

John

This is New Books Network. My name is John Armenta. The idea of a liberal media is so shop-worn that conservatives believe it instinctively and liberals either ignore it or attempt to prove it wrong. But A.J. Bauer, author of the book *Making the Liberal Media, How Conservatives Built a Movement Against the Press*, has decided to look at where the idea itself comes from. In a deeply researched and highly readable book, Dr. Bauer shows the lineage of liberal bias criticism going back to the early leaders in the modern conservative movement and press, as well as the conservative and right-wing grassroots. In addition to promoting this idea of media bias, these early conservative media pioneers taught their audiences how to be media critics themselves, a tradition that is still practiced today. A.J. Bauer is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media at the University of Alabama and is also the programming chair of the Office of Politics, Communication, and Media. He has authored or co-authored numerous journal articles and publications such as *Journalism Studies*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*, and *Media, Culture & Society*. He's also the co-editor of *News on the Right, Studying Conservative News Cultures*. A.J., welcome to New Books Network and congratulations on the book.

A.J.

Thanks so much, John. I really appreciate it.

John

All right. So first of all, let's get a bit about your background. How did you get interested in right-wing and conservative media?

A.J.

Yeah, so I touch on this a little in the book. As you know, I was raised in North Texas, Denton County, so just north of Dallas. And I was raised in a conservative household. Both of my parents were Reagan Republicans. They voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980. I was born a few years later, just before his reelection in 1984, actually. But I grew up listening to Rush Limbaugh and kind of being a little conservative, right? I was very much a Bush fan, a very much anti-Clinton. All of the kinds of ideologies and ideas you would associate with Rush Limbaugh in the 90s I was because that was where I got my cut my political teeth. And so Part of the reason that I am who I am and what I study is when I got to grad school, which was kind of around 2008, 2009, I was a journalist for a few years and then decided to, there wasn't that many journalism jobs and decided to go back and get a graduate degree in American studies from NYU. And when I was there, I was reading a lot of works about modern conservatism. I was curious about where I'd come from, I was no longer conservative at that point. And so I was realizing that a lot of the literature on conservatism was not fully capturing kind of why I felt it was salient in the community I grew up in. And so part of my research agenda is about better understanding how and why right-wing ideas circulate. And obviously media plays a really important role there.

John

So thank you. Let's jump into some of the big questions in the book. What is the role of the "liberal media" in conservative political thought? And I'm using "liberal media" in scare quotes for the listeners at home.

A.J.

Yes, always in scare quotes. So it's interesting. There are lots of works that focus on the history of conservatism as an ideology or as a philosophy of governance, right, or a philosophy of policy. I consider myself less of like a history, like an intellectual historian and more of a history of ideas. And so part of what I'm working on is how does this idea of structural media bias, so not just I disagree with this story or I disagree with that story, but a belief that there is kind of a bigger structural bias in favor of or against a certain political ideology. I was interested where that came from. And so one of the things that I think is somewhat unique about my approach and in my book, one of the interventions is, whereas a lot of folks look at conservatism as a kind of coherent and in development ideology and movement, I'm more concerned with how that movement borrows tactically, rhetorically, and intellectually from its opponents, right? So not just how did it go about, you know, opposing the left or opposing liberals, but what did it borrow from the left and liberals, right? How did it emerge in dialogue with its opponents? And one of the things that I found that was interesting when I started researching this book is my first move was, all right, well, when did the "liberal media," again scare quotes, when did it begin? And part of what that required is reading back further and further into the kind of political historiographic tradition to see, well, when were people saying "liberal media" for the first time and what came before it? And a book that was really important for me was Victor Pickard's great book, *America's Battle for Media Democracy*, which is about the 1940s and about the progressive media reform movement. And part of what he unpacks and develops in that book is that in the 1940s, there was a strong belief in structural media bias on the left. That basically they believe that most newspapers, Franklin Roosevelt was fond of saying like 85% of newspapers were against him in the New Deal. And so there was a belief that the press, meaning the printed press, the newspapers, right, were biased against Roosevelt and against the New Deal and supported, you know, the National Association of Manufacturers and various other kinds of opponents of the New Deal. And so what I realized is, okay, well, there was a moment where the common sense wasn't that the media was liberal, it was that it was conservative, right? That it was reactionary. So how do we get from point A to point B? And that drove me into the 1940s and reading a lot of the same primary sources that Victor Pickard looked at, as well as looking at some other ones as well. And what I found is during the Second Red Scare, which is most commonly referred to as McCarthyism, you see some really interesting movements happening internal to both the left and the right. So what you see on the left is a lot of anti-Stalinists who were increasingly disillusioned by their alliances with communists. You saw a lot of folks that were a part of Popular Front mobilization, so were liberals or socialists who just didn't go along with the Stalinist party line. And they were becoming increasingly disaffected and being kind of, so they're being pulled away by the Cold War, right, and the increasing

need to ally with the United States and its increasing competition with the Soviet Union. Remember, they were allies during the war. But you also start to see the creation of, and this is part of the early stages of the modern conservative movement, a series of right-wing anti-communists starting to invest in media operations, right? So one of the people that I write about in my book is Alfred Kohlberg, who was later a member of the John Birch Society board of directors. And Kohlberg was, he was known as the China lobby, right? He was this importer of textiles from China. He was very concerned about the growing possibility of communist revolution there, was a big supporter of Chiang Kai-Shek and the nationalists, and basically created a lot of institutions designed to basically oppose it, right? Gave support in the US to support the nationalists in China against Mao, right? And so part of what that meant was he invested in a journal called *Plain Talk*, which I realized was a really important stepping stone from socialists and liberals who were anti-communists, who were interested in dabbling with what ended up becoming conservatism, but didn't make that jump entirely yet. So some people I write about are folks like Eugene Lyons and Ralph de Toledano. Both of those wrote for the *New Leader*, which was a democratic socialist publication that actually was a site of a lot of media criticism, structural media criticism on the left that Victor Picard writes about, those folks end up migrating rightward. And by the 1950s, late 1950s, they are editing and writing for the *National Review*. And so part of this is a story about a rightward migration of anti-communism during the Second Red Scare. Now, don't get me wrong, there were anti-communists within the Democratic Party liberals as well, but I'm tracking a very specific milieu of those folks that did cross that threshold into the right. But Kohlberg also sponsored a group called American Business Consultants, which created the famous radio and television industry blacklist red channels. And part of what I saw when I was looking at their archives, which are at NYU, New York University, is you saw that they were really upset by, in particular, a progressive media critic named George Seldes. So George Seldes was really famous for popularizing structural notions of press bias on the left during the 1940s. And he really pissed off conservatives and right anti-communists. And so there's some evidence that I tease out in the book that basically their feud with him gives them some tactical ideas and discursive ideas that they then go and run with into the 1950s.

