

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

The Truth of the Matter

“Chris Stirewalt: Why Media Rage Machine Divides America”

FEATURING

Chris Stirewalt

American Enterprise Institute, News Nation, Former Fox News political editor

CSIS EXPERTS

H. Andrew Schwartz

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Transcript by Rev.com

Andrew Schwartz (00:06): I'm Andrew Schwartz and you're listening to the Truth of the Matter, a podcast by CSIS, where we break down the top policy issues of the day and talk with the people that can help us best understand what's really going on.

To get to the truth of the matter about a fascinating new book that comes out August 23rd, it's called "Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back," we have with us, Chris Stirewalt who's a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He is a contributing editor at the Dispatch, and he is the political editor of one of my favorite news channels, News Nation.

Chris Stirewalt (00:43)

Well, thank you. I'm tired just hearing the list. I feel like I need to go lay down, but you...

Andrew Schwartz (00:48):

You have a lot of jobs man.

Chris Stirewalt (00:49): Yeah, I went from having one job at Fox News that was all consuming, to a bunch of jobs quilted together, and I think after a year I probably am just starting to have my sea legs.

Andrew Schwartz (00:59): Well, you know, that's good because you had quite a year <laugh> and <laugh>.

Chris Stirewalt (01:05):

It's a process.

Andrew Schwartz (01:06): So, Chris, tell me about this book. I'm fascinated by it. My listeners know that I teach a class about how media polarization impacts policy. Do you think Americans now confuse cable TV news with reality?

Chris Stirewalt (01:22): Well, you know, my experience at Fox was, I'll put it this way, a Republican Senator called for my firing and accused me of a cover up as a result of our first and best and accurate call of the great state of Arizona, the Grand Canyon state. And it revealed to me something important, which is we don't have any votes. We don't award any votes. We don't have any ballots. We don't have anything to cover up. We were like a bunch of guys and gals, a bunch of nerds in a room with some good computers and a great poll that helped us forecast the outcome, but we don't do anything. We just cover what other people are doing, and politics I find enormously entertaining. I find in, I have loved politics since I was a kid. I made my parents purchase for me the statistical abstract of the United States, which I read under the covers like other kids were reading comic books.

Chris Stirewalt (2:27): I love it. I think if you love America, you have to love Americans, and our political demography is a great way to know and understand your neighbor and where we are. I think all of that is fantastic, and I also just love the horse race part: who's going to win, who's going to lose. That's what I have made the centerpiece of my professional life. But for content for the country, news is bad filler, political news especially, is not good filler. News as entertainment is a real problem because the difference between news and

entertainment is I have to tell you from time to time what you don't want to hear. And if you think about it this way, so let's say Rachel Maddow and Sean Hannity. So you have people who have audiences that are strongly partisan and have come for partisan information.

Chris Stirewalt (03:12): They're siloed. They're well sorted into Democrats and Republicans. I assume there's some hate watching going on, but the core audience are people who are there to be affirmed in their points of view. Nobody's going to watch if Sean Hannity or Rachel Maddow tomorrow night went on television and said, you know what? Things are really looking bad for the home team and what a series of mistakes. What happens? Click, click, click, click, click, right? The audience goes away, and then they lose their platform, and they lose their job. So even without people intending to do it, the way that the media marketplace works, where you have such atomization, you have so many people, you know, in a country this big, 3 million people is not that many people, but boy, if you can get 3 million people to tune in every night, you can make a couple billion dollars a year.

Chris Stirewalt (04:05): So the incentives there, the perverse incentives, do not align with the incentives of good journalism or public service, right? It's just the two things are often in diametrical opposition. So you're not, you're going to flatter your audience. You're going to, if you don't lie, you will elide. You will allow a false perception to persist. You will encourage a false perception in your audience, which is, by the way, not that this is about me, but that in the end, why were people so upset with Fox's calls in 2020? They were so upset with Fox's calls because a lot of them had been fed a steady diet of horse pucky for a long time. And so here comes, this nerd on television says, no, actually you're going to lose. This was shocking, right? It's like the punch bowl getting pulled away. I think the problem is news as entertainment invites flattery of the audience, flattery of the audience creates serious gaps in knowledge and situational awareness.

Andrew Schwartz (05:07): And I should point out that before you called Arizona for Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr. Your poll at Fox was almost universally praised by Republicans and Democrats as something that was an even-handed poll.

Chris Stirewalt (05:22): Yeah. Well look, I mean, I'm very proud of the work that I did at Fox and the work of our politics unit. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons I'm at News Nation now is Fox's old director of politics left, Sherry Gretch, left to go to News Nation to be part of the startup there. And her very convincing argument to me was, you talk about how we need to show that aspirationally fair journalism can be profitable. It won't by the way, be as profitable as garbage, right? Garbage is more profitable, but we have to be...

Andrew Schwartz (05:51): Sure. People look like looking at car crashes.

Chris Stirewalt

(5:53): Right. Exactly. We have to be able to demonstrate in our business that aspirationally fair journalism can make a profit, and her point to me was you keep running your mouth about this stuff. We're doing it. You better come, right? You better join us in doing it. So, I better put, you know, I better put my money where my mouth is. And so I'm pleased to be part of it. But I was very pleased with Fox, we had the best decision desk. We had a fantastic

polling unit. I had a great boss in Bill Sammon, just a great team. And there is not any market pressure, no, it's not any market pressure, there's little market pressure for outlets to be good citizens and to take their role as Americans and the need for patriotic grace and all of that stuff to heart. But I gotta tell you without it, without understanding journalism inside the construct of the American system and our patriotic obligations, if you fully detach yourself from that, you end up where we are now, which is that we are soul sick and unhappy and angry at each other because we are so far apart in our understanding of each other.

