

ASHLEY: A lot of Americans have given up their daily news habit, but millions of others are now addicted to rage media, cable news and social media that push sensationalism, groupthink, and tribalism. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. The dramatic changes in the news media are actually quite recent. Over the past three decades, many regional newspapers went bust. Countless numbers of reporters were laid off. In their place, we've seen the rise of slick, easy, and profitable national opinion journalism that caters to narrow segments of the population.

ASHLEY: Very different than when most people read the same local newspaper or watched the same nightly network news.

RICHARD: Our guest on this show is Chris Stirewalt, a contributing editor at the conservative news site, The Dispatch, and Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He's also the author of the new book, Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back.

ASHLEY: In this episode, we hear about the current state of the news business and talk with a journalist who fell in love with his industry when he was still a teenager. We had a pretty wide-ranging conversation, right?

RICHARD: Yeah, Chris is talker and passionate about journalism and what we can all do, not just journalists, to make the media better.

ASHLEY: Richard, you got the first question.

RICHARD: Chris, let's start with you and your love for news and reporting. How did you get into the news business? Where did your career begin?

CHRIS: I started as a reporter, a sports reporter, when I was 17 for the Wheeling Intelligencer in Wheeling, West Virginia and fell in love with it from the start. It was truly a wonderful thing to do. I don't know what I thought I was going to do in my life, but I am very blessed because I think a lot of people, when they get to college, are looking for what to do. I knew what I wanted to do. College was something that I needed to complete in order to get back to doing what I wanted to do. I looked forward to summers working at the newspaper far more than I did the school.

RICHARD: Why? Why did you love it?

CHRIS: Well, it's a backstage pass to life. You get to be the skunk at the garden party. You get to ask people difficult questions. You get to see what other people don't always get to see. One of the things that's particularly appealing about journalism, the sensation of choosing words, choosing stories, and then sharing them with the wider world. Especially for a young man, it was a very heady feeling. That the words that I chose and the stories that I chose to write about would be seen by tens of thousands of people was a pretty awe-inducing thing for me.

ASHLEY: I'm curious, did anyone in your family work in journalism? Did either of your parents -- were they reporters?

CHRIS: No, no, no, no, and I frankly think that's good. There's nothing wrong with families where you have multigenerational news families, but we don't get enough people from outside the bubble into journalism, and I am, for sure, from outside the bubble. I am definitely from outside the bubble.

RICHARD: Yeah, your dad was a coal salesman, right?

CHRIS: That's right. He was a coal salesman, and a good one, too.

RICHARD: So not too many national political commentators and reporters with folks in the coal industry.

CHRIS: That is for sure.

ASHLEY: Can you just expand on what you said a minute ago about being from outside the bubble? When you talk about journalists being from inside the bubble, what do you mean?

CHRIS: Where do people come from who work in journalism? They come from the Acela corridor. There's always a couple people from California, one dude from Chicago, and a gal from Miami, right? You go into the American major national news organization, you go to the newsroom, there are not people from red states. If the main geographical draw for journalists in America come from places like Bethesda, Maryland and northern New Jersey and Connecticut and New York and Boston, who are you going to get?

RICHARD: You mentioned the term Acela corridor, which for people who don't ride Amtrak, that is the express train between Washington, New York, and Boston, right?

CHRIS: And it's great, I should say. I love the Acela.

ASHLEY: So Chris says he loves being in the news business, but that with so many journalists coming from the same backgrounds and sharing similar political views, they live in a bubble. So it's no wonder the national media didn't see the Trump wave coming in 2016, and then after the election, there was a sense of shock.

