Conversely, the exertion of advertisers' influence on Twitter has demonstrated a begrudgingly benevolent concern for the well-being of the public. After infamous Tesla CEO, alleged tax credit fraudster (Fleming 2015), and egregious tax loophole beneficiary (Eisinger, Ernsthausen, and Kiel 2021) Elon Musk bought the platform in 2022, hate speech statistically increased immediately (Ray and Anyanwu 2022). Major advertisers, for whatever reason, waited an

entire year to drop their support, only after Elon Musk himself called an antisemitic tweet "the actual truth" (Mac and Conger 2023). In the case of Twitter—considering the thorough documentation of increased hate speech (Ray and Anyanwu 2022; CCDH 2023); the reckless choice to allow anyone to buy a "verified" blue checkmark (Hart 2022; Mac and Conger 2024); the site's massive drop in users (Ingram 2024); and other harms to the platform and general public (Hansford 2023; Kelley and Robertson 2023; Klippenstein 2024)—the power of the advertisers effectively acted in favor of the public interest. For better or worse, advertisers have extended their influence to social media companies in the 21st century, while maintaining their grip on the traditional news industry.

#### 2.2.2.3 The Third, Fourth, and Fifth Filters in the 21st Century: How the Plausible Genocide in Gaza Demonstrates Their Relevance

U.S. news outlets' coverage of Israel's plausible genocide in the Gaza Strip (Borger 2024) shows how sourcing decisions, the threat of "flak" (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008, 62) from powerful entities, and dogmatic fear of a national enemy results in ruling class propaganda being disseminated to the public.

A recent study from FAIR reveals the strong prevalence of Herman and Chomsky's sourcing filter. Felipe Rendall reviewed the broadcasts of five TV networks' Sunday morning shows, four networks' daily news shows, and 51 op-eds from four print outlets that discussed the campus protests against various universities' investments in companies affiliated with or directly involved in

Israel's ongoing atrocities (2024). All pieces of content were aired or published between April 21 and May 12, 2024. None of the Sunday shows interviewed the students, only 8% of the guests—six out of 79—interviewed on the daily news shows were students or activists, and only two out of the 51 op-eds were written by students (2024). While government officials and politicians represented 81% of the Sunday shows' guests, the daily news shows featured a healthier representation of all the categorized guest perspectives: 29% of the guests were government officials or politicians, 23% of them were journalists, 24% were academics or educators, 8% students, and the remaining 16% were classified as "other" (2024). Overall, however, Rendall's analysis of campus protest coverage alone suggests that Herman and Chomsky's third filter functions as efficiently today as it did over thirty years ago when the writers first articulated it, affirming Fishman's characterization of the news media sourcing subsidy:

> In effect, the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news. The large entities that provide this subsidy become "routine" news sources and have privileged access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers. It should also be noted that in the case of the largesse of the Pentagon and the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy, the subsidy is at the taxpayers' expense, so that, in effect, the citizenry pays to be propagandized in the interest of powerful groups such as military contractors and other sponsors of state terrorism.
>
> Because of their services, continuous contact on the beat, and mutual dependency, the powerful can use personal relationships, threats, and rewards to further influence and coerce the media. The media may feel obligated to carry extremely dubious stories and mute criticism in order not to offend their sources and disturb a close relationship. It is very difficult to call authorities on whom one depends for daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers. Critical sources may be avoided not only because of their lesser availability and higher cost of establishing credibility, but also

> because the primary sources may be offended and may even threaten the media using them ([1988] 2008, 82).

Concerns of flak—"negative responses to a media statement or program" (86)—regarding the plausible Gaza genocide has proliferated among mainstream U.S. news outlets. Perhaps the most prominent organization that's been primed to sling flak towards media outlets that criticize Israel is the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which operates upon the false belief that anti-Zionism is inherently antisemitic[10] (ADL n.d.b; Rosenfeld 2021). Only a few days after the October 7th attacks, ADL CEO and National Director Jonathan Greenblatt suggested that MSNBC—while being interviewed on the network—was letting Hamas write the language of the network's Israel-Palestine coverage (Ball and Enjeti 2023a). "Like, guys," he warned, "get the story right" (2023a). Analyses of coverage on the war (Johnson and Ali 2024a; 2024b) and the campus protests (Rendall 2024) would suggest that news outlets heard his warning loud and clear.

Outlets did not heed that warning simply fearing strongly worded press releases or statements. The ADL has existed in the U.S. since the 1910s, and has consistently conducted successful pro-Israel media campaigns (ADL n.d.a). Flak from such a well-established organization will be treated as an existential threat by mainstream news producers.

> If flak is produced on a large scale, or by individuals or groups with substantial resources, it can be both uncomfortable and costly to the media. Positions have to be defended within the organization and without,

[10] The "Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism"—a definition of antisemitism "developed by a group of scholars in the fields of Holocaust history, Jewish studies, and Middle East studies" (Anziska et al. n.d.), which holds "around 370 signatories" (n.d.) and was released on March 25, 2021 (Rosenfeld 2021)—lists various examples of statements regarding Israel and Palestine that are antisemitic and not antisemitic. One of the five non-antisemitic examples clarifies that "criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism" (Anziska et al. n.d.) is not antisemitic.

> sometimes before legislatures and possibly even in courts. Advertisers may withdraw patronage. Television advertising is mainly of consumer goods that are readily subject to organized boycott.… If certain kinds of fact, position, or program are thought likely to elicit flak, this prospect can be a deterrent (Herman and Chomsky [1988] 2008, 86).

The writers also note that despite repeated onslaughts of criticism from these "flak machines…the media treat them well" (89) to keep these resourceful groups satisfied, allowing such organization "to contain any deviations from the established line" (89)—or, in Greenblatt's words, to ensure that the major news outlet "get the story right" (Ball and Enjeti 2023a). Thus, in addition to softball interviews on TV networks, mainstream news outlets frequently publish opinion pieces and letters to the editor from Greenblatt where he characterizes pro-Palestine protests as violent and antisemitic (2024a; 2024b), despite the fact that only 3% of the protests featured any instances of violence (Ho and Doyle 2024), with "nearly half of the 3%" (Beckett 2024) resulting from police forces being sent in to destroy the illegal, yet courageous encampments (2024). Though mainstream news outlets advertise themselves as coalitions of independent thinkers and observers who speak truth to power—with insufferable mission statements like "We seek the truth and help people understand the world" (NYTC n.d.) and taglines like "Democracy dies in darkness" (Washington Post n.d.)—in the aggregate, they struggle to speak such truths to preserve their bottom line and prestige among the ruling class.

Preserving such prestige also requires the incessant renunciation of the boogeyman that paralyzes this class, as Herman and Chomsky's modified fifth filter articulates. At the time of *Manufacturing Consent*'s 1988 publication, the

U.S. had the Soviet Union pinned to the mat as the Cold War's conclusion approached. But, like the fans of the victor at the end of a nail-biting competition, national and cultural pride was inflated, and that sentiment was reinforced in news media through the embrace of "anticommunism as a control mechanism" (89). Twenty years later, however, Herman and Chomsky recognized in an interview that the control mechanism had evolved to adopt "the 'free market' as a principal ideological underpinning along with 'anti-terrorism' and the 'war on terror' that have provided the needed Enemy or Face of Evil, with anti-communism pushed into a back-up and reminder/ideological role" (Mullen 2009, 15).

In covering the plausible genocide in Gaza, U.S. news outlets have largely adopted the Israeli propaganda line. These outlets' statistical blind eye to the suffering of Palestinians aptly proves that (Johnson and Ali 2024a; 2024b; Rendall 2024), but their persistent denouncements of Hamas that lack any acknowledgement of the Israeli Defense Force's well-documented atrocities (Paul 2024) reveals that Herman and Chomsky's fifth filter still affects mainstream news media in the U.S.

In fact, all of these filters still affect the news that gets published in traditional U.S. outlets. If anything, the width of the Propaganda Model's filters has expanded to private investment funds and social media platforms, with mostly detrimental effects. Herman and Chomsky expressed skepticism multiple times throughout the 2000s at the notion that the adoption of the internet as the primary method for news consumption would challenge the structural barriers they identified ([1988] 2008, 16-8; Mullen 2009, 20). That skepticism has aged quite

well, further demonstrating the need not only for sweeping reforms to our traditional public media infrastructure, but to our internet-based media infrastructure as well.

## 3. Findings: Implications and Guidelines for Independent Political Podcasters, Reflected in *The Honorable Series*.

Having outlined the structural faults of traditional U.S. media from both the perspective of the newsroom and the content produced, and having contextualized it within an information industry desperately in need of policy reform, a set of general guidelines can be outlined for independent political podcasters who want to produce content that genuinely challenges the prevalent ruling class ideology and propaganda of the American Empire. Observations from the supplemental *Honorable Series* produced for the thesis will exemplify the tenets of the articulated.

### 3.1 Journalists, Editors, and News Organizations Are Not Objective Arbiters of Truth, and Neither Are Podcasters

I want to preface these guidelines comparing their function to that of the AP Stylebook to dismantle the role of objectivity in independent political podcasting, and even the journalism industry writ large. The AP Stylebook is The Gospel for The Professional Journalists™, the ones who "abhor inaccuracies, carelessness, bias or distortions[11]" (AP 2024a), who would *never* "knowingly

[11] They're *especially* the cultured ones who refrain from using the dreadful eyesore known as the oxford comma!

introduce rumor or false information into material intended for publication or broadcast" (2024a), and who must never reveal to anyone online publicly—or "even in supposedly password-protected conversations" (2024a)—that they are human by sharing such a horrendous thing like an "opinion on contentious issues" (2024a)!

I hope my sarcasm rings loud and clear.

The AP Stylebook, in all fairness, does not explicitly articulate an expectation for journalistic objectivity, but its excessive holier-than-thou language reads as if it *desperately* wants that to be the expectation. In fact, the AP fired fresh-out-of-Stanford-University journalist Emily Wilder in 2021 "over her social media activity" (Bauder 2021), only informing her that they detected a violation after she started working for them. A spokeswoman for the AP refused to even tell Wilder what the problematic behavior specifically was (2021), though AP Vice President and Managing Editor Brian Carovillano said in a CNN interview, presumably around that time, that Wilder's firing was "a unanimous decision" (Stelter n.d.) among the service's editors. Citing a retweet that called to "free, free Palestine" (2021) and Wilder's own tweet questioning the objectivity mantra by using outlets' terminology for stories involving Israel and Palestine, AP reporter David Bauder notes that the news wire service "prohibits employees from openly expressing their opinions on political matters and other public issues for fear that could damage the news organization's reputation for objectivity and jeopardize its many reporters around the world" (2021).

Of course, this was not the first time that the AP felt it had to worry about a pesky biased reporter. As a part of his book documenting the historical fallacies of the objectivity standard in news outlets, Lewis Raven Wallace writes in *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (2019) about news outlet editors' and owners' sudden adoption of an expectation for their reporters to be objective in the mid-1930s—at a time when reporters were unionizing at various outlets.

> At this point, a very important distinction comes into play: the concept of an objective *approach* was still relatively new. The concept of the objective *individual*, the reporter with no attachments whatsoever, was even newer—and this, in particular, appeared to be a direct rebuttal to the presence of organized labor in the newsroom, a display of anxiety over what the activist-journalist might mean for the editor and publisher in a rapidly changing world (62).

When AP reporter Morris Watson joined the Newspaper Guild in 1935, the bosses panicked and fired him, alleging that he "couldn't *be* 'objective'" (62) as a member of a labor union. Unfortunately for the AP, it failed to mask their reason for firing him, giving him the perfect opportunity to sue the news wire service, with the help of the brand-new National Labor Relations Board (62-3). The case went to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of Watson and the NLRB (63). In the Court's ruling, Justice Owen J. Roberts

> observed that although the AP claimed to have discharged the employee for biased reporting, the record revealed the actual reason to be his union activity, which had no bearing on First Amendment issues: "The business of the Associated Press is not immune from regulation because it is an agency of the press. The publisher of a newspaper has no special immunity from the application of general laws. He has no special privilege to invade the rights and liberties of others."
>
> He noted that the AP could be held accountable for libel, punished for contempt of court, and subject to antitrust laws (Vile 2009).

The expectation for journalists to be objective observers of the truth was never about ensuring accurate coverage—it was about newspaper owners' strong desire to prevent workers from organizing to demand wage increases, even if that meant taking a radical interpretation of Nelson Antrim Crawford and Walter Lippman's writing on objective reporting (54-6).

Even today, prominent outlets like *The New York Times*, again, proclaim that their mission is to "seek the truth and help people understand the world" (NTYC n.d.), yet utterly fail to do so at the seemingly most important moments.

*Intercept* reporters Jeremy Scahill, Ryan Grim, and Daniel Boguslaw uncovered perhaps the most blatant ignorance of such a mission from *The New York Times*. Scahill, Grim, and Boguslaw's "'Between the Hammer and the Anvil:' The Story Behind the New York Times October 7 Exposé" (2024) revealed a catastrophe of journalistic and editorial malpractice at *The New York Times* in its disturbing "'Screams without Words': How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on Oct. 7" (Gettleman, Schwartz, and Sella 2023).

The *Times* article had a massive claim to prove: Not only did individual Hamas militants sexually assault women in their October 7 slaughter, but Hamas as a whole "*weaponized*" (2023; emphasis added) such heinous acts as a part of their attack.

> The question has never been whether individual acts of sexual assault may have occurred on October 7. Rape is not uncommon in war, and there were also several hundred civilians who poured into Israel from Gaza that day in a "second wave," contributing to and participating in the mayhem and violence. The central issue is whether the New York Times presented solid evidence to support its claim that there were newly reported details "establishing that the attacks against women were not isolated events but part of a broader pattern of gender-based violence on Oct. 7" — a claim

> stated in the headline that Hamas deliberately deployed sexual violence as a weapon of war (Scahill, Grim, and Boguslaw 2024).

*The Intercept* journalists effectively dismantled the article. *The New York Times* reporters cited testimonies from previously discredited sources, such as "Israeli officials from Zaka, a private ultra-Orthodox rescue organization that has been documented to have mishandled evidence and spread multiple false stories about the events of October 7" (2024). The article opens with a gruesome description of a video depicting the "charred body" (2024) of Gal Abdush, validating the Israeli police's suspicion of sexual assault. "The Times report mentions WhatsApp messages from Abdush and her husband to their family, but doesn't mention that some family members believe that the crucial messages make the Israeli officials' claims implausible" (2024). *New York Times* reporters Anat Schwartz and Adam Sella even had to pressure the woman who captured the footage into sharing it with them. "'They called me again and again and explained how important it is to Israeli hasbara,' she recalled [in an interview with Israeli outlet Ynet], using the term for public diplomacy, which in practice refers to Israeli propaganda efforts directed at international audiences" (2024).

As it turned out, while Sella at least held prior experience writing on "issues ranging from 'food, photography, and culture to peace efforts, economics, and the occupation,' according to his LinkedIn profile" (2024), Schwartz *never held professional reporting experience before writing her first article for* The New York Times *on November 14, 2023*—only about a month and a half before the publishing of "Screams without Words" (Gettleman, Schwartz, and Sella 2023). *The Intercept* reporters were unable to confirm how exactly Schwartz

found herself in that role, but the fact that Sella is her romantic partner's nephew might have influenced the hiring decision (Scahill, Grim, and Boguslaw 2024).

None of that got Schwartz fired, however. Rather, she was fired for liking blatantly genocidal tweets, such as one calling on Israel to "turn the [Gaza] strip into a slaughterhouse" (2024). Despite her quietly public disdain for Palestinians, however,

> Schwartz did not commission herself and Sella to report one of the most consequential stories of the war. Senior leadership at the New York Times did.
>
> Schwartz said as much in an interview with Israeli Army Radio on December 31. "The New York Times said, 'Let's do an investigation into sexual violence' — it was more a case of them having to convince me," she said. Her host cut her off: "It was a proposal of The New York Times, the entire thing?"
>
> "Unequivocally. Unequivocally. Obviously. Of course," she said. "The paper stood behind us 200 percent and gave us the time, the investment, the resources to go in-depth with this investigation as much as needed" (2024).

The Pulitzer-Prize-winning reporter on the team, Jeffrey Gettleman, seemed to put too much faith in Schwartz and Sella as well. The two freelancers "did the vast majority of the ground reporting, while Gettleman focused on the framing and writing" (2024). A *Times* spokesperson asserted in a *Semafor* article that Gettleman "supervised their work closely and conducted dozens of interviews alongside them" (Smith 2024), though the defense is not as strong as the spokesperson might think, as Schwartz mentioned in an interview on the Israeli Army Radio that she conducted over 150 interviews while working on the story (Scahill and Grim 2024). The outlet's PR agents, in fact, were quite slick in their attempts to defend the *Times*' reputation for it thorough editorial process, when

asked about Schwartz's eye-opening admission made in her Channel 12 interview:

> "We had a weekly meeting, and you bring out the status of your work on your project," she said. "And Times writers and editors who are concerned with Middle Eastern affairs coming from all kinds of places in the world, they ask you questions that challenge you…
>
> …Those questions were challenging to answer, she said: "One of the questions you get asked — and it's the hardest ones to not be able to answer — if this has happened in so many places, how can it be that there is no forensic evidence? How can it be that there is no documentation?…is there no [written] report to make what she's saying authoritative?"
>
> The host interjected. "And you went at that stage to those official Israeli authorities, and asked that they give you — something, anything. And how did they respond?"
>
> "'*There is nothing*,'" Schwartz said she was told. "'*There was no collection of evidence from the scene.*'"
>
> *But broadly, she said, the editors were fully behind the project.* "There was no skepticism on their part, ever," she claimed. "It still doesn't mean I had [the story], because I didn't have a 'second source' for many things."
>
> A Times spokesperson pointed to this portion of the interview as evidence of the paper's rigorous process: "We have reviewed the wider transcript and it's clear you're persisting in taking quotes out of context. In the portion of the interview you refer to, Anat describes being encouraged by editors to corroborate evidence and sources before we'd publish the investigation. Later, she discusses regular meetings with editors where they would ask 'hard' and 'challenging' questions, and the time it took to undertake the second and third stages of sourcing. This is all part of a rigorous reporting process and one which we continue to stand behind" (Scahill, Grim, and Boguslaw 2024; emphasis added).

Notice how the *Times* spokesperson never specifically confirms that Schwartz actually found the evidence, only pointing to "the time it took to undertake the second and third stages of sourcing" (2024).

Gettleman publicly shared his lack of concern for evidence at a panel event on sexual violence at Columbia University.

> "What we found — I don't want to even use the word 'evidence,' because evidence is almost like a legal term that suggests you're trying to prove an allegation or prove a case in court," Gettleman told Sandberg. "*That's not*

> *my role*. We all have our roles. And my role is to document, is to present information, is to give people a voice. And we found information along the entire chain of violence, so of sexual violence."
>
> Gettleman said his mission was to move people. "It's really difficult to get this information and then to shape it," he said. "That's our job as journalists: to get the information and to share the story in a way that makes people care. Not just to inform, but to move people. And that's what I've been doing for a long time" (2024).

Even a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist at the Paper of Record does not seem to care about evidence. The "Screams without Words" article is yet another notable example of how mainstream news outlets consistently fail to live up to their standards as objective arbiters of truth.

Therefore, while independent political podcasters should absolutely verify the facts of the stories they want to tell and the evidence they want to cite, they should refrain from making the arrogant and condescending assertion of objectivity that news outlets have made for so long. Not only is such a promise one that cannot be met, but it is one that will make a podcast sound incredibly boring. A peer-reviewed survey conducted on 89 Danish radio and podcast listeners found that consumers want to hear a "clear and vigorous voice" (Heiselberg and Have 2023, 638) who's "engaged and passionate" (638), uses "everyday language" (638), and has a "focused and attentive style of communication" (638). Listeners usually do not want to hear someone speak in some objective, matter-of-fact manner. They want someone with personality and flair. And while that does not mean that carelessness in a podcaster's assertions is acceptable, it does mean that such a medium is not designed for objective delivery.

That said, as the instances of Joe Rogan promoting vaccine misinformation would suggest (Stecula and Motta 2021; Burton 2023; Qiu 2023), podcasters could still benefit from a set of ethical guidelines, perhaps enforced through the various podcasting platforms or collectively agreed upon by a decentralized coalition of prominent podcasters. Wallace, after examining numerous failures throughout the 20th and 21 centuries by mainstream news institutions to attempt or achieve the dominant standard of objectivity, suggests a new set of ethical standards for journalists to adopt:

> I propose hanging on to some basic tenets of traditional journalistic ethics: Verification and fact-checking, editorial independence from political parties and corporations, clarity and transparency about financial and political conflicts of interest, and deep, thorough sourcing. I also join a chorus of journalists who have been gradually replacing objectivity with the practice of radical transparency about both our values and methodologies. Finally, I think defining our values as journalists when journalism is under attack means admitting that we are activists and becoming clear what we are activists for (2019, 211).

The podcasts produced for the creative portion of this thesis exemplifies these tenets quite well. While the interviews with candidates act as primary sources that simply feature a back-and-forth between me and the candidate, the ones that did require sourcing, like Ben Tscheschlok's, did feature verification and fact-checking through the displaying of various sources that he cited throughout the interview (Schmidt 2024b). Further, the editorial independence from corporations is quite apparent, demonstrated in the numerous episodes where the guest and I deride corporate control of society at large (2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2024e; 2024f; 2024g; 2024h; 2024i; 2024j). Independence from political parties may not seem as clear in *The Honorable Series*, as I note my involvement

with Middle Tennessee State University's Young Democratic Socialists of America chapter (2024b), and all candidates interviewed are Democrats (2024a; 2024c; 2024d; 2024h; 2024i). That independence, whether clear or unclear, is present. For one, the Democratic Socialists of America is technically not a political party—it's a nonprofit that endorses candidates, among organizing other activities (DSA n.d.). Further, *The Kennel* has always operated independently of political parties, even before I became the Social Media Operator for the MTSU chapter of the YDSA. The chapter has never had a say in what content I produce, though our steering committee will occasionally approve my request to share a link to an episode on our Instagram account's story. The universal nature of candidates' alignment with the Democratic Party results from a greater pool of candidates within that party who refuse to partake in today's legalized and normalized corruption. If there will ever be a space for Republican voices on *The Kennel*, the party should start looking for candidates who actually reject such corrupt practices, instead of running certain candidates like Josh Hawley who merely wear a cheap façade of populist principles (Coleridge 2023; OpenSecrets 2024). Additionally, the podcast has no "financial or political conflicts of interest" (Wallace 2019, 211), sources deeply and thoroughly as necessary, and is unafraid to transparently espouse its values through its explicit purpose of sharing interviews with candidates who reject corporate PAC money.

### 3.2 Go Local

Without public media reform that grants ownership of the means of podcast production and digital communication to the public, podcasters are out of luck if they want to start an independently produced podcast that fully bucks ruling class structures and ideologies.

That does not mean one should not try, though. Perhaps they might find luck if they can connect at the level of a local community, focusing on sharing their podcast through interpersonal connections with their neighbors instead of praying to the Algorithmic Gods that they bless you with amplification on social media.

On *The Honorable Series*, some of the candidates interviewed were running in districts that cover the MTSU campus (Schmidt 2024c; 2024i), and other guests are tied to the Murfreesboro area (2024b; 2024e).

### 3.3 Delegitimize Institutional Perspectives

Mark Fishman concludes *Manufacturing the News* (1980) by identifying nine sources of bureaucratic, ideological control in the structure of the journalist's work:

> 1. Their movements through a beat territory
> 2. Their exposure to news sources.
> 3. The meaning and relevance of what they are exposed to (i.e., their sense of something as an event and their sense of its importance).
> 4. What occurrences are not worth seeing (i.e., nonevents),
> 5. The permissible times at which events may be reported (i.e., news pegs).
> 6. What constitutes a factual account and, thus, what constitutes the facts of the case.

> 7. What constitutes a suspicious account and, thus, what constitutes a matter to be investigated.
> 8. What constitutes errors and oversights and, then, what constitutes their correction in news stories.
> 9. What constitutes a controversial matter and, then, what constitutes the sides and terms of the controversy (134).

From these, three guidelines can be gleaned.

### 3.3.1 #1-2: Break Away from the Beat Sources

For independent political podcasters, the sources on a beat refer to their sources of news, whether that be primary sources for original reporting or news outlets for commentary. Journalists and podcasters are no longer confined to the physical constraints of their beat in the age of the internet, and should take advantage of that luxury.

Further, while certain experts and beat agency officials are great to use as sources or to interview directly on the podcast, their status does not necessarily make them a great one to interview. A podcaster must consider how the specific interview should be handled. For example, should a podcaster handle an interview with Donald J. Trump as if they're relaxing with a good friend (Gold, Balk, and Levien 2024; Kulinski 2024b)?

### 3.3.2 #3-4: Determine a Purpose or an Ethos for the Podcast

For addressing Fishman's third and fourth sources of institutional ideological control, this is incredibly important. Having a conscious awareness of why one sees an event as newsworthy and another as unnewsworthy will prevent them from simply making content for content creation's sake, a result from the

high story quotas of traditional news. Further, this awareness will demonstrate to listeners "subject are expertise" (Heiselberg and Have 2023, 638), a "focused and attentive style of communication" (638), and an effective ability to give a "quick and clear WHY" (638) for each episode, and a show as a whole, increasing its appeal to listeners.

*The Kennel* has always held such a purpose and ethos: that our current campaign finance laws are allowing wealthy individuals and corporations to harness tight control of our democracy, and in the process, silencing the People's voice. That purpose guides me in considering which guests I should invite onto the podcast, making my framework very clear for deciding what interviews would be newsworthy.

### 3.3.3 #4-9: Use Your Judgement

As an independent political podcaster, or as an independent political podcast production team, you do not respond to the editor, who has to respond to management, who has to respond to the owners.

You decide when "events may be reported" (Fishman 1980, 134).

You decide when something needs to be investigated and how you investigate it (134).

This is the beautiful, yet downright terrifying facet of independent political podcast production, and independent news media in general: This is your choice. As such, you hold responsibility for them as well.

### 3.4 Burn the Filters of Information

Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model almost acts as a hit list for the potential ideological blind spots of an independent political podcaster. Find those blind spots, and burn them—preferably, with a flamethrower.

#### 3.4.1 Kurt Vonnegut: "Get a Gang" (Harbrecht and Shimer 2004)

Kurt Vonnegut gave that advice to a crowd of graduating students at Leigh University in 2004, and it certainly applies in burning the first filter of information in the Propaganda Model. That does not necessarily mean one needs to get a co-host or get their version of Jamie from *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Rather, it means one should start making a network of friends' podcasts to jump onto. For example, the *Breaking Points* podcast does this, through the marriage of co-host Krystal Ball to Kyle Kulinski, host of The Kyle Kulinski Show (or Secular Talk, as it is known on YouTube); the employment of journalists Ryan Grim and Emily Jashinsky for their own show, *Counter Points*; and the employment of a producer who runs a relatively small YouTube channel, GoodPoliticGuy.

*The Honorable Series*, to an extent, also demonstrates how a network can be formed through political podcasting. The series jumbles together a variety of guests who normally would not have been compared and contrasted in another media environment, especially considering that two of the guest were invited on because of a personal connection, rather than their academic or political status (2024b; 2024j).

### 3.4.2 Advertising: Acceptable in Very Limited Contexts

While there are indirect ways to obtain advertising revenue through platforms like YouTube and Spotify without having to worry about advertisers arbitrarily deciding to pull advertisements from your show, events like the YouTube Adpocalypse have shown that depending on this revenue can be fickle (Kumar 2019), and becoming eligible for YouTube's program specifically requires at least 1,000 subscriber with 4,000 watch hours in a year or ten million views of Shorts (YouTube Help n.d.).