John

And we're definitely gonna unpack a lot of that stuff. But before we get there, let's talk a little bit more about your sources. Can you tell us about some of the archives that you were using for this book? 'Cause I have to say that you're pulling from a lot of different and very interesting places. So please talk about some of the sources that are going into this.

A.J.

Yeah, so my approach to archives is very like dialogic. Whenever I'm in an archive, I'm trying to get a sense of who, because often, for those of you that are not historians, you're looking at correspondence oftentimes. These are letters from one person to another or incoming periodicals that are being received or other kinds of ephemera. And

so often when you're in the archive, you'll see conversations happening, but you're only seeing one half of the conversation. And so part of what you have to do is kind of say, all right, I need to chase this down by going to this other archive and putting these two archives into convo. So one of the things I did, one of the first moves I did in this book was, again, with Victor Pickard's great book, I was interested in the origins of the Fairness Doctrine. And Victor Pickard writes a really great chapter on the Mayflower hearings, which was a reconsideration of the Mayflower Doctrine, which was a ban on broadcast editorials. These hearings by the Federal Communications Commission happened in 1947. By 1949, they create the Fairness Doctrine, which mandates balance over the airwaves from 1949 all the way till it gets got in 1987 by the Reagan administration. The Fairness Doctrine is kind of the bookend for the book in some ways, or the narrative of the book. But I started out at the FCC archives, which I was able to find the specific files for the Mayflower Doctrine by looking at Victor's footnotes, actually. Thanks, Victor. Very helpful. But then what I realized when I was flipping through all of these transcriptions of the hearings is I started to see a name pop out occasionally. And I think it was because "Junior" was a part of it sometimes and just kind of stuck in my eyes as I was flipping through it. And I just made a note in my notebook while I was taking scans of these documents, who the hell is Fulton Lewis Jr. Because I had never heard of him before. But there were some people at the hearings that were really critical of him. And so, since I was at the FCC, I also asked Tab Lewis, who was the archivist there, hey, do you have any complaint letters available? Because I would like to look at those and see if I can find any names that would be interesting to me. And so he was like, oh, I'm really glad you asked because we were about to deaccession those. They were about to get rid of those files because people thought that they weren't that useful. Not a lot of scholars have looked at them, but he saved them because the *War of the Worlds* complaint letters were in those boxes. And he was like, no, this is historically important. The *War of the Worlds*, everybody, you know, that's important radio history. But what I found is in the complaint files at the FCC, I found an entire folders devoted to Fulton Lewis Jr. And so I had seen his name in the Mayflower hearings. I saw that there were a lot of complaint letters about him. So I scanned those too and I was like, okay, I need to learn more about this guy. And so I Google him and lo and behold, he has his papers donated to Syracuse University. So I ended up, I was living in New York at the time where I was doing grad school. I ended up taking like a Greyhound bus up to Syracuse and just spending a couple of days. I targeted my search on the consumer cooperative movement because a lot of the times that Fulton Lewis's name came up in the context of the Mayflower hearings was around consumer cooperatives. Luckily, there were three or four boxes that were on his fight with the consumer cooperative movement. And so it didn't require me digging through massive, there's more than 100 linear feet of Fulton Lewis Jr. papers, but I was able to target my search. So the long and the short of it is, It basically was me seeking out archives. And then once I get into an archive and see what conversations I'm interested in there, going and figuring out what other archives and putting those, connecting those dots. So rather than just saying, I'm going to write a book about Fulton Lewis Jr., which somebody should do, he's got a large career history from the 30s to the 60s that I did not cover in full, but I'm

able to go and do like little quick hits and find out where these archives connect. That's what I'm usually looking for.

John

Yeah, thank you for that. I love these type of stories of like, I started here and ended up in a completely different place that I had no idea about just because of, a certain name drop in one letter. And also, like good note for any grad students out there looking for a dissertation topic, Fulton Lewis. He's he is and he is an interesting guy. Can you say a little bit more about his background and what got him into media?

A.J.

So Fulton Lewis Jr. was initially like a reporter and a columnist, like writing for newspapers, and was kind of, you know, got into radio in the early days, right, in the 30s, when they were starting to develop, you know, commentary type reporting. He actually plays a really important role in developing radio journalism as a political medium. He played a role in, I think it was the like Radio Correspondents Association being formed. He played a role in getting seats for radio correspondents in Congress who were covering congressional hearings and things like that. So he, even though he's, you know, a right-wing media guy, right, he was a journalist effectively. I had this really fun aha moment, by the way, while I was doing my research. So I didn't do a lot of oral history in this project, but I did end up interviewing Richard Viguerie, who is important in the 1960s and '70s, '70s especially, direct mail pioneer for conservatives. So, you know, he goes about creating a mailing list and then sending out mailers, kind of cross-pollinating between like the gun advocates and the anti-abortion people, right? But anyway, he is very good at self-promotion. And so I sent Richard Viguerie like a cold e-mail basically saying, "Hey, I would love to interview you," and he said, "Yes." And so I talked to him for about an hour at his offices in Virginia. And it was somewhat of a frustrating interview experience because he was kind of reciting things he'd already written. I'd already read all his books. And I was like, I could almost see him quoting directly from books I'd read when he was responding to my questions, which as an interviewer, it's frustrating because it's like, oh, I already know this. Like, I could have just quoted your book, you know? And so at one point, kind of out of frustration, I said, "you know, Richard, you say that the conservative movement invented all this media that was really important, and that, but you also say that you were always conservative. How did you become conservative if there was no media that you were consuming that gave you these ideas?" And he sat for a minute and he thought, and he said, well, And I was like, "where did you get your news from? Where did you get your media from?" And he's like, well, "I used to listen to the radio." He was like, I was a big St. Louis Cardinals fan because back then, he grew up in Houston, they would get St. Louis Cardinals games. And so he was like, "I would listen to St. Louis Cardinals games on the radio." And he was like, and I would listen. He was like, "actually, you know what, I used to listen to Fulton Lewis Jr. He was like the Rush Limbaugh of his day." And in my head, like dollar signs are going off or whatever, like a slot machine going off. Cause it was like, hey, I just got done like doing archival research at this guy's archive. I was

wondering if anybody thought he was significant. And lo and behold, here's Richard Viguerie saying, oh yeah, that guy was important to me. I later found Fulton Lewis Jr. in the John Birch Society newspaper that I write about. later in the book as well. And so once you find somebody and then you go into these other archives, all of a sudden those archives make much more sense. It's like you start to see the kind of richness of the historical milieu that you're writing about. And it's like you just need to find that one in, and once you do, you know, everything pours out.

John

Yeah, thank you for that. And that connecting the dots moment is always so much fun. So what was Lewis's issue with the Fairness Doctrine? Why was he, well, actually, maybe let's back up a bit. Why were so many people writing to the FCC about him? And then how does he get strung in with the Fairness Doctrine?

A.J.

