

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** James C. Warren, Veteran Reporter and Editor

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### I: From Print to Digital Media (0:15 – 49:14)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by long-time friend Jim Warren – a reporter, columnist, editor, managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Washington Bureau Chief of the *New York Daily News*, as I recall. So you have huge print experience and TV experience. You've been on various TV talk shows. And a student of the media in much of your writing, especially in recent years, has been about the media, for the media. So we're going to talk about the media, and you're going to explain where we are, how we got where we are, all the implications, business and civic, of the new media landscape and –

WARREN: I was just thinking, you know, how many people do you know who have been paid pundits of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox?

KRISTOL: That's you?

WARREN: A trifecta.

KRISTOL: That's impressive. Are you still being paid by any?

WARREN: No, no, no, no.

KRISTOL: But you've retired on that huge amount of money. [Laughter]

WARREN: They all started getting smart and realized that they didn't have to pay vain, particularly print journalists to go on at any time of the day or night, and they saved a whole lot of money that way. So there went my late-night-screwing-around bar money from the three networks.

KRISTOL: Your personal business model did not correlate with their business model.

So, you went into – I mean, we were friends in high school, obviously, and you went into journalism right from college, and that was what, '74 or '75? So I mean, it's a cliché that it's changed so much and all. I guess I'll be devil's advocate: *has* it really changed? Maybe people are overstating it? Maybe there's always changes, come on: radio, tech, TV. I mean, is it really that big a deal? Is it that big a difference?

WARREN: No, it won't be hard fending you off as you play devil's advocate there.

KRISTOL: Okay.

WARREN: And, in fact, we should make clear that we were sort of friends from the old neighborhood on the Upper West Side. So it goes way, way beyond – way predates high school. I mean, we were like the last of a group of people who spent 13 years at this private school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. You were like on, uh, Riverside –

KRISTOL: I joined in fifth grade. You were there.

WARREN: 80<sup>th</sup> or something?

KRISTOL: 81<sup>st</sup>. You were there from kindergarten. I joined only in fifth grade. So I was like the –

WARREN: That's right; that's right. A latecomer.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: But just think: when we grew up in the Upper West Side, so this is the 50s and 60s, when it came to just, say, media consumption, what were you talking about? You were talking about a bunch of daily newspapers in New York. My dad had sort of a mid-level job on Wall Street and would come home every day around 4:00, 4:30 with some, you know, the *afternoon* edition of a newspaper, the *New York Post* or something like that. The *World Telegram and Sun*. And then we had a few TV stations that would have –

KRISTOL: Now, in the morning, you probably got the *New York Times* and maybe the *Herald Tribune* or something?

WARREN: We got the *New York Times* delivered. And you had a world of – just a short time ago there was a world of pre-internet, pre-computers; my high school graduation present was a Smith Corona electric typewriter, in a world before computers and cell phones.

KRISTOL: And before cable news.

WARREN: And before cable news. No cable news.

KRISTOL: Before talk radio. Before political talk radio, really.

WARREN: Right. And so when you talked, for instance, about diversity of opinion in the media, I mean it was – there really wasn't much. I mean, just consider yourself and sort of the intellectual background you came from: what was there for conservatives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan? There was maybe, what? The editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, there was –

KRISTOL: Which didn't become what we think of as the editorial page of the *Journal* really until the 70s, though. It was one column. I mean, there were not op-eds; there were not – so just, I'm confirming your point. There wasn't much. So there was Bill Buckley's *National Review* once every two weeks if you had a –

WARREN: And what? Maybe *Forbes Magazine* once every two weeks?

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: Then there were monthly's–

KRISTOL: *Commentary*.

WARREN: So the *National Interest* or *Commentary*.

KRISTOL: But those even were later almost. Yeah.

WARREN: Later. How about your dad's? Was that a quarterly?

KRISTOL: *The Public Interest* was a quarterly. Not founded until '65. So, I agree. I mean, if you're looking at the 50s, late 50s and 60s, it's amazing how little opportunity there was.

WARREN: Newspapers. When one thinks back to conservative editorial papers – a handful.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: I think the *Detroit News*. Famously, the *Orange County Register*.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: "Bastion of the Right Wing."

KRISTOL: *Chicago Tribune* in the old days, right?

WARREN: Yeah. So, there really wasn't much. And I don't know what you looked at on television. I guess I looked at a little bit of local TV news from one of maybe three stations in New York City. I don't remember watching anything on really PBS. It was ABC, NBC, CBS. It really was quite limited.

KRISTOL: And they had 22 minutes a day, pretty similar, pretty homogenous. Mainstream center-liberal, I would say, news. And that was it.

WARREN: No really news radio. I think maybe, I think that was in its – and certainly no talk radio.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: I mean, Rush Limbaugh, for a lot of your younger viewers, that's a late 1980s phenomenon.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: And that dramatically changed the media landscape. So fast forward to today, I mean, when every crackpot, left or right, can have their own site, can have their own blog. I mean, the diversity of opinion is dramatically greater.

At the same time, I wonder whether there were any benefits to this, I don't know what you'd call it, sort of intellectual cohesion. Say on the right: the parameters of debate intellectually were probably pretty narrow. I think like maybe the *Wall Street Journal* back in those days was for "open borders." Bill Buckley and his magazine were sort of against it. But you had nowhere near the sort of fervent conversation you have on a bunch of issues today.

So it really was different. Economically, the local TV stations were a printing press – they just made money. They had 50, 60 percent profit margins in a world in which the broadcast guys controlled *everything* on television pre-cable.

Most of the newspapers were making a whole lot of money. But you began then, partly because of television, having the decline; so you went from six or seven or eight newspapers in a big market to two

or three. But you still didn't have the revolutionary fall of, and the situation that you now have where most of them are dead-man-walking. You didn't have that in the 60s or 70s. They were still very vibrant.

KRISTOL: Or 80s or 90s. They still controlled classified advertising.

WARREN: With big newsrooms. And, they were really sort of the news. The print guys were sort of the elite. They were sort of the agenda-setters; they decided what were the three or four topics that the TV guys would discuss.

It's interesting, at the University of Chicago a few months back, I interviewed Laurence O'Donnell, the MSNBC host, you know, of clearly liberal bent and a guy who was involved in that very successful TV show that liberals are going nostalgic over during the era of Trump, "The West Wing" with Martin Sheen, the president who they sort of— He's done a book on the '68 presidential campaign. And the one surprising element of an hour-long conversation at the Institute of Politics, which you know well of, at the University of Chicago, one surprising element was when I asked him to compare coverage back then in '68 to today. He makes the claim that it was superior *then*. And I said, "Well, that's kind of weird." Because, I mean, today — every stop, there's a reporter on — there's a reporter giving you live video.

KRISTOL: Real time. Twitter. Yeah.

WARREN: Five appearances by Hilary Clinton; six by Trump. You're getting every single thing from the scene; you don't have to wait until the day after.

He makes the case that things back in '68 were far more thoughtful, far more contemplative, precisely because the reporter didn't have to instantly send something out. He or she — it was mostly he — had five, six, seven hours to make sense of these five or six appearances by, you know, the candidates back then as opposed to now. That was — that's a bit of a surprise.

I'm not sure I totally agree, because I think, in some ways, [in the] political realm possibly, this is, I think, an amazing golden age of at least quantity of coverage. And it's not just covering of day-to-day events, but it's the ability to quantify things, to give you statistical data. I mean, if you want to know about some Congressional race going on in Peoria or something, you don't have to have someone fax you stories; you can just find out instantly what's going on; you can get all the demographic data from the district. It is pretty amazing. And one has, I think, in a lot of other areas: sports, I mean — this time for the Winter Olympics in South Korea. I mean, you can watch every single event on *some* platform if you're interested. You want to watch the great U.S. curling team? You can watch every single time they did — As opposed to in our day, where there wasn't even same-day coverage.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: ABC would have to take film, send it to London, send it to New York, and then show it to us. And sometimes proudly say, "We have same day coverage of the figure skating."

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: So, the technology, which was kind of a little bit of a toy back then, now, really, and I think often for the better, drives a lot of what the media does. I mean, that's a double-edged sword, and we can talk about that later.

KRISTOL: Yeah, we should talk about it. I'm struck — I always when I speak on campus — So, ten years ago when I was, I'd say, more pro the current situation — because I thought the internet had really opened things up for people, including young people — when I spoke on college campuses, I would make the point that when I was in college, and we were in college at the same time, you didn't have access. I mean, people now take it for granted. "Well, if I'm a smart conservative kid, I'll go online and see what did

Charles Krauthammer say; what did *The Weekly Standard* say; what did *National Review* say; the *Journal* editorial page?” “Oh, that’s an interesting distinction here,” and their thoughts on what happened yesterday. None of that was available to us.