In all other cases, relying on direct advertising for funding will hold a podcaster accountable to the whims of advertisers, and thus can lessen their independent nature.

On *The Kennel*, while there may be unintentional product placement due to my occasional enjoyment of a Red Bull while recording and the general disorganization of my apartment, there has never been and never will be a place for some advertiser to hawk their modern-day snake oil to the viewers and listeners of *The Kennel*.

### 3.4.3 Keep the Boot out of Your Mouth

If a political podcaster wants to be an independent voice, they must act the part. If there is a critical issue with an official who is being interviewed, call it out. Challenge them. The official by now should know the risks of getting on an independently produced podcast, and if they cannot take the heat, then they

certainly have no place in power, and especially no place on a podcaster's hot seat.

*The Honorable Series*, and *The Kennel* as a whole, walks on a very fine line in this regard. There's no intention to metaphorically lick the boots of any official who gets interviewed, but there also exists a risk of such bootlicking when the candidate meets the main expectation of rejecting corporate PAC donations, and especially when the candidate happens to run on a platform that I mostly support. Moments like the testy debate with Lore Bergman over the idea of placing an arms embargo on Israel (Schmidt 2024h), then, tend to stand out instead of being a typical affair.

### 3.4.4 Pick Your Battles

Whether an independent political podcaster has ten or ten million subscribers, they are going to catch some flak. One cannot fight every accusation of falsehood, bias, or unfairness that comes their way. Pick your battles. If one does not trust their judgement, they should wait to hop on the microphone until they do.

### 3.4.5 Define a Unique View on Capitalism

Labeling any social welfare program as "communism" is mainstream news media's job, not that of an independent political podcaster. Free market ideology is the belief system of the ruling class, as it inherently benefits them. If a

podcaster wants to channel an independent worldview and ethos, then, they must articulate how that worldview and ethos differs from that of the ruling class.

Give the listener a unique perspective on the current existence of America's capitalist economy: What are its harms? What are its benefits? How should we maximize those benefits and minimize those harms?

While no manifesto can be found in *The Honorable Series* or throughout *The Kennel*, the podcast's main purpose inherently rejects at least one facet of America's capitalist society: the fact that corporations can effectively tilt elections in their favor by pouring cash into candidates' campaign chests. Further, my hyperfocus on specific policies like single-payer healthcare (2024c; 2024h) imply a disdain for the reliance on the for-profit incentive in certain industries.

### 3.5 "*The Truth is Funny*" (Halpern, Close, and Jonson 1994, 15)

Sara Ödmark's "Making News Funny: Differences in News Framing between Journalists and Comedians" (2021) suggests that a rather unique phenomenon occurs in political podcasts when the host(s) apply a comedic approach to their shows. Based on a comparison of 5,119 pieces of mainstream news from Sweden to 104 episodes of two Swedish political comedy podcasts, Ödmark found that the podcasts contained a greater density of information on each topic covered (1550). Moreover, she found that podcasts with a similar comedic frame can engage audiences much more effectively than traditional media. The podcasts featured a greater application of "thematic framing" (1550), which "places the event in a broader perspective and might include comparison

over time" (1548), and had a much greater tendency to examine their topics at a "societal level" (1550), which refers to the act of covering issues that concern the public (1548). "If a news item is framed thematically with societal relevance, the citizen has an easier time connecting the story beyond the immediate context, and thus as a wider societal issue to be debated and solved" (1548). Therefore, independent political podcasters should not be afraid to find the honest humor that arises from the topics they cover, when appropriate, of course.

*The Honorable Series*, and perhaps every piece of content on *The Kennel*, fully embraces that approach to podcasting. I think I reflect a portrait of a rather awkward, dorky, and political "debate bro," and I have always compensated for that characteristic by embracing a rather silly aesthetic. The intro to every episode of *The Honorable Series* and *The Kennel* features a couple soundbites of me clicking a lamp switch and gawking some animal-like and high-pitched vocalization. The set has always been my living room, decorated with a wall of some of my favorite books, movies, video games, and music albums attached by a couple of Command Strips. And while most interviews feature relatively clean language, some of them, especially the ones that feature chats with personal friends (Schmidt 2024b; 2024j), do not shy away from cursing and explicit jokes. That approach stems from a personal desire to see more news content that stops taking itself so seriously, and a natural inclination to produce content that's an honest depiction of my personality and humanity, rather than a caricature of myself as some high-minded and objective arbiter of the truth.

## 4. Areas for Future Research

Future research should be directed towards examining how the public can take ownership and regulatory control of how podcasts are produced and distributed through public media reforms. The decentralized nature of the podcast medium allows this thesis to even be feasible, but the growing dominance of Spotify's and Apple's podcasting platforms are making such a characteristic more meaningless. Why start a new podcast when the platforms are becoming increasingly saturated, presenting little hope for newcomers to see growth in their audience or financial compensation, especially for the independent political podcasters who refuse advertising subsidies? Public media policy reform should consider not only how to preserve the crumbling mainstream news media institutions, but also how to facilitate a grassroots news media environment that allows for average people to have a fair chance at obtaining moderate success in their podcasting endeavors. YouTuber Benn Jordan's video on "Media.gov (or something similar I dunno)" (2023) presents a rather plausible, though messy proposal for a universal media distribution service, but his idea's apparent radical nature and lacking support from any peer-reviewed sources that even address a similar concept demonstrates that future research is needed.

Additionally, given current speculation in the news about the impact of Joe Rogan's interview with Donald Trump on the 2024 election (Harb 2024), future research should swiftly examine the episode's impact on its audience. Such an investigation would show the maximum extent to which political podcasts can alter listeners' voting behaviors mere days before a major election.

## 5. Conclusion

> TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — Linguist, activist and social critic Noam Chomsky is hospitalized in his wife's native country of Brazil recovering from a massive stroke he had a year ago, she confirmed Tuesday.
>
> Valeria Chomsky said via email that her 95-year-old husband is in a Sao Paulo hospital, where she took him on an ambulance jet with two nurses once he could more easily travel from the United States following the June 2023 stroke. The couple has had a residence there since 2015.
>
> She confirmed the details of a Monday report in the Brazilian newspaper Folha de S.Paulo, which said her husband has difficulty speaking and the right side of his body is affected. He is visited daily by a neurologist, speech therapist and lung specialist.
>
> Valeria Chomsky told the newspaper that her husband follows the news and when he sees images of the war in Gaza, he raises his left arm in a gesture of lament and anger (AP 2024b).

Chomsky's stroke at age 95, and the loss of Herman seven years ago (Smith 2017), should underscore the lengthy nature of this fight for a truly independent press, as they have waged it for nearly the second half of their long lives. The financial powers that benefit from this status quo will not give up easily, making one wonder if there is any point to these academic endeavors at all.

The news media industry suffers, and cries out for policy reforms as outlets continue to lay off workers and close their doors. Independently produced political podcasts can better engage audiences, but with such concentrated ownership of the means by which podcasts are distributed, they act only as a band-aid over the bullet wound in the gut of the news industry.

Continue to apply pressure. Hopefully, the ambulance will arrive soon.

## Appendix A: Episode List and Personal Reflections

**“Introducing: The Honorable Series” (Schmidt 2024g)**

**“Cyril Focht” (Schmidt 2024d)**

The August 26 interview with Cyril Focht was perhaps one of the most unique interviews I’ve had with a candidate on The Kennel. The night before the interview, I emailed Focht to verify he was still available to interview. He immediately responded, informing me that he apparently lost the primary election earlier that month. I still had him on, planning to conduct a post-mortem on his campaign and get a better understanding of how he lost the election, despite raising the most money than the rest of his candidates. He reasoned it was due to Lore Bergman’s name being on top of the ballot.

Funny enough, we ended up not spending as much time on that topic as we did talking about public media reform and how social media platforms should factor into that. Focht gained some academic experience on that topic while working towards his Master’s degree at the University of California Santa Cruz.

**“Ken Paulson” (Schmidt 2024e)**

Paulson’s interview was relatively inoffensive, eliciting remarks from Paulson that I expected from the head of the First Amendment Center. That said, I wished I had pressed him more on the idea of using professionalism as a standard for journalistic performance, rather than objectivity or subjectivity. As the Ödmark findings suggest, and as the social media profiles of journalists like Ken Klippenstein would suggest, rejecting professionalism—especially in podcasts—can sometimes be a unique and effective way to engage audiences.

**“Aftyn Behn” (Schmidt 2024a)**

This interview was relatively short, for a reason I didn’t understand until I sat down to write up some questions. Behn was the first guest to interview on The Kennel for a second time after interviewing about a year ago before her election to the Tennessee House of Representatives. We had a pretty thorough 40-minute interview last time, but when it came to this interview, I realized that the interview wasn’t going to be terribly exciting.

To summarize the 23-minute interview, it featured me asking, “Hey Aftyn, what’s the possibility of the House passing [insert progressive policy]?” She would respond, “No chance. The GOP supermajority sucks.”

I scheduled this interview because it fit the purpose of The Kennel: Interview candidates who reject corporate PAC money. What I had not realized until conducting the interview, however, was that simply running for re-election—especially in an overwhelmingly Democratic district like Behn’s—is not enough to justify a second interview, especially only one year later, which featured no meaningful developments in the policy agenda that Behn had spoken about in her first interview.

**“Matt Ferry” (Schmidt 2024i) and “Cheri Brown” (Schmidt 2024c)**

I’m lumping these two interviews into one reflection because these interviews both feature what I would consider to be the typical interview with a candidate on The Kennel thus far: Discussions on populist policies that feature

minimal, if any, disagreement. Both of these candidates were running against incumbents who seem to have an unhealthy addiction to corporate and corporate PAC donations, leading to meaningful discussions in their interviews about the corrupting role of wealthy elites' and corporations' ability to heavily influence elections. From there, the interviews differed a bit. Ferry's interview jumped all over the place, encompassing discussions on healthcare reform, cost of living increases, the Tennessee Drivers Union's strikes, drug policy, and more. Cheri Brown's interview, on the other hand, was more focused on labor union policy, cost of living increases, especially with regards to housing costs, and healthcare policy, especially concerning long-term care at home.

Both interviews, as well as Aftyn Behn's, also featured discussion on Tennessee's anti-BDS legislation, which prevents public entities and private entities engaged in contracts with state or local governments worth $200,000 or more from boycotting Israel. This law has become a notorious roadblock for pro-Palestine college students who want their universities to abide by the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement and cut off all affiliations with the state of Israel, which the International Court of Justice has ruled to be an apartheid state that's plausibly committing a genocide.

(Note: As I would find out later, this question was quite important for me to ask. The Instagram account @dear_white_staffers—which invites campaign and legislators' staffers to anonymously submit their experiences of mistreatment, mismanagement, or general BS that goes on behind the scenes—posted a message from an anonymous manager of "a Democratic campaign in south Nashville

(Franklin, TN area)" (2024) who asserted that they were "fired for speaking out about Palestine" (2024) through their personal Instagram page. More insidiously, after various Democratic candidates had already agreed to do short interviews with the anonymous manager for their Instagram page, the candidates began canceling those interview plans after they discovered the page's pro-Palestine position, probably at the advice of a TN Democratic Party communications firm "run by a loud and proud Zionist" (2024).

Therefore, because of my willingness to get these candidates on the record about their perspectives on the issue of Israel and Palestine, I ended up being able to get Democratic candidates to speak up on this issue when the Tennessee Democratic Party was, allegedly, actively trying to silence any candidates from advocating a pro-Palestine position.)

**"Lore Bergman" (Schmidt 2024h)**

This interview was quite unique for a number of reasons. For one, at the start, Bergman implicitly emphasized a weakness in my approach to interview preparation. Frankly, I do not care one bit about candidates' biographies on their websites. I don't care that a candidate has three kids, went to school at the University of Memphis, did x-y-z throughout their professional career, etc. I care about what policies they're gonna support: Will they fight to increase the minimum wage? Guarantee access to healthcare through a single-payer healthcare system? Legalize marijuana?

Bergman, however, noted that she does have a rather unique story, having experienced homelessness herself and having lived on disability for some time now. I don't think it was necessarily a major blind spot in the interview, but I think it would've been an important thing to consider in the interview preparation process.

Moreover, there ended up being a relatively heated debate surrounding the idea of placing an arms embargo on Israel. Bergman took a "both-sides" approach, advocating for unsatisfactory position espoused by the Biden administration and the Harris-Walz campaign: "We need a ceasefire," sure, but we aren't willing to articulate how we're going to ensure that ceasefire, nor are we going to consider the idea of exercising our main lever of power over Israel by cutting off military aid to the apartheid state.

While I obviously have a major disagreement with Bergman on that topic, I also understand that she at least comes by her position honestly, rather than at the behest of a bunch of pro-Israel donors.

**"The Honorable Series Bonus | The Return of Big Dog Jay [Explicit]" (Schmidt 2024j)**

This was a bonus episode I recorded with my best friend from high school, "Big Dog" Jay Duda, on a bit of a whim. Jay worked with me on our first foray into the podcasting realm when we started our Tea Time with the Big Dogs podcast back in the summer of 2019, right after we graduated from St. Louis

University High School, producing episodes until December 2020 that commented on a variety of pop culture and political news developments.

I had him come on The Kennel to discuss the censoring of the JD Vance files from Twitter and the Vice Presidential debate. We had also planned to discuss our thoughts on the Missouri and Tennessee Senate races, but due to technical difficulties that occurred when trying to get the recording going, we had to cut the episode a bit short.

I think the episode reflects Ödmark's findings on political comedy podcasts—that such podcasts can cover political issues just as effectively, if not more, than the ones that maintain a neutral or objective tone. The episode, like the next one, maintains a "two bros shooting the you-know-what" vibe that creates a casual environment for the listener to be easily invited into.

**"Ben Tscheschlok [Explicit]" (Schmidt 2024b)**

After telling me about the work that he was doing on his Honors College thesis, I decided to have fellow YDSA comrade Ben Tscheschlok stop by The Kennel to discuss his research. He had a lot of cool insights to share on the inherently fascist ambitions of billionaires, exemplified by Silicon Valley billionaire tech bros Marc Andreesen, Peter Thiel, and Elon Musk. These interviews were especially relevant to the upcoming election, with Peter Thiel and Elon Musk being massive financial backers of JD Vance and Donald Trump, respectively.

On top of that, the interview was a little unique in the technical sense: This was one of the rare times that I've had a guest come interview in-person on The Kennel. While I don't think my webcam is well-suited for a wide-angle shot like the one we had to use, the in-person nature of the interview did have a lot more energy and felt a little more dynamic because of that slight delay one normally experiences on a Zoom call.

Furthermore, the episode featured the kind of friendly banter from the podcast that Ödmark's study considers. It's the kind of vibe I prefer to have on episodes where I'm not interviewing a candidate for public office, and this episode certainly exemplifies that intention.

**"Inkstick Field Reporter Taylor Barnes" (Schmidt 2024f)**

I met Taylor through my internship with the Physicians for Social Responsibility's Nuclear Weapons Abolition program this past summer. She's a reporter with the online nonprofit news outlet Inkstick, which holds a critical lens to the military-industrial complex. We mainly focus on her work with Inkstick, how the outlet embodies a different approach to journalism than the traditional one that emphasizes objectivity, and how the structure of her workday as a journalist differs from the image painted by Mark Fishman in *Manufacturing the News* (1980).

I think her response on the question of journalistic objectivity was quite interesting: Journalists shouldn't strive for objectivity in their work, per se, but they should strive for a "rigorous" reporting process. I think back to some of the

most compelling articles I've read, podcast series I've listened to, and video I've watched, and all of those were so compelling not because of their objective nature, but because of the rigor the reporter(s) demonstrated in their work.

To name a few examples, the Blowback podcast isn't so compelling because of an objective tone—it rejects such a tone explicitly in its first episode—but because of the rigorous research process that the podcasters demonstrate throughout the entire series thus far. The same can be said of The Lever's Master Plan podcast, which incorporates research carried out at a university's archive of Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell's private writings.

While objectivity should certainly be cast aside, that doesn't mean one should treat lazy journalism as acceptable, and that is especially true for the podcast medium.

## Appendix B: Transcripts

### "Introducing: The Honorable Series" (Schmidt 2024g)

*The "set" of* The Kennel *video podcast—which appears to be a small apartment living room—fades into view.*

*Numerous items hang on the two blue walls: a blue and white plaid blanket, some acoustic foam panels, a red Middle Tennessee DSA T-shirt, a cluster of a couple Blu-Rays, a couple CD cases, a book, and more.*

*The edge of a beige couch can be seen in the bottom-right corner of the frame. A keffiyeh drapes over the back of a dark green club chair. Between them, where the walls form a corner, two plastic storage containers stacked on top of each other act as an end table, holding a desk lamp that bends upwards and casts a light on the T-shirt and cluster of physical media.*

*A white door partially covered in acoustic foam looms in the left third of the frame. A scraggly piece of notebook paper hangs just above the peephole, bearing a simple doodle of a kennel.*

*In the foreground, a black Shure SM7B microphone sits off-center in the bottom third of the frame. A black leather desk chair hides behind it.*

*ETHAN SCHMIDT strolls onto the set, wearing a grew sweatpants and a red T-shirt that bears the logo of a distorted skull and the word "SPOON" above it. A pair of AKG K240 headphones rests on his head.*

ETHAN SCHMIDT [*sitting down in their chair*]: Oh, shit…my wires are going all over the place…alrighty! Let's get this shit on the road!

*Fade out.*

*TITLE SCREEN:* [12]

*A blue screen fades in.*

*SOUNDBITE: A light bulb's pull chain clicking on.*

The Kennel *logo appears in the top right corner of the frame.*

*SOUNDBITE: An unintelligible vocal, best described in writing as "Mrah!"*

[12] The same title screen and end screen is used in each episode.

*A text written in a bold yellow cursive font appears, filling in the rest of the frame: "The Honorable Series."*

*ETHAN, sitting in his desk chair behind the microphone, slides into view over the TITLE SCREEN, leaving a thin blue border around the frame.*

ES: Hey, friend! You know, it's kinda weird…It's been five years since I first started college at Henderson State in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and I am not sitting in the spot I would have expected to be in when I was a freshman. I started out as a double major in Communications and Theatre [Arts], focusing in digital media production and acting, respectively.

I started really getting into the student radio station there—[*The station's logo pops up on the left side of the frame.*] KSWH-LP 102.5 FM, "The Pulse" in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. [*The logo disappears.*]

My show was nothing like what I do on *The Kennel*, though. At the time, I had no interest in politics. I felt like I knew barely anything about it—other than that, well, most of our politicians were essentially acting as the minions of wealthy elites and corporations. And based on that, I considered myself an independent.

The show I did on KSWH was called "*In One Ear* [*Digital flyer appears in the top right corner of the frame.*]—where everything you hear can go in one ear and right out the other!" [*The flyer disappears.*]

At its core, there was an honest admission: I'm going to cover the things that are—or should be considered—less important to any news media outlet—music, movies, video games, and tech, et cetera. Topics with political elements would be discussed if they directly related to any pop culture events, but otherwise, I wouldn't touch political topics with a ten-foot—[*chuckles*]—with a ten-foot pole. I took a lot of inspiration for the show from different pop culture news commentators on YouTube, like theneedledrop and ReviewTechUSA.

I called myself "Big Dog Ethan" on there, uh, as my high school friend, Jay Duda, and I ran a podcast called *Tea Time with the Big Dogs*. And, uh, yeah! Still sticking with that name today! [*Makes clicking sound as he sips from his coffee cup*]

But then COVID hit. Everyone at Henderson went back home for remote instruction. I went back to my hometown of Saint Louis, Missouri, where I stayed at both my parents' and sisters' homes. We kind of went—*I* kind of went back and forth between those places, but, during this time, I started seeing how the developments in government and politics can have a direct impact on my life. While I didn't receive the direct $1200 or $2000

stimulus checks from the CARES Act and American Rescue plans, respectively, I did receive a couple of $800 stipends from Henderson State, as a result of CARES act assistance provided to the school.

ES [*continuing*]: I think I might have misspoke there, uh, just a second ago. I think I said, "two—$2,000 stipend?" I think technically it was, but I remember there being, like, a lot of debate around whether or not it was cool for Joe Biden to first promise $2,000 and then be like, "Well, it's $1,400 plus the $600 in—in funding that, uh, President Trump already provided y'all."

Anyways, that…I just had, like, a flashback there, like a [*chuckles*]—like a PTSD flashback to having to, uh, witness that ridiculous walk-back from the Biden administration. Very emblematic of it, if you ask me, BUT anyways…

So, there was also the COVID-19 vaccine. That was another way in which I saw how government, would have a material, uh, effect on my life. And, uh, of course, this was a vaccine that essentially brought an end to the lockdown. Now, side note, of course: Despite what the Biden administration might want you to think, COVID still exists. People are still getting sick from that shit. I, myself, had a bit of a COVID scare mys—uh, myself, and, also, I have another friend who had to isolate, I would say, what, maybe 2, 3 weeks ago? So, COVID is still a thing. COVID is still an issue. And frankly, we haven't really talked enough yet about long COVID either, and I—I probably should be chatting more about that on here, but, uh, well, I can't cover everything, it seems, so…

But, anyways, yeah, so the COVID-19 [vaccine] brought an end to the lockdown—even though it's still a thing—it did bring an end to the lockdown, which was—which is obviously a nice thing for the government to do.

But during that lockdown, as I was sitting around waiting for those vaccines to drop, I realized I should probably start keeping up with the news. Of course, I downloaded the, uh, the essential news apps: the *Associated Press*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, et cetera. But, those outlets were a little too dry for me. Since I liked watching YouTube videos for pop culture news commentary, I figured I should start doing the same with political news commentary. So, I started watching Secular Talk on YouTube. It's a political talk show hosted by Kyle Kulinski.

It became a daily ritual for me to watch his videos. Coming off the high of the Bernie Sanders 2020—[*pauses to burb quietly*] gotta burp there—presidential campaign, the populist left-leaning Kyle Kulinski delivered both funny and nihilistic commentary on the wild developments

surrounding the 2020 presidential election. There was also the George—[*stumbles*] blah—George Floyd protests, there was COVID-19, and there was just everything in between that year.

ES [*continuing*]: At the time, he would put together roughly one-to-two-hour shows that he would record as a podcast in front of a camera, then upload the full audio recording to, uh—it was this obscure site called Blog Top—Blog Talk Radio—and then he would also upload video recordings of each segment to YouTube. Of course, having hundreds of thousands of subscribers at that time, he had developed a network of fellow commentators, which I would naturally, uh, check out myself.

He actually appeared on Joe Rogan's—bumpin' into the microphone there—now, he actually appeared on Joe Rogan's 2020 election night YouTube live stream. There was also his appearance on The Hill's *Rising* talk show, which would explode in popularity after its move to YouTube.

Now, the hosts of that show, Krystal Ball and Saager Enjeti—yes, Krystal Ball's her actual name—they would eventually leave that network in 2021 to start their own video podcast called *Breaking Points*. Also in 2021, Kulinski and Ball started their own podcast, *Krystal, Kyle and Friends*. And since starting that podcast—fun fact—they apparently fell in love and married in 2023. Kind of weird.

I can list a ton more left-leaning political podcasts that I've found since watching Kulinski's show, but we'd be here for another two hours. The point is, I was becoming a hell of a lot more concerned with the developments in politics since I started watching or listening to these independently produced political podcasts. And I wanted to share that change of heart in the content I made for Henderson State's student radio station. Though, I did recognize I was also a little nervous talking politics on the airwaves.

So, in the Fall 2020 semester, I started doing a late-night political talk show called *The Small Stakes Show*.

*The digital flyer—bearing a simple design that was clearly made with a simple word processor—appears in the top right corner of the frame. A random black bar appears below it, which can only be explained as a technical glitch. Both items disappear after a few moments.*

ES: Now, the name refers to the show's theme song, "Small Stakes." It's the opener to indie rock band Spoon's 2002 *Kill the Moonlight* album.

*The* Kill the Moonlight *album cover appears in the top left corner of the frame.*

*ETHAN pinches the top of his shirt to emphasize the big "SPOON" logo on it.*

ES: I'm, uh, you know, I'm, uh. just a small fan. Ju—just a small fan.

*The album cover disappears.*

ES: Uh, yeah, I love their shit. Especially "Small Stakes"…that—that song never fails to get me hyped. It's got, like, this, really cool, like, digital keyboard, uh, kind of background to it.

*ETHAN starts vocalizing a keyboard melody while pretending to play a keyboard.*

ES: "Small stakes give you blues.
[But] you don't feel taken, don't think you've been used."

[*more keyboard mimicking*]

"'Cause it's all right Friday night to Sunday!
IT FEELS ALRIGHT, KEEPS YOUR MIND ON THE PAGE!"

*JUMP CUT to zoomed-in shot of the TITLE SCREEN, now crooked, as a high-pitched tone rings out. Simple text on the screen reads, "I'll spare you the rest of that awkward-ass rendition of 'Small Stakes.'"*

*JUMP CUT back to ETHAN.*

ES: Anyways, I'm really butchering that, uh, butchering that song, but, uh, yeah, that song is a goddamn banger, and—and, I just remember…yeah, I just remember getting so hyped, uh, for the show every time I would, uh, start the show off with that song.

But, yeah, the show broadcasted, uh, during the FCC's safe harbor hours. It's a time designated for slightly edgier content, in which FCC guidelines on curse words aren't as strict. Really, I wasn't even trying to get away with curse words. I just wanted to use the show as practice for delivering political commentary.

Now, the following semester in 2021, I got an internship at a nearby community radio station in Hot Springs, Arkansas—KUHS-LP 102.5 FM. [*The station logo briefly appears in the left side of the frame.*] The main job was to produce weekly spots for the local library and any other ones requested by the manager there, but, I also got to host a two-hour show called *Beasts and Dragons*—"discussing politics when the Beast and Dragon are adored!

[*in a noticeably deeper voice*] "…Welcome to the apocalypse, friend."

ES [*continuing*]: Uh, yeah, so the title is also based off a Spoon song. It's called, "The Beast and Dragon, Adored," which, uh, was actually the opening track of the band's 2005 album, *Gimme Fiction*. Frontman Britt Daniel actually got the idea for the song from this picture that he saw in a magazine at his grandma's house when he was growing up. [*The picture appears in the top right corner of the frame.*] It shows a picture of a seven-headed beast and a seven-headed dragon being worshiped by a group of seven people.

Naturally, I took a copy of the picture, put the Republican and Democratic Party logos on the Beast and Dragon, and ran with that as a poster for the show. [*The poster appears as he says this, then disappears*.]

I did that show for about seven to eight months, and as I was doing that show, I started this Substack, just as a way to upload recordings of my *Beasts and Dragons* shows.

Funny enough, for a variety of reasons, I only ended up getting one uploaded, which was this interview with, uh, Dan Whitfield. He was running for U.S. Senate in Arkansas…

But fast forward to Christmas of 2021. My brother was kind enough to get me, well, this mic and a USB interface to hook up the mic to my laptop.

Now, initially, I used it to record a variety of interviews for the student radio station at Henderson during my last semester there, in Spring of 2022. During that semester, though, I later found myself connecting with numerous candidates who were rejecting corporate PAC money…and they were more than willing to hop on the podcast—which is wild to me, 'cause like, literally, it's just—it's just me, like some random college kid going to a small school in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, that's already like struggling financially—which we'll get to that in a second—but it's just wild to me that there were—and honestly, that there are still politicians who are just like, "Listen, you know, it doesn't seem like this is, uh, that you got a big following, but, hey, publicity is publicity. Let's hop on there and, talk shit." That that's just kind of wild to me, but, nonetheless…

At the same time, it also acted as a resource for covering students' views on the destruction of Henderson State…uh, the—*The Kennel* did. The school had been going through financial hell, as the former president, Dr. Glen Jones—as I've been told—spent about $50 million on a new set of dorms at our commuter college with no evidence that we would see an uptick in on-campus residents. That sent the school into debt and a decrease in enrollment resulting from the pandemic…did nothing to help the crisis.