Yeah, so Fulton Lewis Jr. was against the New Deal. He was very opposed to the CIO, which was an important labor development during the 1930s, very against communism, and very, you know, kind of a prototype for what you would end up seeing with a lot of modern conservative commentary in the 1950s, for example. He came across the FCC's radar in a way, partly because people were complaining that he was very critical of Roosevelt. This was a time when the public was very supportive of the New Deal and of Roosevelt. And so the fact that he was giving these radio diatribes against him, people would complain, right? In the 1940s, Lewis got involved in a crusade against the consumer cooperative movement. Now, the consumer cooperatives during this time period were kind of similar in some senses to like Costco, right, or Sam's Club, where people pool together, they become members, they put some money in, and then they buy goods in bulk in order to save costs. This is still really common in farming communities and in other agricultural spaces, right, to buy seed or other kinds of things that if you're buying it on your own, it would be cost prohibitive. But if you all get together, it's cheaper, right? And so Fulton Lewis Jr. was opposed to this partly because the consumer cooperatives would take the profits that they would make and then reinvest them in their firm, right? This was basically a tax loophole so that they could maintain their nonprofit status and wouldn't be taxed in the same way that a for-profit market, farmer's market or something like that would be, right? And so Lewis was aligned with a lot of businessmen. A lot of Midwestern businessmen were very against the consumer cooperative movement because it was cutting into their profits and increasing competition. And so he gave a series of radio, he was in conversation with the National Tax Equality Association actually behind the scenes, and they were feeding him a lot of talking points and research. But he ends up giving this multi-part expose of the consumer cooperatives movement. That created a major stir among consumer cooperative advocates, many of whom wrote these diatribes against him. That kind of amplified the complaints and critiques against him. Those were also amplified by the, around the same time by an organization called the Voice of Freedom Committee, which was founded by Dorothy Parker. And this was basically a group of liberal radio

listeners that would listen to conservative programs like Fulton Lewis's and then write letters of complaint to local stations or the FCC in order to basically try to silence them, right? Now, it's important to note that in the 1940s, from 1941 onwards, you had a policy called the Mayflower Doctrine. This was a New Deal policy created by Lawrence Fly. He was a big head of the FCC under Roosevelt. He was the very anti-monopolistic in his politics. And he felt that the public airwaves are a public good that's held in trust by the government. And if you have a broadcast license, you ought to be serving the public interest, not your own private, personal, political, and pecuniary interests. And so in 1941, the FCC passes the Mayflower Doctrine, which basically banned all broadcast editorials. It said, if you are going to use the public airwaves, you can use it to inform the public or even to have commercials to make a little bit of money or whatever. But you can't use it to the bidding of the licensee, right? That gets reconsidered in 1947, in part because the National Association of Broadcasters by that point had become quite a powerful lobbying group and it kind of forced the FCC to reconsider that policy. And so Fulton Lewis Jr. wasn't really weighing in on that policy so much. It just so happens to be that his battle with the consumer cooperatives movement happens in the year leading up to the Mayflower hearings. And so ends up becoming some of the subtext of those hearings. Because when they're saying, well, so the problem that we're trying to stop here is editorialization, he becomes a frequent example where people are like, well, for example, this Fulton Lewis Jr. guy is constantly editorializing and the Mayflower Doctrine does nothing about that, right? What ends up happening is when Fulton Lewis Jr. talks against the consumer cooperatives, the FCC basically allows for a right of response for the cooperative movement. And it ends up kind of just ratcheting up the conflict. And so in some ways, the book is also a critique of the fairness doctrine, which often gets looked at kind of fondly by liberals and some progressives as this period of relative epistemological stability. Part of what I point out is actually it just led, it gave like a government mechanism to increase the hostility in a way. I don't think there's anything wrong with political conflict and hostility. Like that's kind of what happens when you have disagreement in a society. But this attempt to try to regulate that away ended up exacerbating it in some really important ways.

John

Yeah, thank you. So let's get into what I think is one of the real hooks in your book is about the how conservative media criticism developed from, basically learned from progressive media criticism. So please tell that story. What were the progressive media critics talking about and how did the conservatives learn from them? And then what did the conservatives do with that new knowledge or those new techniques?

A.J.

Yeah, so a lot of the progressive media reform movement was rooted in a structural analysis, kind of a political economic analysis of the media, right? This idea that, well, increasingly, especially by the time of the 1930s and 40s, if you wanted to have a newspaper that had any kind of mass circulation, you needed a decent amount of resources in a lot of cases, right? The kind of the barrier to entry to become a

newspaper baron, right, was pretty high at that point. Same went with radio. If you wanted to get a broadcast license, you needed to have enough money to operate it. You needed to hire engineers to make sure that it was working properly and that it was working within the parameters of your license. You need to buy all the equipment, transmission equipment and whatnot. These were costly expenses. And so part of what the progressive media reform movement said as well, this means that the people who can afford to buy the media are going to be people who have some kind of vested interests in capitalism oftentimes, right, and in big business. And so part of what they were seeing was, a lot of the newspapers were against the New Deal, as I had mentioned. Radio initially was a space where some liberal commentators could talk, right? There was initially some space for liberalism. Famously, FDR does his fireside chats, right? Uses the radio as a way of speaking directly to the people, right? The radio becomes a medium that allows for liberalism, whereas the press was kind of a more conservative space at that time, right? Part of what you start to see in the late 40s is, again, aligned with the second Red Scare, is major networks start kind of laying off or firing liberal commentators while maintaining conservative ones. And so there was a real anxiety that that basically radio would go rightward too, right? The press was already conservative and like, the liberals would lose the radio too. So during this time period, one of the main figures that I write about is George Seldes, who I mentioned earlier. And Seldes created a newsletter called *In Fact*, which was highly influential among progressive media reformers. was influential among a lot of consumer advocates going forward. I know Ralph Nader was a big fan of George Seldes, lots of other important progressive leaders into the 20th century more deeply. But Seldes was a former print reporter who had worked for the Chicago Tribune under Colonel Robert McCormick, who's a kind of famous old right figure, isolationist, conservative, anti-New Deal, et cetera. And Seldes realized that his dispatches from Europe were being censored in a way, and that he couldn't actually report all the things that he saw as a reporter, partly because of pressure from management. And so as a journalist who had experienced pressure from management, his newsletter, *In Fact*, was basically about reporting news that couldn't be reported elsewhere due to management or due to commercial imperatives. or criticisms of mainstream media outlets that he thought were basically engaging in a proto-fascist alliance, right, with the rise of fascism abroad. This is in the 1940s. And so Seldes develops an approach that in some ways was really important. He was a really early advocate for the fact that tobacco causes cancer. He amplified a lot of early medical studies that pointed to ill health effects. And he basically argued, and pretty compellingly, right, that a lot of major newspapers weren't running those studies because they got so much advertising from the tobacco industry, right? Now, Seldes didn't take any advertisements because he was friends, or his neighbor was Bruce Minton, who was low-key a communist. So it's debatable whether Seldes knew that or not. I think he may have, but Minton claims that Seldes didn't, for whatever that's worth. And so, regardless, Minton connects Seldes to the CIO and a lot of CIO locals and basically builds up a pretty mass circulation for his newsletter among union rank and file, right? And so within a matter of a few years, Seldes is writing for an audience of 170,000, I think more than 150,000, which at that point made him a bigger

