

Ghosting the News | Part One

SEASON 2
episode ten

Nicholas Lemann

Hello, Underreported listeners, I'm Nicholas Lemann. Thank you for joining our show. This week I'm speaking with Washington Post media critic Margaret Sullivan. In *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*, her first book, Sullivan combines a deeply personal story about the Buffalo News – what it once meant to the community, and how sharply it has declined – with extensive original reporting in the United States and abroad, on the overall phenomenon and what it means for our democracy.

The story Sullivan tells is not a happy one, but this is a book meant to give rise to hope, not despair. Many people, some of whom you encounter *Ghosting the News*, are working hard to bring local journalism back. Sullivan points the way to solutions. That requires first taking a sobering and clear-eyed look at the problem. Margaret, thank you for joining me over Zoom today.

Margaret Sullivan

You're very welcome. It's very nice to be with you and your listeners.

Nicholas Lemann

So let me first confess that – I don't know if you have this problem, but I know a lot of people who aren't journalists. And, you know, it can be tough at times, but there are a lot of non-journalists out there. So when I run across these people and I talk to them about your book, I often get this kind of reaction. They say, "I don't know what you're talking about. First, the big problem in journalism is that the media are treating Donald Trump with kid gloves. And why aren't you publishing a book about that? And second, there isn't less journalism. There's more journalism than ever. I feel like I can't get away from journalism."

So I'd like you to start by just pushing back against those kind of arguments – you may get them, too, if you have the same issue of knowing people who aren't journalists – and give us a sort of reality check on that.

Margaret Sullivan

Well, there is a great deal of information out there and people do feel overwhelmed

by the news. So let's start with that piece of it. But this issue that I'm writing about in *Ghosting the News* is a subset of all of that, all of that news. And it has to do with local journalism.

So it has to do with journalism that has traditionally been done largely by regional newspapers. So, the Miami Herald, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Seattle Times. Also, of course, by radio and television stations. And also, of course, by weekly newspapers that are smaller and serve smaller communities. And it is that subset that is under siege in a very, very extreme way, because it's been hit very hard by economic and social and technological issues that went to the heart of their business model.

So the business model – let's talk about mostly right now, at least about newspapers. The business model for these local and regional papers was about 75% print advertising revenue, and about 25%, or a little bit more, of subscription revenue. You know, there was a time, and it wasn't that long ago, when newspapers could easily have a 30% profit margin because this was the way advertisers like car dealers and grocery stores and others were able to get their message out.

But then, something happened, and that something was called the internet. And it, along with some societal changes, has really kicked the legs out from under the business model of newspapers.

And then, you know, as far as the question of what's the biggest problem in in the media world right now, it is a problem that Donald Trump puts down the media and adds to the mistrust and distrust that people feel in their news sources. And it is a problem at times that the news media have treated him with kid gloves.

I don't dismiss those things, but I think when we're talking about an informed citizenry that can go to the polls, or do whatever they need to do in their communities, this actually may well be – and I think is – the most important journalism and media problem we have right now.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, well, I certainly agree with you about that. Before we get into some of the details, let's just talk somewhat about your own personal story. Why did you – why and how and where did you go into journalism yourself?

Margaret Sullivan

So when I was a kid, you know, probably a freshman in high school or something like that, the Senate Watergate hearings were taking place. And, you know, my family was – my dad was a lawyer and my mother was a schoolteacher, and, you know, we were – I have two older brothers.

We were all completely mesmerized by what was happening in national politics. And we were sitting around the living room TV, watching this, and you know, I was a kid, really, but I was very compelled by it.

And I remember having a conversation with my eldest brother, David, in which he sort of said, “You know, what are you interested in doing someday?” And I said, “Well, I really don’t know.” And we talked about talked it through a little bit, and in a moment, somewhat reminiscent of that famous moment in the movie *The Graduate*, where the word *plastics* is uttered, my brother, David, pointed at me and said, “Journalism.”

