

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the Syracuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse

And as a reporter and as an editor, I have dedicated so much time and energy to thinking about how to help people understand what's going on, what's going on in the moment, what's going on big picture, what's kind of the nuance behind the scenes, and helping people get information. And this was a massive information fail, or at least a failure of true information to kind of offset bad information that people were getting.

And I really thought, do I want to manage coverage of another election cycle, looking ahead to 2024, where I'm going to get caught up in a lot of the churn of news, which is like what happened on the Hill, what happened on the White House, what's happening on the campaign trail when what I really, really cared about was focusing on the governance and the information piece of this, which is like, how democracy working for people, what do people believe democracy is, and why are a segment of Americans so upset with the process as they believe that it's working, that they're willing to resort to violence or willing to believe conspiracy theories? What is that about? To me, that became the central question that I was interested in reporting on.

And the chance to build an institute that would really be dedicated to that, that would look at what's the connection between news and government, between journalism and politics, between how people perceive the way their country is working and the news they're ingesting, that they have access to or that they don't have access to, what are the relationships between those two things? That's really what is at the crux of the new Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship, and having the opportunity to build that and to help put the pieces of that puzzle together to educate students and to educate the public, and to bring journalists and policy makers and advocates, people in the business world into that space together

So a lot of the first year was a getting to know you tour literally of going up to campus and saying, "Can we have lunch? Can we have coffee? Tell me about what you're doing." Also on the front, the same thing, going into newsroom and government classrooms and talking to undergraduates and saying, "Are you interested in coming to dc? Why or why not? Are you interested in democracy issues? What interests you? If we were building a program from the ground up, what would you want it to look like? What would you want to do there? Would you be primarily interested in getting a great internship or are there classes that don't exist now that would be a dream class for you to take? Who are the kind of guest lecturers you'd be interested in? Who are the kind of guest speakers you'd love to meet?"

So kind of hearing what other people's hopes and dreams for this could be engaging with alum, engaging with many of the advocacy groups or educational groups that are in the space, and talking to journalists and politicians in town, trying to get a good sense of what are the other institutes that are in the democracy space and how are they different from what we're envisioning? It's really understanding where is there an unmet need, and how can we have the most impactful role? And then starting to bring on some of the key staff. So in the first year, we have hired our research director for the institute and our senior researcher for the institute. Our research director is this incredible professor named Joanna Dunaway. She comes to us from Texas A&M, and she's a political scientist, and her expertise is polarization. And Josh Dar, who comes to us from LSU and is a professor at Newhouse School, is also in political communications.

And he and Dr. Dunaway have been academic research partners for many years, and one of his areas of expertise is local news and the impact of local news on polarization. So together, the core of our research operation, their focus really is, what is the connection between polarization and the news that you consume or don't consume? And having that awesome team on board is critical to building the rest of the institute around it. So that really involved doing the work behind the scenes to figure out what the research we want to do, what's the programming that we want to do, and how do we want to bring teaching into the mix? And we have launched the Institute's class in DC, and it is very creatively called Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship. So it's easy to remember the name of the class, but it's offered to any student who is in DC for the semester.

So my first cohort of this class was a combination of Maxwell and Newhouse students, and it is really a media literacy and civic engagement course. It's about... By the time you complete this class, which is a semester long and a full credit class, you are extremely conversant in things like trust trends across the last half century in America. What are the trust trends for how Americans view the Supreme Court, the military, the press TV, news, local news, congress, the White House, healthcare, and so on and so forth? But you also learn about news consumption, who is watching what channels, who is reading what publications. How do they break along ideological lines, party lines, gender education region of the country? And how do those kind of patterns of who watches and reads what impact, how people look at policy?

Basically, in other words, it's sort of the data to why we are such a divided country that's so hard to message. And then the second half of the course is sort of a combination of all these intersectional areas about democracy. What are the intersections between sports and democracy or AI and democracy, for example? And then each of the students researches one kind of civics group that aims at bringing divided people together or at informing people in an era of disinformation. And then finally, the students are challenged to create their own concept for a media literacy or civic engagement group.

John Boccacino:

What was your kind of light bulb moment that you needed to switch gears? And how did it come to be, this idea of leading our institute?