circulation than like *The Nation* and the *New Republic*, right? He was a significant voice, right, within progressive and liberal circles. Now, importantly, though, even though he did a lot of good, his tone was pretty pugilistic. And he engaged in a lot of things that later we would see taken up by the right in the second Red Scare. These are practices that honestly sell this may have been borrowing from the first Red Scare. He was a very big critic of Elizabeth Dilling, for example, who was a big, you know, Red Scare person during the Woodrow Wilson years, right, and all the way through the New Deal as well. But in any event, he engaged in a lot of guilt by association. He engaged in a lot of really combative kinds of allegations that, you know, people with conservative viewpoints in the US were fascists, right? Even if they weren't, in some cases, actual fascists. And so in some ways, the kind of guilt by association, the kind of using international connection as a way of slandering, you know, domestic political speech, right? Seldes was engaging in those practices, right? Now, importantly, what I start to see is you also see progressives who thought, or not progressives, but like socialists and liberals who thought that Seldes was a little too closely aligned with the Communist Party line. They suspected that he was a front. Again, Bruce Minton says he tried to make Seldes a front, but failed famously, right? But in any event, they suspected it. And so they started using similar kinds of tactics, red baiting, for example, against Seldes, saying, well, your party line seems pretty consistent with what the communists are saying, so maybe you're just doing their bidding, right? And so what I depict in the book is kind of a tit for tat back and forth between Eugene Lyons, who was a socialist at that time, but was drifting rightward and would ultimately write for *National Review*, and George Seldes. And I show that basically they're using structural press criticism against one another, right? Seldes is claiming that Lyons is, you know, fascist conspirator and is doing the bidding of global fascism. Lyons is claiming that Seldes is doing the bidding of international communism, and they're just kind of going at one another. Now, if we're just talking about this discursively, right, this just sounds like who cares tit for tat. But importantly, at the moment where they're engaging in this fight, you start to see the House Un-American Activities Committee and a lot of the kind of McCarthyist engine revving up. And so what happens is the folks that end up getting red-baited and targeted in the same kind of rhetorical ways that Seldes was targeting the right, Seldes just like raised awareness. There was no targeting or crushing of fascist conspiracy, right, in the 1940s, because at that point, the US was inviting a bunch of former fascists to come and be our scientists and things, right? And so what ends up happening is the right connects with the state security apparatus and ends up pushing people like George Seldes to the margins of public life. That's a really important moment in the second Red Scare because a lot of media critics who were critical of the conservative tendencies and reactionary tendencies of the mainstream media, many of them were aligned in popular front endeavors and ended up getting red baited to the margins by the 1950s. And so the McCarthy era is a really important moment because it pushes those out of the public sphere while taking a lot of their rhetorical tactics and running with them, right?

John

Great. Now, it's really interesting to see that movement, these rhetorical techniques. Now, let's do the next step and tell us about how these conservative and right-wing media types taught or maybe trained their audience to be media critics themselves.

A.J.

Yeah and so the kind of next turn in that happens pretty closely thereafter, right? So as I mentioned, the Fairness Doctrine goes into effect in 1949. It was partly a result of that progressive media reform movement that gave us George Seldes or that George Seldes was an important proponent of. But in 1949, they issued the Fairness Doctrine, right? That mandates that all broadcast licensees in the country have to cover controversial issues, right? Because that's in the public interest and they need to do so in a way that balances both sides of whatever that issue would be. So a wealthy oil man named H.L. Hunt strikes on the idea of what he initially calls the Facts League, but ultimately evolves into something called *Facts Forum*. And so *Facts Forum* was H.L. Hunt's idea of basically amplifying this idea of constructivism or conservatism, Because he felt that the problem wasn't that people didn't believe in conservative values and ideas, it was that they were not expressing those, that they were kind of ashamed or they were not confident enough to do so. So the goal here was to put a bunch of folks together in small discussion groups, no larger than 50, and to basically debate the issues of the day, right? Bring in news that they read and then talk and debate amongst themselves. So because of the social milieu that he selects for this, which is primarily middle-class white folks, it ends up being, in Texas, I should say, right? It ends up being a conservative milieu and advances his cause in a way, right? But he strikes on this other, because it's hard to organize small-scale discussion groups in communities all around the country, which was, it was hard to scale that, he gets this idea of turning to radio and television, right, as a way of scaling up the discussion group idea. So he hires a former FBI agent named Dan Smoot. And Dan Smoot, initially in the first *Facts Forum* programming, basically goes about kind of debating himself in a way, right? Dan Smoot will get up there and he'll pose a question. something about, you know, whether or not we're doing enough to stop the threat of communism. He'll say, you know, on one side, you know, we're doing just enough. Here's what we should do. On the other side, we're not doing enough and time is tight, et cetera, right? So consistently, and Heather Hendershott in her great book, *What's Fair on the Air* gets into this a bit more. It's basically balanced, quote unquote, balanced programming that nevertheless tilts the rhetorical scales in favor of the right, right? And so the benefit of this is, again, the Fairness Doctrine had just been implemented in 1949. This is around 1951, '52. H.L. Hunt produces all of this tax-free, right, like as a tax write-off, basically, and then gives it away for free to any broadcast station that needs to fulfill its Fairness Doctrine requirement. So what this means is he's creating programming that is not overtly advocating for conservative causes. It's subtly doing so, using that balancing as a rhetorical strategy in order to be consistent with the regulation, and then giving those folks an ability to basically air his program for free, right? So if you are a radio station owner, right, you no longer need to go and create your own programming. You can simply just, you know, syndicate this programming that H.L. Hunt was providing to you.