ES [*continuing*]: It all came to a climax during the spring 2022 semester, when rumors swirled about the campus that a lot of professors would be fired and programs cut. Those rumors turned out to be true. 88 faculty professors were eventually fired, with an announced 25 academic programs planned to be phased out. With those kind of fears swimming throughout the campus community, I felt that it was important to have some discussions with students about what they were hearing. With the university remaining so tight-lipped about what was in store for us—or at best, obscuring the reality of the events in the most euphemistically-phrased language possible—*The Kennel* ended up being a source of raw, unfiltered speculation about what was going down and what was about to happen next.

Since the administration essentially said, "Fuck you," to every liberal arts department, and since I was a communications student at the time, I transferred here to MTSU in the fall of 2022. That s—[*stumbles over his words*]—that semester, I conducted as many interviews as I could with different candidates. The following semester, with no major elections coming up…I kind of put the podcast on hiatus, choosing to use it for, uh, sharing relevant projects or interviews for my classes.

Since then, I've used *The Kennel* for a variety of projects: interviews with candidates rejecting corporate PAC money like I usually would do, though there was really only one instance of that since Fall 2022, which was my interview with Aftyn Behn. That was a special election. Um, really, since then I haven't done, like, a lot of interviews with, uh, candidates who are rejecting corporate PAC money.

There's also recordings of the commentary segments from my radio show with WMTS 88.3 FM—that's the student radio station here at MTSU. It's called *The Unnatural State of Affairs*. [*The logo briefly appears in the top right corner of the frame.*] It's a left-leaning political commentary show that also provides an hour of music, usually punk and indie rock, but really, it's just whatever music I'm vibing with that week.

Really, it's just kind of a continuation, maybe a "spiritual sequel," if you will, to, uh, *Beast and Dragons*, the one that I did at that community radio station in Arkansas. *The Unnatural State of Affairs*, I should note, that is going to continue this semester.

Of course, *The Kennel* is also going to be home to my honors thesis project. It's going to consist of two parts: 1. A creative component, which will take the form of eight interviews that I'll produce and upload to *The Kennel*—one every Friday.

ES [*continuing*]: Uhhhhhhhhh…or maybe Saturday because, uh, yeah, by the—by the looks of it, I won't be able to get this first interview up until tomorrow. I've already got one recorded, and believe me, it's pretty cool.

It looks a little bit disorienting, not gonna lie—or at least, *I* look a little bit disoriented because, yeah, there is a ton of stuff I was finding out about the person I was interviewing, uh, literally the night before. Then on top of that too, I was also, like, starting new classes, and so—anyways, I—I literally, like, I just, like, I would say, like, maybe 15 minutes before that interview started. I had just gotten through the door.

So, you can kind of—you can kind of tell I look a little bit, like, frazzled, a little bit disoriented, but nonetheless, uh, I do think that, a really good discussion does unfold between me and the guest, which will be, uh, Yeah, it'll be interesting! I can't wait—[*stumbles over his words*] BLEH!—Can't wait for you to see that!

If I can talk tonight…Goddamn…

There's also going to be a written component, uh, to this project as well—this thesis. Um, it's going to be, a pretty long, uh, pretty long written component. It's going to contain a justification for a set of guidelines for independently produced political podcasts. Um, initially my plan was to have that ready to share with you all, but I was a tad busier than expected with my internship in D.C. this summer.

So, uh, listen, I—I'm working around the clock to get that ready to share with you, but in the meantime, I'm gonna share with you a paper that I wrote in the Fall 2023 semester for my Honors research seminar. It has served as the main point of inspiration for this thesis, and it'll give you a good idea of what I hope to accomplish with this project.

Before I do that, there's one last thing I—I'd like to say about *The Kennel*: I transferred to MTSU, after attending Henderson State for three years. Now, your senior year—it should be a last hurrah with your professors, and friends—and really, your entire campus community. But, it kind of felt like I was starting back at square one when I got here, a—and, um, you know, thankfully, I—I—I have kind of managed to, you know, find, uh you know, find a community here—especially with my friends at, uh, the Young Democratic Socialists of America. And believe me, we—we've got a lot of great plans ahead of us as well. Stay tuned to my Instagram for that—and really stay tuned to our Instagram—the MTSU YDSA's Instagram. That's, uh, you can find that at, uh, what is it, mtsudsa on Instagram. That's where you'll find all the main updates for what we're doing there. But, anyways, um…

ES [*continuing*]: I—I have found a lot of great community here, but one thing that has always been a source of empowerment for me is…this: *The Kennel*. Um, and I think it's…an ongoing radical experiment that demonstrates why journalists really shouldn't concern themselves with appearing [*in a sarcastic bold voice*] "OBJECTIVE" or "NEUTRAL."

I've personally found that the news outlets that wear that facade of "objectivity" or "neutrality," or whatever—they tend to appear in the most manipulative and distorting, in my view.

With that in mind, I'm incredibly proud of the work that I've done on here. and will continue—continue, uh, to do. I am aware, however, uh, that I'm going to need a job once I graduate, and I'm also aware that not every employer is gonna be keen on taking a new worker who liberally shares his views on politics online. There may be a time where I will need to take this down.

Uh, these episodes that are set to come out, though: Those will be transcribed, and they'll be available in writing with the approval of my thesis at the end of this semester.

So, I'd like to extend a—a massive thank you to the Honors College at MTSU for allowing me to embark on this thesis. I hope that it'll demonstrate the power of the podcast for reengaging a genuinely disillusioned American public.

And finally, I'd like to extend a thank you to all those who tuned in to these episodes. You make this a worthwhile endeavor, and, I hope you enjoy what I've got in store for you this semester.

Also, sorry that you had to put up with that wobbling camera. I literally, just like, looked over to the left of me, and I saw that it was wobbling, and I'm like, "Ahhhhh, fuck!"

You listeners, you really put up, uh, with a lot. So, genuinely, I—I do appreciate it. I—I do.

*Fade out.*

*Fade in.*

ES: All right, so this is the paper that I wrote for my honors research, uh, seminar class.

Um…yeah, th—this has really been kind of the—the main point of inspiration, um, for this, um, for this thesis, uh, I would say.

> Independently Produced Political Podcasts Foster Audience Trust…by Ethan Schmidt.

…if you didn't know already. Anyways…

> Independently produced political podcasts foster audience trust. The status quo of the dominant, heavily consolidated, and corporate-owned news media environment continues to profit off the peddling of careless misinformation, damaging the trusting relationship that it used to hold with its citizens.
>
> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky examine one of the main causes of this poor news coverage in *Manufacturing Consent*, arguing that the structure of mainstream news outlets allow for a lack of coverage on critical current events, which favor the interests of the ruling class. The writers propose a "Propaganda Model" comprised of five filters that outline how for-profit news outlets determine what information gets published or broadcasted:
>
> "One: the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass media firms;
>
> "Number two: advertising as the primary income source of the mass media;
>
> "Number three: the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business and,"—

—quote-unquote—

> —"'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power;
>
> "Number four: 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media;"
>
> "And five: anti-communism as a national religion and control mechanism."

Yeah,

> Herman and Chomsky then apply this model to six case studies which examine for-profit U.S. news outlets coverage of foreign affairs, affirming the model's efficacy. Recent academic work has reaffirmed the Propaganda Model's applic—applicability.

ES: I think that's how you pronounce that word? I mean, I fucking wrote it, I should know how to pronounce it, right?

Anyways, uh…[*scoffs*]

> Recent academic work has reaffirmed the Propaganda Model's applicability to today's current events…and presented ways in which it could be improved.
>
> The public senses, the flaws of mainstream news media. Americans' trust in mass media has hit a record low. 38 per—38% of respondents to a recent Gallup poll said they have no trust in news media at all, 34% reported little trust, and only 28% said they have a great deal or fair amount of trust. The decentralized nature of the podcast holds the potential to regain the trust of citizens.
>
> Yet, the dwindling faith in mainstream news media has left a power vacuum for either unreliable or blatantly dishonest actors to fill it. By simply donning the facade of an anti-establishment ethos, toxic podcast hosts—like those of the "Intellectual Dark Web"—easily convince news li—new listeners to trust them.
>
> Not all of the podcasters filling this vacuum pose such threats. In fact, they pose a unique capability to provide thorough analysis of wider societal issues with a greater density of information, while utilizing a comedic approach to delivering news and commentary. The use of a comedic frame in presenting the news, however, requires the examination [reexamination] of a central journalistic principle: Objectivity.
>
> Can any news media organization be truly objective? Is it enough for journalists to simply strive for objectivity and shrug their shoulders if they don't meet that standard? Or, is it time to accept a different understanding of th—of the limitations of news media an—and embody that understanding in the blossoming medium of the podcast to reestablish trust with audiences who feel betrayed by the shortcomings of today's mainstream media networks?
>
> A change to the status quo in traditional news media is necessary, as a functioning journalist—

—[*stumbles over his words*] MLAH!—

> —as a functioning information ecosystem is crucial to the maintenance of a healthy and functioning democracy. The *Washington Post*'s tagline may be trite, but it is true: "Democracy

dies in darkness." Can the podcast medium reinvigorate or help revitalize trust in U.S. news media? If so, how should podcasters tailor their content to maximize audience trust?

**Corporate Filters**

Political podcasts' rejection of corporate filters strengthens their credibility. As the prevalence of independent news media has expanded with the growing adoption of the internet as a primary source for information, the once unquestioned credibility of major news institutions has cracked in recent years. Coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq demonstrated how even the most highly respected news outlets can devastatingly—

—and I want to stress here…

*ETHAN cups his hand around the mic and leans into it.*

ES: DEVASTATINGLY—

*Screenshots of multiple Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting studies appear for a second all over the frame. They deride mainstream news media coverage of the Bush Administration's publicized case for invading Iraq in 2003.*

*ETHAN returns to his normal upright position.*

ES: —fail to provide fair coverage of a major foreign policy event to their audiences. The lack of substantial warning from the supposed "watchdogs" about the 2008 Great Recession further highlighted U.S. news outlets inability to inform their consumers. Most recently, a trove of documents released during the litigation of the now-settled lawsuit between Fox News and Dominion Voting Systems revealed that prominent hosts on the most watched cable news channel—which once boasted to be [*in a sarcastic, deep, and booming broadcaster voice*] "fair and balanced"—

—quote-unquote—

—deliberately spread false conspiracy theories about the 2020 election.

The structures of these dominant outlets fuel such poor coverage. As Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model articulates, the for-profit motive of major news networks—

—what they call the first—

—“the first filter”—demands that outlet owners prioritize profits and consolidation above adequate news coverage. This incentive to cut costs and maximize revenue encourages a heavy reliance on the subsidies of advertisers, whose money wields massive power over what content gets disseminated, forming a second filter of information. Mainstream news outlets submission to the profit motive also dictates a—

—quote—

—“need for a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news”—

—unquote—

—meaning that news media personnel must maintain efficient access to powerful government officials and business executives to produce a continuous stream of content. Journalists achieve this constant production of content by facilitating relatively uncritical relationships with their powerful sources. The maintenance of such relationships acts as the third filter in the Propaganda Model. The fear of catching flak—

—what they call, quote—

—“negative responses to a media statement or program”—

—unquote—

—constitutes the model's fourth filter. The final filter—

—quote—

—“anti-communism as a control mechanism”—

—unquote—

—seeks to ensure that any—any content which can be construed as pro-communist will not be disseminated. These five filters predict that the content produced by news media organizations will favor the interests of their wealthy owners and the U.S. government. While some academics remain captivated by the Propaganda Model, more than thirty years after its introduction that fascination lies in the understanding that the aging theory requires an update.

ES: The Propaganda Model ignores the influence of concrete journalism practices on the quality of news coverage. While sociologist Jeff Goodwin praises its compelling dissection of the for-profit news outlets' structural incentives that lead to poor coverage, he notes that it fails to account for the tangible newsroom operations that directly impact the news that gets published. Goodwin suggests that further research into pro-establishment news media bias should attempt to integrate Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model with the—

—quote—

—"everyday journalistic practices that produce the news"—

—unquote—

—whose effects have been examined in works like Mark Fishman's *Manufacturing the News*.

The Model operates within a limited perspective, but that limited perspective still demonstrates how the structure of for-profit news outlets partly leads to poor coverage on current events.

The U.S. population—whether aware of the model's expectations for corporate news outlets reporting or not—share a growing sense of distrust in these dominant institutions. Richard Fletcher and Sora Park found that among 20,000 respondents across 12 different nations, U.S respondents prefer—

—quote-unquote—

—"non-mainstream news sources" the most. While the 2023 Reuters Institute Digital News report showed 32% of respondents affirming their trust in US news media—a 6% increase from the previous year's report—that percentage is still well below the global average of 40%. Further, Reporters Without Borders 2023 Press Freedom Index ranked the US at 45 out of 180 countries—a decrease of three points from last year's index.

I'd like to note as well—an—and believe me, I make a big deal about this in, uh, in the written portion that I'm working on right now for the thesis—

*A screenshot of the Reporters Without Borders' 2024 World Press Freedom Index report on the U.S. appears in the top right corner of the frame.*

ES: —uh, yeah, that's dropped down to 55. Like, since I wrote this, they did the next report and they found that, “Oh yeah, shit has gotten worse!” So, anyways, just—just something to keep in mind, just…We're fucked! We're fucked.

Anyways, uh, yeah…

> Part of their justification for the ranking

that they—that they gave in that report

> included—

—quote—

> —“the unprecedented levels of distrust in the American media”—

—unquote.

> This low trust creates a power vacuum in the news media ecosystem for independent news and news commentary podcasters to fill.

Now,

> from a technical standpoint, the establishment of audience trust is a good podcasting technique. Lene Heisenberg and Iben Have examined Danish listeners’ expectations for podcast hosts in 2023, finding—among other important qualities—that host must demonstrate—

—quote—

> —“insight into the world of the target group”—

—unquote.

> More specifically—

—quote—

> —“the participants expect a podcast host to be one with the audience and understand their way of life, as well as what is currently running through their minds”—

—unquote.

ES: Independently produced political podcasts inherently provide an insight into the world of their target groups. Their very existence addresses—or at least aims to address—their target audiences' deep concerns with the efficacy of established news media outlets, as such, podcasts provide an alternative to these institutions. Additionally, at an international level, low trust in mainstream news correlates with a preference for non-mainstream news sources, meaning that those turning to independent news and news commentary podcast might—*might*—largely be doing so in rejection of established news media organizations.

The "Intellectual Dark Web" embodies this capitaliz—

—[*stumbles over his words*] MLAH!—if I can talk today, uh, they embody

this capitalization on distrust in mainstream news media. The term, coined by Barry Weiss in a 2018 *New York Times* opinion article, refers to—

—quote—

—"a virtual network of self-proclaimed cultural critics who host various media within the realm of online pseudo-academia."

Is it "aca-dee-mia or aca-day-mia?" I should probably look that up, but honestly, it is 11:20 right now, and I gotta get this thing edited, so…

The most prominent members of the Intellectual Dark Web, or IDW, include the Daily Wire co-founder Ben Shapiro, psychologist Jordan Peterson, conservative political commentator Dave Rubin, and—

—probably most notably—

—Joe Rogan—all of whom host popular podcasts and proudly brand them as independently produced.

Yeah,

IDW podcasters amass hundreds of thousands, if not millions of views per episode, but their reputation for slanted, obstinate, an—and,

frankly,

ES: outright bigoted news commentary should not result in such popularity. Uh, despite their lack of concern for providing accurate information, and despite the tendencies for some of these IDW figures to promote their own agendas that encourage the maintenance of the status quo—contrary to their claims of being anti-establishment—these podcasters have captured the attention of massive audiences. Why?

And, uh, this comes from, uh, Fran—how do you pronounce that—Fran—Francesco Manella. Uh, she's a Stanford University student—er, or was a Stanford University student at the time of writing this. Quote—

—"the public seems to trust them because,"

well,

"they operate outside of the norms of institutional, traditional journalism where trust is in decline, not despite that fact"—

—unquote.

At this moment, a podcaster's mere appearance of challenging corporate news media hegemony—whether substantial or not—strengthens their perceived credibility.

Now, onto

**The Stimulating Brew of Comedy and Journalism**

Uh, first, I—I—I'd like to highlight, uh, um, a very brief quote from, uh, actually, uh, from a book on improv comedy. It's called *Truth in Comedy*. An—and they have a simple line in there that—that's really stuck with me for some time:

"The truth is funny."

The mixture of comedy and journalism potently engages audiences. Caty Borum Chattoo and Lindsay Green-Barber examined the relationship between comedy and political journalism through their research on a collaborative effort between the New Jersey-based Dirty Little Secrets investigative reporting project and stand-up comedians.

ES: Side note: The name of that outlet, Dirty Little Secrets? It—it's already got that All-American Rejects song, uh—uh, just playing rent-free in my head right now, but, I digress…

> Uh, the effort, uh, resulted in two stand-up comedy shows featuring acts that all provided factually-accurate commentary on the egregious instances of environmental contamination in New Jersey—the sole focus of Dirty Little Secrets. Borum Chattoo and Green-Barber conducted surveys on audiences for the two shows, finding that audiences were overwhelmingly entertained and informed by the events, expressed that the issue of environmental contamination felt like a more pressing matter to them, and reported a willingness to act on the issue.

And this comes from their, uh, article. Quote—

> —"comedy, therefore," the researchers concluded, "may be an effective way to engage audiences with serious journalistic information and facts"—

—unquote.

> Sara Ödmark's "Making News Funny: Differences in News Framing between Journalists and Comedians" suggests that this effect also applies to political commentary podcasts, but it indirectly raises questions about the validity of a central journalistic principle. Ödmark compared 5,119 pieces of traditional Swedish news content—

—what she dubs as "vertical media"—

> —with 104 episodes from two different comedic Swedish political podcasts—

—what she dubs as "horizontal media"—

> —finding that the podcasts more frequently focused their coverage on topics concerning the public, provided a greater amount of information about their stories, and—

—quote—

> "present the news overwhelmingly with a personal and emotional framing, while the vertical media and national radio journalists are more detached from the material"—

ES: —unquote.

The podcasts' heightened focus on a—

—quote—

—"societal level"—

—unquote—

—demonstrates that they performed more effectively than traditional Swedish news media at informing listeners about political events, and features a greater density of information on the topics covered. This is where comedically-framed political podcasts excel. Evaluating these podcasts' strong tendencies to indulge in personal and emotional framing—

—like I do on here—

—however, requires the scrutiny of a fundamental journalistic tenet: objectivity.

In my view—in my view, uh, yeah,

the concept of objectivity in reporting is a

goddamn

farce. Considering the American Psychological Associations definition of objectivity—

—quote—

—"the tendency to base judgments and interpretations on external data rather than on subjective factors such as personal feelings, beliefs, and experiences"—

—unquote—

—the possibility of objectivity in reporting has never been possible. How can news media outlets be objective when their stories must rely on human sources who convey their own—

—quote—

—"personal feelings, beliefs and experiences"—

ES: —unquote—

that inform their worldviews? And what—

—quote-unquote—

—"external data" can reporters and content creators utilize to determine which of these sources should be included in their content?

In the words of Lewis Raven Wallace from his book, uh, *The View from Somewhere*,

some journalists may—

—quote—

—"understand objectivity as aspirational, but agree to the attempt"—

—unquote.

But this agreement lacks an understanding of the history behind the development of a—

—quote unquote—

—"objective" press.

This standard was first invoked by news outlets to suppress journalists' rights to form labor unions and collectively bargain with their employers. Lewis Raven Wallace illuminates this history in *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, which in part examines the 1937 Supreme Court case *Associated Press vs. National Labor Relations Board*. In 1935, the *Associated Press* fired reporter Morris Watson for his membership with the growing American [*sic*] News Guild, reasoning that his affiliation with the union prevented him from providing objective reporting.

While the First Amendment protects publishers rights to fire employees for perceived poor work—

—quote—

ES: —“the AP blundered, putting too thin a veil over the fact that they fired Watson for organizing with the Newspaper Guild”—

—unquote.

The court ruled in favor of Watson.

Quote—

—“the majority view was that the AP was simply using the argument of potential bias to thwart organizing, and Watson was reinstated”—

—unquote.

Not only is true objectivity in news reporting simply not possible, but news media outlets have also held journalists to this impossible standard to prevent them from amassing the collective power to determine the conditions of their employment.

Considering the fallacy of objectivity in news reporting and ulterior motives of news outlets in expecting reporters to adhere to such impossible standards, Ödmark’s findings about the use of negative personal and emotional framing in political podcasts do not imply an inferior quality to the medium, but rather demonstrate the tactics that hosts must employ to attract listeners.

Heiselberg and Have found that podcast listeners also expect hosts to—

—quote—

—“attract and retain attention”—

—unquote—

—exude—

—quote—

—“engagement and passion”—

—unquote—

—and demonstrate—

ES: —quote—

—“self-disclosure (a willingness to share personal accounts)”—

—unquote.

The findings suggest that podcast listeners do not turn to a podcast—

TEXT-TO-VOICE RECORDING: —simply for a purely—

*A black box appears with simple white text in the bottom right corner of the frame: “yikes…audio recording software glitched out here…”*

—objective delivery of information. They want a personality that can form a—

—quote—

—“parasocial relationship”—

—unquote—

—with them, a—

—quote—

—“one sided relationship”—

—unquote—

—in which the host knows nothing about the listener.

In the case of political podcasts, then, the pursuit of pure objectivity will not engage listeners. Rather a host willingness to disclose their subjective truth composed of their own analysis of the news, disclaimers on unknown factors, and acknowledgments of the vulnerabilities in their arguments will engage listeners.

**Conclusion**

Independent news and news commentary podcasts foster audience trust. The future of the news media industry remains hazy and bleak, but the growing power of independent political podcasts, as well as their capability to include a greater density of information and analysis than traditional news media, are a source of hope for

positive change. And while the established standard of objectivity in news reporting no longer remains true, that doesn't mean all journalistic principles should be abandoned. New codes of ethics need to be crafted not just for journalists, but for news content creators of all types—podcasters, YouTubers, Twitch live streamers, Instagram influencers, TikTok influencers, and more. Lewis Raven Wallace concluded *The View from Somewhere* with a good starting point for what these codes should look like.

Quote—

—"I propose hanging on to some basic tenets of traditional journalistic ethics: Verification and fact checking, editorial independence from political parties and corporations, clarity and transparency about financial and political conflicts of interest, and deep, thorough sourcing. I also join a chorus of journalists who have been gradually replacing objectivity with the practice of radical transparency about both our values and methodologies. Finally, I think defining our values as journalists when journalism is under attack means admitting that we are activists and becoming clear what we are activists for."

*Fade out.*

*Fade in.*

ES: I don't know how awkward, uh, reading a paper off a—[*chuckles*]—teleprompter is gonna show up on camera, but nonetheless, uh, hopefully it turns out well.

Um…anyways, friends, uh, thank you so much for watching, listening to this sort of introductory video to, uh, the series, I'm gonna be working on for this semester. So, uh, yeah, really means a lot to me, and uh, it's kind of nice. I'm finally getting to do what I do here on *The Kennel* as, uh, part of a class project, um—not really a class project, really more like a, I don't know, kinda like an independent research, uh, project, I guess, so…

Um, anyways, you're gonna be seeing some cool stuff, uh, happening on here, uh, this semester. So, hit the subscribe button, hit that "like" button if you liked what I had to say, leave comments, and all that good stuff, and, uh, yeah, I'll be back with some, uh—with some fiery stuff, for sure!

*CLOSING SCREEN:*

*ETHAN fades out, revealing the opening TITLE SCREEN.*

*“The Honorable Series” text disappears.*

*SOUNDBITE: An unintelligible vocal, best described in writing as “Mrah!”*

The Kennel *logo disappears, leaving a blank blue screen.*

*SOUNDBITE: A light bulb’s pull chain clicking on.*

*Fade out.*

**“Cyril Focht” (Schmidt 2024d)**

*TITLE SCREEN*

ETHAN SCHMIDT: Hey, hey, hey, what's happenin’, friends? Big Dog Ethan here!

Um, so, this is gonna be the first inter—interview for, uh, my thesis project: Uh, the—it’s *The Kennel: The Honorable Edition* or *The Honorable Series*? It's still a bit of a working title…

Um, so I have, uh, Cyril Focht with us today. Cyril, how are you doing?

CYRIL FOCHT: I'm doing pretty well! How about yourself, Ethan?

ES: Um, yeah! Yeah, I'm doing pretty, uh, pretty well…

Um, so this…this is really—this interview is going to be kind of interesting, I think, because, um, I—so I, you know, I set this up about two months ago, and uh, I, um, I set it up with Cyril because I actually ran into him at, the Nashville City Hall, which I—I would definitely love to talk about that a little bit.

CF [*quietly*]: Oh, yeah!

ES: Um, but anyways…so I set it up, like, about two months ago, then I thought to email you, uh, last night, just confirm all the details, and…yeah, I guess I haven't been keeping up, uh, with the election as much as I thought. So, um, you ran for, uh, Congressional District 6 of Tennessee?

CF: That's correct.

ES: Yeah. And, uh, you ended up losing the primary—which, um, which really surprised me!

CF: Surprised a lot of people! [*chuckles*]

ES: Yeah, yeah. Because, I mean, I was looking at OpenSecrets’, uh, website. Um, I think, among all the Democratic primary candidates, you, uh, you had the most money. You still weren't taking any corporate taxes.

CF: Yeah, uh, not only did I have the most money, I was the only one who did any fundraising.

ES: Yeah, yeah, and, um, so I guess first, like, I have to ask: So the person who beat you was, uh, Lore Ann Bergman, who, by the way—

CF [*correcting ETHAN*]: Lore [Lor-ee] Bergman.

ES [*misunderstanding Cyril*]: Yeah, Lore Ann Berg— okay, and, uh yeah, for starters, I'm also going to be reaching out to her to try to get her on the podcast, because I think she'd be really interesting to talk to.

Um, so what would you attribute, um…uh, Lore Ann Bergman's, uh, like, win too?

CF: Yeah. I mean, the, the short of it is having your name first alphabetically does a lot for you.

ES: Really!?

CF: Right? So, you were surprised about the—the primary results, so were a lot of people. Really—basically, everyone in, uh, not only in my political sphere, but also what I was hearing from people, sort of, two or three degrees of separation away were—were really expecting for me to win the primary, you know, not in part because of what you saw on, uh, for my FEC filings, because I had done so much fundraising, right? I was putting in all of this, uh, time and effort into, uh, running a good campaign.

Even…there's someone I was talking to, uh, a couple months ago who's been helping a lot on a bunch of, uh, state level cam—state House races, uh, who's currently in college for political science, and even he was saying that like, "Oh, yeah, we were talking about you in my class the other day, because my professor was talking about how all the primaries were going, and he was saying like, 'Oh, yeah, Cyril's absolutely a shoe-in for this primary, um, 'cause, you know, there's also this Clay guy who's running, and…some—some third person who I haven't heard about.'"

ES: Yeah…

CF: Right, so—so based on, like, all of the—the sort of traditional metrics that you would be looking at, uh, which like, again, campaign finances are typically kind of the biggest one, but that's not the only one, and that's not—not the only significant one. Um, that's just kind of typically the starting point for a heuristic. Um, so like, based on all of these things that people were looking at, you know, everyone was kind of saying like, "Yeah, Cyril's probably going to win the primary."

