

Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Bob Schieffer's "About the News" with H. Andrew Schwartz
Podcast**

Subject: "Mic Media Trailblazer Chris Altchek"

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CEO and Co-Founder,
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(Music plays.)

BOB SCHIEFFER: I'm Bob Schieffer.

H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And these are conversations about the news. We are in the midst of a communications revolution. We have access to more information than any people in history. But are we more informed, or just overwhelmed by so much information we can't process it?

MR. SCHWARTZ: These conversations are a year-long collaboration of the Bob Schieffer College of Communication at Texas Christian University and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

(Music plays.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: Today we have with us the founder and CEO of Mic, Chris Altchek. Chris founded Mic in 2011 with his friend and business partner, Jake Horowitz. Chris was an investment banker at Goldman Sachs and did work for Mayor Bloomberg in New York before founding Policy.Mic as a startup that provided unique forums for readers to debate one another. In five years, Mic has grown to reach an audience of 30 million people per month. They have original reporting and analysis, as well as high-quality video and original shows. There is now Science.Mic, News.Mic, Style.Mic. and the list goes on and on – all tailored to an inquisitive and educated Millennial audience.

As one of the foremost pioneers in digital media, we are glad to have you with her today, Chris. Let's start with where you got this idea for Mic. What was your inspiration?

CHRIS ALTCHER: Yeah, so we started Mic five years ago, in 2011. And my co-founder and I, Jake Horowitz, were really focused on how this – how our generation, our peers seem to have an incredible energy towards making the world a better place, and that their values were actually fundamentally different than the values our parents' generation, yet weren't reflected in the media in a meaningful way. And so we felt that there was this incredible energy, this incredible passion, and a different value and belief system that we saw and felt every day, that we hear from our peers in conversation, that we heard when we traveled the world.

And Jake had just come back from spending two years as a reporter in the Middle East, in Lebanon and traveling across the Middle East. I had worked in politics across a bunch of interesting spaces. I'd worked for Mayor Bloomberg. I'd worked for SEIU in Boston. I'd worked in the Bush administration. I'm probably – (laughs) – only one of the only people to do those three things. And throughout it all felt like the ideas that were being discussed at the national level were old, tired ideas, and that with the rise of, you know, the biggest generation in American history, that was connected in a way that nobody had ever been connected before, we had a unique opportunity to contribute in a really meaningful way. And so that was the original inspiration for Mic.

MR. SCHIEFFER: For those who might not know, tell us exactly what Mic does. What exactly is your programming?

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah, so we are – our mission is to inform and empower Millennials, our generation, to have the biggest impact on the world. And what we do and how we do that is by building the most influential and trusted voice in news for Millennials. So what does that look like in reality? We're 160 people, based in New York, with offices in Stockholm, Berlin, San Francisco, L.A., Chicago. We have about 90 editors, writers, reporters, video producers who report on the issues that our generation cares about deeply.

So, you know, an example of how we're set up versus other news rooms – we have eight editors and reporters who work exclusively on Black Lives Matter, because we believe this is a space that our generation is leading, driving, and thinks about very, very differently than other – our parents' generation. We have reporters and editors who focus on these sort of beats that are uniquely ours – ours, meaning generational. And so that's how we operate. We produce, you know, between 10 to 30 videos per day. We report, you know, about 50 to 100 articles per day. And through all of that, reach 65 million Millennials per month in the United States. So almost every Millennial in the U.S. sees or reads Mic on a monthly basis.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You alluded to this in the beginning. You said your values are different from those of your parents' generation. Tell me about that.

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah. I think we're lucky because, you know, this a generation – and now I'm generalizing. You know, there's between 75 and 80 million Millennials. So they're – we are not all the same. And we have a bunch of unique and interesting preferences, you know, amongst that generation. It's incredibly diverse. But that diversity's actually one of the values that's consistent. So, you know, a good example is the Millennials are just more diverse and more inclusive than our parents' generation in every social issue. So, you know, more than eight out of 10 Millennials believe in marriage equality. But when you look at Baby Boomers, it's still only half.

And so from a reporting standpoint, the way that plays out is we report from the perspective that marriage equality is – and equal treatment of LGBTQ people is a fundamental right. And we report objectively with that as a belief. But a lot of other media companies don't necessarily share that belief. And that sort of goes down the line in terms of how we think about social justice – whether it's race, whether it's women's rights, whether it's how we think about trans people or gender fluidity. Our generation has a specific and strong set of values there that underpins, you know, how we view the world and how we report.

