

#1489 Journalism, Social Media and the Billionaire Business Model

Intro 5-10-22

[00:00:00] **JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left podcast, in which we shall take a look at the impact of media ownership on society, including legacy newspapers and social media platforms owned by billionaires and the consolidation of our news and entertainment corporations through mega mergers.

Clips today are from Endeavor; Novara Media; Democracy, now!; Past Present; Adam Conover; and The Readout;

With additional members only clips from KERA's Think; and, What Next? TBD.

Who Rules America: The Power of The Media | Propaganda - ENDEVVR Documentary - Air Date 1-3-21

[00:00:35] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** From the earliest days, freedom of the press was what defined America. Thomas Jefferson, who helped write the Declaration of Independence, believed a free media was essential for a free nation, saying, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." That was in 1787. Today, our newspapers seem to be fading in importance in a multimedia world that is largely owned and controlled by a handful of large media corporations.

[00:01:13] **JEFF COHEN:** I think we're probably the most media-dominated society in the world.

[00:01:18] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** Jeff Cohen worked in major media. Now he's one of the industry's fiercest critics.

[00:01:23] **JEFF COHEN:** Half a dozen corporations own and control most of the mainstream media in our country. So if you're looking at who rules America or who owns America, it's the same people that propagandize to America.

[00:01:38] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** The press and the outlets that report news or convey information are just a small slice of vast media empires producing entertainment products that also sell a way of life based on consumption.

[00:01:54] **JEFF COHEN:** When you look at who's on the boards of media corporations, they're also on the boards of U S oil companies, and they're on the boards of US military contractors. So, trying to study who owns America you really also, these are the people that own the media. We don't have a state media, but in some ways it's very much like a state media, just a corporate state.

[00:02:18] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** 30 years ago, 50 companies dominated American media. Now it's down to six. With new global digital enterprises like Google, Facebook, and Twitter growing in importance worldwide, US-based media became a transnational force.

The US media companies are themselves owned in large part by hedge funds, mutual funds and finance companies.

Barry James Dyke is an asset manager who has studied media ownership.

[00:02:48] **BARRY JAMES PYKE :** The research which I've done is it's unequivocal. And I kind of stumbled into this is that the media companies, the major media companies, ie. The Disneys, the CBS's, the News Corporations, all of them -- this is all public documents -- is that they're all owned, actually owned by mutual fund companies, the majority shareholders are owned by mutual fund companies. And also they also get a lot of their revenue from these companies. So you're never going to see any consistent criticism about these fund companies.

[00:03:12] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** Are these companies investigated by the media?

[00:03:14] **BARRY JAMES PYKE :** No, they're not.

[00:03:16] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** Are they responsible to the public in some way? Are they accountable? Do the public really know what they're doing?

[00:03:22] **BARRY JAMES PYKE** : The public really doesn't have a clue. They really don't know what they're doing.

[00:03:26] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVR**: He has documented his findings with charts in his own book, *The Pirates of Manhattan*.

[00:03:32] **BARRY JAMES PYKE** : Well, people are not going to be getting, not getting the truth.

[00:03:35] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVR**: But there is a lot of coverage, especially of politics, that's often treated as a sporting event, with an emphasis on poll numbers and election results. Mary Boyle follows media coverage of elections for Common Cause.

What about the role of the media? Is the media helping to strengthen our democracy? Do you think it's helping to divide us?

[00:03:57] **MARY BOYLE**: Well, I think that's a great question. I think that there are a couple things going on there. Obviously you've got kind of cable channels that are in different camps and they are not showing different points of view. You've got Fox News showing the right. You've got MSNBC showing the left. And so with a setup like that, you have Americans that are just kind of tuning in to the channel they want to listen to that expresses their views and you're not seeing kind of a mix of an opinion, a debate, anything like that.

You've also got the shrinkage of the media. You've got less coverage of what's going on. And I think this is particularly concerning more around state-based and local politics, where there's even less coverage of what's going on in politics.

[00:04:44] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVR**: But even as the world is known for its diversity, American media is not. Editorially and ideologically, the power elite tends to reflect the views of the government and the people who shape its views. Dissenting politicians like congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. have a hard time getting their views heard.

[00:05:05] **JESSE JACKSON JR**: Who owns the media, how the media is translated, some of the moguls and the titans of media and industry are part of the problem.

They shape a narrative for the American people, a narrative that ultimately leads millions of people to vote for candidates based upon the narrative that they

shape based upon the talking heads that they control. And those Americans tend to vote and tend to engage the system on the basis of that which they hear. Media is a significant part of this problem.

[00:05:37] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** Historian Eric Foner agrees. He says it's not just political bias at work, but what the media as a business feels it's forced to focus on to attract ratings and revenues.

Somehow that idea of, of power behind the people in office is not really in our media very much. It's not really in people's minds very much. They personalize politics. There are personalities combating each other, but they don't look at who's behind the scenes.

[00:06:07] **ERIC FONER:** Well, you you're quite right that the media focuses on personalities, you know, and often the quirks of personality. Clinton's sexual escapades or whether Obama was born in the United States or not, or Romney and his cars and his not paying taxes and many other things. Those are not totally unimportant issues, but maybe it's the nature of the media today in and of itself, and that it has to go for the quick news. Deep investigative reporting is not emphasized as much as perhaps it was in the past. And, you got to sell papers and scandal sells papers, personality sells papers, celebrity sells papers.

So, you're right. The larger nature of how the system operates tends not to get emphasized as much.

[00:06:52] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** It's not even understood by many people.

[00:06:54] **ERIC FONER:** Well, it's hard to understand. This is a very large country, over 300 million people, a very, very complicated economy and political system. So it's difficult to understand exactly how things operate. But I think, in a certain sense, the anti-government sentiment, which is rife in this country, which is generally associated with the right wing, is also a response to the feeling. It's an inchoate feeling. It's not an analytical feeling, but it's a feeling that government is aloof. It is not responsive. It does not really represent the people. It represents some very particular interests. And that sense is pretty widespread in this country.

[00:07:34] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVVR:** Media watch groups are also concerned about the lack of diversity within the media that makes it unrepresentative of the country it serves in racial, ethnic and gender terms.

[00:07:46] **CHRIS HEDGES:** The unwritten credo of the New York Times is, do not alienate those for whom we depend on for money and access.

[00:07:56] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVV:** Chris Hedges was an award-winning journalist for the New York Times, an American media star.

[00:08:02] **CHRIS HEDGES:** And that means the power elite and the financiers who advertise.

But it's expandable. I mean, you have, at least in the positions that I was in, the possibility to do journalism -- not that there aren't restrictions or constrictions; there are. And not that they can't be punishing.

[00:08:21] **DANNY SCHECHTER - HOST, ENDEVV:** Hedges work is still very respected, but he believes that much of the press is ultimately a charade that covers up for power more than covers it, especially when reporting on elections.

[00:08:34] **CHRIS HEDGES:** Because the political theater, I mean the personal narrative of the candidate, it's all irrelevant. It's meaningless. And people, we still play the game. Look, every totalitarian country I covered had elections. They all play a charade. I mean, even East Germany did. And that's the charade we play. And when we have a compliant corporate media that pretends that that charade is real. So I think the problem is that the illusion still remains so powerful. But people are changing. But the illusion is still so powerful that people confuse where power actually exists.