But something that kind of started occurring to me in the week or two following the primary election is that, um, was sort of recontextualizing the way I was thinking about races—because, again—because this is the

first time that I have run for office—for any kind of office, and to start with, uh, a congressional race is a really—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah…

CF: …REALLY big endeavor to start with, um right, so, um…,The—the sort of typical insider baseball that you'll hear about how—about expectations in terms of what level of money that you've raised is that for a congressional race—right? So, for a federal House race, it is…I don't think there have been any wins, at least in modern history, to have done that on less than six figures fundraised, right? So, you're kind of like, people will tell you your minimum baseline for having any…any non-zero amount of expectation for winning is if you have fundraised a hundred grand—um, and even that is like very minuscule probability of winning. And so that chance—those odds kind of go up with the more fundraised, uh, and so then we start to get into average numbers and we see that, uh, based on data collected, um the sort of mean fun—either mean or median, maybe both, um, number of dollars fundraised for a winning U.S. House race is about one million.

ES: Woah…

CF: Right? So, there is an entire order of magnitude—uh, or—or a couple orders of magnitude between…how many...no, one order of magnitude between these two numbers.

ES: Yeah, and that's—and that's to win the general election, like, as a whole, right?

CF: Right. Right. So, that's to win the general election, and that's the thing that I had been thinking about throughout my entire campaign, but the thing that I started realizing, um following the—uh, following the primary, is that there's also kind of a certain threshold of a level of campaigning that you need to get to before you can start beating out, just, what is the order that these names appear on the ballot. Right?

So, if we think about, um, if sort of your—your average baseline voter who does not pay a whole lot of attention to politics, like maybe marginal attention to things that are—are appearing on the news and on their social media feeds, which means, uh, presidential-level stuff and not a whole lot else. Um…how are they going to be basing their decisions on who to vote for in any election, but especial—but like, even if they're engaged in it enough to be going through—to the primary, um, you know, we might—and I had been thinking of this before leading up to the primaries, like, "Oh, well, yeah, people who are engaged in it enough to—to know when the primary election is and who are engaged enough to bother showing up

to the primary, which is a very small subset of the voter demographic, right?

So, Tennessee has the lowest voter turnout in the country. Um, this is like, a—a well-regurgitated fact over this year's election cycle, um, and then also noticing that like of the…something like a quarter to a third of people who are turning out to vote in Tennessee for the general election, we really only have, uh, a—about five to seven percent of people showing out to the—the primary election, right? And so, that goes for Democrat-and-Republican-side.

Um, and so, of people who are turning out to the Democrat election primary, like, a very small number, right? So, it's easy to assume, as I had done, that, people who are turning out on the Democrat side to vote in the primary election like, "These are the people who are well engaged in politics. These are the ones who are more likely to have more informed decisions." And, I'm sure that's true for many of them…but not all of them. Right? And so, like, sin—since the primary, I've actually had—had conversations with a handful of, like, even my friends who have said, like, "Oh, yeah, like, I'm really engaged in politics now, but before I was, like, I knew when the primary election was, and I knew I should vote in the primary. But even knowing that, like, I still didn't have a great idea of who the candidates were. And so, yeah, I just vote for the first person on the, um, on the ticket."

ES: Woah…

CF: And that was even coming from, uh, the woman who had been working for—as my campaign manager for most of my campaign.

ES: Wow.

CF: Right!? Like, she has turned into someone who is, like, building her life around political engagement, but when she was in her early twenties, like, "Yeah, you know, pay enough attention to know when the primary is," but not enough attention to—to know who she's voting for. And so, yeah, I think it's—it's, um, you know, thinking about this idea of—of human factors that we see in areas like psychology and—and design…um, then, yeah, I think it seems like a very natural instinct for most people to just be voting for, whoever the—whoever is the first person that we see, of this list of names, um…

ES: Yeah…yeah—

CF: —Right? And so that winds up being a huge advantage for the primary that does not translate to an advantage, uh, in the general election, because by

the time we get to the general election, um, it is people are—are predominantly voting for the letter that appears next to your name.

ES: Yeah…

CF: Right? So is it that—that "R" and the "D," um, and so, again, unless people know who they're voting for, there is a predictable default response that people are going to be getting.

ES: Yeah, well—

CF: And so, given that there is a—a, um, still a certain threshold of "I did a lot of work, I did a lot of fundraising." Um, but, I did not do the, uh, sort of the level of work that was necessary to overcome the advantage of—that you get from—from having your fir—your name appear first alphabetically.

ES: Yeah…well, an—and the, um, the phenomenon that you're describing—because…as soon as you kind of mentioned, like, you know, how, like, people really just don't know much about, like, what's going on in the primary, um, whenever, like, whenever I—I went on, um, whenever I Googled, like, just like the—the election results, um, a Ballotpedia [page] would show up, but of course, I always like to go to the news section just because, um, you know, maybe there's, like, some kind of analysis or like, some kind of, like, bigger article. And I kid you not, there was only one article announcing the results, and it's literally one sentence from the AP. It's like a local news out—I forget which local news outlet it was—um, but that was it!

And so, part of me wonders if maybe this is also, um, an—an issue with our news media. Because, like, you know, that's kind of like the—that's kind of like the bread and butter for, you know, any kind of democratic society is having a news, um—having a news ecosystem that—

CF: Yeah, yeah, I think so! Um…Right? Because ,like, if you do Google searches, uh, for the race as a whole—and also for individual candidates, right, because this is always, you know, I, uh, have always been one of those people who is like, "If I'm going to vote, I want to know who I'm voting for." Um, if I get to a—a—a box on my ticket, that like, I don't know—I don't have an informed opinion, then I'm just going to leave that blank, because I didn't do my due diligence to—to research that, uh, that spot before going in. I don't know what, uh—I don't want to vote for something and then like, later, find out, "Oh, I really hate that choice, actually!" Uh…right? But, I guess turns out I'm in the minority there [*chuckles*]…um, right? So…um…God, I forgot what I was talking about.

ES: No, no, it—it's fine. Well, an—and, um, you know, that's—

CF: OH! Right, right, you were talking about news media, right?

ES: Yeah.

CF: So what I'll do is, I always like, Google search each, um, candidate individually. So, I'll look for, like—the first thing I'm looking for is their website. Second thing I'm looking for is social media feed, um, right? So, if I'm looking up a candidate and I see, you know, the only thing I find is a Facebook account that's…doesn't have posting very, actively, then, like, that's automatically someone I'm not gonna vote for, because, like, clearly you're not putting in the work to—to actually, um, be winning in the general election, right?

So this was kind of my strategy, like, especially for the, uh, for the Senate primary in 2020. I remember there was something, like, uh, nearly a dozen candidates for the primary that year. And so, I like—I was looking through the list of, um, of—of people who I was voting for. And so, it's like, I will pull up someone—someone's website, read through the information on their website, and then, uh, make my decision based on that.

Um, but also, people are going to be, uh, inclined to base their opinion on, like, what do I see in my media sources, right? So that's why social media is such a huge thing these days, um, but also based on traditional media, and so that was another thing that kind of, um, you know, a—another one of those heuristics that was pointing toward me being ahead that was, uh, turned out not to be, uh, such a reliable heuristic, um, is that I think Lore Bergman had—when I was Google searching her shortly before the primary, it was—she had, uh, I think one article that was written in a local paper that was—that she made an announcement that she was running. Um, Clay Faircloth, I don't think had any kind of news, uh, media attention, and, uh, I—I didn't have that many more than either of them, but I did have a handful, um, because I had an article about me in *The Herald Citizen* when I was announcing, um, when I was launching my campaign, there was a—a reporter locally—uh, and *The Herald Citizen* is—is Cookeville's local newspaper. Um, and so there was a *Herald Citizen* reporter who was at my launch party.

Um, there were, I think, one or two other, uh, news articles that had, um—th—there wasn't anything else there was about me specifically. There were a handful of others that were talking about all the races across the state, um, and when they got to district six, it was kind of like, this paragraph-long, very brief analysis that was, you know, "Here are the people running," and like, something, like, vaguely alluding to like, "Maybe Cyril kind of looks like he might be the frontrunner," right? Not so directly, but

based on some kind of, like, thing that we might read as a—as a heuristic that we could use to inform that decis—that—that thought.

Um, and then, the one that I was really surprised about was actually, uh, a couple of weeks before the primary, *The Herald Citizen* ran a handful of articles about some of the, uh—some of the races that are going on locally. Um, so both, uh, the—the two state House races that are happening in Putnam County, and also for the congressional race, talking specifically about their campaign finances. Um, and it was just reporting on like, what are the, um, the—the raising and spending reports for people who are running, um, right? And so, there was an entire article just about my primary that said, "Cyril here has raised $60,000. Um, these are the places that, uh, he has spent the most of that fundraising on. Here are a handful of people who have donated to this campaign, and neither of the other two people in this primary have reported any fundraising to the FEC." Um, right? So, that was something that, like, I kind of figured might help me out a little bit.

But then there's also the matter of, you know, what's the scale here, right? So, if I have, like, three to five articles, you know—at most half of a dozen articles—being written about me, that's still not enough—that like, my name is reaching people who are not otherwise, like, deeply invested into the political process.

ES: Yeah. Well, an—and one, um, so one thing that the written portion of the thesis that I'm working on argues is that, um, that independently produced, uh, political podcasts can actually—could potentially be this catalyst for reengaging, audiences, right?

CF: Yeah.

ES: Um, right now, we have a catastrophic distrust in, uh—in, uh, U.S. news media, um—

CF: Yeah!

ES: There's, uh, who is it? Reporters Without Borders—they reported, um—they have, like, this World Press Freedom Index that comes out every year. They basically rank every country, depending on, like, um, uh, like the legal freedoms, and also just the general quality of each press system on each country.

CF: Right.

ES: And surprisingly, the U.S. is 55 out of 180, which is insane! So, um, so that kind of leads me to my next qu—so, that leads me to my next question:

Um, did you and, uh, d—did Lor—and if I heard you correctly, it's Lor-ee, not Lore?

CF: Lor-ee, yeah.

ES: Lor-ee. Okay, huh. Um, so, did you or Lore[13], like, go on any podcast or, like, try to do any kind of podcast interviews?

CF: Yeah, I did a couple! Um, I did a couple, sort of, um, local and statewide podcasts. So, I was on, um, *Better Together with*—uh—*Kosta* [*sic*] Yunopolis… that's not how you pronounce his name—It's, a—a Russian name that is spelled, uh, in a way that I have trouble trying to put together his pronounce—uh, Kosta, um, in Cookeville, and so that's something that is, um, very well, widely listened to by, um—by people who live in the Cookeville area. Um, I was on, um, a couple episodes of, uh, *The Loyal Opposition*, which, um, Len—Len Assante runs out of, um, uh, Portland, Tennessee. And so, that's actually a radio show that, uh, that he typically, like, records and then posts online as—as podcast episodes. Um, and so, that's something that, like, he had done interviews with, uh, with all three of us—for both when we had first launched our campaigns, um, and then also he did a—a round of interviews with us last, uh, last month in July, while we were leading up to the primary election. Um, and…yeah, there were a couple of other, um, local radio shows in Cookeville that I did, like, short segment interviews with.

Uh, that was one of the big things, actually, very early on in the, um, in the campaign process that we were looking at was, like, "What are, um, sort of national—nationally listened-to podcasts that we can try and get on?" Um, and so, I was—we were reaching out to people like, um, the—the *Tech Won't Save Us* podcast with, uh, with Paris Marx, some—uh, a couple of the podcasts in the, uh—what is it—Pod Save America network because they were—

ES: —Ah, Pod Save, yeah, yeah—

CF: —which focuses specifically—right, either Pod Save America, or they've also got one that, like, specifically focuses on technology issues, and since, um, that's what my—my platform was really largely, uh, paying emphasis on, um, I figured that might be, a—an appropriate podcast to appear on as well. Um, so like…really trying to reach out to both national and—and local, uh, locally listened-to podcasts, uh, for that, right?

So, um, and I think that, like, what you're saying about podcasts, um, is sort of, you know, again, being a—a technology person, a lot of things

[13] Any further use of Lore's name is appropriately pronounced.

that—technology and—and society thing that I'm paying attention to is like a lot of what builds that up is—is, um, how do we engage with the internet and sort of, uh, communication media and communication technology? And so, like, uh, a lot of that attention goes on to things like social media. Um, but there was actually, like, a particular, um, kind of like—I—I don't know if—if I'd call it, like, a light bulb moment or a—a minor paradigm shift that I—that happened, um, in ways that I was thinking about politics when I was in college, but there is a, uh, a—a friend of mine who's actually the, um, he used to be a, uh, a—a mainly a history teacher in high school. He also did a little bit of music education. I actually know him because, uh, he's the director for the barbershop chorus that I sing with.

ES: Oh, wow!

CF: Um, yeah! Um, I—I've got a lot of really interesting hobbies, um—

ES: Yeah, well, I gotta ask—I gotta ask: Are you a bass, baritone, tenor?

CF: I sing bass.

ES: Bass. Alrighty, nice. nice…yeah.

CF: Um…and so…yeah, like, I sing tenor a little bit, because, like, once I get into the—the falsetto range, like, all of the tenor line sits very cleanly within my falsetto, um—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah—

CF: —and then baritone and lead, I have a little bit more trouble with, because—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah—

CF: —those jump back and forth across my break, um—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah—

CF: —and that's—that gets to be a little bit tricky—

ES: —Yeah, no, I—I feel ya, yeah. I, um—

CF: —But, a nice challenge that I try and put myself to—to try and, like, improve my skills a little bit.

*JUMP CUT*

CF: The point that I was getting to was, you know, there was something that—that Jim, my—my barbershop director had said to me that was, like, "Oh, that's a really fascinating idea that I want to try and unpack a lot more!" And so, I, like, I spent years thinking about this following, um, and he was pointing out that, like, a lot of the—the skills of a good politician are being able to effectively utilize the, uh, the—the mass media of the day, right?

So, if we look back to presidential elections historically, um, a lot of, like, the earlier presidential elections, like, we've got different kinds of strategies about how we're trying to reach people, um, before mass communications the way we think of it today, right? So, are we traveling around the country making stump speeches in little, small communities where people have never heard of us, or are we trying to get our name in various newspapers around the country, um, right? And so, that turns into things that we think of more as—as the—the—uh, as we get into more sort of digital and electronic technology. Once we developed radio, um, it was…um, you know, people like Richard Nixon were really ab—were really effectively able, um, to—to utilize radio as a communication technology.

ES: Yeah.

CF: Um, and so, uh, there was a really interesting shift that we saw, um—I don't remember which year the election was, but it was, uh, Nixon versus JFK, um, and JFK was, like—

ES: Oh, '60, yeah!

CF: Yeah, very, like, traditionally attractive man, um—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah—

CF: —right? So, you look at him, and it's like, "Wow, that guy's just got a really attractive face."

ES [*quietly*]: Yeah.

CF: And that was also at a time where, like, we were starting to make the shift, uh, culturally, from radio to television.

ES: Yeah, yeah!

CF: And so, there was a big schism of people who were, like, listening to debates on the radio and watching debates on the TV, and what we saw at the time, um, was that people who were listening to the debate on the radio said, like—tended to say, "Wow, I really like this Nixon guy. He's seems

like he's doing so much better of a job, um, in this debate." And people who were watching it on the television said the same thing about JFK. Right?

ES: Yeah!

CF: Because it is a matter of, like, how is your presence on this particular mode of communication? And so, if we extrapolate that—and this is a big thing that I started thinking about over the next handful of years, because I want to say he'd said that to me, um, probably around, like, 2015, maybe '16—and then, like, over the next couple of years, we were seeing that 2016 presidential election, um, and then the rise of people like, uh, like AOC in Congress, and I was like, "AH! I have context—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah—

CF: —for why these two people are so successful on very different ends of our political spectrum," of like, the reason both Donald Trump and also AOC and other politicos, um, that we think of along the same lines as—as AOC, like, the reason both of these two people are successful, um, has to do with the way that they are engaging social media, right? So—

ES [*quietly*]: —yeah—

CF: —Donald Trump on Twitter, in particular—basically exclusively on Twitter—and AOC on…a little bit of Twitter, but mostly on Instagram, I think, um, and that is the way they got to the kind of popularity that they have, is because of the way that they're, uh, they're engaging this method of—this—this medium of—of mass communication.

Um, and so nowadays, with the rise of TikTok, we're also starting to look at people like, um, like Jeff Jackson out in North Carolina, who's, um, you know, stepped away from—who—who was utilizing TikTok for his congressional race, and now he's stepping away from that, um, to—to do his run for—for Attorney General in North Carolina. And like, his presence on TikTok and Instagram Reels are working out very well for him—

ES: Yeah!

CF: —um, in—in the Attorney General race as well.

ES: Yeah. So, um, this is kinda—

CF: —And so I think, like, podcasts—uh, especially since podcasts have—have got a big, uh, sort of re-burgeoning of popularity over the last decade, or

so—I think that, like, is—is a very astute observation and fits in very well with, um, with the—the similar sort of trends that we see, uh, with—uh, with politicians reaching wider [*sic*] audience on other—on other forms of social media—

ES: —Yeah—

CF: —and the social internet.

ES: Yeah, an—and, so, it's just kind of, like, dawning on me now, ‘cause I realize, like, you know, I have someone who, you know, has a lot of ex—uh, expertise with, like, the tech sector and also has a lot of, um, you know, concern with, uh, the democratic process as well.

CF: Right.

ES: Um, another thing that my thesis is, um—at least touches on is the need for a revitalized, like, um, public media, uh—

CF: —Yeah!—

ES: —infrastructure, because it—it's wild: Um, so per capita, um, uh, whenever you compare how much we spend per capita here in the U.S. on public media versus, like, a lot of other Scandinavian countries and Japan as well—we spend—what is it—about $1.40 per capita? Like, a bunch of other countries: They spend, like, anywhere between fifty to a hundred dollars per capita on their public media—

CF: —Right—

ES: —which is insane—and I think that's part of the reason why we're, um, you know, kind of seeing, like, a lot of news outlets starting to—to flounder, because we just kind of left it all up to the private industry.

CF: Yeah!

ES: But, um, the thing—uh, the thing that I haven’t been able to touch upon, uh, much at least—and I think a lot more research and investigation needs to be done—is, uh, number one: How does the—the pod—how would the podcast medium fit into the revitalization of the U.S.—um, of U.S. public media? And number two: Um, should social media companies, um, you know, also be included in—in part, uh—you know, as part of those, uh, reformations as well, because they play just as much of an important role now—

CF: —Yeah, no, actually, that's something I was starting to think about, even before you got to—to bringing that up. So, um, I've got kind of two different threads of ideas to go down here, right? So first, thinking about, um, support for public media, um, is that, like, traditionally, we've got, um, public media broadcasting that is, uh, you know, not, uh…well-funded, but reasonably well-enough funded that—that most people are at least familiar with its existence, right?

ES: Yeah.

CF: So, we've got, uh, things like NPR and, uh, and PBS, um, and then a lot of local, um…I don't know what the technical term would be, but like, branches off of—of NPR and PB—

ES: —Yeah, affiliates, yeah—

CF: So—so local stations, uh, for radio and—and for television, um…and so, that also means that, you know, if we've got these local media stations, then those are being supported by people in the community, right? So, it's not just that we've got this station that is putting forth all of their—all of their—their own programing onto the station, um, it is often community access as well, right? So, people in the community, uh, will have the ability to work with these stations to, um, to—to put their own, uh, pro—to develop their own programing to put onto these stations.

Um, actually, like, uh, sort of thinking recently about, uh, some programing that's been so—showing up on my social media feed a lot recently is, uh, a show called *Last Week Tonight* that's been—

ES: —Oh, yeah, yeah!—

CF: —New York's, uh, public broadcasting station, uh, I guess for the last, uh, probably year or so—

ES: —Wait, *Last*—

CF: —and they've been putting out some, like—such delightful, um, political news programing.

ES: Wait a minute, maybe I'm thinking—wait, *Last Week*—I th—isn't that John Oliver's show?

CF: No, no, no, no, um, so that's *Last Week Tonight*…I don't know, may—I—I have ADHD, so sometimes—

ES: Yeah, same.

CF: —like, there are words in my head and those don't match the words that come out of my mouth.

ES: Yeah.

CF: Um—uh, but it was, um—um…oh, gosh—

ES: —I can do a quick fact-check—

*ETHAN leans over to his keyboard off-screen.*

CF: —I—I'd have to look it up—

ES [*barely audible, not positioned in front of the microphone*]: —I can do a quick fact-check—

CF: —I'm going to try and look this up, um, while I—I continue to be talking, um, but—

ES [*twisting his head towards the microphone*]: —uh, I—I can—I can take care of it, if you want to focus on the talking.

CF: Okay. [*chuckles*] Um…

*Clicking sounds of ETHAN'S keyboard can be heard briefly.*

CF: So…there is, uh, not only public, uh—so—so these local stations, uh, public stations wind up acting, um, as a sort of publishing body, and so, that means that people who are trying to put things onto these stations can also get, uh, access to public funding, um, to put together that—that programing, um…and…so, that's well and good! And so, we can actually, like, very easily replicate that model fairly directly into podcasting, um, right?

So, if we think about how are podcasts hosted on the internet, um, usually they're going through, um, uh, sort of conglomenter—conglomerate services like, um, like Apple Podcasts, iHeart Radio, et cetera, et cetera—all the ones that you hear advertisements for when you listen to—you know, when your—your podcast hosts say, "Or wherever you—you get your podcasts from," um, right? It would be very easy to—to put together a service, um, that is a—a sort of nationalized service—um, this, like, oh, this website that's government-run that, um, that members of—of the public can, uh, be publishing their own podcasts onto, um, and maybe even be able to—to get some funding for, um, in the same way that we can get through, um—for like NPR and PBS.

ES: Yeah, an—and, uh, to kind of…yeah, ‘cause that—that was kind of, like, an idea I was thinking of too, be—but it does, like, kind of bring—bring up, like, another…I don't know, maybe ethical, uh—I don't know if, like, ethical or legal debate, regarding, uh, the First Amendment, right? Because—

CF: —Right—

ES: —um, you know, a lot—a major issue that really, just any kind of social media company or streaming company, um—think of like, you know, Spotify and their partnership with Rogan—um, uh, you know, uh, a big issue that they've ran—ran into is how do they create guidelines that are fair enough to, uh, you know, allow for, um, you know, a free exchange of ideas, while at the same time mitigating the harms, um, that could come from that—you know, being on such a massive, uh, massive and easily accessible platform. Um…

CF: Yeah.

ES: And so, I kind of wonder, you know, in one sense, it would be good because you really could extend First Amendment protections to such a platform—'cause it's nationalized. It's run, you know, through the government. But at the same time, is that something that we actually want to do where we extend those kind of First Amendment protections? Because, I mean, think of something like, you know, COVID-19 misinformation! I mean—

CF: —Yeah! —

ES: —there is, like, a legitimate concern with just kind of letting that flourish on—on, um—

CF: —Right—

ES: —Yeah—

CF: —Um, and so, the issue that we run into with that, um, has less to do with the fact that people are, um, saying these things—uh, that th—that this is that this information exists—so much as the spread of information, right? So, that's the big thing that we get from, um, especially from having privatized social media companies, um—or—or corporate social media companies, uh, controlling our access to information on the internet, um, is that…the—the—the free speech matter isn't really the issue, um, right? So, the—the reason that this becomes a problem, uh, is because of the scale of propagation behind these ideas, um…right?

And so, the other thing is, like, there is a—a distinct difference between if we're talking about something as a public service versus if we're, um, talking about something in the private sector, um—is that private sector companies don't have to abide by the First Amendment, right? Because the First Amendment applies very specifically to government. Um, and so, uh—and even then they'd like to try to lean as much toward a free speech absolutism as they can. Otherwise, they moderate, an—and with regard to what are their, um, ideological positions, which is, um—they—they tend to remove, uh, more left content than they do ri—well…uh, they tend to remove more…um, high-traffic left content, and they tend to remove more low-traffic right content—so that they can feign this kind of, uh, political neutrality. But if we look at, like, what is the most popular content that is appearing on, um, on a lot of these social media websites, right? So, I'm talking about, like, Facebook and, uh, PRE-Musk Twitter—

ES: —[*chuckles*] Yeah—

CF: —And we know that—that post-Musk Twitter is—is, um…probab—I'm sure MANY orders of magnitude worse than—than, pre-Musk Twitter.

ES: Yeeeeeeah, yeah.

CF: Um, but I—I think Facebook in particular is, like, the most, by far the most popular, uh—uh, the most high-trafficked content on these platforms is—is, uh, right-leaning content. So, these are people like, uh, like Ben Shapiro, like Steven Crowder, um…uh, Jordan, uh, Pears—Peterson, um…those sorts of people, um, right? And so, even though we've got all these right-wingers who are saying, like,
"Oh, yeah, they say this social media network is, uh, is censoring all of our content," like…sure, there might be a case for—for what they're seeing with this at—at the small scale of people who are only reaching, like, a couple hundred, um, friends. But, like, at the large scale? No, absolutely not. That's—that's definitely the content that these, uh, social media platforms are—are propagating more, and in some ways, even have, like, kind of a financial incentive to be propagating more.

Um, and so that's the same, uh, wing where we see a lot of misinformation campaigns. Um, that's a lot of, uh, what we get with, um…uh, esp—especially foreign adversaries when it comes to, um, using, uh—uh, information—sort of information warfare…um, right? So, what they're trying to do is, uh—uh…further divide our social stratifications, um, based on information, right? So, we—we kind of have a—a very general idea of when people get on the internet, they tend to argue with each other!

ES: Yeah.

CF: Um, right? So, the—the question for foreign adversaries is, “How do I make that worse—

ES: —[*chuckles*]—

CF: —so that people are arguing each other—with each other more?” Um, and then, we are—are less connected, uh, societally to one another. Um, right? And they don't have to do that by fabricating outright lies—in fact, that is harder to do. Um, what they're typically doing is they are—are, uh, planting some seeds based on…stratifications that already exist, right? So, if they see that there are people who have some inherent mistrust of a vaccine, and this other cam—camp of people who are, like, “Vaccines are going to help us. They're going to, like, help us stay healthy and—and not have to deal with the—the worst effects of having a global pandemic” Like…sure, this kind of division already exists. So, how do we plant a little bit more in here to say, like, “Oh, well, vaccines are gonna, uh, do this, that, and the other, and turns out I'm actually gonna die from taking a vaccine.” Um, right?

And that doesn't just happen to right-wing people—like, that absolutely happens to left-wing people.

ES: Yeah.

CF: When you start to really dig in and look at it, like, um, I have got a—a close friend of mine who works in military intelligence—that's kind of where I figured out some of this idea from. Uh, he works in the Air Force. And so, um…he's like, pointed out a couple of things with me—to me that are, like, not directly, but it's like, “Okay, so let's think about this situation. What are your thoughts on this? How did you come to hold those thoughts in your head? How do you know that?” Right? So, the thing in particular he was talking about was with the, um, the—the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There are a lot of people, um, especially, like, further to the left, who, you know—most of us kind of generally agree to that, like, “Yeah, Russia invading Ukraine is not good.” Um, but there's a lot of conversation amongst leftists in particular who are, like, “Yeah, this is bad, but also, the Azov Battalion, which is a very specific, like, neo-Nazi sect, um—like literally neo-Nazis—

ES: —Yeah. Yeah.—

CF: —They evolved out of a n—Nazi battalion in World War Two, and they still hold on to the same ideology. Um, is like—so there's an issue that we run into because that Azov battalion has been using this invasion to gain political power within Ukraine, um, and they have a lot of control over the—the country's politics now. Right?

So, this is an idea that I was already holding in my head prior to this. And then, he starts asking me these questions—I was like, "Oh, wait, but how do I know that the Azov Battalion has been doing this?" And the answer…is because Russia wants me to know that! Because I'm going to have far more complicated opinions about what's going on, um, with this particular conflict, in this other part of the world, um, in a way that, like, Russia has invested in me having more complicated opinions about that, and Russia invested in and a lot more people—more widespread from U.S. backing—having more complex opinions about that.

