

The Aspen Institute  
Aspen Ideas Festival

How We Survive Attacks on Journalism

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St. Regis Hotel Ballroom, Aspen Colorado

Speakers:

Andrea Mitchell

Jonathan Capehart

Susan Page

Joshua Johnson

David Folkenflik

Brian Stelter

DavidFolkenflik:

I just am delighted to be here at the Aspen Ideas Festival 2018. It's a great week, a great intellectual ferment. I wanted to welcome Aspenites. I wanted to welcome out-of-towners. I wanted to welcome people seeking truth. I wanted to welcome Truthers. I wanted to welcome Birthers and trolls, and Birchers, and Never Trumpers. I wanted to welcome the Bernieites, and the MAGAs, and the "I'm with hers."

I want to welcome people who ascribe to things they read in Mother Jones, and people who might somehow still have sympathies for what they might once have heard on Father Coughlin. I think this is a big tent kind of event, and we saw big tents earlier today. I think you're going to hear a lot today about what's been titled How We Survive Attacks on Journalism, or Why Do They Hate Us So Much? In a little bit of a self-reflective mode.

There has been a lot of dismay. We're going to hear, in just a moment, about this all-star panel that we have right here. These journalistic thoroughbreds. But there has been a lot of dismay expressed from a lot of different directions about what journalists do, and how well they're fulfilling what we say and believe is our mission to the public.

You're seeing it from a lot of sides. You're seeing it in local news organizations taking hits for not providing, perhaps, what they should. Tonight, you've got a very national panel of people who think about things on a national and international way. So you may hear things of a bit broader scope about what's happening in our nation's capital.

But this, indeed, goes abroad, too. If you think about the journalist who was just assassinated in the Philippines. If you think about the threats to journalists working in Turkey. If you think about what the Putin regime does in Russia. These are live threats, and real ones.

Yet we have a time where journalists are being rhetorically attacked on a seemingly frequent basis. Where a journalist was actually, genuinely attacked by a man who was then, within 36 hours, elected to be the congressman from Montana. We are at a time where there are a lot of people, from a lot of different directions, who are wondering what we're doing, and expressing their dismay.

Yet, I think we should note, as we embark on this conversation, The New York Times has never had more subscribers. The Washington Post is reaching incredible heights. NPR has larger audiences, online and radio, than ever, and this is, by the way, at a point at which people had been predicting the decline and destruction of what we call terrestrial radio. Old-fashioned radio. So this is heady times for the press. We are relevant.

We have with us tonight, to discuss this question about how we survive this moment, how we sustain our mission, do what we should do ... an incredible lot. So let's take them, perhaps, from on my left.

Andrea Mitchell hardly needs to be introduced, and yet deserves it. She's the Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent for NBC News. If I'm not mistaken, has covered the last seven presidential administrations. Is that correct?

Andrea Mitchell: That is correct.

DavidFolkenflik: The last seven. Done it with finesse, verve, and breaking almost every story that she can find a way to break, in all those years.

To my left, Joshua Johnson. He is the host of 1A, from NPR and WAMU. An extraordinary talent, relatively new to the network, proving his worth every day. Joined us from San Francisco, where he'd embarked on a number of really interesting journalistic endeavors there.

Mr. Brian Stelter, Captain Media from CNN. Formerly at the New York City Times, and also in a previous life, a friend of mine as a student journalist down at Towson, Maryland.

We have Susan Page, who's been covering the White House since 1995 for USA Today. One of the most storied and prize-laden White House journalists we have still on the beat.

And, of course, Jonathan Capehart, well-known to us as an opinion writer, columnist, editorialist for The Washington Post. Also an almost constant presence on MSNBC, and eloquent in all of these venues.

I guess I'd like to start, Susan, with you. How different is this moment than others? How much more, really, are we taking heat? When you think back on previous administrations that you've covered, and those that perhaps preceded those.

Susan Page: David, it's great to on with an all-star moderator like yourself. Let's give the moderator a clap. I'm not saying that just so he'll give me the easier questions as we go on.

Andrea's covered seven administrations. I've covered six. I've covered 10 presidential elections-

DavidFolkenflik: The junior correspondent up here.

Susan Page: Junior.

Andrea Mitchell: Junior [inaudible 00:04:45].

Susan Page: But I would say this is different. This is different than anything I've seen before. The other five presidents I covered, as different as they are, from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, they are all more alike than Donald Trump is different.

It's different in many ways. In policy ways, and experience. But it's a different experience covering it. It is more difficult to cover the Trump administration than previous administrations. It's more hostile to the news media. It doesn't recognize some of the traditional roles of the news media. The president has found a way to get around the traditional news media, with his extraordinary skill at communicating with people using Twitter. This has been, I think it is not hyperbole to say, this is a different time, and we are all still trying to figure it out.

DavidFolkenflik: Jonathan Capehart, why does it matter that the president in, I guess, a 280-word presidential missive ... Or excuse me. Letter ... presidential missive, can say something like, "The press is the enemy of the state?" Why does it matter that he uses such sharp and seemingly historically-loaded terms?

Jonathan C.: Because we have never ... No president likes the press. No elected official really likes the press. The president, especially, doesn't like the press. To pick up on what Susan was saying before, all presidents have tried to figure out a way to get around those people in the briefing room, or those people in the pool, or the-

DavidFolkenflik: With some success.

Jonathan C.: With some success, but usually, they go and call in regional reporters. Bring in the television reporters from local markets, and bring them to the White House. Then they get to have the big story that, because a local reporter almost never gets an interview with the president, usually ends up being a little softer than the folks in the room who are covering the president on a daily basis.

With this president, we have never seen a chief executive really go after the press. By saying that we are "an enemy of the people," by going after individual reporters by name. Maggie Haberman has been called all sorts of names, personally, by the president of the United States.

I think what gives his tweets even more impact, or more import, is not just because he's the president of the United States. Whatever the president says is always important. But early on in the administration, I believe it was Press Secretary Sean Spicer who said that tweets were actually presidential announcements. To the point where some clever person came up with a Twitter handle that turns every presidential tweet into an official White House statement.

Brian Stelter: I like that. Yeah.

Jonathan C.: So that's why, when the president tweets anything, we focus on it. We pay attention to it. But when the president of the United States goes after journalism, goes after journalists, goes after individual either networks or individual reporters, it's worrisome. Because one, it never happens before.

We've seen it happen in other places. The president sets the example for other leaders in other countries, so if the president of the United States can say that "Journalists are the enemy of the people," then there's ... They're like, "Hey. Fake news. Journalists are the enemy of the people. Oh, a journalist gets assassinated? No big deal. No need to worry about freedom of information, or even the rule of law."