I mean, you had the local paper or papers. In my case in Boston, I guess the *Globe* and the *Herald*. You had the national TV news, which was pretty homogenous. And that was *literally* it. And you couldn’t even – and there were columnists began in the mid-70s, [William] Safire, I think George Will, ‘73, ‘74. But you couldn’t necessarily get them. It wasn’t like every newspaper showed up in Boston; maybe a day late you could get stuff, you know.

And you had to make a pretty special effort to get the *Washington Post* in Boston. And then the columns were syndicated, so maybe you’d see them three days later, you know, depending on the paper’s schedules. Not all papers had much in the way of op-ed pages. I mean, the degree to which everyone has access to intelligent reporting and commentary today is extraordinary.

And the degree to which people have access to unintelligent reporting and commentary is also extraordinary. And I guess – well, so let’s talk about that.

And for me, the big break is probably sort of, what, mid – The internet itself is a big deal, but then social media sort of takes it all to – and talk radio was a big deal and cable news was a big deal. All of those, I think, were big deals within a certain context. I do think, don’t you think that something happened, though, five, ten years ago with social media that takes it to a whole different level?

WARREN: Yeah, and it also changed sort of our relationship to news. Without getting too nostalgic and without sort of trading in sort of mythologies, I sort of remember consuming news was somewhat a sense of it being a civic duty. Now, for so many, it’s kind of, more a little bit more entertainment. And that’s a real challenge for a lot of folks, particularly in an era where, say, advertising rates may somehow be tied to how many eyeballs, how many people look to that story.

So, you know, you want to kind of juice up that headline a little bit more; you want to get out those bulletins as quick as you can. There was a recent day, I looked at the face of my iPhone: there must have been 20 bulletins about Jared Kushner’s security classification being changed. It was all the same story. And one was more overheated than the next. And in a couple of cases there were some you could sense from some of the media outlets, there was a vague sense of vindication: *Aha! Jared Kushner has got his*.

So, the quantity of stuff that we have access to at a given moment is quite astonishing. I mean, if you want to take time out now and just go online and see what they’re saying in Johannesburg about something – it doesn’t even have to be a big national thing; it could be some local crime story – you can find out.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

WARREN: But why is it, I wonder, that we don’t necessarily feel that much more informed? Or we feel a little sort of confused? I mean, I live on this tree-lined block of single-family homes on the north side of Chicago, a lot of upscale professionals. There are a bunch of seven-figure homes, new and old, on the block. There are Harvard lawyers and Yale trained neurosurgeons and stuff. Virtually nobody gets a newspaper delivered anymore. And all due respect to my, in some cases Ivy-educated friends, their hold on what’s going on, even just locally, is often tenuous.

And I think it has something to do with just being bombarded, not having the time to sort of focus on a particular thing. It’s got something to do with our being entranced with news as entertainment and the models of so many, even some of the elite media, has changed. I mean, in some ways they – the *Washington Post* is a fascinating example. Its success has something to do with the world’s richest man

coming into save them; it has something to do with the ability to hire great reporters. It also has something to do with technology and their ability to get more and more people into the tent by being at least responsibly provocative, but provocative.

KRISTOL: And also by swamping the local papers, right, and the smaller competitors? I mean, so let's talk about the business side of it a little and then we'll get to the civic stuff, which is something I'm more interested in. But you studied the business side. So newspapers? I mean, that consolidation and diminishing of numbers continues?

WARREN: Yeah, it continues.

KRISTOL: And the swamping of the local papers, in particular?

WARREN: The *New York Times* even admits their relatively astonishing revival and the fact that they have now two million digital subscribers, which is quite remarkable. There's somewhere in the mix some sort of Trump effect. But, you know, as recently as 10 or 12 years ago, their revenues were around \$3 billion a year. They're at half of that now.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

WARREN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Despite the fact that they have more people reading any particular article in the *New York Times* than was once the case.

WARREN: But take a look: I live in Chicago; I pay \$1,000 for my print subscription. If I cancel that tomorrow and just go to digital only, which wouldn't be stupid, because there's a lot more content on the digital platform, I think they charge me anywhere from, depending on the type of subscription, \$150 to \$200. The *Washington Post* is significantly even cheaper, because it's sort of the Bezos, Amazon model: get larger numbers in for cheaper.

But that – Even though their total audience in the *New York Times* has increased dramatically, the loss of those print subscribers – but more important, the loss of the print advertisers – is something they've not come even close to making up. So when we were kids and opened the *New York Times*, you might see the full-page ad for Bloomingdale's. They paid \$30, \$40 thousand dollars for that. Now, if Bloomingdale's wants an ad on the digital version, it's a pittance. An absolute pittance.

KRISTOL: And classified ads, which were a huge profit center for every paper, because you use them – we moved to Washington: *how do we find a place to live in Washington?* We had to buy the Sunday *Washington Post* and look at the classifieds. I mean, that's totally gone, obviously. And that was hugely profitable, because what were they doing? They were taking the copy you sent them, you know, looking for apartments, looking to buy this, looking for a job, and they were just reproducing it and then charging you, right?

WARREN: Yeah. The loss of classified advertising and then some of the mainstays of car advertising.

KRISTOL: Display advertising. Yeah.

WARREN: Display advertising, sort of went at the same time. So now you have a situation in which –

KRISTOL: So what's the future of the papers?

WARREN: Well, I think –

KRISTOL: A few national papers make it?

WARREN: I think the print, the print versions are – it's just a matter of when most of them cease. The *New York Times* CEO, a very smart guy, British guy, he gives the *Times* – in some interviews, he talks about maybe another ten years for the printed *New York Times*. Maybe another ten years. But, that may be kind of rosy.

Say you're the *San Francisco Chronicle*: 30 years ago, 1988, you had 670,000 subscribers; I think now you've got about 160 [thousand].

KRISTOL: Wow.

WARREN: In a giant, booming, affluent market. If you're the *San Jose Mercury*, which used to have a newsroom of 300 or 400, you have a newsroom that has about 50, covering Silicon Valley – which gets us into other issues about the business models imploding and thus not having the money to pay journalists to cover significant areas.

The *Chicago Tribune*, which I worked for for 23, 24 years, when I left there as managing editor, we had about 650 people in the newsroom.

KRISTOL: When was that?

WARREN: In 2008, ten years ago.

KRISTOL: Ten years ago.

WARREN: Now, maybe 300, 350. We had about \$750 million dollars a year in revenues in 2007. Imagine this: beginning of 2008, and we had made very, very conservative budget projections for 2008, very conservative. The guys that ran the company were sort of Midwest, penny-pinching guys, you know. But come March, we started realizing that we were missing our weekly projected revenues by seven figures. A million dollars a week we were coming short.

That had a bunch – something to do with the recession that was coming, but it also had to do with technological change and an internet, which we, in our case, we were too far in front of six, seven, eight years earlier; it was us and the *Raleigh News and Observer* were sort of in the forefront. But then that was a world of dial-up connections, we're spending a lot of money, and then we started losing money. So we cut back, and by the time we realized that the world had changed, it was sort of too late.

Then making, like everyone else, the crazy, strategic decision to give away our content for free on our websites. And by the time the newspapers woke up and said, "Boy, this is kind of stupid, because then people don't have to go buy the paper; they can just get it for free." By the time we decided to start charging people – maybe after ten free articles a month or something like that – for most of us it was too late.

So I think you're going to see the print versions in almost all these markets go, and the question's going to be will our children and grandchildren be willing to pay *something* for digital content, and can we figure out ways to get enough revenue in to pay people money to actually do things?

Anecdote, which I refreshed yesterday: about six years ago, I gave a speech at the University of Chicago, at the Harris School of Public Policy. And for the speech, I want to make big points about decreasing government coverage. And so I call the guy who was head of the Springfield, which is the capital of Illinois, Springfield Reporters Association or something. I said, "How many people, full-time, are covering state legislature?" Notoriously, as ethically challenged any legislature in America; they make the folks here on Capitol Hill look like they're out of some convent and righteous.

And I was shocked to learn that they were down to 24 full-time journalists from 32 only a year or two before. That even a paper as big as the *Rockford Paper*, second biggest city in the state, no longer covered the state legislature full-time. Last week I checked into update the figure – they're down to three.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

WARREN: *Three* full-time reporters covering a legislature, where the real skullduggery plays out. Where, like, money may be passed –

KRISTOL: And where billions of dollars are appropriated and so forth.

WARREN: Oh, yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's a serious, big state, Illinois. Yeah.

WARREN: Yeah. So how that's going to change, I don't know. But that's sort of one sort of window onto changing business model, because all the papers are – the *Chicago Sun Times*, another paper that I worked for for seven or eight years, they're losing a couple of million dollars a year.

KRISTOL: I mean, online advertising has turned out to be kind of a disaster in the sense that you just can't make money off it. Google makes money off of it, and Facebook makes money off it, but normal newspapers and magazines don't.