That doesn't mean it's wrong.

ES: Yeah.

CF: Um, but that does mean that, like, I—there's still the matter of—I think this and I know this because Russia wants me to know this, right? So, like, I don't know how to process and deal with that. I don't know what to do with that information, but I know that it's definitely true, right?

ES: Yeah!

CF: I can see exactly how my thought process has been informed by, um, foreign interference, um, in trying to sow the same divisions, right? So, part of what they're trying to get out of people here is that, like, if more people have these kind of complicated thoughts about the—the conflict in Ukraine, then we—we're more likely to butt heads with, uh, with each other about what's going on in Ukraine, which is also something that has happened in practice—uh, for me personally.

ES: Yeah! Yeah, and—

CF: So, uh, sorry, I do want to go back to your—your earlier question, though, that got me down this whole…whole tangent, um, right?

So, thinking about public support for, um…uh, for podcasts and social media. Right? So, when you were asking this question earlier, that was, uh, public, um…systems, kind of in a similar vein of NPR and PBS, um, for…social media, or otherwise, internet technology, was actually, like, something I was thinking about before you even got to that part of the question, um, because I'm thinking about a particular scholar, uh, Dr. Sophia Noble, who wrote a book called—[*stifling a burp, sneeze, or hiccup*] excuse me—*Algorithms of Oppression*, um, which is, like, a very, very widely cited, uh, book, um, when it comes to the sort of racialization of technology. Um, right?

So, she started writing this book, I think, um, sort of toward the end of the aughts…um, maybe 2008-2009 area, if I—if I remember correctly, sort of—

ES: —Woah—

CF: —getting toward 2010—

ES: —that's—that's very forward thinking, 'cause I—

CF: —Yes! Uh—

ES: —don't—I don't even remember these discussions—

CF: —That's the interesting thing about—

ES: —Yeah!—

CF: —Uh, the—these social impacts of technology is that, like, we had a lot of very forward thinking, uh, people, and most of them were, uh—or marginalized scholars who were like sounding a lot of alarm bells early on that people otherwise outside of that sphere were not paying attention to. Um, and then, like, lo and behold, they were right, and we didn't listen to them.

ES: Yeah.

CF: Um, right, but the actual publication didn't come out until—I think about, uh, 2016 or so. Um, so, I was actually first introduced to—to her work, um, because when I was in grad school, um—I think this would have been 2018, um, when I was doing my master's degree at UC Santa Cruz—she was giving a, um, a—a talk there as part of a lecture series that she was doing, um—uh, doing a book talk, um, right?

So, basically, she was giving a—a summary of what are the points in the book that—that she's making, what is—what's the thesis, and, um, how does she—what's the—the overview of how she's walking through ideas there. And then, at the end of that talk, part of her conclusion was like, "What are some takeaways for how we can fix these problems," right? So, the—the kind of thesis of the book is she noticed that in doing Google searches, there were very particular kind of racialized results that she was getting from doing a Google search. Um, right? So, for one of the big examples that she brings up in the, uh, in the text of the book, um, is things like if she—if she's—if she does a search for three white children or a search for three black children, right? So, if we search for three white children, we would typically see, like, this sort of stock footage of, like,

three, um, white-skinned children, like, at—at a birthday party, or like, playing in the backyard, or some, like, very sort of typical, um…uh, middle class suburbanite kind of image, uh, and if we do a search for three ba—black children, uh, we typically see a mugshot…

ES: Wha—?

CF: —Uh, for image—for image search.

ES: WOAH!

CF: Right…um, and then, uh, there are also other examples. I—I can't remember exactly what the—what the search term was, but it was something like, uh, "white woman," um, versus doing a search for "black women," or doing a search for "Asian women." Um, and so, for white women, you were seeing, like, a lot of, sort of "style blogs" sort of thing, if I remember correctly, uh…maybe some things like "professionalism" or models or so on…um—I don't remember exactly the kind of results that she was getting for those, um, but that was—but whatever it was, it was in stark contrast with the fact that searches for "black women" and "Asian women" were, uh, hitting almost exclusively pornographic results.

ES: WHOA!

CF: Right.

ES: Hol—[*covers his mouth to stop themself*]

CF: Yeah! And so…um, right, so this is, like, a—a very particular sort of, um, set of case studies and examples that she was sort of churning through, and was like, "Well, if we look at this result, how do we—how does Google search as a search technology wind up arriving at these kinds of results, right? So how did the—the systems of how we're constructing Google do that, and also, how do the, um, the sort of, like, gestalt composition of things that we find on the internet lead Google to understanding these certain ideas about what we might be looking for?

Um…and so, at the end of this talk, she was talking about all these different, you know, "These are the takeaways. These are like, you know—we've spent an hour talking about all of these things that are going wrong. Let's conclude by talking about, like, what are some things that we can do about this," right? So, um, there were a handful of takeaways that she mentioned, but one of the suggestions was, um, putting forth public funding and some government services, again, sort of in the same vein that we're thinking about, uh, organizations like NPR, PBS, um, how do we put forth, um, uh, government…organizations toward internet services?

Right? In the same way that we think about broadcasting services or television services.

Um, right, so we could do a, um, a—a government-run organization that is, um, doing indexing of the internet—doing, uh, search—internet searches, right? So, same thing that Google does. Um, and we can put forth internet, um—and actually, there's been a lot more conversation about this one since the Musk takeover of Twitter, of like, um…is should we put forth a—a government service toward, uh, that—that looks similar to what we would expect of Twitter, right?

Because Twitter, um, came to be such a useful, uh, media service because it was so broadly, publicly accessible, right? One of the big things: You didn't need an account to access Twitter. Um, the other thing is that it is a one-to-many-connection [kind] of service, right? So, like, if we think about something like Facebook, this is one-to-one connections or bidirectional, and so, uh, a lot of the time, the—the content on Facebook is—is—um…or—I guess sort of in the original conception of Facebook—it's much more scattered of a service now—uh, but in the original conception, it is like, "I can see content from people that I am connected to, and if I am not connected to them, they're probably going to want to keep that private from me," right? So, Twitter, um, is…not like that in—in that regard, right? So, Twitter is. "I put something onto Twitter, and then it disperses out into the world for anyone who wants to look for it." Um, right? So. that turned out to be extremely valuable to a lot of public forms of communication, um, for even just, like, public updates, right? So, things like weather service—

ES: —Yeah—

CF: —Um, or—or updates about, um, emergencies happening in areas and, um, and, uh, big news happenings, right? So, a lot of the mass propagation about reporting on mass shootings was happening primarily because of Twitter. Um, right? So, even if we think about the—the spread that we see through other platforms like Facebook, you know, you're going to get propagation happening from, um—there are fewer directions of propagation happening. And so, because of that spread…uh, there's a higher sort of activation thresholds to having a mass spread an—and snowball effect of—of spread of information that, um, that—that Twitter has a little bit more sn—uh, more of a snowball effect of information than, uh, than other platforms because of that. Um…right? So—so spread of—of—of tragedy news, um, right? Not only, like, do we—uh, how do we alert people about, um, mass weather events, but also, like, spreading news about the results of mass weather events, um, that have claimed a lot of casualties. That, um, also was spreading a lot because of Twitter in a way that, like, that became a—an invaluable, uh, service for, um, for a public

good, for public information that…really shouldn't—I don't—I—I have—I don't think that should be, like, entirely left up to—to being run by a private company, right?

So, maybe not necessarily run by the government. You know, maybe this becomes, like, an open-source kind of community run-thing. Um, but then there are, like, a whole host of—of different problems that we run into with that, right? Like, open-source is not a magic bullet of, like, "Oh, open-source! We—we do a communism for the internet, and then things are magically good. Like, no, that's definitely not how this works, actually. Um, right? Plenty of services have tried this already. Like, Mastodon is an attempt at this. Like, Mastodon has its whole host of problems.

ES: Yeah. Yeah.

CF: Um, and—and—and adoption is…not…the biggest one, uh…

ES: Yeah.

CF: And adoption has been a huge problem for—for Mastodon. Um…right? So, like, maybe a—a public or, a—a government organization offering, uh, a similar service is, um, is—is a good thing, actually.

Um, right? So, like, regardless of whether that becomes sort of the dominant platform like Twitter used to be, or it is not the dominant platform, like, that's neither here or there. I don't think that matters very much, but so long as it—as such a platform exists, I think is a net positive for the public good.

ES: Yeah. Yeah, no. And I—yeah, I definitely, uh, I definitely agree with that too. Um, you know, I—you know, I think it is kind of one of those things that, um, you know, I think, you know, more policymakers an—and, uh, experts in this kind of field, I think kinda need to flesh out some more specifics of maybe the, uh, mechanics of how it would—how it would work, like, I mean, like—like you said, you know, maybe there's a difference between total government control versus some kind of, like, uh, maybe community, uh, oversight.

Um, I think I'm going to leave it on that note, uh, Cyril? Um, I think that was a, uh, I—that was—it's kind of funny. I went into this interview not even expecting to talk about this, and it's just, like, halfway through, I realized, "Oh, crap! I'm, like, talking to, like, a tech professor who's like—

CF: Well, also, like, these—this is the shit that I prefer to talk about anyway. Like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, you know, that's great." This is where—this is

where I really nerd out, like, these are the parts that, like, I really like getting into the weeds about.

ES: Yeah. Um, so, I always like to, you know, end these interviews, of course, with, like, uh, information about where people can find your work. I mean, I guess you're not running anymore. Are you, like, working on any kind of, like, academic work as part of your, uh, employment at Tennessee Tech?

CF: Um, so, I have gone back to teaching this semester. Um, I'm just doing, a—a single class. Otherwise, um, you know, I'm—I'm teaching an assembly language class, which is sort of a junior level computer science [class]. Otherwise, I'm really, just, kind of working on some personal projects.

Um, so I—I'm still…gonna come back at some point to, um, to doing online stuff about, um, sort of politics of technology. But right now, I'm actually take—making a return to, um, a—a series of personal projects I had been working on for a couple of years.

So, I also do video essays on YouTube—

ES: OH!

CF: —talking about, uh, video game analysis.

ES: OH! That is—

CF: I've got a couple of projects in the work—

ES: —Where—where can people find that stuff? Where can peop—

CF: Um, yeah. So, like, my—my graduate education was really interesting, right? Like a weird conglomerate of things. Um, so my degree is in computational media from UC Santa Cruz, which is—is sort of whatever broad intersections that we can find between computing arts and humanities, um…and so what I was going into that program intending to work on—and this was, um, uh, my—this is what composed my entire research agenda there, was doing game studies work. But also, a lot of what I was doing in my coursework at the time was sort of, like, building off things that I was otherwise sort of tran—tangentially interested in, um, as a computer science undergrad, and like, much more directly led to, uh, what I've been doing with my political career was a lot more, um, software studies work. But, again, that was things that I got in the courses that I was taking. And then my—my actual research was like, "No, I want to study video games!

ES: Yeah! [*laughs*] That's awesome!

CF: So, um, I'm like, I also, like, think a lot about things like, religious studies about, like, different, like, a—a lot more, like, kind of abstract philosophy. I've been getting a little bit more into post-modernism recently. Um, and so one of the essays that I'm working on is about a, uh, sort of,uh, adventure puzzle space exploration game called *Outer Wilds*—

ES: Oh, yeah, I've heard of that!

CF: Right? So, a lot of the kind of themes around of that game are science and exploration and scientific curiosity, and then you get to the end of the game, and I was like, "Oh, wait, actually, no, this game is kind of about God also!?"

ES: [*scoffs*] Wow!

CF: So that's the—the kind of thesis for—for that essay, is that, like, when we get to the end of the game, how does this conclusion—how did that reframe the way that I was thinking about this game, in terms of, um…uh, like thinking about God in the abstract sense—like not necessarily God in a Christian sense. But, like, sort of the—the divine generally.

ES: Yeah.

CF: And the other one that I've got in the works is I'm also, uh, I'm also a LARPer. So I do—

ES: —Oh!—

CF: —a lot of sword-fighting. So there's—there's a combat LARP that I do called Bellegarth, which is like, we all show up and—and hit each other with foam sticks, and then wear fancy costumes, um, and so there's, like, some conversation in that community about, like, some people like, "Oh, yeah, Bellegarth—it's a LARP! Like, I come in, my name is—is "Cecil the Awesome," and like, I'm this, that, and the other character when I come in, and then other people are like, "No, this isn't a LARP. I come in to fight people. It's not a LARP, because there's no role-playing, because I just fight people. Like, yeah, but no, but other people are definitely doing some role playing here.

So like, the kind of essays I am doing, um…kind of tangential, you know, a very inspired by it, but also thinking about public, uh, education. So like, I'm pulling this sort of, like, um, academic autoethnography methodology where I'm, like, going to be doing some interviews with—with other people in the game. And then also, framing that within my own experience

to talk about how aspects of the game are, um, are influencing the—the community dynamics, right? So, if we think about when we get, like, the big field battles, we've got a couple of hundred people fighting each other on two sides, then how do the ways that we, um, design the rules of the game, right? So, if we do, like, a respawn battle where, oh, I get hit in the chest and I die, and so I run back to respawn and I come back and keep fighting. How does that change the community dynamics in a different way than, than a single life battle where it's like, oh, I get hit, I die, and then I'm out on the sidelines waiting for ten minutes for the next fight to start.

ES: …Yeah. So, what's the name of the YouTube channel that you, like, do all—

CF: Oh, OH, RIGHT!

ES: Yeah! [*chuckles*]

CF: So, the YouTube channel is just "Cyril Focht." I use my own name for the YouTube channel. If you're wanting to follow me on Instagram and TikTok, it's @vote4focht. I'm not going to be—you know, you can find my—my old videos there, where I was talking about a lot of different political issues, but like, primarily, um, kind of the politics of software. I will…

Um, if I do run again, I will definitely be returning to posting those—to those accounts, um, once my campaign starts. If I don't run again, I kind of started thinking this week about the possibility of—of repurposing both of those accounts to, um, to—to kind of just talking about political issues or—or doing that as, like, a public-facing—

ES: —Yeah—

CF: —uh, shortform video account for me to talk about, like, whatever kinds of issues…but I'm not sure what direction I'm going to go with that, but I'm sure I'll—I'll probably be using them for something again in the future.

ES: Alrighty, awesome, alrighty, so that's where you can go find, uh, all of Cyril Focht's, uh, stuff.

Cyril, thank you so much, uh, for coming on the podcast! I really appreciate it. Um, an—and, oh, I should probably also—man, I—I know should be roundin' this up—maybe we just cut this out, I don't know—but I also really appreciate you showing up to that city council meeting. That's where I first met you. I—I think I might have mentioned something about it on—on—on *The Kennel* here.

Um, there was a whole effort to try to get Nashville City Council to—to pass a ceasefire resolution, as a lot of other city councils have been doing. And Cyril, um, I think he was the only, like, candidate for public office that showed up to that one. So, I—I really appreciate you making that drive out there and, uh, assisting that effort, um, 'cause, yeah…

CF: Yeah, um, and like one of the—the big…sort of claims to fame that I took a lot of pride in was that, even though I was not the only, uh, candidate in Tennessee who was, um, advocating for a ceasefire, I was the first person to do so publicly. And it was not for quite a few months after, uh, the first statement that I had made online explicitly advocating for a ceasefire, that there were other candidates who started speaking up to do the same.

ES: Nice, nice. Yeah, that's, um, yeah—

CF: —Because I stand with my values! I—I lead with my values, which is what I think a lot of people really, uh, like most about me as a candidate.

ES: Yeah.

CF: Or *liked*! [*chuckles*]

ES: Yeah, yeah, well—

CF: —'Cause I'm not running anymore!

ES: Well, hey, or *will* like! Who knows, maybe you decide to run again?

CF: Yeah, you're right! I am definitely still thinking about running again in '26.

ES: Yeah. Alrighty, well, wonderful. Well, Cyril, thank you so much, and, uh, yeah, I'll let you know whenever I get this, uh, get this interview up. I'll—I'll just email it to you.

[*looking directly into the camera*] And, uh, friend, thank you so much for watching this first installment of, uh, I guess we'll call it *The Honorable Series* of *The Kennel*. If you liked what you saw, hit the like button. If you have any thoughts or, uh. questions you wanna ask, uh, hit me up in the comments section below. And, of course, if you also like what you see, please share this with your friends, and, uh, hit the subscribe button as well.

Uh, Cyril, thank you again, and, uh, hope you have a good one, alright man?

CF: Yeah, of course! Thank you so much for having me.

ES: Yeah, of course.

*CLOSING TITLE*

**“Ken Paulson” (Schmidt 2024e)**

*TITLE SCREEN*

ETHAN SCHMIDT: Hey, hey, hey, friend. Big Dog Ethan here. And, this is the second episode of *The Honorable Series*.

For this second episode, I've got the esteemed Ken Paulson [here]. He is the director of the Free Speech Center. And, he is also the Dean Emeritus. He's—or is it *a* dean or, like, *the* dean emeritus?

KEN PAULSON: [*laughs*] There are—there are a few over the history of the university—Yeah, I'm essentially the dean of the college in which you reside.

ES: Okay.

KP: The Dean Emeritus of the college in which you reside. And, uh…

ES: Okay.

KP: —Have been proud to have that role. So you're…you're—you're Big Dog Ethan, and I'm former Dean Ken, and we’ll just leave it at that.

ES: Alrighty, sounds good—and, well, I should also note too, he's also the, Former—what was it—Editor-in-Chief of *USA Today*?

*KEN nods.*

ES: Okay, that—yeah, I mean that that's awesome. And I—I—I would definitely recommend folks, go—I know you gave, like, a really great, what was it—a great TED talk? It was a few years ago. We watched it, in, uh, Dr. Eschenfelder’s class.

KP: Great!

ES: Yeah. Yeah. But of course, I wanted to have you on here, because, well, there are kind of three main topics I want to touch on: One being pro-Palestine protests on college campuses, the second being the state of the freedom of the press here in the U.S., and the third one being the role of objectivity in—in mainstream news media.

So, this is something interesting, an—and, uh, you've already mentioned this to me before: So, you were actually the free…um…uh, you were the Director of the Free Speech Center at Vanderbilt before you came here. Is that—that correct?

KP: No, you actually have the wires crossed.

ES: Oh.

KP: I was the…just by way of background, I—I have been alternating running news organizations, and doing First Amendment legal issues, and educational issues—all my career. I've done one or the other almost all of that time. And, uh, and so, in 1977, I left my job as a newspaper editor in New York, and came to Nashville. I worked with the legendary John Siegenthaler…uh, in the early years, it was something called the First Amendment Center. And that—funding for that in Nashville essentially disappeared about five years ago.

And so, I decided to emulate the organization that I previous—previously ran, and uh, when I retired as Dean—about, actually, five years ago—Dr. McPhee at—at MTSU was gracious enough to let me pursue that dream, and essentially, we recreated the old First Amendment Center with a new name: The Free Speech Center. And it does, very much, the same work.

And that's, uh—anybody who's listening to this, who may not know what we do: A really good idea is to go to freespeech.center. It's that simple URL. And it is honestly the most comprehensive guide for any student in particular who wants or needs to write about the First Amendment. We have had as many as 5.4 million visitors a year, and a majority of those are students, so—

ES: Wow.

KP: That's—that's what we do. So, at MTSU, it's the Free Speech Center.

ES: Okay. So, at MTSU, it's the Free Speech Center. Gotcha. And, uh, yeah, no, an—and just to touch on, um, sort of the impact that y'all's works have done—er, uh, that your work has had, um…so, I mean, I've use—you know, of course, I've used, uh, the encyclopedia that y'all run, like on all the, uh, previous court cases, uh, for numerous papers—including this thesis, actually, which, uh…I'll touch on that later on in the podcast…

But on top of that too, like, I've even seen, like, uh…there's a big podcaster I love to watch. He's, like, a big left-leaning political commentator called, uh, *Secular Talk*. Um, he's even used it a couple of times before, which always, just…yeah, makes—makes me have a lot of pride in—in the—the school I'm at right now.

KP: Yeah, a—a big part of our mission is actually to answer questions from members of the news media who are writing about the First Amendment, and because I have a background in both fields, I'm able to actually help

them translate complex First Amendment issues for readers, and that's a huge part of—of our mission.

ES: Yeah, um, so, an—and I guess kind of, like, the first…um, the—the first topic regarding the First Amendment that I wanted to, uh, chat with you about was on the, uh, the pro—pro-Palestine protests that are happening across the country.

So, um, you know, last April, Vanderbilt's student body was told by the administration that it couldn't vote on this initiative to, um, make the Student Government abide by the BDS movement. And, the reason provided by Vanderbilt was the state law banning any private entities, uh, engaged in contracts with local or state governments worth $250,000 from boycotting Israeli companies.

Now, of course, whenever I first emailed ya, um, I think I kinda sent ya a poorly-worded question about whether or not Vanderbilt could sue on behalf of, uh, its students, an—and you were correct to respond, uh, that, they really couldn't do that. It has to be, like, the person who—who's been injured directly. Um, so—though, I do wonder, couldn't Vanderbilt—the—the university itself—sue the state on its own behalf, because that law is essentially, like, hampering their ability, um, to, you know, to participate in economic boycott?

KP: The, uh, the university certainly can sue the state any time that a regulation or legislation that impacts their operations in a negative way. Uh, you know, this is a, um, highly politicized state—highly polarized state, and universities wanna stay above the fray as much as possible, so, you know…it's—it's easier for many universities—especially private schools—to grin and bear it, rather than fight fights they don't wanna have. I—I have no idea what Vanderbilt, internally, what they think of all of this.

But, um, you know, it's important, probably, at this juncture, and for those of—of your viewers who don't have a lot of background on the First Amendment—When you navigate these issues, you have to ask a couple of really basic question, when it comes to free speech issues:

One is, "Is it speech?" So…a—a fair question would be, um, "Does anything the state does in this case, does it affect the speech of Vanderbilt?" Universities have free speech rights, businesses have free speech rights. So, that would be a—a question you would ask—"Are their First Amendment rights being violated?"

And the second one, of course, is whether this is a private entity or a public entity. Um, and, that's something you look at when you ask

whether the stud—students are being, uh, censored in violation of the First Amendment. And, as we've just touched based on, you know, uh, Vanderbilt is a wealthy, private university that makes its own rules. And students there have no First Amendment rights to protect them from things Vanderbilt does.

You know, it's—it's a little bit like joining a club: You—when you join a club, you pay your dues—in this case, tuition—and you say, "I agree to your rules! Just let me in the college! Let me in the university!" And once you've paid them, and signed up, and you know what the rules are, you know, that's it. You—you can't complain later that the First Amendment protects you, because Vanderbilt is not a government, and your only relationship with the university is a contractual one. You gave them money, they accepted you, and you have to accept the rules. Students can still protest, of course, but they have no constitutional right to express themselves when the university says you can't.

ES: Yeah. Well, and the thing—you know, I—I guess whenever I think about it, the—the issue wasn't necessarily that the university took issue with the protest [in general]. I think, specifically, they had an issue with the protesters doing a sit-in at the, um, uh—what was it, at the main, like, administration headquarters—I'm forgettin' the name of the building now…um, but that was a whole thing where, like, you know, they basically called in the police, an—and, uh, there was this whole…yeah, it was li—what was it—it was like, an 18-hour affair, or something like that, where they were just sitting there—

KP: It—it wa—it was a terrible public relations fiasco for Vanderbilt, but they didn't violate any constitutional rights, and, you know, they called in their own—I guess, what was it—their own law enforcement.

The—the—the bottom line there is that they say they have rules that would prevent students from sitting-in these room, these locations, these administration buildings. And again: They hold all the cards. The only—only thing you can do as a student is protest further, and maybe have people who help you pay tuition make some phone calls to the president of the university, but there's no leverage at private schools.

ES: Yeah. And frankly, that's alway—'cause I actually went to private school, um, uh, for elementary, middle, and high school—I went to Catholic schools, so—that's kinda why I've always wanted to kind of remain at public schools for, um, you know, my time at—for my university education, just 'cause, um, that—that's always been something that's—that I—I've kinda had an issue with, was, um, you know, being at a school where I'm—where I'm not kinda granted those, uh, those First Amendment protections. Um—

KP: Right, so, in addition to getting First Amendment protection, you—you get a much lower tuition, so you win on two fronts!

ES: That—that is a great point too! Yeah, uh—that—yeah, that's definitely a great point.

Um, one more question regarding the Vanderbilt thing, 'cause one of…so, the—the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition—they're kinda, like the main group who, um…sort of advocated for getting this, uh, this initiative on their ballot. Their argument was that, um…their argument that, uh, that the state law didn't apply to Vanderbilt Student Government was because, um, it was just the Vanderbilt Student Government who was doing this initiative, not Vanderbilt as a whole. So, and maybe this is something you can speak to, maybe not: Like, can—

KP: Well, I can't—I can't imagine the state having any right to limit the speech of Vanderbilt students, or their right to petition for change. Uh, so I—I, uh…you know, I think students have every right to speak out, and—and take a stand.

Where the other issue is here, is that if the—if Vanderbilt engages in activities that students feel violate their rights under their agreement, as students, they can sue Vanderbilt in—in a contract violation. Remember, the relationship they have with—with the state—excuse me—with the university is all—all based on sheets of paper that everybody signs. So, if they say, "You've represented to us that we have a full right to protest, um, the kind of investments you make, because in this document, you said you—you recognize full free speech rights on campus"—I don't know if they've, in fact, done that. I mean, that's what the recourse would be—it would be a private lawsuit against a private university.

ES: Hm. Okay. Yeah, an—yeah, that's, uh, definitely—alrighty, yeah, that definitely makes sense…um…

Okay, so I kinda wanna move on from Vanderbilt specifically now to a—a more broader thing that, um…at least immediately, probably won't affect MTSU, just because the legislative session is—is almost over now, but I—I don't doubt that this issue would come up again…Um, so on May 1, the U.S. House of Representatives, they passed this "Antisemitism Awareness Act," which would've changed the Department of Education's definition of "antisemitism" to consider criticism of Israel as antisemitism. Now, the effect of this, um—it—it basically would've allowed the Department of Education to withhold federal funding from universities who don't punish students and faculty for criticizing Israel—which, by the way…if you're

looking at all the ICJ cases that came out, I think there is some valid criticism to be made.

Um…now, granted, it's probably not gonna pass the Senate, of course, um, but I've also [*sic*] have no doubt that legislators will probably try to pass it again during the next—during the next session.

So, uh, my question is, how—how would MTSU respond to the passage of—of such a law? Like, would be just politely accept it and abide by it, or are there any kind of, like, alternative courses of action, like, maybe something that's legal?

KP: I would leave, um…any description of MTSU's reaction [*chuckles*] to the people who are responsible for that. I'll leave that to the president.

What I can tell you is…just st—starting back and looking at this legislation…it's a mess! Um, it was clearly done for political reasons. It's—it's, uh, you know, it's just a game. They know it's not constitutional. The—the description that has been adopted—the people who wrote that description said it was *never* intended to be applied to prevent people from speaking in any way—certainly not on American campuses. It's—it—and the—here's why it can't be—it'll never up—be upheld: What is criticism of Israel? I mean, that's—that is clearly within every American's right to say that they don't agree with Israel's policy, or how they're conducting the war against Hamas…or that they don't think that, uh, Israel respects the President of the United States enough, and is not taking criticism…uh, not—not accepting guidance from the U.S. —I mean, all kinds of things you could say about Israel, in which you would say, "You know, I just don't agree with them. I don't like what they're doing." Um, well that is absolutely protected by the First Amendment! [*chuckles*] And—and, uh, and that is protected in the ultimate marketplace of ideas: college campuses.