CHRIS: Look, after the 2016 election, it was not safe for any West Virginian to go have breakfast in a diner and eat their biscuits and gravy in peace because some reporter -- I call it Hillbillies in the Mist -- some reporter is going to show up and stick their iPhone recorder in your face and say, "Was it more the racism or the economic despair that drove you to vote for Donald Trump?" because American journalists went on an odyssey after the 2016 election to try to find out how Donald Trump won. And that's a good impulse in a lot of ways, to, like, "Okay, what did we miss? Let's go find out," but it also speaks to the thickness of the bubble. Now, I will point out that we're all Pauline Kael now. You guys know the famous Pauline Kael story?

RICHARD: Pauline Kael was The New Yorker movie critic for many years.

CHRIS: And a great writer and a great critic and, by everyone's account, a lovely woman. But she came in to The New Yorker the day after the 1972 election and said, "I cannot believe that Nixon won by so much. I don't know anyone who voted for Richard Nixon." Well, yes, Pauline, you live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. You work at The New Yorker, and you live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. So, yes, that is 100% true. And it was funny then because the bubble was small. It was very thick, but it was

small. Now we all live in self-contained bubbles, right, where because of political sorting, because of geographic sorting that went on in the 1990s, it's very likely that in your neighborhood, whether you're a Republican or a Democrat in America, Conservative or Liberal, a Progressive, a Nationalist, whatever, you don't know many people who don't think like you, who don't believe the same things that you believe. Journalism has suffered for the stove-piping of its high-caste practitioners. The same schools, the same places, the same opinions, and the same attitudes, which makes it impossible to really see the rest of the country.

RICHARD: So you started out in Wheeling, West Virginia working for a newspaper in the 1990s. How have things changed for journalism and journalists in the 30 years or so since then?

CHRIS: Well, I'm very lucky because I arrived in the newspaper business at the end... it's the last days of the Raj. I arrived in the newspaper business when it was fat and sassy. Profits were reliably in the 20s, above 20%, and of course you had to have the newspaper, right? You needed to know what time the movies were on. You needed the classified ads. Young people cannot summon -- not only can they not summon it, but it would just be crazy to think how indispensable newspapers were to be alive in America prior to 2000.

By the way, laws in every state had requirements about advertising in newspapers. The state and the county and the city had to post legal ads in newspapers because they were so central to how we did everything, and, by the way, how we did everything since before the founding of the country. So America was made on and raised on newspapers.

RICHARD: But in the 1990s, things began to change.

CHRIS: A little tiny thing called Craigslist arrived, and it was one inch tall, and they said, "We're just going to let you post ads here for free." And the newspaper industry said, "Oh, you're adorable. You're so cute, little Craigslist, that you've come along, and you're going to do that." And you can track the arrival of Craigslist and the death of these newspapers in astonishing fashion, right?

RICHARD: Because newspapers rely, to a very large extent, on classified ads.

CHRIS: Well, they rely very heavily on classified ads for ad revenue, but they relied on classified ads for another reason, which is that you had to buy the paper to get the ads. It wasn't just that you were posting an ad, that you were paying the ad revenue. It was a driver of subscriptions, too. You had to be subscribed to the newspaper so that you could have those ads. It's like, we always want to flatter ourselves to say, "Well, they were reading it for our great journalism." No, they were getting it for the grocery store coupons and the movie listings. They needed to know what time that Fatal Attraction was showing at the Marquis 6. That's what they needed, and the weather and the sports and all of the things that people now take absolutely for granted as free.

So, as Craigslist arrives, it just starts knocking the legs out from under these papers, and they reach their peak in 2005 in advertising, just piles and piles of money, and then the collapse. And in the course of three years or so, they lose 80, 85% of their revenue.

RICHARD: That is a staggering drop for a once mighty and proud industry, and so much of it is because of Craigslist and its competitors. They took away a huge range of classified ads for jobs, services, and all kinds of stuff from newspapers.

ASHLEY: So, when this change in their business model swept over newspapers, what did they do?