WARREN: Yeah, and most of these markets – I don't know what it's like at *The Weekly Standard*, but in most of the local markets – and it's the same whether you're in Albuquerque or Houston or Seattle or Chicago – all that advertising, it used to be the sole province, basically a monopoly of the newspapers, the TV stations, radio stations. Now, 80 percent of it, *80 percent* goes to Facebook and Google.

KRISTOL: Yeah. They have 80 percent of the online advertising in the country, I think. Those two.

WARREN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And it's more efficient, if you can advertise on Google against – if you're a hotel, you advertise against searches for "hotel in Chicago," "hotel in the north side of Chicago," "boutique hotel in Chicago." That's more efficient than buying a generic ad on the *Chicago Tribune* site, right?

WARREN: Or, "30-somethings interested in hotel in Chicago."

KRISTOL: And then at the Facebook level you get to targeting people who have searched for, or in Google have mentioned the word "Chicago" and "hotel." You can buy the ad that pops up, right? So that's a hugely more efficient way of targeting.

WARREN: It's astonishing. So, you know, a lot of people have focused on the revival of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* – and, in fact, I've written about it. And it is genuine revival in both cases, for different reasons. In one case, you've got the world's richest guy; another case, you have this astonishing family, now in the fifth generation, 37-year-old, I think, new publisher. And they have no other revenue source, just the paper. And they're going to, they're going to go down with the ship if they have to. I mean, they're going to still – they have a newsroom of 1300 people, 1300. That's as big as they've ever been.

The *Washington Post*, which is often considered in tandem, is like 750. And I would argue, all due respect to all our friends at the *Washington Post*, those products are still very, very different. I mean, the breadth of the *Times* can't be matched by the *Post*. The *Post* has done a fabulous job, and Bezos has



brought a lot of technological aplomb: for every big-shot reporter they have hired at the *Post*, unseen by the world is maybe one or two really smart engineers who they've hired, which make things like the load factors, you know, how quickly you can get a story from the *Post*, like...

KRISTOL: It's an excellent website.

WARREN: ...far better than any other papers.

But with the focus on the *Times* and the *Post*, forgotten is that all the rest of the industry, the newspaper part of it, is dying. And it's unclear what comes instead, what comes in its place?

I ran for two and a half years, on my resume – which I got to update one of these days – next to my resume I got to include a two and a half year period in which I helped run a nonprofit in Chicago, a media nonprofit, called the Chicago News Cooperative. And we were unusual because we cut a deal with the *New York Times*; Bill Keller was the editor at the time. We became the – for the first time in the *New York Times* history, they contracted out to people not on their staff to do journalism for them on a regular basis.

Back then, and even now, they had been afflicted with a problem of figuring out how to cheaply cover local news. Because everybody had always told them in their surveys for years and years, "Oh, we love the *New York Times* for their national coverage, foreign coverage, but I wish it had a little bit more about my town." And they couldn't figure out a way to do that with a moderate expense. And so then, here come these old-fart newspaper guys who are from a similar tradition starting a nonprofit, so they cut a deal with us. So twice a week in the Midwest print edition, whether you were in Peoria or Chicago, there were two pages of Chicago news right in front of the editorial page and the op-ed pages. So, what in every other edition would be two pages of the national news was two pages of Chicago news.

I actually was – so for two and a half years, I could claim I was a *New York Times* columnist, because I was the columnist on the two days we ran stuff. So that went well for about two and a half years until we ran out of money. Now, by that time, the *Times* had replicated our seeming success in San Francisco and Texas; but, as we speak today, all gone, all dead. And on these local levels, I'm not sure what it's like in, say, northern Virginia where you are, but in these big metropolitan areas, it's unclear what comes, what there is.

KRISTOL: Now I guess the question is, a) could some of the online news providers become more like colleges and universities and museums with, you know, wealthy individuals and institutions backing them? It's not a for-profit model, it's more of a not-for-profit model. But you can, of course, have excellent museums that don't make – a third of their money is from charging people for entrance and most of the money is donations and philanthropic backers. That would be one question. And people talk about that a lot; I'm not sure it's really happening that much.

On the other thing I guess is, you know, so in northern Virginia if you want local news, there are actually pretty good websites that have the local crimes, the local sports, and maybe that's fine. And maybe people are learning as much as they ever did.

Though, I sort of take your point about the state capitals and the local and state governments. It's one thing to report on, you know, Langley High School beat McLean in football last Friday; that's kind of fun and there's a market for that. Do people care about the Fairfax County Board and how much, some decisions they've made, and probably to have someone cover that intelligently – you know, football, anyone who's a sports fan at some level can go look at the game and say, you know, this is – But intelligent coverage, where you have to know some history; you'd have to know what's really going on; what the real, why this person's voting this way – And so you're right. I mean, hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent in Fairfax County, and I don't know do we have any coverage to speak of that? I

mean, that's a good question.

WARREN: Yes, there was recently much attention given to the *pater familias* of the Ricketts family. You know, the big Omaha wealthy family that started the big insurance, E-Trade, I think.

KRISTOL: Yeah, E-Trade, which is a stockbroker – I think the online sort of brokerage.

WARREN: And the father, who's got a son whose I think is the governor of –

KRISTOL: Joe Ricketts is the father.

WARREN: Of Nebraska.

KRISTOL: He's an impressive guy.

WARREN: Then there's a son who runs the Chicago Cubs.

KRISTOL: Right. Huge victory last year for them.

WARREN: And then there's another son who's a bicycle shop owner in the north suburbs of Chicago who briefly was a Trump selection for Commerce Department?

KRISTOL: Right. And now he's RNC Finance Chairman. I know that family some.

WARREN: The best connected, bicycle shop owner you've ever met. And then, interestingly enough, there's a gay daughter, big Democrat.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: Part of the family. But the dad started, I think out of the best of motives, a local news service, I think mostly in New York and Chicago called DNA Info. And there was a lot of publicity given a few months back to his deciding, seemingly very arbitrarily one day, to close it all up. And it was mostly covered if it was simply an attempt by him to subvert a unionizing attempt in New York.

That was part of it. But it was also because he was losing tons of money. He couldn't figure out how to do it. And they were doing very good work in New York and Chicago; they were breaking lots of nice little stories, but they still hadn't figured a way to get enough people to actually pay for the content.

And so with those gone, you know, you're left in some neighborhoods, like, just well-intentioned bloggers. There's a woman in Brooklyn who broke big stories about Paul Manafort because she goes around – in Carrol Gardens, I think, her neighborhood – she goes around with her camera taking pictures of weird stuff going on in the neighborhood. And on one block people were pissed off at this townhouse that had been sort of under renovation on and off, and it was a big eye sore and she checks into it, and who owns it? And where did the money come from? Well, it was Manafort and, apparently, *the Ukraine*.

So would you believe a well-intentioned non-journalist blogger in Brooklyn breaks a big story?

But, you know, I don't think that's the model that's going to save American democracy, or what to me is ultimately a real concern out of all this, which seems – again, without being too nostalgic – sort of almost a decline in civic engagement that has something to do, I think, something to do with the lack of consistent reporting on what's going on in these communities. Not just governmental, but other things too.

You know, a couple of years ago Rahm Emanuel, cantankerous, you know, strong-willed, mayor of Chicago is taken to a *runoff* by a rank mediocrity. And, you know, it didn't get any more dramatic than that. He had spent millions and millions and millions of dollars against a guy who had a few bucks from the unions and that was it. And I think the final turnout was like 32 percent.

KRISTOL: I mean, I suppose the anti-nostalgic point of view would be a lot of these local papers were kind of corrupt; they were in bed with the politicians. So it is a mixed, a little bit of a mixed bag. But it can't be good for the country to have almost no coverage of local and state government, I guess. Do you think a local and state issue is more serious a problem than the national issue?

WARREN: Oh, yeah.

KRISTOL: And it gets less attention of course.

WARREN: Oh, but look just think of yourself: just think of *The Weekly Standard* and probably the pretty aggressive competition you have just –

KRISTOL: Totally.

WARREN: In just sort of one area. And look at the job you guys do on more national things and look at the job that the thousands of reporters do here covering Congress.

I don't think there's any comparison between the quality of coverage today and the quantity of coverage of Capitol Hill and the agencies compared to 20, 30 years ago. There's just more of it. I mean, there is very little that gets passed in Congress – provision snuck in, that at some point doesn't come out, and then someone's cross checking with the files about campaign contributions, and, right or wrong, linking and figuring out that Congressman X put this thing in and it actually involves a bridge in the district – whatever.

The quality of stuff now. I mean, *Politico*, you go up to the Hill, it's like crack cocaine for these 20 somethings. Oh, what's *Politico* saying now? And we can all jest, in some ways, or derisively look at some of what seems occasionally to be the over-heated acclaim of some big exclusive or some big breaking news. But compared to what? Compared to 30, 40 years ago –

Well, say, when you were working for Quayle and then working for Bennett, what was it like? You woke up in the morning, looking at the *Post* and the *Times*?