Andrew Schwartz (07:01): So, the synopsis of your book says it dives into how the news is made, how it must be repaired, and that you have surprising takeaways about who's to blame. Let's jump into that. Where do you come up with that analysis?

Chris Stirewalt (07:16): That sounds like something my publisher wrote. And I hope the book delivers on those things. Look, my belief is this: we owe each other some grace and some love in the United States. We have a deep love deficiency. We have a lot of hate. We have a lot of anger, but what we fail to understand is that, and I don't like a lot of analogies about how countries are like families or whatever, countries are countries, politics is politics, and you know, that's fine, but we do owe a filial love, right? A brotherly sisterly love for our fellow Americans. It will not work. This is a voluntary association, right? It will not work if we do not have love for each other. Philadelphia baby, like, that's the idea is that we are doing this, we are engaged in this enterprise out of a common love for liberty, for ourselves, for all these other things.

Chris Stirewalt (08:13): But it requires that we have love for our fellow Americans, journalism detached from that is no journalism in America. Right? Journalism detached from that does not work. It doesn't function. No is always the easy answer, right? Never, no, wrong. Yes is risky. Yes, gets you into trouble. Yes, you can be wrong much more easily. If you, if you defeat every idea, right, if every suggestion to reach out or do something ennobling is met with a sneer, how would we ever get anything done? And I wrote about this for The Dispatch, which is: We used to understand political courage in America as being willing to take one for the greater good. We think about Gerald Ford pardoning Richard Nixon to bring Watergate to a close, Barack Obama telling the many Democrats who wanted members of the Bush administration prosecuted for allegations of torture or the Iraq war, and Obama said, absolutely not, we're not going to do that, we're not going to go down that. Those came at a political cost to those men, but they did it anyway. And that is how we used to understand political courage.

Chris Stirewalt

(9:20): Now it's to the point that we can't even get people to do the right thing if it means not hurting the other side. Right? So it's, it's now a proactive awfulness. It's not just a selfish awfulness. It is a proactive awfulness. And in the news business, some have succeeded and some have failed at different levels. I really have to say, I admire what the New York Times has been able to do. If any Republicans are listening. I understand. I hereby stipulate your point about the bias of the New York Times. I stipulate it. It is the, also the hometown newspaper of a very democratic city in the Northeastern part of the United States.

Andrew Schwartz (09:54): Sure.

Chris Stirewalt

(9:55): It is. It is what it is, but in terms of aspiring to fairness and keeping a sober sided reporting of things, I think they've done a great job. The Washington Post, democracy dies in darkness, and it became performative, and it became a lot of click baity click, and a lot of that stuff. And when I started this book, I was looking for examples of this emotion over information phenomenon. So I went to the Washington Post. It was, and this is in the introduction of the book, but it was the day of the fall of Kabul. At that point, the biggest foreign policy story in, I don't know, a decade.

Andrew Schwartz

(10:33): Sure. Yeah.

Chris Stirewalt

(10:34): And the number one, and the Washington Post had great reporters on the ground in Afghanistan doing great reporting. What was the number one story? What was the number one trending story at the Washington post? It was a story of a Roman Catholic Cardinal who had spoken out against the vaccines, who was maybe dying of coronavirus. So instead of talking about, oh my gosh, what is the latest from Kabul? It was hahaha, look at this mean old conservative, he's hateful, we hate him, and we are going to delight in his misery. Well, that's an easy click, right? And social media will rocket that thing right up to the top because it's so shareable. You put that on Twitter, you think about, you know, if a hardcore, partisan, Republican, or Democrat, your feed is going to be filled with two kinds of news stories: it's going to have a bunch of stories that tell you how smart you are and how dumb and evil the other people are, and it's also going to have stories about how good people are afflicted by those bad people.

Chris Stirewalt (11:32): And those are really the two drivers, and that's why social issues, cultural issues work better on the national news because there's nothing to do about it, right? It is an endless series of heartbreak and outrage about other people who are different than you, living differently than you. And the degree to which, in the, one of the phrases that an analyst used that I've found delightful and saddening, was optimizing for anger. And they praised the Washington Post for optimizing for anger better. And that does not create the space that we need to have a conversation.

Andrew Schwartz (12:09): So, you know, there's more than enough blame to go around on both sides of the media. You mentioned the Washington Post there's others on the right. Do you believe that journalism is responsible in part for our fractured politics and our polarization on policy?

Chris Stirewalt (12:25): Sure. I mean, all of these things are caused by and are causes of. These are ratcheting cycles. So, in the 1990s, for a lot of reasons, America got really well politically sorted. We previously lived in a country that included liberal Republicans and

conservative Democrats. In the 1990s and the mofi arena at Stanford is the, you know, the guy I looked to on this, but basically over the course of the decade as the media changed, and how people got their news changed. By the turn of the century, we were in a much flatter political demography. All of the conservatives had gone over to the Republican side, all of the liberals had gone over the Democratic side, and everybody was where they were supposed to be, or we thought they were supposed to be. And this was the beginning of the end of the old tip O'Neil all politics is local.