So this spreads pretty quickly throughout, you know, 1951, '52, '53. By that point, it's reaching pretty much across the country, right? Various stations across the country are carrying it. It's getting a lot of national attention, right? It's starting to have interview programs. There was one called *Reporters Roundup* that are like interviewing conservative Congress people and that sort of thing. And so it's becoming a kind of a media juggernaut, right? Right around that time in 1953, December into 1954, Ben Bagdikian, who would later become pretty famous writing for the Washington Post, would later actually be a really important proponent of structural media criticism and in political economy. He wrote an important book called *The Media Monopoly* that was published in the 1980s. Among his earlier kind of successes was he was a reporter for the Providence Journal in Rhode Island. Late 1953, early 1954, Ben Bagdikian writes an expose of *Facts Forum*. He basically looks at Hunt's associates. He looks at Hunt's political ideology. He looks at the kind of biased kind of tendencies within the programming. And he basically says, this is a right-wing front, right? These are a lot of right-wingers who are trying to advance their mission. They're trying to propagandize, you know, right-wing anti-communism and conservatism, but they're claiming that they're doing educational programming. I argue this is a really important moment, not necessarily because Ben Bagdikian was wrong. I mean, he was right. Like that is what HL Hunt was doing, right? But if you put yourself in the perspective of people who are listening to *Facts Forum* and participating in it and participating in the discussion groups and were like supporting it, all of a sudden you've got mainstream news outlets like the Providence Journal that gets picked up by Associated Press, by *Time Magazine*, right? And they're saying that what you're doing is wrong, right? And so there was already a kind of critical reading practice that was being cultivated by *Facts Forum*, right? Here's how to navigate the news. Here's how to read between the lines, right? Once you have the press targeting *Facts Forum*, though, that changes the calculus a bit. It's no longer, "I need to be careful because communists might be sneaking information into the mainstream press," which is kind of the conceit of red channels and the American business consultants. Instead, "the press is saying that the thing I like is wrong and that by proxy, I am wrong," right? And so that gives conservatives a kind of chip on their shoulder as well. And later in facts form, so in 1954 through its end, it closes up in end of 1956, early 1957, what you see is basically increasing coverage of what they see to be media bias, right? And an increasing sense that like, why are these journalists attacking us just for being patriots and just like supporting being against the Soviet Union, right? And so being in favor of winning in Korea, right? Like all of these, it basically gives an outlet and a voice for people that were consuming CBS or other kinds of media programs and not seeing their worldview reflected to them. And so, The reason why I focus on *Facts Forum* is oftentimes we tend to focus on the rise of conservatism along with the rise of *National Review* and William F. Buckley and the kind of Young Americans for Freedom, American Conservative Union, right? All of the apparatus that gets built from the 1950s into the 1960s. But what you see with *Facts Forum* is actually a precursor to that. It's basically creating the audience in some ways for those later publications, but it's also giving conservative media activists like William F. Buckley. William F. Buckley actually appeared on *Facts Forum* programs, right?

Talking about the fact that the media was biased on the same panel with Fulton Lewis Jr. of all people, right? So again, you start to see these connections taking place and all of these people are increasingly coming to the shared awareness that we need a conservative media, right? And that the mainstream media is directly inhibiting us in some ways. And so that belief is baked in even before William F. Buckley creates the *National Review*. And even before you end up getting the kind of civil rights era in the 1960s when people tend to think of liberal media emerging, right? With like Spiro Agnew's speech in 1969, for example.

John

Yeah. Again, love the connections that are going on between all of these characters. But staying on this for just one more moment is you're talking about this shared sense of a of being embattled or shared sense of that liberal media. You also in this chapter talk about this is sorry for quoting back at you on page 86.

AJ: Oh, please, yeah.

John

"In providing a routine critical activity performed by individuals who are made explicitly aware that the same activity was being simultaneously performed by unknown participants with presumably like minds, *Facts Forum* conjured modern conservatism as an imagined community." Can you say a little bit more about how this shared practice was so important for creating these consumers later for Buckley et al?

A.J.

Yeah, and so a couple of things, kind of details I didn't get into in what I just said that relate to this. One, *Facts Forum* encouraged people to write letters to the editor, to their local publications. And unlike other letter writing campaigns at the time, which would basically say, hey, this policy is happening, everybody write letters to your congressman opposing this policy, right? This was not as instrumentalist as that. It was, hey, you've got beliefs, you've got ideas, write to your letter to the editor and express them. *Facts Forum* had letter-writing contests where after you got it published in your local paper, you could send it into *Facts Forum* and win a prize if you were the best letter that week or month or whatever it would be. And so part of what *Facts Forum* was doing was giving an incentive structure to conservatives to write letters to the editor, but also to read the letters to the editor in the paper and to recognize that, oh, there's other conservatives who are writing to this as well. It's creating that sense of shared community. The other important thing that they did was they engaged in amateur public opinion polling, where they basically would put out note cards that were either sent through direct mail, or you could get them in the *Facts Forum* news magazine, or they would put them as ads in like street cars and things like that. And so these were public opinion polls that would ask you yes or no on a variety of questions, all of which were slanted in ways that were designed to evoke a right anti-communist response. And part of what they did was they would say, okay, Gallup poll and Roper, right, are saying that the public thinks that McCarthy is doing a bad job. What do you think? And then you

would see these responses that would be like, oh, McCarthy's doing a great job. And they would publish those responses and say, well, among *Facts Forum* poll, 70% of respondents said that McCarthy's doing a great job, right? And so they want to publish that next to the Gallup poll. But the insinuation was, you're reading the newspapers, you're seeing like that people are talking bad about McCarthy, but like the public that we see actually supports them, right? So part of that, what I'm arguing there is it's not just that they're saying, hey, McCarthy has popular support, it's that they're engaging in kind of participatory activities, right, with their readers and their listeners in order to give them a sense that they're participating in politics, right? This is important because I think it comes up later with like Rush Limbaugh, in a sense, as well, if we're getting into talk radio down the line, is that so much of mainstream broadcast news, which was the main way that people got their news throughout most of the mid-20th century, was through television. You're consuming through ABC, CBS, and NBC. And as our mutual colleague, Reese Peck, points out in his great book, *Fox Populism*, that employed a certain style, right? That was kind of a highbrow, right, style, where you had to kind of develop a taste for watching Walter Cronkite and that kind of dry form of reporting that was going on there, right? But the whole idea behind journalism during that high modern era was that the audience was kind of passively receiving. This was the kind of whole premise of the Fairness Doctrine, actually, was, well, people can't talk back and express their opinions, so we need to make sure that multiple opinions are heard so that people can kind of consume debate, right, as a passive receiver of the debate and hear the kind of spectrum of deliberation because they themselves are not going to be participants here, right? What *Facts Forum* did was says, no, you're participants too. Maybe you're not going to be on the radio or on TV with these talking heads, but we're going to ask you to participate through polls or through writing letters to the editor, right? And so throughout this entire process, part of what makes conservative media so appealing and salient is that it trusts its audience, it thinks its audience is smart, it thinks it's critical, and it's asking them to perform activities that make them feel as though they've got buy-in. And I think that that's a really crucial component of a lot of successful conservative media endeavors from the 50s through today, basically.

John

Yes, and it's just another example of how, throughout this book, there's so many echoes that we can see from today that we can see back, not just these techniques that they're doing, but also even like the language that they're using. So let's jump to another example you use, and like Birmingham, Alabama, 1963. So obviously, Birmingham in 1963, this must be a hotbed of liberal press and liberal media, right? Or what is going on there?

A.J.

