

RICHARD: America has one of the highest news avoidance rates in the world. Tens of millions of people don't read, watch, or listen to the news each day. The media are held in low regard by the public. So is there a better way to report and cover current events? That's the focus of this episode. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Our guests are Mark Sappenfeld, Editor of The Christian Science Monitor, and Story Hinckley, the paper's National Political Correspondent. We're releasing this episode less than two weeks before the midterm elections, a time when many news outlets have amped up their coverage and put additional emphasis on red versus blue.

RICHARD: We discuss why The Monitor has put a recent focus that drive its news coverage, how reporters and editors are working to highlight constructive solutions that unite rather than divide. With the upcoming election in mind, we asked Mark Sappenfeld, how is The Monitor's coverage of politics different than the usual focus on winners and losers?

MARK: As you might imagine, I've been thinking about that quite a bit recently. I was just reading an article about exactly that, about how the media covers politics. That person likened it to just covering a fight, that everyone is very excited when things seem worse because everyone is, "Wow, there's so much tension," "Wow, there's so much drama."

And while that might be good from a sense of storytelling or amping up drama, there's the question of: is that actually good for journalism? Is that good for the country? Does that accomplish what we want it to accomplish? And as I was thinking about it, it really came down to a question for me that's actually quite large, which is: what is our view of our reader?

Do we think our reader is someone who needs that kind of reptilian gratification of, "This person's up, this person's down. This person's winning, this person's losing," to really simplify politics into a zero-sum sort of winning and losing thing? Or do we have a different view of our reader? Do you have a view of a reader who can understand these things, who wants something more? And I don't think it necessarily needs to be an intellectual thing. It's not that you need to have expectations of your reader that they know a lot about politics. That's not what I'm talking about. It's, what's your view of what your reader wants from their news, and can you deliver that?

In so many ways, the way that we consume news is so much at variance with what we say we want from our politics, and it strikes me that, at some point, someone's got to break that chain. Someone's got to actually deliver the news that we think is the kind of news that leads to solutions, that leads to people having honest conversations. I mean, you at Common Ground are so good at finding exactly that.

It's not that we want to prescribe solutions about, "Oh, it needs to be this policy," or, "This person needs to get elected." We just need to have better, more meaningful conversations, and I think that really comes down to, again, in my way, kind of, who are you serving? And how are you viewing someone you're serving? I think that very quickly cascades into, how are you viewing society? How are you viewing the world? I would hope that The Monitor takes a very firm stand on having that -- for lack of a better term -- higher view of our readers in the world.

ASHLEY: Story, you're out there as a reporter who travels to a lot of campaign events. You speak to all types of voters. How do you keep readers in mind while you're doing that? Can you give us an example from the current campaigning?

STORY: So let's say a candidate is having a rally in a Pennsylvania suburb. That's just at top of mind because I just went to a few rallies in Pennsylvania suburbs last weekend. If I interview people at Democratic Senate candidate John Fetterman's event, I need to keep in mind the type of voters that I'm going to be interviewing. It's going to be people who are motivated enough to spend a beautiful Sunday afternoon at a political rally, which is a small fraction of the country, and it's going to be people that are usually particularly passionate about Democratic politics.

So I'm going to want to also interview the protestors that are protesting across the street. They were Dr. Oz supporters, who is the Republican opponent. But then I'm also going to want to go out into the city where the rally is occurring and interview voters who are not at the political event because that is the majority of America, right? Those people are getting ready the Eagles game that kickoff is in two hours. I went to the grocery store where people are stocking up on game foods and drinks and snacks.

And then I have to think about, what type of grocery store am I going to? The Whole Foods moms are very different from the Wegman's moms. It depends on the grocery store chain that I go to because that's going to affect the type of people that I'm talking to. I hear outrageous things from voters at political rallies all the time because I'm talking to the political diehards, the really passionate people. And, you know, I could reprint some things that voters say that would get retweeted tons of times, but that's not my goal. My goal is to show an accurate photograph of this moment in time, a photograph through words, and to do that, it's a lot more nuanced than people think.

MARK: What is Story doing there? She's acting the way that we should be acting as a populace. She is going out and talking to different people. She is going outside of her comfort zone. She's going outside of her biases. She's going outside of what's easy, what's hard, and this is what you at the Common Ground literally do all the time, is you are getting people to come together and to have meaningful conversations.

She's doing that, and I think that's what we try and do at The Monitor. Reporting becomes hypocritical if you're not living what you're saying, and Story is really living this idea of going out and trying to give a whole picture of the population. And in doing so, you should present a portrait that will be something of an antidote to the polarization that happens.

