

## You Might Be Right - Media - Transcript

**Chris Stirewalt:** If you do not have a healthful media diet, it is a fundamentally unloving act to your fellow American because you are not in a position to be a partner in self-government with that person because you don't even know who they are.

**Judy Woodruff:** In order to keep our democracy strong, I absolutely believe we are going to always need a strong, smart free press. How can we fulfill our role as citizens if we don't know what's going on and we need the press to be our eyes and ears?

**Marianne Wanamaker:** Welcome "To You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee. Trust in the news media is at an all time low. In a recent Gallup survey, half of Americans indicated that they believe the news media intends to mislead, misinform, or persuade the public to a particular viewpoint. This distrust contributes to both our increasing polarization and the spread of misinformation as Americans look to alternative sources for their news.

In this episode, the governors and their guests discuss the role the news media plays in our democracy and how to be a responsible news consumer today. This episode was recorded at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, in May, 2023.

**Bill Haslam:** Phil, it's great to be back with you. There's a lot of kind of easy punching bags in today's world. One of those is the media and whether it's a left or right, people could say, "Wow, this is the media's fault." And I think the data shows that trust in the media is at an all time low and think not just are they misinforming, that they're actually intentionally misinforming us to lead us to a certain place today.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Yeah, this is an interesting topic for the two of us because I think, I mean both of us have been so intimately involved and probably have all sorts of complaints about and all sorts of nice things to say about the media. This one's very close to home, but it's the channel by which so much of what happens in the public sector is moved to the public and it's changed so much in the last couple decades. It's an important conversation.

**Bill Haslam:** Yeah, I do think we both started our political careers in a world where everybody still read their local newspaper. They watched one of the major three networks for local and national news, and then we lived through the transition where that's just not true anymore. So I think today's discussion is going to be interesting and let's go ahead and go to our first guest.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Okay.

**Bill Haslam:** We're going to have a great time with our guest today. Chris Stirewalt is not only a great human being and really funny, but he's a senior fellow here at AEI, focused on American

politics, voting trends, public opinion, and specifically the media. He has his own podcast that we won't compare listenership, but called the "Ink Stained Wretches," which I'm a listener and it's worth listening to. He was a political editor at Fox News Channel for 11 or 12 years. Notably, he was the election forecaster on the decision desk that made the very early but correct call that Joe Biden would carry Arizona in 2020 and there might've been a few consequences after that call one way or another that we can talk about. But prior to being at Fox, he wrote a twice-weekly column for the Washington Examiner. Most importantly, he hails proudly from West Virginia and began his politics, his career, for papers covering local politics in West Virginia.

So, Chris, thrilled to be with you. I'll start with maybe the other part of the bio. You recently wrote a book called Broken News.

**Chris Stirewalt:** I did do that.

**Bill Haslam:** How is it broken and how did it get that way?

**Chris Stirewalt:** Well, first let me say thank you for having me and thank you guys for doing this because we have very few good role models in public life today for people of different parties and who have different views on things, who can have decent, humane discussions. And I think your experience and your example that you've set demonstrates that if we can treat each other as people before we treat each other as partisans, the possibility for real progress and real growth and healing,, hopefully is there. So thank you for doing what you're doing.

Broken news, how did it get broken? Well, people wanted worse products. One of the things that I have to remind people in my business: this is a demand side issue. This is not a supply side issue. It's not like Americans are out there saying, if only I could get more boring, balanced news, I would do it. What happened was basically, to do a 30-second thumbnail history: in the 1990s, America got really well politically sorted. After a long time when states like your own, you had conservative Democrats, you had liberal Republicans from the Northeast, you had this interesting hodgepodge, this menagerie of political views that were pretty regional when you got down to it, that what really the factions that the founders had envisioned that were arranged around geography and economic interest were still pretty dominant, right? And whether you were a Republican or a Democrat from Tennessee, you were a Tennessean first and you were interested in advancing what was good for Tennessee.

In the 1990s, a couple things happened. Number one, cable television, and this is one that really wowed me in the research I did for the book. The peak year of television consumption in American history didn't come until 2009, 2010, and it was almost nine hours on average per household in the United States on average. And cable had really facilitated a kind of bespoke media experience that had not been possible to people before because what did we watch or listen to, what was on? Right? My children will never be able to understand the idea of why did you watch that? And the answer is because that's what was on. That was what was on. Why did we watch The Sound of Music? Because The Sound of Music was on television, so we watched

it. Why did you read that? Why did you do that? Because, and I make a comparison to the obesity epidemic, for most of human history, the struggle was to get enough and then all of a sudden the struggle became to regulate how much you were taking in and start to make different choices.