Billionaires Control The Media - and Its Destroying Democracy - Novara Media - Air Date 11-20-19

[00:09:07] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** Billionaires control the media. And it's undermining democracy.

[00:09:13] **ARCHIVE NEWS CLIP:** This is a great set of paper. A really I've had such fun out there reading those papers. Anybody who thinks politics are boring would be, had their mind changed by these papers.

[00:09:22] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** The Sun, Times, Mail, Metro and Telegraph are all owned by individuals who are incredibly wealthy and don't even pay taxes in the UK.

It's Rupert Murdoch who founded News Corp, whose UK arm, News UK, owns The Sun and Times stables. He lives in the US where he's a citizen. There's Viscount Rothermere with the Mail, Mail on Sunday and Metro. He lives in France and there's a non-dom. And there are the Barklay brothers with the Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph, not to mention the Spectator twins so cartoonishly bad they have a secret lair in the Channel Islands. Rupert Murdoch leads the pack in wealth and he's worth around 20 billion pounds. The Barklay brothers, they're worth about 8 billion, while the fourth Viscount Rothermere is worth a comparatively measly 1 billion pounds. Rothermere, like his father before him, is based in France, with his business interests operating through a complex arrangement of offshore holdings and trusts. The Barklay brothers operate not just from their private island, but also Monaco. Like Rothermere, they too are non-doms, although they claim that's for health reasons. Ever thought about maybe just a gym membership?

All of these individuals use their papers to ensure their vested interests as a wealthy elite are best served. For example, ensuring any potential government is committed not only to low taxes for the rich, but also isn't serious about tax avoidance.

What is more, they lobby for privatization and outsourcing to always be preferred, no matter the cost or the catalog of failure. Why? Because both act as a machine to take money from ordinary people and give it to the rich.

So every time you walk past the newspaper stand, be it in the supermarket or the petrol station, remember: it is this handful of billionaires whose opinions you are staring at. It's like that stupid racist Facebook post your uncle sometimes makes; rather than ignoring it, you have to face it head on everywhere every day.

All these media barons have backed the Tories in recent elections, not only through endorsements from their papers, but personally. Rothemere favored Cameron, and knew him, while Murdoch entered 10 Downing Street, literally through the backdoor following the 2010 election, when David Cameron wished to thank him for his support.

[00:11:31] **ARCHIVE NEWS CLIP:** Why did you enter the back door at number 10, when you visited the Prime Minister following the last general election? Because I was asked to.

[00:11:42] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** More than just supporting the Tories in the past, the Barklay brothers have even donated them money. Guys, it's not supposed to be that obvious.

Now we're supposed to believe that these money bags don't interfere in what their papers really say. But they do. Harold Evans, a former editor at the Sunday Times, spoke of how he was often rebuked for, quote, "not doing what he [Murdoch] wants in political terms" and how the two almost had fisticuffs after he published an article by the economist James Tobin, with which Murdoch disagreed. David Yellen, former editor of the Sun, made a similar admission, but he went further saying most Murdoch editors wake up in the morning, switch on the radio, hear something that has happened, and think, "What would Rupert think about this? You look at the world through Rupert's eyes."

Now they don't own these papers at the goodness of their hearts. These are ultra wealthy, powerful individuals who own newspapers, which often make no money, because they want to influence political outcomes in a decisive way. This is one of the most insidious ways of undermining democratic politics.

Recently, there was a confected outrage over a WhatsApp group, which included left-wing journalists and Labor party press offices. The criticism was that these journalists were taking cues from Labor party HQ and acting as nothing more than messengers. But while the left had a dozen people blinking at their smartphones, the Tories and, the press barons had coordinated attack lines across the pages of the country's most widely read Sunday papers. There, they lambasted Labor's spending commitments, despite Labor having not actually published a manifesto, plucking a 1.2 trillion pounds figure from thin air.

[00:13:23] **ARCHIVE NEWS CLIP:** Every single costing in this dossier that we've published today is either come from Labor's own figures. Most of them actually over 50% of the costings come from Labor's own figures, the rest of them have either come from independent external sources and in some cases, yes, we have had to work them out ourselves.

Fact is we know Labor is going to go on a wreckless spendathon -- well, that's different to -- this country has never known anything like."

[00:13:45] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** The Tories are making up Labor's numbers and then attacking them. You'd think this was such a crazy story, that it would be ignored. And it was. Unless you count the front pages of the Sun, the Sunday Mail on Sunday and the Sunday Telegraph.

[00:13:56] **ARCHIVE NEWS CLIP:** The claim from the Conservative party that Labor's general election policies will cost the country a total of 1.2 trillion pounds. Sunday Telegraph, that also leads with the same claim, saying the Conservatives will publish a dossier setting out calculations that they say show the true cost of a Labor government.

[00:14:13] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** Just days before that story landed, the editor and political editor of the Daily Mail was seen walking into Number 10 Downing Street. But I'm sure that's just a coincidence. After all, there's no precedent for that kind of closeness between newspapers and the Tory prime minister. It's not like Margaret Thatcher, I dunno, literally wrote the headline on the front page of the Daily Mail after the 1987 general election. [off-camera] So she did. She did?

The BBC, a public service broadcaster, is meant to be a counterweight to this, offering an impartial perspective. But while it does control a large portion of broadcast news, it often just follows the agenda set by Fleet Street.

[00:14:50] **ARCHIVE NEWS CLIP:** "At the Daily Mail, fury over Corbyn ISIS chief gaffe." "Labor's four day week to cost the taxpayer 17 billion." "The Sun's headline: 'Cheers Nige' over a picture of Boris Johnson holding up a pint."

[00:15:01] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** It's the most obvious on programs with a paper review. Ostensibly these shows are just impartially reporting what the papers have said. But when the papers they cover are overwhelmingly owned by billionaire Tory supporters, the message that gets through is the one set out by their newspapers. I can't remember the number of times a guest on a politics show said it's looking bad for Labor while glazing over universally hostile front pages.

[00:15:25] **ARCHIVE NEWS CLIP:** "Here's the Mail on Sunday: Today Britain could have begun to heal after the end of our Brexit purgatory." "If they say, take on this in the Sunday Times, talking about Labor's hypocrisy over this issue." "You might not know it for reading these newspapers and lots of things saying 'Downing Street, Macron, Merkel might not give us a deal, watch out,' you know, they will give us an extension." "A lot of the supporters of Corbyn aren't MPs, partly because a lot of the politicians don't privately want him to

become prime minister." "Corbyn and Labor bashing today. I mean the Daily Mail for instance is pictured Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott, and John McDonald on their front page." "Lord Rothemere is a tax dodger. What do you call it now? He has that because obviously that's not what we're talking about, oh yeah. I just want to talk about, yeah, it's about, yeah."

[00:16:11] **AARON BASTANI - HOST, NOVARA MEDIA:** Look, I've done these shows before. When you highlight the structural dynamic at play, people look at you as if you were David Cameron on a pig farm walking around with a giant tube of Vaseline.

It goes beyond just paper reviews. The newspapers, despite dwindling readerships, often set the whole news agenda for broadcast more generally. From the Today Program when you wake up, to Newsnight, when you go to bed, these shows reinforced the agenda of the print newspapers, an agenda that is peddled by billionaires. That happens across the board. But in the case of the BBC, this amounts effectively to a public subsidy, for the likes of Murdoch, Rothermere, and the Barclays. So even though people are buying fewer newspapers, the BBC ensure these outlets still find a national audience for their message.