Yeah, so this was, I feel like so much of writing this book was accidental. Like I don't, it arrived at what it is in a way that I think is very helpful and good. But so like the Birmingham chapter didn't exist until I got a job here at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. And I, almost immediately when I got hired here, I got reached out to by the

subject area librarian for my college, whose name's James Gilbraith. And James's grandfather was Jimmy Jones, who was a former pharmacist who had died about a decade or maybe five or six years before I got hired here. And he was a John Birch chapter leader in Birmingham, right? And Unbeknownst to me, Birmingham was the highest concentration of John Birch Society chapters in the country in the 1960s. A lot of that was because of the Birmingham campaign by the Civil Rights Movement, which was all about using Birmingham as kind of a flashpoint for advancing the cause of desegregation, right, or the desegregating of public accommodations. And so James gets in touch with me and he says, hey, like my grandfather passed away. I've got all these boxes of materials that he left me. Do you want to look through them? And those of you who are listening can't see, but right behind me right now is one of those boxes. I'm still scanning through all of them. But as I was looking through these papers, I started to see clippings by Jimmy Jones in some publication called the *Birmingham Independent*, which is something I had never heard of before. And so I looked in our library here, and I found that we have microfilm here at the University of Alabama for 1963 through 1965 or six, I can't remember, of that publication. And so I was like, well, I'm going to go and read all of that. And lo and behold, this is basically a hyperlocal John Birch Society affiliated publication. It was not officially a John Birch publication, but basically in 1963, it got bought by a lot of local business owners, all of whom seem to have been John Birch Society members, if not chapter leaders themselves. And I've been able to track at least a few of the folks who wrote frequently for it were connected to the John Birchers, like Jimmy Jones. But they would publish John Birch Society materials. So things that were published in John Birch outlets like *American Opinion* or *Review of the News*, they would be syndicated. Or folks like Dan Smoot or Fulton Lewis Jr. or Clarence Mannion, right? Major conservative movement figures would be sent, had their columns syndicated there. What's his name, Paul Harvey, the radio broadcaster who, when I was a kid, used to say "the rest of the story," right? He used to write for John Birch Society publications like in the 1960s. And so I found this kind of interesting treasure trove. But what I noticed when I was reading it is there was all of this meta commentary about the press. And there was an article written several years ago now by David Greenberg that was basically positing or speculating that one of the reasons for the idea of liberal media bias or the belief in it was that during the civil rights movement, you had a lot of television news crews that would come down to the South and report on civil disobedience and police brutality. And the images were really visceral. You know, you're seeing, you know, innocent Black people being like torn apart by dogs and fire hoses, like really gruesome, horrific things, which was from the TV programming perspective, very dramatic and captured audiences, right? And so there was this kind of perverse dovetailing in a way of like, if it bleeds, it leads. And then like horrific police brutality that was used to kind of advance the interests of the civil rights struggle, right? And so I think that, That's not entirely wrong. I do think that those images on TV did create within the South a considerable amount of distrust in mainstream outlets, many of whom were coming down from New York. Even though a lot of those reporters were actually from Texas and other places. Dan Rather was from Texas famously, right? And they had to negotiate their kind of, you know, quote unquote

Southern identity vis-a-vis being Northerners, right, coming in and reporting on this. But all of that to be said, a lot of the folks and the John Birch Society papers were arguing that the local news, local daily news, so like the *Birmingham Post-Herald* and the *Birmingham News*, that those were liberal, right? And that they were advancing the cause of civil rights. Now, the *Birmingham News* came out with like an apology statement, like in 2010 or something like that, basically apologizing for its like racist coverage during this period. So it isn't like either of those publications were like, I mean, to use contemporary parlance, "woke" or something, right? They were also conservative. But, and this gets back to this like borrowing structural media criticism from the left, they were owned by the Newhouse chain, right? Which was based in New York, right? And so they were like, these New Yorkers, and there was a lot of anti-Semitic coding stuff there. These New Yorkers, right, own now our local newspaper, and all of a sudden the civil rights movement is happening and we think the coverage isn't critical enough, right? So, part of what you see in those Birch Society hyperlocal publications is it wasn't just a critique of those mainstream outlets. It was also a critique of local media, right, as being biased against the correct on their end, like white supremacist take. But also what I ended up seeing in the publication was critique of the *National Review* and William F. Buckley for being insufficiently willing to go along with the John Birch Society line, right? And so what you start to see is a contested terrain even within conservatism, right? Where you've got the Buckley kind of respectability politics and trying to like navigate this moment in a way that allows for conservatives to succeed, but in a way that doesn't get the limbs in with the conspiracists and the racists. Meanwhile, you've got the conspiracists and the racists being like, to hell with you, Bill Buckley. Like we like Governor Wallace for president, not Nixon, right? And so you start to see the kind of fragmentation within the broader conservative movement. But part of what I'm arguing there is, one of the things that links all of them together, though, links the Birchers and the Buckleyites, even though they've got kind of different projects going on, is all of them think that the mainstream media is out against them, right? And so even if there are nits to pick between them in terms of strategy or rhetoric, they all have a shared enemy, right? And that's part of what the idea of the liberal media does. There were other things that did that as well. Higher ed, universities is another example. You could write a similar book about university discourse too, but the liberal media becomes a really central one for them, right, that allows to cobble together and pave over internecine disputes within the movement.

John

Right. Thank you. So let's jump forward a bit, maybe 10, 15 years. And in towards the end, you note that many in the conservative media have started to adopt the Fairness Doctrine and even supported it as Reagan and his FCC was looking to get rid of it. So why this turn? Why did conservative media decide that, no, the fairness doctrine is a good thing? And then what led to the eventual end of the fairness doctrine?

A.J.