RICHARD: Story, what I'm hearing from you is a parallel to what Mark is saying. Mark made a strong argument for why it's important to respect the reader. In your reporting, you're also respecting the voter.

STORY: Well, I have to. When you talk to people face-to-face, you find it very difficult to be disrespectful. At least, I do. People are taking time out of their day to talk to me about politics, and I'm looking at them in the face, I'm shaking their hands. And every single person asks me, "Is this going to be published? Where can I see it?" And when people are a little hesitant to speak with me, I say, you know, I've been doing this for a couple years now, talking to -- I would say it's probably thousands of people at this point across the country -- and I've never had somebody say I mischaracterized their words because I send them the copy. Sometimes they don't agree with the angle of the article because it'll be critical of the candidate who they are supporting, but they will say, "I don't agree with this or that," but

they never say that I characterized their words wrong. And I think that's because I looked them in the eyes, I shook their hand, and I had a little, two-minute relationship with them.

RICHARD: Story, it sounds like you're building trust with the people who speak with you.

STORY: Well, I think they have to trust me a little bit if they're going to tell me anything, the really telling quotes. It's frustrating for writers sometimes because I'll have a 30-minute conversation with somebody, and I only fit eight words from our conversation in the story. That's one of the big responsibilities of being a journalist, I think, is that I'm trying to save my reader time. They could go out and spend hours reading these transcripts and everything, but I'm trying to give a quick synopsis that you can read in 5-10 minutes that will really tell you what's going on and what people are thinking.

So, of the 40 people I interviewed, I have to pick the five people that are going to be included in the story, and then the eight words from these five people that are going to make it in the story. So there's so much that readers don't see, but what I think is important for readers, particularly Monitor readers, to understand is that if I'm sharing a quote with you about this mom who lives in the Philadelphia suburbs who's really upset about crime, I'm including that because I had five other moms tell me that. We don't want to tell you the most egregious or new, shocking thing that people are saying. We want to tell you the truth.

ASHLEY: Mark, how do you feel about the need to build trust and how you cover the news?

MARK: You do need to build up trust with the reader. You do need to build trust with the audience, and that, to me, comes from being transparent, being honest about your motives. So, for example, we have this podcast that we're starting that's called Why We Wrote This, which is really about exploring why we wrote this. It's about looking more deeply into some of our biggest pieces of content and really explaining, "Here's our motivation. Here's what we were trying to accomplish," and that's all a part of just trying to open the doors to readers so they can see who we are and say, "Yeah, I trust you. I understand that."

But there's also this part of it that, in some ways, I am less interested in trust that before because I see, in so much of the news media, people seeking out news publications that tell them what they want to hear. You would say, "Oh, I have a lot of trust in that news organization," but I, as a journalist, might look at that and say that's not really the greatest journalism because I feel like it's leaving out parts of the story or there's places they're unwilling to go, or there's bias being expressed in that. I feel like, in a lot of ways, the readers are not doing a great job of holding us to account. In some ways, they're driving us more toward the poles because they're wanting that coverage that speaks to their worldview.

So, in some ways, I almost have gone the opposite way on trust, which is really just underlining what Story is talking about here today, just trying to be as fair and as fact-based as we can and just leaving it at that. And if that angers people, and I know it does because I get letters from them every day, is that building trust? In some ways, it's not building trust because they don't like it, and they say, "Hey, if you don't do this, we're going to cancel our subscription." But on some levels, it's like you just kind of have to do what you think is right. You have to challenge yourself. You have to push yourself into uncomfortable places and do the most honest, most fair, most fact-based journalism you can, and then you just hope people will find that.

STORY: And there must be some understanding that that is what voters actually want. I'm thinking of a very Left-leaning news broadcast, and I'm thinking of a very Right-leaning news broadcast, and I recently heard advertisements for both of them in which both of them are selling themselves as the "tell it how it is, unbiased, real news." So the fact that so many organizations are marketing themselves that way, it suggests that that is what voters and readers want. So I think that voters and readers in America need to be honest with themselves, too, about what they're choosing to read or click on or watch.

RICHARD: Along with many other institutions right now, approval ratings are very low for the news media. Does that affect your values at The Monitor, and have you had a rethink in how the news is being covered?

MARK: Yes, I think so. One of the things that we're doing is actually around the idea of values. It's not applying a value to something, but it's recognizing that what really drives the news, what's really behind all of this is how we want to express compassion, how we want to express joy, how we want to express responsibility, dignity, respect. We're trying to focus more on that and, in that way, we feel like we're getting to a place where everyone can be a part of the conversation.

