

## **MAKING HISTORY TODAY (S2E10): Media and Politics - Heather Hendershoot on When the News Broke**

[ Classroom Stories theme fades in ]

[ 00min 07sec ]

### **Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

Heather Hendershot is Professor of Communication Studies at Northwestern University. She studies TV news, conservative media, political movements, and American film and television history. Her most recent book, which we read for this course, [\*When the News Broke: Chicago 1968, and the Polarizing of America\*](#), received an award from the Pattis Family Foundation, from the Newberry Library, was praised in the New York Review of Books, and in February 2023 was chosen as a Best Book by the New Yorker.

Her previous books include *Open to Debate: How William F. Buckley Put Liberal America on the Firing Line*, and *What's Fair on the Air: Cold War Right Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest*.

[ Classroom Stories theme continues ]

Here's Alison Marshall Rubin discussing *When the News Broke*.

[ 00min 55sec ]

### **Allison Marshall-Rubin:**

Hi, I'm Allison Marshall Rubin, and I'll be giving an overview of *When the News Broke: Chicago 1968, and The Polarizing of America* by Heather Hendershot.

[ Classroom Stories theme ends ]

*When the News Broke* focuses almost entirely on the four day period during which the disastrous 1968 Democratic National Convention was held in Chicago.

[ 01min 04sec ]

The fact that the DNC ended with Hubert Humphrey securing his position as the Democratic presidential nominee is practically tertiary compared to the chaos that reigned in the streets. Hendershot, a media historian, presents the August 1968 Democratic National Convention as a watershed moment for distrust in the media, as well as the start of more stringent polarization in the United States. The 1968 DNC illustrates a core theme in the relationship between U. S. politics and media. When politicians perceive coverage as favorable or even neutral, they treat the Fourth Estate as a legitimate disseminator of information and an integral part of the democratic process.

However, when the media shows or writes about activities and policies that cast a political party or particular politician in a negative light, charges of personal bias, ideological agendas and inaccurate information about.

[ Classroom Stories theme fades back in ]

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**Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

Welcome professor Heather Hendershot.

**Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

*[ Classroom Stories theme fades ends ]*

**Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

Could you tell us a little bit about your latest book, how it came about and what it's about from your perspective?

*[ 2min 10sec ]*

**Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

I wanted to revisit one of the key events in media history. I'm a media historian. Historians of media often, American media in particular, often point to Chicago 1968 and the Democratic convention as a really important moment in our history of America and our media history specifically.

The most remembered part of that convention, the most memorable part for many people, is when protesters were beaten by police in the street, on Michigan Avenue on the third night of the convention and TV cameras were there and the protesters were chanting, "the whole world is watching!"

And this is footage that people have seen in documentaries and on TV. It's been recycled a lot. It's become a famous catchphrase. There've been books given this title. And I was fascinated by how people pointed this as an important moment, and yet I suddenly realized that no one had actually rewatched the convention since August of '68, that no one had really engaged with it as a media event beyond this one key moment.

And so what I wanted to do was to go inside the convention hall and see what people were actually talking about, what was actually going on there. And I found a, a very multi-layered kind of thing happening. A lot of issues around social justice and voting rights and as much chaos in many ways on the convention floor as there was in the streets.

*[ 3min 26sec ]*

I argued that before the convention, the notion that the mainstream media suffer from liberal bias was seen as a very right wing position and also as a regional position. If you were from Alabama or Mississippi, and you did not like how network TV covered the civil rights movement and moves to desegregate, you might say well, there's a liberal bias there.

So that was the regional perspective on this among many white Americans.

And if you identified as far right, which could be extremists like the Ku Klux Klan, but it could be someone like William F. Buckley Jr., a more legitimate, as he understood it, part of the hard right in the Republican Party.

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But most people thought they were very neutral, very balanced. You might make mistakes because journalists are human and they make errors, but their professional objective was to be very balanced. And I'm going to be very fair. And you could identify as a member of the Republican party and still think that the mainstream media was basically neutral.

*[ 4min 20sec ]*

And after the convention that shifted. Part of it was not because the media had gotten more liberal. But because of how people reacted to convention coverage. And people like Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago and Richard Nixon weaponized the idea that there had been mainstream media "liberal" bias in Chicago, that it was unfair how they showed the police and police brutality.

*[ 4min 44sec ]*

### **Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

I want to start with a figure that you just mentioned, and that is Richard Daley, because the students in their questions really focused on him and his particular role, not just in the convention itself, but also how his actions shaped the media's coverage.