KRISTOL: So I would say the only counter argument I have to that is that I think there is a lot of coverage, and a lot of it's good. And anything, as you say, biggish, meaning Congress, I think gets more coverage.

When I was at the Education Department, the *Washington Post* had a reporter who was assigned, as I recall, to maybe two or three second-tier agencies, like Labor, Education, or something. And she, and I got to know her a little since I was Bennett's Chief of Staff and we had an interest in what the *Post* said and she had an interest in covering us. And so she didn't just take press releases; she wanted to meet people who were senior people in the Bennett Education Department – we didn't get in the *Post*; I can't imagine there was more than one article every two weeks about education.

But she knew, I mean, she really – she had the leisure to study education policy a little, not just to have lunch with me, but to go talk to people at Brookings and AEI and the education lobbyists on both sides, and to go, *well what is really going on with the college-loan program?* And you would get a kind of informed coverage of fairly in the weeds bureaucratic things you might say. Which I'm not sure you do get.

I think that's one problem with the kind of herd-like coverage now. They're on the – you have 200 people covering gun rights on the Hill because that's a huge legislative fight, and Trump just weighed in, and well, you know, this happened. Maybe fewer people covering, you know, the student-loan program or covering it less. Or they're assigned to do it for two months and then they move onto – or they kind of dip in if it's a controversy and then dip out.

So that would be the one, I'd say flip side of that, where I think there was once better coverage of the more routine aspects of government.

But having said that, I sort of tend to agree with you. Washington is pretty well covered, in general, and major international issues are pretty well covered. And if you want to find out the debate on U.S. policy towards Putin, obviously, or towards Syria, it's not like you can't – And you have access to foreign papers, and you have access to specialty magazines, and you can read *Foreign Policy* or, you know, you don't just have the *Post* to depend on or the *Times*.

WARREN: My eighth grader goes to private school, South Side of Chicago, run by the University of Chicago, and he had a paper the other day and it was on ISIS. He was doing something on social media and ISIS. And I was trying to think back, when we were kids what would we have to – what would our sources have been? I could remember myself going to the public library –

KRISTOL: Right, you would have looked up –

WARREN: On the Upper East Side, when we moved to the Upper East Side, on York Avenue, or maybe going downtown on 50 something near the main branch of the public library there was a research facility; I went there, and looked at books.

KRISTOL: And magazine articles. You could look –

WARREN: Was it microfilm?

KRISTOL: Yeah, and you could look in the yearly index of magazine articles. But, again, it wouldn't really be quite up to date, and you would read some article from five months ago in *Foreign Affairs*, I suppose.

WARREN: Yeah. But he has access, partly through Google to stories – he found a story on *Wired* magazine that I had never seen on ISIS's use of social media. That was a very sophisticated take, far more than I had known, about them. So, you know, that sort of gets to the notion of a far larger quantity of sophisticated stuff.

And then, you know, the internet gives everybody, whether it's Brookings Institution or AEI, a chance to do, they put out big papers out there and make those available. And, you know, now everybody is social media conscious, so they're trying to, you know, come up with little sexier ways to do things, which in and of itself is maybe, if look at the glass half full, is a double-edged sword.

Because if you think of it back in the day, a long time ago, the editor of the magazine or the newspaper, really was driven by anecdote as to what people were looking at.

It should also be said that, at least the daily newspapers, they always lied to advertisers about what people looked at. So they said, "Oh, this column [by] Kristol, really popular." Our survey shows –

KRISTOL: Yeah, you want to buy the ad next to it. Right.

WARREN: Absolutely right. And it's going to cost you twice as much. "That thing back in the back section, oh, that's not so popular." Fast forward to today, they can't lie, because the advertisers also have their own data. So they know, they know that that column that you're so proud of writing, 28 people

looked at it.

KRISTOL: Right. And half of them didn't go to the second page.

WARREN: Right.

KRISTOL: After the first page.

WARREN: Exactly. And you could answer this better than I could: the pressures placed on an editor, whether it's a TV editor or a radio editor or a newspaper editor or a magazine editor or just a digital-only operation, of that data are significant.

KRISTOL: I mean, having been owned by two wealthy and generous billionaires, who I think felt a sense of public spirit in supporting *The Weekly Standard*. We have several million dollars in revenue, but we don't quite make up the gap between that and expenses. I was able, and still is the case at the *Standard*, that we don't put on our website "most read," "most emailed," and so forth, which the *Times* and everyone else has basically done for over a decade. And this is already an old debate, pre-social media, almost.

And I didn't do it because I just thought it is inappropriate – We're making a judgment every week – this was still in the old days where the print is dominate – that's the weekly issue, as opposed to the website; but the same argument would be mostly true of the website – we're making a judgment that this stuff is worth publishing.

And I don't want to be in the business – we're giving you what we think is important; obviously we know that fewer people read a book review about the ancient world than read a jazzy, you know, a Fred Barnes piece about a huge controversy in a presidential campaign.

But we want to preserve the, you know, not just the image, but, I mean, the message that, "We think, you know, people should read what they want; it's a free country. But we hope you'll read all of this and take a look at all of this."

And I thought it was very bad, and very bad psychological and incentives and sort of sends a very bad message for people to see on your own website "This one was read by 32,000 people," and "this one was read by 7,000," and "this is the most emailed."

And I do think it's had a huge effect – but, when I said we're not doing it, and I said this many times; I also said we're not going to have comments. In each case I was told, correctly by our business people, "Fine, I mean, but you're sacrificing about 25 percent extra readership. Because people love that and you'll get, you know – "

And I said, "fine." And to our owners' credit, they were willing to take that hit, you know, to the degree we're not a big thing.

But I think the pressure's on the *Times* and the *Post* and the big, *Politico* and the people who are more in the business of, you know, they need to show – don't you think the pressure's there just very great? And that has all kinds of effects on the reporters and on the columnists and on the tone and on, you know–

WARREN: I took a job as, I think you alluded to, as Bureau Chief in Washington for the *New York Daily News*. My first day was Obama's second inaugural day. And my first trek up to the *New York Daily News* office, which is now way, way, way, the southern tip of Manhattan, the first thing that hit me when I walked in the newsroom: giant screens, like tote boards, like, you know, I don't know, like Pat Sajak has or other game hosts. But a second-by-second accounting of how stories were doing online.

And there it was. And it becomes part of the ethos. And reporters inevitably are looking to see how their story's doing. And they see –

KRISTOL: And they think they'll be compensated accordingly to some degree, which is true, of course.

WARREN: And then they see the story about Kim Kardashian is like going gang busters, and that, you know, that very honorable piece they did on something at the city council is like number 15. And there's the double edged sword.

Same thing at the *Washington Post*. The *Washington Post*, all over that newsroom is not just data on what people are looking at; it's data on load times; it's data on how far into stories people – They've got everything.

KRISTOL: How sticky people – yeah. Well, now these days you can put up a piece with different titles, different headlines, or even different leads or different photos, and quickly test which is getting the most pick up and then adjust accordingly. Which, in a way, isn't *bad*. I mean, if they're all legitimate photos, I mean, why shouldn't you test and do the one that people are most interested in? I *guess*.

But, of course, it has a certain tendency to mean that you're not going to have – you're going to use the most – I find this even with *The Weekly Standard*, for online purposes, you're going to use the most famous person in a photo or in a headline. You're going to use Trump, even if it's not really a story about Trump; it's a story about, I don't know, his Labor Department doing something and he doesn't even know what's happening. You know what I mean?

But "Trump's Labor Department Announces X" will get a lot more readership than "The Labor Department announces X," you know. So anyway –

WARREN: A guy who lives across from me in Chicago, this 36, 37-year-old CFO of, it was sort of clickbait firm, his boss is 29 or 30 years old, and he was home schooled in La Port, Indiana. At age 12, he gets up the nerve to contact JK Rowling. And he asks JK Rowling, of Harry Potter fame, about can he, would she give him approval to do a Harry Potter fan website?

KRISTOL: Incidentally, even the contacting of JK Rowling is itself a modern phenomenon of the internet, presumably, right?

WARREN: Right. So he contacts her. She says fine. He's off to the races. He's now a wizened, maybe 29, profiled in the *New Yorker Magazine* as "the King of Clickbait." He has, in downtown Chicago, a couple of long rows of wood tables, and they've got these computer engineers. And they crank out algorithms, which media companies and corporations buy – which do exactly in part what you're talking about: put on four or five, six, seven different headlines on the same sort of content, and immediately will know within a minute, two minutes, three minutes what's working.

