Marshall and Sagar here. Welcome back to The Realignment.
Quick note before we dive in, Sagar and I are about to record the next edition of our Supercast subscriber exclusive Ask Me Anything discussion episode a little later this Thursday afternoon. So if you are a subscriber, go to realignment.supercast.com to submit any additional questions or points for us to discuss. And if you are not a subscriber and would like to get all of our exclusive audio content while supporting the show, go to realignment.supercast.com as well. On to the episode. Every once in a while, a book comes out with just incredible timing. The realignment's previous best guest timing world went to Chris Miller's Chip War, The Quest, to dominate the world's most critical technology. That came out last October and that was right as the semiconductor debate discussion reached its peak after the signing of the Chip Act.
Today's guest, Ben Smith, has Chris Miller beat. Got some big news in the media space, related to this topic obviously, the closing of BuzzFeed News and the fact that Vice declared an horizontal path to declaring bankruptcy this week. Ben's new book is Traffic, Genius, Rivalry, and Delusion in the Billion Dollar Race to Go Viral. It's all about how digital media from BuzzFeed and the Huffington Post to Vice and Gawker crashed and burned. Ben is the editor-in-chief of Semaphore and was the former media columnist at the New York Times, while also previously serving as the editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed News, so he's the perfect guest to cover this topic. You can find traffic and plenty of other great guest books at our bookshop store in the show notes. A huge thanks to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting our work. Ben Smith, welcome to the realignment. Thanks so much for having me. It's good to see you, man. Good to see you. Congrats on your independent new media venture. I wrote about you when you were still working for Big Media. You were one of the original people. Yeah, let's not be too generous. Speaking of Big Media, let's kick off here. So just read the book. Really enjoyed it. I have to say, though, it's hard to find a note of optimism coming from this in the sense that looking at the media landscape right now at BuzzFeed, is it doing too hot? The whole creator economy thing is kind of cratering in its own way. You've got a lot of pessimism on the newsletter front with platforms like Substack.
If you're looking at the digital media space today, is there anything that excites you? Is there anything we were like, oh, man, if I were 23 years old, this is the trend or the feature in the environment I would lean into? Yeah. I mean, I just started a new media company some before. So obviously, I have some remnant either optimism or delusion. I guess that's the word in the subtitle of the book I just wrote. But yeah, I mean, I think the thing about these moments is that in these moments of dramatic change, basically in what consumers want, it's not, this isn't technical, it's about what people want. There's a lot of opportunity to do something new. I think in the early digital media years, which I just spent all this time thinking and writing about, what it was was that there was this small number of media outlets that had, among other things, really massively failed the country in the Iraq war and were technically wildly out of sync with digital media and the way people were living. And then substantively, it just got on the biggest story in the world, Ron. And so there was this real hunger for alternate outside challenging voices. I think now people are like, wow, it's fun to have all those voices screaming at me in my head all the time, but I don't know which is which, and I don't know who to trust, and there's too many of them. And can someone please give me something that feels more synthesized

and authoritative and still, I think, personal in a way that didn't used to be true?
People want to hear more from an individual than they want to hear from kind of a faceless institution.
I think in some ways, the podcasts like this are one of the answers to that. And that's why audio has become so popular is it gives a kind of synthesis, a clear telling of the story, rather than the kind of chaos of social media. I think newsletters, which we're doing a lot of, is this another sort of answer to the same problem? I think what people want is a little different from what it used to be, it changes. And so that does make it an interesting moment to do something now. So reading the book, though, Ben, the question of what do people actually want becomes interesting, because so much of 2010's media is a debate over what people actually want.