The sorting that happened politically in the United States in the 1990s was media driven in big parts. There were other factors that worked in, but you ended up in a world where everybody who thought of themselves as a liberal went to one corner and everybody who thought of themselves as a conservative went to the other corner and that overlay came in. Meantime, local media starts to die. Over leveraged, over consolidated, the newspapers, small town and regional newspapers, had been the bulwark, the backbone of the American news business for 200 years, right? And as the market changed with the arrival of the internet and that got hollowed out when people could put their classified ads up for free, they could get the weather forecast for free. They could do everything for free and they didn't need the newspaper anymore. And that started to hollow out. That sorted national politics got washed over the country in a red versus blue concept that was not accurate, wholesome, helpful or healthful, and people were keeping their eyes on Washington instead of what was in their community.

**Bill Haslam:** Today people can get information anywhere. How do you get your news?

**Chris Stirewalt:** Well, I'm weird. I'm supposed to be weird. You want me to be weird. The American Enterprise Institute and The Dispatch and NewsNation, places that I work, want me to be weird and they want me to get up in the morning and read a lot and consume a lot. They want me to do that because what I'm supposed to do, if I'm doing my job right, normal people, I have in mind always a person. He is a guy, he's a fictional character I created.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Chris Stirewalt:** He owns a Ace Hardware store in Terre Haute, Indiana.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Chris Stirewalt:** They got a little rental business that they got going and it's making pretty good money.

**Bill Haslam:** Yeah.

**Chris Stirewalt:** His son's getting ready for college and he hopes maybe he'll come back, but he's not sure. This guy does not have time in his day to do what I do, which is to read The New York Times, to read the Washington Post, to read The Wall Street Journal, to follow breaking news, to go to the aggregators.

**Bill Haslam:** So what do you tell him to do?

**Chris Stirewalt:** Well, read me. No, no, no, but one of the changes in the way that we get the news – once upon a time, it could be said that you were done reading the news.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Chris Stirewalt:** You remember that there was a time in American life where if you read the newspaper in the morning and watched the evening news, you could fairly say you're done consuming the news and then we'll try it again tomorrow. Now there is a waterfall effect that makes you feel as if you're never finished and then I'm just swimming in it and I can't get to the end of it. And people get– The percentage of Americans who now tell people conducting surveys that they feel anxious and afraid and concerned about what they're seeing in the news is really high. It's like 40 or 50% of Americans now say that they feel anxiety about things that they see in the news.

Most of the things that are in the news are what? Things that you cannot do anything about. Most of the things that are in the national news are stuff that you have no effect over. And whether it is talking about the coming climate crisis or the rise of authoritarianism, these are abstract, mostly abstract ideas that there are things in your life that concretely that you can do, but what are you supposed to do? Sit and obsess and feel bad about it all the time and live in that space. And, unfortunately, as the media broke, what's the best way to attach users to your product? Anger.

**Bill Haslam:** Stir outrage.

**Chris Stirewalt:** Yeah, fear and anger, right? Anger lives right next door to fear because you can't really be angry at something you're not afraid of. You can be contemptuous of it, but you can't be angry at it. So first, people need to be afraid and then they need to be angry about it and you need to tell them who to be angry at.

Andrey Mir, the media scholar coined the term post journalism, which I think is really useful. I came into the business right on the bubble. I was the last days of the Raj. I started as a full-time newspaper reporter out of college in 1998, and that was right at the beginning of the end and the end of print journalism was about 2005 where it hit the peak revenues and then revenues declined 90%.

**Bill Haslam:** Right. We can't ignore that the business model has changed dramatically.

**Chris Stirewalt:** It collapsed, and by the way, 50,000 newsroom jobs across the United States got eliminated over the next period of time. Where were those jobs? They weren't in the big cities. They were in small towns and mediums. So long story short, you have this totally scattered, atomized media. How do I get you? If I'm not getting you by having information, if you're not coming to me for the stocks and if you're not coming to me for the score of the

Volunteers game, what are you coming to me for?

You're coming to me for me to mirror back to you the feeling that you have. You're coming to me for validation of your feeling and for fellow feeling, for a sense of fraternity and a sense of community in a culture that is very short on those feelings these days. So we went from a top-down information based exchange to a bottom up, us mirroring the feelings back to people. So before you start telling people the news, you have to make sure that you tell them, "I'm with you and those other guys are bad. And here's why."