And local, for instance, a lot of local TV stations hire them. You know, you may see those things at the bottom, you know: "Who's got the NBA star with the best abs?" or "the celebrity with the best" blah, blah, blah. They're masters of trying to gin up a readership. Now, you can certainly argue that whether you're *The Weekly Standard* or you're *Vice* or something, getting as many people into the tent to see your quality stuff that's pretty honorable.

KRISTOL: Right. And headline writers, even in our day, weren't inattentive – said, "Gee, let's have a jazzier headline, not a super" – you know, "not a boring headline." So you could argue that's more of the same, more sophisticated-ly done. But let's, we'll go ahead, but then I want to move to social media, which strikes me as a whole different level of kind of –

WARREN: The other thing I was going to say: For the last few years I've done a newsletter on media. And I was getting a lot of, I was getting some grief initially from my employer about the length of my items. I was too long and I was told, you know, on an iPhone these things are too long, you want to be short and snappy. So I called up Marty Baron, the editor, famous editor of the *Washington Post* and maybe a lot of Americans first sort of encountered when the Academy Award winning movie about ethical disarray and the Roman Catholic Church dioceses of Boston.

KRISTOL: He was then the editor of the *Globe*.

WARREN: At *The Boston Globe*. So I called and said, "Listen, you guys are masters of newsletters: you do a thousand newsletters, they're really good, and they're on cooking and they're on politics and they're on this and that, on travel. Can you tell me about what all these smart guys from Amazon, who now essentially own you, what they tell you about length of newsletters?"

And there was this pause, and I thought the line had gone. I said, "Marty?" He goes, "Yeah?" "So what do they tell you about length?" And he goes, "I don't understand the question." I say, "Marty, what do they tell you about length?" And he says, "Nothing. They talk to me about headlines and images." That was very revealing to me. And it's something that he admits he's way, way, way more conscious of.

Now, they have not, you know, undermined the integrity of their editorial content, but they have become way more, I think, intentionally provocative in how they try to get stuff out. In a given day, if you look at them and the *New York Times*, there's a certain sort of, I would argue, a reserve still, still with the *New York Times* that one doesn't quite see with the Post. But, is that so bad to figure out ways to get people to look at that trade story – the Trump trade story that they probably would have just sort of rolled their eyes about to begin with? An important subject? That's fine by me.

KRISTOL: As we speak here in – it's the beginning of March; it's a big story. Now, I would say in the, the contrary argument is you get this initial blush of *everything's got to be short*.

When we started these *Conversations*, when I started about three years ago, people said, "Yeah, you know, no one's going to listen to an hour and 20 minutes, and you need – five, ten minutes, that's what people want."

And people do want that and there are many successful internet programs of different kinds that are short. But, actually, there's also, it turns out, there's conversely a market for the longer form.

And I'd say the same is true of print, incidentally. One of the great things about the internet is they print a long print piece, which, in the old days, might have been too long for people to read within a week or two and then there's a new *Weekly Standard* or a *New Yorker* and it goes in some pile somewhere and doesn't –

Now, these things can have second and third lives. Because it turns out you did a profile of someone – well, you mentioned this fellow who's going to now get some new – the piece on the, the *New Yorker* piece on the clickbait guy, and it's now going to get some new readership when people see this and they say, "Oh, I'll search for that."

So there is a – these things are somewhat – I mean, I could argue that a lot of intelligent pieces get much higher levels of consumption than in the old days when, unless you were the kind of person who saved an old *Commentary* magazine, or went to the library to look it up, you couldn't just go Google and say, "Oh, that was a good piece." Well, your piece on ISIS, or your son's piece on ISIS and Al Qaeda or whatever it was – I mean, ISIS and social media. That was published months ago, right?

WARREN: And throw in – and I'm sure *The Weekly Standard* exploits this too – throw in a much more imaginative, and sort of robust use of images and graphics and data.

So, you're not sending a guy, a photographer to cover a story, or your reporter, and then you've got room for one kind of black and white, maybe two color photos. Now, I mean, you can have 20, 25. You can have video, well-edited.

When there were the floods in Houston, then in Florida, I talked to the video guy who heads a 60 or 70 person video unit at the *Washington Post*. They turned out a thousand separate videos of all that flooding, for various different platforms. Shot and, particularly, edited differently for multiple platforms. Certain types of videos work on [Snapchat], certain work on Instagram, certain work on the *Washington Post* – better on the *Washington Post* website. They have 70 people working on video. And I think that's been, that's a godsend. I mean, there was nothing akin to that.

## **II: Social Media and Fake News (49:14 – 1:27:15)**

KRISTOL: So I think that's why, about ten years ago – I think I mentioned this – I started to mention this when I spoke on campuses or whatever. I would say a double-edged sword; you got to realize what you've lost, coverage of state capitals; got to also recognize what we've gained. Everyone can read competing views on something in real time, not two weeks later, intelligent, access to huge amounts of information, and articles keeping alive even if they're a year old, or ten years old, or 50 years old, obviously.

So, I was mildly a defender of the modern, you know – for all its problems. I was a net – I argued that it was kind of good for informed citizenship, the current situation.

And then social media happened, which I guess we can date, roughly, from Facebook, which is '04, '05, and then – But really the iPhone, I mean, the smartphone, I think, which transforms everything. Well, the combination, I guess, of the internet, Facebook, and the smartphone.

So the ability to access other people's thoughts and information, if they wish to share it with you; or in some cases, I guess, find a way if they don't. And then the immediate availability of everything.

I feel like that's a different kind of phenomenon almost, from the more normal, "Gee, the journalists are being a little more, you know, more attentive to who reads what." And the technology, and as you say, the decrease in newsroom staff, it's been made up for, maybe, by the increase in access to a lot of other sources. All those things strike me as more glass-half full, glass-half empty.

Whereas I kind of feel like the social-media thing is a different level of challenge to our traditional ways of thinking about citizenship. It doesn't mean it might not also turn out to be, in some ways, beneficial, but I don't know. So talk about that some. You've thought a lot about this and written a lot about this.

WARREN: Well, I'm confused.

I mean, maybe start with Donald Trump. The image of a President sitting – I don't know where he sits, in his bed? In, I don't know, in the Oval Office, at 5:00, 6:00 in the morning. For the two and a half years I recently covered media, literally I would watch a show like from 5:00, say 5:30 Central, 6:00, 6:30 Eastern, which I named "Trump and Friends" on Fox.

And it was clear – as now, has been shown – he'd be watching it, and then he'd send out a tweet. Or he'd be, you know, maybe stumbling into Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski bashing him, and then he'd be sending out nasty things about him.

And no matter what mainstream journalists say about the fact that you've got to treat all this with a certain degree of, you know, of moderation and, you know just, don't repeat everything that – The fact is that everything becomes a story.



I mean, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, they've got people who are monitoring early in the morning, sunrise, this stuff. And it's sort of part and parcel of this train that's out of the station. I'm not sure what one does. Journalists are as guilty as anybody, in feeling compelled to tell one and all about every single thought they have on everything.

I mean, there are prominent anchors, who are telling me their take on the football, the Redskins football game they're watching. I don't care. But they just sort of feel that their views on every single thing can be mentioned. And then there is the passing around of totally bogus stories.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so that's a slightly different thing, because that –

WARREN: Without any sense of responsibility. "Well, this appeared here – so just FYI, that doesn't mean..." And Trump has been caught doing this, too.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: "It doesn't mean that I am supportive of that, but it's just sort of interesting."

KRISTOL: Just the pure technology of fake news – let's use that term – is, I think, it's stepped even further than – I mean, Trump happens to have access to Twitter, which he wouldn't have had ten years ago, and so he can immediately react to a story and then people can comment on it. That's still recognizably a president and a news media and other politicians reacting to each other. It just happens in, like, warp speed compared to, you know, what would have been a press release, that the next day would have been analyzed by George Will, and the third day would have been responded to by, you know, a Democrat and whatever.

The social-media fake-news phenomenon is really, it strikes me, qualitatively different. I mean, you – well talk about – Mueller recently had an indictment in which he cites –

WARREN: Mueller had an indictment, you know, a while back. And it's the Russians.

KRISTOL: This was the 13 Russians.

WARREN: The Russians and it's tied to the campaign. Forget the issue of –

KRISTOL: Collusion, right, all that stuff.

WARREN: The substantive issue about whether Trump was, you know, somehow in league with Putin, blah, blah – put that aside. To me, what was very revealing about the Mueller indictment was the evidence of the Russians who are doing all this stuff – whether at Putin's behest or not, I don't know – just sort of scoffing and almost incredulous at how *credulous* American consumers were about this stuff.

They're putting this crazy stuff on Facebook, and they were exploiting what turns out, I think, partly because of social media, to be this increasing news illiteracy. Now this is politically incorrect, and particularly as a journalist –

KRISTOL: Go ahead. We're for that on these conversations, you know.