So that's why, even though his tweets can be unhinged and sometimes laughable ... Sometimes, you just have to laugh to keep from crying. But when it comes to attacking the press, we have to take that seriously.

DavidFolkenflik: Andrea Mitchell, the president once called you, and let's be clear, desperately unfairly. I don't think she would think this. But nonetheless, the president once called you "Hillary Clinton's PR person." You've talked and written about, I think, what it is to cover a State Department, and Secretary of State, that itself doesn't want to engage. And doesn't want to do that.

I think it's important to drill down and say, "What's the actual harm here?" President Nixon did a lot of stuff against the press. President Bush campaigned for re-election, said "Annoy the media. Re-elect Bush." Clinton, at a certain point, lashed out at the media and couldn't fathom why they weren't siding with him.

Every single president becomes the media critic-in-chief, trying to take away Brian and my job, at some point. What is the actual repercussion of this for the public, for reporters, and for the understanding that we have of what the government does on our behalf?

Andrea Mitchell: I think it's profoundly important, because it hurts the ability of Americans to understand what their government is doing. Frankly, I responded to that, I did not know that he had called me that, because I just can't keep up with everything that he calls people.

But if you asked Hillary Clinton what she thinks about me-

DavidFolkenflik: It would not be the same.

Andrea Mitchell: Believe me, she thought I was a royal pain in the ass during that entire campaign.

Susan Page: As you were.

Brian Stelter: But she had enough respect not to say so. Not to try to take you down publicly, the way Trump has.

Andrea Mitchell: That's true.

Brian Stelter: So at least she had respect.

Andrea Mitchell: Well, the fact is that I was very aggressive on rope lines, because from March, when The New York Times broke the story ... March of 2015, when The New York Times broke the story about her private e-mail server, and she had a bizarre press conference in the UN Security Council, which was another whole issue, eight days later ... From then until September fourth, when I sat down with her for her first interview, she had not done a press interview.

Much to the stress of her staff, because they thought she needed to get ahead of it. She needed to answer these questions. But she was so defensive about it, that I said to my colleagues in the press corps, "We have to get her to answer questions." So she would finish a speech, and I would be climbing over chairs and people to get past the Secret Service and to the rope line, and try to shout up questions. She was very good at deflecting.

It was completely inappropriate. I've done similar things with Ronald Reagan, as Susan knows. But the fact is, if presidents are not going to hold press conferences, or answer questions ... or candidates for president ... it's our job to try to get them to talk. For people to understand who it is that's either the Commander-in-Chief, or someone who's running to be Commander-in-Chief. I do think that that is our job.

DavidFolkenflik: Sure. So you-

Andrea Mitchell: We're not stenographers.

DavidFolkenflik: Right. You're definitely not a stenographer. So you went after Clinton, and ultimately, no doubt with the prodding of her staff, but you ultimately got her to sit down and address these questions about a topic that she desperately wanted to avoid. There was accountability there, although avoidance there for a long time, as well.

The thing that strikes me about some of the things I've seen you say currently is that it ... Unpack this for us to make sure that I'm clear on this. But it seemed to me that you were saying the nature of the hostile stance from the president down affected what you've characterized as sort of a "Heisman approach," from former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Mike Pompeo, who is now the Secretary of State, right?

Andrea Mitchell: Who has still not engaged with the media.

DavidFolkenflik: Talk about why that matters. Because these are huge agencies these people run, and presumably you have sources deeply buried ... Even if they're not Deep Staters ... deeply buried within the bureaucracy there, and that you can ferret things out. Why is it important that they, from the top, are open about what they're doing?

Andrea Mitchell: Well, in this case, it's particularly important, because you have a president who will fire Rex Tillerson on Twitter at 8:40 in the morning, who will make pronouncements ... That's why his tweets are important. And actually, the National Archives and the presidential documents agencies have decided that they are presidential statements. So it is something that we have to cover.

But because he is so unique, and so changeable, shall we say-

Brian Stelter: That's charitable.

Andrea Mitchell: ... in his statements, you can get two, three, five sources at the State Department, in the National Security Council, and they are not necessarily giving you the truth. They think they might be, but they're giving you their version of what they think the policy is.

We also don't have principals, and deputy committee meetings in regular ways. Policies are not decided in an orderly fashion. Decisions as to whether or not the president is going to tell Kim Jong-un that he's canceling the joint exercises with South Korea ... spontaneously, without telling Secretary of Defense James Mattis, as NBC reported last week. Without telling South Korea's President Moon. Without telling Shinzō Abe in Japan.

There are consequences to a president who is as spontaneous and ad hoc in his diplomacy, so it makes it that much harder. I am very, very careful about anything I report now, because I don't know if the president is going to contradict it. The other piece of it is that facts don't seem to matter. That's why we're in a sort of crisis of journalism.

DavidFolkenflik: Do you associate that with the hostility to journalism?

Andrea Mitchell: I think it's just a ... I'm not sure whether it's a psychological impediment or a deliberate impediment, but ... I mean, Mike McCurry, who was a very fine State Department and then White House spokesman, said that-

DavidFolkenflik: Democrat.

Andrea Mitchell: A democrat, but someone who had studied foreign policy at the Woodrow Wilson School, and knew and cared about the stuff, said that "The job of the press secretary is to tell the truth slowly." There's spin everywhere, and we've all experienced it, but it's not to deliberately, consciously lie. It happened a

couple of times under Reagan, with Larry Speakes, former deputy press secretary.

But what we have reached is a level where the mendacity is epidemic from the spokespeople, or they simply don't know what the president is doing, or he changes his mind. It's just very hard to make sure that you have enough sources, unless you're talking to the president himself.

DavidFolkenflik: Joshua, you helped to, in a sense, from last year plus, to in some ways guide a national conversation on your show about a lot of these issues, and about what's unfolding in front of the nation, and from the nation's capital, where you live and work. How has the hostility toward the press, which it seems to me asymmetrically comes from allies of the president, but not solely from allies of the president ... Some of his opponents, as well, very much. How has that informed and affected the kind of conversation that you conduct, and what you're hearing back from your audiences?

Joshua Johnson: Well, I feel like I have the benefit of not being considered part of the "D.C. Press Corps," and so that gives me a little bit of cover. My job is much more that of an itinerant preacher. My job is to go around the country and get people together, not to talk about me, but to talk about something more important than all of us. The benefit I have is acknowledging that that hostility is there, and still being a person who resolves to open my arms to you no matter who you are.

There are so many more conversations that are going on in this country that don't have a damn thing to do with Donald Trump, on a daily basis. There are millions of Americans who are really grateful for that, and there are also Americans who would really like to have that conversation that is squarely about Donald Trump, but they can't have it with their wife. They can't have it with their father. They can't have it with their co-worker. They can't have it with anybody. I get to be the itinerant preacher, to whom you can confess all of your sins, and hopes, and beliefs, and thoughts. And know that I will be here to keep a congregation in line.