And so that's on the social justice sphere. If you think about how Millennials think about actually the economy, it's really interesting. I mean, despite being in a worse financial position than our parents were at our age – so, you know, we're the – one of the few generations that's looking at potentially having lower incomes than our parents. And that's the first time in a long time that's happened in America. Despite all of that, we're – the vast majority – 70 percent of Millennials are optimistic about their personal futures, and are approaching the economy and how we think about the economy in a really progressive and innovative way.

So, you know, Millennials are not the ones driving populism in America towards, you know, bringing manufacturing back, for examples. If you talk to the vast majority of Millennials they know that their jobs are going to come in new industries and they're not trying to close the borders of America, despite the fact that they actually may be benefited by some of these policies. And this is consistent with Millennials in the U.S., and Millennials in a lot of other countries. And so there's this real sort of positive focus on what's next that we try to cover thoroughly and deeply, and from that perspective.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You talk about there being 80 million Millennials. And I think you said at one point we focus on the 40 million who went to college.

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah, that was – you know, that was Mic's north star since when we started. And that was our way of focusing on – focusing on intellectual, intelligent storytelling that we felt could actually make an impact on the national conversation, and that that was a filter through which we used for a long, long time. This year we actually started reaching more than that 40 (million). You know, now we reach 65 million Millennials a month. And you know, what we realized through that was it's important not to try to be everything for everybody. And that's why we focused on sort of reaching college-educated Millennials and focusing on being smart.

But what we've learned – and it turns out we were wrong – is that there's a much bigger appetite for the type of storytelling we're doing, and that we don't have to lower the quality bar for what we do if we want to reach more people. And so now we're consistently reaching more than that 40 (million). And so we've shifted how we talk our audience in a pretty meaningful way.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let's bring in Andrew Schwartz here.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Hey, Chris. First, I want to say anybody who says Millennials don't get up early and get at it, we're doing this at 8:15 on a Monday morning. So kudos to you.

MR. ALTCHER: (Laughs.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: I'm from Generation X. (Laughs.) And my generation –

MR. ALTCHER: I don't know if that's a compliment or – I don't know if that's a backhanded compliment, but I'll take it. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: No, I think you're a proactive guy who's out there, you know, getting to it. And I go to your site every day. I think Mic is a terrific example of new media. I think it's got rich multimedia. And it's got a terrific user experience.

You know, one of the things I wanted to ask you was why do you think there's a specific need for a Millennial media? I mean, I – help me out here, because I'm from Generation X and I think we were too depressed or too anxious to start our own media.

MR. ALTCHER: (Laughs.) Yeah, I think – I mean, I would say two things. One is, our values in many ways are different than our parents. And our parents still run all of the biggest news brands in the world, whether it's CNN or The New York Times or The Washington Post or CBS News. You know, the biggest, most respected news brands in the world are run by people who think about the world differently than we do. And so I think that's – you know, that's one.

And then the second one being we've been lucky – and Mic has really benefited from this – our audience is at the forefront of changing the way news is consumed. So the way we think about it at Mic is, you know, our phones are the only device that matters. And you know, our phones went from being sort of social network connected devices for reading articles now to – you know, the way we think about them is our phones are hyper-personalized TVs. Whether it's Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, you know, our users are opening their phones hundreds of times a day, opening feeds and getting very personalized video content all day long.

And as a media company that's oriented exclusively towards that, we end up building our teams differently, doing our reporting differently, and it actually changes, you know, how Mic is structured in a very meaningful way. So I would – the biggest difference is sort of, OK, what are our values and how are those values expressed in the content formats that we've created.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Do you think other media companies understand that notion that you just said, that our phones are our personal TVs, they're our personal media devices?

MR. ALTCHER: I think so. I mean, the – I've been consistently impressed with – you know, especially as of recently – how quickly some of the bigger news organizations are evolving. And so I think it's – you know, if maybe a year ago it was sort of a new concept, but now I look around and I'm actually really optimistic by what I see happening at least at the national news level from some of the bigger brands. I see a lot of innovation around news right now.

MR. SCHWARTZ: As they continue to innovate and, you know, you've created your media for Millennials, is there a point at which you've capped your audience?

MR. ALTCHER: Maybe. I mean, I think, you know, the good thing we have – the thing we have going for us is, you know, Millennials are a median age of 27. There's 75 to 80 million of us. We are now the biggest group of employees in the workforce. You know, there's more of us than Boomers or Gen X. We're also approaching peak spending years. And so as a sort of, like, foundational part of the economy, Millennials are by far the most important group for the next 40 years. And so, as a business, that's the group you want to build your audience around.

