

**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

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

**Subject: "Washington Post's Margaret Sullivan: Fake News, Muddy  
Waters and Presidential Tweets"**

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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 Margaret Sullivan, who has just joined The Washington Post as the media critic. Prior to joining the Post, she fielded questions and comments from readers. As the public editor of The New York Times, she started her career at her hometown paper, The Buffalo News, and when on to become the first female editor there. She was a member of the Pulitzer Prize Board from 2011 to 2012, was twice elected as the director of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, where she led the First Amendment Committee, and she also talked journalism at Columbia University and City University of New York while she was at the Times. She takes on serious issues in her weekly column, but she does so in a breezy and, if I must say, a very readable way.

She joins us as we've just gone through probably the strangest campaign of our professional lives, which has produced in its wake, well, a very unusual transition. So, Margaret, welcome.

MARGARET SULLIVAN: Thank you.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I want to start with this whole business of fake news that has become such a problem, because we got a really good dose of just how dangerous this stuff can be here in Washington, where a North Carolina man walked into a Pizza place armed with a military assault rifle and fired a shot, claiming he'd come to investigate reports that Hillary Clinton was operating a child porn ring out of the restaurant basement, a rumor circulated on social media that had been thoroughly discredited for weeks. Among other things, of course, the restaurant did not even have a basement.

Margaret, we're just seeing more of this. What can we do about it? And how seriously do you view it?

MS. SULLIVAN: I think it is a real problem. And we are seeing more of it. And it just, as you say, Bob, became – you know, we call it fake news, but it became very, very real this past

week when a gunman walks into a restaurant and is threatening. And, you know, honestly, that could have been a terrible situation. I give the D.C. cops a lot of credit for the way they handled it. But that could have been a bloodbath. And it's very scary.

I think – you know, I hesitate in some ways to even use the word “fake news,” because I think that that suggests somehow that it's – you know, that's kind of like regular news, but with a twist somehow. It reminds me in a way of this expression we're hearing so much, alt-right, which makes me think about alt-country, right? Oh, or maybe the fact, it's an alternative – a positive alternative. You know, words really do carry so much meaning. And fake news worries me a little bit. I think I'd like to call it lies or propaganda or something more direct.

But whatever we call it, we're seeing more of it. And it's hard, particularly because of the way news is distributed now, or the way information is distributed, especially on social media, to know what you're seeing. Things are disaggregated. So they come to you in one piece, you know? You get something on your phone or it comes across your Facebook feed or you see it on Twitter. And you can't see it in the context of a newspaper or, you know, the full website. And so I think that disaggregation makes it harder for people to really know what they're getting.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, we've been seeing this kind of stuff. And maybe since 9/11, and in the aftermath of 9/11, when we saw the fake stories that were going on that day. I mean, I can't tell you how many times at CBS News we got reports that there was another plane headed toward the Sears Tower in Chicago. We would have to stop what we were doing, go back, check it out, report that there wasn't any such plane. This is totally false. And then an hour later, we'd be doing the same thing. In the old days, as you know, in journalism if you made a mistake you corrected it. If your competitor made a mistake, you generally just ignored it and let them correct it. But you can't do that anymore. I think one of our jobs now in the mainstream media, if there is such a thing, is to not only try to report the factual news, but to knock down the fake news.

But this stuff is very difficult to knock down, because – it's like during the Birther thing. Barack Obama birth certificate. You'd show them the proper stuff. You'd show them the contemporary birth announcements. And people would say, yes, that's just part of the conspiracy. None of that is true. I guess it's not our job to argue with news consumers, but how can we do something? I mean, I think we have a responsibility to do something about this. How do we do that?

MS. SULLIVAN: It's not easy. I think one of the things that really has to happen – and unfortunately it sounds a little unsexy – but I think that news literacy is a key part of this, and that kids need to learn – (laughs) – and I'm afraid adults do too – what actually is responsible, fact-checked, verifiable news, and what is something that's just being put out there to roil the waters, or to create problems, or to advance a political agenda? So, you know, if you can bring some critical thinking to what you're seeing, and if you're taught to bring that critical thinking, I think that can go a long way. So I think one of the things we can do is to promote that kind of – that kind of education, and maybe do some of it ourselves.

I mean, the other piece of it that we do all the time now is fact check. And I think that's very useful. The Washington Post has its fact checker operation. There's PolitiFact and there are others. But I think if there's a will to believe these other things, that those fact checks don't really make a dent. And that is – that's very worrisome and very bothersome.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I'm interested in you say we shouldn't maybe even call it fake news or false news. And I tend to agree with that. But do we just call it a lie? I mean, what do we call it?

