

**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

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

**Subject: "CNN's Brian Stelter is Reliable"**

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**Date: Monday November 7, 2016**

*Transcript By  
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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 Brian Stelter, the host of CNN's show, "Reliable Sources." He's the senior media correspondent for CNN Worldwide. He began his career at The New York Times in 2007, where he covered television and digital media. He also contributed to their Media Decoder blog. While just a freshman in college, he started and wrote for a blog titled TVNewser, which he sold to MediaBistro.com. He's also written The New York Times bestselling book, "Top of the Morning: Inside the Cutthroat world of Morning TV," about the competitive world of morning news programs. He was extensively featured in the 2011 documentary "Page One: Inside the New York Times," directed by Andrew Rossi. As host now of "Reliable Sources," he has been called America's most influential teacher of media literacy in the digital age.

Brian, we are delighted to have you with us on our broadcast. I want to start right in with your recent piece, that bogus story about an anti-Trump protestor getting paid \$3,500 to go to Trump rallies. There are a lot of phony stories out there. This is one of the latest. Tell us about this one and what caught your eye.

BRIAN STELTER: Well, thank you for having me. It's an honor to be talking with you. This is a plague right now on the internet – this plague of fake news. Some of it is intentionally fake. Some of these stories are just misleading and sloppy. But what really worries me is are these websites that actually set out to trick people, that set out to hoax people. And for the website operators, they make money off this, they profit off of this. But it ends up hurting the rest of us because these stories get spread so widely and so virally on sites like Facebook.

So this story, from a fake version of ABC News, claimed that a guy was paid \$3,500 to show up and pretend to protest Trump at a rally. And it played into a right-wing narrative saying that there are lot of paid protestors, that Democrat operators are out there trying to disrupt Trump rallies. Now, there may be separate evidence of that, but this story was completely phony. It tricked Kellyanne Conway, the Trump campaign manager, back in October. It also tricked one of Trump's children. They shared it on Twitter and had to delete it afterwards.

And listen, Bob, I've been fooled by these sites too. I think we've all be tricked by these fake news sites at one time or another, which just goes to show how important it is nowadays for journalists to be debunking this stuff and for each of us as individual news consumers to be skeptical when we see a website that looks a little bit fake or doesn't seem to be quite real. We've got to really work harder than ever to check this stuff out.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, this one, for example, tell us about it. The link suggested it was ABC News, am I correct?

MR. STELTER: Yeah, it kind of looked like ABC News. There's knock-off sites that look like CNN, that look like CBS, that look like Fox. In this case it was registered to a domain name in Colombia, down in South America. So that was a the first way to tell it was fake. You know, what our listeners can do is they can look at the domain name, they can scrutinize it. They can look at whether, you know, it really looks like a reliable source.

A lot of these fake websites, honestly, if you just take two minutes to look at them you can tell they're fake because they look like they're not really a legitimate news operations. But I got to tell you, some of them are pretty convincing. Some of them look pretty real. So another way to check them out is to check Snopes or FactCheck.org or PolitiFact. Take a look at other sites that are linking to them. You know, it's basically actually a form of journalism 101 that I think all of us, as Facebook users, have to do now.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you about the story itself, that this protestor was paid \$3,500 to go to Trump rallies. We keep hearing stories like that. Is there—was there anything to this one?

MR. STELTER: In this case, it was completely made up, and really meant to trick people. And it did trick some Trump campaign officials. There has been reporting – you know, there has been reporting that there are some protestors – not necessarily paid – but there are Democrats that have organized, that have sought to come to Trump events. We haven't seen that lately, though. Actually, lately at Trump rallies there have been far fewer protestors than there were during the primary season. So right now if you see these stories on Facebook and Twitter, they do seem created to trick people.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, we first began to notice phony news at CBS way back on 9/11. We kept getting this report that there was yet another plane headed towards the Sears Tower in Chicago.

MR. STELTER: Oh, right.

MR. SCHIEFFER: We'd stop what we were doing. We'd check it out. I know you all were getting the same kinds of reports. During the Bush administration I remember – (laughs) – a story that appeared on the internet that said Bob Schieffer had expected Condoleezza Rice on "Face the Nation," and was stunned when Jerry Rice, the wide receiver for the Oakland Raiders showed up. (Laughter.) And the story went on to say that Jerry Rice had some very interesting things to say about foreign policy. (Laughter.) And here is the great part about this story, Brian.