**Phil Bredeesen:** You spoke earlier about these changes that have happened in human society that we're trying to deal with, things like eating and you talked about other things with 100,000 year old set of synopsis wired in there. I think in a lot of ways it goes even deeper than that and that what people have learned to do are to tap into these very kind of basic things that we have wired in that were useful when we were wandering around on the plains, and worried about tigers and not so useful today. What do you have to change in the media to sort of divert them from this sort of playing with the way we're wired?

**Chris Stirewalt:** You guys both got elected and reelected and you—

**Bill Haslam:** You sound amazed by that.

**Chris Stirewalt:** Being willing to do some things but not other things.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Chris Stirewalt:** Right. You were not willing to get elected doing the wrong things. There were some things that you said, "Well, it may be effective, but I won't do it."

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Chris Stirewalt:** I am here to say that 24 years before the Civil War or so Abraham Lincoln speaking to the young men's lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, said that the United States will either endure for all time as a nation of free men or die by suicide, and the option remains exactly the same. And either consumers are going to say, "This is unwholesome. What I'm consuming and what I'm doing is bad and I know it's bad." And they do know it's bad. We have lots of survey research that people know the difference informationally between Taco Bell or I guess I would say in your case, Krystal, they know that there's a difference between Krystal and a T-bone steak.

They know that there's a difference there. With, to use the obesity example, it is a noetic problem on a certain level. Once you intellectually can understand, "Yep, I see it, I know where it is. There is an informational problem here." And that once people understand the problem, my hope is – because I will promise you, just like there are lots of politicians who are willing to cut

every corner and tell every lie to get elected, there will always be a race to the bottom in the media that people are willing to do the worst things to try to get there. We have a bottom-up problem, so we need a bottom-up solution.

**Bill Haslam:** And so keep going. What's that look like? I mean, there's a lot of discussion about how do we get our politics, how do we call it to a better place? Same thing with media. How does that bottom-up solution actually work?

**Chris Stirewalt:** There are places out there that are trying to do aspirationally fair news. We're never going to have perfect unbiased news because just like you'll never have a perfect jury, everybody brings their own perspective to the case and we're human beings and all of that stuff, and that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to be fair.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Chris Stirewalt:** There are some practical things that you can do. We talk about in the book about ways of being and ways of thinking. For consumers, they have to know that if it feels too good, it probably is. The pastor at my church one time said, began a sermon. He said, "Do you all feel comfortable in your faith?" And we said, "Yes, I feel quite comfortable. I'm feeling very comfortable." He said, "That's not good. You need to be outside of your comfort zone from time to time. You need to be pushing yourself out." And for consumers, if what you read and what you consume and day affirms to you, how good, smart and right and wonderful you are.

Back to your point about running away from tigers. The human species' superpower is coalition building. We can meet a group of strangers. I have never met you before, but in 20 minutes you and I could come up with a great plan to do something that nobody had ever thought of before. We could imagine it and we can do it. We can form a team to do it. That's what you guys did in politics. You took strangers and you made them part of a coalition and then you did stuff with it. That is an amazing human superpower, but it comes at a cost. And the cost is that we dislike people out of our group very quickly and we know about the Stanford Prisoner test. We know about other things, the social psychological term, fundamental attribution error. That we believe that people who are not in our group who do the wrong thing are doing it because they're bad. That's just their nature not, "Well, life is complicated. Life is hard."

So as consumers, we should always be working because we have this obligation as consumers, not just as journalists. We have this obligation. Will you let me be very corny for 30 seconds? Ronald Reagan in his farewell address said that you can't love America without loving Americans and that filial love is the requisite. A republic is like a family in the sense that it exists because we say it does, right? It has power because we say it is.

And if you do not have a healthful media diet, it is a fundamentally unloving act to your fellow American because you are not in a position to be a partner in self-government with that person because you don't even know who they are. If you're a Republican and all you do is watch Fox

and read Breitbart, and if you're a Democrat and all you do is watch MSNBC and read the Huffington Post, you have no idea what Republicans are thinking or you have no idea what Democrats are really thinking. You're just reading about straw men that are built for the sake of burning.