Um, so…you know, the number one reason that—that laws become—well, there's two major reasons things get turned down for const—on consten— constitutional reasons—but—but the biggest reason is—is "void for vagueness." If you can't tell exactly what is being prohibited, um, then, uh, then you—a law is never enforceable, because we owe everyone due process. [*scoffs*] You're te—telling…you're telling people they can't teach in any way that criticizes Israel— ever?

ES: Yeah…

KP: Can—can they talk about Israel in 1951 and say something about a misstep—that's crazy. It will never, ever be upheld.

The other reason, by the way, for things to be declared unconstitutional in—in the First Amendment is very often prior restraint—uh, an effort to prevent somebody from actually exercising the First Amendment. And so—uh, First Amendment rights. So, if you say you can't criticize Israel, that is prior restraint too. No one believes that this legislation is constitutional, and I have to believe the people who support that legislation don't really believe in their heart of hearts that it's constitutional.

Um, but…it looks good on your fundraising email!

ES: [*laughs*] Yeah! Yeah, especia—yeah, 'cause I—I—I suspect that…yeah, I—especially just seeing how much money, uh, different, uh, pro-Israel lobbying groups have been dumping into elections. I—I—I can't imagine that, uh, yeah….I—I'm sure that—that the passage of that legislation was definitely geared towards, uh—uh, specific interests, uh—specific interests who'd be funding those candidates' campaigns. Um…

KP: Very little legislation's passed these days without an eye towards how it will impact the fl—the flow of funds for the next election.

ES: Yes, I—you're—yeah, I literally spent the last two months, uh, doing an internship where I was writing a report on the influence of the ICBM lobby in Congress, and…yes [*laughs*], yeah. Um…

So, I guess we'll move on now to the, uh, um, the—the topic of the state of the freedom of the press in the U.S. Um, so, this stat h—has kinda been livin' rent-free in my mind for, uh, I guess the past four months? Five months? Um, Reporters without Borders—they do, like, this "World Press Freedom Index" where they ranks all the countries, uh, on a variety of different factors, and, uh, they sorta, like, on a scale, they rank, like, how free is, uh, is each country's press compared to the others. And the U.S., um, so, the—last year, 2023, they were at 45. This year, they dropped by 10 points—uh, so, 55 out of 180.

Um…clearly, I think we're doing something wrong here. Um, I—now, I've argued on here, and in the written portion of the thesis, uh, that I'm still working on—um, I—I've argued that this ranking is the result of a systemic issues within our news media industry. Um, what are other countries doing to ensure their news outlets' freedom and success?

KP: Well, I think Reporters without Borders is primarily about government intervention in—in, uh, in news media. It's not about—it's really not about the quality of [a] job they're doing. It's about how free are they to do it. That's typically what the measurement is for anybody who—who monitors freedom of the press around the world. And what they see are all

kinds of pieces of legislation, uh…that…um…seem to target news media, uh, and that makes them uneasy.

The—the dilemma we have in this country, in terms of gauging exactly how much freedom of the press we have, is that, um, it—you know, it's one thing to measure, um, political dialogue, and rhetoric, and efforts, and another when you look at, "Well, how much freedom of the press do we really have?" Um…it's—we have actually extraordinary freedom of the press in this country, but there are politicians—legislators—who would—who would very much like to limit that. And, you know, you think about the Trump administration, and—you know, I wanna emphasize the Free Speech Center is non-political—we're constitutional! And so, we—[*scoffs*]—when we—when we see the Chief Executive of the United States describing all the work of those news organizations as "fake news," and trying to eliminate *Times v. Sullivan*, which is the number one protector of investigative reporting in this country—those are things that would give us pause, and it would also give pause to any third party looking at efforts to limit a free press.

So, honestly, I don't think we're 55th. Um, I think we are—and, you know, we have the most potent protection for freedom of the press anywhere. But, we live in—in a highly polarized environment, in which politicians score a lot of points by attacking the press, by ignoring the press, by trying to limit the press…um…by—a—as has been the case in the Biden, Obama, and Trump administrations—uh, pursue, uh, prosecutions against, uh, reporters who are trying to protect their sources, and…that's not one party or the other—it's both, trying to use their political power to uncover what sources are—so, all those things contribute to a 55 rating.

I don't think it's a cause f—for alarm. I think the real cause for alarm in America is…we do not have a business model—well, here or anywhere in the world—that allows us to properly do what we do as watchdogs. And I say "we" because I spent close to 40 years in and around news organizations. We do not—you know, people st—[*scoffs*] it's a nasty cycle! People will—people will…st—stop subscribing to the paper because there aren't as many reporters as there once were. That means less money for the paper, and it means another reporter gets laid off. And—and if people won't pay for news, then wh—a free press is—is—I don't wanna say doomed, but, it will never be what it has been in the history of this country. If—if you are more than happy to pay for all kinds of digital delivery of—of content, and—I mean, uh, the cliché about eight-dollar, nine-dollar lattes—I guess they're probably more than that now—um, but not spend a—really, a modest sum [supporting?] a news organization—well, then the watchdog role of a newspaper disappears, and we have no one looking out for us.

So, it—it's fine to compare us to other countries, and slap our hands when that's appropriate—that's fine. But the real problem's internal—a refusal to pay for news and support news gathering. That's…a terrible situation.

ES: Yeah. Well, and to add on, um…so, part of that ranking, they—so, when trying to tally up those rankings, they do, in part, look at, like, you know, government interference, of course, uh, but they do look at a couple of other factors.

The main thing that actually drags down, um, our ranking by far is actually the safety of journalists. Um, so, they looked at, like, how many journalists reported, like, getting death threats on social media, and, um…also just being vaguely intimidated, if not, uh, getting those death threats. Um…th—

KP: —Yeah, uh—

ES: —Yeah, I was also gonna note, the second thing that they did note as well, um, was the economic indicator, which you were just talking about, with—how, um, you know, news outlets right now are kinda struggling, um, to stay afloat. Um, so anyways, yeah, um…

KP: Well, an—and, you know, the threats…the threats…do come from real Americans out there who—who have been kinda whipped into a frenzy, but you have to remember: The frenzy-making came from government officials, who tell us to "Disregard the—disregard the watchdog! Don't listen to the barking! It's all fake!" So, yeah, it's not a healthy climate, uh…but [*chuckles*] the First Amendment and freedom of the press remain potent weapons on behalf of the American people.

ES: Um, one other thing that, uh, an—and, I'm exploring this in the thesis—uh, the written portion of it—and, I actually—I just had a, uh, a pretty extensive talk with, uh…uh—it was actually kind of unexpected too, 'cause I set up the interview 'cause he was running for, uh—uh, U.S. House of Representatives at the time. But, um, he ended up losing the primary, and I still had him on because he, uh, went to UC Santa—uh, what was it…uh, UC at Santa Cruz for his graduate studies, and um, he's done, like, a lot of research on, like, um, especially artificial intelligence, but also, um, the role of social media in society. And so, we started talking about, um, the, you know, sort of need for a revitalized, like, public news media in the U.S., and how social media and podcasting would fit into that.

Um, so one thing I just, kinda wanted to ask you—and I, you know, obviously, I think the—the, uh, the—the press definitely needs to be included on this, of course—um, can and should U.S. legislators, uh,

consider, like, a few lessons from other countries who do, like, provide, uh, subsidies, uh, to different news outlets to ensure that they, uh, stay afloat?

KP: Well, you know, the…the traditionalists in the news business have always hated that idea, because we're supposed to have an arms-length relationship with the press—excuse me—with the government, and you don't want to be having to lobby them for increases to your stipend.

Um…unfortunately, we absolutely need help from the public, just as NPR and, uh, PBS have some government money—although most of it is from donations. I—I worry about small towns without local newspapers, and, you know, what they call "news deserts," so, yes, I think that, uh, there should be some effort to provide grants to news organizations—to serve the people with information. It's hon—honestly the only way for so many news organizations to survive, and they're critical.

The other thing, though, is what has been explored, and—and in fact, is in play in—in California—we need a more equitable, uh, way to pay journalists for their work. You know, you can't copyright information—you only can copyright the exact way information is worded, or the exact way a video is edited and presented. But the information you glean from that can always be taken and…and put on a website, as long as the language is new—as long as the wording is new. There's no money due [to] the news organization, and increasingly, the hope is that—that those who post content from media will recognize that that media will…all that—that content will dry up if there's not—if there are not media outlets that's being supported.

So, it's gotta be a combination of—of revenue, increases from unexpected locations, and I think some support—some modest support from government—and we can save a lot of news organizations.

ES: Yeah. Well, and I think, uh, yeah, 'cause you mention California, I think one thing that they were also looking at was, um, uh, placing a tax on social media companies, and, uh, using that revenue, uh—an—and I—maybe you did mention that specifically when I was taking a sip from my Mountain Dew, but, um, they're, like [*chuckles*], uh, they're…yeah, so they're, like, taking, like a…the—the bill that they did try to pass—I don't think—I think their session's already ended, last I checked, but yeah, they wanted to, like, uh, take a tax from social media companies, and then use that to, uh, funnel revenue into, uh, certain, uh, outlets, like in California.

KP: So, you know what—you know what's a real surprise, though, that kinda throws a wrench in all of that: You've got Facebook downplaying politics. You've got Threads trying not to have any politics. Well…[*chuckles*]

that's the information that's valuable! News organizations reporting on public figures and election is critically important, and so…you know, the stuff that should be subsidized—that there should be an effort by media companies to make sure it happens is what Facebook and Threads view as—as traffic killers. It's—it's—it's a bad thing. Um, so you have to subscribe to *Politico*, and *The New York Times*, and, uh, *The Washington Post*. And, um, I mean, they're all great, but…that's—that's not a way for somebody to learn about their election in Danville, IL.

ES: Yeah. Yeah…um…so, uh, and actually kinda, uh…uh…you know, you kinda brought up those mainstream out—outlets, uh, one thing that has kind of interes—interested me in the last few years has been, um, sort of the proliferation of smaller nonprofit outlets like *ProPublica*, and then, also journalists, uh, sort of starting their own Substacks, like we had, uh, most recently, uh, uh, some of the most prominent reporters an—and, uh, editors from *The Intercept*—already another nonprofit—they broke away from *The Intercept* to form *Drop Site News*, and then literally the first article they put out—it's like an interview with Hamas officials, which I—I've never seen that in any mainstream outlet, so that was kinda wild.

Um, anyways, um, so we've been kinda seeing a—a lot of that. Uh, can consumers rely on these alternatives, um, for the investigative journalism needed for an informed citizenry, or is—is this just a mere Band-Aid that's being slapped over this gaping systemic flaw within our news media ecosystem?

KP: Well—ev—every—everything helps. Every reporter who's out there doing serious journalism, um—that helps. That's a good thing. The problem is that, as good as *ProPublica* is—and as—well, actually, well-funded it is in recent years—it just can't match what existed here…for probably 40 years in American history, from, you know, '60—1960 to 2000 before the internet upended everything.

[I'll] give you an example: When I walked into *USA Today* as the Editor-in-Chief in 2004, I had a staff of approximately 550. When I left six years later—when I left in 2009, actually—we had…um, less than 300. So, I lost—what—35 to 40% of my staff in that period of time?

All those other people—those people who are gone—they're not gathering news, they're not taking photographs, they're not, you know, they're not doing the job they had done well for so long. And that—that's the dilemma. You know…I applaud independent news organizations. We need them. And, the good news about them is that people are willing to—to pay for Substack, or whatever it is that they feel like "This information is worthwhile." "I'm gonna give ya 10 bucks a month for this, or 15 dollars a month for that." That needs to be our mindset across this country!

Because, you get what you pay for. And if—if you don't pay for news, if you don't pay for information, you get exactly what we have now: heavy—heavy traffic towards the most biased of sites—left and right—and all of it undermines democracy.

ES: Yeah. Uh, yeah, that's a good point. Um, an—and, you brought up bias there. I—I—I, um, I think that kinda leads pretty well into, sort of, this last, uh overarching topic that I wanted to, uh, mention to ya: Um…so, the role of objectivity in mainstream news…um…

So, based on my experiences in Leon Alligood's , uh, communication—er, sorry, commu—community engagement class, um, and also based on just the research I've done for this thesis and discussions with other, uh, journalists and journalism students, uh—I'm more convinced that journalists and news organizations need to seriously—an—and even publicly—question the role of objectivity in their craft. Um, I—I had a very interesting, uh, chat with a reporter from this online news outlet called *Inkstick*—they kinda focus on military-industrial complex reporting. Um, she had said the—the goal in reporting the news shouldn't be objectivity—rather it should be facilitating a "rigorous" reporting process. Um…and further, as Lewis Raven Wallace's *The View from Somewhere* argues in its third chapter, the primary motivation for news outlets' adoption of the principle was…really to crack down on reporters' unionization efforts, not out of affirmation of the ideas posited by Walter Lippmann. And, of course, as her [his] analysis of 20th-and 21st-century news coverage has demonstrated, and then the other works like Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*—um, news outlets seems to fail at providing their self-described objective reporting when it matters the most.

So, I guess my question, then, is how—how should news outlets be responding to their audiences' shifts towards more biased news?

KP: Well…I, um…I have gray hair. The first time I walked into a newsroom professionally, I did it and sat down at my typewriter—

ES: —Whoooooaaaaa!!! [*chuckles*]—

KP: —which you may know as a primitive—

ES: [*chuckles*]

KP: —laptop. Um…and so, I'm coming from the—my own bias of years and years in the business.

I—I've always felt the debate between subjectivity and objectivity to be, frankly, kinda lame.

I—I think that what we really oughta be aspiring to—and frankly, I've always aspired to in my—in my own career—is professionalism. That means I take a—um…I take my own background as a reporter, as a human being, I take my critical thinking skills, and I sit down and say, "If I'm gonna tell this story, what do I need to know? Who can tell me—best tell me what I need to know? And, who has the most credibility of those I might be able to talk to?" And I approach that story without any anticipation of how it will play out. Um—and then you just do that—you do that as a professional.

You don't care—you don't care if your accountant's a Republican or a Democrat. You don't care if your medical doctor's a Republican or a Democrat. It's not gonna affect the quality of service you get from those professionals. In the hands of real journalists—who actually care about professional ethics—you don't have to care whether I'm a Republican or a Democrat. All you have to care about is whether I know how to accurately report a story, and to report it as I find it, and without any other influence—that's what should happen.

And, I totally reject people who believe that they—that the real journalism today has gotta be, "You have a point of view. You speak truth to power." But it's—it's your truth to power! And, that's not—that's not the way this should be. You just become one more…you know, opinion writer—and that's great! We live in a free society with free speech and free press. Go for it. But you're not new! You're not new. *Mother Jones* was all over this in the early 70s. They called it—someone—what was it—someone called it "New Journalism." That was a fad. Look that up!

It is—it is tougher, it is much more difficult to be disciplined, and, just like a police officer would—a good police officer—might think you're a—you're a total creep, but will not arrest you if the facts don't support that—that—that you committed a crime. That's professionalism. Would we ever condone cops saying, "Well, the color of your skin is all I need to run you in." No, we don't! We expect professional law enforcement, we can expect professional journalism, and where that lies is with the people who say they're professional journalists. Do it! Deliver it! And—and, again, that reflects my age and years, but sometimes, old values are not extinct values, and I keep hoping for the best.

ES: Yeah. Alrighty, well, I think that's a great—um, I think that's a great place to end on, uh, frankly. Yeah. Um, that's uh…yeah. I—I think that's a great place to end on, so, uh, Ken: Thank you so much, uh, for stopping by, and uh, friend: Thank you so much for tuning into this episode of *The Kennel:*

uh, *The Honorable Series*. Um, if you liked what you had to see, hit that "like" button. If you have any thoughts you wanna share, uh, hit me up in the comments section below. Um, also, if you have any friends who thin—who you think would enjoy this, hit that "share" button as well—share it with them, please! And also, if you wanna stay up to date on all the stuff that's coming out on *The Kennel*, uh, hit that "subscribe" button. You will not regret it!

Uh, Ken: Thank you so much! I really appreciate you taking the time to—to do this, and, uh, yeah, um…I hope you have a good one, okay, friend?

KP: My pleasure! Have a—have—I hope—best of luck to you on your show!

ES: Alrighty, thank you so much! You have a good one, man!

KP: Take care.

*CLOSING SCREEN.*

**“Aftyn Behn” (Schmidt 2024a)**

*TITLE SCREEN*

ETHAN SCHMIDT: Alright! Hey, hey, friends! What’s happenin’? Big Dog Ethan here! Um, so for the third episode of this, uh, *Honorable Series*, I have Aftyn Behn on the podcast with me. Aftyn, how are you doing?

AFTYN BEHN: I’m great! Thanks so much for having me!

ES: Yeah! Um, so I—I should note, Aftyn’s kinda, like, the first, uh, repeat guest that we’ve had on here. Um, she, uh, su—you know, was successfully elected, uh, to, uh, Tennessee State House District, uh, 51, uh, last year, um…

So, Aftyn, the first thing I wanted to ask, and the—the—the big thing that I remember kinda seeing, uh, throughout your, um, throughout your time here in the State House was the grocery tax. I think I remembered you mentioning that in—in the interview, uh, last time I had you on here. Um, so, what all kinda happened with that? Like, was that, um, uh, ‘cause, if I remember correctly, not—it was pretty difficult to get Republicans to vote on that, right?

AB: Yeah, so, the way that we—so, we’re one of, now, 11 states that have a sales tax on groceries—bo—both state and local portion. And, uh, my bill—and Senator Charlane Oliver’s bill, who’s my Senate co-sponsor—would have closed corporate tax loopho—loopholes to pay to end the grocery tax in Tennessee, which is about a billion dollars a year.

So, the Republicans, um—which, I think there’s more interest in ending the grocery tax, uh, this coming year, uh—weren’t in approval as to how to pay for it, and so, um, there was a lot of lobbying and jockeying around in the committees, as to, um, you know, trying to make it salvageable, in a way where the Republicans could vote on it.

But, I will tell you, they, uh, they pushed back tooth-and-nail. Leader Lamberth really didn’t want his members to vote on this in an election year. But, during the budget…uh…the budget week—which was the final week of April—I was able to, uh, turn in an amendment that was voted on which would’ve taken $700 million from the franchise tax cuts.

So, for your listeners: We handed over a billion dollars to, uh, the biggest companies, who, uh, the Republicans would like you to think are in Tennessee, but really, they’re multinational companies that have a base in Tennessee—um, but a billion dollars over to them!

So, my budget amendment pulled $700 million from that tax cut and would've given every Tennessean a six-month grocery tax break. Uh, and so, they did have to vote on that, and one Republican from, uh—representing one of the poorest counties in Tennessee ended up crossing over to vote.

ES: Oh, wow! Okay. So, yeah, uh, slowly, but surely kinda getting 'em all i—in line. That's really great.

Well, an—and the thing that—the thing that I find funny, too, is uh…what was the guy's name who said we couldn't vote on—it was Lambert? Was that it? The guy who said, like, we couldn't vote on the separate bill itself?

AB: Well, he didn't say that, but that's the organizing that was happening. They refused to let me speak on it in committee. It was just really—there were shenanigans afoot. But yeah, Leader Lamberth.

ES: Yeah—Lamberth! Alright, thank you…yeah, which, I find really interesting, because they spent all that time trying to get this school voucher plan passed. There was, like, so much hubbub about that, and they never [*chuckles*] really ended up getting that passed either.

Which actually kinda leads me to my second question…so, school vouchers: Is that kind of a dead thing now, or is that—do you think that's gonna be coming up in the legislature for the next session?

AB: So, Governor Lee has one more year to pass it, because he's done with his term in 2026. I think we were all looking to Republican primaries in August to determine whether there was a path forward, and honestly, the results were a bit of a mixed bag. So, there were some pro-voucher candidates that were elected, others that were picked off. So, I think we're coming back. I think the fall will be an excellent indicator as to how the voucher fight stands next year, especially if we're able to flip some of these target districts across the state.

ES: Alrighty, sick. So…the second [third] thing I wanted to ask you, and it's kind of weird because I remember at the end of our last interview, I had about, like, I don't know, two or three more questions left, and one of them was based off the questionnaire you had answered about…like the questionnaire you had answered, for the DSA—the Middle Tennessee DSA. And it was on your views on like Israel and Palestine. Now, at the time, I was just kind of like, "Eh…you know, I'm not going to ask that," because, like, that's nothing that really has, like, much, you know, much effect at the state level.

But since then, of course, we've seen what happened at Vanderbilt University where the student government was basically told, “Hey, you can’t vote on this resolution that would require the student government to divest from—or not divest—but, boycott companies that do business with Israel, and basically abide by the BDS movement.” And then they were told, you know, “There's this Anti-BDS law. You can't do that.”

So, do you see, like, any chance of, like, being able to pass some kind of, like, reversal law or, like, try and find some way to get rid of that law because, it seems to be a kind of law that's really hampering any kind of, like, grassroots organizing against what we're seeing right now going on in Gaza. I think it's especially a big concern for college students as well, who are like, trying to protest all this, and trying to do something, and it's like, it's kind of getting in the way for folks who want to do that in Tennessee.

AB: Yeah, so a few things. I mean, 1. I have visited the student protest. I think United States students have always been on the right side of history. I think I would have to…before I even would consider the idea, I'd have to probably hold a few town halls in my district and get constituent feedback. I have a very active, engaged district, and they care deeply about these issues. I think I've seen them move further left.

But I also want to reiterate that I'm the only elected leftist in state government right now. So, it is really lonely. And, there are very few allies that I would have in the legislature to even do something like that. So, for me, it would probably take a lot more heavy lifting and political education to get to a point where I would even carry something like that.

ES: Yeah. Yeah. No, that makes sense. I figured I'd just try and ask something about that because…yeah, that's—that was one that I was thinking about a lot lately, and I wanted to get your thoughts on that.

Regarding corporate greed: So, I think you had already mentioned this. They just, like, passed this tax break for, you know, corporations who are in the state. Do you expect, like, finding any other ways, maybe to try to get a bill passed that would, like, at least address corporate greed at all here in Tennessee, or is it kind of seeming like those that you're having to try to work with across the aisle are just kind of being obstinate at this point in trying to get, like, anything, accomplished on that front?

AB: Yeah. I think the Republican Party is operating in a really antiquated paradigm. They still are talking about tax reform—and in the absence of populism, like it's 2018—and I think the politics have shifted so much. And the polling even has corroborated a bipartisan approach to, I think, an economic populism that includes, you know, the libertarian-bent right and the economic populist left.

But I think there just isn't a political appetite for massive tax reform, besides probably ending the grocery tax by 2027. I'm going to make it an issue in the 2026 gubernatorial race.

So, what I'm really looking at right now are using these next few years to socialize big ideas when it comes to progressive tax reform, because in 10 years, Tennessee will be in a really—in dire financial condition, and people will be looking for answers, and I don't want them to…there needs to be positive alternatives to privatization.

And so, I look at my role right now as really socializing the big ideas, like, "Why don't corporations pay what they owe? Why is a mother buying baby formula at Kroger paying, in effect, a higher effective tax rate than FedEx and Amazon?" And I think asking those questions makes people feel really uncomfortable.

I also represent downtown. And so, as a byproduct, it puts me in a position where I have a very progressive constituent base that wants corporate accountability. It's what I ran on. It's what I was elected on. And also, my district is the embodiment of big business in the state. So, I think there's going to be some really interesting fights, in the next few years. And I look forward to, raising awareness about corporate accountability in the state of Tennessee.

ES: All right, yeah, that's great. You know, speaking of corporate accountability—this is something that I've kind of noticed: We are kind of starting to see just a general bipartisan shift towards, like, approval of legalization of marijuana at the state level, to the point now where—I couldn't believe I was seeing this myself—but now Trump—probably because he's seeing the polls right now with the general election—we're starting to see like a shift towards, you know, a bipartisan shift towards approval of, legalizing marijuana, at the state level.

But one of the issues I know that's also starting to manifest with that is a lot of corporate consolidation among the companies who are, like, producing all that.

So, I guess my question in that regard is 1. Do you think that there's, like, maybe a growing shift in the Tennessee state legislature to legalize marijuana? And 2. If there was ever to be, like, some kind of bill passed that would legalize marijuana, do you think it would be more difficult to put some barriers in place to ensure that we don't see that kind of consolidation happen if we were to legalize it?

AB: So, the political climate is still very religious, and I think I got a taste of that this session when it came to some alcohol bills that I carried. I think

there's still, like, you know…Tennessee is still the buckle of the Bible Belt, and the people in the Legislature are just very tethered to, you know, a very purity kind of realm—politic that doesn't include drinking or smoking.

So, I think there needs to be a bunch of retirements and seats flipped before that's even a possibility. And then, I would love to see, you know, anti-monopoly measures and a lot of these—you know, if we were to legalize it, and it would become an economic issue—that there are protections for small business owners. I think we've seen an override—an overhaul—in the past decade of protections and support for small business owners, even though the Republican Party touts that.

So, yeah, I would absolutely include that. And I think, more importantly, that we have seen just a massive consolidation in every industry across the board. And I think it's really hurting consumers in the state like Tennessee.

ES: Yeah. And whenever you mentioned the, like, alcohol bills, you just totally made me remember about the one guy—I forget his name—and I feel bad because I think part of the reason why he was proposing this bill was because he himself had gotten involved in an accident that was caused by a drunk driver—but, yeah, this…proposing a bill to ban the sale of cold beer, I—I can't—[*laughs*]—that was, just, insane to me. I don't know how you…yeah…What would you say ha been, like, maybe one of the craziest pieces of legislation that has been, like, proposed or even passed, since you got to the state House?

AB: I think the trafficking bills are just—I mean—utterly unconstitutional, yet they don't seem to care. So, we banned the trafficking—well, they're calling it "abortion trafficking"—but should a minor need an abortion, you can't traffic—you can't bring them out of state, which, you know, is kidnaping inherently. But, if you're a family friend, for example, there wasn't any exemptions for that.

And then, if…you have a connection with a trans child who needs gender-affirming care, you're not allowed to take them out of state, which is a violation of the U.S. Interstate Commerce Clause, which is federally protected. And then the word "recruit," which was used in the abortion trafficking bill, is a violation of our First Amendment right. And so, I've been engaged in a lawsuit against the state, to uphold the First Amendment protections when it comes to talking about abortion, and we had our first hearing, last Friday.

ES: Nice. Yeah…So, I guess I would assume abortion is probably, like, at the top ten of your policy priorities. What would you say is like, two or three other of your, like—of your policy priorities for, like, the next session—*if*,

elected, I guess, though I think you're pretty popular—I imagine you're pretty popular in your district.

AB: [*chuckles*] Well, the numbers do affirm that I had the highest turnout of any Democratic state primary candidate in Tennessee, so I think they know I'm fighting for them. I also would say that I have, as I said, a highly engaged district. And, you know, they continuously vote. So, I'm grateful for that.

But, in addition to ending the grocery tax and clawing back abortion access, I would say…I'll also be launching a campaign to put pressure on the Republican leadership around roads. I think all of us—I drive a 2003 Jeep Wrangler, and so I feel every pothole and crack in the roads, and I wake up really mad, because, it's a $64 billion program that we've allocated $200 million a year towards, and there's just not, you know—we could have been really capitalizing on the demographic growth that Tennessee is experiencing, and instead, that money is hoarded in our rainy day fund, and then it's given—the money's rerouted back to corporations.

So, there's no money for roads. Our roads are awful, so I'm really interested in…hopefully stopping the toll lane debate, which the Republicans are pushing right now, and rerouting some of that funding to filling potholes across the state.