But this story kind of turns on Mark Zuckerberg saying, actually, people want news, they want a newsfeed. Actually, people want friends and family and then a couple of media companies crash there. So how like writing this book and telling this story and living it, do you think about the question of what do people actually want? Because the answer seems to be kind of unclear from my perspective. Yeah, I mean, I think there is this interplay of, right, actual consumer preferences. And then particularly in this world where there's like one platform, Facebook, it's making decisions that are basically like, ultimately, their goal is to get more people to stick to Facebook. What they are mostly trying to do is give people what they want and have them spend more time on Facebook and click on more ads. It's easy for people in the media and politics to imagine that they're basically sitting around thinking, like, how do we screw the right wing media and how do we promote Donald Trump or the vice versa or whatever. But mostly they're thinking,
how do we raise the number of minutes the consumer is spending on our platform from 3.3 to 3.4. And but what that means is they make these decisions, these technical product decisions that can cascade through society, particularly again, when we're living in a world where there's basically one platform everybody's on, and one guy is making decisions about it. And I think, I guess, the part of, there was this period, after 2016, where Facebook was under all this public political pressure to get away from essentially right wing populism dominating the platform and simultaneously, you know, wanted to keep growing and tried to, and there was a thing that they were hearing that, you know, that like kind of toxic drive by politics and stupid stories that people didn't really read, but shared about Hillary Clinton secretly having been replaced by a body double, were kind of going everywhere. And they would, what they would do is they would tweak the algorithm. So the thing that they really favored were meaningful social interactions. And they thought that meant you really read the article, you were passionate about it, you shared it. What it actually meant when they implemented it was that like, I posted a meme of like, Bernie Sanders, you commented, kill yourself 17 times in a row. And then they were like, wow, look at all this engagement and showed it to everybody. Yeah, it turned out engagement was mostly like hateful and toxic, and honestly, might have been worse. I had something you mentioned, and you spent some time on, which I actually find inspiring relating us to kind of my own journey in media is, what were the problems that new media in the mid 2000s and the 2010s were solving for
you mentioned there, the Iraq war, I'm thinking to the blogger era, which eventually coalesces

inside of Buzzfeed in terms of Gawker in terms of we're being real, we're going to give it to you, raw. What was that landscape like Ben for some of our viewers were literally not even alive on 9 11. So they don't even know what we're talking about. You'd have Miller, who's she, right? Yeah, exactly. I don't I don't even think they might know who possibly some of our some of our co hosts were not old then. I don't know. We were we were alive. We're in fourth grade. So straining it. Yeah, we were young. Yeah, children. Yeah, the word we're going for. I mean, I was basically a child. The Yeah, I mean, I think the thing that was so exciting, and it is sort of interesting to put your head back in that place, which is how wide open it was that the media had been controlled by the people who control the printing presses and the broadcast towers, who felt I mean, not wrongly, a lot of responsibility to limit what would go out. You actually have to throw everything out, but also did mean that really narrowed the conversation. There was an alternative media. There were all weeklies and things like that and early chat rooms and blogs, but that is that really accelerated it kind of just, you know, opened up this whole new inability to challenge that media where it was just manifestly wrong, right, or where you thought it was. And then to report facts, and I'm just at the speed at which people were really living. I mean, it's interesting when I went back to that era, the thing that kind of struck me because there were a lot of famous blogs and moments and sort of forgotten lore. But the one where I thought,
wow, this was a sort of preview of what was to come with this is a site called Jezebel, which like you were probably not reading both because you were a child and I know I'm a guy, but I was not reading because I was a guy with a women's women's blog that it's launched in 2007. And these women who like had been living inside, working for Glamour and places like that, and writing just the dumbest stuff that had no connection to any real person's life and hated it, started this blog where the first thing they did was they offered a $10,000 bounty to whoever could find an unretouched image of a model that had then run in a magazine. And sure enough, somebody turns up with an unphotoshopped version of Faith Hill that had run in Red Book and they kind of deconstructed how they'd gotten rid of her freckles and gotten rid of her smile lines. And like, it feels like a small thing, but it was actually like, you think about how photoshopping and the sort of way women's body images were like, it was a big deal, actually. Oh, yeah. And in general, they sort of, and it was sort of parallel to all the other bullshitting media, but they kind of opened, they also like pointed just just started publishing a list of how many black models were in each issue of every magazine, it was usually zero. And you know, the magazine editors were ashamed about it and changed it. And it was this like early instance of like, wow, like this kind of media which would evolve into social media and kind of organized around identity can be incredibly powerful, constructive, I would say, like positive, frank and honest in the way they talk to each other, but also almost immediately they developed this pretty pathological relationship with their commenters who were so dialed in, so passionate, felt so connected to the authors. When the author strayed from the orthodoxy, they would face this fury that was totally unlike anything you had seen before in legacy media, and really kind of like put enormous kind of emotional pressure on them and drove them nuts and by within a year, the whole thing kind of melts down. And it did just writing about it and talking to the people doing it. It was like, you really saw the whole cycle of the 2010s kind of play out in advance and everything that felt positive and everything that felt really toxic.