Chris Stirewalt (13:11): Well, it ain't. And now how you feel about the January 6th committee will be material in the vote for 'dog catcher' in 'Wolf snout county', and that's not a very healthy place to be, right? The American government, system of government, was designed for competition among states, but also among regions and that there would be regional affinity. What we have now is, parties are bad custodians of ideology, but excellent in seeking and maintaining power. And we have managed to dislocate ideology from a lot of this. The way I joke is, and I know you're a Ravens fan and I apologize in advance for this <laugh>.

Andrew Schwartz (13:54): But just our listeners know we're talking to a Steelers fan here and there is mutual respect.

Chris Stirewalt (13:59): Mutual respect, I have to say, but the, but the, the point of the Pittsburgh Steelers is not to run the, is not to run a west coast offense or go out of the eye formation or their job is to win football games and win the Superbowl. That's what their job is to do and make money. But parties are the same way. Parties exist to win elections. And as Republicans have demonstrated, and Democrats have demonstrated over the past 10 or 15 years, the ideological space that these parties have traveled in pursuit of votes, or what they think is pursuit of votes, often erroneously. If you describe to the Republican electorate of 2008, the policies that the Republican party would put forward in 2020, people would've been, they would've laughed at you. They would've been aghast right. What is this protectionism? What is this isolationism? What is all of this? We're not into that stuff. We're not into all that culture. You know, what are you talking about? And it's, you know, like boiling a frog, it happens gradually as you go. And you're, you are pursuing voters and you're, and also <laugh> a big part of this stuff is, no one has ever won an argument, and because no one ever says, you know what? You made a great point. I'm an idiot. I'm totally wrong in all of my beliefs. And you are right.

Andrew Schwartz
(15:15):

You don't see that much on TV.

Chris Stirewalt (15:16): You don't see that on TV. And I, and for years and years, I have told people when they're going on television, they're like, what should I do? People who don't go on very often. I said, what, you know, you have any advice? And I say, yeah, no one's ever won an argument. Don't argue, go on, be cheerful, be positive, present your point of view, disagree where you disagree, but don't get in an argument because your chance to be persuasive will be in how likable and relatable people find you to be, if you are cool, and people think that you're cool and that they like you, they're going to listen to you. If they

think that, it doesn't matter how right you are, it doesn't matter what you've got, if you seem like a jerk, or you seem like you are angry or hostile, they're going to pull back from that.

Andrew Schwartz (15:58): So you think if somebody goes on cable news, and regardless of what their politics is, as long as they're cool, cheerful, present something that's not combative, somebody who has an opposing view is going to look at that person and say, well, at least they're a decent spokesperson for whatever concept that they're bringing.

Chris Stirewalt (16:18): You know, how did Joe Biden become President? Joe Biden became President because enough people who were sometimes Republicans, at least, said, well, I know I don't agree with him about anything, but he seems okay.

Andrew Schwartz
(16:30): Yeah, I like Joe.

Chris Stirewalt
(16:32):

He seems like he's an okay guy. He seems like he's not a monster. And the most important question, always in every presidential election for the polling, and this is to time in memorial, is cares about people like me.

Andrew Schwartz (16:44): That's the question you ask.

Chris Stirewalt (16:46): Yeah. Is cares, does this person care about you or people like you it's asked in different ways. Hillary Clinton managed to lose on that question by a wide margin to the host of the Celebrity Apprentice, which is a pretty, that's pretty tough to do. That's, that's pretty tough to do.

Andrew Schwartz (17:02): But a lot of people didn't think he, well, I guess at the time when he ran against Hillary, a lot of people weren't saying he cares about people like me either.

Chris Stirewalt (17:09): Well, long ago, the American editor for the economist, this is long, long ago. I think this is probably around his 2000 run. I can't remember when but said Donald Trump is a poor person's idea of a rich person. And I definitely think that there's something about Donald Trump. The Bucket of Blood was the bar across from the landfill. It was in between the landfill and the corrugate, the old corrugating plant where I grew up, and the Bucket of Blood, the best named bar also had weird swing shifts because their liquor license allowed them to be there to catch the guys who were getting off the cat eye so that they could drink in the morning. R.I.P. Bucket of Blood. But those guys could relate to Donald Trump, right?

Andrew Schwartz
(17:48):
Yeah.

Chris Stirewalt

(17:49) Because if they, they, cuz they said, you know, if I had a billion dollars, I'd get rid of my wife <laugh> and I'd get a, I'd get a newer model and I'd have my name on the side of my airplane. And those same guys, if Bill Gates had walked into the bar, would've been like, who is that dork? Who's that guy, what a loser. And, and he's carrying a tote bag full of books and he's wearing a crew neck sweater. No thanks.

Andrew Schwartz (18:10): So given this climate that you talk about in the book, and you know, it's really a fascinating discussion. How can Americans reliably consume news?