How much did Daley's role shape the outcomes and the narratives that emerged?

*[ 5min 11sec ]*

### **Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

First of all, to understand where Mayor Richard J. Daley was coming from. He's running a machine, a party machine, the Democratic Party in Chicago. He hates the media. He really does. So he hates the local media. He hates the national media. He thinks that they're just terribly unfair to him. And this gets a little in the weeds, but if you go into the history of Chicago newspapers, like the Chicago Tribune, it's run by Republicans, right?

Is there bias there? Well, they like a lot about Daley. They like what he's doing for business, but they don't like the Democratic Party. So, you know, he's got that fraught relationship, but he hates the mainstream network TV news. Heading into Chicago, I've listened to his phone conversations that were recorded by LBJ, right? Long before Nixon, they were making recordings in the White House.

And Daley is telling President Johnson that he doesn't really want reporters on the floor of the convention at all. That they're just there to create these sort of gotcha moments. And he'd rather they couldn't even interview anyone in the convention.

And all reporters did at this convention was interview people on the floor. He failed at that, but he really tried. He radically reduced the number of floor passes they could have so that you couldn't get enough reporters on the floor. And he packed the floor with security forces, his local police, higher extra hired security. There were secret servicemen there.

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*[ 6min 30sec ]*

Meanwhile, out in the streets, he is going overboard with security and you referenced law and order, right? That's his perspective, right? That he's going to maintain law and order. And he has 12,000 police officers operating on, 24/7 shifts, really got the full police force out.

He's got 5,000 national guardsmen who he's called in. Usually you wait till the emergency before you call the national guards. He called the National Guard in before the convention started. There are a thousand secret service. So that adds up to 18,000 security forces. And there are 10,000 protesters.

So two to one.

A lot of those security people, police officers are really primed to beat protesters, to show them who's boss. It's a kind of a tinderbox in many ways.

*[ 7min 19sec ]*

You sent me some questions from students ahead of time and one of the questions was about like would it have been different in another city? Like what if it were in Detroit?

My goodness, there was an urban uprising in Detroit where people in the streets were shot, buildings were burned down. Now this was in, I think, '67 for six or seven days. They picked their convention city over a year ahead of time.

So Chicago seems to have managed to avoid much of the worst, what they then called race riots, right? These uprisings. They seem to have avoided the worst of it, and Chicago seemed – because it was so under Daley's thumb – it seemed like the safest, best place to have a convention during a very difficult year at the peak of Vietnam War protests all this kind of stuff.

Of course when they selected Chicago way in advance, they didn't know that Martin Luther King would be assassinated in April of '68 and after the King assassination there's uprisings in over a hundred cities. And things go very badly in Chicago, many buildings are burned down, people are killed by police.

*[ 8min 18sec ]*

And in Chicago, as in elsewhere, the most people who are killed are people of color, are Black people. And as the convention gears up, that's the context, they've just had this uprising after King is assassinated. Daley is concerned that there will be more of what he calls race riots. So that's part of the reason he's increasing security.

And he's not really in tune with the fact that the protesters coming to the convention are mostly white and the local Black activists see this as a very white event. And they're laying low or leaving town if they can. Like a lot of the activists left town or went into hiding because they knew that Daley's police would just round them up before the convention started. It wasn't safe to

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be around. He is going overboard on security in large part because he fears a kind of reprisal of what happened in April. And he's creating a violent event, even as he thought he was trying to avoid that event, perhaps.

[ 9min 11sec ]

### **Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

Students noticed how your book reveals the way that the Chicago convention was a watershed moment in and of itself, some of because of the unique factors that existed in Chicago, but also the way that the different perspectives that were present on scene gave viewers then and now looking back these different vantages into these changes that were gripping U. S. society, U. S. politics, and media.

And so I'm wondering, when you were approaching this book and thinking about the political parties, did you have the media lens first, or did you have the wider watershed of the United States in mind first? And where do you situate this event between changes in the media and the bigger social political upheavals?

[ 10min 08sec ]

### **Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

Ultimately, to my mind, you can't really separate these huge political issues from what is happening in the media at the time.

And I really try to do them both at once. I come to it as someone trained in media history, not as someone trained in history who then gets interested in media, which is a kind of fine grained sort of distinction, right? *(laughs)*

So I'm always thinking, what is the relevance and importance of media here in this particular event?

There is the issue of what's happening in America in '68 as a crisis. And then there's also the party issues. And so from the media historian angle, if I'm going to report on what happened in '68 at a convention, my starting point is, okay when did they have cameras at conventions at first?

