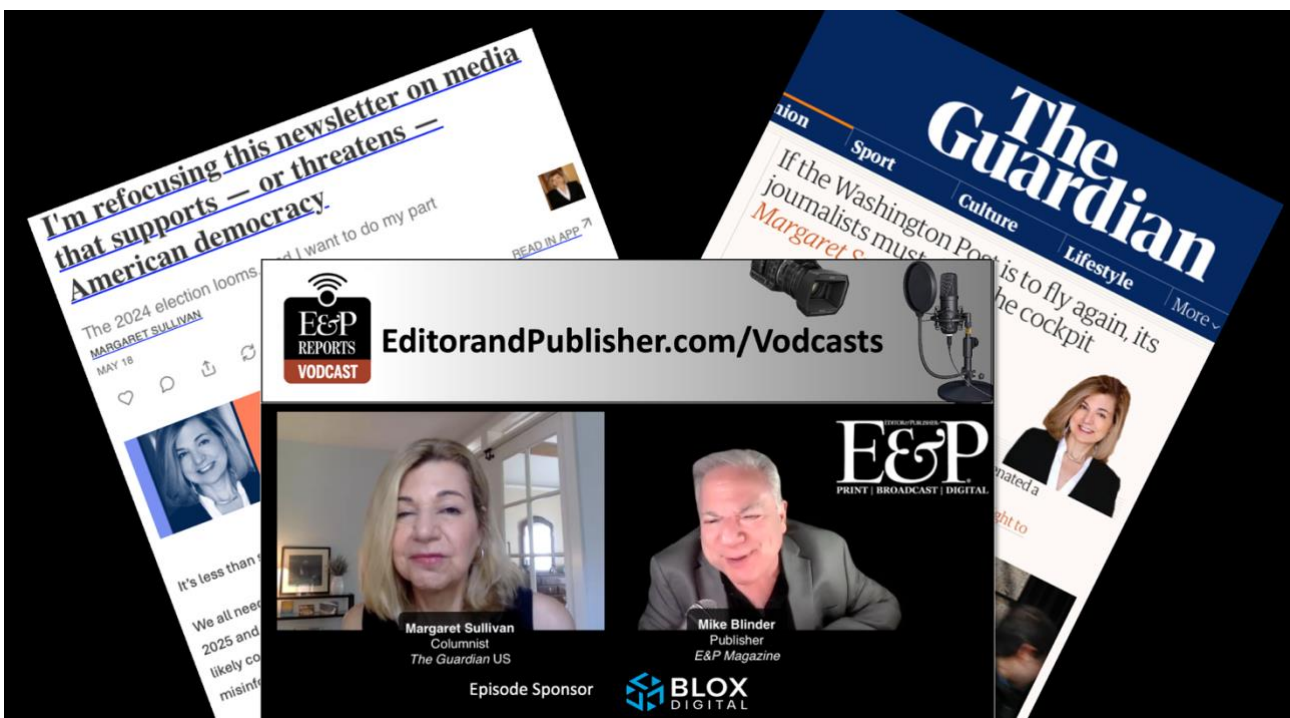


Audio Transcript
Episode 242 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*
Publication date: Tuesday June 24, 2024



[Margaret Sullivan on controversies at The Post and prioritizing her focus on media’s critical role in the upcoming election’](#)

In this exclusive interview with E&P, prominent American journalist, [Guardian columnist](#) and media critic Margaret Sullivan discussed the current leadership turmoil at The Washington Post, highlighting Jeff Bezos’ decision to hire Will Lewis as the new publisher and the controversies surrounding his tenure. Sullivan also emphasized her efforts to reshape her Substack newsletter, “[American Crisis](#),” to address the critical role of the media in informing the public and safeguarding democracy, particularly in the context of the upcoming 2024 election.



0:00:01.3 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor & Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:20.5 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off with housekeeping, listening to this program on a podcast platform of preference. There's a little alliteration. Please follow us watching on our YouTube channel. Go below me, hit the subscribe button, ring the bell to the right. You get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series dedicated to news publishing we call E&P Reports. Margaret Sullivan, we finally got you on the show. Thank you.

0:00:49.1 Margaret Sullivan: Thank you very much for having me, Mike. It's great to, I know you have an erudite and influential audience, so I could not resist.