So my job, in terms of hostility toward the press, is to try to humanize us, one to another. I think the reason why people denigrate the press is because you don't view us as people. You think that we're part of some elite class, in some vast, [inaudible 00:17:27], upper-echelon of the atmosphere-

DavidFolkenflik: And you get together in places like Aspen.

Joshua Johnson: Exactly! And we hang out in places like Aspen. I was invited! I was invited. I was ... This is for work.

But they assume that we have no connection to the real world. That none of us have parents who are of a different socio-economic class. That none of us have

fathers that served in Vietnam. That none of us are people of faith. That none of us have any kind of connection to the rest of the country.

Even if that's true, my job is to connect you to you. So you can see yourself more clearly. I can't ask you to respect me as a journalist unless I can create an atmosphere of respect for everybody. So I start with you. I start with giving you a chance to see your neighbors more clearly. See people in other states more clearly. See people of other points-of-view more clearly.

We try to create an atmosphere of humanization. An atmosphere of welcome, to deal with the issues of the day. The better we do that ... I don't have to worry about how you feel about me at all, because our values as a program speak to the kind of a country we want to build. To the kind of a conversation we want to build. It makes it much easier for somebody to say, "They're doing good work. They're doing worthwhile work."

It's not just about the reporting. It's about the way we relate it to you. It's about the way we connect to you. John Maxwell once said that "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." So my job is to make sure that the knowledge that reporters on the program bring, and that you bring from your life experience, is married with an atmosphere of welcoming, of care, of respect ... no matter what. Anyone who heard today's second hour knows that I sometimes have to lay the hammer down, but that's another conversation.

Then, it makes it much easier to have a sense of ... to deal with the attacks on journalism. People who are our fans go, "Wait, wait, wait, wait. That's not the kind of atmosphere we want. That's not the way that he treats us, why would you treat him that way? That's not the way we treat one another on this program." We become an oasis, regardless of what it is that we're discussing. But it begins with us being able to start by saying, "You don't have to like me. I've made a decision to welcome you. No matter who you are. Now let's talk. You first."

DavidFolkenflik: That's a very nice ... No, please.

A little plug for the home team. That's a very nice encapsulation of what Public Radio and Public Broadcasting can do, at its best.

Brian Stelter: Now, to CNN!

DavidFolkenflik: That's right.

Brian Stelter: I know. I know what you were going to do there. I saw it coming.

DavidFolkenflik: I'm really not that adroit. Brian, I want to read to you a couple of headlines that I noted over the years. It goes a little bit like this. Earlier this year, March 2018,

Nate Silver ... and the headline ... FiveThirtyEight, "Why Do Americans Hate the Media?" If you go back in the dusty archives of 2014, Howard Kurtz of Fox News, "Why Do People Hate the Media?"

If we go back to 2011, Ezra Klein in The Washington Post, "Why Do Americans Hate the Media?" The scholar Jonathan Ladd, Why Do Americans Hate the Media? It was his own book. Andrew Cohen, at The Atlantic, "Why Do Americans Hate the Media?" 2012. And in 1996, James Fallows, "Why Americans Hate the Media," The Atlantic Magazine.

Why is it different that people are frustrated with the media now? Why should we be so defensive about that? Why should we be on DEFCON Two or One? Why should we be up in arms in this? When over the years, the media presents people sometimes with information that is unwanted, sometimes with information that turns out not to be the case, sometimes with information that turns out not to be true.

My old mentor, the late John Carroll, once said he thought his old paper, the Lexington Herald-Leader, should apologize for their entire coverage of slavery and the Jim Crow era. That would be a legacy that would affect how a lot of people thought about that newspaper in Kentucky. And they did ultimately apologize, by the way. Why is this a moment that we should be so concerned about?

Brian Stelter: Because the most powerful people in the world are trying to destroy our news organizations. They are ... I mean, the president is trying to destroy our news organizations. That has never happened in our nation's history, as far as I'm aware.

DavidFolkenflik: Well, John Mitchell, the former attorney general of the United States, threatened to put body parts of Kay Graham through the ringer-

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:22:04]

DavidFolkenflik: ... United States threatened to put body parts of Kay Graham through the wringer during Watergate-

Brian Stelter: Find me when Nixon-

DavidFolkenflik: ... and threatened their financial underpinnings by threatening their TV license.

Brian Stelter: Find me when Nixon, a criminal president, actually used the word enemy to describe us in public. Even Nixon knew not to go that far.

DavidFolkenflik: He had a real enemies list.

Brian Stelter: He did not use the rhetoric that President Trump uses in public. President Trump is poisoning the American people, specifically a subset of the American people that has been infected by the poison. It is getting worse every day and we're going to reckon with the consequences for decades. I don't mean to be the pessimist. Actually, some days I'm very optimistic. I wake up glass half full a lot of days and I think Trump's pretty weak right now and we're gonna get through this and it's an aberration.

Other days I wake up and I think, how are we going to win people back? Every single day he's beating the you know what out of the press, not just CNN, but many, many outlets. Tarring the nation's news media along with other institutions. I find myself wondering in 20 years when we look back, will we think this was an emergency? Why didn't we step up and say this is an emergency? Now, many of us do call it a crisis, right? There's a crisis of credibility for the White House, there's also a crisis of credibility for the press. We're clearly flawed and I don't think we should pretend like we're not flawed and we don't make mistakes. But rather than hang on the mistakes and focus on the mistakes which are few and far between, there's this incredible amount of journalism being produced every day that's being dismissed by a segment of the population.

And I take your point about the headlines, about why people hate the media. There's always been that theme. There's always been an ability to dismiss unpleasant or unwanted news, but it's been supercharged and lit on fire and fuel now by the boss, by the president, and that is clearly what's different and clearly what's a threat. I think we have to ask ourselves, if this is an emergency, what should you, what should I, what should we be doing differently? If this is a crisis, what should we be doing differently? Will we be proud of ourselves in 20 years? Was this an aberration or is this the start of something new and very troubling and then how are we going to win people back? How are we going to win people back?

DavidFolkenflik: Andrea.

Brian Stelter: Sorry to be the pessimist.

Andrea Mitchell: One thing that comes to mind is that I was raised to be, on the one hand and on the other hand, that can kind of journalist. That's the way I always reported. It never occurred to me that I would be in a situation where I have to say in the lead of a story, because you cannot bury the fact check at the back end of the story. You have to say the President falsely accused today Democrats of having created this migration crisis. You can't bury that.

Brian Stelter: It's uncomfortable, isn't it?