That's interesting. That's interesting. You know, reading the book, I think you do a good job of conveying that it's easy for us to Monday morning quarterback on a couple of different levels. But there's a sentence where you describe kind of Jonah Paredi, you know, founder of BuzzFeed,
co-founder of HuffPost, his kind of pitch, which is, hey, in the 80s, you had cable come out, and there were a variety of channels via com, via MTV, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, that then provide content for cable providers, now they have these big companies. So we could say to ourselves, wow, it was so crazy that like BuzzFeed and the dodo and now this that they built their businesses on top of social media, but actually that's an entirely legitimate and understandable pitch to make. So the question for you is what went wrong? Because when you say it the way you wrote the sentence, I'm like, oh yeah, like that could have just happened like BuzzFeed and Facebook
could have grown together and everyone's rich and everyone's kind of happy. Like what actually stops
that story from turning into the disaster where media companies like the Bustle, Mike, et cetera, are kind of nuked because they put their stuff on Facebook or depend on Facebook for their content.
Yeah, I think that's, I mean, I think that's the core business bet that all these companies got wrong. And I guess, you know, you can argue about was it knowable in advance that it wasn't going to play out that way? Like I think that there's a scenario, the one that I think in some ways, Jonah and others anticipated and we anticipated that, you know, as these platforms compete with one another and make, there's going to, they're going to like the way cable networks might compete with one another or direct TV competes with Comcast, they got to have good content and they have to pay for it and they have to realize that they need to create an ecosystem where quality content creators are compensated for the work. And I think, but they, but there was this new thing, user generated content and it was free. And they liked that that the profit margins on free are a lot better than the profit margins on splitting revenue with media companies.
And, and the other stream of it was this idea of creators, a word essentially created by the platforms to prevent, you know, any kind of organization among the atomized individuals they deal with, like Uber would rather deal with drivers than fleets. And YouTube would rather deal with creators than media companies or other kinds of cartels that could jam them up.
And so I do think there was this underlying kind of economic choices made by the platforms. And I think as you watch Facebook, to my mind unravel right now, you can say like, huh, like, maybe they did need to move further up market to have higher quality content. Maybe that was the real, a smarter
direction of travel for them. Then relying forever on UGC, you know, they made like Netflix is in a pretty strong place, I think having its problems. But ultimately, you know, Facebook made some sporadic gestures to try to compete with Netflix, but never nailed it. And, you know, there is obviously a lot of consumption of high quality professionally created content. And the social networks for various reasons, economic ideological never got into that business.
Well, quick thing, I mean, there were Facebook originals for a bit. So like my inner Facebook exact is like, wait a second, we did do that. Remember, they brought the, what was it? They brought the real world. There was the real world on Facebook for a high second. What went wrong there? And it didn't, you know, it didn't work. They weren't, I mean, part of the problem is like

they weren't that good at it. These creative industries are tough and you need hits. And the people at HBO are the best at making hits. And it's not for, and there's something about the DNA of these tech companies that makes them bad at it. And that's a cultural, that's very, it's not soluble problem. And maybe none of this stuff was soluble, but I think there was a world. There's an alternate universe where Facebook chooses to compete by leaning into professional content, but they never, maybe it wouldn't have worked either. I don't, I mean, I don't, I'm not particularly smug about this. That's the ultimate question. Cause I've same thing happened with Apple TV. It's like, you know, money can't just buy you great content. You know, and as you said, you do need it. Well, actually, Apple TV is a great example. Like it's now it's working. Why is it working? Cause they bought Ted Lasso. Why did they do that? I don't know. Somebody had good taste.