As Story says, you can talk to people, and they can completely disagree with you on policy, on politics, on all of these things, but when you get down to a level of values, you're getting down to a language that everyone... like she says, you have to look someone in the eye. That's a way of trying to create a conversation at which everyone has a place at the table, and everyone can hear everyone. So we're just at the beginning part of this, but we are trying to rethink the way we do news a little bit to try and meet what we think are some of the needs of today in journalism, which are quite different from what they were even 5 or 10 years ago, certainly 30 years ago.

ASHLEY: Why is that? Why are journalistic needs different from 30 years ago?

MARK: Well, now you're getting into kind of my big journalism class. In Journalism 101 in college, my professor walked up and down the row, and he said, "Who decides what is journalism?" And the answer was, "You do!" He was pointing to us in the room, "You are the gatekeepers." Well, that's completely not true anymore. That entire paradigm of journalism has collapsed because everyone can decide on their own what news is. And so people's relationship to news has just been revolutionized in the past 10 to 20 years. It's not just Dan Rather sitting in front of the TV delivering you the news. There needs to be a relationship. There needs to be that trust that you're talking about.

ASHLEY: Editor Mark Sappenfeld and political correspondent Story Hinckley of The Christian Science Monitor. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. We want to tell you about the Scorecard. It's a way to find out whether or not your local and statewide politicians are seeking common ground.

ASHLEY: How does it work?

RICHARD: Well, first, go online to commongroundscorecard.org. Put in your zip code. A map of your congressional district pops up. Click on that, and you get the scorecard ratings for your senators, governor, member of Congress, President Biden, and Vice President Harris.

ASHLEY: Each politician has a numerical rating, and there's also a deeper look at what they said about finding common ground. You can look at how your selected politicians compare with each other on how they reach out to voters who support other parties.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview with Mark Sappenfeld and Story Hinckley. The midterm elections are just around the corner.

ASHLEY: Story, what's the most interesting Senate race you've covered so far?

STORY: I'm paying close attention to the Senate races that I think can talk about larger trends happening in U.S. politics. I have been covering the Pennsylvania Senate race a lot, which is what I'd mentioned earlier between Democrat John Fetterman and Republican Mehmet Oz. I think that Democrats are looking at Fetterman, kind of wondering, "Could he be the kind of candidate that could win statewide in close elections in the future?"

Democrats are really excited. He's kind of a norm-busting candidate because he leans Progressive on some issues, years ago, being pro-LGBTQ rights and pro-marijuana legislation, but he's more middle-of-the-road when it comes to guns and fracking. And all of this is bottled up inside a very, very tall man with a goatee. He wears shorts and Carhartt sweatshirts to formal meetings. So I think Democrats are kind of scratching our head going, "Could this work?" Right? Like, "Could this help us in some places where we're losing some rural voters, working class voters, white working class voters. How big is personality and character?"

I think, then, on the flip side, you can look at the Colorado Senate race, where I think Republicans are looking at O'Dea who's running against Senator Bennet. O'Dea has made it clear, "I'm my own man." So he's trying to separate himself from Trump, and he's doing well. Colorado might be an interesting, particularly good place to try out this messaging because it is Colorado. Maybe O'Dea wouldn't be successful in more of a red state, but he's doing well, and that race is getting tighter and tighter. Just as Democrats are looking to Pennsylvania as a potential winning lesson, I think Republicans could be doing the same with Colorado.

RICHARD: You have talked to voters of all types, and something that we've touched on in our earlier podcasts at Common Ground Committee is this question of whether voters, whether citizens are really as divided as they're portrayed to be. But in real life, do fellow Americans of different political stripes have the potential to come together on some things rather than just seeing themselves as members of opposing tribes?

STORY: I'll give the example of something that I just experienced. When I was in south Texas for a week, working on a cover story for The Monitor about how Hispanic voters in America have been shifting towards the Republican party at a really fast pace, and nowhere more so than the Rio Grande Valley, which is the southernmost tip of Texas. Despite the polar opposite opinions that the Left and the Right have on a particular issue, the motivations are often very similar, if not the same.

For example, in south Texas, I was speaking with so many Latino voters who were strongly against immigration, and they were shifting towards the Republican party because they wanted stricter immigration laws. They were unhappy with the level of how many people were coming over the border from Mexico, from just... you can see the wall from shopping centers down there. And I would think, "Okay, that's so interesting," and it would seemingly be confusing because a lot of these families I talked

to, their own parents came over illegally. So I was trying to unpack that all, and their immigration beliefs have a lot to do with the economy. They want to provide for their kids, and they don't feel like they are succeeding economically at the pace that they want to be, and they blame other immigrants for that.