**Bill Haslam:** That's the point of our podcast. Let me ask you, we're about run out of time, so it always helps with making a point to actually make it personal. So you actually sitting and running a decision desk at some point in time had to make a decision you thought, "I'm not certain the higher ups are going to be really thrilled with this." Walk us through, like I said, we're about out of time, but walk us through what's it like to be running a news decision desk, being watched by lots and lots of people on a consequential election night. What's it like to do that? And then in this particular instance you had to say, "Listen, I know my higher ups here aren't necessarily going to like this, but I think Joe Biden just won Arizona and therefore is going to be the next President of the United States."

**Chris Stirewalt:** I was just part of a wonderful decision desk and I got to go out and defend and trumpet the great work that our team did and I was very proud to be part of that team. But here's the thing, as my old daddy used to say, the time to decide whether or not you want to kill a deer is before you go hunting. There are consequences to becoming a politician. There are consequences to taking the oath of office as governor. There are consequences to saying you want to be a journalist and that means that one day you're going to have to face difficult choices. You have, if you are being an adult, put that into your thinking at the beginning that you knew. And the other thing is, Governor, it's a weird business, right? Much like politics, I did not get into journalism because it was stable and steady.

It gets wild out there. It gets weird out there. The wild weirdness is part of what I love about it. The good news is there are institutions like AEI and there are places like The Dispatch and NewsNation where that's what they want because I do think, Governor, this is confusing to do, but I do think to your point about what's the answer, there is a market out there that is going dramatically underserved for people who would just like the news to be normal. They would just like to get news that was basically normal and that they felt a decent degree in confidence that the facts being presented were the facts. They weren't being talked down to, but neither were they having their patooties kissed. I think there's a market out there and part of how we have to get through this chaotic moment in our history is we have to form a new consensus to replace the consensus that got wiped out at the beginning of this century.

**Bill Haslam:** Last question. We always ask all our guests this, the podcast takes its name from Howard Baker's famous quote of, "Always remember the other side might be right, the other person might be right."

**Chris Stirewalt:** That's right.

**Bill Haslam:** Can you think of a time when you realized I didn't get this exactly right, the other

fellow might be right?

**Chris Stirewalt:** I think the degree to which I underappreciated the tectonic changes happening in the American electorate in 2016. The interesting thing is I should have more than most people because most people who work in the national news media do not come from the North Fork of Short Creek in Ohio County, West Virginia. That is not the norm and I knew people who were like that, who were fed up. Right. Who were just absolutely fed up. A lot of them had been Democrats and the rise of Donald Trump and the rise of the populist right, I should have seen coming sooner and understood better. I assumed that the old forces in politics would assert themselves in a way that whether it was Jeb Bush or whatever, that history would just continue its long march on. And I didn't appreciate the disruption of the moment that we were in and we sure did get disrupted.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Thank you very much.

**Chris Stirewalt:** Thank you for having me.

**Bill Haslam:** Chris, we really do appreciate your insight.

**Chris Stirewalt:** Totally my pleasure. Thank you guys for doing what you're doing.

**Bill Haslam:** Thanks.

Phil, what do you think? Like I said, I've known Chris for a while and I listened to him on The Dispatch and other places. What do you think?

**Phil Bredeesen:** I really liked it. I thought he had a very perceptive view of what was going on in the media. It wasn't just railing against the usual enemies or problems and that, but saw it in a much larger context. And I think his analogy with it's a little bit like our diet. I mean, we've gone from a world of never having quite enough to one where there's more than you never possibly consume and it's unhealthy.

**Bill Haslam:** Yeah, so I do think the fact that we can choose our news and self curate it for what comes to us and that with the points he was making about confirmation bias, we all want news that says, you're right, you're right, you're always right.

**Phil Bredeesen:** I thought his idea about, with the example of the preacher about if you really like and think the stuff you're hearing is really good and smart and so on, you probably need to be looking at some other places.

Well, Bill, our next guest, somebody I think everyone knows, Judy Woodruff. She served as the anchor and the managing editor of the PBS NewsHour through 2022. Certainly where I first heard her. After stepping down as the anchor, she began America at a Crossroads, which is a



project on American political divisions and whether they can be healed.

She started her career in local television in Georgia, moved to NBC, covered the presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter, assigned to the White House as a White House correspondent, spent 12 years at CNN hosting or co-hosting Inside Politics in the World Today and Worldview and anchored CNN's coverage of major world events. She's a professional debate moderator. Glamour Magazine put it, she has moderated too many presidential debates to count. And earlier in her career she authored a book, This is Judy Woodruff at the White House. Has any number of awards, the Editor Armor, Lifetime Achievement Award. She's a graduate of Duke University, recipient of more than 25 honorary degrees, another one of which she got earlier today, as we have talked here as a graduate of Duke University and lives in Washington DC.

