

Meet Me in the Middle Ep 07 Transcript

Announcer: From Curtco Media.

Celeste: Whatcha gonna do?

Bill Curtis: Welcome to a media focused edition of Politics. Meet Me in the Middle. I'm Bill Curtis. We've always had a fascination with media. It's watchdog role in American politics, and especially these days, we're gonna deep dive into the politics of media. There are four of us here at the table today. Firstly, of course, my co-host, Pulitzer Prize winning historian, author, worldwide lecturer and walking encyclopedia of everything political and historic. Ed Larson, how you doing Ed?

Ed Larson: Thanks very much. Great to be here again with you,.

Bill Curtis: Joining us here from the office right down the hall, Stuart Halperin is a media movie entertainment executive and innovator. He built the movietickets.com brand as head of marketing, and he also co-founded Hollywood.com. And in full disclosure, Stuart is our general manager here at Curtco Media. Thanks for sitting in today, Stuart.

Stuart Halperin: Thanks for including me.

Bill Curtis: And now our Hot Mike guest. He's been a media critic, producer and lecturer since the 1980s. He was founding director and associate professor of the Park Center for Independent Media at my alma mater, Ithaca College. He also founded the media watch group Fair in 1986. Jeff Cohen has produced a number of documentary movies. He's written books like Cable News Confidential, and he's been a commentator on CNN, its rival, Fox News, as well as MSNBC. Oh, and his columns have been published by major newspapers, well, everywhere. Welcome, Jeff. It's nice to have you.

Jeff Cohen: Great to be here,.

Bill Curtis: As always. Ed, you're up. Tell us about the role of media during the writing of the Constitution. You know, early in our country's history.

Ed Larson: The media during the colonial period was mostly advertisements for homes or for arms or runaway slaves. Benjamin Franklin probably published the best of the colonial period. He had wonderful remarks about the need for freedom of the press. He just threw out the truth from views from all sides and people will get the truth out of it. Now, he was one of our founders, but that's before America lurched into partisanship. You had the Jeffersonian Republicans having their press and the Federalist having their own press. If you read the papers of that time, it's a little bit like if you watch MSNBC and then watch Fox.

Bill Curtis: In 1789, when the First Amendment was written: Congress shall enact no law abridging the freedom of the press. At that time, weren't most of them becoming propaganda rags?

Ed Larson: There was this sense that the media had been the bulwark of liberty by speaking out against the British during the run up to the Revolutionary War, speaking out against the Stamp Act, against the Sugar Act, and that they had been a backbone of liberty. And what they wanted to make sure then was the press would continue to play that role of being critical of government. But it was only a matter of years before the press changed to truly a partisan press. And once it did, they still had the benefit of that First Amendment.

Jeff Cohen: And even then, the framers of the Constitution, when they saw the politics of the politician being savaged, they still said, look, this is the First Amendment. This is a good thing.

Ed Larson: And we have to remember that Hamilton starting a partisan press in reaction to James Madison starting it. He was the first orchestrator of building a partisan press on the side of his hero, Thomas Jefferson. And he was the one who wrote the First Amendment.

Jeff Cohen: One thing about the Constitution before we move the constitution has all this stuff about the importance of a post office. And it was seen by the framers of the Constitution as a subsidy to a free press. It's why many of us who are critics of the current day, we think there is an important role for government in subsidizing media.

Bill Curtis: What, what, what?

Jeff Cohen: If you look at it in today's dollars, what the post office did for the American press was a subsidy to media of billions of dollars. We think that what this should say to us is maybe we should look at Scandinavia and some countries in Europe where the governments give all this money to public broadcasting. You want to start a Web site with your right wing, left wing, or center. You get a little subsidy.

Bill Curtis: You don't then end up in a world of propaganda?

Jeff Cohen: Every study done by groups like Reporters Without Borders finds that those that have those countries that have the freest press, the most diversity of press, also have most governments subsidy of the press, strongest public broadcasting. And those countries are always Finland, Sweden, Norway.

Bill Curtis: Does that sound workable to you, Ed,.

Ed Larson: When you were speaking I was thinking of the BBC. The BBC is, I think, the most trusted voice in journalism. If you want to get a fair reading on things and it is subsidised indirectly by the government in the sense that the government has a tax on all the radios owned in Britain. But there is that established precedent.

Yes. That is in fact the argument I'm making that we need to look back at what was the post office about to the framers. They understood it was partly about promoting a press. Remember, the debate among the framers was should newspapers go through the mail for free or should they go for a drastically reduced postage? That was the debate. It's an important part of history that's not well known.