It's a little hard to predict. So they had Ted Lasso and then the morning show, but they also had like 10 other shows. I believe they had to cancel and I believe it costs like several hundred. I mean, it's fine for them. Yeah, that's the studio. That's the studio business, right? Like it's a weird business where you have hits and you have misses. And it's totally unlike the business of sort of building a platform by learning and learning and testing and learning and making these microscopic adjustments until you get somewhere better. It's like this, these cultural businesses are totally different where it's like, you make movies and you have brilliant people. You have to pay a lot of money and behave very strangely and you put up with them. I mean, it's a different right. Right. Yeah. No, that's a very important point about why there's kind of a mismatch. Actually, we were curious. Why did you choose a BuzzFeed and Gawker and not some of the other BuzzFeed? I'm assuming just cause you had the insight, but like a Vox or vice, so many of the actually vice given the basically say facing the same constraints. And also, I mean, when I was a teenager, Shane Smith's like vice guide to North Korea's what inspired me to get into the business, which is kind of sad to see how it ended up. But yeah, I'm curious the choices for the book, you know, not BuzzFeed aside, just cause your own person. I mean, I think, I mean, I think, you know, if you're ever, if you're telling a story, you're always going to choose your own way in and it's always going to be a little arbitrary. I mean, I chose Jonah and Nick and as the sort of main characters, HuffPost is in there too early a lot because they were these two people who in the early aughts thought they saw the future had very, very different visions of it were very bitter personal rivals at one point. And, you know, and I think that this sort of Jonah, this very optimistic idea that social media as he was very early to see would change the way people communicated and change what they communicated. He thought that would be almost entirely positive
that people interacting in public would not do screaming negative politics. They would do inspiring positive things because who wants to look like a jerk who's yelling at people? It turns out many people. And Nick had this totally different idea that this kind of digital media would sort of rip the hypocrisy off of journalism and of content and would allow you just to give people the pornography they wanted without all the nonsense and dressing of other, you know, of an hypocrisy of old media. And these were these two very different paths and philosophies. And I think that sort of in people and chose to follow it through that way. I mean, I think there are many I think box that is really interesting and was a much less ideological, much more business

driven place. And quick thing, we mean like Vox Media. So if there's Vox the publication, but you like Vox Media is like the bigger, the Verge and Bleacher report, which are the things that, you know, the Jim Bank office, you kind of snap together in a way that was less ideological and holds up better. Vice is totally interesting and different in that it was never totally on the internet. Compared to these other sites, it was just a tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of their traffic, but had an incredible brand, sold a television show, made tons of money, but spent more. Another question that comes to mind here, you're bringing up Jim Bankoff. So much of this story comes down to people who like really cut their teeth and like the failure of the AOL Time Warner deal, just so many just name, after name, after name, after name in that post.com bubble era. Looking at the 2010s, if we could compare the failures of big ambitious companies of talented people to that failure of AOL Time Warner, where there's a bunch of talented people who go outwards, do you think there are any hints at, well, like maybe BuzzFeed didn't work, but it turns out that like these 10 to 15 people who worked in this space are going to be really defining characters in the late 2020s. The, let's say, you know, I would say a couple of things. One is just that, yeah, the New York Times in Purdue, which is the premier journalistic institution in the country, absorbed a ton of the talent and the DNA and the way of thinking about journalism from the internet. And by the way, in 2020, like I'm working there, Kara Swisher is working there, Corey Sica is working there, Dodie Stewart is working there, a lot of the people Ezra goes there, Ezra Klein, of course, yeah, who had sort of figured this stuff out. And by the way, had figured it out in totally different ways. Had were many very critical of the New York Times, critical of each other, had totally different philosophies of how to do journalism are all working together for the New York Times with all these New York Times people who are kind of skeptical of us. And so one of the reasons that I think the New York Times lost its mind and is having these kind of rolling civil wars, which seemed to be subsiding, is that they kind of swallowed the whole internet and the whole internet is so much crazy people who hate each other. And suddenly they all work for the New York Times and are fighting inside the tent. Taylor said Barry Weiss in the same publication. Taylor worked there, but exactly like everyone worked there. The I think, Marshall, like the thing you said before, I think so, I didn't really thought about it, but people coming out of the AOL Time Warner merger, by the way, the AOL people
made off like bandits. One of the lessons of it was sell your company. Ken Lear, the chairman of BuzzFeed had been at AOL. But I do think partly because that merger was perceived as a disaster, people like Jonah, Shane Smith, were very reluctant to sell their companies. And Ken Lear was like, I mean, continues to this day, I think, to think we were total morons to not sell the company to Disney for $600 million in 2014. I think any normal business analysis of shareholder value would in fact confirm that we were total morons. But I do think that like the shadow of those, you know, we cared a lot about the work and didn't think it would, the merger would wind up producing, you know, like it would sort of all fizzle if we sold. And we're looking certainly at things like AOL Time Warner, just to see how like what bad mismatches these have been. I totally understand. And, you know, in that context about why wouldn't, look, it's always, nobody ever knows whether they're making the right decision or not. I'm curious about the news business starting it for BuzzFeed. One of the things you wrote about was about how BuzzFeed news brought legitimacy kind of to the advertising business. Do you still think that that's true?