Chris Stirewalt (18:20): So I guess the most important thing is to know, I joked at the time, you know, the Black Lives Matter moment, the Me-Too moment, I said, you know, it's really good that we're coming to terms with the fact that middle aged white guys don't know everything. I said, you know, who does know everything? Nobody, nobody knows everything. This is the Edmond Burkes, the ad hocracy, right? We are making this up as we go along, and America is always making itself new. We're always figuring out as we go, this is the best thing. But humility for makers of news and consumers of news is really important. You have to understand that not one outlet or one person has all of the answers. You have to be courageous to say, I am going to be open to the world and I'm going to, I'm going to read widely, consume widely. I think it's crucially important. If you're a Republican, make sure you have some democratic inputs or some left, left of center inputs. NPRs morning edition, millions of conservatives listen to that. There's broad listenership across the country... cuz people are taking their kids into. So that's good.

Andrew Schwartz

(19:29):

Of course.

Andrew Schwartz (19:32): I've always said that if NPR turns itself into a television station with all of its correspondents all over the world, yeah. It would be the thing that people would watch.

Chris Stirewalt (19:41): Charles Murray's book "Coming Apart" points to a lot of this. So we have people in the 20% of Americans who are getting better and better educated, more and more elite, more and more the news flows they're paying for their news. They're subscribing to multiple outlets. What's happening on the other side of that is in the 80% is not great because we have a lot of people, I talk about this in the book, you know, we have a significant chunk of the American populace that is understandably tuned out.

Andrew Schwartz

(20:12): Sure.

Chris Stirewalt

(20:12): They have absented themselves from this process. They are low propensity voters. They don't consume news. They're getting news often through just social media streams.

This is very dangerous, right? This is very bad. You have an obligation. Our politicians do not like to tell people what they owe. They don't like to do it.

Chris Stirewalt (20:33): But people actually like to be told you have duties as a citizen. We can think back to, and this dates me, but when, do you remember George W. Bush got in trouble for saying when people said, well, what, what, what should people do in the wake of 9/11? What should people do? And he did say go shopping. Now he said a lot of other things. Yeah. But he was like, get out there and spend money and get out in the economy.

Andrew Schwartz
(20:56): And people did.

Chris Stirewalt
(20:57): And they did. It's true. But it sounds hollow. When you say to people who, Americans yearn to be good citizens, to be part of this. A big part of being a good citizen is being a well-informed citizen. This will not work. We will not keep this Republic under any circumstance if we are not a well-informed electorate. And we are right now learning some very hard lessons about the costs of ignorance and misinformation.

Andrew Schwartz (21:27): So, Bob Schiefer and I did a podcast for a long time leading up to the 2016 election called 'About the News,' and we wrote a book following the 2016 election called "Overload," and part of the premise of the book was Americans are overwhelmingly better equipped, better informed than they ever have been, but are they simply overwhelmed? What do you think of that?

Chris Stirewalt (21:50): I think it is, you know, the parable about the blind men and the elephant?

Andrew Schwartz
(21:55):
mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Chris Stirewalt
(21:55): This is where you put guys around and they'd say, well, it's a rope. It's a tree, says the guy at the leg, it's a snake, says the guy at the trunk. We have siloed ourselves to such a point in our media consumption. I think it's called the hostile media effect. So, it was first discovered, the social psychologist, Lee Ross at Stanford and his team came up with this. They took, this was during the real hostilities in Lebanon in the early 1980s and there had been a massacre of Arabs or Palestinian, I forget what, but basically, not surprisingly, the Arab states blamed Israel, and the Israelis said, well, it was a Druze militia or whatever. It's really not our fault. And it was turning into a big, it was a big flare up.

Chris Stirewalt (22:45): It was a big problem. So they got a group, they took a group of Stanford students, and they asked them questions to determine how they viewed the conflict, and then sorted all of the pro-Arab into one and all of the pro-Israeli into another group. They showed them an identical news report, the same exact news report, and then asked them questions about it. Guess what? Each group was certain that it was terribly

biased against them and that the creators of that news report would have excused the same behavior in the other side because they are so clearly biased. And it has been proven again and again and again, this hostile media effect. So it's you think about like when Democrats are trying to get cuckoo for cocoa puffs, Republicans nominated as they have been in this election cycle which is what.

Andrew Schwartz
(23:39): Pennsylvania.

Chris Stirewalt (23:40): Yeah. Which is reckless and wrong. It's bad. It's dis-patriotic. Don't do that. By the way, if you say that that democracy is in peril and that the Republic is teetering on the brink, don't help nuts get nominated so that you can win elections more easily. That's not good <laugh> but anyway, when they do it, it doesn't work if you just run positive ads for the fluffernutters. What you have to do is run attack ads from the left that say he's too pro-Trump. And all of a sudden, the ears perk up, oh, they're attacking him for being too pro-Trump. Oh, I stand with him now, I'm going to come and stand with him. We observe this with Sarah Palin. Sarah Palin had no business. I mean, she didn't make it a whole term as Alaska's governor, but Republicans knew that if the New York Times hated her and the mainstream media in America hated her, she must be doing something right.

Chris Stirewalt (24:35): And Donald Trump was sort of the apotheosis of that idea, which is why are you attacking our guy constantly? And the more you attack him, this is one thing that Democrats have failed to understand in all of this stuff, you will not change their minds by attack. What you will change their minds through is sympathy and saying, and we care. I think the January 6th committee's valorizing Mike Pence is quite smart on their part. It's good for the Republicans, which is bad for Democrats. I understand that in the binary concept, but they're not saying to Republicans, all Republicans are bad. They're saying Mike Pence did a good thing. He was a good guy. He acted correctly. That opens the door of perception for Republicans. But all that is a very long way of saying, if you are in a silo and your news is all coming from the Washington Post or Fox News or wherever you're getting in it.