ES: Yeah, I—I definitely feel you on that one. So, I drive, like, this 2004—I'm not, like, one of those guys who drives, like, an obnoxiously big pickup truck. It's a very compact kind of truck that I drive. But it also has, like, very cheap suspension on it. It's, like, a 2004 Dodge Dakota. Every time I hit one of those potholes on I-24 going up to Nashville, it's like—I don't know, I feel like I'm, like, in some kind of action movie.

I—I don't know if you follow this account—it's called Dear Murfreesboro on Instagram—but, they, like, post, like a bunch of memes about Murfreesboro. And, one of them was—what was it—the caption was "Driving down I-24 be like," and it's got a picture of, like, the *Mad Max* movie, 'cause, yeah…it just kind of feels like it's always an adventure driving…

So, one more—another thing regarding, transit then, actually: So, I—I was in D.C. over the summer. I was doing an internship with this nuclear weapons abolition group, and I, you know, I was kind of interested, you know, I kind of supported the idea of, like, trying to revitalize, like, our public transportation. But after, like, getting to ride the subway system there for, like, two months, I'm a total, like, convert on that.

That's, like, a big thing I would love to see here in Tennessee—is, like, some kind of public transit system—subway system to be specific,

because I think that would just make it, like, a hell of a lot easier to get back and forth between the different…suburban areas around the Nashville area. You know…would that, like, be a possibility at all for even the state to pass some kind of [*sic*] legislature to sort of expand that? Or do you think that's, like, another one of those pipe dreams with the current makeup of the state legislature?

AB: So, Tennessee—I mean, Nashville, I can't speak for the other cities—but materially, we are unable to put a subway system in just because of the type of rock and mud that is underneath the city. It would just—it's not conducive to having an underground transit system.

But, I will say that, hopefully—you know, we have a transit referendum for this election. It'll be the last thing you vote on, if you live in Davidson County. And it's a start. I think it's a start to improve the bus system. It's a start to enhance sidewalks.

And then from there, once we have a dedicated federal—because if we pass this, we have access to federal funding, and…it puts us in a prioritization line for more federal funding in the future that we could then apply to a broader, more expensive project for transit. But, you know, Tennessee is one of those states—southern states—that just haven't figured it out, and I think passing the buck, it's just…the lived reality is that it's congested—the worst roads in the country. And what do we do about it? And I'm tired of passing the problem to the next generation. Like, we really need—this is something that we really need to tackle.

ES: Yeah. Yeah. For sure. Alrighty, well, I think those are all the questions I can think of to ask ya…yeah, those are really all the questions I can think of to ask ya. But, I don't know, do you have, like, any other final thoughts you wanna, say to any listeners or viewers before we head out?

AB: Yeah, just to say that, you know, don't put all your eggs in the electoral basket in Tennessee. I think—if you think that we're going to win a bunch of races this year, then I think you need to find—redefine what success means, especially in the long term, because Tennessee's a long-term political project, and you have to stick with it for a decade to even see the fruits of your labor.

So, I'm excited that folks are involved, and are as excited as they are to get involved in elections, but we really need to be thinking about 10, 20 years down the road, and when we are able to wrestle back some of the control from the state and the Republicans, what leadership actually looks like.

ES: Yeah, for sure. Whenever you said about—sorry, one more thing—I know I said I was going to end this, but whenever you said about trying to find

other ways to organize outside the electoral process, the one last thing I wanted to get your thoughts on: the labor union expansion across the state. We've had Chattanooga—you know we had the, VW plant [vote to unionize] right now, we've got—what was it—17,000 workers in the South on strike, and I know we've got about 800 here in the Middle Tennessee area on strike with AT&T—or from AT&T with the CWA labor union.

You know, again, I feel like I kind of know the answer to this question: Do you see, like, any movement with regards to maybe trying to repeal some of these, anti-labor union laws? Like, I know we have the right-to-work law that's in the Constitution now all of a sudden, then we also have the legislation banning public workers from collectively bargaining with their state employees [employers]. I don't know if you've seen any shifting on, like, the mood or the approval of that in the state legislature?

AB: No, I think that's gonna be as soon as the Gen-Z takes leadership, and is in office, I think we'll see different policies. But, for—for the—no. [*chuckles*]

ES: [*chuckles*] I thought I'd at least ask, but yeah, I kind of knew the answer to that! Ugh, anyways…[*chuckles*] But, still, yeah, nonetheless, it is kind of hopeful to at least see—to see labor unions at least becoming a little more militant here in the South, because, yeah, I think that's—

AB: —And winning!

ES: Yeah, exactly! I mean, that's—Oh, and there was also like—I forgot, there was also that EV battery plant that I think they just had like a thousand workers there who voted to join the UAW. So, yeah, I mean, it's really insane that that's all happening, but, anyways…

Well, Aftyn, thank you so much! Just so people can learn more about you, where can they find you on social media?

AB: Sure, you can go to my website, www.aftynbehn.com, and you can find all my events and social media platforms and what I've been up to.

ES: Alrighty! Wonderful, well, thank you so much, Aftyn, and, best of luck in the upcoming election—even though, like I said, I think we were talking about that—you probably have that one in the bag!

AB: Thanks, Ethan.

ES Alrighty, you have a good one!

AB: Alright, bye.

ES: Bye.

*CLOSING SCREEN*

**“Matt Ferry” (Schmidt 2024i)**

ETHAN SCHMIDT: Hey, hey, hey. what's happenin’, friends? Big Dog Ethan here! Comin’ back at’cha with another entry into this *Honorable Series*. Today, I've got Matt Ferry with me. He is running for State House District 48 of Tennessee, which I did double check: That is my district, so, I will be able to vote for him in this upcoming election.

Matt, thank you so much for joining! How are you doing today?

MATT FERRY: Thank you! I'm doing okay. We had a big dinner last night, so I'm recovering a little bit from that, but I'm doing all right. How are you?

ES: Yeah, doing pretty well! I just kinda rushed back here from Nashville. I had to—I’m covering the Tennessee Drivers Union strikes. I don’t know you've been hearing about those, but, I tried to go to this roundtable with Mayor O'Connell for the media, and turns out, they changed the time! So, that was—

MF: —That’s not fun.

ES: Yeah, that was something for sure.

But anyways, I'm actually real glad to have you on! So, I guess I could say this is kind of, almost, an interview two years in the making, because I know—I think I reached out to ya last time you ran in 2022, and, unfortunately, I spread myself a little bit too thin at the time, and I couldn't get around to having you on here.

But last night, I was going through the campaign finance records for the incumbent, Brian Terry, and comparing him to yours. And I think having you on here especially—with regards to the main purpose of *The Kennel*—to have candidates who aren't taking any corporate PAC money—I think having you on here is, honestly, just a great example of why we need more candidates like you who are running.

Brian Terry's campaign finance reports are just astounding. He's bought out by Amazon, Eli and Lilly, HCA Health Care, a variety of other corporations, and these very discreetly named PACs—bumpin’ into the microphone there…Oh! I got the sensitivity turned down a little bit…sorry about that. Anyways, yeah, this guy's just clearly bought out, and very few of his donations even come from individual people, and many of these donations are like $500 or more.

Your reports show the exact opposite. I think that was like a few $300 ones from this retiree. And there were a large variety of smaller donations

from people working various jobs, like a Kroger store clerk. There was also a Walmart cashier as well. So, what would you say this difference, between you and your opponent, speaks to?

MF: Well, it just like you said: He's bought and paid for by these big corporations. You know, one of the issues that I've run for in the past—and I haven't really talked about it this much this year—is about the landfill. You know, we have the largest municipal dump in Tennessee, in northern Rutherford County and Walter Hill area. They actually own 99 acres out there, but they can't dump on all 99 acres. But they're trying to—that's the end game for them. So, every few years, they say, "Hey, we're almost at capacity. We need to keep—we need to expand it. But recently, there has been some pushback against that, but what we found was that, you know, Brian Terry—he would talk big about this issue, but he was bought by Republic Services—by the landfill people, and he pretty much did whatever they wanted him to do.

And, you know, some of the other corporations that you mentioned on there—HCA, Eli [and] Lilly—that lines up because he is on the Health Committee. And, of course, you know, he is all for these big health insurance companies that are going to gouge the customers and not pay what they owe. And I mean, billion dollar corporations—I think Nashville's got five of them headquartered up there—that, you know, they have these really slickly produced commercials about being on, you know, "the innovation of health care!" Well, there's a lot of people suffering in Tennessee.

Real quick, I don't know if you ever heard of Remote Area Medical, but it's this group founded by a guy who was a former military doctor, and he would fly into, you know, various countries and try to get some sort of tent city set up and, you know, do all kinds of medical stuff for them for like two or three weeks and then leave.

Well, he retired and moved back to his hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee. And guess what he found? Almost the same conditions exist in East Tennessee. And so, he started Remote Area Medical. Why—Remote Area Medical should not exist! If we have these huge health care companies that talk about, just how amazing they are about saving people's lives, why do we have to have something like that happen?

But, you know, it's greed. It's greed, when it comes down to it—and Brian Terry is a part of that. Like I said, he sits on the Health Committee, and he lets them do whatever they want. So, you know, this is the reason why we don't have something like Medicare-For-All or something similar.

ES: Yeah.

MF: It’s because of these corporations and legislators who take money from them and think that that's okay.

ES: Yeah, no. And that's—

MF: Sorry, that’s kind of a long-winded answer talking about—

ES: No!

MF: Now, I don't know all the people that finance him either. But, you know, obviously, he is, you know, bought and paid for by these big corporations and, you know, he either looks the other way or helps them when it's time to do some legislating.

ES: Yeah, and no, I mean that's a great point! It's actually something that HCA—whenever you're talking about kind of, like, lack of access to, like, hospitals and all that—HCA was a big—is kind of a big culprit in all that. *More Perfect Union* did this great video where they documented how HCA Healthcare actually got the idea of their business model from KFC.

MF: [*laughs*]

ES: It's like, they literally took the business model of a fast food restaurant, where the idea was, you know, buy up as many properties as possible, and then consolidate and close them to the point where, you know…I mean, they literally took the same kind of model from KFC.

And now, because of that, I mean, because of corporate consolidation within these different hospitals and health care facilities, like, people are now struggling to get access. And that's even—we’re only even talking about just, like, trying to *get* to a health care facility! That's all ignoring, you know, being able to *pay* for the healthcare, and also having insurance—like you talked about Medicare-For-All and single-payer. I mean, it's kind of a no-brainer at this point.

MF: Yeah!

ES: I don't know if you saw it—because I noticed that you actually did cite a statistic about Tennessee, I think, on your web page. It was, like—what was it—Tennessee is like ninth or 10th—has the ninth or 10th most uninsured people out of all 50 states?

MF: Yeah.

ES: I was looking up those stats, and I found the same thing from The Commonwealth Fund's study, and they do a lot of great research on, like, on health care, and they just put out a new one.

So, they do, like, this repeating study. It's about every couple of years or so. It's called "Mirror, Mirror," where they compare the U.S. health care system to those of other developed countries. And once again, they found the U.S. is the worst out of all of those, just because of severe lack of access to health care, whereas all these other, you know, Scandinavian countries and Canada—I mean, you know, they have single-payer there and everyone gets covered.

MF: Yeah.

ES: Yeah. And I think you're right about that—I think Brian Terry is absolutely part of that problem.

Now, why would you—so, you know, you were pointing out, like, what this difference between you and your opponent speak to.

Why do you think District 48 voters should be concerned about this district—this difference? Like, how does that affect them, more specifically?

MF: Well, you know, and just talking a little bit more about health care: I originally—years ago—when I started getting involved in local politics and state politics, we were fighting to keep the ACA.

The ACA was under attack—The Affordable Care Act—and our job was to try to defend it, and also try to expand Medicaid. Because of a Supreme Court case that said that states can, you know, decide whether or not they want to accept the expansion of Medicaid, you know, Tennessee became one of the states that refused to do it.

The governor at one point was for it, and had his own plan, and the state legislature tied his hands to it. And, you know, we're still talking about their health care plan because they've never come up with one. I remember, I was in William Lamberth's office—William Lambert's—he's, from Portland, and he's a very powerful state House member. And, he even said that he had a health care plan, and I was like, "Oh, wow! You have a health care plan!?" And he was like, "Oh, yeah, man! It's coming out any day now!" You know?

It never came out.

ES: [*laughs*]

MF: [*a few seconds of garbled audio*] The ACA was Romney Care out of Massachusett! It's a very conservative plan to begin with. And as we know, they don't care about health care plans. They don't care about rural hospitals closing. Over 15 rural hospitals have closed since their reign of power started in 2010. And when I asked a legislator about that, he said, "Oh, well, you know, it's fine! You know, they can just drive an extra hour to Knoxville and get the medical care there!"

Well, that's completely unacceptable. I don't think I have to tell you why, but if you're having a medical emergency, every minute counts. And closing down a rural hospital could be a death sentence for somebody.

But, you know, no one should go in debt to fight a preventable disease. And, you know, the health care model that we have in this country really is all about greed.

And Brian Terry is right up there with them. You know, he's a doctor. He's an anesthesiologist. He should know better. But, he's rich! He's got lots of money. And so, it doesn't affect him, and it doesn't affect his rich friends. And so, he really doesn't care. But when you're talking about health care in Tennessee, I think medical bankruptcy is the number one bankruptcy in America and in Tennessee.

So, it affects a lot of people, and nobody should be going into debt, and nobody should be weighing whether or not they need to sell their house or sell their car, or sell their belongings just to live. I think that's completely unacceptable. So, I've got a lot of feelings about this, obviously. But, you know, we could be so much better! We could be so much better. When you look at ACA, NHC, United Health Care—all these big companies that headquartered in Nashville—billions of dollars! They have billions, upon billions of dollars! They could afford to open up their own rural hospitals, but, you know, and maybe, maybe, maybe they shouldn't because, yeah, they'll run the wrong way.

But, you know, I want to tell you one more story: You know, there's a representative—he's actually in Congress now: Mark Green.

ES: Oh, Mark Green! [*laughs*]

MF: You know Mark Green!?

ES: I know of him, yep.

MF: Yeah. He represents like, it's like, West Nashville now. You know, they split up Nashville, and it goes to Clarksville.

He fought against expanding Medicaid—fought hard against it—and won. And after that, he started his own private health care business in Clarksville. And guess what? That health care business is the worst.

They will overbuild people. They will not provide the services they tell people to—and it is just a scummy, scummy, awful health care company that should not exist. But it does, because it's run by a congressman, and all his friends are fine with it, or they're paid off.

And, you know, another example, is this Ballard Health in northeast Tennessee. They have been given special privileges to do what they do from the state legislature—and a special tax break even. But they're, you know—the health results are subpar there, and a lot of people who have to deal with it are very, very frustrated with it, and have been asking for help from the state, and the state refuses to do anything about it.

So, we're allowing the worst of the worst to run these companies. And, of course, you know, it's all about greed for them. It's all about cutting everything to the bone and, you know, not providing money for staffing or for resources, and it's just going to CEO pay. You know, I forgot how much the CEO of Ballard makes, but he makes an ungodly amount of money. And, you know, he's fine! You know, he gets on his yacht and doesn't think two things about the people who are suffering in his area.

But, something needs to change. There needs to be a big change. And I'm really, like, happy because, again, ten years ago, we were kind of arguing about the ACA. It's a little bit different now where it goes, "Hey, look, can we all agree this is a bad situation, and something big needs to be done?"

I'm saying I'm happy because I feel like there's a lot more people who are saying, "Yes, we need single-payer. Yes, absolutely. This system needs to change."

ES: Yeah. No. And…whenever I learned more about, like, regarding health care access issues—that was something that got—that really motivated me politically, especially hearing folks like Bernie Sanders, kind of rail against that. Because I, myself, I mean…I was fortunate enough to be raised in a family that did have that kind of access to health care. So, you know, growing up most of my life, I was, like, totally oblivious to that. And then I get into college and I start reading these things about like, "Oh, yeah, you know, not everyone, like, we still have—what is it, like 10% of the entire population, I think, in the U.S. is uninsured—and that's not even counting the people who are underinsured, where they're paying way too much of their income for health care. It's insane.

MF: Yeah.

ES: I did want to ask—because I was reading up a lot about the battle to get Medicaid expansion through a lot of these very fragmented *Tennessean* articles that would just pop up on my search engine. I couldn't find any positions from Dr. or Rep. Terry on Medicaid expansion—with the exception of a couple of articles that, at the very least, demonstrated—to put it lightly—uninformed positions on Medicaid.

He reposted this opinion piece from the *Times Free Press* in Chattanooga, that basically compared Medicaid, not only to single payer health care, but socialized medicine. Literally, the person started off the article by calling Medicaid "single-payer health care," which is insane, because it's means-based, and, like, that's not what single-payer is!

MF: Right. Right.

ES: But anyway, so, I don't know if you can speak to this, or maybe, you know, you've learned more about his position on Medicaid expansion since this is—what, is this the third time you're running, right?

MF: This is actually the fourth time I'm running.

ES: Fourth time. Yeah…So, in your time, like, running against Brian Terry, have you found, like, what his position is on Medicaid expansion?

MF: That's a good question. I have not—well, I mean, he's against It, because they're all against it. You know, he might be for it if they were all for it! You know, that's the kind of thing about Brian Terry: He's not the worst, but he's far from the best.

ES: Yeah.

MF: And he just, kind of, goes along with whatever they do. So, I don't know his exact position on Medicaid expansion, besides being against it. Which, as a doctor, I think is inexcusable.

But, you know, I'll tell you a quick story that's not quite about Medicaid expansion, but maybe gives you a good clue about who Brian Terry is: There's this TANF money—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Tennessee gets a pot of money from the federal government for this—for TANF funds, and they have not spent over $700 million of it—which is completely inexcusable.

ES: Yeah.

MF: So, this story has popped up in the media every now and then, and people have said, you know, “What's going on with this? What's going on with this? What's going on with this?” Well, at some point, Brian Terry was anointed—was appointed the head of the task force to figure out how to spend the TANF money.

You know, look, when it comes to federal and state money that needs to go to rich individuals or corporations, they can figure out how to get that money to them. There's no problem. There's no computer snafus. You know, they get that money lickety-split.

But, you know, there is a SNAP backlog recently—the food stamp—they had a huge backlog. They actually, took that number down because they kicked people off, not because they fixed their computer system. You know? So, when it comes to aid to go to needy folks, that money gets tied up—intentionally tied up. You know, the state legislature is saying, “Oh, we don't know how to do this!” Or, they have some computer snafu that they *never* can figure out how to fix.

But with the TANF money, they actually appointed Brian Terry to be the head of the task force—the TANF Money Task Force. And I was like, “Okay, you know, we'll see what happens with this.”

Well, later, someone from *The Tennessean* or another media outlet caught up with Brian Terry and said, “Hey, what's the status on the TANF money?” And his answer was, “Oh, I don't know. Whatever they want to do with it!” You know, he literally said, “I don't know what they're doing! Whatever Bill Lee and Bill Lamberth and Cameron Sexton want to do with it!” Well, that shows that you're not actually the head of the TANF Task Force. *They* are.

So, I think he just kind of takes orders and is just very comfortable doing that, you know? But, he's not working for the people up there—not by any means that.

ES: That’s—yeah, that, just, *exudes* leadership abilities right there: “I don't know what's going on with that. I got put in charge of that whole thing, but I really don't know what's going on with that. Talk to the House speaker on that one.” That's insane.

You had mentioned corporate—you mentioned that, you know, we have no issues passing tax breaks for corporations. That's actually another thing I want to ask you about.

So, you know, Republican state legislators, they passed another corporate tax break in April, which I did confirm this: Terry *did* vote for that. What would you do about the corporate tax rate in Tennessee if elected?

MF: Oh, that's a great question. Well, you know, let me think about this for a second…You know, there's FedEx: I believe they pay nothing. GE: I believe they also pay nothing in taxes…or next to nothing. There's, you know, Amazon…Lots of big corporations take advantage of Tennessee. And millions, upon *billions* of dollars of tax money—they just don't pay, because they're paying our state legislators.

So, something absolutely needs to change with that, because they have the money to pay! You know, there's no reason why they should be paying next to nothing or nothing at all.

So, yeah, I would—I don't know exactly what I would propose, but I do think that we need to start making them pay their fair share here in Tennessee. You know, we already don't have a state income tax, which is okay, except we have a big sales tax—

ES: Yeah.

MF: —that is, you know, that disproportionately hurts people without the means. You know, the grocery store tax—whatever they call it—that hurts people, everyday citizens, more so than people who are just swimming in money.

And I like to say that because, you know, this is just another thing of that, you know? If they actually paid their fair share of taxes, maybe we could fully fund our schools. Maybe we could, you know, do certain things with it that we need to d!. Maybe we could keep these rural hospitals open. But, it's just inexcusable to me that a company like Amazon—which, by the way, I mean, they do not treat their employees very well.

ES: Noooooo.

MF: We have a warehouse here in Murfreesboro, and I've heard all kinds of horror stories, and I've known some people that worked in their corporate office in Nashville, and that can be really brutal.

And…they have the money. They have the money. Does Jeff Bezos need another yacht? I mean, he's got billions and billions of billions of [*sic*] money, and something needs to be done.

Honestly, I do believe that billionaires should not exist. You know, if you have millions and millions and millions of dollars, you're okay! You're doing fine!

You've got yachts, you can take off and workout all day, and eat, you know, roadkill like RFK. No, I mean—

ES: [*laughs*]

MF: [*chuckles*] You know, you could do whatever you want every single day! You don't have to deal with the pressures that everyday Americans have to deal with. Why do you need billions and billions more?

Well, I, you know, I think it's an ego thing. I also think it's to kind of protect themselves. But, you know, at the end of the day, we do—corporate greed is at an all-time high. I mean, this is like a new Gilded Age.

ES: Yeah.

MF: And to let, like, you know, a company like GE or FedEx take advantage of our tax system here in Tennessee? I mean, that's not being a good citizen! That's not being a good Tennessean. That's not being a good American. And, I think that we definitely need to push back against that and make them pay their fair share.

I'm not asking, you know, them to give up all their money. Just pay your fair share in taxes! You'll still have your yachts.

ES: Yeah.

MF: You'll still have plenty of money to do this. You know, you don't need a crazy amount of,—you know, you don't need a golden parachute if you've already got $100 million. You know, you don't need an extra $100 million.

But, you know, going back to these health care companies, you know, their CEOs literally make millions, upon millions, upon millions of dollars, and people are suffering in Tennessee. They're not getting the right care.

So they can, you know, produce some slick commercials to play during the football season, say, "They're on the cutting edge of innovation of health care!" But nothing could be further from the truth. You know, they're sitting high in their skyscrapers, and enjoying their Sundays, and meanwhile, the rest of us are struggling with medical debt.

So, I'm sorry, that kind of went all over the place with that answer. But, you know, yeah, we absolutely need to make them just pay their fair share.

ES: Yeah, for sure! And, I mean, talking about corporate tax breaks, you know, that can lead to a lot of different subjects. And, unfortunately with health care, because it's, you know, primarily run by these corporations who don't have enough—you know, certainly aren't paying their fair share. I mean, that absolutely connects.

You mentioned the harms of this corporate tax bill, or like, this corporate tax break bill on the "Widening Economic Divide" page of your website. So, you know, you kinda mention making corporations pay their fair share. What else would you do to narrow that economic divide in Tennessee? If elected?

MF: That's a good question. Well, you know, we need to be paying workers a lot more. You know, the minimum wage is—the federal minimum wage is still stuck at $7.50, I believe? You know, that's unacceptable—completely unacceptable.

ES: I'll note, $2.13 if you're a server, by the way, thanks to—

MF: Oh, right! Right!

ES: The other NRA—the National Restaurant Association—they love that $2.13-an-hour tipped wage. It's insane.

MF: Yeah. You know what? It really is insane. And not only that, when you do that, you make the servers have to really work for their tips, you know, and that's something that, you know, they'll try to say the people who pushed it to $2.13 say, "Oh, well, that's a good thing," you know, and "They're making so much tip money!"

Well, actually, you're putting people in a bad situation. You know, sometimes these servers are female, and they have to be very nice to men who maybe aren't being very nice to them, and just so they can get some tips—and you can't rely on that! You absolutely can't rely on that. So servers and other service workers are really getting gypped there, while some of these restauranteurs make big money.

But yeah, you know, going back to just, like, the minimum wage, you know, I was reading the other day that, like, you know, there's been a big push for $20 an hour, and some companies have adopted that, which is great. But I heard, you know, because of the rising cost of living—the cost of housing, and health care, and education, and transportation keep rising ,and keep rising, and keep rising!

That's not even—$20 an hour won't even do it for you, especially if you live, in a big city like Nashville! It is *expensive* to live in Nashville. It is

not cheap, and you need a lot more than $20 an hour if you're going to be living in Nashville. But unfortunately, people make far less than that, including our servers and people who work, you know, down Broadway. You know, you might think that "Wow, they make, you know, so much money every night!" It's a hustle. It's really tough. And sometimes, they don't make that much money. You know, they're not going home super rich.

I actually have some friends that play music down there. You know, they love it. And sometimes, it's really good, and sometimes it's not, you know, and sometimes they're kind of dealing with, you know, drunk tourists, which is not maybe the thing they want to do on a Friday night.

ES: Sometimes you have to deal with Morgan Wallen tossing a chair—was it Morgan Wal—or Wallace, the country star—like, toss the chair over the balcony of his brand new bar, hit some like—Yeah, I mean, that's the kind of stuff that I've heard. I've actually never been there during the night. I've only been there a couple times during the day for protests, of all things, actually.

And, yeah, I mean, I've seen the crowds there, and it's like, I can't imagine how hard a lot of the musicians, servers, cooks—all those workers that keep those restaurants going. I mean, I don't know how they handle that kind of a capacity. I mean, it's quite insane.

MF: Right. And, you know, they get squeezed too. You know, they've got to pay for parking, you know? And it wasn't that long ago when they could, you know, pull up to the door and unload their gear—you know, these musicians—but they can't really do that now. And, you know—it kind of depends on the place—but, you know, they're getting squeezed as well.

And I think, you know, I really like Freddie. I like the new mayor of Nashville. I think he's smart, I think he's dedicated to changing the way things work, and I really hope he changes the way things kind of work in Nashville, as far as a tourist go, because one point that he made during his campaign is that they're catering to the tourists, They're catering to this—this business of selling alcohol, basically, and they're probably over-serving people.

But everybody else in Nashville is getting left behind. You don't travel that far from Broadway to see that there's a lot of Nashvillians that are suffering. We could be housing a lot of individuals there. There could be a lot more sidewalks.

There could be trains. I'm a big proponent of trains. We need to stop these corporations from using our rails to move their goods, and try to move

some people, because, you know, this car culture is killing us. But, you know, I did like that message from Freddie, and I hope he pursues policies that will focus more on the Nashvillians that live there, and not the tourists that are coming in, but it does seem like they cater to those—the businesses that do business down there.

And I was there the other night, actually—and I'm not there very often—and I was blown away! I was like, "Wow, there's a lot more stuff here!" And there's all kinds of people here. And, you know, it's not a bad thing, except people—the residents of Nashville are getting left behind. If you go to East Nashville, if you go to some places up north and Bordeaux, people are getting left behind, and we need to start thinking about the future of Nashville.

What is this going to look like? Are we going to continue down this path, or are we going to continue to cater to out-of-town drunks, or are we actually going to pursue policies that are going to help the people who live in this area?

ES: Yeah, no, and that's a good point too, and, you know, you brought up, Mayor O'Connell. So, you know, one thing I should note before I kind of start elaborating on this: So, I actually canvased for Freddie O'Connell—

MF: Okay!

ES: —Whenever he was running his campaign. At first, I started with Jim Gingrich, and then once he dropped, like, basically everyone moved over to Freddie O'Connell's campaign.