Like, or is that no longer true in terms of news as a whole around legitimacy and advertising as a market itself? Well, I think, you know, brands do matter in media. And I think, you know, you and I are both starting new brands and it's quite hard. And how people perceive your brand matters a lot. If you're in an advertising business, how people perceive your brand matters a lot. And for BuzzFeed in that moment, there was a bunch of, I don't know if you remember this, but there was a bunch of websites that were just like great at generating like weird nonsense that got traffic. And BuzzFeed was one of them. Nine Gag was the biggest actually. If any of you remember that, it was massive. And break.com was one. And none of those others exist because they were really perceived as spam and garbage. And advertisers don't want anything to do with them. Also, the platforms didn't want anything to do with them. And I think doing news sort of vaulted BuzzFeed out of that category in a way that was really important and sort of generated this kind of cultural relevance that made us really hot for a while and was really valuable and commercially valuable. And for a little while, I was like, Oh, this totally makes sense. Like news is doing this useful service to the brand. Our revenues are growing like crazy and a bit of it's going to subsidize news that kind of may all makes commercial sense. I mean, that did that run out of time. I guess something I want to ask you then is the way you're telling this history really starting late 90s and moving onwards as you go from a world where Jonah is going viral because people forward his emails and then you have people who are mastering search and then you're really centering down to mastering the social media algorithm for a hot second or at least claiming that you have sitting in 2023. How does content get shared today? And also the thing too is that like, this is why Elon's in a bit of a scuffle with publishers. Twitter, right, despite being the water cooler is not actually where most publishers get most of their content. So like if you were to say in 2023, like how does someone share or go viral? Or does even going viral, does it even matter now?
I think it's I think I mean, I think that world is shrunk a lot. Like these platforms are smaller and less relevant. The web, the like worldwide web is much less, is smaller and less relevant than it used to be. I was trying to run my kids actually and was trying to explain a website of saying if you see something on business insider, what's business insider? I was like, oh, it's a news website. And they said, oh, you mean in Safari? I was like, right, it's a feature of this app called Safari that's one of a number of apps on your phone. You know, I mean, and meanwhile, TikTok, I mean, TikTok is the biggest right now winner. But you know, these in short video probably remain whether TikTok or not is important part of the landscape for a while. It's not that social, like some people post, but a lot more lean back and consume. So no, I think that I think the world has changed a lot. And I think I think probably for better people are much more silent or getting news much more from people they trust in a sort of more closed environment, whether it's the New York Times paywall, or I hope our newsletter products and less from stuff bouncing around social media.