So in effect, you're paying 140 pound a year, so the billionaires can tell you what to think. The BBC is not a counterweight to media billionaire oligarchs; it's amplifying them. Whatever politics show you what you're listen to, someone from one of the media baron-owned outlets will almost always feature.

How The Washington Post's New Owner Aided the CIA, Blocked WikiLeaks & Decimated Book Industry - Democracy Now! - Air Date 8-7-13

[00:17:13] **AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** I wanted to read from an article about Jeff Bezos written by Emily Bell, director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. She wrote, quote, "How will he react—especially after Amazon's recent clinching of a \$600m contract to provide cloud services to the CIA—to the flow of stories from his own publication on the NSA and its covert pact with the tech industry to trace our every move? How will he like his Amazon workplace practices scrutinised by his own paper? How will he like being in a world where

the greatest measure of success is to irritate, damage or, at best, remove a president and other public officials?" Interesting questions, Jeff Cohen.

[00:17:56] **JEFF COHEN:** Oh, I think these are all good questions. I think one thing that's missing is a discussion of the hallowed traditions, the hallowed journalistic traditions of The Washington Post. I mean, any media consumer who's been looking at the bevy of articles in the last day and a half has heard about this—you know, "What's going to happen to The Washington Post's journalistic tradition—the paper of Watergate—or, the paper that exposed Watergate and published the Pentagon Papers?" I think any serious and very, you know, diligent news consumer is going to realize that the incidents like Watergate conspiracy and the Pentagon Papers, that was 40 years ago, and the hallowed tradition of The Washington Post that we're worried Bezos is going to ruin—and, again, it may get worse, it may not; most likely it'll continue—but that hallowed tradition, for 40 years, The Washington Post has really been a newspaper of the bipartisan consensus. And items like or invasions like Iraq could hardly have happened without the editorial pages headed by a sort of a hawk, Fred Hiatt, who's still in power today, and Fred Hiatt's editorial pages of The Washington Post has, in a five-month period before the Iraq invasion, more than two dozen editorials urging on that invasion. Skeptics of the invasion were mercilessly savaged in the editorial pages and the op-ed pages, but they weren't allowed to speak for themselves. And so, when I hear people talk about The Washington Post under the Graham family, the paper of Watergate, it reminds me of people who would look at today's Barack Obama and say he's a community organizer embedded with the poor in Chicago. The Watergate Washington Post was decades ago. The Washington Post we should be thinking about in the last 10, 12 years has been a very important instrument of U.S. intervention, imperial foreign policy, at the hands of the editorial page editor Fred Hiatt.

[00:20:02] **AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** You know, just on what you're saying, just to read part of the Washington Post editorial from February 2003 that ran the day after Colin Powell's Iraq presentation to the United Nations, under the headline, "Irrefutable," it read, in part, "It is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction. Mr. Powell left no room to argue seriously that Iraq has accepted the Security Council's offer of a 'final opportunity' to disarm." The headline, again, "Irrefutable."

[00:20:28] **JEFF COHEN:** And on the Washington Post op-ed page in the next two days, every op-ed columnist, from, you know, one baby step to the left of center to the far right, was endorsing Colin Powell's speech and endorsing the

invasion of Iraq. And that's been par for the course over there for the last 10, 20 years.

[00:20:48] **NERMEEN SHAIKH - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** Well, you also mentioned the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. And Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, of course the most famous reporters in the history of The Washington Post, say they're optimistic about the paper's sale to Amazon's Jeff Bezos. Woodward said, quote, "If there's somebody who can succeed, it's Bezos. He's the innovator, he's got the money and the patience, so we'll see. I think in some ways, this may be the _Post_'s last chance to survive, at least in some form of what it was." Bernstein also said he had high hopes for Bezos, saying he, quote, "seems to me exactly the kind of inventive and innovative choice needed to bring about a recommitment to great journalism on the scale many of us have been hoping for—while employing all the applicable tools and best sensibilities of a new era and the old." Jeff Cohen, could you respond to that?

[00:21:38] **JEFF COHEN:** Yeah. You know, he might be innovative, and he does have deep pockets, and if I was a journalist at The Washington Post, I'd want someone with deep pockets, as opposed to the Graham family, which has been bleeding money. But the reality is, when we have, as you pointed out earlier, one of the big issues is the surveillance state, and Amazon, the company that has made this individual so wealthy, is so embedded with the surveillance state, I'd be very concerned. And as for Bob Woodward, again, 40 years ago he unraveled a conspiracy and brought down a president. In the last 10, 12 years, he's been very, very cozy with American presidents, whether Republican or Democrat.

[00:22:18] **NERMEEN SHAIKH - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** And, Bob McChesney, your response?

[00:22:22] **ROBERT McCHESNEY:** Well, I think that the absurdity is that we're reduced to the point where journalism is dying in this country as an undertaking supported by commercial enterprise, and we're reduced with these monopoly franchises to hopefully get a good billionaire, relative to the Koch brothers, for example. But we should stand back and understand how ridiculous the situation is, that we're reduced to this pathetic state of affairs, because we really actually need real journalism. We need journalism that tells us about war plans, that tells us about the NSA, long before it becomes too late or deep into the game. And we're not getting that now, and there's no reason to think the current system is going to give us that. It's incredibly corrupt.

It's worth noting that we have a system like the one we have now a hundred years ago in the United States. If you were to look at American journalism in between 1900 and 1915, it had grown incredibly concentrated except in our very largest cities. There were huge empires, and the Hearsts, the Pulitzers, the Scripps—the bosses of that era—used their power to actively and aggressively promote their politics, their generally right-wing, anti-labor politics. And it was a result of that period that there was a great crisis of journalism that led to the creation of professional journalism, the idea that the editorial content should not be influenced directly by the owners and the advertisers. And we're going back to that era, except for we're doing it without any resources, and there's even less accountability, far less, than there was then. There's—you know, in those days, there were four, five, six, eight major daily newspapers in each of our great cities, like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago. Today we don't have anything like that.

What we have is a plaything for these billionaires that they can then use aggressively to promote their own politics. And when we talk about promoting your own politics, we've got to understand, it's not like Jeff Bezos has to march into a newsroom and say, "Cover this. Don't cover that." It rarely works that way. That happens once a decade. You basically set an organizational culture, and smart journalists who want to survive internalize the values, and those that don't internalize the values get out of the way.

[00:24:22] **AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** You know, Bob McChesney, Koch Industries, of course—and we've been talking about this for a while—interested in acquiring Tribune's big regional titles, which include Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Baltimore Sun, Orlando Sentinel. I mean, this is what you have these days. You have the Koch brothers. You also have Warren Buffett, right? What was it? Last year, Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway bought 28 daily newspapers for something like \$344 million. This is how it operates in the United States right now. And so, then compare Jeff Bezos to the Grahams, who have owned this newspaper for decades.

[00:25:06] **ROBERT McCHESNEY:** You're right, and we're looking at a situation where we have these owners who are making these investments now, like the Koch brothers, and it's—

[00:25:11] **AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** And, of course, I should say Bloomberg. You cannot forget our mayor in New York City—

[00:25:15] **ROBERT McCHESNEY:** Yeah.

[00:25:15] **AMY GOODMAN - HOST, DEMOCRACY NOW!:** Bloomberg News, one of the world's largest news and media companies, employing 2,300—2,300 professionals in 146 bureaus around the world, and, I'm sure, employs many more people than that.