Yeah, and so that's why the story is a little bit complicated, right? Is that the easy story to tell would be, oh, the Fairness Doctrine was meant to conservatives, and conservatives hated it, and so they built their own alternative media, right? In truth, from *Facts Forum* all the way up through the New Right in the 1970s, the conservative movement consistently used the Fairness Doctrine to get conservative viewpoints on the airwaves, right? So in the 1970s, you see the emergence of Accuracy in Media, which is created by Reed Irvine. and was and is a media watchdog that's designed to basically look at mainstream media coverage and point out the ways in which it is insufficiently supportive of capitalism, insufficiently supportive of U.S. imperialism, right? And the Accuracy in Media used the Fairness Doctrine to basically challenge CBS, ABC, NBC, PBS channels, local WETA in Washington, D.C., right? In order to get conservative viewpoints on there, to the point that during the Reagan years, actually, they were able to, not using the Fairness Doctrine, but kind of using the logics of the Fairness Doctrine to get some counter-programming. There was a famous multi-part, I think it won awards, series on PBS about the Vietnam War and television's coverage of it. And Accuracy Media created counter-programming that was narrated by Charlton Heston, of all people, that was basically that Reagan made PBS run, right? And so, again, This balance imperative was something that conservatives used. Phyllis Schlafly famously, in her crusade against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, had a very sophisticated media activism apparatus that was all about getting Phyllis onto all the different TV shows to counteract various feminist pro-ERA. talking points, right? So by the time of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan in general was deregulatory in his impulses, right? He deregulated a bunch of different industries across the board, including telecoms, right? And so he put in the head of the FCC, he put Mark Fowler, who was a libertarian primarily, right, is, I think, still a libertarian. I think he still exists. And so Fowler, basically, it was Fowler's desire to get rid of the Fairness Doctrine, partly because he saw this as kind of a vestige of the New Deal that was, in his view, disrupted the First Amendment rights of broadcasters and was unduly skewing radio and television, right? So he wanted to get rid of it for ideological reasons. Reagan wasn't really all that focused on the Fairness Doctrine, it seems like. This is kind of during his losing it phase of his second term, right? But in any event, was in favor of doing whatever Fowler wanted to do with it, it seems like, right? And so what you had though is there were liaisons within the Reagan administration. And you can look at all of this, the Reagan archives in Simi Valley, California. There was liaisons that basically were charged with going to conservative movement folks, members of the new right like Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, Phyllis Schlafly, and like running ideas by them, right? Hey, we're thinking about this policy. Is it good for you or bad for you? What do you think about it, right? And so when they went out and solicited constituents within their movement for getting rid of the Fairness Doctrine, what you saw was Phyllis Schlafly and Reed Irvine with Accuracy in Media saying, "don't get rid of it," right? Conservatives need the Fairness Doctrine in order to get conservative viewpoints onto these broadcasts. There's no other way for us to do it. On the other hand, you had people like Paul Weyrich, who was a New Right activist, one of the founders of the Heritage Foundation, of ALEC, I think as well, like very, very prominent New Right figure. He

wanted to create a conservative television network, right? And so he saw the Fairness Doctrine as an inhibition on that. Now, don't get me wrong, he also tried to do cable programming, right? He had a short-lived cable television network that, again, Reese Peck writes about it ends up failing. But cable was never subjected to the Fairness Doctrine. I think he had other things in mind, right? He wanted to be able to create blatantly conservative channels or programs on radio and television terrestrially as well. And so ultimately, I guess you could say that Weyrich wins out. But I think more realistically, Fowler just got what he was advocating for because he was the head of the FCC, right? And then there were other things that were going on. It gets complicated with, you know, different legal cases and things like that that made it possible for them to get rid of it. But in any event, Fowler ends up winning and they end up getting rid of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Now, this matters partly because in 1988, ABC picks up Rush Limbaugh, who at that point was a local, you know, radio host in San Diego. No, Sacramento, I'm sorry, Sacramento. I was like, is there a San Diego connection? No, Sacramento, right? And so he goes national, and then within a couple of years, right, he's like a nationally known name and kind of revolutionizes AM radio. So there's a way that because of that, because of Limbaugh's rise to power, because Limbaugh himself was against a reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine, which was briefly considered in the early 1990s, late '80s and early 1990s, which he thought was kind of a "Hush Rush" bill is the way he would frame it, right? Limbaugh's success, in hindsight, makes us think that, oh, well, it must have been a conspiracy, right? The conservative movement must have known that they could have this guy do this talk radio and it would work, but it doesn't seem to have been that way, right? And part of this speaks to a broader intervention in the book that I try to make is that oftentimes we give the conservative movement, because of its success, it's been very successful over the last 80 years, we tend to kind of take that success for granted and make it feel like it was inevitable, like it was always going to be this way. The key here is that all along the way, the modern conservative movement wasn't simply having a grand vision and implementing it. They were constantly being opportunistic. They were surveying the balance of forces, the regulatory environment, the other media, the other political organizing that was going on, and then they were finding a way to replicate it when it was successful and to innovate. And it wasn't, right? So for example, the American Conservative Union, which is an important, I mean, it's a host of CPAC, right, is one of its most famous things, right? That was created because in the 1940s, there was a liberal group called Americans for Democratic Action, the ADA. And the American Conservative Union was like, these guys are getting really good at basically policing Congress people to vote the way that they want. We need a version of that, right? And if you go to the archives, because both Accuracy in Media's papers and the American Conservative Union papers are both at BYU in Provo, Utah. So you can go to one shop fits all, right? You can look at the early days of the ACU, and you can see William F. Buckley sharing documents about the ADA with his fellow conservatives and saying, look, these guys are doing great. We need to replicate it, right? And so part of what I want us to think about here is that Conservatives are successful not because they've got good ideas or because they've got more money or because they've got smarter strategists. It's just that they're

like relentlessly opportunistic. They do have the money to just basically throw everything at the wall and see what sticks. A lot of it doesn't stick. A lot of conservative movement initiatives and media initiatives fail actually, right? But the ones that do stick are quite successful and we're still reckoning with them today. And so I think part of what the book is trying to do with unpacking this idea of liberal media bias is it's where is the driving force that causes conservatism to constantly be seeking out new media arrangements and new attempts to leverage the media to get their point across. Part of the reason for that is because the big diagnosis that starts the modern conservative movement is the way that we view the world in our minds, right? Our ideology is different from the way the world looks, right, in real life. And especially in the way that the real life is depicted back to us in media. How do we make the world as it exists look more like the world in our heads and less like the world that exists? That is a very different political drive than liberalism during the same time period, which is more a matter of, here's the world that exists, how do we tinker with it to make it better in some way, shape, or form, right? Conservatism is coming in with a different vision, and that's why they're so driven to media innovation in ways, because they need to be able to construct that view of the world in the face of its non-existence.

John

And this is a great place to kind of wrap right now is like, what lessons do you draw from this work to help you understand the current media landscape? And you don't, like maybe the recent dust up with Stephen Colbert and Talarico, that was referring to the equal time rule, but also just conservative media and liberal media as well, more broadly speaking. What do the lessons from your research show about what's going on now and where things will be going in the next several years?

A.J.