But wait to bring back, you know, filter bubble. The negative way of saying what you just said is that we're all hanging out in our right quiddle filter bubbles. So like, what's your, what's your kind of, because that was a very, because to your point around, you know, Jonah and the optimism, like this was supposed to be the answer to filter bubbles, but we ended up there, like, what's your response to that? Yeah, it's interesting because, you know, social media, on one hand, it was sort of a filter bubble. But on the other hand, you're really

like the main thing it does now is show you what your enemies think. But also like whoever among you, whichever of your people, whichever like the dumbest expression of your enemies is the thing that it's absolutely the best at bringing to your attention. Which is a funny kind of, it is sort of a filter bubble, but it's like a funny funhouse mirror type of one. No, I mean, I think the, you know, like the normal history of media is you mostly hear from people you like and trust, not people you hate and despise and distrust, and seems not terrible that that's how people would consume. It doesn't seem like the experiment with having everyone in the world standing in the same giant public square screaming at the top of their lungs was like hugely constructive. I mean, I do think for people like you, who, who, who, who wanted to really tear down institutions, like the, and me too, in the world of media, like it actually did that and we succeeded and did enormous amount of damage to institutions that in many ways were pretty sclerotic and corrupt and messed up. I would say immediately, at least I underestimated the value of having some kind of trusted institution and that we're now in a moment where rebuilding that is pretty important. I think that's fair. Yeah, it's interesting too. Well, here's a, here's a great question. Not to attack you personally or say, no, no, I mean, you can. He's more institutionalist. He's like you. Just fire outfits. If you're watching on YouTube. I know you're such a so deceptive. He's an Austin tech bro. Yeah, it is. Ben, I'm curious here around you. Obviously, your first column at the times was just all about the success of the New York Times and whether that was good for media. We're thinking of a book passage where Jonah Peretti was telling the New York Times executives. He's like, I would, what did he say? He's like, I go in and close my door and cry. If he was given the keys to the castle. Right. They asked him what he would do if he was CEO of the New York Times. And this is in the peak Buzzfeed era against Times panic. And he said he would first, he would ask for a raise and second, he would go into his office and cry. Right. Well, it's like, it turns out he probably should have been one crying. So whenever we think about how the New York Times, like you said, just successfully absorbed the internet, why though, did they of all of the brands succeed? I always think about the Washington Post here where the narrative. Yeah, go ahead. Go ahead. I mean, specifically, they beat the Washington Post. The Washington Post was owned by a billionaire and did not have the same kind of existential panic that the Salisbury family did. And they were forced to just sort of like stare death in the face and, and, and dealt really well. What they did, it's interesting. You know, there's this idea in tech that it's, there's a strategy called fast following that you sort of, you know, you're watching your competitors and you move very fast to do what is ever succeeding better. Times didn't do that. They followed slowly. They watched what was working. They didn't, the post was always skipping from trend to trend. The times was slow, but it was very, very deliberate and thoughtful and, you know, and stuck to what it's strength. Didn't try to become something it wasn't, but stuck to its strength. It's kind of funny. If you look at the successful New York Times business now, you see something that you can kind of squint and see the great New York Times print business of the nineties with a cooking section and crosswords and sports and a great news front page that all are sort of a lifestyle bundle. And, you know,

they, you know, and that's, they didn't, they didn't mostly go into video actually, interestingly, which is very expensive and distracting for other publishers. They have these incredibly successful podcast business, though, that feels very, again, in sync with their brand. I mean, I think, you know, it's very impressive and, and it actually, to me, at least, does show a little the, you know, I mean, that it was because they were under so much pressure that they were able to figure it out. Yeah. I'm gonna also, I think they got lucky. I mean, they got lucky and had good management and could easily have screwed things up more and made worse choices. Yeah. Good management. Got lucky. Great brand too. Just can't deny it. Yeah. Oh, for sure. Fantastic. Yeah.
I think it's, I want to own Sawger's slight, slight of me as the Austin tech bro, but just kind of asking you something that the tech bros are really obsessed with. So, um, apologies to University of Austin, had him on the podcast, like Mark Andreessen, had a lot of these guys on the podcast, and they frequently will attack the New York Times as this like family enterprise. It's hereditary. It's, it's the opposite. It's nepotistic. It's the opposite of like the, the desired framework of tech, which is meritocratic and like this, this, this or that. But reading your book, I'm sort of like, wow, it really seems like this quasi like monarchical system was actually the perfect way to weather media change versus like private equity or versus like VC money, like this, this or that. Like, how does this make you think about like media ownership structure? Yeah. I mean, Jonah and I used to joke about, like, about how the notion that you, you want to find the most qualified. It's like, we've done a global search for the most qualified executive in the world and it's my son. Um, you know, like obviously that feels like it doesn't make sense, but I mean, news is a funny business and like it is not always the absolute highest return on investment business and how, and it's interesting. Like these, those tech companies often talk about having values, but really like their commercial enterprises and the values follow from that. These family businesses, I mean, for better and for worse, I would say, like the Salzburgers really know who they are. They lose their footing sometimes, but they have a sense of what they want the New York times to be. And it's not just a commercially profitable enterprise. And it kind of allowed them to keep their feet and their brand through this moment of change. I'm not sure it's always, I'm not sure it's always the best ownership structure, but I think most of them do, because most of these family businesses have always failed. So I'm not sure. I think they did a good job in this case, right?
