

Rachel Maddow: An Intellectual On Her Own Terms

Rachel Maddow is widely known as the liberal, lesbian MSNBC news anchor with the closely cropped hair, who is often criticized by those on the political right. She is far more than the typical liberal news figurehead her critics have painted her to be. She is committed to delivering the news honestly, and she isn't afraid to apologize if she gets things wrong. Additionally, her shows always begin with long, thought-out stories which are entertaining yet relevant. Donald Trump's ascendance to the presidency in 2017, however, came with a growing hostility towards journalists. President Trump lied so much and artfully managed to convince his supporters he was telling the truth by simply dubbing any contradictory information as "fake news." This led to a pattern of rejecting experts and creating "alternative facts," as Kellyanne Conway, a senior Trump advisor, infamously said. Social media became a source of news and a dangerous hotbed for misinformation. Rachel Maddow wasn't immune. She was frequently accused of delivering liberally biased news on conservative news channels, but she was undeterred. Best known for her #1 ranked MSNBC show, Rachel Maddow is a sharply intelligent woman, whose independent mind, moral honesty, and creative storytelling have set her apart from her fellow public intellectuals and enabled her to transcend the recent deterioration of respect for accurate information.

[Rachel Anne Maddow](#) was born in the early '70s to a U.S. Air Force Captain father and a school program administrator mother. She grew up in a staunchly Catholic family in a small, conservative town called Castro Valley in Northern California. She attended Stanford University, where she majored in Public Policy. When she was a freshman, she wrote a letter in the school newspaper, coming out as gay. Following her graduation, she studied at Lincoln College at

Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. She received her Doctorate of Philosophy from Oxford in 2001, and wrote her dissertation about AIDS healthcare in American and British prisons. While she was finishing her doctoral dissertation, Maddow began her radio career in Boston as a co-host of a show called *Unfiltered* and was soon awarded her own show titled *The Rachel Maddow Show*. Simultaneously, Maddow began appearing as a regular analyst on several MSNBC shows. She was promoted to fill-in anchor and eventually earned her own show in 2008. Since then, it has been a rocking success, [frequently topping MSNBC's primetime ratings and even being the most-watched show in all of cable television for some of her higher profile interviews](#). Over the course of her show's run, she has published several books, produced multiple podcasts, and has even overseen a film adaptation of one of her podcasts. Maddow's independence, honesty, and creativity have driven her professional success as nationally-recognized public intellectual.

Rachel Maddow's most recognizable and loved features are what set her apart from her fellow colleagues at MSNBC and public intellectuals everywhere. First, is her unapologetic authenticity. The way she chose to come out as lesbian as a freshman in college demonstrates this side of her from a young age. She came out to her freshman dorm early on in the year, with the intention to establish herself honestly. After hearing homophobic comments from other students, [Maddow felt compelled to write an open letter to the editor of the school newspaper](#). She felt a responsibility to not only normalize but also humanize the existence and experience of being a part of the LGBTQ+ community. Against her wishes, her letter was published before she could properly come out to her parents. Given her family's conservative, Catholic background, this caused a rift between Rachel and her family from which they have since healed and grown. Her coming out process exemplifies her lack of fear in telling her truth, regardless of who her audience is and how uncomfortable the consequences may be. This fearlessness has continued

into her professional persona. Despite the fact that some of her commentary on certain public figures and events may not always be particularly kind, polite, or even politically correct, she always backs it up with good reason. For example, she referred to the Oath Keepers entering the U.S. Capitol Building in their “fake little uniforms” but proceeded to quote prosecutors’ accounts of their actions, “...[they split up into two teams, fanning out to go hunt down individual lawmakers. And after January 6th, the group’s leader did definitely keep buying weapons, and messaging fellow Oath Keepers about continuing to try to block President Biden from taking office.](#)” Everything she said was factually true, whether she added her own bit of colorful language or paraphrased court documents. Inclusion of her cutting humor exemplifies how she’s able to share her personality without sacrificing her intellectual integrity. Rachel Maddow may be one of the most famous news anchors, but she’s known for her authenticity both personally and in her storytelling.

Maddow earnestly pursues the truth and has the ability to apologize when she has it wrong, which is rather rare among public intellectuals. For plain intellectuals, it’s often a mere matter of pride. For *public* intellectuals, it’s a matter of fame-fueled inflated pride as well as reputation. For Rachel Maddow, it’s simply not a problem. She’s not worried about her image so much as she is about the quality of information and analysis she broadcasts to millions of Americans five nights a week. In the very beginning of nearly every interview she conducts, Maddow asks her guest whether she has explained anything incorrectly, misinterpreted information, or left pertinent information out. As she sees it, she’s making sure that her viewers are getting the most complete story. While noble, this also makes her vulnerable. She is creating space for someone to point out a shortcoming of hers in the opening moment of the interview. What’s more is that she is willing to apologize when she hasn’t managed to anticipate a mistake

or has truly offended someone. There was a show in October of 2014 in which Rachel told the story of a Nevada Republican Senate candidate who scared away potential voters with her ode to the Second Amendment, which was seen as a veiled threat of violence if she lost the election. In order to reassure those spooked potential voters, as a candidate for the House of Representatives this time, she instead put forth a “Mushroom Cannister Remedy” kitchen set as the symbol for her campaign. Rachel presented a near-identical replica of this set on the desk in front of her to accompany her account of the Nevada Republican. She referred to it with great distaste, calling it [“A full set of mushroom-ornamented, baby-poop-colored, made-in-China ugly kitchen cannisters.”](#) After the show aired, she received a high volume of messages from viewers pushing back on her criticisms of the kitchen canister set. The very next night, Rachel began on a somber note. She apologized for her open contempt for the mushroom cannisters. Even her apology was precise. She contextualized her disparagement with her incredulity that the cannisters could wipe away the suggestion of wielding guns to overturn an election, but also expressed sincere regret and thanked her viewers for holding her accountable. It takes an immense amount of courage to admit being wrong...especially on national television. She did it genuinely, without hesitation. In this way her fearlessness is coming to bear. Rachel Maddow’s unflinching loyalty to the truth and utter humility when it comes to protecting the truth make a true and unique intellectual.