Andrea Mitchell: I don't feel comfortable saying that.

Brian Stelter: Right. It's very uncomfortable.

Andrea Mitchell: I've always felt we have to be challenging and create context, but I don't want to be the person. I don't want to use the word lie, but I get criticized if I don't. Well, I can't say he lied if I don't know what his intent was because that's an intentional misstatement. So I don't know if he misunderstands it, if he doesn't understand what a tariff is. I mean, I have to explain-

Brian Stelter: Which may be worse than lying.

Andrea Mitchell: ... what the trade war is-

Brian Stelter: Yes.

Andrea Mitchell: ... and what the impact is. That's not how I was raised as a reporter, so I'm not comfortable with this role.

DavidFolkenflik: And it's interesting because a number of the broadcast outlets and USA Today, I think, tend to be very tempered and careful and cautious sometimes. People accuse NPR of that. Brian, one of the questions that I might have is, you articulate this, you're performing role not only as a media reporter and host, but as a media critic as well. You think about what Stephen Miller did, the President's domestic policy advisor. After the President's homeland security secretary went out and claimed there wasn't a policy. There was. Claimed there was no effort in deterrence. There was. And this was about parents seeking asylum, traveling with children and the separation of those children, and those were things that I think could fairly be called vital but my network does does not do that. Fine.

Steven Miller goes out that night to a Mexican restaurant and he's shouted down. But he goes to a Mexican restaurant, people talk about civility. Clearly he's trolling his critics. He's rallying, I think, this is my projection, but I think this is a fair assessment. He's certainly getting support from Trump's strongest supporters and people get to rally against him.

Brian Stelter: Right.

DavidFolkenflik: In a sense, it seems to me this is a metaphor at times for what happens with the press. The President's attacks on the press may well be completely heartfelt. There is also a performance art in this-

Brian Stelter: Yes.

DavidFolkenflik: ... where feels a utility in drawing our outrage-

Brian Stelter: Yes.

DavidFolkenflik: ... and distracting.

Brian Stelter: Definitely.

DavidFolkenflik: To what extent is it useful to respond to that as a result?

Brian Stelter: He also encourages us to repeat his lies-

DavidFolkenflik: Sure.

Brian Stelter: ... in some of this coverage.

DavidFolkenflik: Think about the question of by him using these wildly overheated and inflammatory rhetoric, him getting us to respond to that as opposed to other things and him getting us to react stronger than our audiences are by and large expecting us to do.

Brian Stelter: Right. We almost always should not be the lead story. I should not be at the top of the broadcast and usually I'm not. But the attacks on institutions in general matter a lot and have to be acknowledged. And I think the reason why there's so much more frustration with the press now is because the press means a million different things, right? There's a million different news outlets, which means a million different medias, which means your media might not be your media. And as a result, we can all hate some form of media because we all have outlets we love and outlets we might not love. So I think it's made this more intense and it makes me think about, okay, so if it's hard to get certain kinds of facts through to a certain audience, how do we do that? What do we do differently? Maybe we need new news organizations. Maybe we need new brands. Maybe we need new anchors. I don't know. New people to try to break through to a part of the country that doesn't want to hear it or doesn't believe it.

And the great example last week with the border, are the folks who told reporters they didn't believe the pictures or those pictures from Obama's years, right? A couple of them were. Most of them weren't. Those kinds of fake news claims and attacks have such a hold on people and not just on the right. I'm really concerned now about the rage and anger and fear on the left and how that's actually causing a lot of folks on the left to tune out news organizations. It is not just people on the right that have media criticism. A lot of folks on the left are furious with the press because they don't think we're taking on Trump enough.

DavidFolkenflik: Although I want to say one thing, which is to remember that after the recount in 2000, there's great anger from the left after the failure of reporting on WMDs. There was great anger from the left-

Brian Stelter: The difference now is they can organize online and create their alternatives.

DavidFolkenflik: Susan, what are the conversations you guys have at USA Today on how to address this and how to keep faith with truth? How do you make sure ... And I want to be clear, in a few minutes we're going to go to questions so I want you guys to be locked and loaded, ready to go.

Susan Page: But David, I want to go back to your earlier question, actually.

DavidFolkenflik: Sure.

Susan Page: Which is when President Trump sends out an outrageous tweet that attacks us, should we take the bait basically? And I think this has been a conundrum from the beginning of his presidential campaign and I think that we continue to fall for the bait. Which is to become consumed by the outrageous action and not by the substantive effect of whatever he's doing. And I think this is actually a ... I think he is very skilled at doing this and I think there have been time after time when he's gotten into trouble on a story. He's in a bad place and he'll send out something so outrageous that you cannot look away. And I'm not saying we shouldn't cover it, but I think we need to be smarter about figuring out where we're going to put our resources and making sure we're not only going for the outrageous comment. We think about this all the time at USA Today about to what degree do we devote our resources to covering the outrageous tweet and to what degree do we devote our resources to figuring out what it is the EPA is doing on environmental policy.

And I feel like if you want to talk about a way to rebuild trust generally with the news media, I think it would starting out by not all jumping toward the bright shiny object would be a start. My very first editor, Bob Greene at Newsday who's a legendary investigative reporter and quite the character. And when I started in the Ronkonkoma bureau of Newsday, he said-

DavidFolkenflik: A much coveted assignment of Ronkonkoma. [crosstalk 00:30:22]

Susan Page: Yes. It was. I was the number two reporter on Smithtown but I don't want to brag. He said, "Watch the pea not the shell. Watch the pea not the shell." A reference to the carnival game. Right? All of us, journalism is the process of watching the pea not the shell. And I think that's what we need to do better.

DavidFolkenflik: Amazingly and crazily enough we're in an age, however, where people like Brian and people like Susan, Andrea, all of us, have to sometimes describe where the shell is going in all this game as well. Right? Like that's part of the thing. Jonathan, what do you make of that? Is it important to look away a little bit from the rhetoric, from the tweets, to just say, "You know what? We're just going to cover policy. We're just not even gonna look at this stuff." How does that sit with you?

Jonathan C.: That sits great with me. I mean, I will speak for myself in this. As an opinion writer at the Washington Post, a podcast host, early on, even during the

campaign, I decided that I could not follow every tweet that this man, or every outrageous statement, that this man makes. I remember going to bed one night thinking, "I'm going to get up tomorrow morning, I'm going to write about this." I wake up at six, I get up, I start writing, I'm almost done. I get to the office, it's about 9:00. He tweets something like, "Shit. Let me add this. I know where to add it." I'm starting to add it. I'm about to file. It's almost 12:00. Something else happens where, and I think it was one of those things where I was like, "Oh my God, how low can he go? Oh my God. He went lower." And so there I am about to file, he goes lower and it's so spectacularly bad that it blows up what I had written and that's when I decided, screw it. I'm not doing this anymore. I cannot do this.