Margaret Talev:

I just had an instinct that I would become frustrated because the job of managing coverage of an election cycle is really multifaceted. You don't get to decide what you want to focus on. The news cycle dictates what you focus on. And so if you have got reporters on the trail somewhere between four and 15 candidates, and again, you never know what the landscape is going to look like until you see what it looks like, but we knew it could be a crowded primary on the Republican side, and that the general election contest would sort of be very hot. And then the evolution of AI, how is that going to play into the twist in campaign financing? How will foreign policy factor? Obviously, the economy's going to be an issue. These are the things, plus whatever is going on with Congress. Is the House of Representatives or the Senate going to flip control? All of these are elements you have to focus on when you're thinking about how to manage a news organization's coverage of a campaign.

But for me, the democracy piece of it and the relationship between the news that's being produced and consumed by people and how that's impacting their views on democracy and on governance, that was the most interesting to me. And I think in a way, it always had been. When I first got into journalism, political journalism, I think covering democracy, whether it's working, how working, who it's working for, and the context of what is an alternative to it has always actually been a large part of what was motivating my passion for covering politics, but I'm sure that I really knew that until January 6th it happened. And when that was happening, and you're not only watching it as a news consumer, but you're managing the coverage of it and the health and safety of two of your reporters are in question because they're trapped to the Capitol and they haven't been able to call you for an hour, that's when it really kind of came into focus that that's why I had always been drawn to covering politics.

And the aha moment was when I realized I don't think I can just go on and treat 2024 like it's every other year behind it because now this thing has happened that's changed what elections mean in our country, what the role of journalists may be in our country, or at least the approach to reaching audiences. For me, it was a recognition that what I wanted to do, what I really wanted to focus on was more specific than I could sort of pull off if I was managing a typical election cycle, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with that. It was



John Boccacino:

We all have a vested interest in where this country is going moving forward. We have a role to play, and a role that stems beyond just voting is incredibly important, voting in local elections, voting in national elections, not just voting for the presidential elections, but one of the key roles is learning about media literacy and learning how to discern where they're getting their information from. So what are some steps people can take to fulfill that role as a citizen in becoming more ~~media~~ ~~literate~~?

Margaret Talev:

When we talk about these issues, it's not like Americans ~~deliberately~~ ~~decided~~ to self-select into a certain tribe that includes a certain media consumption diet. People just... They're drawn to what they're drawn to. My friends and my family watch this channel or read this publication, and I generally agree with what they're talking about, so this is what I'm going to consume. And I talk to a lot of people who actually ask me what you asked me, which is like, how do I know what

probably isn't true or at least hasn't been verified or validated yet. Don't spread stuff that's titillating to you if you don't know whether it's true or not. Then you'll be part of the misinformation network. I also just want to say this. Sometimes when we have these conversations about democracy, they seem very doom and gloom, like, oh my God, what's going to happen? But I think if you study American history, you will see that since the founding of the United States, we have dealt with really challenging periods, periods of even civil war.

A lot of bad things have happened in the United States that we can look back on and say, "God, I'm glad we're past that." And so I think even though we're going through a really challenging time now, to me, it's not gloom and doom and despair, but what we've learned from all these other really troubling times in American history is that people have to come together and envision a future. This moment that we're in now full of division and disinformation and this sort of populism that can be really divisive and not that constructive, I don't give up hope on that, but I think there is a connection between the role that media has played and the position that we're in right now, and I think it's up to universities that are educating the next generation of media leaders, but also it's up to media consumers, and that means everyone. That means you to do a better job of informing yourself and not to be played so easily for political purposes and to decide to you, what does it mean to be an American?

And it's not like that democracy is some perfect thing to get back to. Democracy has worked unequally since the beginning of this country. For different groups of Americans. Democracy does not work very well for some people. It works much better for other people, and there have been winners and losers, and those have changed over time. So it's not to kind of revert to some imaginary time when democracy was perfect, but is to think of democracy and freedom of speech and your freedom to consume crappy news as well as good news. Those are all deeply held American rights, and they're tied to our democracy and our first amendment. How can you affect your democracy? We talked about voting a little bit. Voting is really important. I know that sounds really stupid.