And he was right, you know, and I don’t think I’ve actually looked back. So, you know, I was the editor of my high school paper, and I’ve been doing this thing for a very long time. And, you know, more in terms of professional development and professional experience. When I got out of graduate school – so I went to Georgetown undergrad, I went to Northwestern Medill School for a master’s degree.

And when I got out, I had internships, summer internship offers at the two papers in my hometown of Buffalo. And my dad said, “Well,” you know, I asked him what I should do, and he said, “Well, I think the Buffalo Evening news is the dominant paper.” So I took the internship at the Buffalo Evening News, which then had been recently bought by Warren Buffett, the financier and Sage of Omaha, as he is sometimes called.

And within about two-and-a-half years, the morning paper, the other paper, was out of business. So Dad was right. Sometimes dads are right, and it’s great when they are. So that’s a little bit of my background.

Nicholas Lemann

You know, this is a question I always ask my students, and the answer is always a blank stare, but maybe it won’t be in your case. Have you ever seen a movie called *The Front Page*, a play?

Margaret Sullivan

I mean, I’ve heard of it, but I don’t know that I’ve seen it.

Nicholas Lemann

Nobody's seen it. You really have to see it. It's the greatest screwball comedy of all time. And it's been made into many movies.

Margaret Sullivan

Is it Rosalind Russell?

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah.

Margaret Sullivan

I am that familiar with it. Yeah. And maybe Cary Grant? I don't know.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah. So the reason I ask is that presents life in a newsroom as a bunch of irresistibly charming, rollicking, unprincipled people who drink a lot and misbehave and cover sensational crimes. And it's hugely fun. Is that what life was like at the Buffalo News?

Margaret Sullivan

Well, I will say that I find newsroom culture a lot of fun, and I do find it compelling and funny and a great place to be. So I'm – to that extent, I think it's somewhat true. There always have been a lot of newsroom characters.

That kind of journalism seems to attract, you know, a kind of, you know, there are subsets but you know, there are the sort of curmudgeons and there are the iconoclasts. And, you know, I think more than your average insurance office, it does attract some pretty interesting people, and it's a fun atmosphere. You know, I don't think it's quite as extreme as what you're describing. There's another great movie more recent than that, but probably from the nineties called The Paper.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. I remember that.

Margaret Sullivan

With Glenn Close and others. And that – I think it's sort of based on the Daily

News, the New York Daily News, and that presents a very, very accurate portrayal of newsroom culture.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, I mean, if we can just wallow in nostalgia for a minute. I'm sure you'll remember, and I do, the days when, number one, the entire newsroom was like a cigarette factory.

Margaret Sullivan

Yes.

Nicholas Lemann

There were butts all over the floor, overflowing ash trays everywhere. And then there were these pneumatic tubes where they would put the story and go whooshing off to the press room. And then you'd hear the rumble of the presses, and all those things that I guess – and there were actual typewriters. You remember all that stuff?

Margaret Sullivan

I do. I do. Although, it was going away. You know, by the time I entered the business in the early eighties, that world still existed, but it was quickly changing. Certainly typewriters probably were in their last year in the Buffalo News newsroom.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. Yeah. No, I, I worked at the Washington Post long ago, and when I worked there was when they introduced, they got rid of the typewriters. And all the old guys in the newsroom said "What's this crazy word processor thing?" Anyway.

But, talk, if you would, a little bit about the role the Buffalo News played in the community. How many people worked there? What did they do? What was your interaction with the political and business systems? And so on. And, you know, we haven't mentioned enough that you rose through the ranks to become the editor of the paper and served in that role for a long time as the first female editor.

Margaret Sullivan

Right. Yes. Summer intern to editor-in-chief. It only took me 19 years. If you hang around long enough, they give you the corner office, it seems. Well, I would not put

this – I want to say upfront that I wouldn't put it in the past tense entirely that the Buffalo News was important to the community, or was a force in the community. That is still the case today.