0:00:58.5 MB: Very well put. Sometimes we... I could go on and on about the audience, but we try to keep them informed about news publishing. Something you have a little background and he said sarcastically. Now, normally in the old days, I just simply read your resume off of LinkedIn or what have you. But we don't do that anymore when it comes to famous, exciting guests like you, because every other story we reported, E&P is about AI. We go to chatGPT. With your permission, I'm going to read what they say about you or...

0:01:30.3 MS: Sure, I'd love to know.

0:01:32.0 MB: And then you can give it a grade between A and F. Are you ready?

0:01:33.8 MS: Okay. Very good. I'm ready.

0:01:35.7 MB: This is from ChatGPT; Margaret Sullivan is a prominent American journalist, media critic, known for her insightful analysis, commentary in the media industry. She's had three significant positions. This is what they list; Washington Post. Sullivan served as a media columnist for The Post, then The New York Times. This is something we're gonna chat about with your permission, where you were the public editor for 2012 to 2016. And of course, the award winning years at the Buffalo News, where you were editor-in-chief. Sidebar, one of my close friends from my days in Portland, Maine, Sherri Deaton-Callahan. Do You remember her? She was assistant advertising director there.

0:02:09.4 MS: Yes, I sure do. Absolutely.

0:02:11.7 MB: Yeah. And she's still up in that area, too. No, I mean, that's what they say. How did they do?

0:02:18.3 MS: I mean, all of that is true. I can't argue with it. I have to give AI a very good grade. I see no inaccuracies.



0:02:29.0 MB: It did not mention your current position, which is you're a columnist for the Guardian US. Right? Been there about a year and a half:

0:02:35.2 MS: I have been there for about a year and a half. And I'll just mention that I'm doing something else as well, at Columbia University, where I'm the executive director of, this is a long title, so bear with me. I'm the executive director of the Craig Newmark Center for Journalism Ethics and Security at the Journalism School.

0:03:00.2 MB: Now, there are two separate ways you're publishing about the industry right now. And I need you to correct me if I'm wrong. One is a columnist at the Guardian. We've read some of your stuff and posted it. But also, you're on Substack with a podcast/column. Am I correct? Called American Crisis. We wanna spend some time talking about. So.

0:03:15.5 MS: That's right.

0:03:19.6 MB: You're publishing twice, once when you're... And by the way, congratulations. I understand recently on Substack, you crossed the 9000 subscriber mark. That's pretty good.

0:03:25.1 MS: Yes. I'm almost at 10000 subscribers. Now, those are not all paid. A fraction of those are paid. But still, it's been very heartening to do it. And it's one of the things that drives me to publish there about once a week, because I think about these people who subscribed and in some cases paid \$50 for the year. And I think, well, I guess I better say something. It kind of started out as a podcast. And I did that. I did a ten-part podcast about sort of the media and democracy. But what I found was, I was also publishing sort of some commentary pieces. And I found and maybe this is unsurprising, Mike, but that people were very, very interested in my written commentary and somewhat interested in the podcast. So I decided to go heavy on what I'm actually good at.

0:04:19.4 MB: We are doing the same thing here. We actually now do the audio transcript of this, because it helps everyone reference the content. But we're going to talk about American Crisis 'cause you're kind of doing a reset on that. I'm gonna tease the audience with that and break for this word. We'll get back with Margaret on the backside of this.

0:04:37.0 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly TownNews. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management and more. Join the over 2000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with BLOX Digital. Serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust BLOX Digital to empower you, to connect you, at scale, with the community you need to reach. BLOX Digital, formerly TownNews, now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at [Bloxdigital.com](https://bloxdigital.com).

0:05:43.6 MB: Okay. So let's first not go to Substack, Margaret. Let's stay with the Guardian 'cause recently, in the last couple of weeks, you've been focusing on the Washington Post.

0:05:54.8 MS: I have.

0:05:54.9 MB: Yes, you have. And I hope you don't mind me, I went to Twitter or X, whatever the hell you wanna call it. And you actually said, your opinion, you said, noting that they put more white men in leadership roles. Can you kind of just unpack where you think the Post is at today? There's three newsroom organizational structure, Jeff Bezos finally coming out this week and he's sweeping everything under the rug. Your last, I'm just setting this up, Jeff Bezos once saved the Washington Post, he now needs to do it again. Go ahead, take it away. How do you feel about the Post?