CHRIS: They cut content. They sack reporters in newsrooms, and they give up their only competitive advantage in a doomed bid to try to hold on to their business as printers, and the results were catastrophic, and the news industry got hollowed out. So, basically, you can peg it to whatever year you want, but let's say 1998. By the time you get to 2010, we have started a process that will end up with something like 60 or 70,000 newsroom jobs being eliminated across the United States, and we're living in the aftermath of that now.

ASHLEY: You say the business of news is broken. Why?

CHRIS: So you have this hollowing out as free information unhorses the newspaper industry, and the collapse is swift. What comes in its place? Low quality, highly political national news.

ASHLEY: And something else happened. As local and regional newspapers folded or let go of thousands of reporters and editors, coverage of national politics replaced news about local communities and how they're governed.

RICHARD: Chris says some of this shift is also dictated by news consumers and their tastes. They're gravitating to a particular type of politics.

CHRIS: What people really want and what really creates the demand, the Pavlovian response, is culture war stuff. What is Ron DeSantis doing in Florida? If you're a Progressive living in Oregon, have you heard about what Ron DeSantis is doing in Florida about Disney? Have you heard about the Don't Say Gay Bill? Have you heard about that? Now, of course, unless you have a child in a Florida public school, it's not really that material to your life. You could very freely ignore it or keep it at a very marginal... you could consider it just very marginally.

Similarly, if you live in Florida, and you're a Conservative, if they have Drag Queen Story Hour at a public library in Oregon, it doesn't have anything to do with you. It doesn't touch your family. It is as far away from you, almost, as Europe is. It's a continent away from you, and it doesn't touch your life. But national news takes those stories and drags them into, "Let's talk about something that doesn't affect you, that you can't do anything about, but it's probably going to make you mad."

RICHARD: Let's talk about the loss of local news. Many American towns and small cities have lost their local newspaper. There's simply no coverage, and as you mentioned, Chris, if there is coverage, it's often hollowed out. There aren't journalists attending school board meetings or town council meetings where the business of government is done. Why is this loss of local news coverage so important and, really, so tragic?

CHRIS: Well, if you wanted to just take it in an easily quantifiable way, there is research that is convincing -- that convinced me, anyway -- that in communities that lost a newspaper, even when there was another newspaper still there, there was a crosstown competitor that closed and one still remained, the price of lending for those municipalities went up.

RICHARD: A town's borrowing costs can go up because the watchdogs, local journalists, are no longer watching.

CHRIS: Over time, what happens? Your county, your city is poorly run. Corruption may creep in, and because of all of those things, your credit worthiness goes down. And pretty soon, bond issuance costs go up, and it's harder to borrow money, and the price of borrowing goes up. I think they found it was something like \$500,000, \$550,000 was the economic cost for bond issuance in a community where a newspaper had closed. If you're a small county or if you're a relatively small county, that's a lot of money.

It's not just the economic cost. Transparency is the promise of the internet in a lot of ways, right? We'll be able to livestream everything. We can watch everything. We can do everything. But transparency and accountability are two different things. We can every sunshine law -- and I'm for it, baby, like, let's do it - - you can have all of this stuff, but if you don't have responsible people present to hold those individuals accountable, transparency is worthless.

ASHLEY: Chris is best known as a TV broadcaster for his work at Fox News, and Fox is very successful. But he says for years, TV news didn't make any money. It was pretty sober, and the production values weren't great.

CHRIS: But as we move into the 1980s, TV news starts to change. It gets better blow-dried. The hair is better, the makeup is better, the graphics are better, and we start to get into pink slime journalism, scary, sensationalized. So, as we move through this period, we're seeing news change.

We get into the 1990s, and cable news, CNN -- when CNN started, people laughed at Ted Turner, and they said, "Who's going to want to watch 24-hour news. That's ridiculous." And, for them, of course it was the Gulf War that really stood them up in the early '90s. But for all of cable news, it wasn't really until 9/11. It wasn't really until the dawn of this century that it took off on its own.

ASHLEY: He says now the news is profitable, often sensationalized, and over the years, cable channels like Fox and MSNBC have sprung up to cater to different political persuasions.