But yeah, no, I mean, I think the sort of, I mean, I think you, the tech industry, probably cause I do think that often got negative coverage that didn't like. And sometimes it was very stupid, the coverage and they were right to be mad about it. And other times it was accurate and fair and they just didn't like it. And, but they developed this huge superstructure of ideology around what the media was doing that in some ways reflected the media's beliefs about the tech industry. Like this, these tech entrepreneurs are mostly entrepreneurs who are trying to make money and build businesses. And partly I think cause they talk so much about changing the world and like to talk like political figures and visionaries, the media, which is much more interested in politics and in society than in business, covered them, like took them with their word maybe and covered them like they were political actors, but that's not really what they spend their time thinking about. And I do think it led to a bunch of really bad coverage. And I do think, but they definitely responded by developing a theory of what medium was motivated by and how it worked

that you are seeing play out really hilariously on Twitter right now. Like the way in which like the Twitter, like the Elon Musk, like had a genuinely like developed theory of what motivates journalists and media that involved these blue marks that like just was not accurate.
You could have talked to any junior editor at the New York Times been like, oh, thank you for saying it this way, because like once again, like we work in tech for awesome media. It's just sort of like, guys, this is David Sachs had some insane Twitter threads where I'm like, dude, like, I thought about, but it's also like, it's why you guys are smart and have thought about this a lot, but haven't really talked to anyone to test this theory. Like it just plausible, but it is not, it's not the media businesses screwed up in all sorts of ways, but not particularly the ways that they thought it was with respect to some of them, Ben, they did talk to us and we were like, that's fucking stupid. And they just didn't listen.
And I was like, listen, man, I align with you guys on a lot. And I'm like, but that is just literally not how it works because I used to work in it. But you know, you do whatever you want, go ahead and charge for it and see how it works out for you. This is an interesting question that you just referenced around business. Do you obviously semaphore, as I understand it, raise money in order to start, do you think there is a venture scale opportunity again in media now that we are going towards the war, niched out cover? So niche can make you, you can be very profitable. You could be, let's say a hundred million dollar company, but is there a billion, is there a hundred billion dollar opportunity in media today?
Politico sold recently for a billion dollars, Axia sold for like half a billion. I don't think that's unreasonable. I mean, that's not a big company on the scale of like Facebook though. And I think that the venture investors who would like, who want to invest 10 million dollars and think that maybe in four or five years, they're going to get 10 or a hundred billion out, the media is not a good place for that money to go. And they're going to be, and we didn't raise any venture capital we raised from, you know, like I think smart business people who think that we can build a strong, high margin, healthy business that does good journalism. But I don't, but not anybody who thinks that in four years, they're going to get a crazy return. And I think, I think that was a mistake. That's probably good. I think it's a good reversion to the mean. Like I was just reading William Randolph Hearst's biography. And yeah, a lot of the people who were involved in media in the early 1900s, they, nobody was doing it to become filthy rich. They understood. Although they did, by the way. They did become filthy rich on the back. Like if you had invested in Hearst early on, you'd be okay. And in fact, I do think there's this, and people also just forget what a great business newspapers were in the 20th century. I mean, it's not really. Yeah, it was fascinating to watch it from go from not that great to really great. And then all those people who did invest for the power purposes also got very, very rich. Anyway, Marcio. Quick, quick, quick comment. And then basically my near last question, it's just interesting though, because Ben, when you're articulating the, this isn't like a venture scale opportunity point, you're getting at why the word traffic was so important. Because the promise of traffic is that traffic meant scale. Scale meant this is similar to the exponential growth that a tech company could really offer. So like this, this conceptualization of like, of you having these social platforms that are akin to cable companies is just really unpacking the fact that that wasn't actually a rhyme was really key.