Yeah, I mean, I think part of what the book explains is this drive to ownership and this drive toward control. And I think for most of the period I write about, conservatives didn't have, even though they had access to resources and power, they didn't have enough resources and power to actually control the media, right? They had enough to build up alternatives and to develop criticisms and to cultivate kind of a critical reading strategy or critical disposition toward the press among their supporters. But for most of my upbringing, right, I consumed conservative media because I grew up in it. But most people, like, if you didn't want to know what Rush Limbaugh was talking about, you just wouldn't tune in. You would listen to something else, right? I was listening to NPR the other day in the shower, and they were talking about Candace Owen has a new documentary about Erica Kirk with some kind of delulu claims in it, right? Why does a regular person need to know that? They don't, right? You can't escape it anymore. And I think for me, what I'm realizing in this current moment where you've got, you know, Skydance buying CBS and then very soon to be buying CNN is, you know, for a while it was like, well, we need a conservative version of this bigger media system, right? Now, conservatives, because of the kind of growing increasing scale of wealth inequality and the fact that these conservative billionaires can buy entire industries now, not just have

one new network or whatever. What you're starting to see is media capture. Where conservatives are starting to not be content with simply having their viewpoint, having an option, an outlet for their viewpoint. If you're a conservative and you want to listen to conservative stuff, you can tune into Fox News or talk radio. There's plenty of options, right? Why do you need all the other media to be conservative too, right? And that drive has been there from the beginning. That's part of what the book shows is that it isn't enough, actually. I mean, that was the claim throughout most of the 20th century is we need a conservative media option, right? Because that was the limits of what they thought that they could do. Now they've got that and they want to complete the mission, which is we want actually the media that we consume, that all the media that everybody consumes to basically create the ideology of the world that's in our heads, right? And so it isn't enough just to have an option, a choice. They want to actually make sure that all the media is conveying their viewpoint. And I think if you had asked me this a year ago when I submitted this book, I don't think I would have given the same answer. But I think that you've seen such a rapid scale up in the acquisition and a shift in the way that even current ownership, like if you look at like, Jeff Bezos in the Washington Post, right? Democracy dies in darkness, man. It was like all about, you know, appealing to liberal audiences and the shift that he made and the shift that like Zuckerberg made with Meta, right? I think we're seeing right now a real challenge to the idea of cultural and political pluralism. And I think that the right won't stop until it gets rid of the conditions of possibility for pluralism. The benefit, the kind of silver lining there is I don't think you can actually eliminate the real pluralism of our society and of our world. And so I think it's ultimately an unattainable goal, but it won't stop them with the resources they have of trying to achieve it. And I think we all need to do what we can to push back against it. One of the main, I think that some people might read the concluding chapter of the book and feel that I don't give them a solution, right? I'm not like, here's what to do to like stop media capture and like, you know, win the media back. But I think part of what I conclude with is there's still a belief and a desire among professional journalists, people who see themselves as doing impartial reporting. There's still a belief in that, and a belief in the possibility of that, and then belief in doing journalism that is covering politics, but is not itself being political or engaging in politics. And I think that until professional journalists recognize the political stakes of the work that they're doing, and then engage in a reflexive way from that position, that we're going to continue to see growing right-wing media sector, diminishing dwindling professional journalism sector for the foreseeable.

John

Thank you. So don't want to put you on the spot here, but let's say in a couple of years, President AOC appoints you as advisor on journalism and media. What do you tell her? You know, do you recommend just a whole scale, you know, breakup of these big media conglomerations or something else?

A.J.

I'm torn on this. I have two things. One, I think breaking up monopoly is a great approach. I like several of my mentors, people like Victor Pickard or Rodney Benson at NYU, like our advocates for public options in media, right? Basically kind of akin to the BBC in the way that it's like funded by the government, but isn't controlled by the government, at least as a vision. I like all of those ideas. I think that we should do them. Unfortunately, what my research shows is that regardless of the regulatory apparatuses that you put into place, that conservatism will consistently find ways to opportunistically exploit whatever the system is. And so I don't think there's any getting rid of, you know, I don't think that changing the media structure diminishes conservatism. I think the best-case scenario would be to relegate it back to one among many options within a pluralistic media system. And so a lot of times in this, a lot of folks that write about right-wing or research right-wing stuff often will get the question is like, okay, you study the right, how do we get rid of it, right? And I think that there is no real getting rid of it, right? This is a long-standing and persistent political ideology that the real thing that we need to think about is why are these ideas of social hierarchy, right? According to what name and category, race, gender, class, sexuality, right? Why are those hierarchies appealing and to whom? And how can we construct a society that those ideas and beliefs are not appealing, that people don't like them, they don't want them? That I think is a harder question. But I think it's what we need. Like, I think that you can make a million tweaks to our media system and regulatory system, and you should. I support those things. But none of those get rid of the underlying problem, which is that a significant portion of the United States and many countries, a growing number of countries, it seems like these days, are discontented with democracy; are enthusiastic about maintaining social hierarchies according to difference of a variety of different sorts; and are deeply invested in political projects that will give them the maintenance of those hierarchies and the worldview associated with the perpetuation of those hierarchies as though they're natural. And so, until we find a way of combating that, again, I support these bigger tweaks, but I don't think they'll do much.

John

Thank you. So the final question I have, I know the book is just out, but what are you working on now, either book length or shorter than that? I know you're having a book tour coming up soon.

A.J.

Yes, I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm going to be in New York Wednesday. I'll be in Berkeley next week and then back in Tuscaloosa the week after that. I'm lucky to have a lot of very generous colleagues in a lot of places who have been nice enough to conspire with me to let me visit them and talk a little bit about the book. But all of that aside, so I'm starting a new project. I'm working on a bunch of things right now. I won't talk about all of them, but one thing I am working on is in some ways a follow-up to this in the sense that one thing I realized as I was writing this book is that from very early on, a lot of criticisms of the right have come from kind of a psycho-pathologization approach. So, if you look at early explanations for right-wing politics during the McCarthy era, there's

blaming things like status anxiety, right, or paranoia, or you know, resentment, right? These are deep psychological feelings, right? If you look back to like the *Authoritarian Personality*, which was like a Frankfurt School study in 1950 with Adorno and a bunch of other people, it's about like investigating a proto-fascist personality type and then projecting that onto the right in the US, right? I'm curious about what that did to modern conservatism. And I suspect that it has something to, it might tell us something about this kind of chip on their shoulder victimhood that you see kind of consistently throughout the history of modern conservatism. And so I've got a handful of other individuals and examples throughout the 1950s, 60s, where you see this playing out. And so I'm doing some preliminary archival. I've got a couple of research trips later this year to start that project. So we'll see, may not pan out, might just be an article or something, but I see it as kind of similar in regards to this book, which is the conceit of this book is, I'm not going to weigh in as to whether or not the media is biased or not. The fact that conservatives have felt it's biased is itself politically productive. And so like, let's study the political productivity of that idea. And so for me, this is looking at a different idea, the idea that conservatives are insane or that they're out of their minds or that they're delusional or whatever the common terms that people use about it. Regardless of what I think about those analyses, right, those analyses have been made for a long time. How did that shape the way that conservatives think about themselves in their political project and how did it shape their movement formation? And so anyway, we'll see. We'll see if that pans out.

John

Yeah, sounds fascinating. Can't wait to read it. So Thank you, AJ. Thank you for your time. The book is *Making the Liberal Media: How Conservatives Built a Movement Against the Press* out from Columbia University Press just a couple of weeks ago. So again, congratulations on the new book and good luck with the book tour and the rest of your research. Thank you.

A.J.

Great. Thanks so much, John. I really appreciate you.