Bill Curtis: I certainly didn't know it. Let's jump ahead to 1841 for a minute. Horace Greeley founded The New York Tribune and he introduced a concept called The Editorial Page.

Jeff Cohen: This is part of that trend that culminated in the early 20th century objective news and that journalists have to have ethics and journalists can't be stooges for one

political party or another. Another turning point is 1960s, when The New York Times starts the op-ed page, which is where we got our editorial opinion. But on this other page opposite the editorial page here will be opinions that are different than the editors of The New York Times. So that goes Greeley one step further.

Bill Curtis: And actually, if you remember, the start of , 60 Minutes has been on television for five decades.

Jeff Cohen: Huge profit center.

Bill Curtis: Huge profit center. But they were very careful to separate opinion from the journalists.

Jeff Cohen: Oh, yeah. I think when I hear people say, if you do serious journalism, you won't get an audience. I mean, 60 Minutes is one of the most profitable shows in the history of television. And it does journalism.

Bill Curtis: Just for a minute, let's bring it back and talk about what I think is a special moment for media, one that actually brought the whole world together in a single moment in the 1960s that you were talking about. And that would have to be in July of 1969 when Neil Armstrong stepped foot on the moon. That was a special moment for media, don't you think?

Jeff Cohen: Oh, yeah. And it was one where television was just becoming the dominant medium. And there is just certain things television could do that newspapers couldn't.

Ed Larson: But even when you mention the space program, which did capture a generation's imagination, that indeed was picked up, it was partly pushed by the media itself in the sense that Walter Cronkite figured out that this is something especially suitable for broadcast media. He became almost a fanatical supporter.

Bill Curtis: I have to tell you, my wife and I had the pleasure of having dinner with Walter Cronkite back in 2006 in Monaco. And with great sadness, he lamented that when he was delivering the evening news, it was only to be the facts without color,

without opinion, and a tear rolled down his face as he described the condition back in 2006 of our media news.

Jeff Cohen: Well, I think that it was a trend that really began in earnest in the 1980s that culminated in more.

Bill Curtis: Along with the cable news networks that had to fill 24 hours of media entertaining news,.

Jeff Cohen: No doubt. But I mean, the three big broadcast networks were all taken over by different companies and they for the first time, they demanded that the news divisions of their networks start making profits. In the days of Cronkite, the owners would say we're going to make profit in the entertainment side of our business. In news, you can actually cover the news.

Bill Curtis: And the news was actually a requirement. I mean, the FCC handed out bandwidth with this specific instruction that these stations had to deliver the news.

Jeff Cohen: They had to act in the public interest. They had to have a fairness doctrine. They had to deal with issues of public importance and have more than one side. So, yeah, the 1980s was a perfect storm because of the deregulation, bigger corporations took over the networks. It led to turning news into just another entertainment format.

Ed Larson: Now I see the argument you're making, but I'm wondering if you looked back at conservatives in that period. They would have said that the way the media actually treated, the way the evening news actually treated Barry Goldwater in his run against Johnson. They would say it was very unbalanced and unfair. Was there any truth to that back then?

Jeff Cohen: When you look back at the coverage in the 60s, very rarely media was middle of the road. The TV network news prided themselves were middle of the road. And here you had a candidate saying extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And there's no doubt that Goldwater was outside of that mainstream. But the media tried to be like BBC in that era.

Bill Curtis: Stewart, take us back a couple of years.

Stuart Halperin: Yeah, I wanted to jump in. We've been talking a bit about the 20th century, the 60s in particular. We spent a lot of time talking about the formative days, both Ed and Jeff, I was hoping to get your reflections on yellow journalism, a phenomenon in the late eighteen hundreds.

Ed Larson: The way it got its name, it came through the Hearst papers, but it was picked up by the others and they were starting to sell explosive journalism, such as causing the run up to the Spanish-American War. But how it got called yellow journalism, to sell more papers they invented the comics, and people liked reading the comics, so they made the comics in color. And the first color they could add to just black and white was yellow. So these papers that were printing these sensational stories about this or that bit of corruption by the government are causing a war. That sort of sensational journalism was tied with having yellow comics and hence yellow journalism.

Jeff Cohen: And I think that so much of the formula there came back with cable news.

Ed Larson: They played celebrities. You'd get a sensational story about a celebrity. You'd create a celebrity. You'd also create positive celebrities like Babe Ruth. There wouldn't be the Babe Ruth that we remember today without this sensational celebrity minded media.