So what I do now is I hang back. I watch the dumpster fire on Twitter. I watch everyone's hair on fire. My hair is also on fire, but it's on fire recreationally. I'm not looking how am I going to ... What's my angle on this? What I will do however is keep in mind all of these things that are happening and then look for the place where I can jump down and have my say in a way that is more powerful than if I were going after everything every day. Also, I would lose my mind. I would completely lose my mind. One, because again, as an opinion writer, I have the luxury of being able to do something that makes Andrea Mitchell feel uncomfortable. You're uncomfortable saying in the lead, "He falsely said." I am perfectly comfortable saying, President Trump lied about this," and say it over and over and over again. Every time he was on television during the campaign, I would always make the point of saying he's run the most racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, nativist campaign we have seen in recent memory and he has destroyed American political discourse. Because no one else was saying it.

DavidFolkenflik: And yet top news executives running some of the shops that are doing some of the hardest hitting reporting on the administration will say to me, "We can't do that all the time. It loses its currency. We can't do this all the time because we're going too far in terms of the decibel levels that we're kind of conveying to our audiences, whether it's in print or on the air."

Jonathan C.: And that I understand, but, look, I'm a one man band, so I'm-

DavidFolkenflik: You're responsible for you.

Jonathan C.: I'm responsible for me, but for networks, there's not just one show. There's several hours of shows and not every show comes at things in the same way. I think we as journalists, there should be people who should be watching the shell because there's interesting things in that, you can glean certain things from that. But there are also should be people who are also watching the pea. We have to do both things. It's just a matter of whether whether we're doing so equally and I know right now it doesn't seem like that and there are times where I'm pulling my hair out because of that. Why are we focused on the fact that she was politely asked to leave a restaurant when the very next day he sent out a tweet saying that there should be no due process for immigrants at the

border? That to me was the much more interesting, much more substantive, much more troubling story than someone, a senior administration official who lies to the American people on a daily basis on behalf of her boss, couldn't eat at a restaurant.

DavidFolkenflik: All right. With that, let's pause for a moment. I'd like to start with some of the questions because you've got an all star line up here. Two things I'd like to ask. First off is I'd like you to hold off until one of our colleagues here gets to you with a microphone to start the question, identify yourself please. The second thing is if you don't direct it to someone, I will. So why don't we start here in the front. This lady here.

Ellen Isabin: Hi, Ellen Sabin. I'm going to let you direct it to someone. I write children's books on social cause issues and one of the things that has been so disturbing to many people and myself is clearly Trump is massively adept at name calling and bullying and using media outlets and Twitter and everything like that just to set an example of really bad behavior you don't want kids to learn. And this isn't fair because it's not the media's job to teach character to kids. But I am wondering what and where is there a place where media can intervene more to say, "Yeah, so he just called like ... That's not a proper behavior." Like is there a place for that?

DavidFolkenflik: I think actually, Joshua, you've done an interesting thing where you've talked publicly about the way in which you use for your journalistic role empathy as both a tactic and a strategy. Tell me how that plays out.

Joshua Johnson: Well, I think, I can't do my job well unless I advance it with empathy. I think the thing that makes 1A successful is that we just treat people like people. I realized early on that I would be at my best as a host if I treated every single person who came on 1A no matter who they were the same. And think about that. If you had one standard in your whole life for how you would treat every single person you would meet for the rest of your life and you would have to treat them all exactly the same, how would you treat them? What would your standard be? That's my goal on the show. With regards to the President's behavior, that's absolutely fair game. Anything you're talking about we can talk about. And I think part of the antidote to the attacks on journalism is being able to make sure you see yourself more in our work. If you, as a parent, are upset about the President's behavior, his rhetoric, his language, his meanness, his vitriol, let's talk about that. You're probably not the only parent feeling that way. So let's discuss it.

I think that also has the added benefit of getting us the hell out of Washington. I feel like we have made ... Journalism is more than the presidency. There's more to journalism than Donald Trump. We know that, right? Your lives are worth covering irrespective of the President. You know that, right? You know you are as important as the presidency. You know the founders intended you to be primary. So we should act like it. I feel like one of the things we don't do well enough is getting out of Washington and just telling your story. I think a lot of

the stories we tell would be received better if you were in them. If you saw yourself, if you heard yourself, if you got a chance to be treated with the same respect as that expert from the George Washington University who apparently knows absolutely everything about this thing that you are living. Especially when it has to do with your kids, with your children.

I mean, I'm still bothered by the fact that after the election there were people who couldn't go home for Christmas. They had to leave their families behind. I mean, there are children who haven't spoken to their parents since November 9th, 2016. That's a story. You have to say to your daughter, your son, your child about behavior, what they see on the news, and then what they hear from you and the dissonance there and what you do as a parent. That's a story and that's something that is about what happens in Washington, but it is for you. It allows you to be the star of the news. It allows you to be the center of the story. The more that we can do that and marry your real stories with our original reporting, the closer our relationship can be because it's hard to argue with an image of yourself.

DavidFolkenflik: There's, I think, a gentleman in the back there. Let's get him a microphone. Take a moment.

Speaker 1: This is for Brian. Brian, and maybe it was about a month ago, I think you were on with Kellyanne Conway-

Brian Stelter: Uh-oh.

Speaker 1: ... and I was in a room and my family with people from all pivot political persuasions and nobody left that interview happy. You couldn't pin her down. She went on for a long time. What's going on in your head when you're dealing with a representative of the President who clearly comes in with a strategy that they're going to use as they're going to debate with you? What's going on in your mind about what you're witnessing?

DavidFolkenflik: Brian Stelter.

Brian Stelter: Well, I didn't leave happy either. So I've interviewed her on television only three times. I know other people do this much more often. I found there were diminishing returns each time. I found the first interview to be more revealing than the third. You know what I mean? With regards to the most recent interview, I think the value of interviewing a White House aide is to see the avoidance of the question, to see the way they spin and pivot. I do think that's newsworthy. I think it is newsworthy to see where she takes it, how she avoids it, the strategy behind it. And I think viewers are smart enough to see it and perceive it, but I came away feeling the same way you did.

DavidFolkenflik: Brian.

Brian Stelter: I mean, Andrea, you deal with this more often, right? Do you have a strategy for these interviews? Can I learn something from ..

Andrea Mitchell: I mean, you could teach all of us a whole lot.

Brian Stelter: Live TV is something.

Andrea Mitchell: My impression of your interviews. The fact is that we don't have very many people to interview.

Brian Stelter: Well, that too.