WARREN: This is America, a great democracy, the right thing always happens, blah, blah, blah, we're so virtuous, we go to the polls, and on and on and on. But the fact is, increasingly, people don't distinguish between BS and what's legitimate. And the Russians, in the Mueller indictment at least, the Russians are – they can't believe how this stuff is taking off and people aren't distinguishing. And that's a real problem.

With Facebook you have, I think, unavoidably a tarnishing of brand. So, maybe now at least half, maybe more, of the stories in the *New York Times*, that people read in the *New York Times*, they're not getting from the *New York Times*' website; they're getting via Facebook. And I think that's good on one hand; it's a greater distribution channel. On the other hand, people increasingly aren't cognizant of a brand where a story comes from, certainly not cognizant of the author.

KRISTOL: And if people are being deceptive, they can make it look like the "*National Times*," you know, a fake-news organ—

WARREN: Oh, my gosh.

KRISTOL: —that, you know, and if you spend a tiny bit of money, you can make it look like an actual news story, right? And then your aunt sends it to you, likes it, and you see it in her, on her Facebook page, whatever; and suddenly that thing is floating around the internet just like the actual *New York Times* story, right?

WARREN: Which is, you know, to get in a plug for my current gig — it's an operation based in New York —

KRISTOL: Yeah, we'll talk about that, because I think that's interesting.

WARREN: — called News Guard. And two very prominent journalists, media entrepreneurs, a guy named Steve Brill and a guy named Gordon Crovitz — Gordon was former publisher of the *Wall Street Journal* — and what we're attempting to do is sort of kind of be a Consumer Reports of news sites in the English language, both real and fake, and try to give people a non-ideological, non-partisan objective, journalist-reported snapshot of who these sites are.

Now, it ranges from NPR to something that might be called "*The Denver Herald*" or something, which, that sounds like a newspaper and the website kind of looks like a newspaper, *but it's not*. It's some crazy thing by some polemicist who made up stuff; but, for a fair number of folks, it may seem legitimate. Remember a few months ago, *Politico* had a story about a Congressional candidate in Arizona heralding her endorsement by the *Phoenix*-something?

Well, that must be a news— No! It's something that partisans of hers made up. It's a phony website. So we're going to try, try to bring some sanity to all this, to at least provide a place that you can go to see — *wait a second, this story that my friend Bill sent me, what is this site? I've never heard of it*. Now, are we going to change the world? Probably not. But I think it's something that's needed, and we've got a bunch of reporters who are spending every day assessing sites, and we'll see what happens.

KRISTOL: Yeah, as we speak this is just launching, so we'll see. But what it really isn't like, if I can say, I mean, quite like Consumer — I don't really read Consumer Reports, so maybe it isn't. But it isn't quite like Consumer Reports, it seems to me in this respect: let's just take Yelp or something that we all probably use. That is genuinely, I mean, leaving aside whether you can game the system and people can pay other people to write reviews, it is consumers saying "this hotel was fine"; "this hotel was dirty," you know, whatever. The analogy of that would be the "consumers" of the news rating, I guess, these sites.

WARREN: Which is *exactly* what Facebook wants to do.

KRISTOL: Right. But you're doing something different, which is more like — to use the restaurant analogy, it occurs to me — I don't know, a Michelin Guide or something, where "experts" are saying, "this is really excellent," and, "this is sort of not quite as good" and trust us because we're, you know, the best professional restaurant reviewers or chefs. I'm not saying that sarcastically. I mean, I think it is — and honestly, I don't even know — I mean, I'm sure there are studies done on Michelin Guide versus Yelp as better guides to where to go out to dinner in D.C., but I think that's very interesting.

And people – it seems to me that people haven't really thought of that yet, though. That the – Well, I don't know. I guess there's such suspicion of the mainstream media; I guess the counter argument to what you're doing is, well, this is a bunch of establishment people deciding they like establishment websites. And that will be, I suppose, what Breitbart will say, right, or something.

WARREN: Which, parenthetically, will get us back to the beginning of this conversation. As we were growing up on the Upper West Side, is a reminder of the dramatic change in popular sentiment toward mainstream media: It was sort of reflexively just trusted; now it's sort of, kind of reflexively mistrusted. That it can be, certainly for a guy like Trump – “Oh, you work for the money-losing *New York Times*,” or something like that.

That's, you know, that's a source of rebuke. And so, you know, that's in the mix, too. And it's going to be fascinating to see how we are responded to.

KRISTOL: I mean, conservatives, incidentally – I'm very struck by this, and I was just having a conversation with my colleague Steve Hayes the other day about it; he won't mind if I repeat it, I think. Which is, I mean, conservatives have been unhappy with the *New York Times* and the mainstream media since forever. And certainly Agnew made a big issue of it in the 70s, in 1970 I think it was; he gave those speeches. And, you know, it's a legitimate – and some of it, I would say, some of that suspicion and criticism was probably legitimate and useful.

Having said that, Steve made a point: Trump really has taken that to another level. Steve says – he used to give speeches two or three years ago, and I've had the same experience – he'd give a speech about politics, what's going on, this, that, Iraq, you know, whatever, health care, and this political fight, the Democrats, Republicans, and you'd get one or two questions, maybe, of the ten you would take afterwards, about the media. *What about the media? Are they fair? What about Fox? Do you think Fox is really good, and how does it compare? And what about, how much effect does it have?*

Steve put it, slightly hyperbolically, three quarters of the questions now are about the media. Trump for conservatives has made, I would say, more than the Democratic Party, more than President Obama, almost as much as Hillary Clinton, has made the media the enemy or the object of at least of derision, but also of suspicion.

And I really – and, look, I'm not against criticizing the media – I've done it myself – for when it's wrong. But, I mean, you do wonder at some point, as a governance matter, how does this work out? I mean, you say people – we were talking about the Facebook example ten minutes ago, and you know I got this thing and I don't know if it's true or not, but if Trump is *telling you* it's all the same level –

WARREN: Two years ago, Pew Research, very reputable organization, canvasses 1500, 2000 Americans, self-identifying as Democrats or Republicans, when it asked a – and most of the questions were media related – when it asked the question about “Do you stipulate to, do you agree that the media has a ‘watchdog,’” that was the key word, “watchdog role in American society?” The response of Democrats and Republicans, roughly the same. It was in the 70s. *A year later*, the Republicans – the Democratic response was about the same; it actually, allegedly, went up one or two points – Republican response was now, went from mid 70s to the 40s.

Now, how'd that happen so quick? It's got something – there's a Trump factor somehow, in his having been very effective in knocking us down. And then throw in – and social media played a real role here – throw in a lot of self-inflicted wounds, a lot of big, high-profile mistakes that became *way more* high profile. CNN had a story they totally messed up. Some other organizations had stories they messed up.

And, as opposed to just ten years ago where there might have been a discrete little correction in a magazine or a newspaper, now it's all over, and Trump is sending it out and saying, “See, how can you trust CNN? They messed up this.” Remember there was a Russian story. Several people were fired. And

they were fired very quickly.

And you had similar problems at a few other organizations. And that has just fed this sense that we can't be trusted. And I don't know how you – I don't know how you necessarily turn that around, and certainly in the short term.

KRISTOL: As someone who thought the media was much too nice to President Obama on a lot of issues – there's the famous Iran Deal coverage, which the Obama Administration itself boasted at kind of manipulating stuff. And I think that's a legitimate question to ask about the mainstream media.

But, yeah, that's a whole different level of questioning than, "it's all fake," or, "you can't believe anything," or, "I'm going to make up some data here and some tweet, and it's equally true." I mean, you know, the joke stuff is "the largest crowd ever" at the inauguration. But he says it!

You know, it's also true about "lowest unemployment ever." Well, it's not actually – or "fastest growth." "Look at my growth compared to Obama's." Well, it's actually about the same. And that's just a fact. I mean, GDP – these are just numbers. This is not, like, an interpretation. But, you know, he says something different.

And you do wonder, without being too Trump obsessive here. It does seem to me that the President of the United States says it, that's new. I mean, whatever criticisms presidents made of particular articles.

WARREN: But it's also because he is able to, unfiltered – I mean, he can – if he went, in an age before social media, went to the James Brady briefing room, and said a bunch of these similar things every day, you know, there would be sort of an editing process and, you know, maybe people would mention some of it; maybe they would edit other things. And they would quickly juxtapose what he said with, "Well, that's not really true."

Here, it's 5:15 in the morning, in the Central Time Zone, 6:15, and it's boom. Boom, boom, boom, boom. And it can also, certainly it can wander into his bashing actor Alec Baldwin for his impersonation of Trump.

I mean, it's all over. But, the impact is really significant. I mean, take – I worked in recent years a lot for *Vanity Fair* magazine, and he *hated* the editor, Graydon Carter; and Graydon Carter, the editor, hated him. I think it goes back to when –

KRISTOL: It's a New York thing, yeah.