0:06:30.4 MS: Okay. Well, your audience probably knows a lot of what's going on. But basically, quick background, Jeff Bezos bought the Post for the bargain price of \$250 million in 2013. He inherited Marty Baron, a great editor. And the Post went on to do very strong work, when Pulitzers compete both for subscriptions and in scoops with the New York Times and had a great run. In more recent years, the Post has been losing money, a lot of money. Its readership has dropped like a lot of other outlets. And so Jeff Bezos decides to bring in a new publisher, and he brings in Will Lewis, who is a Brit who had been at various Murdoch publications, not just at Murdoch, but kind of comes out of Murdoch World, including having been high up at the Wall Street Journal recently. And it went pretty well for about a couple of months. And at the same time, Will Lewis says he's going to start something called what he refers to as a third newsroom, which is really bizarre. And actually, I'm still shaking my head about that one. Because if there's a third newsroom, that suggests that there have been two newsrooms before and there really weren't.

0:08:03.9 MS: There was a newsroom and then there was the opinion section. But anyway, this supposed third newsroom was going to be devoted to service journalism and social media journalism. Wasn't well explained what that was. And ever since, there's been a lot of turmoil. And just to add an important element to this, Lewis had tried to squelch some stories about his involvement in this scandal in Britain from 10 years ago, this so-called phone hacking scandal. He had discouraged his editor, Sally Busby, from running a story. He had tried to bargain with David Folkenflik at NPR, saying if David wouldn't publish a story about this, about his being named in a court case, not as a defendant, by the way, but being named, that Will would give him an exclusive. And David did not do that, published the story anyway. And then Lewis, I think he could, fair to say, attacked him, saying that he was a not a journalist, but an activist. And I would say of all media figures in the United States, David Folkenflik is one of the most well-respected, straight up guys. He's not an activist. And so since then, now everybody's sort of like, hmm, there must really be something there if he's so eager to hide it.

0:09:37.8 MB: But the question is, how damaged is the brand in a world, where news publishing has already got a low credibility rating?

0:09:46.1 MS: It's not good for the brand, particularly because the Washington Post brand has always been accountability holding.

0:09:54.3 MB: Exactly.

0:09:54.6 MS: Public officials and public institutions... Powerful people and institutions

accountable. So when this happens, it sort of cuts into the whole idea of what the Washington Post is. And at the same time, I will be quick to agree that the Post, like a lot of news organizations, need to be doing something different. I mean, it's not okay to lose \$77 million a year, although let's face it, I don't think it would really create a big problem for Jeff Bezos. But I worked for Warren Buffett and then for Jeff Bezos indirectly. And my observation is that billionaires do not like to lose money. So.

0:10:40.2 MB: No, it's not in their DNA.

0:10:42.2 MS: It's not in their DNA. They really would like another plan. So, I don't know that Will Lewis really has that magic. But I think that Jeff Bezos is reluctant to unseat him because then he's back to square one. What's he got to do about the problem?

0:11:00.5 MB: All right. Well, here we are. So you did send out a May 18th. We subscribed to your Substack.

0:11:06.3 MS: Thank you.

0:11:06.4 MB: Not pay.

0:11:07.1 MS: That's okay.

0:11:09.6 MB: You're making...

0:11:09.7 MS: You get most of it on pay.

0:11:09.9 MB: I'm refocusing this newsletter on media that supports or threatens American democracy. There's your headline. We all need to do what we can to make sure American democracy survives in 2025 and beyond for journalism, that means making sure voters know what the consequences are. And you then say many Americans seem misinformed or underinformed right now. If I may be accusatory, aren't you missing your days as a public editor and now you're a public editor for all of us? Is that what...

0:11:38.5 MS: Well.

0:11:38.7 MB: Go ahead.

0:11:39.9 MS: I mean, I think that as a media columnist and as a public editor, even though they're very different roles and now as a writer who writes about the media a lot, although not exclusively, it's, you know, that kind of public editor feeling is built into it, which is I'm observing what's going on and trying, I mean, my hope is to call the media and journalists to their highest, you know, highest level of functioning in our society, their highest mission. And our mission is to serve the public. And we obviously, you know, we all wanna make money and we all want to win awards and all those sort secondary and tertiary things. But the Constitution only gives a nod to one profession.