You actually can make a difference by voting. And I think most Americans are sort of like, ah, what difference does it make? It doesn't really make that much of a difference. And you see low turnout even in presidential election years. And the truth is you can make a bigger difference in a battleground state or in a battleground district. But if you are a young American, your vote can have an outsized impact. If you're any American, your vote really does matter, but people also don't vote very tactically in most cases. You don't have to be registered to the party with which you feel the most affiliation. You can register for any party. I'm an independent voter. I'm not aligned with a political party because I'm a journalist, and I have had a longstanding policy not to vote in races that I'm covering, but if you want to make a difference in the place where you live, you can be tactical about you vote.

You can reregister as a Democrat or as a Republican and vote in that primary and whoever the nominee is going to be. If your biggest issue is guns or reproductive rights or something else, taxes, you can vote on the basis of that. If that is the most important issue to you, then vote on the basis of that, not for who you think is going to win. And so I think people can be sort of more engaged consumers when it comes to voting, more engaged citizens, but part of that is on us to help people think through that stuff and convene those kinds of conversations. And that's part of what we're trying to do, both through the courses that we'll be involved in offering and through the conversations we're going to engage with the institute.

John Boccacino:

With the limited time remaining, I want to do a quick lightning round session. And these are really important topics. I feel bad putting them in the lightning round, but I want to get your opinion on them. How do you see the institute being able to promote civil discourse and nonpartisan research

Margaret Talev:

By doing it. We are already doing the research. In terms of the engagement, I think we want to be doing it in Washington, we want to be doing it in Syracuse, and we want to be doing it around the country, bringing people together to talk about complex topics and learn how to talk to each other.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to artificial intelligence, and you can take a little more time with this one if you want, exactly what kind of challenges does AI pose to our democracy?

Margaret Talev:

So with AI, the biggest threat we believe is disinformation because information can be produced and replicated and modified and expanded so quickly. If the information is bad to begin with, it facilitates the quicker spread of all of that. Also, fakery. Obviously, if you can use AI models to make an image or likeness or voice of someone seem real and have them be saying things that they never said or doing things that they never did. Then you can misinform people and you can also create kind of a new base of distrust where nobody believes anything because it's so easy to inject something false into the process. Those are the main threats. And on the flip side, a lot of the experts and innovators that I talked to say that only AI can save us from AI. And also that there are ways that AI can help. In the medical field, a lot of people believe that doctors working with AI can do much better diagnosis over time than the same skill doctor working without AI. Put that into journalism.

If you can use AI sort of in a similar way to how the advent of databases or laptops or data software helped us transform journalism and do much more data-driven work much faster, you can see a role where AI could help a lot. There is some hope that AI could help rebuild local news. The challenge and the responsibility is to keep humans connected to the decision-making process. Humans working in good faith who are able to use AI technology to do a better job at their job could be transformative. But when you're kind of turning any of the decision making and validation over to the robots, or when people of good faith are allowing people of bad faith to lean into it too much when it comes to AI, I think that's where the danger lies.

So the bottom line is whether you are a great AI enthusiast or a great AI resistor, doesn't really matter. It's already happening. It's not like it's coming. It's here. It's already here. And so we all have to accept that central reality, and I think make part of our literacy and engagement work in terms of helping people quickly understand what's already possible and their role in creating guardrails for it.

John Boccacino:

Last question for you, for our audience who does not know this fact, Margaret is the child of an immigrant who actually fled communist Bulgaria, and now you are fighting for American democracy. How surreal has this arc been for you?

Margaret Talev:

Yeah, my father and his little brother fled Bulgaria in the early 1960s and never saw their father again. My grandmother eventually was able to get a visa and come live with us. And so I grew up speaking a broken Bulgarian and loving my Bulgarian roots and culture, but also being very mindful of what they left behind and why they left it behind. The communism, theocratic life under dictator was always a part of our dinner table conversations growing up and why my parents, my dad was American born, but why my mom and my dad really valued democracy and really valued journalism. And it's funny you say I'm fighting for democracy. I think really what I'm fighting for is our ability to preserve our freedoms. And to me, journalism is one of the greatest tools of those freedoms, and it's also one of the greatest empowerers of those freedoms.



What independent journalism is about is getting access to information, whether it's information the government wants you to know or not, whether it's popular or not, whether it's something you wanted to know or something you wish you didn't know. If it's true and it impacts you, it's really important for you to be able to know it and trust it. And the whole idea of democracy is our ability to govern ourselves as a