Judy, welcome.

**Judy Woodruff:** It is so good to be with both of you. I've followed both of your careers as governor and it's a treat, although I'm not sure I'm comfortable in this role reversal with you asking me—

**Phil Bredesen:** We love it!

**Judy Woodruff:** Said you!

**Bill Haslam:** We'll only be here a couple hours. I promise.

**Phil Bredesen:** This is our chance to get even,

**Bill Haslam:** Exactly.

**Phil Bredesen:** After all these years.

**Bill Haslam:** We also have the rare privilege of being with someone who covered Howard Baker as a politician, a senator, statesman, et cetera. Give us some reflections on Howard for those who might not have had that chance to know him personally.

**Judy Woodruff:** Well, I was just so lucky to be in Washington at the same time he was for part of his tenure in Washington. And I mean when you think of the word statesman, that was Howard Baker. And a term we do not hear very much today is bipartisan. It was completely common to see Senator Baker talking with Democrats, working with Democrats. It didn't mean he didn't have strong views. He certainly did, and you knew it when you were in a conversation or an interview with him and he felt strongly about something, but he was always able to listen. I mean there was always, I always thought whenever he was talking about something, I sensed that there was kind of a turning up in the corner of his mouth. He was smiling about whatever it was he was thinking and there was a twinkle in his eye because he was thinking beyond that

moment to we've got to deal with this, we've got to fix this. I just found him delightful, bright, smart, brilliant at politics and respecting the other side of an argument.

**Phil Bredezen:** You've spent a long time in the Washington media world and the national media, which has incorporated some enormous changes obviously. Just give us a little perspective here as to your view. What really has changed over the years?

**Judy Woodruff:** Well, in one word, everything. When I started out in television news, we used film, 16 millimeter film, and we went on after a period of a time to move to something called video videotape and it was about four, five, six inches wide. And by the time I came to Washington to cover Jimmy Carter, who had just been elected president in 1977, we were using videotape. Well, today there's no more tape, there's no more digital cassettes, it's all computers, everything is virtual. Technology has transformed the way broadcasting works, and that's great from the standpoint of being able to cover more things and cover them in the moment and cover them immediately.

Where it's become challenging, and I know you probably want to talk about this, is it doesn't give reporters as much time to think. And so to the extent there's an emphasis on speed and getting it first, which not every journalist, not the PBS NewsHour and my colleagues at the NewsHour, but for many journalists, the speed is what drives it and all of us are under deadlines. And today those deadlines are constant. And when I started out, we had the 6:00 PM news, the 11:00 PM news maybe, and we didn't even do the morning news that much, but today it's nonstop. It's social media, it's everywhere, it's television, cable, you name it.

**Phil Bredezen:** What has that implied for the content of the news that I would be consuming as a person sitting at home?

**Judy Woodruff:** In terms of content, there are many, many more sources of news. So you have access now to much more news at your fingertips. If you want to sit at your desktop at home or your laptop while you're waiting at the airport or your smartphone, you can look up what was the exact language of that bill that we worked on back in 1998. You can get that information if you're American citizen, John Q Public or Susie Q Public. You can get that information in a flash so you have access to more if you're looking for it, but you're also bombarded with many more choices.

And so for many Americans, I think it feels kind of overwhelming. And what they've done and what we're watching now is that many people are resorting to their favorite news sites or site where they get one version of the news and often it's one opinion of the news and it's often advocacy journalism and they really don't have time for or aren't interested in the rest of the news. So in terms of what you get and the content, it depends on who you are and what you're interested in. But it can run the gamut from everything to just a blizzard of confusing sources. And I don't know where to go and I can't keep up with it all, which by the way is where I am. I can't keep up with all the technology.

**Bill Haslam:** One of the things is two people who are recovering politicians, it's sometimes almost personally hurts to see where our politics has gotten today. We think of this as being who we elect really matters because there's such responsibility and there's such impact from it. I have almost a personal lament about the state of our politics today. As a journalist when you read that trust in the media is at an all time low and you see that people are watching the news just to look for more ammunition against the other side instead of information. I'm just curious, how do you feel personally as somebody that's kind of devoted their life to the news business?