Andrea Mitchell: In covering the State Department, first of all, they haven't filled vacancies. Second of all, they're not permitted to give interviews and then the Secretary of State does not do interviews very often. That's been a real problem. For the first time since Henry Kissinger started the practice of taking the press corps with the Secretary of State. I've traveled with every Secretary of State but not with Rex Tillerson and so far not with Mike Pompeo. They're not taking a press pool. Tillerson eventually would take two or three people. We used to travel 13 to 17 people depending on the country and how much security they needed on the plane. I never once gone on Tillerson's plane. So I spent four or five months traveling around the world commercially-

Brian Stelter: Seriously?

Andrea Mitchell: ... trying to keep up with a military jet. I don't recommend it.

Brian Stelter: But you did it.

Andrea Mitchell: It was very, very expensive. I did get to Moscow and Brussels and Ankara and Seoul and Beijing and Tokyo and a bunch of other places. I never once got a question or got called on a news conference or got an interview.

DavidFolkenflik: It also means that the Secretary of State is not showing to those nations the importance of the press as well.

Andrea Mitchell: That's such a good point. Every other Secretary of State. And I first went to the State Department in 1994, oo Warren Christopher, Madeline Albright, Colin Powell, Condi Rice, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, all of them. Democrats and Republicans would deliberately take a press corps to Beijing or to Ankara more recently, as Erdoğan has cracked down, and certainly to Moscow and hold a press conference. And if the foreign minister of the host country would not participate, they would hold an individual press conference to project an American value of freedom of the press. It is the First Amendment folks. And they have a whole department at the State Department that used to exist to train foreign journalists. I used to help and participate in these sessions.

One of my bosses, Andy Lack, who used to be one of the officials involved. Rick Stengel, one of our contributors, used to be a participant and they would say, "Can you come in and help these young Iraqis or young Afghans. They're getting their first taste of democracy and of how to cover things." What the press corps is supposed to do and we would teach them. I mean, it was a privilege, frankly. These heroic, young, interested foreign journalists, fledgling journalists. That is not a value anymore, and so that is what I really think is the public policy-

PART 2 OF 3 ENDS [00:44:04]

- Andrea Mitchell: And so that is what I really think is the public policy issue. This is not private pleading. There is a role of the press corps in knowing what your government is doing.
- DavidFolkenflik: There's some more questions here. Yes ma'am. About the fourth row up here. You gotta wait. You've got to make your way. Apologies. Here you go.
- Pat: Hi, I'm Pat. I'm old enough to remember watching the news and seeing what was happening in the world. And that doesn't happen now for watching the news, whether or reading the papers or hearing the news on radio. I'm feeling as though the amount of time that's given to Trumpisms is so out of proportion. Is that something that is controlled by your superior forces that decide the timing or is that there's some other way that we can start to discover what's happening in the rest of the world?
- DavidFolkenflik: So first off, of course, I mean, one does have the choice of turning into the news hour on PBS or turning on to ... You've got more opportunity to look at more sources than you've ever had at any point in human history. However-
- Brian Stelter: Bingo.
- DavidFolkenflik: ... it's a fair question for some of the largest news organizations in the country. Brian Stelter, like me-
- Brian Stelter: Don't point to me.
- DavidFolkenflik: No I'm going to you. I don't speak for NPR. Brian doesn't speak for CNN. He does an admirable job as media critic there. But when you look at major news outlets, including your own, is there a disproportionate diet? My God, if I go abroad and I watch CNN international, it's a different balance than on CNN US.
- Brian Stelter: I think Trump is the biggest story in the world and I think Trump is about America. We are debating basic American values. Personally, I want to watch that 24 hours a day. I want the never ending talk show about what we are as a country. I think what's at stake is so incredibly serious. This is a crisis, so we have to cover it that way. But I think the broader answer to your question, if I may, is I think the internet changed everything 20 years ago, changed

everything. Which means CNN can't be what it was 20 years ago and NPR can't be and The New York Times can't be. I think the Internet changed everything, which means all the news is on your phone and on TV and the radio. We can't be that anymore. I've given up on the idea that we can have an old fashioned newscast. I know others are not giving up on it, but I have.

DavidFolkenflik: Go ahead, Jonathan.

Jonathan C.: This is my soapbox and I'm going to jump off of what Brian said because he's right. News has changed. When I was a young reporter at Carleton College, working on the college radio station as the news director, and I had the UPI machine and I was ripping off the news, getting my 6:00 newscast ready. There was so much more news that I was reading than I could actually fit into a half hour. And that was when I learned that being a journalist, I had so much more information than you could ever know. And I was the gatekeeper and then the internet happened. And then all that access to information that I used to have, just me as a journalist, just we as journalists, you suddenly had as well. And so my new soapbox is you now as news consumers with access to all the information and news outlets that you have, have as much responsibility as we do as journalists.

And I'll just speak for myself. When I write a column, I don't phone call anymore, I email because everyone's on email. I make emails, I do my research, I double check, I triple check, I write, I make assertions. I have in my head what you might think as you're reading, and I'll think writing this one line and someone's going to say, "How do you know that?" I put in a hyperlink so that way when you say, "How does he know that?" You hit that hyperlink. Hyperlinks all throughout. I'm thinking of all sorts of ways to give you as much information as possible so that you can know where I'm coming from. Sometimes I'm even devious and I'll have something like a three word phrase in quotation marks and there's a hyperlink and it leads you to this gigantic report. Just so that I hope you'll click on the report and try to find where this came from. All part of an effort to give you more information so that at a minimum when you go to that cocktail party, or if you go home at Thanksgiving, or you have an argument at the water cooler, that you have the best information so that you can have the best argument possible.

Here's the problem. I do all of that work and all you do is look at the tweet. There's a link right there, but no one bothers to click the link. I don't know how many times I've had to tweet back at people who are saying, "How dare you say this?" Well, actually, that was a quote. "Why didn't you write that?" Actually, let me screenshot the paragraph that you said I didn't say because you want it in there. Actually, here it is. "Well, why did you say this?" Actually, I didn't say that and those aren't the words that I use. As news consumers, it is imperative. We talk about rebuilding trust in the press, but there's only so much hand holding we can do.

Brian Stelter: But we do need to help with media literacy. There is more we can do.

Jonathan C.: Well, right.

Brian Stelter: I don't think we-

Susan Page: Let me when disagree with both of you if I could.

Jonathan C.: I wasn't even done.

Susan Page: Okay. I'll disagree with you. I think President Trump is a very important story. It's important. It's a story of a lifetime, of a generation. We need to do a very serious job of covering President Trump. He's not the only story that's important.

Jonathan C.: Sure.

Susan Page: And there are important stories in Washington and across the country and around the world that are unrelated to President Trump that also warrant coverage.