Rachel Maddow’s creative passion is what makes her show so captivating and, at times, mystifying. Each evening, she sits at her desk in the studio and begins to tell a story to her viewers. It could be just about anything, but it often comes in the form of a little history lesson. Although it may be interesting, it can be a little confusing as to how it’s relevant to the present day. But, then, as the temptation to change the channel reaches its highest peak, the connection snaps into place. For example, she anchored a show in which her opening line was this: [“It was](#)

[almost exactly 100 years ago. It was 1922. It was October 1922. And the fascist party announced that they would march into the nation's capital. They would march on Rome.](#)” She goes on to explain how the fascists took over Italy, and how brutal their executions were of political rivals. After quite a detailed account of Italy's fascist takeover and how it led to fascist takeovers in other European countries ahead of World War II, she finally settles on the crux of her point. The ideological descendent of the Italian fascist party had just won the election to become the next prime minister...and she had been photographed in Washington D.C. with Steve Bannon, a top Trump ally. Italy becoming a fascist country, ruthless to all dissenters, may not seem topical to the everyday American. But, a current Italian fascist coming to the United States capital to commiserate with upper echelons of government officials is worth knowing about; however, the gravity of the situation would have been lost if not for the thorough political history leading up to current times. This exemplifies Maddow's sharp intellect in action. She is so passionate about politics and history. She has a PhD from Oxford. How she chooses to relay the news to her audience is like play for her mind – drawing creative, unique, and sometimes oblique connections from history to the present is her idea of play. These stories aren't only entertaining mysteries about why they matter to that day's headlines. They also serve as a sort of filter to taper Maddow's raging intellect. The stories ground the often-complicated concepts she tries to communicate in interesting stories. It's not a bombardment of scary information, but rather a gradual buildup to the important news items of the day. This is what allows her to bridge her high-brow intellect to her everyday viewers. This creative way of delivering the news reflects not only Rachel's passion for what she does, but also demonstrates an ability to connect to people through that passion.

An independent mind, a moral sense of honesty, and passion-driven creativity have distinguished Rachel Maddow as an intellectual. These three characteristics set her apart. They're also what have allowed her to survive the American public's growing hostility towards any information that disagrees with their personal beliefs. This has been fueled by social media's mass circulation of information – whether true or not – and taken advantage of by Donald Trump. Journalists bore the brunt of this hostility. For someone who relies on external validation, the disrespect and intimidation could have caused them to step back and close up shop. Rachel Maddow, however, is not that way. She is very much of her own mind. She does her job because she wants to be able to explain how and why things are happening, and because it's what she loves to do. Outside of those two things, there is nothing that can deter her. Even when her relationship with her family hung in the balance, she still felt compelled to tell her truth and come out as lesbian. From a very young and vulnerable age, she has been fearless in speaking the truth and unafraid of the consequences. That steeliness has only strengthened as her publicity, and thereby criticism, has grown. A few hecklers who say she is too biased or wrong or flippant are too insignificant to intimidate her. She doesn't aim to please everyone. That's impossible. Instead, she aims to retain the integrity and quality of her work. Her independent mind has allowed her to tune out the noise of disinformation and continue to provide the American public with her astute takes on national politics. Additionally, Maddow's humbly honest approach to her job establishes a level of trust between her and her audience. The instantaneous and wide spread of ideas over social media make it hard to know who and what to believe. Her use of primary sources, like newspapers and court documents, reflects her dedication to operating on pure facts. Social media has dehumanized and depersonalized communication, and has therefore made it a lot easier to be nasty. Rachel is not only honest, she is morally honest. She doesn't hesitate to

give others the opportunity to point out that she's wrong nor does she have any qualms about apologizing when she's wrong. Showing her audiences that she won't let her pride in being right all of the time get in the way of the quality of the information on her show establishes a deeper level of trust in her. Finally, her strategy of beginning each show with a long, seemingly tangential, story stems an immediate alienation of any potentially hostile viewers. She starts in neutral territory. Her stories reel in her audience with the mystery of how it connects with current events, but in an apolitical manner. By the time she's made the connection, any trepidation about biased viewpoints have been forgotten. Because of who Rachel Maddow is at her core, she is able to deftly walk the line between conservative and liberal viewership without sacrificing the integrity or quality of her work.

Rachel Maddow is, without a doubt, a public intellectual. She has the credentials and TV show to prove it. Not to minimize her accomplishments, but these are things that nearly anyone can achieve if they work hard enough. At the end of the day, they're simply things to put on a resume to make someone look good. Stanford, Oxford, and *The Rachel Maddow Show* make Rachel Maddow look good, but they don't *make* her good. It's her little quirks and characteristics that differentiate her from her fellow public intellectuals and which also make her indomitable, amidst the social media-fueled information crisis during Trump's presidency. She isn't like other anchors who just repeat the news, but rather she contextualizes it so that her audiences don't only come away informed, they come away *educated*. And entertained. Maddow deftly synthesizes the most complex parts of the news for her viewers, and has more loyalty to the truth than to her reputation. Impressions of her may have changed due to the ever-polarizing political climate, but Rachel hasn't changed. She is just who she has always been. A strongly, independent, fiercely intelligent, quirky truth teller.