Jeff Cohen: There was no golden age of media. As I've studied it, there's always been too much profit motive as opposed to let's get the news out to inform our citizenry. When we get to what's happened in the last 30 years, I really think we're in a new era. We're in an era of news as entertainment. We're in an era where no one pretends yet few people pretend to be objective and neutral and trying to get out the facts. And I'd say the era began in the 80s. It's never been worse than during the last few years with Trump.

Bill Curtis: We're going to take a very quick break now. We'll be back in 30 seconds.

Promo: Hey, this is Chris and Jenny from When Last I Left, another Curtco Media podcast. And we have some awesome news for you. Super exciting if you're anything

like me gift giving can be kind of difficult this time of year. I'm not like you. No, you're not. I'm really great at giving gifts. She's much better at giving gifts. You want to know why? Why? I got to Vicesreserve.com. Vicesreserve.com. It's the perfect place to get unique curated gifts that don't suck like cocktail kits. Oh that sounds cool. Gadgets. Oh Yes. Really great liquor. They don't stop there, though. They don't. If you use the code podcast VIP, you get an extra 15 percent off everything in the store. Everything is 15 percent off with the code podcastVIP, everything at VicesReserve.com. That's insane. You should go now. I'm going to go as soon as I finish listening to this episode. Go buy me something. I will.

Bill Curtis: Come back with me to March 9th of 1954. It's 10:30 p.m. Eastern Time. Edward R. Murrow opened his black and white evening TV series See it Now by exposing and speaking out against Senator Joseph McCarthy. Jeff, would you consider that one of media's high watermarks?

Jeff Cohen: Yes. Joe McCarthy had been created by the media, propelled by the media. Reporters would complain that I realize he's not front page news. He's not telling the truth. But the publisher wants Joe McCarthy on the front page. So media had very much created him. Mainstream media and Edward R. Murrow's show finally was the beginning of the end for Joe McCarthy.

Ed Larson: We're talking about Joe McCarthy and how he was a media creation. We have to look back. He had been in the war in a very low level position and he'd run for Senate and he won the Senate from Wisconsin in much of a surprise. And he hadn't done much during his first term in the Senate. And he saw that this anti-communism thing would be an effective way to get the headlines. So he was using the media. And so they helped propel McCarthy. And that's why his fall by the media was shocking, because this drove ratings, his so-called attack on communists in the government and in other places.

Jeff Cohen: And I would say he's the closest figure in U.S. history to our current president, Trump. That he was prone to making up stuff. He was always viciously on the attack. And when Murrow did a accurate report about him, what did he do? He started going after Murrow's staff that, you know, a couple of them had been in left wing groups. It really is a parallel.

Bill Curtis: In this case a journalist, Edward R. Murrow, he actually stepped into quite a bit of danger to take the chance to expose McCarthy.

Jeff Cohen: He knew it. I mean, McCarthy was vicious. McCarthy had a big media megaphone and he knew it was very dangerous to do accurate reporting. You're going to get attacked by this guy with the megaphone.

Ed Larson: Well, then the story became bringing down McCarthy and it was just as good a story as raising up McCarthy.

Jeff Cohen: But see that right. And that's what's happening today at CNN and MSNBC. In a democracy, journalists are supposed to serve the voters. They're not supposed to be going just nakedly for ratings as our country goes to shit. Can I say that as podcasts?

Bill Curtis: Absolutely. You just did. Who? Who says that you're supposed to be serving the voters?

Jeff Cohen: The code of ethics. I taught journalism for 10 years. There's a code of ethics for journal.

Bill Curtis: You have to be kidding me.

Jeff Cohen: Well, journalistic code is actually talked about more, but perhaps practiced less.

Bill Curtis: So slowing it down for me. I wonder if you could explain to me how now that millennials and generation Z's, they're getting their news from social media. How do you feel about that paradigm shift?

Jeff Cohen: I like it. I mean, I again, I'm looking at the results.

Bill Curtis: So my friend in Newark, New Jersey, should be absolutely as credible as the network news.

Jeff Cohen: I would say today, if you think there's credibility here with MSNBC and CNN and Fox, you're kidding yourselves. So young people know how to look across.

Bill Curtis: Yeah. you have a point.

Jeff Cohen: They can look across this universe of options. I've got two daughters that are ,I've got a 22 year old and a 28 year old. They're, Dad are you the only person who's still watching these news shows? And they and their friends are very progressive. They're more anti-racist than older people. They're more anti-sexist than older people. They believe in more economic justice than older people. They want Trump impeached more than older people. And it's got something to do with where they get their news and information.