**Judy Woodruff:** It's a great question, but actually I think I'm in good company because there are a lot of other institutions in America that are now held in much lower esteem from the Congress, to the executive branch, to our courts, to some extent our churches. I mean, you look around, business, but to your point, it breaks my heart.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Judy Woodruff:** I've spent my career, I started out not having studied journalism, but studied political science and fell into journalism at the very last minute. But my first producer told me, "Judy, go out there and report, but remember, nobody gives a damn what Judy Woodruff thinks. We want you to go out and gather the news, bring it back, write the story, and deliver it to the audience, the American people." And I think today there are a lot of young journalists who think that way, but there are a lot of other journalists out there who really have gone into journalism, I think, to express a point of view and to advocate for something. And I'm not against that. I think, Thank goodness we can have these great debates in this country, that we have freedom of speech, freedom of press for the most part." I think it means that the public is having a harder and harder time distinguishing between what's news and what's somebody's opinion and what's just out-and-out wrong. Misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories. But no, it breaks my heart.

**Phil Bredezen:** You've observed, and it's something we certainly both agree with and others have observed the sort of growing lack of distrust, the growing distrust of institutions, all sorts in our society, and you've been involved in this up to your eyebrows for while all of this has been happening. What do you think is going on there? Why is that happening? Why we're losing that trust?

**Judy Woodruff:** Well, I can speak better about journalism than anything else. I think part of it is what we were just discussing, the fact that there's just, that it's less seen. There are no more Walter Cronkite, let me put it that way. We don't have one or two prominent places that almost everybody agrees that that's a trusted source. Today there are so many different channels and cable, talk radio, and online and social media. You two know very well, they're just endless places to get your news and information. And what somebody may see on one site may not square with what they understand is right, or it may just be flat out wrong. And so then they paint the whole institution as bad. They just say the media, the news media. Well, of course the

media is diverse. It's as about everything from the Associated Press, which is as straight as it comes, and programs like the PBS NewsHour and our great newspapers of which there are many, many fewer than there used to be and we can talk about that, too, all the way to, again, talk radio, social media, just making stuff up.

Somebody who started a blog yesterday can call themselves a journalist. So that's part of it. I think, frankly, another part of it is, and I'll, I mean admit it, we're not perfect. We're human. We make mistakes. I believe that when we do make mistakes, we need to accept responsibility for them and fix them, correct them as soon as possible. But another piece truly is that we've had political leaders in this country in the last few years, including former President Trump, who made it one of the central tenants of his campaign to talk about fake news and how the media, reporters, are the enemy of the people. Well, I mean that goes back to Joseph Stalin. I've looked up what happened during that era, and it's something that happens in countries when the government leaders just don't want the press to be trusted. They don't want anybody to read anything that they don't agree with. I think that's hurt. We now have, as you just said, I think it's a third or half, no more than half of the American people say they're not sure they can trust the news media.

**Phil Bredezen:** Is there any hope here? I mean, do you see a path in which we can get back to having more trusted sources of news that are shared with people with different views of the world?

**Judy Woodruff:** I don't see a silver bullet. I think we're now so far along, the genie's out of bottle, and especially with AI coming along, and I was listening to a report this morning about how I guess Google has released more, I should say, is being used in the work that they provide to ordinary folks in writing and in business and so on. And I don't begin to understand that, but I know enough about it to understand that it's going to lead us in some directions where we need to take a hard look and make sure that what we're reading and what we're listening to is based on facts. I think it's going to be harder to figure out what the facts are.

So I think the genie's out of the bottle. It's going to take time. To me, the only way we even begin to regain the trust of the American people is to do our jobs, to be humble about it, not to act as if we have all the answers and we know everything we, in the press, I mean, but just every day to work really hard to look across the landscape, think about what are the stories that the American people need to know about, I mean in our best judgment, and then report the heck out of those stories and report and report and report.

Because in the end, I want to believe that facts will out, the truth will out whenever we get to that. And I don't assume that that's always easy to know at all, but it's going to take time because it hasn't taken very long to undo some of the trust that people have, but once you've lost that trust, it's hard to win it back. Once you've, I say this to my colleagues at the NewsHour a lot, once we lose credibility, if we're seen as not being credible, that's the coin that matters for us. And once we lose that, it takes some work and time and you may never get it back. So it's

work.

**Phil Bredesen:** One of the things I think both of us have observed in Tennessee, and it's happening across the country, is this precipitous decline in local news organizations, and I don't think there's anything evil going on. Maybe the business model has just changed. You don't have a classified ad section anymore that can support the paper. Is there any kind of an antidote to that?