CHRIS: This profusion of options is multiplied by the internet. So what do you end up with? Really small market segments for news outlets. And Fox News has been remarkably successful, but remarkable success in cable news means that you have three million viewers. That would've been a joke for the major network newscast back in the 1980s and before. That would've been a laughably small number for Tom Brokaw. That would've been hilarious, to talk about the influence of what somebody that gets three million viewers does. Therefore, the need for habituated, addicted consumers grows because if I can't have a broad audience, if I can't broadcast, I have to narrow-cast, but they'd better stay, and they'd better come back. Three million people is not a lot of people in a country of 330 million. But if you can get them to come back every night, then you have something powerful, and you can make billions of dollars a year.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Chris Stirewalt on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. We make this show for Common Ground Committee, and before they made podcasts, they put on a lot of interesting live events.

ASHLEY: And there's another one coming up next week on November 17th at 3:00 p.m. Pacific Time. It's called Finding Common Ground on the State of our Democracy. The panelists are Democratic political icon James Carville and former Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus.

RICHARD: The conversation will be moderated by Bob Shrum, Director of the Dornsife Center for the Political Future at the University of Southern California. It's totally free to attend. If you're in L.A., you can get a ticket to go in person. Everyone else can register to see the event online on Zoom. Should be a fascinating conversation coming out of the midterm elections.

ASHLEY: That's November 17th at 3:00 p.m. Pacific Time, 6:00 Eastern. See details of the event and register at commongroundcommittee.org. Now back to our interview with Chris Stirewalt.

RICHARD: So you say, and it's the title of your book, Broken News, that the media is, indeed, broken. What can be done to improve the situation? Are you depressed or hopeful?

CHRIS: I'm never depressed. I have had far too many opportunities in recent years to quote Abraham Lincoln's speech at the Young Men's Lyceum more than two decades before the Civil War when he laid it out, and he said that, "We will either endure for all time as a nation of free men or die by suicide." And I hate to have to be the one to keep telling people this, but our options remain exactly the same. We will either get better at this, or we will die. Our media consumption habits are so deeply enmeshed with our political dysfunction that if we, as journalists, and we, as news consumers, cannot figure out how to operate this machine, it will kill us.

And I'm not saying right now, but I am saying you can see the unraveling. You can see the fraying of the national fabric. A republic is like a family. It exists because we say it does. It's true because we say it is. There is nothing making America America other than the will of Americans to be together in this common purpose, and we have forgotten that in a pretty substantial way, and helping us to forget that has been very lucrative for many in the news business.

And I think the events of January 6th, I think the events surrounding the pandemic, a lot of things have made Americans realize that this could go away, that we really could lose this. So your podcast, the existence of your podcast is proof of concept that Americans understand that there is a problem. What do we do about it? Well, I hate to say, but this will have to be an inside job. There is no external factor that will come in to make us be better journalists or better citizens.

I owe, as a journalist, a special debt. I owe a special debt to the Constitution and the astonishing rights that it affords me. A month or so ago, in Arizona, a county official is said to have murdered an investigative reporter who was exposing corruption inside the government, in the United States. It was a shocking story. Would it be a shocking story in Russia? No. American journalists have to understand how rare our experience is not just compared to history but compared to the whole world today.

RICHARD: Chris argues that journalists should be grateful for their rights and freedoms, and not just journalists, the rest of us, too.

CHRIS: The reason that we have crappy news isn't because it's unpopular, right? We have it because it sells, and it's easy. It's the shortcut in the TV news business. We say talk is cheap. It's expensive to send reporters out and do boots-on-the-ground reporting and get the story and talk to the people, and investigative journalism often -- most of the time -- does not produce results, right? That's the hard part

of investigative work, which is most of the time it's going to be dry wells, but you keep doing it in the hopes that it will pay off. So that's all expensive and time-consuming. Not expensive to put two fatheads in a studio and have them bark at each other like a couple of seals. There's no problem there.