Chris Stirewalt (25:29): And you live in this little space, the conclusions that you're reaching are logical, cuz you haven't seen the rest of the elephant. You have not been around to see the rest of it. So you're reaching logical conclusions based on lies, eliding. And I guess I'll put it this way. We have a lot of Americans who want to do a better job at being citizens. But what our political leaders tell them is only after I have all the power, will we be in a position to do it? We remember the Republicans with Obamacare. They had been bellyaching about Obamacare for 10 years. And then they said, but once we have the House, okay, well now we have that, once we have the House and the Senate, okay. Once we have the House, the Senate and the Presidency, then we will come up with our great healthcare plan.

Chris Stirewalt (26:14): And they said, okay, what do you got? And they're like, well, here's our plan. We're going to fake repeal Obamacare, take the money for tax cuts. And then we promise in three years we will come back with a plan. You're like, holy cannoli guys. You had all of this time to come up with a plan, but you couldn't because what would a plan

have been? A liability, right? Having a plan would just be another political liability. We have the concept of the sun party and the moon party. You have one party that's generated, and for most of the 20th century, the democratic party in the United States was the sun party, generated the issue set, generated what the discussion was. And then you have another party that reflects back the different version. So, and in the United States and Britain, that was pretty much what you saw post World War II era. The energy, the origin of the energy was on the, in labor, in the labor party or among the Democrats. And then you had the Republican party, which cooled and reflected back that energy. Now we have two parties that don't want to be majority parties because being majority parties stink. When Republicans say, well, January 6th committee, we should be talking about inflation. I say, okay, what do you got? And it's like, well, you know, it's bad. And you're like, okay, I stipulate, what do you want to do? And they don't even, there's not even the, what Republicans could propose for dealing with inflation, which would be massive spending cuts on the federal level. They're not going to propose cuz they're trying to get reelected. What they want to do is complain about it. And I know that we're here to talk about the media and not that, but the phenomenon of the perverse incentives of a duopoly in the American political system, anybody who is as old as us will remember the Cola wars fought between Coke and Pepsi.

Chris Stirewalt (27:53): It didn't matter who won the Cola wars. It mattered that they'd be fought that you go drink more Cola and you say, oh, Coke will never perish. I don't know what sort of deviant, terrible, people drink Pepsi. It's gross. But I assume <laugh>, I assume they don't know that they're bad people, but that the Pepsi people say we are here, and we will never surrender to Coca-Cola. And that's where we are with these parties. We have a host of issues, take immigration. 70% of Americans agree on immigration, strict enforcement of existing laws, including tough border security, and a pathway to citizenship for those in the United States, illegally who haven't committed other crimes.

Andrew Schwartz

(28:31): And that's a lot of people who agree on an issue that seems to be so fractured.

Chris Stirewalt

(28:35): Yes. And we are told that on issues like abortion, it's impossible. You have 75% agreement on, just for starters, you have all of the pro-life people. And most of the pro-choice people agree. Yeah. After the second, you know, for late term, abortion is a no go. That's not popular. There's not a lot of, there's no wellspring of support for that, but we don't do it because it's not in the interest of these parties. And I'm not going to, anybody who has ever heard me before, I will not now engage in a vicious jeremiad against the American primary system, but it stinks on ice. And it creates a lot of bad incentives that are then reflected in the media audience. Why, if you were a Democrat who had a great idea for compromise on gun control and to try to curb mass shootings, where's the last place to go? Don't you go on MSNBC, don't go over to CNN, don't talk about it because what will happen is you will go on and then another guy will come on right after you and be like, what a sellout he is. This guy's selling you down the river. I will never surrender right.

Andrew Schwartz (29:44): Talking about the guy who's trying to compromise.

Chris Stirewalt (29:45): Yeah, exactly.

Andrew Schwartz (29:46): You know, and this is why we're talking about the media as it impacts our policy, our politics, is that these echo chambers reinforce more extreme points of view.

Chris Stirewalt (29:56): Absolutely. It's conflict. So there is no news. This is why 24 hours is the wrong increment in which to consume news. There are not enough. There are not enough truly national news stories, right. To make up around the clock national news. So what we have, we have news inflation. We have too many hours, and too many pixels, chasing too little news.

Andrew Schwartz (30:20): And isn't our news mostly talk now, anyway?

Chris Stirewalt
(30:24): Yes.

Andrew Schwartz
(30:24): It's not, it's not actually hard news. Like if you watch the BBC, it's hard news.

Chris Stirewalt (30:28): Well, here's the thing you have Norm McDonald, R.I.P., used to joke, he goes, you know, when I was a kid, the news was only about 30 minutes, and it wasn't even the whole 30 minutes cuz at the end they always had a story about an elk in a sporting goods store or something. So it wasn't even the whole half of the hour. And most of the history of the news business, which in America goes back to Ben Franklin, and the early newspapers in the colonies.

Andrew Schwartz (30:55): Early newsletters, even.

Chris Stirewalt (30:56):
Early newsletters.

Andrew Schwartz (30:57): I would always say about newsletters they're so old, they're new.