**Judy Woodruff:** I think you put your finger on something that is just enormously important in our country, and it's not quite invisible, but almost invisible tragedy, and that people don't, they're aware of it, but they really are not seeing it and paying attention to it because it's the disappearance of hundreds of newspapers around the country. It used to be when I started as a reporter, every city of any size had a newspaper. And there were some that were better than others, some were, but there was a newspaper, there were reporters going out, gathering information and writing it up. And people knew what was going on in their communities. Again, not perfect, but that was happening. As you say, along comes the internet and people can get their news for free on their smartphone or on their desktop, and they don't need to buy a subscription to anything. And the advertising model went out the window, newspapers collapsed.

Thousands and thousands of reporters have been laid off, really good reporters, and there're now news deserts in America, places. We call them news deserts where people just don't have access to local news. And why does that matter? Because in my humble opinion, knowing what's going on in your community is one of the building blocks of our democracy. People need to know what's happening with the school board, with the zoning commission, with county commission, the city, what's happening with traffic, with children, with education. And if you don't know those things, how can you be a good citizen? How can you make the right decisions when you go to vote, if you don't know what's going on? Now, people, again, they can go to their computer and look at whatever, Google feed or Facebook or whatever and catch the wires or national news, but when you don't have local news, the community just doesn't have the glue that holds it together.

So right now, you ask about a remedy. I happen to know, I was at a conference just a week or so ago in Cleveland of this organization called the American Journalism Project. They are trying like mad to raise a lot of money to seed nonprofit, mostly digital, news organizations all over the country. Right now, I think they're in 33 states, 37 outlets, but it's very, very, it's like little green shoots and it's a lot of work because they've got to raise— The idea of replacing all that ad revenue and salaries for those people with today, little green shoots, it's a big mountain to climb, but I think we need to support it now. I'm now, I've become a postulate, whatever you call it, a preacher for local news. I'm telling people, if you get an opportunity, contribute to your local this or that. The Texas Tribune is a good example. The Mississippi Today is some really important reporting in Mississippi. They've now won several prizes, including the Pulitzer, just a couple of days ago. So these organizations are there. They're doing good work, but we need to support

more of them.

**Bill Haslam:** You were talking earlier about Trump and kind of the whole fake news, et cetera. One of the reasons I think that whether it's Trump or somebody else, you get traction is because there's people have this innate sense that the media is not being fair to my side, whether you're a left, right. It's like everybody thinks the umpire's for the other team.

**Judy Woodruff:** Right.

**Bill Haslam:** Is it possible, can you have a truly unbiased news presentation or just inevitably is what we think going to creep in?

**Judy Woodruff:** Well, if I can amend, kind of amend your question a little bit because what I'm often asked is, "Can you stay truly objective in your report?"

**Bill Haslam:** Okay. Okay.

**Judy Woodruff:** Can you be straight? And my answer is, I'm not a computer, I'm a human being, so I can't be purely objective. I have views. I'm the sum total of all my experiences as a mother, a grandmother, a reporter of 52 years, somebody who's lived in Washington for 40 some years, who grew up as an army brat, lived overseas, lived in the south for a long time. I'm the sum total of all those experiences and everything I've ever covered. So I have opinions, I have thoughts about issues. What I can do and have to do as a reporter is to make sure all sides are heard and to try to be as fair as possible in presenting a story. Where it gets hard is when it's an issue that is really dividing the American people, that people have very raw feelings about, whether it's abortion, guns. Today, I mean, all the debate right now about transgender, about gender issues,

**Bill Haslam:** You name it. Yeah.

**Judy Woodruff:** And you name it. And immigration and on, even the environment but, so you have all these so-called hot button issues. I have opinions on a number of them, but I just try to keep my views out, and that's all any reporter can ultimately do. I don't think it's, I mean my colleague, my late colleague, Jim Lehrer, who was the founder along with Robert MacNeil, the NewsHour, didn't vote. He believed that it was important never, I mean, to put his role as a journalist above that of a citizen. I just happen to disagree, I still vote, but I'm not registered in either party. So some reporters take it to that degree. I think what's most important is that we try as hard as we can to tell all sides, but I understand there's a lot of distrust. A lot of people feel the media has gone off in one direction and it's frustrating to them and they say they don't trust the press, and it's why we have to work really, really hard to regain that trust.

**Phil Bredezen:** If I were to be asked by a young person today, saying, "I really like what journalism does, I'd like to study journalism and make a career as a journalist," what would you

tell them?