[00:25:28] **ROBERT McCHESNEY:** Yeah. In Dollarocracy, John Nichols and I outline people like the Koch brothers and Shelly Adelson and a whole host of CEOs and billionaires that most Americans don't now, because they aren't seeking publicity, who are spending hundreds of—tens of millions and hundreds of millions of dollars to buy elections, oftentimes anonymously and surreptitiously through dark money. Well, if you look at that closely, it makes perfect sense they'd want to start buying up newspapers as a political investment, because they're so cheap now, and you can dominate the discussion to have it frame the issues your way, talk about what you think is important. It's a very wise political investment. And for people concerned with democratic theory, democratic governance, it's antithetical to what this country needs to be for the constitutional system to work. When the news media, the Fourth Estate, a pillar of our constitutional system, becomes a plaything for billionaires and there's no accountability, our government—our governing system can't work effectively as something except a plaything for the rich.

Elon Musk, Twitter, and the History of Media Oligarchs - Past Present - Air Date 5-2-22

[00:26:25] **NEIL YOUNG - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** I'm not sure how much is new... I mean, this man's wealth, obviously, is on a scale that, you know, historically, no other person has touched, uh, even comparatively, right?

I do think that the richest man in the world owning one of the largest social media platforms feels different than, I don't know, someone owning a newspaper in the 19th century. For one reason, just because of the global implications of this. And I think that that's a significant difference here. Obviously, we all operate in a globalized media economy in general, but it seems significant to me that someone with this much power and wealth is now at the helm of one of the largest global connectors.

[00:27:10] **NATALIA MEHLMAN PETRZELA - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** Yeah, no, I think that's important. And I think that it's also reflective, you know, as been the subtext of this whole conversation of, like, the

concentration of wealth at the top, and the increasing power of a very few number of people to control a lot of things in our lives.

But one thing which I think is interesting is that... you know, we've read a few pieces of people on the ground who have worked at these news organizations before- and after- acquisitions. And they say like, they're, they're all very cautious and circumspect to not be, like, pro-billionaire acquisition, but they're, like, "You know, if you find the right rich guy to take over your media operations, it often comes with a lot of resources, and this is actually often better than a hedge fund, which is so obsessed with like turning a profit."

And they are quick to say, you know, not all rich acquirers are created equal, but that given the um, you know, like, real dire straits that newsrooms are in right now, that the right person can actually be, like, a really necessary lifeline, and can ultimately do good. It's just, you know, you... there's a lot of like faith being put into this one, extraordinarily powerful person. But, you know, a lot of people say that, whatever you think of Amazon, but about the Washington Post, the LA Times, you know.

And I think that that is, um, that is, you know, a little depressing, to think of what the options are, but also important to think about in terms of, like, real lived experience of the people working there in these rooms, and the resources they have.

Today, just hours before we taped, BuzzFeed announced that they were closing their investigative reporting, uh, division, which I'm gonna talk about in my "What's Making History," one of their pieces. But that's... that's what we're looking at here, right?

This morning, you know, someone was appointed to a new position at a pub we all love, and we looked at what the comp was, and it was less than all of us made writing for them years ago. Like, by half! Like, this is the situation. So, I don't know, like, find yourself the right billionaire, I guess?

[00:29:13] **NICOLE HEMMER - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** Well, and that those billionaires see this as philanthropic work. They see it as, um, civic giving, just like Carnegie building a library in the 19th century, saw it as part of, um, you know, giving back, and helping to build American civic culture.

And I think that this is exactly... exactly the point, right? That these media institutions-- setting aside Twitter, which obviously is new-- but, like, the... the media institutions like The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, these places,

The Atlantic, The New Republic, had existed on a mix of ads and subscriptions for decades. And that model broke, and they're looking around, and they're saying, "Well, how do we continue to do journalism?"

And so far, the most sustainable answer has been, "We need billionaires to sweep in and take care of this."

And it's interesting. I think that maybe, like, "Is this new?" was probably the wrong question, but it is interesting to know what choice is embedded in that. Because the actor, the deep-pocketed actor who does not seem to be playing a role in any of this is the government. And that is whether the government playing the role of: regulator for social media, particularly for things like Facebook and Twitter, um, and whether or not those should be treated as, um, public resources, um, rather than private ones; um, uh, the public funding of media, which has shown to, um, and gender more ideological diversity, um, more freedom for the people who write for them, it's... the U S has long had a very pathetically funded, um, public media compared to... to other nations.

And so, you know, I guess what I'm saying... it's not new, right? It's something that we saw in the Gilded Age. Um, and it's something that has been true for most of American history. But when you have these, like, incredible concentrations of wealth, and you have a dominant political philosophy that is opposed to a government intervention and government regulation, what you end up with is billionaires who are functionally playing a role that, in a democracy, government should probably play.

[00:31:27] **NATALIA MEHLMAN PETRZELA - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** Um, I mean, "See Also Schools."

[00:31:29] **NICOLE HEMMER - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** Well, yeah, I mean, but, like, benevolent billionaires, I would suggest, is not, um, a great policy model, but it is the one that we seem to have landed on.

[00:31:39] **NEIL YOUNG - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** I also think that this space, or this industry, the fact that both billionaire investors and hedge funds are involved should tell us something. I'm not exactly sure what it tells us, but it says something significant that those are the two major players here we're talking about when it comes to ownership.

That's not the case when... I mean, you brought up the conceptualization, or even the personal framing of themselves, as philanthropists that a lot of billionaires have taken in this space. Although I think a lot of them have said

that this is a business proposition, that there are bottom-line objectives that they have of the outlets that they own, and they have to meet them, and, like, this isn't an open purse.

Some of them though are approaching this as a philanthropic endeavor; but the fact that journalism or media institutions are not fully in the philanthropic space right now-- in the way that it's just a given assumption that symphony is, or that museums are-- I think it speaks to the very particulars of media and of, um, media outlets and institutions and where they operate in American life, and suggest the ways in which it is different as a business than those other, you know, things are.

[00:32:49] **NICOLE HEMMER - HOST, PAST PRESENT:** And I think that it's important that... that we also not treat the market as a neutral operator here. It's quite possible that market forces and a healthy, small-D democratic press are not compatible. Right? That the, "If it bleeds, it leads" ethos, and the "clicks" metric, is not necessarily going to generate the most functional and useful media ecosystem. Certainly it doesn't seem to have so far.

And so, if you can't create a healthy, democratic press through the market, um, then your choices are billionaires philanthropists, or, um, or the government. And not that the government should control the media, but it wouldn't hurt if they threw a few dollars their way.

Anyway, the problem, at the end of the day is capitalism. Capitalism, and Elon Musk.

Adam Conover's Statement to the FTC and DOJ on Harmful Media Mergers - Adam Conover - Air Date 4-28-22

I'm a worker in the entertainment industry. I'm a writer and a board member of the writers Guild of America West, a labor union that represents over 11,000 writers who work in TV, film, news, and streaming video.

I'm also an actor and a comedian, and I'm here today to talk to you about the most hilarious subject of all: corporate media mergers. I'm here in part because the show I created, Adam Ruins Everything, was killed by a corporate merger; specifically by AT&T's acquisition of Time Warner.

Waves of mergers in this industry, approved by regulators or the courts, have put a handful of companies in control of what stories writers are allowed to tell and what viewers are allowed to watch, and done tremendous harm to the everyday workers whose labor powers the entertainment industry.