You know, when you look at Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, all of those – all of those great news companies have a median viewer above 60 years old. That's median. That means half of them are even older than that. That's a scary prospect, you know, when, you know, the average age of an American is somewhere between 70 and 80.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So are you growing up with your audience, or is this – you know, or

really I should ask, what's the – what are the innovations you're focused on next to keep your audience engaged?

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah. So we plan on growing up with our audience. You know, the biggest innovation is actually improving the storytelling, improving the journalism. You know, our audience is maturing, is approaching a new life stage where it's about getting married and having kids and thinking about the world differently than they've been thinking about it for the last decade. And so for us, you know, a big part of what we're doing is continuing – is sort of a relentless focus on making our journalism better. And that's one piece and that's going to consistently happen.

And I think that's what's going to ultimately either keep people or people will leave. You know, if our audience thinks that The New York Times is consistently doing better reporting than we are on the issues that they care about, then they will read The New York Times, or watch The New York Times. And so I think that's the bar that we hold ourselves to. And that's a lot of work. But on the flipside of that, we need to consistently innovate if we want to reach the next college graduates, you know, who are 21, 22 today, who are now, you know, on the border between Millennials and Gen Z.

And that's where we're doing a lot of interesting things. So we have built out a team that focuses exclusively on messaging and emerging apps. And so, for example, on Kik, which is a widely used chat app amongst high school and early college-age students in America, we have about 700,000 people who interact with Mic content on a weekly basis. And that's a different form of content and it's really targeted towards younger audiences, but we're trying to bring them into the fold. You know, we have – we have launched a new – or we have launched a new app called Hyper, which is a really innovative video-only app that's performing really, really well with younger audiences as well.

And so what we're trying to do is actually really make sure that, you know, on one side our journalism's getting better and we hold onto our current audience, and on the other side we're on these new platforms because Facebook is not that important to teenagers today. And they are consuming content on different platforms. And that's where, you know, a lot of the innovative work is happening at Mic.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me just go back to this whole talk about values. I want to ask you about some old-fashioned values. Where do you come down on such things as objectivity, for example? Have you learned anything from the old media? Is there anything in the old value system that you feel has become part of your – of your value system?

MR. ALTCHER: A hundred percent. I mean, we believe deeply in objectivity. Our – you know, the head of our newsroom, Cory Haik, is a multiple time Pulitzer Prize winner from The Washington Post. We actually just hired a new executive news director from The Washington Post. And so, you know, our team is built on that. So objectivity is key. That means, you know, on the issues that we really care about – whether it's, you know, a Black Lives Matter activist doing something really wrong or the police being really innovative in how they're thinking about dealing with racial issues – those are all things we will cover objectively all the

time.

I don't think having strong values is counter to objectivity. You know, a good example is CNN for now, for many years, has been focused on ending modern day slavery. That's been something they've done – you know, they've stated as a core value of CNN and something they've now covered in great detail many different ways with a lot of documentary and a lot of reporting. And it's been really impressive. And I would say having the value that nobody should be a modern-day slave doesn't mean you can't do objective reporting. It just means you're going to report on stories – on different stories than you would if you didn't have that value, and that you're going to focus your resources in a different way, and ultimately speak to your audience, you know, consistently on a topic that's important to you, and hopefully important to them.

And that's how we think about, you know, how our values affect our reporting. It's not that we're slanted and that we do heavy analysis or heavy opinion. It's that there are certain values that we know our audience holds deeply, and therefore we're going to learn about those things alongside of our audience better than any other news organization will.

MR. SCHIEFFER: How do you – what had you decided is the best way to tell a story? Is it a mix of analysis and objectivity? Does it contain a certain amount of opinion? When it is opinion, do you label it as opinion or do you even think that's necessary?

MR. ALTCHER: So we do label things as opinion on the site. And there are a certain set of reporters that are not allowed to write opinion pieces. And so in that sense, we're pretty conservative about how we think about those labels. But the best way to tell stories – actually, I think about it more as the format.

So a good example is this summer after the killing of Alton Sterling one of our reporters, Jamilah King, who's on our identities desk and focuses on the Movement for Black Lives, wrote a powerful story about – that summarized all the different ways black men have been killed at the hands of the police in America. And we had reorganized our newsroom to have video producers sit within each desk. And so our video producer for Instagram took this story and produced it into a short Instagram video. You know, it was about a minute long, very moving, very powerful, all reported out based on these 23 instances that we – 23 killings that we were focused on.