RICHARD: Taking their jobs away or working at lower wages?

STORY: Both, so coming in and undercutting their wages because they are coming over, and they're willing to work for less. But then, a lot of times, then I would speak to some people who came across illegally, and they were also trying to provide for their kids and improve their children's lives economically. And I was like, here's two families I just talked to that had the same exact motivation but are in conflict with one another.

MARK: What you're saying there, Story, goes directly to this idea of there's a deeper level on which we can all talk to each other. And if we just stay at the policy level, and we're just going Left and Right on politics, then you just get clashing. But when you get down beneath it to whether you want to call it that values level or that sense of what really drives us, you all of a sudden are getting to places where we can, again, look each other in the eye, and you can have a conversation about something that's deeper and more meaningful than the conversation we are currently having in this country. That's what we're trying to do with deepening our coverage.

RICHARD: One reason why this work is hard is because we're living in fearful times not just caused by COVID or by problems with the economy. There seems to be a lot of anxiety about this forthcoming election. Do either of you sense that?

STORY: Yes. In many ways, it's understandable because, increasingly, our parties are getting farther and farther apart just legislatively in what they support policy wise, and the margins are getting thinner and thinner. Right now, the Senate is 50/50. When I talk to voters in Pennsylvania when I'm covering the Pennsylvania Senate race, they see themselves as being on the front lines of democracy, and that's even an exaggeration to say. They are because their vote could determine who is the 51st senator, and then the House is going to be not as close, but it could decide the entire legislative agenda for the next two years of the United States of America. So the stakes are bigger, and, in some ways, fearfulness is understandable.

RICHARD: Mark, your thoughts on the election season?

MARK: Because of the nature of politics and exactly what Story was saying, it strikes me that they're all probably a little bit disproportionately important at this time. To me, democracy has always been about losing. I know that's a strange take, but if it's all about winning, then autocracy's great. I mean, you can win all the time if you're an autocrat. That's super. The whole point is: what do you do when you lose? And that's what democracy is about.

Our system is not dealing well with when you lose, and I'm not just talking about President Trump and the election and that sort of thing. I'm just talking in general, the whole stakes is, "I don't trust the other person. So, if we lose, it will be a cataclysm." The point that you raised earlier, and I think that Story raised, about us all kind of, at the core, having some of the same values if we can get to it. We don't express them in the same way, but on some level -- there's an author named Marilynne Robinson who said, "Democracy forces us to think well of one another." That's a really important lesson that goes beyond politics, and I think something that we need renewed within our republic.

ASHLEY: The news is vital to healthy democracy, right? But a lot of people are actually walking away from the news. Journalist Amanda Ripley, who wrote the book *High Conflict*, wrote that a lot of people she knew, a lot of journalists, admitted that they weren't reading or listening to the news every day. And actually, *The Christian Science Monitor* was cited in that piece as a good example, but why are increasing numbers of people, even people who report the news, not actually watching or reading it anymore?

MARK: I think there's a lot of reasons behind that. One of them is that news is kind of fundamentally unhealthy, if you think about it. You are besieging yourself with all -- in some cases, at least the way the news is often reported today -- you're besieging yourself with everything that's going wrong. So it's you're taking a steady diet of the worst things happening in the world, which is not terribly uplifting, not terribly great for your mental state, and I would argue also a little bit warping your sense of reality into thinking that everything is catastrophic when, in fact, we have very serious problems we need to deal with, but we need to put them in context, and we need to recognize where progress is being made, and all of those things.

We do need, as Amanda was talking about in that story, we do need to rethink how we do news because it's kind of not working. I don't think there's any one-size-fits-all solution. I think a lot of times the news media has thought, "We just publish the news. What happens with it is not our problem." My gut tells me that that's maybe got to change and that the news needs to think more about the whole and what impact it's having on society. It's a question that we, as a society, are going to have to wrestle with, and we're just kind of right in the middle of it right now. So how it happens is ahead of us.

RICHARD: Mark Sappenfeld and Story Hinckley from *The Christian Science Monitor*.

ASHLEY: During our interview, Mark mentioned *The Monitor* podcast, *Why We Wrote This*. The show features the paper's reporters and editors discussing how they cover the news. One aim is to build trust between readers and journalists. Find the podcast at csmonitor.com/whywewrotethis.

RICHARD: And our podcast is called *Let's Find Common Ground*. This is Episode 69. You can listen to others at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: And this episode is also being featured in election coverage compiled by The Democracy Group podcast network. We are members. Find a link to their website on our show page. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.