What's the long story here? And the first convention on TV was in '48. But if you think about it, one of your first questions would be, wait a minute, who had TVs in 1948? And the answer would be very few people, right? In '52, a lot more people had TV and so as early as '52, the parties are aware, okay, we're staging this. People are watching this.

And by '56, for sure, the proliferation is so vast of television that they really have to be aware of what they're doing as being a TV show. And there's a tension between the people on the platform, the organizers, and the TV cameras and the reporters.

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The tension is that the organizers, whether they're Republican or Democrat, want this to be their TV show. And so there's a back and forth in convention coverage between we're just putting on your show versus we have some important questions to ask you.

[ 11min 46sec ]

I wrote a piece from the Washington Post that your students might want to look at where I pointed to 2020 as the dream for the political parties in some ways, because they'd finally achieved total control of a convention because it was locked down.

You look at the, the Democratic convention, which is pre-filmed and there's live elements and it is so stage managed that it's like the epitome of what the parties were going for as early as, maybe 1952, even though if you go back pre-pandemic and, look earlier, you're still going to see from the '80s and '90s on very managed shows.

'68 and '72 in many ways are the last sort of wild card moments where people could have fights on the floors and, otherwise things are really going on behind the scenes and not being shown after.

[ 12min 32sec ]

### **Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

Yeah. And that really sets up this next question by Griffin, which is about the implications of this media revolution and politics on the political process. He was wondering if this creates more backroom dealing and secrecy in the political parties so that they can avoid the image making problem of hashing those in party fights out.

[ 12min 58sec ]

### **Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

The more there appears to be transparency in political processes for Americans to watch the less transparency there probably is. [ *laughs* ]

So let me try to unpack that and say that, for example, after Watergate, they passed the Government and Sunshine Act, saying that, "okay, we're going to show all these government processes. in front of people instead of hiding." Total transparency. For the FCC, for example, what that means is that they're going to have their meetings in public when they vote on things.

Sounds really transparent, right? What they're doing is meeting ahead of time to sort out how they're going to vote, doing all the advanced work. And those are pre-meetings. And then they have the real meetings, which are public and everyone can watch them. And there's no controversy, they've already sorted everything out behind the scenes.

So definitely that's happening with the parties too. One important piece of background here is that in 1964, there had been a media crisis with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party coming to protest that the delegates from Mississippi were not fairly chosen because Black people were not allowed to participate in the voting.

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*[ 13min 56sec ]*

Fannie Lou Hamer was a very famous part of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and she was on camera and giving her testimony about her physical abuse by police officers, the crisis of disenfranchisement in the South.

The famous story is that LBJ was watching this on TV, called the networks and were like, I have something important to say. And the cameras cut and they went to him and he gave a speech that he just made up on the fly because he realized that she was a very effective presence and he didn't want the cameras on her.

The reality is the cameras kept rolling, but not live. And everyone saw that footage later and it's become really important historical footage.

But I add a bit to that story by saying, let's go back. Let's go back before that mythologized moment of LBJ freaking out and look at what happened, which was that Joseph Rao, who's the attorney for the Mississippians who were protesting, he shows up in the room where they're supposed to have this credentials hearing, which is a pre-convention thing that you would think of as a boring committee meeting, right?

But there, he shows up in the room where they're going to film this and have TV cameras. And the room is too small. They're not going to be able to get all the lights in there. They're not going to be able to get enough cameras. They're not going to be – and he immediately protests and gets a room change to a room that's much bigger so they can get all the lights and cameras in there.

*[ 15min 13sec ]*

That's huge in 1964: a room change. Because he knows people need to see this. And even if LBJ tried to stop it, his room change, was like the revolutionary moment that made all this sort of happen and made it become part of history that we know about. So in '68, they're like, we don't want that to happen again. That was embarrassing for the Democratic Party.

Of course the Republicans in '68 just kept everything very secret. It was super stage managed. And they succeeded in all the ways that the Democrats failed. So they really tried to keep all this stuff much more out of the media eye in '68. Everything they did before the convention.

The news story is like, "Oh look, Mississippi was seated right away this year. Great." That problem in '64 was totally solved in '68. Felt about right, until the convention started. And then suddenly people in Alabama and North Carolina, Texas, Georgia, are all like, "wait a minute, we need to be seated too."

You have all these protests and so on. The media management didn't work, but your student is exactly right to say wait a minute, do they start doing things secretly, getting them off camera? And that's exactly the effort that's made. But of course it doesn't perfectly work.