MS. SULLIVAN: I know. I think that we – you know, I don't know that we necessarily have to have a label for it. But we can say, for example, that this information originated on Alex Jones' website Infowars, and that it has – that it is untrue, or that it is – has been proven to be laughable or false, or whatever it may be. It's interesting, Infowars I think is one of the real problematic sources of this stuff. And Donald Trump has praised Alex Jones and said he's, you know, remarkable. And he's, I believe, gone on his radio show.

But Infowars, someone just sent me this, has a list on its site of what it calls fake news sites. And they start with The New York Times and it goes through The Washington Post and CBS News and every what we would consider legitimate news organization there is, probably 20. And they have labeled that fake news. So it's – there's a really strong effort to muddy the waters here, and to make people, I think – to give people a weapon when they don't like what the mainstream media is saying. It's very quick to say: fake news.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, you talked, and you mentioned the term alt-right a while ago.

MS. SULLIVAN: Mmm, yes.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Tell me what that is and why that term is? Because some people are saying just by using that term we're maybe normalizing people that we shouldn't or organizations.

MS. SULLIVAN: Right. Well, this has come up – this has come up particularly because Donald Trump has named Steve Bannon as his chief strategist. So Steve Bannon has been the chairman, I guess was his title, at Breitbart News. And Breitbart News has – you know, does do some things that look like journalism. But it does a lot of things that look like right wing propaganda. And it has been identified with the so-called alt-right movement. And while that's – it's hard to know just what that means. But it certainly is associated with white supremacy and white nationalism. And so when we put a label like alt-right on Steve Bannon, we may be missing and failing to get across the idea that he has, in fact, be associated with these much more problematic-sounding efforts and movements.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, you had a very interesting column I think not so long – or a couple of weeks ago, maybe, where you talked about we're moving into a post-truth world. And – (laughs) – I guess what kind of set you off on that was when a Trump spokesman declared recently, and this is a quote, "there is no such thing, unfortunately, anymore as facts." Did she

really say that? And what was the context?

MS. SULLIVAN: (Laughs.) Well, I was on the Diane Rehm Show on Public Radio with Jim Fallows from The Atlantic and a very good other reporter from Politico, myself, Diane Rehm. And she had a woman whose name is Scottie Nell Hughes, who has been a Trump surrogate and has been a paid commentator on CNN representing the Trump point of view. She had her on. And in the course of the discussion, Scottie Nell Hughes did say – you know, she was challenged on this business that Trump has tweeted about, that the popular vote would have gone to him if millions of illegal immigrants hadn't been allowed to vote. And she was – there's no truth to that. There's absolutely – that is an evidence-free statement.

And she was asked about that. And that's when she said, well, you know, there are no facts. People – there are different opinions. And those – she essentially – I mean, it doesn't really make a lot of sense, so I can't translate it into sensible discussion. But she essentially said: People believe it, and therefore that takes the place of verifiable fact. And I think that's very concerning. But I thought at first, well, that's crazy talk but maybe she was just having a bad day, or maybe she's an outlier.

But then the very next day there's, as you know, Bob, this quadrennial gathering at Harvard University, in which the two campaigns kind of get together to kick around what happened. And this was a rather contentious one. But in the course of it, two other people associated with Trump essentially – Corey Lewandowski and Kellyanne Conway – had versions of the same idea when they spoke, saying, well, what Trump says isn't meant to be taken literally or, you know, oh, that's not really – don't worry about it. These things don't really matter. So I think that when we get away from verifiable fact, we're in some pretty deep water.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So what is a reporter to do? I mean, because basically he's saying sometimes you shouldn't take him literally?

MS. SULLIVAN: That's right. Well, I actually proposed a second paragraph – you know, humorously, I hope – a second paragraph in every story that would say something like: Although Donald Trump has said that he absolutely will build a wall, this statement should not be taken literally because he didn't really mean it that way and, hey, don't worry about it. And you know, you – but you're right, you can't report the news that way. And when a candidate for president, the Republican nominee, or the president-elect, or the president is speaking, you have to believe what they're saying and take it seriously.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Andrew?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Thanks, Bob. Margaret, you're the first media columnist that we've had on the podcast. I've always thought that being a film critic or a media critic is a pretty exciting and engaging job. What do you like about it?

MS. SULLIVAN: Well, you know, I actually don't call myself a media critic. I call myself a columnist, because I think the critic role – critic role is to, you know, look at what's happening today and say I like this, I didn't like that. I try to take kind of a broad approach. I

was such an admirer of David Carr's at The New York Times. And David passed away – it's getting to be two years ago. So in some ways I've tried to – I don't think I can be David Carr, but I've tried to model what I do on that.