But when I joined it, it had 200 people in the newsroom. 200 reporters, editors, photographers, etc., editorial writers, columnists. Today – and I'll get back to how important that was – but today, there are fewer than 100, probably more like 75 or 80. So that's a big drop.

But I will tell you, it's nowhere near the size of the drop that's happened at a lot of other big papers, who probably had a bigger newsroom to begin with, more like 350, and might be down to 50 or 60.

So when that happens, you can't do the things that we used to do. For example, cover every suburban meeting, go to every suburban school board meeting, you know, not just the town councils, but the school board meetings. Have deep sources in every local and regional agency. You know, the Department of Environmental Conservation, we covered that. We had a, for example, someone covering just the Buffalo public schools. And then there was a someone covering the suburban schools, and someone covering higher education.

Nowadays, I mean, I can't tell you exactly, but I can tell you for sure there aren't three people dedicated to covering education. So it's probably one person, and it's probably one person who shares, who also does other things. Like comes in on the weekend and does police reporting. So you can't get as much done.

I mean, this kind of journalism is a labor-intensive and person-intensive business. So when you don't have the reporters to send out to things and to cultivate sources and to work on an investigative project, you don't get the stories you would have otherwise gotten. But you don't know what you don't know.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. So, I mean, I just want to spend a minute pushing on that. This I think has faded a bit in the last few years. But say, ten years ago, when somebody would say what you just said, you'd get the argument, especially from sort of internet visionary types, "Oh, but you don't need those people anymore because we have bloggers, we have citizen journalists. And the first photo of x news event was posted online by somebody off their cell phone." So why do you need these salaried employee, trained people who are reporters in the online age?

Margaret Sullivan

Well, I'll say, first of all, that those things are true. There are people who, there are citizen journalists, there are people shooting video. Thank goodness. I mean, thank goodness there's people shooting video. Our world would be very different right now if there weren't. So there's no question that the putting a little newsroom in your hand in the form of an iPhone has democratized journalism and generally in a very positive way.

At the same time, I won't say "but," it's more of an "and," at the same time, it is very valuable to have a someone who knows how to, and is accustomed to, filing a freedom of information request to dig out information. Someone who can be the recipient of a source, or of a tip from a source who says, "Hey, I think you ought to take a look at this city budget in this particular category, because there's something fishy going on there." These are things that probably, you know, your average person is not going to be able to do, and they are things of great value.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah. And I mean, just to state the obvious, citizen journalists, almost all the time, don't interview people. What reporters do all day – it'll be obvious to you and me, but maybe not to everybody – that's what they do. They interview people all day. And so they're sort of surfacing information that wasn't already in existence.

Margaret Sullivan

That's right. It's not just about recording information. It's about digging it out.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. So a newspaper like the Buffalo News sort of sits between on one hand, you know, powerful entities in the community, the political leadership, the business leadership. And on the other hand, ordinary citizens who vote. What kind of picture did you get from doing this job of running the paper? Of how each of those groups was reacting to you, or listening to you? Or interacting with what you were doing?

Margaret Sullivan

Well, the powerful people in the community were trying to work us all the time. They wanted to come in and meet with the editorial board and try to get the Buffalo News to back their project or to be on their side when they were doing whatever it was they were doing.

And that goes for government officials, and it goes for real estate developers, and all kinds of other, you know, bankers. They wanted the paper, which soon was the only paper in town and was a big power player on its own, to be on their side. And journalists, particularly at the reporter level, but I certainly felt this too, think that we're supposed to represent – I hesitate to use this word because it can be misinterpreted – but ordinary people, regular citizens.

And that, the sort of maxim is that journalism should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That's, you know, we like that. We hold that close to our hearts, that we're not supposed to be in the pocket of these powerful forces, we're actually supposed to be representing the regular voter, the regular citizen, and telling them what they need to know.