In 2015, I created an investigative comedy show for the cable network, truTV. It ran for three seasons and 65 episodes. It was the second biggest show on the network. And it was described as "a breakout hit" by the network president.

But, in 2018, AT&T acquired Time Warner, truTV's parent company. And then, as so often happens after mergers, AT&T announced a "major reorganization." Now, we all know that that's boss code for "layoffs;" but this time, it was code for basically shut down the entire network. Roughly a hundred truTV employees were fired, including the head of the network and the entire programming department, and AT&T then started canceling shows to cut costs.

A month after our season finale aired, I got a call from the new boss at AT&T, saying that they were canceling the show despite its success. And today, what was once a thriving TV network that employed thousands of artists now airs archival reruns of a single reality show, over and over again.

Three years after that merger turned out to be a financial disaster, Warner Media merged again, this time with Discovery. And just yesterday-- two weeks after that merger closed-- that new entity announced that they were ending all scripted television production at TNT and TBS, two networks that have been leading the way in cable scripted programming for over 30 years.

I received texts all day from friends who shows had suddenly been canceled in the middle of shooting. Now, why would a healthy television network, with hit shows watched in millions of households, voluntarily commit suicide? Well, the executives of the new mega-corp proudly state, in the press, that the only reason these cuts were made was merger.

Now, in decades past, when a show was canceled, the writer and the studio could take it to another network. And that's because, until recently, the networks that broadcast the content competed to buy content from the studios, and the studios in turn competed for the services of writers, directors, and other artists; all to bring the best ideas to the public.

But after two years of vertical and horizontal mergers, today, the network that broadcasts your show also owns the studio that makes it, the IP that it's based on, and the cable infrastructure that brings it to your house. Just six... excuse

me, just six companies now control the production and distribution of almost all entertainment content available to the American public; in theaters, on TV, and on streaming services.

And the impact on those of us who actually make all this content has been profound. When I created *Adam Ruins Everything* in 2015, we pitched it to truTV, TNT, TBS, Discovery, and HBO. But today, all those buyers have consolidated into a single entity: HBO Max. With fewer employer... with fewer employers competing for our labor, they can more easily hold down our wages and set onerous terms for our employment. For example, despite unprecedented growth and record profits, my union has found that median pay for TV writer-producers is nearly the same as it was in the nineties, 30 years ago.

And this problem affects every worker in our industry. Because the companies unilaterally control the schedules of so many movies and shows, crew members are now being forced to work longer and longer hours, sometimes working 18 hours a day, six days a week, for months on end, for very low wages. Actors find themselves trapped in exclusive contracts that prevent them from pursuing other work, even when they're not shooting. And, after Disney merged with Fox, they use their market power to end back-end participation, preventing show creators and producers from sharing in the profits of the work they created.

Now, the corporate lawyers will say that all of this, the layoffs, the cuts to worker pay, are good, because they reduce prices for consumers; but if there's a single example of one of these media mergers reducing prices in any way, I would love to see it. In fact, a recent report by the Writer's Guild lays out the truth that every media viewer already knows: today, we pay more than ever for less choices.

Finally, the economic power wielded by this tiny group of companies means that they control what we, as creators, are allowed to say, and what messages the public has access to. My show was well-known for telling the uncomfortable truth about difficult subjects. But the only time we were censored by our network was when we did an episode called "Adam Ruins the Internet" about monopolistic consolidation in the cable industry. And after it aired, Time Warner pulled the episode from reruns and streaming because they were worried it would anger AT&T and jeopardize the merger.

And I know that my story is not the only one. Without competition, these companies have no incentive to take a chance on new stories from emerging

creators. Instead, they pack their services with cheap, repetitive content, based on IP they already own, because there's nowhere else to go.

So-- I know, I'm getting the light, so I'll wrap it up-- my earnest plea is that the next time our government... our governmental agencies review a merger, they asked the question, "Whose voices will this merger silence? Which ideas will never reach our ears? Which... Whose stories will the public never get to see?"

It's long past time to recognize the harm that mergers like these do to workers, to creators, and to the viewing public. Our media ecosystem and the workers who make their living within it must have fair competition to survive.

A Future Of Equitable Speech Terrifies Those Like Elon Musk Says Giridharadas - The ReidOut - Air Date 4-25-22

[00:39:25] **JOY REID - HOST, THE REIDOUT:** Let me take you back to America's gilded age in the late 19th century, it was a time of rapid economic growth, but also a period of gross materialism and blatant political corruption. The wealthy grew even wealthier and look to wrestle control of every facet of human. One of the most powerful and corrupt robber barons of the time is sitting there at the table.

Financier, Jay Gould, Gould used every underhanded trick from bribing public officials to massively manipulating stocks. He had control of a railroad lines and newspapers. And for a time he single-handedly controlled America's Telegraph wires with those wires, Jay Gould controlled the flow of information in this case.

Fast forward to today. You can make the case. We are living in a new gilded age, where you have people with extraordinary wealth, like Elon Musk, as Axios points out, looking to follow in the footsteps of people like Gould. And they want to control everything from the courts to politicians, to the leading forums, for information sharing.

And today it became official Twitter accepted Musk's \$44 billion offer to buy the company and put control of this dominant social media platform into his. It is not enough for the richest man in the world to try to replace agencies like NASA and send people to near space. He also wants to control what he calls the town square.

[00:40:49] **ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:** Twitter has become kind of the de facto town square. So it's just really important that people have the, both the reality and the perception that they're able to speak freely within the bounds of the.

[00:41:07] **JOY REID - HOST, THE REIDOUT:** Now Elon Musk will own the town square with me. Now I'm on geared at us publisher of the ink and author of winners take all the elite charade of changing the world.

So, uh, on, on my friend, what does it mean for Elon Musk to privately own the towns?

[00:41:24] **ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:** It's such a good analogy. And I love that setup except I would make one, this analogy from the period you talked about those people a hundred years ago, did not own portals into a billion people's minds. In real time, right?

The nature of the technology is now such that if you are now Elon Musk or a mark Zuckerberg or others, it is not just owning a newspaper or owning the rail and owning the railroads and owning this and that it is specifically this particular kind of straw into the live consciousness of a very large chunk of humanity.

At all times, there are studies that have been shown that this power can be used to tilt elections. If someone were to. To use it that way. Um, and so what you're seeing right now, when I called it a winners take all for a reason, this is the winners take all playbook first. You just try to make money.

That's the kind of foundational, uh, overriding goal. But if you just do that, you're going to have regulatory pressure or you're going to have people mad at you. After a certain point, you can have all kinds of problems. And so what you do is you take the spoils of that moneymaking and you buy political.

In Washington, you find super packs, you fund things like the Federalist society, different approaches that you know well, and then, uh, you start investing in rigging the discourse. It's not enough to just rig law and policy. You want to rig the discourse. You want to make sure you control the terms on which.

I can talk back at you. Uh, I'm curious what the safeguards are at Twitter after this acquisition, do people get to read the DMS of the leading dissidents and journalists and regulators in the world? Uh, I have DMD over the years with

people who work in governments. Uh, people. You know, who have critical, uh, positions relative to all kinds of authority.

I'm curious, what are the safeguards preventing the world's richest, man? I'm sure there are some I'd love to hear what they are, but this is truly the winners take all world where not just as you said, not just one form of power, but every form of power is used to purchase the next and up to the point where we are fully encircled and democracy itself is suffering.