The email we got suggested that there were people who thought it was absolutely true. And, while some agreed with what Jerry Rice had to say, others totally disagreed. But this was obviously – somebody did this just for fun.

MR. STELTER: (Laughs.) As a prank.

MR. SCHIEFFER: We're seeing this over and over now, to where it's really become, I'll use the word that everybody's using now, troubling. It really has become a serious thing, and more than ever I think buyer beware is what we have to keep in mind when we approach anything we're seeing now on the web. How widespread is this stuff?

MR. STELTER: I mean, there are hundreds and hundreds of these sites. And they all link to each other, which actually increases their power because if you get caught in one of these spider webs you start to believe it's true because lots of other sites are also linking to it. So it does require a sort of a skepticism when you're surfing the web. When you're reading a story that you're inclined to believe because it promotes your side – you know, right now everyone is so polarized and rooting for their own team – whether it's the Clinton team or the Trump team – when you read a story that supports your beliefs you're going to want to share it, you're going to want to believe it. But that's actually when you should be the most skeptical if you don't know the source, if you don't know the outlet or the writer.

Frankly, Bob, I think this is what makes the CBSs and the CNNs of the world more important than ever, because we do have credibility. We do have decades of experience to rely on. It doesn't mean we don't fall down on the job sometimes. We do. But we've got decades of credibility. And we can help people know what's real and what's not real out on the wild, wild west that is the World Wide Web because, you know, you make a good point about the Jerry Rice story. Some of these are just pranks. Some of these are just jokesters. But in many cases, this is really serious.

You know, right now there's voter fraud lies out there telling you that if you want to vote via text message you can vote for Clinton via text message. You don't have to go to the ballot box. Well, obviously, if someone believes that and tries to vote via text on Tuesday it's not going to count. So they're being actively misled in a way that could actually hurt them and disenfranchise them. So that's the kind of disinformation that we all need to be on the guard against.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, that's new to me. And I think it's – (laughs) – up to both of us now to try to get that word out as quickly and as widely as we can, that this is absolutely and totally phony.

I want to go back to what you said about partisan media, and how we see things that sometimes we want to believe, and that makes it easier for us to believe. I think it is important to point out that this stuff comes from the left and the right.

MR. STELTER: Oh, it does.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And I think about the most recent one that I saw, the so-called famous People Magazine interview, that Donald Trump gave back in 1996, where I believe he said: If I ever decide to get into politics I'll become a Republican because they're the dumbest people on the face of the Earth. And that story – we were talking about it around the CBS newsroom for about five minutes, and then as we began to check it out we discovered that it had been totally made up out of whole cloth. There was no such interview with People Magazine. And Donald Trump, who said many things, did not say that – or certainly didn't say it in People Magazine.

MR. STELTER: I remember that one. I remember that one. You know, people have taken that lie, that fake quote, and put it into pictures, and then they share those pictures on Facebook. And you look at it and, you know, if you're a Democrat you're going to want to believe it's probably true. So you're going to want to share it with your friends. But when you do that, when you share it, when you retweet it, when you spread it, you're actually making the problem worse. And that's why I think there's an individual responsibility here.

There's some websites that are out there just to be fake, but there's also another crop of websites. These are hyper-partisan sites that aren't really fake, but they're very misleading because they only tell you good news about your side, bad news about the other side. And there was a great BuzzFeed study recently showing that on hyper-partisan liberal Facebook pages about 20 percent of the stories are false. And on hyper-partisan conservative pages almost 40 percent of the stories have falsehoods in them. So there's a lot of that kind of misinformation out there, even on sites that aren't trying to trick you, but they are definitely misleading.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me bring in Andrew Schwartz here.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Brian, thank you for doing this. We're in an age now where, as you just described and Bob just described, Americans almost have to have a cybersecurity degree just to, you know, pursue the news online. Are we – are Americans overwhelmed by all this media, and false media?

MR. STELTER: I think they absolutely are. I think many of us are. I think many of us are. I don't want to speak for everybody, but I know personally I'm overwhelmed by a lot of what I see on Facebook nowadays. And it's not just Facebook's fault. You know, this is a shared responsibility. New organizations need to do a better job of debunking this stuff, and individual users need to do a better job of being skeptical and in scrutinizing this stuff. But, yes, you know, I think it's one of the downsides of the World Wide Web.