WARREN: – when he was editor of *Spy Magazine*. Yeah, it was a New York City pissing match. So I've done – I was writing every day for *Vanity Fair*, and I did one, recently, fairly big story in the September issue – and, thank God, Angelina Jolie was on the cover, so maybe a few people got into that issue. And it was about the *New York Times*, and I said, versus the *Washington Post*.

And if Donald Trump knew – and I don't know if he would care – but I wish he knew the care and precision of the editing process on that story. I had to go, after I finished the first draft, I had to go to the nearby Staples or Kinko's or something in Chicago; I had to make copies of every single interview I had, every single relevant email, ship it to New York, because every single sentence they said, "How do you know this? Kristol said that? Where does he say that?" And I'd have to send the notes. And it was, it was very impressive. And it was several weeks of editing, and they caught some mistakes and they said, "Well, no, Kristol didn't say, 'I believe'; he said, 'I think.'" I mean, it got down to that granular level. And I was truly impressed.

But that's – on one hand, a reality that most people don't know, won't concede. And on the other hand, it's a reality that, I think, is on the decline in a lot of newsrooms because there's no room to hire; there's

no money to hire editors to have that sort of –

KRISTOL: No, we do the same kind of fact checking. It takes time and someone who's competent to sort of look up stuff or double check. And, you know, when Chris Caldwell writes a long piece for us, he sends in the email after he sends in the piece, "Here are my notes and citations." This you can find in this book or, you know, this article, or even Wikipedia, but I mean it's a fact, you know, that Merkle did X in Germany.

But it is shocking, a little bit. I mean, it's a Trumpy talking point, so it's not one that I particularly like, but I will say this: it is amazing how often you walk by and look up at the screens in the airport or anywhere and it's CNN, "sources say, colon." And it really is – at some point you do say, really?

It used to be, when I was in the White House, you had to argue hard to be able to go on background. You had to say, "Why should I let you say this without your name?" "Well, look if I say it with my name I'm going to be fired. And I'm telling you something is true, and this is, like, inside dope from the White House. And I'm, of course, arguing from my point of view."

And people would then say, "A senior administration official says." But it was – and there was a lot of that already in the late 80s, early 90s; but even so, it was pretty limited. You certainly had to be a senior administration official or a senior White House official. And, certainly, the reporter would tell the editor who it was. And they might say, "You know what, he's just litigating his own little grievance here; we're not going to use that." And that happened quite often, actually, and perfectly legitimately, you know?

And you couldn't just get to random, "sources familiar with this dispute say," or, "people close to Jared Kushner say." That was not considered like a – maybe in an exceptional case, you know; Watergate you could get away with that.

And now it is just "Katie bar the door." I mean, anything can be printed with one or – it used to be two sources, remember? You had to have –

WARREN: You had to have two sources.

KRISTOL: I mean, it was like – and now, on mainstream – this is where the mainstream media hurts itself, it seems to me; I mean, this is where you can't, you know – this is not just bloggers.

I mean, if CNN's going to put up stuff that one source has told them third hand about something, why shouldn't a blogger report something equally dubious? And then, what's the distinction?

WARREN: And getting back to your social-media questions: there's no doubt of the pernicious role that social media plays in even these editing decisions. Because of the competitive pressure of seeing a rival have that story: "Sources say Kushner says blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and then you feel – you can't wait an hour; you can't wait. You call your person at the White House; you call your person at Treasury, wherever he or she may be, "We've got to have something; we have to have something now."

And editors will deny this. They'll say, "Oh, no, we're as rigorous and contemplative." It's just not true. You talk to friends that you might have at the *Post*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and ask them about the pressure they feel in a given hour to at least replicate somebody's story. And I often find it interesting to look when a story is, quote, "breaking," and you go on a prominent website, take a look at the story by a reporter you may trust, and then look at that story five or six, seven hours later when he or she actually has time to do some reporting, to do some thinking. And I think there are marked differences.

KRISTOL: But, meanwhile, every other place that is more of a clickbait, if I can say, place – or just even of people just trying to make sure the website’s fresh, which even we do at the *Standard*, of course – has quoted or replicated, or not quoted, but just stolen from the first story.

So the *Post* person writes, let’s say a semi-respectable story, *The Hill*, *Politico*, everyone else is now churning out versions of it. And, yes, by the time the *Post* guy actually writes a more sophisticated story that’s got some context and nuance and counter arguments about, it wasn’t way, it’s like – it’s over, right?

WARREN: But just realize what you just said, which was totally correct, and what’s implicit in it. Not too long ago, your rival broke a story; you would go out and try to *independently* confirm it.

KRISTOL: Correct.

WARREN: Now, that’s gone.

KRISTOL: I’d say that’s still the case like at the *Times*, *Post*, *Journal* level. Those three. But everyone else is gone.

WARREN: I don’t know.

KRISTOL: Even? Okay.

WARREN: No. I think you’ll see, if the story is big enough, the *Post* and *Times* will go “Blah, blah, blah, blah: the *Washington Post* is reporting....”

KRISTOL: Right, right.

WARREN: Because they just feel this intense pressure. It seems so quaint – when I think back to being Washington Bureau Chief of the *Chicago Tribune* during the Clinton Era, and I remember the weekend – and you probably remember it vividly – when word leaked out – I can’t remember if it was through the Drudge Report or through Jackie Judd of ABC, about a semen-stained dress. *That* weekend. Remember that weekend?

And so I’m sitting in the Washington – I’m sitting in the *Chicago Tribune* Bureau on G Street, and for 24 hours, having a debate with my bosses back in Chicago: “I can’t confirm that. I don’t know about a – I don’t have FBI sources that tell me that there was a semen-stained dress.” And this story is taking off. It started taking off, I think – I can’t remember if it was late Saturday night, but certainly by Sunday morning, and ABC and a reporter named Jackie Judd.

And, so we’re debating this. And by that evening, and you know, there was no internet so we didn’t have any place to send anything, but by that evening, we had decided on the following: that we would mention that ABC reported this, and we could not independently confirm it. That was, I think, a hint of things to come.

Now, people aren’t even necessarily saying we can’t independently report it. They’re just repeating stories that may prove to be total crap.

KRISTOL: And exaggerating. I see this quite a lot – that the initial report might be a fairly nuanced one. I just saw an instance of this, which is now escaping my mind – just last night, it struck me – and by the time you get to the second or third headline, and this is, you know, particularly true of the more clickbait-ey places, it’s like wildly exaggerated.

I think it was this one: someone, this guy that worked for Trump, the lawyer – I can’t remember his name right now – says he believed that Donald Trump, Jr., would have told his father about the Russian, the

Trump Tower meeting. He knows the family; he worked for them for years. Now, that's a legit, interesting thing. Sam [Nunberg], I think is his name. That's a legit – he said it on TV. Perfectly reasonable thing for someone to report.

But the headlines – I was sort of struck – an hour later, from some other places, were, you know, “Trump Told His Father,” or, you know, “Source Says Trump Told His Father.” The source didn't say he knew that Trump told his father. He, at that point, I think, was on the outs with Trump and had left the campaign itself. It was that he believed, knowing what he knew about how the family worked. Which is, I say, still legitimate, as long as you report that this is this person saying it, *not knowing*, and just is his assumption based on his knowledge of the family.

But that, by two hours later on Twitter, is kind of, “Hey, Trump knew – someone who knows, someone saying – the source says that Trump, Jr. told his father.” And it's actually being discussed on TV in that way, you know, two hours later on the different cable networks. And, I mean, it really is – yeah.

WARREN: And it covers every category of our lives. So, there's a story a while back: ESPN has a story about – they have learned that, according to sources, that the FBI had a wiretap on the famous Arizona, University of Arizona basketball coach.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: Talking to some agent about \$100,000 payment to the family of a potentially star high-school recruit, who now is a star player, freshman for Arizona; many people think he'll be the number one pick in the pro draft of the spring. “Sources familiar,” or something, “say that FBI has a wiretap.” That story gets instantly repeated; nobody has, I mean – unless you heard the FBI wiretap, which presumably, even ESPN has not heard – don't really know.

The guy now totally denies it, so somebody is lying. Somebody is wrong. There's no middle ground. The guy, the coach, has said it's totally untrue. ESPN “stands by” its reporting. But, in the context of what we were just talking about, it led to hours and hours and hours of sports radio and sports TV discussion, with the premise being that this was true.

KRISTOL: Was not the coach even – I don't know if he was suspended.

WARREN: One game, and then he came back.

KRISTOL: Right.

WARREN: Then he came back. “With the support of the University.” The player, whose family supposedly got hurt, he's still playing and presumably he's going to be a star in the March Madness, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

But, nobody independently confirmed that. No one knows about if there's an FBI wiretap that exists. I don't know, you know, *maybe* the ESPN lawyers know. Maybe they really grilled the reporter. I hope so.