And I think it's an important role now. So much of what – there's so much that affects how people live their lives. It's changing so much. The technology has changed it. And it's just – it is the beat that keeps on giving.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Margaret, you know, you've talked about a new new journalism as a method for countering, and some of the dangers of normalizing things – terms like alt-right or fake news. You've talked about context. You know, so many times now, with people like Alex Jones – people like Alex Jones, they think he's authentic, they think he's cool. Well, you know, I think you're pretty cool and I read your stuff all the time. And you came in here with a really cool motorcycle jacket. (Laughter.) Tell me about, you know, what context in the new new journalism's about?

MS. SULLIVAN: Well, thank you on the jacket. I think that we have to be more willing to call things out in the course of a news story, in the course of a broadcast, however it happens. We can no longer just put out the sort of he-said, she-said ideas and leave it to the reader or the viewer to figure it out. I think we have to be much more forthright in saying that is a false claim and there is no evidence to it, or that is a line of thinking that arose on this website or through this person, and they're – it's been checked and there's nothing to it. I mean, the wording could be different, but we have to be able to help the news consumer as much as possible.

Now, I will say that there are – like, my mail is full of people who want to push back against all this. And what they want to say is, you know, I don't trust the mainstream media anymore. And in fact, mainstream media is at a very low ebb in terms of trust. And that's very worrisome, especially now because, you know, I think we are probably all in agreement that there are reputable news sources. They don't always get it right and they make mistakes.

And I know that every news organization I've worked for, and I would say – I would include myself in this – everyone makes mistakes and gets things wrong. Are you willing to correct it? Are you willing to acknowledge it's wrong? Will you bring in other sources? You know, will you listen to criticism. I think that there's so – now so much mistrust that that eats away at our ability to actually tell the story straight.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But, you know, that is part of a general distrust of all institutions now – whether it's the church, whether it's government –

MS. SULLIVAN: Congress.

MR. SCHIEFFER: – whether it's Congress, business.

MS. SULLIVAN: Right, yes.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And that seems to be sort of the general view, not just in America but

around the world.

MS. SULLIVAN: Yes.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Democracies are having a hard time right now. And I think maybe that's part of this.

MS. SULLIVAN: It is a part of it. And it's a very concerning part of it, because when people mistrust institutions – and there may be some reason for mistrust – they, I think, are more likely to say, well, we've got turn this whole thing on its head and we must have change. And I think that's what – part of what we saw with the election of Donald Trump. There's just a very strong feeling, particularly in the red states, but as you know not only in the red states, that what was happening wasn't working, they just weren't buying the status quo. And they saw Hillary Clinton as a symbol of that. And they just – you know, I saw an ad of Trumps, and I'm – we probably all saw it – but it had a line in it that said: Donald Trump will turn Washington on its head on the first day. And that was, in fact, what he was proposing. And I think he's carrying through on it.

MR. SCHIEFFER: What has – what's been your impression of the transition so far? In some ways I kind of think of this as sort of the Wizard of the Oz. You know, here up there at the top of this tall tower is this mysterious person, and you people come up –

MS. SULLIVAN: Yes, yes. You have to go up the gold-plated elevator –

MR. SCHIEFFER: – to see him. And then in the middle of the night he puts out these pronouncements and declarations. What do you think of presidential tweets?

MS. SULLIVAN: (Laughs.) Well, you know, I understand that we now have a different way of communicating. I'm a – I'm a big user of Twitter and I'm certainly on Facebook and other social media platforms. Donald Trump has taken advantage of this ability to take his message directly to the people. And he's done it in a very effective and I would say masterful way. I don't approve of the content of it very often, but I think the technique is genius. You know, he has not yet given a news conference. But he's been on YouTube. And he's been communicating primarily through Twitter. And there, there's no one to push back against what he's saying or – you know, within that context of that pronouncement. So it's something that's working for him. I wouldn't expect him to abandon it anytime soon.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, one of the questions that I think about is, is this campaign a result in the change in our culture? Or is this campaign changing our culture? Because some would argue that what Donald Trump is doing is simply the mean girl in high school and what's going on at an adolescent level.

MS. SULLIVAN: Mmm hmm. Yeah, well, I think there's a little bit of both involved. He certainly was able to take a strong message that spoke to a certain segment of the country's economic disenfranchisement, people who just felt like the economic recovery had left them behind. And, you know, he was able to take that message to them. And meanwhile, I think that

Hillary Clinton really didn't have that kind of strong message. A colleague of mine from the Buffalo News who is here in Washington said if she had campaigned with a slogan that said good jobs, good wages, that she might well be president right now. But she didn't have a message like that. And he had such a strong message of I'm going to take care of you people, I'm going to help you.