There's been so many upsides to the growth of the internet. We are so much better off as a society to be connected the way we are. But one of the downsides is that we – there's this pollution, there's this trash that is piling up. And of course, it's only as powerful as we let it be. These sites exist and these Facebook pages exist because we click on them and because we share them and we're making money for the creators. So if all of us try to turn these pages off or avoid these pages, we can actually help solve this pollution problem.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Let's talk about this in the larger sense. What's been the effect of

Silicon Valley on the news media business?

MR. STELTER: Well, incredibly destabilizing. You know, I say to journalism students, we live in the best time ever to be a journalist, but also the most destabilizing, most uncertain, most unpredictable time. And it's because of these tech giants like Google and Facebook and Twitter that are rewiring how we get the news. People have such intimate personal connections to their smartphone. I mean, I can't take it out of my hand even as I'm talking to you two right now. We are glued to our phones, which in some ways is very good because we can be in touch with the world, know what's going on, and get instant information. But as a result, of course, it's changing the way we pay for news, changing the way we consume news. And I know a lot of journalists are just trying desperately to keep up.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, you know, at times like this I always think about your late colleague, David Carr. Can you channel him just for a minute? What would he be saying about this media age right now, this election, these circumstances we're seeing?

MR. STELTER: Oh, that's a high challenge. I don't think I can match that challenge. But, yes, my mentor David Carr at The New York Times – I was able to learn from him for many years, until he passed away in 2015. And I think what I took away from him was he loved this innovation. I remember the first day he and I opened up the first iPad that Apple had sent over. The potential of a device like the iPad, you know, it's unmatched. I'd love to know what he would think about virtual reality and the potential to take the audience with us as we cover stories.

But the downside, of course, is that we can be stuck in our own holes. We can be stuck in our own echo chambers. We can be stuck hearing only the people who agree with us. And again, I think that's about an individual responsibility on the part of the users to pop your own bubbles – (laughs) – to pop your own filter bubbles. Listen, as a consumer, I'm always fascinated to read a story that changes the way I think about politics or changes the way I think about culture. And that's what we need to instill in all Americans, in our friends and in our family members. Really, this is a media literacy problem.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Who do you think are the most interesting media companies out there today, and why?

MR. STELTER: Well, I wish I understood Snapchat. (Laughs.) I know that Snapchat's a big deal and I struggle to understand how to use it. And I don't mean to sound like an old fogey but, you know, I think Snapchat is figuring out what it means for us to be making media all the time. And what I mean by that is when you open up snapchat it opens to the camera, which means it encourages you to be making a video or making a photo right away. There's that process of constantly making media, of communicating via images and videos. And YouTube is a part of this phenomenon and well, and so is Facebook.

And I find myself trying to get my arms around what that means for the future, when we all have cameras and we're all broadcasting in real time. And I think what it means is – you know, going to toot our own horns here for a minute – journalists are going to have to be the

ones actually authenticating information. When we are in this sea or this swamp of information and we don't know what's real and what's fake, we don't know what's true and what's false, it's going to fall on reporters and anchors to help sort through it all, to an even greater degree than it used to be.

I mean, I think, Bob, your point about 9/11 is really significant. I think we all remember the misreporting that day, not out of – it was on – of course, it wasn't intentional. There was so much confusion and chaos and fear that day. And so there were those false reports about car bombs and other things that – alleged to have happened that didn't actually happen. And those reports came from journalists just trying to sort through information as quickly as they could on a terrible, terrible day. That's, in some ways, magnified now, 15 years later, in a world where everyone can be a citizen journalist and everyone can either create a true report and share a true report, or share a false report. It just puts the onus on us as journalists to authenticate all this information.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, Brian, I can help you on one front. If you'll just hang around with me, you will not be accused of being an old fogey. (Laughter.) I think I have probably retired that title. But, you know, you bring up a very interesting point. And going back to 9/11 – 9/11 really changed the role of journalists, or it changed, I would say, the way we do things. Up until that point, if I or my news organization made a mistake, it was my responsibility, and I felt it so, to correct it as quickly as possible.

But before 9/11, if our competitors made a mistake, we let it stand until they corrected it. We simply ignored it. But we found out on 9/11 that we could no longer do that, because if we didn't correct this false information as quickly as we could, we ran the risk of setting off mass hysteria and pandemonium. And so the rules changed on 9/11 about a lot of things, but certainly for us in journalism. I remember Bob Orr, who was our –

MR. STELTER: That's really interesting, yeah.