Chris Stirewalt (30:59): They're so old, they're new. You know, when, back when Ben Franklin was slipping copies of the Pennsylvania Gazette into the mail bags of the riders that he was dispatching as the postmaster, the idea was we can't get enough information, I think this goes to your point, we can't get enough information into the hands of the people who want it, and we can't get it fast enough. So for the next 200 years, the struggle was, we'll build the telegraph. My favorite in that is when the first long distance telegram, of course, used by Samuel Morris to go to Baltimore, and Washington to Baltimore. And he sent the first news report, which was about, not surprisingly, a bill that was stalled in committee in Congress and the headline in the magazine, I forget the name of the magazine, but the next day was space is obliterated, right?

Chris Stirewalt (31:53): That for all of human history, the struggle had been how to get, how to let people know. People used to have until not that far back in human history, watch fires, right? How will we know when the invading army is coming? I will light a bonfire on top of this hill that you'll see from there to there, like that's not caveman times. And so we have shrunk down space, shrunk down space, shrunk down space, and finally got it to the point that we thought we wanted to go, which is that we can know everything all at once, right? Everything all at once. And it is impossible for an individual to sort out that flow of information. What is required are people in my vocation who can say, this is more important than that. This is true. That is false. This is real. That's not real.

Chris Stirewalt (32:42): It used to be that the news cycle was like a waterfall, right? It's pouring over, it's pouring, and then here's the next thing, and then here's the next thing. Now it is like a Mobius strip of BS because it's the same stories over and over again in different iterations coming back, and coming back, and coming back. And it's the same stuff. And it's to the point now, whether it's gun control, abortion, immigration, like it's these, and it's just it, you lose track almost at a certain point of where we are in the conversation, cuz it's just the same conversations happening over again. And each side in the media can determine, is this a good story for us? Or a bad story for us? And what they mean by this is do our people like this, right? Is it good for our side and bad for their side? Then yes. Why do Democrats love coverage of January 6th? It's great for them, right? It looks bad for Republicans, looks good for them. Why do Republicans love stories about crime? It looks good for Republicans, bad for Democrats. Unfortunately, the underlying issues require statesmanship to address.

Andrew Schwartz (33:43): Well, and I don't think it's cynical. I mean, you tell me if you do, a lot of this is driven by not just, you know, people like this, so we're going to report on this and in this way, because we're going to make money.

Chris Stirewalt (33:55): Well, and the other thing is we cannot lose money, or we cannot miss. Right? The fear of failure leads to people not trying things. I love what News Nation is doing cuz they're trying something, right?

Andrew Schwartz
(34:07): Yeah.

Chris Stirewalt
(34:08): When Fox News got started, they were trying something. It was an idea like let's try it and see if it works. Over time though, what happens is ossification, right? These things harden. And then you say, yeah, you know, we could try it that way, but why don't we just do more of what we're doing?

Andrew Schwartz (34:24): Cause we're making money doing it.

Chris Stirewalt (34:24): We're making money doing it. And I'm not going to be the guys as I, you know, as I said at the outset, no is always the easiest answer. Right? Yeah. The easy answer is out. It'll never work. Just keep, be cynical. Assume the worst. You'll seldom be

disappointed and go do it. On the other hand, to go out and say, I have an idea and I'm going to put it into practice. I'm going to pay my nickel and take my chance. That's what is required. I am optimistic because in 1920 KDKA, the first radio station in Pittsburgh, broadcast the results of the 1920 presidential election. And when they called it for Harding, there was no one listening because there was nobody around that had a radio that was going to receive it. Right. But they were doing it to say they did, right.

Andrew Schwartz (35:08): It was the early days of radio.

Chris Stirewalt (35:08): Brand new day. And, and we have done it. We have been the first we have, we have broadcast results and they were on the roof of a Westing house plant in Pittsburgh. We have done it well, you know, if a race call falls in a forest and there's no one there to hear it, did it really happen at all? We went from that to 20 years later, a nation with every household essentially had a radio in it. Americans were savvy radio listeners. In between 1920 and 1940, we had Father Kauflin with a massive share of the electorate, in my book, there is research to demonstrate, even controlled for the presence of the number of Roman Catholic voters, how places where Father Kauflin was very popular, it affected Franklin Roosevelt's vote share in the 1936 midterms. Huge influence that he had, evil influence that he had. Huey Long, the great scam artist of all time.

Chris Stirewalt (36:02): He would be terrifying if he wasn't, he is terrifying, but he is also hilarious. So he is like Donald Trump sort of in that way. And I always point people to the War of the World when Orson Wells recreated the War of the World's, I think it was 1938, people were not sophisticated enough consumers of radio news to identify, ah, this is fake and they panicked and were stuffing wet towels under their doors so that the men from Mars were not going to, you know, kill them all and all that stuff. When things change radically, you have to give people time to be better consumers. And I think this is true for the constitution, the understanding of the constitution, and the understanding of the American system, but also for news consumption. We've been through a brutal stress test, right? 2015 to 2022 has been a brutal stress test for this country.