And, what I am seeing right now is, I think the promises of his campaign are really going to be tested here in the upcoming weeks, with what's going on with the Tennessee Drivers Union. I don't know if you heard about that or read about what's going on with them, but they've been targeting Nashville City Council, and especially Mayor O'Connell, because part of his transit improvement program includes having this partnership with the bus system, WeGo, and Uber and Lyft. And, I think they're kind of using that reliance on that connection—the Uber and the Lyft drivers—and taxi drivers as well—they're all kind of using that reliance to sort of coalesce together, form a union, and make demands from the local government there, because they do kind of have that power. I mean, you know—the Uber and the Lyft companies—they don't really have much negotiating power with them because they're considered independent contractors, or whatever. And right now, I mean, they're also part of the people—they're part of that group who are also struggling to make it by as well.

And, kind of give a plug here as well: I've actually been reporting on that for *MTSU Sidelines*, so if you want to stay up to date with that, definitely check out the—I've got one article out so far. I'm gonna be covering next Tuesday—they're actually set to meet with the—who is it—it's like the legislation director, or like, the policy director from Freddie O'Connell's office. They're gonna have about ten council members show up there as well, so…

MF: Okay.

ES: Yeah, so I think that's going to be really interesting, especially because Freddie O'Connell never mentioned much about labor unions during his campaign. And so, I think it's going to be real interesting to see how his office, how he specifically, you know, handles the Tennessee Drivers Union, because I think it's also going to send another clear message as to what his thoughts are on the workers who kind of power the area. So, yeah—

MF: Excuse me, like, what are they asking for? I missed that part.

ES: Oh, yeah! I probably…glossed over that…

So, the main things they're asking for: One, they want a—they're kind of asked for a variety of things, but the—I'm trying to think of them off the top of my head right now.

Obviously, they are asking for, like, wage increases, but really, the local government doesn't have much say over that.

Another thing they're actually asking for is a curfew on electric scooter usage after 9 p.m. Because what they found is, is that while they're driving around and, there are just, like, a lot of people who are drunk, riding the scooters, trying to get home—which, I mean, God bless them, they're trying not to drive themselves, of course, but the issue is that becomes a hazard for all the Uber drivers and the Lyft drivers, so, they're asking for a curfew on that.

They're also asking for the city to enforce its bans on these fake taxi companies. So, there are there are, like, legit taxi companies. They actually have a public—they have, like, a partnership with the local government there to provide taxi services. But there are a lot of these fake taxi companies that are just kind of being set up as like, you know, these totally independent ventures. And the city actually has a ban on those, but they aren't enforcing them, according to the union.

So that's another thing they're demanding, and there was one other—it was literally the first one—You know what? I'm going to cheat. I'm going to go on my phone here real quick.

MF: Yeah, go for it!

ES: Yeah, because I might just need to cut here, honestly, We'll see…

MF: You know, that's a dangerous situation, though—when you have these fake taxi companies operating. Anything could happen to the passengers. You know, they could get robbed, or worse, from someone operating an unlicensed company.

And, you know, I mean, it's bad for the people who drive for Uber or Lyft too, you know? It can be dangerous, you know? I've known some friends that have worked those kinds of jobs, and sometimes it pays well and they have a good night, and sometimes they're like, "I don't know if I want to do this anymore, you know? I had a really weird encounter last night, and I had to fight the guy for the money and, yeah, you know, he was drunk and he threw up in my car and—

ES: Oh!

MF: It can be bad, you know?

ES: Yeah.

MF: And if they don't have the protections, and if they're not getting the money that they need, they're being abused, you know, those workers are being abused.

ES: Yeah. And, so I did finally—and I don't know why this didn't come up because literally this was where they had their first strike: So, they want the rideshare lot expanded, and they also want to get clean bathrooms as well. I guess that's been an issue at the airport. Yeah, so those are at least the three demands that they're issuing to the local government that they do have some power over.

MF: Okay.

ES: So, like I said, we'll kind of see how the office responds to that, but I think it's also going to be a good indicator of how they can kind of, respond to more of these—what's the word—I guess, sudden developments in labor issues, because, like I said, Freddie O'Connell really didn't mention much about labor during his campaign, so I think it'll be interesting to see how he handles that.

MF: Yeah.

ES: So, next thing I wanted to, to move onto, actually, was the issue of cannabis.

So, I was reading on Dr. Terry's website—Rep. Terry's website.

MF: Yeah.

ES: And he—so, he seems—I don't want to say, "Led the charge." It's kind of difficult for me just to base that off the different bills that he sponsored. But he did sponsor a few bills to get the state legislature to at least examine legalizing medical cannabis. I looked on your site. You haven't mentioned much about cannabis. What would be your approach to, to cannabis regulation if elected?

MF: Well, for one thing—I do want to mention this—I know some people who, sell hemp products. Perfectly legal. This is something that they had to fight with the state legislature for years on. And then, the federal government in 2018, when they passed their farm bill, that they pass annually, they defined the word "hemp." And that helped, open like—you know, there's a lot more of those kinds of stores now—that's because of that.

Well, after that, of course, Rutherford County got in trouble for trying to bust a bunch of those stores, even though the TBI told them not to. But I, you know, my feelings is that if hemp is legal by the federal government, you don't need to be messing with them. These products are perfectly legal, and I know someone who operates, one of those stores, and the TBI messes with them all the time.

They actually came in recently, and took a bunch of their plants, and said that they were testing them, and they were fully THC plants! And, you know, it turns out that they were storing them incorrectly, but they'll never admit to that! But, that's what was happening, because they're not fully, you know, marijuana plants. But, I think that needs to stop completely—the harassment of these hemp stores.

But, going to the issue of cannabis: We absolutely need to legalize it medically, and we need to legalize it recreationally as well, because that money is just going to the pockets of black market profiteers, and it could be going into the pockets of rural farmers. There's a lot of farmers who are struggling in Tennessee, and some of them, you know, their crop used to be tobacco. They could easily retrofit their farm to grow marijuana, to grow medical marijuana, to grow hemp that could provide all kinds of products, not just, you know, things to do with, these hemp products that are sold to their stores. You can make all kinds of things—paper and rope.

So I'm a big believer in hemp. I'm a big believer in cannabis. I think there's nothing wrong with it. I think that the people who are pushing back against it are police unions and other entities that make money because it's criminalized.

Another good example of this are these drug testing companies. I forgot what it's called—maybe Path Group? Path Group is owned by—I believe it's Diane Black's husband. And Diane Black used to be a legislator in the state government. I think she was a senator out of Wilson County. She ran for governor one time. But, you know, these companies, they will bill people quite a bit of money to test pee and—

ES: You're kidding! Oh my god!

MF: Right? Exactly, you know what I mean? Like, when it comes down to cannabis, I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I think there's so many benefits from it—from opening it up to more things like hemp or medical marijuana. I have heard that you can combine some of these cannabinoids with cancer drugs to make them less harsh. Why aren't we doing this?

Well, you know, again, it's because our state legislature is in league with corrupt police unions, and these drug testing companies, and other entities that make tons of money if marijuana is criminalized.

Again, I want to go back to this law enforcement thing for a second, because, you know…And we don't have like a huge, huge problem, maybe, in Rutherford County, but this does exist across the state of Tennessee and across our country, where law enforcement can take your money! They can take your car!

ES: Yeah.

MF: Oh, recently—Oh, well, here's a good example—recently there was a family, I believe, from Alabama, and they were driving through Tennessee, and a state trooper pulls him over, because his windows were too tinted, okay? Which, you know, okay, it's against the law. Give him a ticket, you know, and go on your way. No, they ended up searching the car and finding, I think, like, a blunt, or a roach, or something like that, and they took the kids! DCS took the kids! Do you remember this story?

ES: I remember seeing—I may have even—I think I may have briefly, like, did a very brief segment on it here on *The Kennel*, like, because it happened like…I don't know, maybe early 2023, I think? Or like, sometime in the spring?

MF: Yeah.

ES: Yeah, I remember that now, I mean, yeah, that is insane. And yeah, I mean, civil—and civil forfeit—what was it? Civil forfeit…

MF: Yeah, forfeiture!

ES: Yeah, Civil asset forfeiture! That's the phrase I'm looking for! Yeah. I mean, that kind of thing is a terrible incentive for police officers to, try to, like, try to arrest people who are being nonviolent and are just smoking a blunt. I mean, it's kind of insane.

MF: Yes.

ES: So, cannabis, you support legalizing that. What about psychedelics? Because I know we've heard some talk about that, and I know—who is it—Colorado, if I'm not mistaken—I know it's legal for medicinal purposes, maybe recreational, if I'm not mistaken, or at least psilocybin, I think?

MF: I think.

ES: Yeah. Yeah. And then, Oregon, I think they decriminalized all drugs, and then they also legalized psilocybin for recreational purposes. I don't know if you've had much thought about that. I know there's obviously not been a lot of movement on that in the state legislature recently, but, I did want to get your thoughts on that, at least.

MF: I, you know, I have read a little bit about this. I'm not an expert at it, but I will tell you that…there's benefits for it. And, I do know some people who have actually benefited from it. You know, I have some friends that struggle with some mental illness, and then, you know, low level psychedelics have actually helped them. So, this is like a newer thing, this—these kinds of therapies. But, they're perfectly safe, actually!

ES: Yeah.

MF: And it's not like, it's not like a harder drug, like heroin or meth or anything like that, and I think that the general public who, you know, really don't understand, you know, how not a big deal it is, you know what I mean? Like, I don't want to say, like, “Oh, man, it's no big deal at all!” But, like, it's really not as crazy as people think it is. And, it really is safe. It's a safe treatment. And people are getting something out of it. That's why laws been passed to approve it.

So yeah, I'm absolutely on board with it. I think it's a good idea. Anything for some people to get relief, I'm all about. And if it's natural, and if it's safe, and if it doesn't do permanent brain damage, I'm all about it!

Hey, you know, there's a lot of treatments out there that can't say that, right?

ES: Yeah.

MF: There's some treatments out there that are pretty harsh, and have lasting impacts on your body and your brain. And I think that low-level psychedelics are perfectly safe—are perfectly fine, and could really, really help people pursue that. And in Tennessee, I think it could help a lot.

Going back to the cannabis issue, though: It's a shame that we have not done this. But, if we did, it would really transform Tennessee. We would get, you know, the state government would get so much money out of it.

MF: Yeah.

ES: These rural farmers would get so much money out of it, and these are safe products. These are not, you know, terribly harsh or, you know—these are not—again, this is not methamphetamine, you know!

But you know what? It could actually help tamper down on opioid addiction, which is raging right now. You know, I think we're in the fourth wave of it, I believe?

And, you know…Unfortunately, I know a veteran who came back, and he had some health issues, due to his time overseas, and they prescribed him opioids, and it wasn't long after that he started shooting heroin. And unfortunately, he's not around anymore. And that really, really sucks.

But what could we have done better? I don't know, but opioids are not the answer.

And again, you know, doctors are legally able to prescribe that, but somebody is not allowed to smoke a joint, or use medical marijuana to help draw down the harsh effects of cancer drugs. So, I'm all aboard medical marijuana, recreational marijuana, and even, psychedelic mental health treatments. I do think that's a good idea. I have read a little bit about that, and it's perfectly safe.

ES: Yeah, yeah. Well, and I will note on the psychedelic thing: It *can* be perfectly safe, right? Because, I think one of the things, and I—there's a group

called MAPS, it stands for—what was it—Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies?

Now, I think there's a lot of valid criticism to go around about the way in which they're—right now, it's kind of rumored that if psilocybin or other psychedelic treatments get approved for medicinal use at a federal level, MAPS would stand to—MAPS would be charging *a lot* of money for these treatments, because initially, they would be considered "experimental" or whatever—I mean, we're talking in, like, the thousands, if not tens of thousands of dollars, right? But, I was listening to a podcast with someone who works there, and he kind of stressed that the main thing to make sure with psychedelics is that you are taking them in some kind of a controlled environment.

Because…it's a kind of substance that can affect your perception, like, heavily affect your perception of different things around you, to the point where if you encounter some kind of stimulus that triggers, like, a harsh reaction or, you know, trigger some kind of traumatic memory, that can have, like, a serious negative effect.

I had one friend who was telling me how he… Granted, I know most of the research has kind of focused around psilocybin. There has been some that's actually been done on LSD in recent years.

But, I did have a friend who, he took LSD, and he frequently took it. And, he kind of stop having to do that once he got hospitalized for suicidal…ideation, I guess.

So, I did at least kind of want to stress there for anyone who's watching it that like it—definitely not calling anyone to action on taking illegal substances at this point, especially because they're unregulated. And even if you are going to do that, you know, someone who's kind of been researching all this has stressed that being in a controlled environment while you're taking that is a good way to ensure that you don't have any negative side effects.

MF: Yeah, well, you know, real quick—you know, if you want to prevent overdoses—heroin overdose—you know, you give them a space that they can do it!

ES: Yeah. Yeah.

MF: It's all about harm reduction. And I think there's a lot of people out there who don't understand that, you know? They're really ginned up on this "law and order," and, "You know what'll solve thing? Stick them in jail!" Well, you know what's in jail? Heroin.

ES: Yeah! [*chuckles*]

MF: And, you know, they're not going to escape it in jail! And you're probably going to make the situation worse.

So, if we actually, you know, try to work on harm reduction, try to work on bringing these people in, and treating them like people instead of criminalizing every move that they make, you know, we can maybe stop the opioid crisis, you know? Maybe we can tamp down on that. But, just saying, "Throw them in jail," is not the answer.

ES: Yeah, for sure, for sure.

So, well, and actually, with regards to "just throw them in jail," I think this might be a kind of a nice little segue…I did want to talk about the anti-BDS law. I wanted to get your thoughts on this:

So, there's this state law prohibiting public entities and companies in Tennessee holding contracts worth $200,000 or more with the state government and local governments—this law bans those public entities and companies from boycotting or divesting from Israel, which I'll note for the viewers: If you haven't been watching all my rambly segments, you know, that I've been recording for the radio station, Israel, according to the International Court of Justice, is an apartheid state that is plausibly committing a genocide at this point in time.

This law was used as justification by Vanderbilt administration for banning their students from voting on a referendum that would have made the student government partake in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

So, if elected…would you try to get rid of this law to some extent?

MF: Oh yes, absolutely. I'm absolutely against that. You know, we have a right as Americans to boycott any company that we feel like we should—and, hey, Republicans love to boycott—

ES: [*laughs*]

MF: —companies! They—right? Yeah, they went after boycotting Hollywood, and Disney, and all kinds of silly stuff all the time. And that's their right to!

But, to say that we can't boycott or divest from Israel, you know…Israel has got so much money. They've got billions of dollars of money. And what you're saying is happening in Israel *is* true. It is an apartheid state.

They treat [*sic*] Gazians awful. There is one set of laws for Israelis, and there's another set of laws for Palestinians. And, it is disgusting how they treat the Palestinians there. It's absolutely awful.

But on top of that, the IDF is very aggressive, and they have worked with companies in America to… you know, years ago we were talking about defunding the police. And, you know, I don't believe in completely defunding the police. I believe that we should have money for police officers who, if they, you know, do their job, they should be held accountable, of course, for their actions.

But I think the big thing is the gadgets, right? There's so much money. It's kind of like the military, you know? Like, there's not a whole lot of money going into healthcare for veterans. It's going into missile companies. It's going into weapons development companies. The same thing is kind of happening here with Israel. And, you know, they have partnered up with companies here in America, including,—oh I forgot what it is—it's something, maybe it's like "Georgia?" I think Georgia's in the title, but they're the ones behind the Cop Cities.

ES: Oh, yeah!

MK: You know, they got one in Atlanta, and they're going to build one in Nashville.

ES: Thank you for that one, Gov. Bill Lee! I mean, I guess—I'd have to look into that one, I know he was a big proponent of it. That is insane…

MK: It's all about being violent to people and sticking them in jail! It's not about the root causes of crime, and, to partner with, you know, I do believe that countries have a right to defend themselves, but the situation that they're in, they created. Netanyahu created this situation. He blew up the two-state deal. He punished the moderates, he punished the PA, the Palestinian Authority, and he rewarded Hamas! He is in league with Hamas, really. And what's happening in Israel is awful and terrible, and we should be divesting from them, and we should be boycotting them, and we should stop sending them so much money, so much weapons, and again, we're working with them. Some of these companies are working with Israel to develop new technologies that just kill more people! You know?

And I don't have any proof of this, and recently, where you saw they went after these supposed Hezbollah members, with pagers! By blowing up their—I mean, this is really sick stuff! And this could snowball into something even worse than this.

So, you know, something's got to change, and I don't know how it's going to change, but I think that it's perfectly fine to boycott and divest, and for the state government to create a law that says you can't is absolutely unamerican, and is absolutely inhumane! So, there you go, there's all my thoughts on that.

ES: Yeah, no, for sure, and I'm definitely glad that your sharing that. It's so odd, and maybe I mentioned this to Aftyn in the interview I did with her, but in the first interview I did with Aftyn—it was right before the general election in September, and I was gonna ask her a question about her views on Israel and Gaza—and keep in mind, this was in September of 2023—and at the time, I looked at how long we were recording, and I looked at the question, and I'm like, "Ah! You know, she's running for state representative, like, this issue isn't really gonna affect her. She's not gonna have much to do on this. And literally, it's, like, what, maybe a month later, October 7th happens, and that really kinda raises the salience of this issue. And, you know, by April, we're kinda seeing laws here in Tennessee having a direct relationship with what' going on in Israel and Gaza, so that's why I wanted to get your thoughts on that.

There was something else that—Oh, that's right! At the start there, you kinda referred to it as a , you know, we have a right to boycott, and I'm kinda getting a little bit—I might be getting a little bit annoying with the technicalities here…So, there was actually a court case in Arkansas. I don't know if you heard about this. It was between the *Arkansas Times*, and I believe it was a two-year college, or a community college? *The Arkansas Times* is kinda like and independent newspaper there. They were gonna sign on with the school to do an advertising deal, like on their website, and all that.

They were just going to renew it, right? So, they had already done this before. But this time, whenever they went to go do that, the school told them, "Hey, we're required by law to have you sign this piece of paper saying you won't partake in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement." And, they looked at that, and they were like, "Listen, like, we've never had that plan. We've never had those intentions, but we're kinda uncomfortable signing this, because it's like, that is our right to do that! So, we're gonna take this to court."

Well, they took it to court. They got a federal court, you know, within the district where Arkansas's at. And, yeah, they lost the case. And they tried to appeal it to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court decided not to hear it. So, as of now, technically speaking. We actually don't have a right to boycott, which is…insane. I mean, that was like, a major source of power for things like the Civil Rights Movement, and all that with the bus boycotts.

So, I think part of this is probably a larger issue that needs to be addressed at the federal level. But, nonetheless, I'm definitely glad to hear that you support repealing that piece of legislation.

MK: I didn't know about that. Thank you for telling me that. That's awful, terrible!

You know, this isn't exactly the same thing, but, you know, I know voters in Missouri—I believe it's Missouri, Arkansas, and Florida—they were trying to put reproductive healthcare on the ballot, and all three of those states wouldn't let 'em do it! And the law clearly states if you get so many signatures, you can put this on the ballot. But, they used their power to push that out. And there's no ramifications for it! You know? The DOJ, I don't know if they don't have a case, or they're just not moving on it, but they just seem not to be concerned.

So, you know, our rights are being restricted—every single day—from a movement of right-wing authoritarians who sit in their mansions, and they really want to take us back to a place where—you know, I hear some people say "They want to take us back to the 50s!" They want to take us further than that. They wanna go back to a time where there was the very rich and the very poor, and nothing in between.

So, anyway—no, thank you for sharing that with me, because every American should have the right to boycott something. And, you know, unfortunately, we're living in a time where, you know, even if you wanna boycott something, sometimes you can't! You know, I don't wanna go to Wal-Mart. They, you know, they make so much money—the Waltons make so much money, and the workers get screwed there, the vendors get screwed there. I could talk a little more about Wal-Mart, but, you know, there's certain stores that I don't care to buy my products from, but sometimes, I'm like, "Oh crap, I need this really badly, and the only place to get it is Wal-Mart or Tractor Supply Co., and somebody was not happy with me. And I was like, "Ehhhh, it was either that, Home Depot, or Lowes, and they're not better?"

We are living in this world where the oligarchs are organizing against the people, honestly. You know, I think that people started organizing in the 50s and 60s, and I think these big companies started organizing against them, and I think they're more powerful than ever.

They make billions and billions of dollars. They don't have to pay taxes. They get to treat their workers like shit. And there's no, you know, there's no pushback against that. You know, no one should have as much money as Jeff Bezos. No one should have, you know, billions and billions and billions of dollars to do whatever. Elon Musk even, you know—that's a

good example of, you know—the SpaceX and Tesla—they are taxpayer funded, corporations. And Elon Musk is not a genius. But, you know, he has, you know, lifted himself to be that way. But man, he makes so much money. And, you know, recently I saw, you know, not only as he lost a bunch of money from Twitter, but, you know, the Cybertruck rollout was not great. And there is talk that Tesla was not going to give him his $46 billion package. But they gave it to him after all.

So, you know, I don't know what's going on behind the scenes. Maybe some bribery, probably bribery. But, you know, something needs to get done. We have to get smart about this. We need to start organizing against this because it's just going to get worse, and worse, and wors,e and worse, and worse. And going back to the health care thing, you know, these companies are making billions of dollars off of the pain and misery of people—of denying people health care that they deserve. So anyway, sorry, that was a long tangent.

ES: No, no, and honestly, that's probably a good tangent to end on because, yeah, I mean, really, what we're seeing right now, I think—as you said at the start of this—is, sort of the resurgence of a new Gilded Age, where, corporations are trying to gain a lot of power.

One last thing I'll kind of note here…I don't know if you have—probably don't have a lot of time to listen to podcasts right now, but there's a guy named David Sirota. He co-wrote the screenplay for the *Don't Look Up* movie. He founded this outlet called *The Lever*. And they just started putting out this new series. It's called *The Master Plan*, and it basically starts all the way back in the '70, at the inception of the Watergate scandal. And they kind of track how the legalization of corruption has kind of developed since then. And there's a lot of interesting things—I don't know if you heard about the Powell memo, but, like, that is basically a document that outlined corporations' main plan for how they're going to take over the government and start kind of ensuring their own power. It is, insane, so, I highly recommend that to you want to learn more about it—

MF: Yeah.

ES: Matt, where—what'd you say?

MF: I said, thanks for telling me about that. You know—who was it? Roger Ailes? He worked for Nixon, for Roger Stone—a lot of terrible people who have had a lot of influence recently—

ES: Yeah.

MF: —came out of the Nixon administration, and they—I remember reading this years ago, about Roger Ailes—who said that he wanted to create Fox News for a variety of reasons, but one is because he felt like Nixon did nothing wrong and should never have resigned.

So, you know, these are the people who are going to back, you know, oligarchs, you know, they're going to back the worst of the worst people like Donald Trump.

And, you know, if it's not Donald Trump, it's going to be somebody else like that. And, you know, I'm hopeful. I'm optimistic about the future. I think there's a lot more young people nowadays who are interested in this kind of stuff, and want to push back against it. They just don't know how.

But, I am optimistic about the future, but man, you know, we got to get organized. We got to get focused. We gotta really get smart about this, because they have taken over so much. So—I'm just blabbering on now, I'm sorry.

ES: No, I mean, that's all based stuff!

Matt, where can people keep up with, like, all your… events, and like, all the updates coming out from your campaign?

MF: Yeah, you can follow me online. I'm on the Twitter, I'm on the Facebook, I'm on the Instagram. I do have a website as well: mattferrytn48.com, and you can find me, you know, if you just search my name, Matt Ferry—spelled like a boat: f-e-r-r-y, I should pop up.

We just had a big event yesterday, and I've been working with some of these other state house candidates in the area. And the congressional candidate—I'm working closely with her, her name is Victoria Broderick. And, I'm really glad to be working with her. She is, a rural resident. She, you know, she's married and got two kids and works a full-time job.

And, you know, it's tough for her. But, she said, you know, "I couldn't just see Scott DesJarlais go unopposed." And, you know, kudos to her, because it's tough! It's a 15-county district. It's not easy. But, you know, she's making it the best run that she can. I think anything can happen in this atmosphere, especially with some of these incumbents who are scumbags and could get arrested next week or something.

But, you know, we need people to step up. We need people to get interested in this. We need people to talk to their neighbors about voting. You know, there's honestly a lot of pessimistic voters out there who don't

think their vote matters. And vote matters quite a bit. We have lost some of these races in Rutherford County by, you know, 40 votes.

We lost that State House District in 49 by just a couple hundred votes years ago. We have a good candidate, Luis Mata, running for that, and I really hope that he can win this year. So, you know, there's some great candidates this year, but it just doesn't end in ‘24. You know, it's going to happen again in ‘26 and ‘28 and ‘30.

And, I think there's a lot of people out there who don't want to think about politics. And they just kind of want to say, “Oh, whatever,” you know, and they might get excited about a candidate and they might get in or not, and they might just leave after that. “Well, whatever!” But, you know, politics affects everything in your life!

You know, again, the rising cost of housing, education, transport tation, there's so much out there that affects your life. And if you don't get interested in it, hey, they're interested in taking your rights away! You need to get interested in it.

Last night at the Rutherford County School Board, they banned six books.

ES: I read about that this morning! Yeah, that was insane. One of them was like, a book on…the institution of slavery, I think, it was more like a novel-type thing. But yeah, I mean, that that's insane.

MF: Yeah. You know, and Rutherford County is not the boondocks! You know, we might be pretty rural compared to Nashville, but we're right next door. We're the fifth largest county in Tennessee. They say we're going to be the fourth here in the next five or 10 years.

So, you know, I mean, we’re a college town. You know, there's plenty of people here who are against book bannings. They're just not coming out. They're not participating. And, you know, I get it. Life is hard. You know, everyone's got stuff going on in their life. It's sometimes hard to keep track of it. But if you're listening out there and you're interested in this, just keep going down that rabbit hole! Keep getting interested. Subscribe to that podcast that you just said. —I know that guy, I do. I think I follow him on Twitter. He's very smart.

ES: Yeah! His stuff is, just yeah, his stuff is awesome. I mean, and some of the articles he puts out there are just amazing.

One line I'd like to end on, Then we'll definitely have to end on here, because I've actually got an appointment, with, a hair stylist thatI think, you know: Davina?

MF: Oh, yeah! She’s great!

ES: Yeah, she's awesome. I got to get running to that. Also shout-out to Davina if you're looking for a good hairstylist around the Murfreesboro area. Definitely hit her up!

MF: Tell her I said, hey! She’s really great. And she's been a supporter of various things: Boro Pride, and RuCo …and, yeah, Davina is really great, yeah. Please tell her I said hey.

ES: Yeah, you bet.

But, to sort of touch on, like, the last point you made about, you know, getting involved: Nina Turner—she has a line. She says—what is it—“To the people who say ‘I don't do politics:’ If you don't do politics, well, then it's going to do you at some point. So…yeah.

MF: Right! Yeah, there's a good saying, it's like, “If you don't have a seat at the table, you're on the menu.”

ES: That's really—WHEW! That's—wise words! I'll have to share that in my Democracy class. It's taught by the American Democracy Project Director. I—thank you for that.

All right, well, Matt, thank you so much for stopping by. Really appreciate this discussion!

And, friends: Thank you so much for tuning into this episode of *The Kennel: The Honorable Series*! If you liked, what you saw here, hit that like button! Definitely be sure to subscribe as well. Just hit that subscribe button. It'll cost you absolutely nothing. And feel free to share any comments or thoughts that you have in the comment section below.

Matt, again, thank you so much! And, yeah, I'll see you later, friend!

MF: Thank you. Ethan! Thank you so much, I appreciate it!

ES: Yeah, of course!

*CLOSING SCREEN*

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