0:12:32.4 MB: And that's this.

0:12:34.7 MS: And that is the press. And we have a very special role that maybe the Brits don't fully understand, by the way. We have a very special role in American democracy and we need to get very serious about doing it. So when we have a nation that for example, thinks that inflation soared under Joe Biden, that's just not true. Unemployment and inflation are at a low rate and people don't seem to know that. And they don't know a lot of basic stuff. I mean, granted, and I understand this because I go grocery shopping. There are prices that feel high and are higher than they were in the past, but wages have actually kept up with that. And so on balance, Biden's economics have been quite favorable to the country. And that's just one example. People really, really don't know that. And I also think that the focus on Biden's age and his mental sharpness or lack thereof, is a little unfair because we know how old he is. We know how old he's going to be. We also know or should know how old Donald Trump is and how old he's going to be, and the fact that he makes gaps and sounds half crazy a lot of the time. And we also can look back on a Biden presidency now and say, what happened and what were the accomplishments?

0:14:15.5 MS: So, it is a concern, absolutely. It is a concern that Biden is over 80 and that either one of them would be the oldest president.

0:14:27.7 MB: Okay. Let's stay with that concept. You're trying to police or at least focus on media, which right now, according to Gallup, has a 32% trust rating in the American public. And that's all media. And that's a shame 'cause sometimes those big echo chamber brands like CNN, Fox, what have you, MSNBC, reflect on the local newspapers serving or local media serving the communities. Public editor. Let's just stay on that for a second, because as you may most probably know, in January, Carolyn Barclift of the Media and Democracy Project blog that the New York Times must reinstate the position you left there. Being back a public editor, you know that I interviewed Grant Moise of the Dallas Morning News recently, along with their new public editor, Stephen Berkley, who I think is the only public editor short of Kelly McBride at NPR in states right now. Do you believe that we need to police ourselves more to bring back that trust? And there has to be more of this in our own DNA?

0:15:34.6 MS: Well, I think we have to be a little bit realistic. I don't think in general, public editors and ombudsman are coming back. I'd be surprised, although I really think the Washington Post could use one right now.

0:15:48.8 MB: One right now. Yeah.

0:15:51.7 MS: That actually would be a way to reestablish some credibility and some accountability. But yes, I do think so. And when the Times ended its public editor role, which didn't happen while I was there, but after I left and my successor, very accomplished journalist Liz Spade was there, they said, Well, there's so much criticism on social media that we really don't need to employ somebody to do this. Which sort of sounded like kind of an argument at the time. But I can tell you that it's not the same thing. And here's why. Because a public editor can actually receive the criticisms from the readers of the paper or whatever it is, radio station.

0:16:40.8 MB: Whatever.

0:16:40.9 MS: TV station, digital site, and absorb those, take the complaints, whatever they are, to the top editor or to the section editor or even to the reporter at times and get an answer. Find out what they were thinking. Why did this happen? Would they do it again? What's the overall view of this? And then you can synthesize the complaint, the answer, and do some analysis. What do I think? The way I used to do it was I would do those things and then I would say, here's my take, and I would end each piece with here's my take so that I would have the chance to sort of think about what the response was. Well, tell you what, social media can't do any of that. It can't really get anything from the opinion makers, the decision makers, and it definitely can't take all of that stuff or doesn't and synthesize it. And then here's a crucial element, present it back to the readers in the very publication that they read.

0:17:42.6 MS: So, to say, oh, Twitter will take care of that is really not accurate. But at the same time, I do understand why there was such resistance to these roles, because you're giving somebody an awful lot of power. When you say, We're going to leave you alone, you're completely independent, and you say what you want to say, and we will stand behind you. I mean, I had tremendous support from Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the father of the current publisher, AG Sulzberger. I mean, he was completely supportive, never interfered. I would write a tough column, and he would stop down to see me and say, "That was a good one." I mean, he really appreciated the role and was willing to let the chips fall where they may. But I'll tell you a dirty little secret, which is when I was the editor of the Buffalo News, the then publisher, Stan Lipsey, came to me and said, "Maybe we should have an ombudsman." And I said, yeah, Stan, no, I don't really think we need that.

0:18:48.3 MB: I Don't want someone.

0:18:49.1 MS: You know, I mean, and I.

0:18:50.6 MB: I don't need an internal affairs department watching the news.