**Judy Woodruff:** Absolutely, come in the water. Jump in. The water's fine. Why? Because in order to keep our democracy strong, and this is going to sound kind of corny, I absolutely believe we are going to always need a strong, smart, free press. And that means the next generation can't be discouraged by all the things we've been sitting here talking about, the lack of trust, the lack of resources and all the rest of it. We are always going to need information we can count on as American citizens, otherwise, how can we fulfill our role as citizens, if we don't know what's going on? And so we need the press and to tell us what's going on, and we need the press to be our eyes and ears to hold public officials and frankly, the powerful. And we define that in many ways, whether it's business, the church, nonprofits, wherever people hold a lot of power over other people, those folks need to be held accountable.

And who else is going to do it? Because if you're the CEO of a company, you don't love the fact that your own employees are going out sharing details about things. And so in government, I've covered a lot of politicians and bless their hearts, your hearts, you don't want the bad to come out. I, as a reporter, don't want the bad. I don't want people to talk about the mistakes that I've made.

**Phil Bredeesen:** I think the word she was looking for was statesman, wasn't it?

**Bill Haslam:** Public servants. Public servants.

**Judy Woodruff:** You are right. Statesman and public servants.

**Phil Bredeesen:** All right.

**Judy Woodruff:** So yeah.

**Bill Haslam:** Let me ask you the final, as a last question, the question we ask all of our guests. The podcast takes its name from former Senator Howard Baker's comment about, "always remember the other person might be right." Can you think of a time when you realized like, oh, I didn't get that exactly, I didn't get that quite right, or the other side had it more right than I did?

**Judy Woodruff:** Oh boy, that happens so often.

**Bill Haslam:** Yeah.

**Judy Woodruff:** Here's what I'll say is that I think there've been times when I've looked at the results of an election and I've thought, "What were the voters thinking?" How did that happen? Because I had covered the race. I felt I knew the candidates, I knew the issues. I didn't understand, whether there's a referendum or an election. But it turns out voters really do pay attention. They listen, they make up their minds. And for better or worse, that's where we go as

a country. I've learned that I need to be humble in covering American politics and covering elections. And not to assume that just because I think I understand it, that that's necessarily it. And just to keep an open mind.

**Bill Haslam:** Judy, thank you. On behalf of both of us, thank you for the role you've played in doing that for several years. We're grateful for you being on the podcast, but also for really kind of devoting your life to this idea that people need to understand more, so they can be better informed because we trust them with electing our leaders.

**Judy Woodruff:** Governor Haslam, Governor Bredesen, and thank you both very much. I mean, you both have, I think the fact that you're doing this together send such a powerful signal that it's possible for the two parties to work together. And I think many Americans are looking for examples of that. So I'm so glad to join you. Thank you.

**Phil Bredesen:** Thank you very much.

**Bill Haslam:** Thanks so much.

Well, Judy definitely knows that which she talks about and has the history and resume to prove it.

**Phil Bredesen:** She's definitely been in the room and in this world for a long time, and I really respect her views. And you almost feel like, I mean, she's somebody I've heard for a lot of years, and to have a chance to sit here and talk with her is great. And I think she had a lot of things that our listeners will find interesting.

**Bill Haslam:** Any concluding thoughts on the prescription here? I think we all understand the issue and the problem about we can choose our news and we look to it for what we want to hear. Any prescriptions that,

**Phil Bredesen:** The only thing that struck me, and I think Judy said it in a way at the end, is that there's no silver bullet here. This is a complex,

**Bill Haslam:** Yeah.

**Phil Bredesen:** Piece of the economy of our country, and it's very big and it's very disparate and like most real problems, it's probably not amenable to a silver bullet. It's going to take a lot of sort of individual efforts in different areas. But what you just hope is that there's enough people out there that consider it important to get accurate information and to use that to make decisions about how the public sector works, how our democracy works. I think there are, and that's what gives me hope.

**Bill Haslam:** And ultimately, you have to have confidence that the market will find a way to find those people and have a business model that works better than what hasn't in the past.



**Phil Bredesen:** Yeah. I remember talking at one point with The Tennessean. I was critical about our local paper in Nashville. I was critical about what they were doing, but I remember prefacing it saying, if somebody died and left me The Tennessean tomorrow, I have no idea how to run it as a business. Okay. I know, I mean, you're tackling a very difficult world here.

**Marianne Wanamaker:** Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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This episode was produced in partnership with Relational Marketing and Stones River Group.