[00:43:34] **JOY REID - HOST, THE REIDOUT:** I mean, I would not, I would doubt that there would be very many safe cards. I mean, Elon Musk calls himself a free speech absolutist. Well, first of all, that's BS because he has a long history of literally threatening to Sue bloggers who say things he doesn't like about him or who posts things about Tesla, that he doesn't like his history is that it's free speech.

Sure. But don't say anything about me. I don't like, because I will Sue you. He also, I think is. I think it's a tale. And I don't know if you agree with this, the right has made multiple attempts to remake Twitter. They've had getter, which I'm sorry. It does sound like a porn name. They've had parlor. They've had gab, which is full of Nazis.

They've had all, and it never works because the thing is they don't want to talk to each other. They want to talk to us. They want to talk to the culture. They want to, they, if they were where black Twitter was not, they would be sad because they couldn't attack black people. Elon Musk tweeted today. I hope that even my worst critics remain on Twitter because that is what free speech means.

Charles blow had already beaten him to the door and said, I'm done. Lots of people were trying to get on counter social today. Cause counter social is actually moderated. It doesn't allow it people to attack people. Do you see this as a tale that they can't recreate Twitter because Twitter, without us, without the regular people isn't useful or entertaining.

[00:44:51] **ANAND GIRIDHARADAS:** I think that's very true. And I also think this free speech issue needs to be unpacked because like a lot of issues promoted by people like this. The actual thing they're saying is not the actual issue. Um, so the actual issue, I think they, there is a feeling that people like you on Musk propagate, and certainly widespread on the.

Right today that this is a time of censorship and control and suppression of ideas on the right by these social platforms and other institutions. Well, what's

actually been going on is that there have been modest, pretty inadequate, modest, uh, slight efforts by some of these platforms to solve an actual free speech issue, which is that so many human beings feeling so unsafe and being so unsafe.

When they use these platforms being bullied, being harassed, being brigaded being doxed for the crime of being female or of color, or both that you were actually drafted, strictly limiting the amount of speech out there because people just don't want to play in that kind of sandbox. And these platforms have understood.

And have made faint, modest efforts to address that by saying let's not have as much Nazi-ism on the platform. Let's not have as much misogyny and bullying. Let's still have a lot of it, but, but less anyone's ever actually reported a tweet knows that it almost never still is shut down, but they've tried.

Is what's called censorship at Elon Musk lives in a world in which the only kind of free speech is white men feeling free to say whatever the hell they want and what he doesn't understand. But a lot of those folks don't understand is speech is actually freer. When everybody, everybody not only has the opportunity to have.

And they're able to afford a phone to be able to tweet, but can feel safe, can know that they're not going to get harassed and know that they're not going to get outed can know that I'm going to get piled on by the act kind of AstroTurf, uh, stands of some very rich man, uh, and this future in which they would actually be more abundant and equitable speech terrifies the crap out of people like Elon Musk.

[00:47:10] **JOY REID - HOST, THE REIDOUT:** Indeed. I mean, there was a time when anybody who was Jewish on Twitter, if you expressed views that were anywhere to the left of Donald Trump, you would get the into the oven responds almost immediately. And these people literally follow you. So that 10 seconds after you tweet anything, you get the monkey attacks and you're the it's, it's a constant assault.

And without the ability to assault, they're not interrupting. They're not entertained. And so they want to abuse and in their mind, that's free speech, as you said, because a certain type of person must be able to harass you, baby. No, you don't have the right to harass. Anybody. People can leave. They can choose to not be in that space anymore.

How William Randolph Hearst Made The Media - KERA's Think - Air Date 9-27-21

[00:47:49] **KRYS BOYD - HOST, KERA'S THINK:** Hearst came along at a moment in history where a lot of things were changing in terms of media technology. He, it sounds like, was among the first journalism giants to recognize the potential of film as a tool for more than just narrative storytelling. How involved was he in the rise of the newsroom?

[00:48:10] **STEPHEN IVES:** Hearst was always on the lookout for the next big thing. He had a tremendous sense of technology and about how that was changing the world of publishing, and he saw film as another way of spreading his broad popular message. He got out of head on newsreels, and started producing them, and they were extremely successful. He also pioneered something called the serialized drama. There was a early hit he had called the Perils of Pauline, which was the, basically the story of this damsel in distress, who's not really that. Who's actually a smart, creative, brave woman, constantly outsmarting these ghoulish men who were trying to kidnap her or steal her money or something, she plays an heiress. That was immensely popular with women at the time.

He really knew how to reach new audiences. He knew how to tailor his message that he might've encountered or first developed in the pages of his newspaper, and then translate it into a whole new medium and figure out how to dominate that as well.

He created something that was really quite extraordinary. He created the first all newsreel theater, that would basically show newsreels every few hours, right off the press, out of the lab. The film print was probably still wet before it got to the projector. In a way it was the precursor of CNN. It was the first all news entity ever created in America.

[00:49:49] **KRYS BOYD - HOST, KERA'S THINK:** And he realized that these moving pictures could also be a tool, along with the papers, for advancing his geopolitical agendas. What sorts of views did he hold on American foreign policy?

[00:50:02] **STEPHEN IVES:** Well, Hearst was a very strong anti-internationalist. He didn't believe that America should get involved in Europe. He thought World War One had been a catastrophic mistake. You see that play out very much in the way he approaches the Spanish American War at the turn

of the century. He sees Spain, the old colonial empire of Spain, still mucking around in the Western hemisphere, in what he thinks is America's backyard.

He also sees what he loves, which is a great mellow dramatic story with the bad guy, in this case, is Spain, and the good guys are the Cuban people. He really went after that. He believes in keeping America safe within its borders, and he's very opposed to the foreign entanglements that he sees the country getting into.

[00:50:58] **KRYS BOYD - HOST, KERA'S THINK:** All right. So he is married to Millicent for decades, but he starts up a relationship with this young woman that you mentioned a few minutes ago, Marion Davies. Who was she and how did she catch his eye?

[00:51:12] **STEPHEN IVES:** Well, she was this, again, a chorus girl. She was a Broadway hooper. She was a beautiful woman that he was captivated by, and he thought he could make her into a Hearst property, in a way. He was very controlling about how he went about this, so property's not the worst word to use. He immediately started promoting her stage work. he then saw one of her first films in the silent era and, really was swept away by her screen presence. They began a relationship that he didn't hide. He kept it somewhat discrete in that he had a suite of rooms down overlooking Bryant Park in New York City while his wife and children were ensconced on the Upper West Side in The Clarendon.

But he wasn't gonna stop going out on the town with Marion and they developed this parallel life that went on and on and on. It was really one of the most extraordinary overt, open affairs that any major American figure has ever carried on and Hearst did it because that's the way he did everything. He just did what he wanted and didn't care what people said.

[00:52:29] **KRYS BOYD - HOST, KERA'S THINK:** So how did Millicent feel about that?

[00:52:33] **STEPHEN IVES:** Well, she eventually found out and obviously they had a series of scenes. Their son remembers one time when she literally took her wedding ring off and threw it at him and said, " if that's what you think of our marriage, take it." But again, there were reasons why they needed or felt they could stay together. Hearst Didn't want a divorce, that would have been terrible for his finances. Millicent was Catholic, a divorce was extremely scandalous in those days in society, let alone for a Catholic, and she liked being Mrs. Hearst.