But, to me, the depressing thing was how quick everybody – *unable to confirm it* – simply repeated and their cop-out is, “Well, it's out there. The story's out there, and people are talking about it.” That's the new bar: “Well, people are talking about it.”

And that's what happened to me that Sunday with the semen-stained dress. I lost out on the argument of not running it, because, quote, “everybody's talking about it.” And that was *before* the internet.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that is – the internet plus social media is a pretty amazing one-two punch, which I think is a bigger change than – maybe television was as big a change, I don't know, 70 years ago? But, I

mean, you're talking about a once-every-two-or-three-generations-level change, I think, in the way we understand information.

WARREN: At the same time, let's not forget that, to say, a world which you're very conversant in, which is academe. I mean, one no longer has – the professor no longer has to wait until some ponderous journal, which is not going to come out for another year, is going to print – he links to his stuff. And some of my most interesting folks whose social media, whose Twitter accounts that I get, are really, really bright academics, who smartly use the new technology to have interesting – they may be political science folks; they may be sociologists; they may be cultural anthropologists. I mean, you can – and interestingly enough, that may also presage the decline of your traditional academic journal.

KRISTOL: Well, I think it will. And also the positive side – and I remain in the belief that there are a lot of positive sides to this – stuff gets fact checked incredibly quickly. A book comes out; it makes a little splash; it suits the partisan leanings of one side or another. But within two weeks, you have 15 intelligent blog posts, which you can find referred to then on Twitter. So you don't even have to be – you don't have to personally be scouring kind of economics or history blogs; you just follow a few people who do read them. And quickly you realize, oh, this is not really good; it looked like a good academic book, was published by Harvard University Press, but actually it's extremely problematic.

So, in that respect, stuff that would have taken 18 months in the old – I mean, no, there's very much pluses and minuses, as they say.

But, anyway, this is a conversation that we need to continue and especially going forward, I think. Where does this all go? I mean, do you want to conclude with a thought or two on this? I mean, we're in the – let me look at this way: are we near the end of this process? Or are we in the middle of it? Or are we in the beginning?

WARREN: No, no, no. I think we're sort of in an early part of a transition, particularly when it comes to business models of media. I think if you had Bill Gates in here, Zuckerberg here, Mr. Brin here from Google; if they were being honest, they would say they do not know where this is all going.

Certainly, if you ask the editors of lots of papers and magazines, "Are you going to have a print version in five years? Is there going to be a reputable, a local paper or a news organization of some sort in Peoria or Grand Rapids?" I don't think anybody knows.

I mean, that's scary. It's certainly fascinating. But, I think, for folks who are listening to us who are sort of new to all this, I don't think one should be, you know, feeling guilty about, you know, thinking that you're so ignorant about it. Because I think only fools and the most arrogant folks around us – and maybe a few genius types like, I don't know, Jeff Bezos or something – have any real sense of where it's going.

KRISTOL: And I would say, on the political side, I was talking with someone very involved in the Obama 2012 campaign, which was considered state of the art – and was, in terms of targeting and digital and so forth; early days of digital, I guess – and he said, "Look, I mean, it's already – that was great; everyone wanted to imitate us for about a year. We're two generations away from that already. I mean, my stuff is now old fashioned," you know, "where we can really target more precisely, you know, suburban women who care about X. That's like fine, everyone does that, but we're way beyond that in terms of social media."

And I said to him, "Do you know where this goes, in terms of its political implications? Would you advise a candidate running for president in 2020 or a local office to...?" He said, "Honestly, I think we could already be a generation or two further along, and I don't know what – it might well be that you shouldn't spend *any* money on TV at this point. You should spend it entirely on super-sophisticated Facebook targeting. Or maybe that's me looking at things the way they are now, and that will be totally wrong two



years from now.”

WARREN: Yeah, that’s fascinating. My bias on that is to think that you have a consultant class, many of them here, who still get rich off a percentage of TV buys, and it’s in their self-interest to convince the candidate or perspective candidate that, “Oh, you got to have to spend X percent on local television.” Where, probably, I believe, by and large, you’re probably getting a lot of older viewers who are already set in their views; they know which way they’re going to vote, you know, Democrat or Republican, or, you know, the moderate or the more strident person in the primary. So I think that’s sort of, by and large, a waste of money.

But I think, to me, more important than a lot of the media-related questions we’ve had is, what is the impact on civic engagement? That I don’t know. I think we’ve been naïve in thinking that the technology was in and of itself a vehicle to get people more politically involved. I don’t necessarily think that’s true.

KRISTOL: And on that point, just to take – not to defend the old TV ads, which were extremely, you know, vulgar, and could be quite demagogic and so forth; and were a huge amount of money, and people lining their own pockets. At the end of the day, at least one virtue of them, I’d say, compared to the current – and I know people who do strongly believe, incidentally, that they should spend a huge, a much larger percentage of – I think we’ll see that more and more; people spending a higher percent of their money on the digital stuff, and less on TV.

Again, if there’s a TV ad up, everyone saw it; it could be attacked and criticized and fact checked. You could say this is demagogic; the other guy can run a response ad, and you had *something* like a public discussion. It was low level in the sense they were 30 seconds each, and it depended on emotional images sometimes. But it was still visible.

The digital stuff is not visible. And you can target – the Russians, of course, showed that you can target different digital messages to different – not just different groups, to different *individuals*, depending on their interests and issues. And that’s okay. So you target the gun-rights guy who on his Facebook page is full of Second Amendment stuff, and you tell him, “Here’s my position on guns.” That’s still okay, your position. There’s nothing really to stop you from having a different gun message to the person who’s more in favor of raising the age for gun ownership. And, maybe you’ll be caught on it, but will you really be? Because no one can monitor every single thing that goes out, right?

So the degree of manipulation and dissembling, I would say – the degree of information goes up and a lot of that’s great, but the degree of manipulation and dissembling that can go on, really is hard. You used to do it in direct mail.

Direct mail was the kind of low, you know, from an ethical point of view, the lowest level, because you could send different mail to the suburban moderates outside Chicago and to the rural, you know, true believers and gun rights. You still might get caught, because the mail was kind of sitting around and some reporter might be on a mailing list, you know. But now with digital stuff, you can really target in a way that’s –

WARREN: If you want to get a couple of blocks that you believe are heavily Jewish with the claim that Candidate A is an anti-Semite? Yeah, you can do that.

KRISTOL: And do you ever get caught, really? Does it ever get tracked back to you if you have some cutout who sends out that stuff? No, right?

WARREN: But then, *what happens?* Especially with the decline of the local media, who is sort of the watchdog? Who is sort of an arbiter? I mean, it’s why – my fingers are crossed that this new venture that I’m involved in and call News Guard can have *some* positive impact. But it’s not going to get to that level of, you know, of political races where people are effectively slinging mud at one another. And by the time

it's already out, by the time thousands have already seen it.

And maybe it's targeted to couple of blocks on their – on ESPN. I mean, you can slice it that much. You can slice it to, you know, your CNN or –

KRISTOL: Or you can just slice it to websites, and to Facebook pages and to a Google search, which really is hard to track, right?

WARREN: Yeah. So I don't know. I mean, I think it's ultimately, absolutely – and maybe my final thought is it's absolutely wonderful that the number of gatekeepers that we knew when we grew up in that part of the Upper West Side of Manhattan has dramatically expanded.

It's also a problem that there's sort of, kind of no gatekeepers, and you have this kind of Wild West, I think by and large, *by and large* healthy democratization of the media. But, at the same time, as there's more great stuff out there than ever before in human history, there's more unadulterated crap.

KRISTOL: That's an appropriately, well, cautious and ambivalent, and I think, serious, note to end on. It's, you know, democracy is – more democracy is both good and bad, and this isn't the only instance of that. But this is maybe a particularly striking instance and a particularly fast changing one, which is why we'll have to get together in a year or two and see both how your project is going and see, really, honestly, what's happening.

So you do have the sense that if we talk in two years, it's going to be different from today. I don't think it's just going to be more of the same, either. These things go, can take off in pretty dramatic ways.

WARREN: Do you think – final question for you – in your world, print publications, will there be prominent ones who are not here in two years?

KRISTOL: Yes. Yes. I know there's talk about magazines that have been around a lot longer than *The Weekly Standard* stopping being print publications. So that's just one thing. Now, there, at least there will be a digital publication that presumably, will be similar. But the social-media stuff is just a whole different level of, I think, of disaggregating and dissembling, and *change* – which, as you said, could be for the better, and will be for the better and for the worse, and the question is then how to deal with it as a functioning liberal democracy.

WARREN: And, knock on wood, we have thoughtful, long-form podcasts.

KRISTOL: And, right. And CONVERSATIONS.

WARREN: That's one of the new species we haven't spoken about.

KRISTOL: That's true. And we'll talk more about it that next time. And hopefully we're doing our little bit. Jim Warren, thanks so much for joining me here.

WARREN: It's a pleasure, pleasure.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.