Now, I don't have reason to think that he will carry through on that. And I don't think his appointments and his appointment for labor secretary is someone – who, you know, is anti-union and doesn't believe in high wages and would like to roll that back.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, actually sees part of the manpower problem in restaurants improving by automating some of those jobs, which I –

MS. SULLIVAN: Exactly right, which is only going to put people out of work. So you know, I don't think that that delivers on his promise. But, as we know, campaigns are one thing and governing is quite another.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Through the campaign, I mean, I actually thought that Donald Trump was going to get the nomination early on, and said so, reported, because I'd been to these rallies. And I was understanding, in those days, that this was not about issues so much as it was about attitude. And you'd go to one of these rallies and you'd hear these people. And you'd go out beforehand and say: What do you like about Trump? I like him because he speaks his mind.

MS. SULLIVAN: Yes.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So, in a funny kind of way, he ran kind of a new and different kind of campaign. He understood early on that if you offer yourself to a certain number of television programs you're going to get on some of them. And somehow – you know, he got pushback during those call-ins. I don't agree with those who say he got a free ride. He did get pushback. But he was getting so much exposure that it overwhelmed the pushback.

And while all that was going on, you had these other candidates running these old-fashioned, very – like a World War I, you know, artillery unit that – it took them a week to, with mules pulling the big guns, to get them from point A to point B. I asked Mika Brzezinski once, why don't you guys ever have Hillary Clinton? Why doesn't she call it? And she said, getting an interview with her is like getting an interview with Mother Theresa. And while they were trying to get an interview with her, he was calling in two or three times. And because he was available, he got on these programs.

MS. SULLIVAN: And, Bob, I think there's another factor there too, which is that he – for whatever reason, and it's a function of just his personality I think – he is what he himself calls a rating machine. He drives ratings. People do like to watch him. He's compelling. Whether you like him or don't like him or object to him, there's something very compelling about him and the way he speaks. He speaks the language of television very, very effectively. And so, you know, that, I think, fed on itself.

CNN – you know, and I’ve written about this – really gave him a great deal of just free coverage. They would – they would be filming his podium waiting for him to come out. And this went on. And, you know, it really was able to drive ratings and profits for CNN. But whether it served the electorate, I really question.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Getting back to journalism, you wrote a rather interesting column, I thought, on a to-do list for journalists now. Tell us about that.

MS. SULLIVAN: Well – (laughs) – I don’t remember specifically, to be honest. But I think that one of the things that I think we do need to do is, as I said, to be stronger about calling things out when we see them, to try to be less smug about knowing everything. I think that’s a real fault of journalists, that David Eisenhower said journalists aren’t nearly as interesting as they think they are. And I think that there’s some truth to that. (Laughs.) We got the election wrong in many ways. Most of us were very surprised that Donald Trump won. We don’t know as much as we pretend to sometimes. At the same time – so I think we need to lose that smugness.

But I also think we need to be very cognizant of our role and our mission, you know, which is to inform and to hold elected officials accountable, and to really do our jobs as best we can. My boss, Marty Baron, was asked recently: You know, well, how is – how is journalism going to deal with this? And he said: Well, we’re going to deal with it by doing our jobs and doing it better than we ever have before. And I think he’s just right on that.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So as journalists struggle to do their job in this environment, should they cover every tweet that Donald Trump tweets?

MS. SULLIVAN: Well, what I’ve said about that is that not every – not every single tweet should be treated like a five-alarm fire. We have to – it is – I don’t think we need to cover every tweet. But I think we can bring a level of judgement to those things that deserve it and let other things – maybe we write a story about it or cover it some small way. The whole dustup about Mike Pence’s visit to the musical Hamilton and the audience’s reaction, you know, turned into this huge, huge story. And I think that was – I mean, I think it was worth covering, but I think it was overblown.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Now, a lot of the news we’re talking about is surfacing through social media. And you talked about disaggregation earlier. Facebook and Google are – most of the fake news has been surfacing through Facebook and Google, almost 50 percent. Does Facebook or Google need to become an editorial function?