Ed Larson: Well, I have a son in that age group, actually younger than that. He's 22 now, just barely 22. But he has become absolutely hooked on of all things N.P.R. Isn't that interesting? Now, explain that to me.

Jeff Cohen: Well, first of all, how did he first listened to NPR? I bet it wasn't on the radio, but it was podcasts. So.

Ed Larson: Right. But he thinks it's fair. But he started listening somehow to NPR and he absolutely loves it. And I think that, if that speaks for that generation, that's pretty impressive.

Jeff Cohen: I would not disagree with that. I mean, public radio has pioneered in what you guys are doing, which is podcasts. They're reaching a younger audience. Their audience was aging just along with cable news. But they've used podcasts to go younger. And by the way. I don't believe, Bill, that the key is to be in the middle. The key is to be fair and accurate.

Bill Curtis: Isn't that someplace in the middle for the most part?

Jeff Cohen: Not necessarily? I mean, I think as you look through the history of journalism, many of the journalists we look back on who have won every award, they saw themselves as being progressive. You know, they're working for reform of society.

They've won award after award. And I'm not sure you have to be in the middle. You have to be fair to the truth. You have to be fair when you report on people you're critical of. You don't have to be in the middle.

Bill Curtis: It's an interesting point of view. I do think that being fair ends up, by its nature, in the middle because most subjects that we could talk about in politics have to take into account all the facts. Just like you said, the lies of omission. And one of the things that we do here and I think we do it fairly well, is we try to inject as many facts as we can remember. And we and we try to be fair, which ends up very much in the middle.

Jeff Cohen: I think if you have a bias and you're aware of your bias. I'm biased. I'm a progressive. I like people like Warren and Bernie Sanders. I know what my bias is. I acknowledge my bias in almost everything I write. But if you're fair to the facts and when I quote Trump, I don't distort it. I have the full quote. when I. I try not to exaggerate any criticisms of people I'm criticizing. I'm not in the middle, but I believe I'm a good journalist that, you know, NYU School of Journalism did something at the end of the 20th century. They said, what are the 100 greatest achievements of journalism in this century? And when you look at the people that were in that list, so many of them were on the political left. They were social reformers in their time. Upton Sinclair, I.F. Stone, who had this newsletter in the 50s and 60s. These were people who got the facts right, did not exaggerate the sins of their opponents, did not ignore the sins of their friends. You can have a political bias and be a journalist. I mean, for 10 years, at Ithaca College I taught independent media and we would often look at these heroes of journalism in the 20th century. And they often had a bias, but they were bent on getting the facts straight.

Bill Curtis: Well, I would actually. Jeff, I have to respectfully, because you're the expert. I'd have to disagree because the concept of news should not have bias. And yes, it's almost impossible for a human being to approach a breath without bias. But I think that the effort that needs to be made by journalists on media, in newspapers, and especially on 24 hour a day, cable TV needs to be without bias. Right. I agree.

Jeff Cohen: I'm going to agree that the goal should be objectivity. The goal should be fairness to the facts. But even in a science experiment when you conduct a science experiment, you begin with a hypothesis. You begin with the hypothesis.

Bill Curtis: You are absolutely not supposed to put bias into your science experiment , Otherwise, it's flawed,.

Jeff Cohen: Of course. But you begin with a hypothesis. You say, I believe if I put this chemical and light some fire under it ,it's going to explode. Now, if you do that experiment 58 times and it turns out your hypothesis was wrong, you write up your experiment saying my hypothesis was wrong and you fairly report what your results were. So I don't mind a journalist having this hypothesis or having a belief that, gee, corporations are taking advantage of the middle class. If that's your bias, fine. Tell me about it. Wear it on your sleeve. But if it turns out, gee, I was investigating this corporation and it turned out that I was wrong, they actually were not stealing blah, blah, blah, then you have to tell the truth about what you found. So I believe even scientists have to begin with hypothesis, which in some ways could be a bias. It's how you handle the data, how you handle your reporting, how you handle the facts that you dug up. Do you reflect them fairly and accurate.

Bill Curtis: Or do you omit the facts that don't support your bias?an infraction in science and it would be an infraction in journalism.

Bill Curtis: Absolutely it would kill people and it does in media

Jeff Cohen: And the criticism I have of people like Rachel Maddow and others is they engage in propaganda by omission. They criticize the Republicans in ways they could criticize the Democrats, but they don't.

Bill Curtis: But, Jeff, I would like to call the news the news and call opinion, Opinion, as a matter of fact. I think that everybody on CNN, CNBC and in Fox should have to put on a T-shirt that says opinion when they're injecting their own or management's opinion into what they're calling the news. Otherwise, it simply is not news. So lets call it something else.