That video went viral on Instagram, reached more people than the original article had. And at that moment, Alicia Keys, who is an activist in this movement, reached out to us and said: Wouldn't it be interesting if we collaborated on this? And we said, yeah, what are you thinking? And Alicia Keys suggested that she have some of her colleagues and collaborators read the Mic story and record themselves doing it. And so that weekend we got videos from Beyonce and Rihanna and Chris Rock and Bono and Wiz Khalifa – all very big artists – recording themselves reading this Mic article that was written by Jamilah King from our team.

And we edited that video into the same format as our original Instagram video. And then all of the artists – Beyonce and Rihanna and et cetera – and Mic all shared these videos across

Instagram and Facebook and all of our social platforms. And that story ended up being watched 100 million times over the next two week.

MR. SCHIEFFER: That is absolutely amazing. Let me just ask you another question. In all of journalism now, one of the big questions is: How can we find a business model to support these operations? Journalism requires a lot of people most of the time – or at least it has down through the years, on the newspapers and things of that nature. Are you making money? And how are you – what advice would you have to other media companies on how to find the way to pay for these staff that are required?

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah. So we – you know, we've grown revenue 300 percent this year. We've worked now with over 65 big national advertisers on integrated campaigns that help them reach our audience. So for us, you know, we're helping big advertisers who need to reach Millennials in a credible way do that. And these are audiences that, you know, are hard to reach on television and print. And therefore, the business of growing very quickly. And we feel really good about where it's going. So that's – you know, that's the Mic approach.

I think, you know, my advice to other media companies is: Spend a lot of time with advertisers and understand deeply what their needs are, and figure out, you know, how, as an advertiser, you can solve those needs in a way that nobody else can, which, you know, is different than the way – it used to be where, you know, you would cut out a certain amount of space, whether it was in a newspaper or in a television program, and the advertiser could put essentially whatever they wanted into that block. That model doesn't really work effectively in the Internet, or if it works it works at really, really low prices.

And so the amount of involvement you need to have as a company to build something differentiated for an advertiser is actually a lot. And so we've built out a whole team that not only sells advertising but also collaborates with brands to help them strategize and create content that actually achieves their goals in unique ways.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Do you use these so-called influences? I know "60 Minutes" recently did a piece on these people that have emerged to do product display and product endorsements.

MR. ALTCHER: So we don't do that exact thing in terms of using influencers on Instagram or Facebook to do sort of subtle product placement for brands. But in a lot of ways, you can think of Mic as a very big influencer on social networks. We have millions of followers across all the big platforms. And so, you know, one of the – one of the formats in which we allow brands to advertise is actually we will post the content we create with the brand onto our social platforms, and engage our audiences in those ways. So it's not analogous to what influencers are doing, but it's similar in spirit.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Chris, I want to talk about social media for a second. You just told an extraordinary story about a Black Lives Matter piece going viral. And, you know, we're counting on your guys to use your social media machine to, you know, get this podcast out once we've published it next week. So I hope you'll be there for us. But –

MR. ALTCHER: I'm excited about it.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Good, good. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: You can be an influencer.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah, we'll be an influencer. (Laughter.) But tell us about – you know, social media is such a big part of today's media landscape. What's your approach to social media? I mean, a big viral hit that you just described doesn't happen every day.

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah. I mean, we are – we are very, very focused on winning the major moments in social every day. We think – we know that our audience just lives on these platforms. I mean, our average reader is with their phone 12 hours a day and checking one of their social platforms, you know, almost every hour. And so that's an incredible opportunity to reach them and engage them. But creating content for these social platforms is – especially creating news content that's high quality and interesting and can stand on its own two feet is challenging. And that's what we've – that's what we're sort of trying to be experts in. But it's not the only platform in which we reach audiences.

You know, we have 30 million people a month that come to Mic.com. We have thriving newsletters. We have ways of engaging users through text message and different subscription models. So – and by subscription, I mean different ways for people to subscribe to Mic content. And so social media is one arrow in our quiver. It's a very, very important one, but it's not the only one.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Chris, let me – we can't let you go without talking a little bit about this campaign. What's been your approach to covering this campaign, and what do you make of it?

MR. ALTCHER: Yeah. So I mean, this campaign has been – (laughs) – incredible and, obviously, it's something you've both experienced and talked about and reported on. You know, our approach – it's actually interesting. I think the – and so I've had some experience working with Republicans. I interned in the Bush White House in the Council for – in the National Economic Council back in 2007. And so, you know, I also worked for Mayor Bloomberg, as you mentioned, worked for SEIU. So I have experience across different political parties.