Jonathan C.: Yes.

Susan Page: So that's where I disagree with you.

Brian Stelter: But of course there are.

Susan Page: Of course there are.

Brian Stelter: That's why I subscribe to all his outlets.

Susan Page: It should be reflected on our news outlets. And let me disagree with you in that you get to do all this research and click on the hyperlinks because you get to spend all day doing this and they pay you for it and they give you health insurance and you have a retirement plan. And other people who are reading it may have other things going on in their lives like a job and children and school or whatever. And one of the things that I think-

Jonathan C.: I understand.

Susan Page: One of the things that I think is important for traditional news outlets like USA Today is that we are a service to readers so that you can feel informed about what's going on in your world without clicking on hyperlinks and reading the report yourself. If you're very interested in something, of course you should do that, but we have a responsibility to give people a sense of what we think is important and happening when they have 15 minutes to spend on the news and not a day.

DavidFolkenflik: Before we hyperlink too much farther on that particular one. I do want to just address the one thing. It's that if viewers responded by the millions in a watching Jane Austin novels being read aloud, then Andy Lack and Jeff Zucker and others on cable news would show you Jane Austin being read aloud. Some of this is about the largest niche audiences that ... We're thinking all the time about cable news and that's not all of news. And yet they do have larger, huge audiences over time and there are a lot of other outlets that do things in a lot of different ways.

Joshua Johnson: Although it's worth noting that the evening news cast that have seen their audiences fluctuate since the election, there's one that's seen its audience creep upward. Not a lot, but it has gone upward, and that's the PBS NewsHour with Judy Woodruff.

Andrea Mitchell: Let me just say-

DavidFolkenflik: Briefly.

Andrea Mitchell: Let me just say very, very brief briefly that I think that there is a legitimate criticism that there's too much focus on Trump and that is partly because of the investigation. The Mueller investigation has taken an enormous amount of resources and we're seeing the New York Times and the Washington Post in particular rise to that challenge. We've hired a lot of people. We've expanded our investigative teams as well as have some of the other networks. That's a very important story. That said, I think it's a fair criticism that we don't have the bandwidth to do the reporting on the EPA, the CDC, the FDA. I mean, or what is happening in the agencies where there is deregulation and some of it may be very good, but we haven't covered what's happening in entitlements and Medicare and Medicaid adequately enough. I'm just saying I think that there is a challenge for us and it's not for lack of wanting to do it, but it's resource driven and there's a lot being focused on keeping up with the many facets of a very important investigation. Russia did attack our election.

DavidFolkenflik: And as you will hear in news organizations, the scarcest resource is often attention of ourselves and of the audience.

Brian Stelter: Right.

DavidFolkenflik: Question close to the front here and then one or two back there and then one back there. So let's go for easier first.

Jeff Burnside: Jeff Burnside, long time-

DavidFolkenflik: We're going to hold you up. We're going to enforce the mic rule. There you go. Thank you.

Jeff Burnside: I couldn't see her earlier. Jeff Burnside, longtime TV news investigative reporter, now Scripps Journalism fellow. And I'm wondering, you guys all represent the national newscasts and news media. Maybe you're just too close to see this, but I'm hearing from people who believe the journalists are opinionated, slanted. I don't think that's true of course, but one thing is the media literacy sees straight journalists, as Chris Matthews likes to say, next to people who are paid to voice their opinions and I totally understand that. But we expect the viewers to make that distinction between the straight journalist and the opinion person. Do you see that also as the problem? I see it in print journalism too.

DavidFolkenflik: Totally.

Jeff Burnside: Washington Post doesn't necessarily make it really clear that these are opinion pieces when I read them on my phone. Not completely clear.

Jonathan C.: It's under the opinion section.

Jeff Burnside: Yeah, but when it's up on my phone-

Brian Stelter: It should be a different color.

Jeff Burnside: But I don't go to the main page to find it. It comes up on my phone.

DavidFolkenflik: Brian Stelter, you're both a host to interviews, opinionaters and straight reporters. You are also somebody who's a huge advocate of media literacy and a proponent of that both on and off the show. What do you take to that? The New York Times used to do a little jagged edge to indicate that a story was an analysis and a very straight line in case report and about zero percent of readers really had a full clear sense of the distinction there. So what are we doing? Are we blurring these lines too much?

Brian Stelter: I agree completely. I think it's a big problem. I think we need to work on solutions. I think on cable news, we are guilty of this. We put a talking head next to a reporter and we act the they're the same. They're not. The colors should be different. The labels should be different. I would have different colors for opinion articles on the web. I would have giant bold opinion letters. I just think we can do a lot more to help people.

DavidFolkenflik: All right. There's another question in the back row, a woman, they're not back row, but towards the back, a woman there.

Nicole: Excuse me. My name's Nicole. I have a question about CNN and MSNBC. Whenever you guys have panels, you always have a Trump surrogate who, in my opinion, never really adds anything to the conversation, doesn't seem to know anything and just seems to perpetuate Trump's lies. And I'm wondering if you do that to give the appearance of fairness because Fox doesn't seem to really do that too much.

DavidFolkenflik: Fox has plenty of Trump surrogates, they are Trump's surrogates.

Nicole: Exactly.

DavidFolkenflik: Different issue. Andrew Mitchell, you host a show as well as being a reporter. You have to find ways to reflect what the administration is doing and presumably thinking. How do you deal with an issue ... Brian talked about Kellyanne Conway and strategy. It seems to me there a lot of tactics. How do you deal with eliciting insight that is useful for your audiences as opposed to simply saying, "Well, we talked to somebody," from that?

Andrea Mitchell: Well, it's a challenge every day and we are very specific on our program that it is a news broadcast. So we have reporters, we have very much less opinion. And if you are quote a political strategist, it's because you are someone who is a credentialed person who has worked on a campaign. It's not just someone who is a Democrat or Republican and has an opinion. It's not the same as what you see in prime time on my network. And so it's more segregated in that way. Now what I have to deal with, because we have a president who frankly does his intelligence briefing, whether he does it at 11 or 11:30, it's a later start his day. He spends a lot of time watching television during the day, during the morning, and opining on it, on what he sees. So he generally does his first big public events at 11:30 or 12, which means the tape is playing back in the middle of my show. Yeah. Jonathon has-

Jonathan C.: I've been bumped many times. [crosstalk 00:57:02]

Andrea Mitchell: Because you don't know what he is going to say, and we are in a breaking news cable and network mode, we really don't have many options.

DavidFolkenflik: Is the question-

Andrea Mitchell: I can plan the best show in the world with really important, I think, authors and experts, we do a lot of foreign policy as you probably know. If the president starts talking on a newsy day, if he's giving us that speech and it's not a particularly newsy thing that I don't have to worry about it, but if he's giving his first reaction to something major that's happened, I mean, that's what we do.