Jeff Cohen: I'd love to see that. I'd love to see these shows have a lower third, a chiron That says "opinion", Sean Hannity's opinion

Bill Curtis: And by the way, the world would be a better place.

Ed Larson: One issue you raise with all this debate is where do facts fit in? When we could play with some agreed facts, whether it be facts about the environment or facts about the Iraq war, then you could have an honest debate and you had some very important conservative commentators, whether it be Hayek or back to Edmund Burke or up to David Brooks today. You have people who could add a lot from the conservative viewpoint as long as they were dealing in this world of facts. And I think we need to give credit to those people because that provides a sort of balanced journalism. And we've had some very conservative journalists who have made an enormous contribution to American society. So the question is, how do we get these people back? And that's part of the debate that is in some ways lacking today.

Jeff Cohen: Yeah, I don't disagree. Let me say this about the facts. There's one story that we all know that there's a big segment of society that is not willing to look at the facts or science, and that's climate change. And this gets back to the point I was making about people under 35. There's an amazing poll that's come out from Ipsos where they pulled 2000 individuals of all ages, Republican, Democrat, independent, and they found there was a gap on climate change. Only people over 40. Like they found a huge number of Democrats saying climate change is a serious threat. And it was only about half or less of Republicans said climate change is a serious threat. But what they noticed in polling 2000 people over 18 is that people below 35, there was no difference. It was three fourths of Republican youth, young voters, three fourths of Democrats said climate change is a serious threat. So, you know, if we can sort of wind down on an optimistic note, there's something to be said that wherever these people, podcasts or wherever they're getting their information, at least young Republicans are not rejecting the facts or the science of climate change like older Republicans are.

Bill Curtis: Well, Jeff, before the peacock unfurls or the credits roll, I just like to ask you one other small question. What's going to happen to media when Trump is gone?

Jeff Cohen: Whoever ultimately becomes the inhabitant of the White House, I am hoping that places like CNN and Washington Post and MSNBC that have learned to say what the president said today is not true. I want to see that carry over when Trump is gone.

Bill Curtis: Do you think Colbert is going to get on the Democratic president?

Jeff Cohen: I think he may. I think that the ratings for all of these places is going to go down.

Bill Curtis: People will go outside and like, say hello to each other.

Jeff Cohen: Yeah, I believe ratings will go down. And what I'm looking for is will the so-called liberal media and some of them aren't all that liberal. But will they be able about, let's say, a Democratic president? Will they say, gee, this president wasn't honest about Iran today? I'm afraid they will go back to the old pre Trump era where presidents don't lie. The Pentagon doesn't lie on CNN. The Pentagon never tells a lie.

Bill Curtis: Ed?

Ed Larson: I tend to look back and you would know the numbers better than I would. But Obama's presidency was just golden for the Rush Limbaughs and the Fox News's of the world. I fear that a Warren presidency would be the same thing, that they would just skyrocket in their attacks on Warren and we would be continuing in this political divide.

Jeff Cohen: I don't see it. I mean, I believe if Warren becomes the next president because she's got more affinity for the truth and for facts, I think she will be able to win over many of those people that voted for Trump. And it's from my experience working on the corporate coup where we sent a film crew to Ohio. They believe that the system has, is rigged against them. And Warren explains it in a way different than Trump. Warren tries to explain why the system is rigged. And here's my plan. I believe she would be somewhat of a unifier, but all I know is the so-called anti-Trump media. Their ratings are through the roof. And when Trump goes, their ratings will fall because Trump is pumping up the ratings of both MSNBC and Fox.

Bill Curtis: Well, Jeff Cohen, Stuart Halperin, Ed Larson, thank you so much for today. We've got to go. We certainly had a great conversation. I hope you'll come back, Jeff.

Jeff Cohen: I'd love to. This is fun.

Bill Curtis: OK. If you're looking for Jeff, you can click on to Jeffcohen.org, and find out more about Jeff. And thanks so much for meeting us here in the middle today. Have a good day. If you like what you heard, please help us by telling your friends. And, of course, subscribe to politics. Meet me in the middle. And if you have time, please leave a review. It really matters to us. You can also check us out at Curtco.com. This episode of Meet Me in the Middle was recorded at Curtco Media's Malibu Podcast Studios and was produced and edited by Mike Thomas. Audio engineering was by Michael Kennedy and our theme music was composed and performed by Celeste and Eric Dick.

Announcer: From Curtco Media, Media for your mind.