Really fascinating anecdote. I loved the story. The book has lots of good stories, but the story I loved when you met with Steve Bannon and Steve Bannon asked you like a very like interesting,

like kind of good faith question, which is if Steve Bannon is capable of such a thing, which is, you know, I respect, you know, Jonah Peretti game, you know, recognizes game. Breitbart is built off of Trump. Why is BuzzFeed and BuzzFeed news going all in on Bernie Sanders? So to help our tech listeners understand how this actually works, because if you guys were purely driven by clicks, you would become Bernie Ville 2K16. It's very clear. It's very, very, very apparent. And then to the point of the Huffington Post history, the Huffington Post was kind of built on Obama's success too. So there was periods where sometimes like digital media and like, you know, like, you know, an insurgent candidate like rhymed talk us through how you guys responded to Bernie in 2016. Yeah. And I mean, and this is probably me and my own journalistic points of view more than anybody else. But I, my, you know, the kind of journalism we were doing was independent and, you know, challenge wanted to challenge power and break news
and be in kind of without fear or favor. And not just, you know, obviously we wanted to write stories, everybody would read, but there was a kind of story to read, which was like, well, this powerful person is awesome, which is about Bernie or about Trump. And that wasn't the kind of journalism we were coming out of. And it was certain, and I don't know if it was a commercial mistake, because I don't think the advertisers Berkeley wanted that. But certainly if you're, but I don't know, that was, though that was not how I was thinking about it, but it was certainly, if you wanted to get scale and build audience, you know, Bernie was as obvious as Trump in that way. And I think for kind of populist politics, following the traffic is sort of a literal kind of populism. Oh, absolutely. I remember working at the Daily Caller at the time and seeing the early surge for Trump and looking at the coverage. I remember being like, man, they had no idea like what is actually going on. Oh, you know, that was something Catherine Miller and I got access to this Facebook data for a time. And I read about it in the book in 2015, when they, they wanted to do some little demonstration project of how smart they were basically and how they could track which candidate was popping in which state. And like month, after the first couple of months, like every week, it's like Donald Trump in every state, no one's talking about anyone else. And then like, and then for some reason, the data stopped being available. Well, but here's a follow up though. What's the limit of that? Because, because at what points does traffic like not matter? Because Obama is an interesting story. Because in Obama 2007, HuffPost is like getting a good Obama traffic. But Obama was a online candidate, and he was an in-person candidate. Marianne Williamson is crushing it on TikTok. But like, let's not pretend that actually translates. So like, when does traffic, I'm asking political reporter Ben this, when does traffic like actually matter? Do you think in a political sense? Yeah, I mean, I think, I think when people encounter this person and say, I like watching their videos, and I want them to be president of the United States. And I think that's a simple good formula. And I mean, Andrew Yang was another who a lot of people said, I like this guy, I like his ideas, but the photos aren't idiots. I mean, like they want someone who they can really see as having is being president. I think that's a great point. Ben, we'll wrap it there. I know you got to go. We really appreciate you. Actually, one quick thing,
soccer, because you have two minutes. Just advice for anyone getting into journalism today, like knowing this story, knowing this conversation. What would you say to a 23-year-old? I have the same, I was the same, but it's just go break some news. Like, the thing that works

across platform and in whatever ecosystem is getting new information that nobody else has and putting it on the internet. Should you be an independent creator or should you go to a publication? Because that's the question we actually get asked the most. I think for the kind of journalism that I guess I came up in, beat reporting, hard news reporting, it's hard to do as an independent creator. And a newsroom is really, really valuable. Not impossible. You can start a newsletter that covers a local place and break lots of news and have some import, but there's a level of legal protection of kind of brand cover that it's very valuable. And particularly when you're young, a community of people who are teaching you how to do it, that's pretty valuable. And so, yeah, get scoops and do it and find other people who like them.
I tell people that all the time. Ben, thank you so much for joining us, man. Appreciate it.
Thanks.
Book will be available in the description.
Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our $5 a month, $50 a year, or $500 for a lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.