Chris Stirewalt (36:51): We've held the line, but <laugh>, you know, we look like I do after, you know, carrying the groceries in. I'm like a little disheveled, there's sweat there's I mean, that's not great, right? <laugh> We're there. We did it. But like it's not, it's not super. So the good news out of it is the National Constitution Center and Annenburg school at University of Pennsylvania, their annual, they do the survey every year. And I used to be able to get a great column out of it every year. Look at how dumb people are, how dare you. You don't know how many branches of government are. You don't know how many Justices are on the Supreme Court, and you'd get these rock bottom numbers. How did the, you should have seen the increase. You should see the increase in 2020. Two impeachments, the besieging of the capital, pandemic involving questions about mandates, American adults have had to get read in, right?

Chris Stirewalt (37:42): Oh, okay. So he can't, you know, he can do that. He cannot do that. That's how this works. That's how that doesn't work. Can the vice president cast the deciding vote? Who does this? So we've had this great crash course in that stuff. And I think

we will be better custodians of our liberty as, as a result of that. But also when you look at the research, the Knight Foundation does on American news consumers, it's not like we don't know. Right? It's not like we don't know that it's bad. It's not like Americans say, I don't know what you're talking about. One of the heartbreaks in their survey work though, is the percentage of Americans who feel like the reason that news is unreliable is that it's on purpose, right? And that it's out of malice that people are doing, and that's, that's really too bad because most of the mistakes that are being made, most of the air, because they ask people, why, what do you think the cause of these errors are?

Chris Stirewalt (38:35): And the majority, more than 50% anyway, said, oh, it was intentional. You're like, oh no, it's just hard. The news business is hard. People make mistakes. It's imperfect. You're just out there trying to do it and give these people a little space and grace. But I feel confident that in the next decade, Americans will be much savvy consumers of news, much better consumers of news. And I hate to tell everybody, but it will not occur by outside forces acting upon the business. It will be the bottom up, not the top down. There's no external force from the government that is going to come in and make the news business be good. We have a demand problem. And the demand problem is people want sugary sweet snacks. They don't want green beans. Right? You know this very well with your work. The trick is you have to provide the nutritious plate.

Chris Stirewalt (39:33): You have to do it in a way that people can, they can get it down. They can, they can get through it. You can't just throw them a bunch of raw kale and say, you gotta do it. But you gotta say, I have prepared this balanced, healthy meal for you. When you put a show together, you thought, okay, this you'll like, this you won't like, this you'll be kind of okay with, but if I put a teriyaki glaze on it, you probably will go for it, and we'll put together something that you can consume. My obligation, I always think about a guy. I have a guy in my mind, this is a made-up person, a fictitious person. And if it accidentally is a real person, I apologize that I've been thinking it's creepy that I've been thinking about you all these years. <laugh> but he and his family own a hardware store in like French Lick, Indiana.

Andrew Schwartz (40:19):

And hometown of Larry Bird.

Chris Stirewalt (40:20): There you go. And he wants to be a good citizen, but business is pretty good and he's pretty busy. They get a little rental business they started on the side doing equipment and things are going well. And he wants to be informed, to be a good citizen. But as your work illustrated, he's overwhelmed. Right? I turn it on. Is this real? Is this not real? My obligation as a journalist is to him, or the people like him who are like, okay, I have a half an hour. I want to feel like I'm smarter and I know something more and I don't wanna write or broadcast for elites who will just, you know, scratch my belly and tell me how smart I am. I want to be of service to that guy who's trying to be a good citizen.

Andrew Schwartz (41:01):

So you think in the next 10 years, news is going to get better, not worse?

Chris Stirewalt (41:06): Oh totally. I'm a believer in the sine wave of coming together and falling apart. I think that countries, and people, and industries are always either coming

together or they're falling apart. And I always use the instance of the period of time between November, 1963, the assassination of JFK, fall of Saigon, April, 1975. Woof. Right.

Andrew Schwartz

(41:32): This was a period.

Chris Stirewalt

(41:33): Yeah. The, you know...

Andrew Schwartz (41:34): And in between there Martin Luther king, right? Malcolm X, et cetera.

Chris Stirewalt (41:37): Yeah. Kill the president, kill his brother, kill the world historical leader of the civil rights movement. Kill Malcolm X, try to kill George Wallace. George Wallace wins electoral votes. There's riots in more than a hundred cities, and not just smashing out the windows at a Ferragamo, but burning down huge, right here in DC, where we're sitting right now, and all of that stuff transpired in the United States in a period of 12 years. And it was really, really rough. And then things got super groovy. I, by the way, attribute some of this to the bicentennial in 1976, that coming on the heels of the vice president and president both resigning in disgrace from separate scandals, the bicentennial gave American chance to like, Hey, we're this. This is cool.

Andrew Schwartz (42:23): You know, there's really something to that because you know, in 1976 I was eight years old, and I'll never forget going out to the national mall and seeing the beach boys play, and the patriotism, and the flags.

Chris Stirewalt

(42:37): Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz

(42:38): And it was like a new beginning for America.

Chris Stirewalt (42:40): It was a new beginning. And we elected a president, Americans elected a president who was an outsider who promised to, you know, clean things up and do all that. And it didn't work out so great for that guy, but in the period between 1976 and whether you date it to the Clinton impeachment, or the Iraq war, whatever your point where it ends, we reinvented ourselves, and we invented the internet. We defeated Soviet communism. We did, it was amazing. Right? We got, we made the world so much richer. The world got freer. Things got better. America was in this amazing period of growth and expansion and change. And then that ended <laugh> and the, for young people, I always, you know, say this century's not been ACEs so far, right? Basically, we start out with a massive terrorist attack and are right now limping out of a pandemic and are riven by insane political hatreds.