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[ 16min 18sec ]

### **Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

I'm wondering about this idea of a – one of my students calls it a circus atmosphere that is created around the convention. Do you see a particular legacy of this moment, for how the media behaves in future conventions, as opposed to the political parties?

How should we think about this as a specific media watershed moment, not only maybe for the coverage of conventions, but for the coverage of unrest or people in the streets.

[ 16min 52sec ]

### **Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

The electronic media, the TV professionals, right? They didn't see what they were doing as creating a circus kind of atmosphere in 1968, right? They were tapping into all their professional norms about how to be fair, how to be neutral, and they didn't want to be part of the story. They wanted to tell the story.

That led to them actually underreporting quite a bit of the violence in the streets.

So they got attacked by Mayor Daley and Richard Nixon later for showing – and LBJ – for showing too much violence. They really undercovered it. In fact, NBC did a content analysis and looked at all their footage and found that they had 3 percent of their footage was violence in the street.

CBS, it was closer to five.

Okay, so it's a really small amount. In a way, this notion “Oh, it's a circus atmosphere” is the *mythology of popular memory*.

I don't want to say it's like history, because historians have done a better job, but the way people remember things doesn't always match the history books.

Since the wide conception was, Oh, it was a media circus, in '72, the networks are still very aware we don't want to create that kind of environment. We want to be professional, etc. And they feel like they didn't really get anything wrong in '68, more than they would at any other convention. They felt that they – they were upset that everyone thought they'd done a bad job, but they thought they had done everything they always did, that they had done a good job.

[ 18min 09sec ]

Now, bringing that up to the present, that's a huge leap. Going forward 50 years, there's no simple way to explain, like, how does that compare to today because we have such a fragmented media environment. We have gone from a world in which TV news is, aggressively across the board, striving for neutrality. And if anything is not neutral, then it's labeled editorial or commentary at the bottom of the screen and big letters.

We've gone from that to a world in which we have aggressively left or right wing television.

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I would argue that a lot of the so-called left wing cable news is actually just very liberal. It's been called, socialist, communist or whatever by the far right, but it's not. MSNBC and CNN are not communist TV, right?

But yeah, there's a liberal slant there. And then Fox News and One American Network, OAN, and Newsmax are not just rightwing, they are often fascist and authoritarian.

And the more neutral news people on those channels, many of them have been weeded out over the past couple of years. So in that context, you still have ABC, CBS, NBC, their brand is, we're old school. We want to be in the tradition of Cronkite. Maybe they fail, maybe they're not.

*[ 19min 20sec ]*

But they want to try to keep those journalistic norms of neutrality, but they're going to give a little more opinion than you would have seen 50 years ago. And then you've got the left and the right, and they're all competing with each other.

So if there's violence in the street, and CNN and Fox are covering a certain way, say during Black Lives Matter's protests in 2020, ABC, CBS, and NBC are going to try to compete with that, but maintain their brand integrity and their dignity and not sensationalize.

But are they more likely to sensationalize and they would have 50 years ago? Probably. Yes.

And then you've got the really difficult situation that comes up, whether there's a lot of violence or police brutality, whatever's happening in the street, but even on a slow news day, you have the problem of these 24/7 cable channels have too much time to fill.

*[ 20min 44sec ]*

And so how do they fill that? Often by not doing news at all, by instead airing commentary. And commentary is a table of people saying what they think about something. They might be super well informed. Or they might not be. Ideally, they're very well informed and they're having a good discussion and you often see that on TV, but you might also see less informed commentary and they're expressing a political point of view and filling time.

*[ 20min 36sec ]*

*[ Classroom Stories theme fades in ]*

You just can't compare that 24/7 news environment to 50 years ago in any kind of simple way. The changes are so dramatic. It's like a whole ecosystem shift.

*[ Classroom Stories theme continues ]*

*[ 20min 47sec ]*

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### **Prof. Katherine Jewell:**

Professor Heather Hendershot, thank you so much for joining us, for all of your insight and critical lens, helping inspire us all to be better consumers of media in the past and the present.

### **Dr. Heather Hendershot:**

Thank you so much for having me. It was great talking to you.

*[ Classroom Stories theme ends ]*

*[ 21min 00sec ]*

*[ Perseverantia theme begins ]*

### **Ali (Computer Science, Class of '24):**

This is Ali, class of 2024, a computer science major at Fitchburg State, and you're listening to Perseverantia Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

*[ Perseverantia theme ends ]*