So ultimately they began this strange transcontinental relationship, where they kept about 3000 miles between each other. Millicent would be in New York for most of the year, and then she'd go to California, and Hearst and Marion would come east. It worked to a degree, but it worked mostly for Hearst. I don't think ultimately Millicent or Marion were ever really happy with the relationship, but they didn't feel like they, or chose not, to end it, and so it kept going on.

[00:53:43] **KRYS BOYD - HOST, KERA'S THINK:** So I get how he could keep that out of his own publications, but how did he keep rival newspapers from reporting on all this?

[00:53:51] **STEPHEN IVES:** That's a good question. There was an unspoken deal with the media barons back then. You could go after anybody with as much of a slash and burn set of articles you could possibly muster, but you didn't go after the other proprietors, because they knew it could turn into a cycle that they'd all pay for.

A lot of these guys were men, and I bet a lot of them had personal lives that were vulnerable to all sorts of scandal, and blackmail, and everything else. The only way that that would change is if your name appeared in court, in which case all bets were off. So if Millicent had filed for divorce in some way, that would have blown the top off of everything for Hearst. These guys knew how to protect their little worlds that they carefully built around them, and they were very good at it.

Is Free Speech Online Just a Myth? - What Next: TBD | Tech, power, and the future - Air Date 5-8-22

[00:54:43] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** There's a tweet from Elon Musk from March 26th where he says that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square. And I wanted to interrogate that concept a little bit: that the public square, once a physical thing like a town common, has truly moved online.

The Supreme Court seemed to back that view in a 2017 case called *Packingham v. North Carolina*. In that case, the court ruled that a North Carolina law that kept registered sex offenders off social media was unconstitutional. In the majority opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that the Internet was the modern public square.

I asked Jameel to unpack that for me a bit, to explain why it's so important.

[00:55:29] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** In First Amendment law, there's the concept of a public forum; like, a city street or a park is a public forum. It's a property on which, historically, we have used to engage in political speech.

Those kinds of public forums are highly protected under First Amendment doctrine. For example, the government can't kick you out of a park because it doesn't like what you're saying.

And that was the body of law that we used-- that the Night Institute used-- when we sued President Trump over his practice of blocking people from his Twitter account. We pointed to that body of law and said for the same reasons the government can't kick you out of a park because it doesn't like what you're saying, president Trump can't kick you off his Twitter account because he doesn't like what you're saying.

Now, it's possible that Justice Kennedy, in the Packingham case, meant to reference that body of law. And what he meant was Facebook and maybe other social media platforms shouldn't be excluding people from these spaces based on their viewpoints. You know, that's the, kind of, legal argument.

I think that his... his descriptive argument, his, sort of, descriptive statement that Facebook and other social media platforms serve as public squares at this point, I think, is non-controversial. If you if you treat it as a legal proposition, though, I think it's a lot more difficult to defend.

[00:56:52] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** Well, because it's not a public park. It's a private company!

[00:56:55] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** Yeah, well, that was true of... you know, in a way, that was true of President Trump's Twitter account, too. Right? President Trump's Twitter account was on private property; was on Twitter's property. And yet, the courts all held that that Twitter account was a public forum.

But it's one thing to say President Trump, a government actor, can't kick you out of this space on the basis of your viewpoint, and it would be another thing to say Twitter can't kick you out of this space because of your viewpoint. These are questions that the courts are only beginning to grapple with, and it's not like there's a single answer that everybody has, you know, cohered around. It's still pretty contested space.

[00:57:34] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** But thinking about it in some ways more as metaphor, it feels like we are maybe circling, as a country, around the idea of public square without any of the other parts intact, without maybe saying, "Yes, we agree on point A, point B, point C... just we all, maybe, think there's something real important here in the middle."

[00:57:58] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** Well, you know, I just think about it as the space, the meta... the, sort of, metaphorical, or even metaphysical, space in which we engage with each other, share information, debate issues, come to consensus. You know, where do we do those things? We do those things increasingly online. And increasingly on social media in particular.

And so, forget the legal stuff. Just as a, kind of, factual claim, those are the spaces whose integrity is important to democracy.

[00:58:31] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** This idea of a public square was at the heart of a speech that former President Barack Obama gave on disinformation in April.

[00:58:40] **BARACK OBAMA:** Thank you, everybody. Thank you.

[00:58:42] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** This was the first time that Obama, who had long been friendly with big tech, publicly called out social media companies for how their algorithms warp online speech.

[00:58:52] **BARACK OBAMA:** For more and more of us, search and social media platforms aren't just our window into the Internet; they serve as our primary source of news and information. No one tells us that the window is blurred, subject to unseen distortions and subtle manipulations.

[00:59:09] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** Jameel, who had a sometimes adversarial relationship with the former president, is surprised by a lot of what he heard.

[00:59:16] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** I was at the ACLU for 14 years, and eight of those years were during the Obama administration. And I think I probably filed 100 lawsuits against the Obama administration, and many of them related to the freedoms of speech, and association, and privacy in particular. We represented whistleblowers. We sued over government secrecy. We filed, I don't know how many suits, over government surveillance. You know, all First Amendment suits, or First Amendment adjacent suits.

And I was very unhappy with a lot of their policies relating to the free speech. I was unhappy with their whistleblower policies. You know, they prosecuted more whistleblowers under the Espionage Act than any previous administration, in fact, all previous administrations combined. The Obama administration's record on government transparency was, at best, mixed. President Obama defended all the NSA programs, or almost all the NSA program that Edward Snowden disclosed. So I was not, you know, I was not enthusiastic about the Obama administration and the First Amendment.

And I didn't... didn't expect to agree with as much of President Obama's speech on disinformation as I, you know, as it turned out I did.

One of the things I liked about it was, sort of, how modest it was. I mean, it started off....

[01:00:39] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** That it wasn't some big sweeping condemnation.

[01:00:43] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** Well, a lot of people come to this issue of disinformation with the idea that if only the government criminalized more speech, you know, why don't we just prohibit all of this disinformation? You know, isn't that the obvious solution here?

And that's not where President Obama landed here. You know, for one thing, he starts off by recognizing, I think, totally appropriately, that social media has in some important ways made our society fairer and more democratic and more inclusive. And there are all sorts of social movements, political movements that many of us think have been great things that would never have got off the ground but for, you know, but for social media. And he starts off by recognizing that he also recognizes that many of our problems as a society are not fairly traceable to social media, or at least not to social media alone.

But then he goes on to say that some of our problems do have the social media companies, as... you know, at their source.

[01:01:43] **BARACK OBAMA:** Tech platforms need to accept that they play a unique role in how we as a people, and people around the world, are consuming information; and that their decisions have an impact on every aspect of society.

[01:01:56] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** And he points to the design of the platforms as, you know, one... one place where we could, you know, look for the roots of some of our free speech pathologies today.

[01:02:09] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** In that they incentivize sharing and disseminating more outrageous content because it increases engagement.

[01:02:15] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** Yeah, I think that's what he highlighted. I mean, I might highlight some other things, too. Like, for example, the fact that some of these platforms are designed in a way that ends up insulating people from counterarguments. And, in fact, you know, on a lot of these platforms, you can run granularly micro targeted ads that reach only a very small community of people. And if that ad contains misinformation, nobody else is in a position to counter it, or to correct it because nobody else even knows that that message reached those people.