MS. SULLIVAN: I think they need to – you know, certainly I think about Facebook a lot with this, because it has become such a huge distributor of news. And for many people, it is their main source of news. So Facebook’s approach on this is to say, well, we’re not a media company. We are a technology company and we’re a platform. And we’re really just here to connect everyone and, you know, you start singing kumbaya with some of this stuff. But the fact is that they are distributing news and they are distributing lies and propaganda as well. I mean, there’s a whole – as people have written, there’s a – there was a whole, and I guess they still exist, group of young people in Macedonia who were doing nothing but producing, and profiting

hugely, from coming up with these lies. And I think that Facebook –

MR. SCHWARTZ: They were just creating fake website after fake website.

MS. SULLIVAN: They were creating fake website after fake website, most of which was helpful to Trump, and making lots of money from it. So for Facebook to shrug – they have not – they have come around a little bit on this, in fairness. But for them to shrug and say, well, we – that’s not our business, is just not responsible. They can’t take that approach.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But aren’t they – aren’t they first going to have to simply declare, or admit, that they are in fact a media company? And that requires an editor or two.

MS. SULLIVAN: Well, I think so. I mean, I’ve at least thrown the idea out there that Facebook ought to appoint an executive editor so that at least there’s someone who’s good at making editorial judgements. I’m not suggesting that this person is going to read and create – you know, make – create judgements on each piece of content. You can’t do that the scale that Facebook has. But when issues come up – you know, for example, the photograph – the iconic, Pulitzer-winning photograph of the napalm girl, as she’s become known, in the Vietnam era was removed from Facebook because it was seen as child pornography. Well, that’s not child pornography. That’s a great photograph that deserves to be there. So if there was someone sort of in charge of making those kinds of decisions that you could at least consult with to come up with policy and to perhaps hire some people, I think they’d begin to grapple with it better.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Why have they been so resistant to it?

MS. SULLIVAN: I think they just don’t want to – I mean, their business model is based on high engagement. It’s based on this traffic. So anything that, I think, limits that traffic is going to go against the grain.

MR. SCHWARTZ: But they also created instant article to, you know, gain revenue sharing with news organizations like The Washington Post and The New York Times, to which The Washington Post and The New York Times have benefited as well. It’s been a mutually terrific situation in terms of elevating the news. They’ve also gotten into video in a pretty big way. Why are they so resistant to just saying: Well, we’re a hybrid company, we do a lot of things, we’re – we have, you know, 2 billion users, but we also have – we do do news.

MS. SULLIVAN: Yeah. I mean, I’m as baffled by it as you are. I think that they clearly are a media company and they need to face up to it. Now that there’s this livestreaming capability called Facebook Live – you know, people are producing things that absolutely are newsworthy, whether it’s a shooting or something else. All of these things are going to force editorial decisions on Facebook. So they better just sort of say, yep, we are in this business now.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And, you know, one thing, we do have to be somewhat sympathetic. This is not easy, because separating irony – I mean, The Onion, Tom Toles of The Washington Post. I’ve always held that at a newspaper the editorial cartoonist is the only one who has the license to lie, because that’s what parody is about. And also, they have to be very careful about

censoring political spin.

MS. SULLIVAN: That's right. You know, and I think that's part of the fear. They don't want to be in the censorship business. And I can certainly understand that. But when there are clearly – when there are these sites that set out to put lies and propaganda out there, there should at least be a way of flagging them and saying this has been reported as false.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I think your idea. I think it's going to take a human editor. I don't think an algorithm can sometimes separate, you know, some of this stuff we're seeing from legitimate political comment.

MS. SULLIVAN: Right. And to be – and to say, well, you know, it's very hard to know what's true and what's not true and what's publishable and what's not publishable, not really. Editors do that every day, and they must do it. Now, they don't do it at the scale and in every language in the world the way Facebook does. So there are problems there, and I am somewhat sympathetic. But I'd like to see them grapple more rigorously with it.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Does fake news exist both on the right and the left?

MS. SULLIVAN: It does. Fake news exists on the right and on the left. But from the studies I've seen, it is more on the right. And it is – it certainly – during this election, it seemed to benefit the Republicans and Donald Trump more – certainly more than it did Hillary Clinton.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Final question here: As we come into this year we're going to have a new president. What do you think will be the greatest challenge for journalists?

MS. SULLIVAN: I just think he's producing so much news, so much of it is shocking, that there's going to be a kind of a burnout. We have to try very, very hard to not let this all wash over us, and to treat things that aren't normal as if they were. We have to be very aware and alert. And we need to do that for the benefit of citizens who want us to be, you know, paying very close attention so that they can make good decisions.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Margaret Sullivan, welcome to Washington.

MS. SULLIVAN: Thank you.

MR. SCHIEFFER: For Andrew Schwartz, I'm 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.

(Music plays.)

(END)