So, in less than a generation, consumers have gotten well accustomed to being catered to. They have gotten well accustomed to being flattered. They have gotten well accustomed to being told that they are smart, and the other people are dumb, that they are good, and the other people are bad. One of the reasons our politics is so toxic now is that we don't say that you're wrong; we say that you're bad.

RICHARD: He says one way to get out of that cycle of accusation, stop reading, watching, and listening to news that always confirms your own beliefs.

CHRIS: So what I tell people is, "If you are totally comfortable with what you see, hear, read, listen to, stream, that's not a good sign. If you're doing it right, if you're living up to your obligations as a citizen, you should regularly be hearing things that you disagree with. You should regularly hear ideas and points of view that make you uncomfortable, that might even point out that you're wrong from time to time. Only of late has it become possible for a person to consumer information constantly and never, from the moment that they rise to the moment that they lay down, ever hear anything that disagrees with their worldview.

My plea to Americans is break out. If you're a Conservative, you better have NPR on in the morning. You better do something to break it up a little bit. If you're a Liberal, you better be reading The Dispatch, of course, which is delightful, or National Review or something else. You better be reading The Wall Street Journal editorial page. You better be listening to something else that shakes it up, that breaks it out.

ASHLEY: This is a personal question, Chris, because I know that media polarization has even caused you to feel it in your own family, right? You tell this lovely story about your father in the book, and I'd just love for you to talk about that for a minute.

CHRIS: Part of the reason I felt obliged to write this book was I watched my father, who was my greatest friend until his passing 10 years ago now, but the 2012 election was, for me, sort of when I -- and I use this term mockingly for myself -- when I went bigtime. I had a front row seat for a presidential election. I was in an influential position. I was part of doing these presidential debates. I was part of all of this stuff, and it was really exciting.

But I could not really talk about it with my best friend, my dad, because his hatred for Barack Obama was white-hot. And my father was a very gentle man, a very loving man, a Christian man, one of the kindest people I have ever known, but his feelings about this election and the incumbent president were so intense that I self-edited. I knew I couldn't talk about it with him in the way that I had about the election just four years prior.

ASHLEY: And why was that? Why were his feelings so intense?

CHRIS: A lot of it, of course, is, as we get old, our brains get clunky, and we become hostile to new ideas, the world shrinks, and so part of it was that. But another big part of it was he was baking his brain in cable news 24 hours a day, and he sat there, bathed in it. When he was home, for long stretches, he would just sit there marinating in political coverage. Politics, which I have devoted my entire professional life to, which is my passion and my love -- I love politics. I love, love politics. I'm a weird

person. It shouldn't be a subsistence food. It shouldn't be the basis of what we're talking about and what we're doing.

And losing part of my friendship with my dad was really heartbreaking, and as I travel around the country, I talk to lots of families, I talk to lots of people who have suffered this, the guy who won't go with his wife anymore to go visit her parents because the dad has MSNBC on cranked, top volume around the clock and wants to argue about politics constantly.

I was brought to tears at a book event not too long ago talking to a woman who talked about her estrangement from her family over the 2020 election results and a bunch of other hot garbage. She has not spoken to her family for a year and a half, and she blames cable news. That's not right, and I know families are hurting. We had a mild case in my family, but for some families, this is really devastating, and we have to get ahold of this thing.

RICHARD: Chris Stirewalt, thank you very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

CHRIS: Totally my pleasure.

ASHLEY: Thank you so much.

RICHARD: Chris's new book is *Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back*.

ASHLEY: And with Thanksgiving around the corner, a lot of people may not be looking forward to family precisely because we're so divided. In our next podcast, we'll share some ideas and tips to overcome some of that tension. We hear from a conservative parent and his liberal daughter. How do they speak together about politics?

RICHARD: That's next time on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.