Chris Stirewalt (43:34): So I know it's not a good look. It's thrown around a lot these days, but it is, the aphorism is true about hard times, make good people, good people make good

times, good times make weak people, and weak people make bad times. And we have been a victim of our own success to such a degree, I refer to us as having cultural type two diabetes. We are so rich and so affluent, so fat and so used to having our way that we have forgotten about the necessary work of citizenship that's underneath. And by the way, if you work in the news business and somebody says, some nerd says, what about the constitution? What about the people? Don't we have an obligation to the country and they're like, country's doing just fine. Right? We're we have to get what's, we have to look out for number one. Now you say that, and people are like, oh yeah, I guess we do. Like, I guess we do. And I can tell from my, you know, my peers and people I know in the business, the experience, how wrong the handling of the 2016 election was, is a big stink pile in the corner of the room of American journalism. And that awareness is good. They should be aware. That was a botch from pen to post. And...

Andrew Schwartz (44:52): You mean, you mean the polling?

Chris Stirewalt (44:54): No, no, no. In 2016, Jim Rutenberg wrote a piece that they ran on the front page of the New York Times that basically said, you know, maybe it's time to get rid of all these old niceties about journalism and maybe it's time, Trump is such an asymmetrical threat, maybe it's time to ditch all that stuff. And the answer of course is exactly the opposite. When stuff gets weird that's when you go back to first principles, right? Chris Wallace, my friend, and who just, I admire so much when he won, they gave him some big journalism award, I went to the dinner, and he basically said, get out of the arena with Trump, right? You want to be a good journalist. Your job is to not confront Trump. Your job is to tell the truth to your readers and your viewers. Keep it clean, cuz all we have in the end is our remove from the conflict, right? Those people are in conflict. We are here to report on it truthfully and honestly, but press briefings where Jim Acosta or whoever, are fighting and arguing with Donald Trump, is good for Donald Trump. It's good for Jim Acosta. It's not good for the country. Right?

Andrew Schwartz (46:01): And you think going forward, people are starting to recognize this. And it's a, it's a real hope. I mean, because one of the things that, you know, we're a bipartisan national security think tank, as we watch our news become fractured in the way it is and polarized, you know, I start to think about it as a national security problem.

Chris Stirewalt (46:20):
For sure.

Andrew Schwartz (46:22): And you know, the fact that you're thinking people are now more aware of this than ever. And that gives you hope...

Chris Stirewalt
(46:28):
For sure.

Andrew Schwartz
(46:28): ... is really interesting to me

Chris Stirewalt (46:30): If I'm Vladimir Putin. And what I know about the United States is what I see on United States television or on American social media ...

Andrew Schwartz (46:38): Which is intertwined with this inextricably.

Chris Stirewalt (46:40): Right? That I'm going to say they're broken, right? They're defeated. They're already defeated. I have, sadly, had many opportunities to quote Abraham Lincoln's young men's lyceum speech, which he delivered, I think 23 years before the start of the civil war. And this is the one where he said that we will endure for all time as free men or die by suicide. And if you were just, if all you knew about America was what was on the news and on social media, you would say, well, they're about to die by suicide, right? They're about to die by suicide. But what that forgets is that underneath that is a majority of Americans of goodwill who want this to work. They want it to work. And I think the lesson of Ukraine was really important. Putin was acting based on his perception of what America was and then he did it. And America was like, no, absolutely not. Absolutely not. When Vladimir Putin invades, and Zelensky goes to a 85% approval rating in the United States, and Republicans who had been kissy kissy with Putin before, it was immediately revealed that for most of them, it was some stuff you said to the enemy of my enemy as my friend, and they were being defensive of Trump about the Russia stuff and all that melts away, and Americans said, absolutely not. We will help. This is unacceptable.

Andrew Schwartz (48:02): And NATO's important.

Chris Stirewalt (48:03): And NATO's important. And I remember for me, it was watching video of Ukrainians holding mass in a subway station during an air raid. And it's like for Americans, they see that stuff, and they're like, like us, this is like us, and we want to go help those people. So we have had worse times than this politically. And we've certainly had worse times with this in the media. One of the things that makes it hard for Americans to understand, I love you baby boomers, you're beautiful, but <laugh> what happened in the United States between Pearl Harbor and the fall of Saigon was a bubble in the media. That wasn't what it was like before. And it's not what it's like now. That was an anomaly. The Ernie Pyle, Edward R. Murrow, all of that stuff was really great, but it was the exception, not the rule and what came before it and what came after it is totally different.

Chris Stirewalt (48:57): It just takes time for us. The simplest way I can put it is anytime anybody tells me that we need like a truth ministry to do this, or we need some regulation of the media. I say, so what's, you're telling me is that we should trust Americans to vote, but not read. Right? We should trust Americans to make a determination about who will lead the most powerful country in human history, but definitely not their Facebook feed. And if you can't trust Americans to figure out how to get informed and you can't trust Americans to do that. Well then, it's too, it's too late already.

Andrew Schwartz (49:36): Chris, this has been a fascinating discussion. The book is called "Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back." It's out August 23rd. I know I'm getting a copy or two. Thanks a million.

Chris Stirewalt (49:48): My pleasure.

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