DavidFolkenflik: Sure. Obviously you're not performing the same role as Rachel Maddow. You have very differently differentiated roles and approaches and that's fine. When you're interviewing somebody from the administration, do you feel that you are able journalistically to elicit something that the audience comes away enriched by the exchange or do you feel like I'm giving it my best and maybe that'll happen someday?

Andrea Mitchell: The latter.

DavidFolkenflik: The latter.

Andrea Mitchell: Because I don't find that they are often very responsive, factual or engaged. I don't know what Brian finds.

DavidFolkenflik: So we have time for two more questions folks. So let's go up here close to the front. Questions in the form of questions.

Betsy: I'm Betsy, I live here in the Valley. I've made a couple of notes and my question actually kind of ties into the previous question, which is a lot of times when you're watching the news, it appears that there may be a story where one side is actually the facts and the other side on the show is actually not factual or not true. But it seems like a lot of times the news coverage gives this idea of equivalency for the two sides, when in fact there really is only one side that's really true. So how do you address that? Because it seems like sometimes a segment will end and the last person to speak is the person speaking about something that's not true. And so you're left with that hangover feeling of, well wait a minute, that's not true.

DavidFolkenflik: Susan, I'd like you to-

Susan Page: So I think that's not a case just for TV shows or radio shows, but for all the news media. And it's something I think we have actually learned a lesson on and I think we learned it originally with the birther movement when Barack Obama was president. So first of all, when the birther movement first started, we were reluctant to write about it because we thought it was giving attention to something that was false and it wasn't that we were spreading a lie. And then we decided that since it was spreading, regardless, of whether we were writing about it, that we needed to cover it. And initially we would cover it, I think, with like the lead saying, "Donald Trump says President Obama should have ... That his birth certificate isn't real." And in the second graph we'd say, "Barack Obama says he was born in Hawaii."

And I think that we eventually learned this was an inadequate response to this story. And began to more aggressively say, as Andrew was saying, that it was say in the first sentence, that it was a false attack. That it was a debunked charge and giving more credence to the truth than to the lie while also covering the lie, because the lie was being spread and believed by a lot of people. Now that was in the previous administration. It's become more important in this administration. In a way, it's unfortunate because it makes us look, I think, more adversarial than journalistic. But I think that we have generally, the mainstream news media, has generally concluded that it is our responsibility to point out the falsehood in a more aggressive way than we have ever done before.

And it's one of the things that makes Trump supporters, I think, suspicious of us and it gives an opening for the President to attack us as fake news. It's not a cost tree calculation, but I think that we have generally decided that that's what we need to do.

DavidFolkenflik: And I think there was ... Right here, actually. I'd like to take this as the final question up here.

Austin: So I'll make it really good.

Brian Stelter: No pressure. [crosstalk 01:01:20]

Austin: Um, so I think, my name's Austin, and I live in the Valley. Oh, sorry. When Trump is in the headline of your articles or segments on TV or radio, they're clearly getting more views and clicks, so your media companies are making more money off of them. So what point is it the media company's responsibility to report the things and highlight the things that won't get as many clicks and viewers and therefore they won't make as money. But we are getting maybe more important information.

Joshua Johnson: May I question the premise? There's a premise based in making your question, I think, bears unpacking. We at NPR are not suffering by not focusing on Donald Trump 24 hours a day. We have never suffered. But I do take the point of your question. Leslie Moonves, who's the chairman of CBS Corporation once said, "Donald Trump may be bad for America, but he's great for CBS."

DavidFolkenflik: And they were one of the least worst offenders [crosstalk 01:02:14]

Joshua Johnson: Right. And I find that mentality vile. I think there's something sick about that. I think there's something really demented about that that speaks to exactly what's wrong and exactly why so many people hate us so much. There is an audience that wants the 24 hour talk show and that's fine. We're supposed to be a marketplace of ideas, so to try to make all journalism look and feel the same is exactly the wrong answer.

Brian Stelter: Right.

Joshua Johnson: I would never tell CNN, "Oh, you guys should cover the Trump administration less." No, they're grownups. Let them do whatever they want to do.

Brian Stelter: But I want you to exist too.

Joshua Johnson: Right. Exactly. And there's room for both. Jack Parr who was the original host of The Tonight Show once said, "I've never seen a bad TV program because I refuse to. God gave me a mind and a wrist that turns things off."

Andrea Mitchell: That's a good one.

Joshua Johnson: So really I think the question partly is why the companies do it because people watch because it'll get ratings, but honest to God, there's plenty of us out there doing lots of great work. Watch Andrea Mitchell reports for an hour. Like sit

down and watch the whole hour. Read USA Today one of these days. Flip through the opinion section of Washington Post.

Susan Page: Maybe every day.

Joshua Johnson: Yeah do it every day. But I mean look around. We get a lot of mileage at least on 1A by mixing it up. We did an hour last week, I'm not kidding, called Ask a Drag Queen. It was one of the most fun shows we ever did because we're trying to target groups of people that everyone's like, "Oh God, if I could just ask you one question, I know what I want to ask, but I'm too scared to ask." And we started this series and it's been great. And the funny thing is that almost gives us more license to talk about the Trump administration because people know we're not hammering it. We're not doing it to make sure that you keep watching because we can't think of any other way to keep you listening. So we better keep talking about Donald Trump. What can we think about today? Okay. We'll find something else to talk about. I'm not sure we have any other ideas. What else can we discuss with Donald Trump today?

We have proven to our audience that we don't need Donald Trump to be journalists. We do journalism with or without him. But at the same time, we connect with journalists who focus very heavily on the Trump administration because we need them too. I think one of the things that has to happen, if we're going to rewrite this contract between the press and the public, is we have to understand that you are diverse and we are diverse. We're not all the same and we're not all going to meet all of your needs, and that's the way it should be.

If you don't like what you see on your network of choice, surf. If you don't like what you're getting in your newspaper of choice, unsubscribe. If you hear something on NPR that doesn't appeal to you, let us know and if we can't change for you, maybe we're not for you, and that's fine. And giving yourself the license to walk away knowing that you have all the power in this equation, I think is the first thing that has to happen to rebuild this bridge. We're not in control of this interaction. We're making the offer. At the end of the day, if you don't show up, we're dead in the water. You have the power. You're supposed to have it. Use it.

DavidFolkenflik: So with that, I think tonight ... I think tonight you've heard a lot of hard truths, a lot of real news, a lot of insight. I'm hoping everyone walks away tonight informed, although that nobody walks away from the news itself. Thank you so much for joining us. This has been a terrific event. [inaudible 01:05:31]

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [01:05:32]