0:18:55.0 MS: But I will say that I think it's a different matter, it's one thing at a local paper. It's another thing at The New York Times or CNN, you know, places that are big and monolithic and really influential. I will say that when I was editor of the news, I made it a point to A, write an editor's column, B, get out a lot into the community. And I think that people could find me if they wanted to.

0:19:19.0 MB: All right. I'm going to quote you to you, if you don't mind, from E&P, if you don't mind. You were interviewed by one of our associate editor Gretchen Peck a few years ago. You may or may not remember it, but the topic still resonates. It was about the fallacy of objectivity. And you kind of said the goal of the reporter today is not to be objected for the sake of appearance, but they can't and shouldn't discount what they know, but to be fair in their news gathering and storytelling. Can you talk a little bit more about objectivity and fairness in today's journalistic ecosystem?

0:19:54.4 MS: Sure. I mean, I think that objectivity has become this really fraught word and it sort of happened in the wake of the George Floyd murder and the protests afterwards. And it's hard to pin down exactly how, and it was happening before that. But it's a word that makes people crazy. So I prefer to use other words because I don't wanna go down the rabbit hole of the emotions around

this word. But I do think that we need to bring impartiality and independence and non-partisanship to our reporting. That it's similar in a way to going into a courtroom and you sure hope that the judge is going to be impartial and is going to look at things with a fair-minded idea. And we have to be that way too. So you can call it whatever you want to. I think we need to think about accuracy, about fairness to everyone, including the audience, and to be wary of doing this kind of false equivalency that some people call bothsidesism, which is whether true or false, we take it down the middle.

0:21:09.3 MB: Right.

0:21:10.2 MS: As someone pointed out, when we're doing a story about child abuse, we don't run out and find all the child abusers and quote them equally. I mean, some things are just, it's obvious. It's like, we kind of came to terms with this when there was a lot of denial of climate change. And at first, there was sort of, well, some people believe in climate change, some people don't. I think we need to follow the science and the facts and give that its due.

0:21:41.7 MB: Well, we're going to leave it at that. But we're going to urge those listening on podcast platforms to come back to the landing page for this interview, which is at editorandpublisher.com/vodcast, where we'll have a link to Margaret's Substack newsletter. We're also going to link in, if we don't mind Margaret, I loved your book. I didn't read it. I listened to it. We live in Nashville, my wife and I. She's the editor in chief, and we drove to Dayton to visit in-laws. So we listened to you to your book on the way up and back.

0:22:14.3 MS: That's great. Are you are you talking about my memoir, *Newsroom Confidential*? Are you talking about my.

0:22:19.7 MB: Yes.

0:22:20.5 MS: Okay. Because I have a previous book published in 2020, also about journalism that's called *Ghosting the News* and it's about the decline of American newspapers and what that means for democracy. But yeah, the more recent one is *Newsroom Confidential*. I'm so glad that you got a chance to listen to it.

0:22:39.1 MB: Oh, it was. It's an amazing story. It's I mean, that book and of course, Marty Baron's are two must reads if you really wanna get inside the head of the news in the people in the ecosystem, the whole thing going on. But beyond that, we're also gonna have a link to both books now. Thank you for that. And to Substack and see if we can get you clear that \$11,000 mark by the time we're done. How does that sound?

0:23:01.5 MS: [laughter] Not thousand dollars, just number of subscribers. Number of subscribers.

0:23:08.6 MB: Oh, sorry. 11,000 Subscribers.

0:23:10.4 MS: This is not a case of, where follow the money really works. In general, follow the money is a great rule, but in this case, not so much. But I do wanna just add, as I said to you before we started recording, that one of my most precious possessions is a copy of *E&P* editor and



publisher in the old days, the pre Mike days. And it was when I was first named editor, the first woman editor of the Buffalo News, and I was the cover Girl for E&P, and the headline said, with a question mark, Women on the Rise? Question mark. So it was, but it's, I have, it's framed and, it hangs in my office.

0:23:50.7 MB: There you go. Margaret Sullivan, columnist for the Guardian US. Also author of the Substack podcast/newsletter American Crisis. We thank you for your time and.

0:24:05.2 MS: Thank you.

0:24:06.9 MB: And keep up the fight.

0:24:07.6 MS: Thank you very much, Mike. Bye everybody.

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