And there is a tension there, without a doubt. You know, and in the days when some of those powerful figures were also powerful advertisers, the idea that you were going to do a big exposé of something, you had a major supermarket chain who just happened to be your second or third biggest advertiser, you know, there would be some issues that would come up around that. But we did it anyway.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. And you, the picture you paint in the book, you feel like the paper has an effect both on the behavior of, you know, powerful people, and on the behavior of what you've called ordinary people. And that you weren't just doing this for your own pleasure. Right?

Margaret Sullivan

Right. Oh, exactly. I mean, the effect that it would have on powerful people, particularly government officials, is a sense that someone was watching and we better be careful. So that I think, is very valuable.

And for citizens, you want to give them the feeling that the newspaper, or other news outlet, is looking out for their interests, is going to tell you what you need to know, and is going to use its resources to dig out the truth. You know, that's an ideal situation. It doesn't always play out that way, but that's what we want and strive for.

Nicholas Lemann

Well, there's an example that you give in the book of what can happen when you have a diminished news ecosystem and politicians feel freer to be corrupt and voters don't know about it as much. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Margaret Sullivan

Sure. This has to do with a Buffalo area story, but not Buffalo proper. There was, until very recently, a congressman named Chris Collins. Chris Collins, Republican congressman from New York 27, was the first member of Congress to endorse President Trump, was close to, you know, certainly echoed many of Trump's points of view and politics.

The Buffalo News' Washington correspondent – and the paper still has a very good Washington correspondent – uncovered that Chris Collins appeared to be engaging in insider trading. He broke that story and followed the story. Chris Collins objected and called it fake news, echoing his friend in the White House, and even fundraised on the basis of how terrible the Buffalo News was being to him.

Nevertheless, Chris Collins was indicted. After he was indicted, before anything else happened, he ran for reelection. And his opponent was a Democratic town supervisor who normally wouldn't have had any chance in the district, because it's been gerrymandered and it goes over literally seven counties and it's very, very Republican.

But this Democratic town supervisor made a pretty good run for it. And in the areas served by bigger media, the Buffalo News, the radio stations, and more of the TV stations and so on, and the Rochester paper, people crossed the aisle to vote against Chris Collins.

But this opponent, Nate McMurray, the Democrat, told me that when he got out into more rural areas that were far less served, underserved, let's say, by traditional media, he found that people in some cases didn't even know that their congressman had been indicted on insider trader charges. And he said to me that he would go into a diner or go to a fair, he'd be campaigning, and people thought he was making it up about Chris Collins and the indictment. They just did not know about it.

As it turned out, cutting to the chase here, Chris Collins was reelected. He was not reelected, though, by the huge margin that he normally would have been because of the makeup of the district, but rather by half a percentage point, a whisker. And the areas that were less served by the media, certainly by newspaper media, stayed pretty well in their tribal partisan corners. They did not cross the aisle as much. And if they had, you know, it's very possible that McMurray would have won.

It's, you know, it's hard to say. But he certainly thought that this was the case. And one of the counties that this took place in is Orleans County, which the University

of North Carolina has dubbed a news desert. Now, I will tell you that in recent weeks, and since the book was excerpted in the Washington Post, I've heard from a place called the Orleans Hub, which is an all-digital site that has one-and-a-half reporters. And they tell me they did a heck of a job covering this race and people should have known.

However, if it's not a news desert, it is underserved by news. And it's one of the places that McMurray said people didn't really know, many people did not know what was going on. So it's really a story about what happens when people are informed and what happens when people are less informed. And it's, you know, it has pretty big stakes. This is somebody we sent to Congress.

Oh, I guess I should tell you the end of the story, which was that Chris Collins was, he pleaded guilty to two felonies and was sentenced to prison.

Nicholas Lemann

That concludes part one of our discussion with Margaret Sullivan, author of the new book *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy*. As a reminder, you can find this book, and all of our Columbia Global Reports titles at globalreports.columbia.edu. Again, that's globalreports.columbia.edu. We'll be back with part two next Monday, so be sure to keep an eye out. You can find us wherever you're listening now. I'm Nick Lemann, thank you for listening.