[01:02:50] **LIZZIE O'LEARY - HOST, WHAT NEXT: TBD:** You're not getting that opposing speech. It's... it's just landing in this this little pocket.

[01:02:55] **JAMEEL JAFFER:** Right. And that... that, sort of... that's a challenge to this fundamental principle that is at the bottom of our free speech tradition.

Final comments on the propaganda of building faulty assumptions into questions

[01:03:03] **JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** We've just heard clips today, starting with an *ENDEVR Documentary*, explaining how bias in media is often market-driven rather than ideological. *Novara Media* discussed media ownership in the UK. *Democracy Now!* in 2013 discussed the purchase of the Washington Post by Jeff Bezos. *Past Present* explained the billionaires' business model of media. Adam Conover in his comments to the FTC and DOJ explained how media mergers squash voices and stories that threaten corporations. And *The ReidOut* spoke with Anan Giridharadas about why free speech absolutism results in less free speech.

That's what everyone heard. But members also heard bonus clips from *KERA's Think* describing William Randolph Hearst's early media innovations and how he used it to push his politics; and *What Next: TBD* discuss the problems of the digital public square.

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because we don't make a lack of funds a barrier to hearing more information. Every request is granted. No questions asked.

And now today I just have some more thoughts on something that is -- it's slightly related to media ownership, or more specifically how we are continually, constantly, forever figuring out how to communicate with each other, both logistically and just linguistically.

So I saw a question asked on Twitter recently -- and to be clear, it was not a good question, but it struck me as the kind of question that has the potential to confuse people who haven't necessarily thought about these issues very deeply. And I mean, in fact, I sort of got the sense that the person asking the question is probably themselves confused rather than trying to be intentionally misleading. But it led me to some interesting thoughts that I thought were worth clarifying.

So here's what the person said on Twitter, in response to a discussion about intentionally mis-gendering a person. This person says, quote, "The question they never seem to be willing or able to answer is who gets to be the arbiter of what is good speech and bad, and how do you ensure that they are going to be evenhanded and unbiased?" So this is clearly a person who is skeptical of changing language and all of that sort of stuff.

So, as I said, I don't think it's a good question, but I find it interesting because I think it is a well-crafted misdirection of a question. It's sort of a straw man argument, but it's phrased as a question, which makes it sound like not an argument at all. It's just a person asking what sounds like a reasonable question.

And I find this to be a really important form of propaganda to understand. So much so, in fact, that I actually co-wrote an explainer song about it, believe it or not.

[Song] Questions can be used/To get to the truth/Just ask Socrates

But when the questions come out, /Because you want to sow doubt/ That's just an attempt to mislead.

Your question can be/There to plant a seed/Of some idea in our minds/ Or to make us stop/And turn our minds off/ Like the answer's too hard to find

[Song fades]

So instead of just declaring it as propaganda, let's actually discuss and figure out what happened here and why I think this is an argument disguised as an innocuous question.

The discussion is about how society collectively decides what is appropriate and inappropriate speech: good and bad speech. This is a phenomenon that goes back to the very beginning of human communication, and it sits right at the intersection of language and cultural norms -- cultural norms just being another word for politeness. I mean, I think the definition of politeness is essentially conforming to cultural norms. If you don't conform to the norms, depending on the circumstance, it could be said that you are being rude. None of this has to do with laws or litigation or arbitration or anything like that. It's just about cultural norms. And if you think back for just a second, you would know that laws or official arbiters have almost never been the cause of language change over time. It's something that happens evolutionarily more than legislatively. Someone says something new, and if it catches on, then it can spread to the whole society. And if it doesn't catch on, then it simply dies away. And that's how language evolves.

But let's look at arbitration and what it's for for a second. It's for when there's a conflict that needs to be solved. And it's fair to say that there is a conflict over language right now. So to jump to the idea that what we need is an arbiter to help solve our conflict sounds super reasonable. And the question posed asks for an even-handed and unbiased arbiter. So what could possibly be more reasonable than that?

The problem is that the question is built on an entirely faulty premise. That's just not how language changes. There was no arbiter who decreed that we would collectively switch from colored to Negro, to Black, to African-American, then realizing that not all Black people identify as coming from Africa, back to Black, and then more inclusively there's a push for people of color, POC, and now the even more inclusive BIPOC, which includes Black, Indigenous and all other people of color, which is approximately where we are now. And if you think it's going to stop there, I've got bad news for you.

So government, legislation, rulemaking, those entities don't lead the way on this. They follow the social norms that bubble up organically, evolutionarily, from the bottom up.

For instance, the most recent example I saw was that the AP Style Guide changed to use the term "pregnant people" to make it gender neutral. If you have no idea what's going on, that sounds like the AP is making a big, bold

decision to try to change our language for the sake of trans inclusivity. But I first heard that type of phrasing almost 10 years ago. And that's just when I heard it. It had obviously been around longer than that in some circles. So the AP isn't going out on a huge limb here, demanding change. They're reacting to the change that was already happening and has been happening for years and years and years to get us to this point.

So if I were going to speak directly to this person who said the question they never seem to be willing or able to answer is who gets to be the arbiter to what is good speech and bad? And how do you ensure that they are going to be evenhanded and unbiased? This is what I would say: You are right, that no one is able to answer your question. But that doesn't show a lack of information on their part or expose a fatal flaw in their logic. It's an unanswerable question because there's a fatal flaw in the logic of the question itself. You're putting forward a premise that makes no sense: official arbitration of language. It doesn't work that way. And yet that is what you are building your argument on top of. So for anyone to take the time to answer your silly question, they would have to take as much time as I am taking, and they're certainly not going to do that on Twitter.

To take this further, though, what I think goes unstated in that question; what I think the real argument is, and I could be wrong because now I'm reading between the lines a bit, but here's what I think this person is really arguing: I think they are saying something like, if there is not an officially-sanctioned, evenhanded and unbiased arbiter in place to tell me and everyone else what is good and bad speech, then three things become true. Number one, there is no legitimate idea of good and bad speech because no official definition of such has been handed down by a recognized authority figure. And two, no other individual in the world, not having been appointed as an official authority, has any legitimate standing to claim that one way of speaking is superior or preferable to any other. Therefore, three, I get to talk however I want, and no one can ever tell me I'm wrong in a way that I will deem legitimate.

That's the basic argument I think is being made, disguised as an innocuous question. And is so often the case, there are a lot of logically consistent connections being made in that argument. It's just that the whole thing is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how the forces behind language change work. So other than that one thing that entirely undermines your entire premise, it makes perfect sense.

So for everyone, when you hear a question or ask a question in political conversations, make sure that you understand the assumptions that are built in,

and that those assumptions are legitimate. Because you're not going to want to get distracted by or asked questions that have illegitimate assumptions built into them. They need to be avoided at all costs, but they are a great way to trick someone into having a conversation that sounds legitimate, sounds like it's making a good and reasonable point, but is actually built on a foundation of sand. And this can be tricky because not all of these questions with faulty assumptions built into them are as obvious as the most famous example, "When did you stop beating your wife?" But even though they're not as obviously biased as that question is, they all lead to the same no-win scenario conversation.

As always keep the comments coming in at 202-999-3991, or by emailing me to Jay@BestoftheLeft.com.

That is going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio, Ben, Ken, and Scott, for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, web mastering, and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at BestoftheLeft.com/support, through our Patreon page, or from right inside the Apple Podcast app. Membership is how you get instant access to our incredibly good bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content and no ads in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player.

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