And I remember now about a year and a half ago went to meet with some senior Republican leaders to pitch them on the idea of including Millennials more meaningfully in the primary process. You know, my pitch to them was, you know, the debates, as they knew in the last election cycle, had gotten completely out of hand and had caused – you know, had left the Republican Party very weakened when it came to the general election.

And my pitch this time was, you know, out of the eight debates that are scheduled to happen, wouldn't it be really interesting if one of your debates focused on the issues that 80 million voter – 80 million Millennials in the U.S. care about? And wouldn't it be interesting to

help that party orient itself around a voter bloc that, you know, they had only won 20 percent of in the last election?

And I thought it was not that – not that dramatic of a pitch. And I thought it was sort of obvious to anybody doing electoral math that Millennials would be an important voter group. I mean, there's 69 million eligible Millennial voters this election. There's 69 million eligible Baby Boomer voters. So it's clear that this demo matters. Made that pitch and it was rejected. (Laughs.) And my prediction was the party's going to end up with a candidate who's way too far off to the right, especially on social issues, and therefore lose the Millennial vote by a landslide.

I did not predict that Donald Trump would be the candidate. I had no idea who it would be. But in many ways, we're going to see dramatic Millennial vote numbers at the election day, and they're not going to be for the GOP. And I think we've only – you know, in many ways that party has kicked the can, again, on creating a real platform that has any chance of appealing to the biggest generation in American history. And so I think, you know, the narrative will be the same narrative it was after the last election, which is how does this – how does this party reform itself to appeal to the next generation?

And so that's what I'm interested in ultimately. I think there are actually a lot of opportunities because, you know, while the Democrats have done a better job at engaging Millennial voters, there's still a lot of opportunity. And as we see, there's still a ton of issues that Millennials care deeply about that aren't part of the national conversation.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Do you think the Republican Party in fact is going to survive this election? Or will it break in two or three?

MR. ALTCHER: I think it's – (laughs) – I mean, if you're sort of objectively speaking right now, it's already broken into two. I think – I personally think that both parties are going to need to radically rethink their platforms as Millennials become the majority of all voters in America, because the issues that we talk about and have been talking about for the last decade are irrelevant to this audience. I mean, they're just completely irrelevant. And the form of the debate around the economy I think is going to be fascinating.

You know, we – there's – you know, if you look at sort of where the debate has landed today, both parties are pretty populist. And whether Hillary's elected or Donald Trump is elected, neither could pass TPP, for example. You know, potentially Obama will pass it before the new president starts, but if he – if that's not – if that doesn't happen, TPP is not getting passed by the next president. And that's an incredible transformation in the national dialogue.

And I think we're at this sort of pivotal moment where neither platform, neither party has a great handle on what the new economy could and should look like, how to build an inclusive society for both diverse people and for Millennials. And I think – I think all of that's going to evolve really quickly. And I'm hoping that in four years we're having a national dialogue that is oriented around a totally new set of issues that we have to tackle as a country if we want to continue to be prosperous.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Chris, let me ask you one final question about today's media landscape. What's most interesting to you about it?

MR. ALTCHER: I think the trend that I'm thinking about a lot is how distribution is becoming commoditized. And what I mean by that is how there are now so many platforms and devices through which we can watch video. You know, it used to be sort of you can watch video on your TV, and that was it. And how you can watch – and through Comcast. Now you can watch video on your phone, on your computer, on your tablet, on your TV. And you can't only get it through Comcast. You can get it through Facebook, Netflix and these platforms.

But you can also soon get it through AT&T. You know, with the potential merger of AT&T and Time Warner, what AT&T is really positioning themselves to do is deliver premium content through their mobile network. And so in five years or in 10 years it's not only going to be about Facebook and Netflix and YouTube on the internet. Sort of everybody and anybody is going to be able to distribute content, specifically video content, really fast, at really high speeds, and at really high quality.

And then the question is, as distribution of video becomes commoditized, what happens to the business? What happens to the content creators? And then where does the value accrue through all these changes? And I don't have the answers to that, but I do feel really confident that the brands that can build really loyal audiences with big audiences, with important audiences, can hopefully become very valuable businesses over the next five to 10 years.

MR. SCHIEFFER: All right. Chris Altcher, truly a trailblazer in today's communications landscape. Chris, thank you so much.

MR. ALTCHER: Thank you. It was an honor to be talking to you.

MR. SCHIEFFER: For Andrew Schwartz, this is Bob Schieffer.

MR. SCHWARTZ: But that's not all, Bob. At the top of this podcast we gave you just a tease of the great music from my friend Aaron Neville's new record, Apache. Let's hear some more from Aaron Neville. I just know this record's going to win a Grammy.

(Music plays.)

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