MR. SCHIEFFER: He was our main guy that day, on 9/11. And I remember Bob saying at the end of the day – (laughs) – you know, I've corrected this story about that other plane headed toward the Sears Tower so often it's like it's become my life's work. He said, I think I'll be remembered mostly for correcting that story. And it did really change the way we do business that day.

MR. STELTER: Right. Yeah, I think about a more recent example of misinformation. I think about the birtherism lie, which started on the internet and sort of spread to talk radio, this idea that President Obama was not born in the U.S., that he was a secret Muslim or that he was a secret Kenyan citizen – you know, all these – all these sorts of lies were wrapped into the birtherism idea. And I thought news organizations did a pretty strong job of trying to debunk it, make clear what the truth was, back in 2008 and then again back in 2011, when Donald Trump led this movement.

And yet, you look at polls that show a sizable minority of the country still want to believe Obama's not a citizen. And that's partly because they want to belong to a tribe. They want to

belong to a tribe that delegitimizes the president and says he's not really the real president, he doesn't really belong in the White House. And that kind of emotion is real. And I don't want to discount it. People sometimes want to believe lies or they want to believe conspiracy theories because it makes them feel better about their standing in politics.

But with that in mind, it's incumbent on news outlets to be very clear about what the truth really is. It's still worth exploring why these conspiracy theories take root and why they are what they are, but I think to take a stand for the truth, when we know what the truth really is, is just becoming more and more important because there's so much noise out there.

MR. SCHIEFFER: How do you – how do you think we're doing? Let's talk about this election right now. And I asked Marty Baron, the editor of The Washington Post, this question. I said, how's the media doing? And he said, I don't even like to call it the media anymore. He said, I like to call it journalism. But he said – you know, he said, I don't speak for all the media. I speak for The Washington Post. And we really do, I think, have to kind of divide it up as to how we're doing.

MR. STELTER: Yes.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But how would you say overall? Do you think the American people are getting the information they need to make an intelligent decision on this election?

MR. STELTER: Well, first I agree 100 percent with Marty Baron. There is no one media anymore. Everything is media. My mom's Facebook page is media and my wife's Snapchat account is media. But talking about the national news media, the CNNs and Washington Posts and CBSs, I think we're going to look back on this election and say that journalists stepped up to a unique challenge. And that is two candidates who were pretty press-averse, who tried not to give interviews or, when they did, tried not to answer the questions, in the case of Donald Trump.

Specifically with Trump, this was a uniquely fact-challenged candidate, someone who was fascinating to cover, but also had the tendency to state a lot of falsehoods. And I saw a lot of journalists on TV and in print and online make clear what the truth was, not in a way to express bias but just to stand on the side of the truth. Certainly, you know, that wasn't always the case. And certainly there could have been even more rigorous fact checking, especially early on. But I think a lot of journalists are going to look back with pride about how this campaign was covered. There was an effort to stand on the side of the audience, stand on the side of the viewer and the reader. And that feels like the right position, clearly.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, I want to bring in Andrew one more time here, but I know you've got a very busy day ahead of you. Every day is a busy day lately.

MR. STELTER: I have a – I have a live shot in about five minutes. I wish I didn't have to go.

MR. SCHWARTZ: OK. Well, again, thanks for your time. I mean, we know that this is



getting hotter and hotter by the second over at CNN. But one last question, Brian. I mean, you've recently embarked on a crusade to make people more news literate. How are you going about that?

MR. STELTER: The number-one piece of advice I've shared on CNN, and I'm grateful for the chance to talk about it here as well, is to double or actually triple check before you share something. And sharing something can mean posting it on your Facebook wall. It can mean telling your friends and family. It can mean writing to your congressman. Before you share it, triple check it. And that can mean going to CBS, going to CNN, finding out if we're reporting it. It can mean looking on credible fact checking sites, like Snopes, to see if it's true.

But we've all got a stake in this, you know, because we're all news literal as a society collectively, you know, together. If we can't agree on some of the basic facts, some of the basic truths, then we're all worse off. And so that's the main piece of advice I would try to share is to triple check before you share something, before you take it as fact yourself and share it with your friends and family. Do the due diligence on it, especially if you are inclined to believe it because if it comports to your view of the world, if you want to believe it because it sounds true, that's all the more reason to check it out before you share it.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Brian, I want to first make everyone know you are not an old fogey. And I'll be glad to testify to that. (Laughter.) But I also want to say, you are really doing a great job.

MR. STELTER: Well, thank you.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And keep your eye on the media. We watch every Sunday.

MR. STELTER: Thank you. Great talking to you guys. Thank 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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