

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

Today's guest is Catherine Carabronel, author of the recently released 24-7 Politics, Cable News, and the Fragmenting of America from Watergate to Fox News. One of The Realignment's

themes when it comes to the future of media is that we're clearly at a transition point.

On the one hand, the cable news business model is collapsing due to declining cable subscriptions, so we could be at the very beginning of the last cable news election. At the same time, what comes next isn't at all clear. As we think about the various possibilities, Catherine's work and the conversation itself takes us back to the dawn of the cable news era in the 1970s, and the underlying truth that our news ecosystem isn't just the result of markets and consumer demand, but instead is the product of active regulatory choices by federal and state governments. We could have approached the cable news ecosystem in a completely different way when it came to the initial technological innovations of the 1970s. Catherine asks if we could do something similar today. Huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast and a reminder that we have our upcoming Q&A AMA discussion episode for Supercast subscribers, so if you'd like to get access to that full episode, go to realignment.supercast.com or click the link at the top of the show notes.

Catherine Cramer Brownell, welcome to the realignment.

Thank you so much for having me.

Yeah, I'm really psyched to talk with you. It's interesting. I am someone who used to work at PBS. I then got into podcasting, doing this independently, but as we were discussing before the episode, I'm working at UT starting this week and I'm also like a think tank fellow, so I'm both at the very centralized end of media and also the decentralized side of this.

So there's a million things I want to ask, but let me just ask you this first question.

This book and so much of our basic mainstream discourse about cable news has been degraded the medium. It's entertainment. It's vapid. That, on the other hand, is the opposite of the narrative we have around cable television in general, so we could say things like, well, look, in the 1960s, there were only three channels, but the TV wasn't that great. By contrast, the rise of cable gave us Game of Thrones, Oz, Sex in the City, like quality programming across ideology and viewpoints, always different things. Why did the rise of cable not produce what we would describe as higher quality news and public discourse in the way that in the entertainment and culture categories, the rise of cable did produce something that was obviously better than what came before?

Absolutely. And this is a central question that I get at in the book. And I think that it's, they're linked, right? We have more options as consumers. We have this deregulated media environment that allows the marketplace to triumph and to kind of shape some of this programming that emerges. And so as consumers, we have more choices than ever before. But those same pressures, those same market expectations also have seeped into our news and our understanding

of public affairs. And so somewhere along the way, and this is something I chart in the book, that the public interest that has always been long associated with news productions on television became connected and intertwined with the consumer interest. And this is part of deregulation. It's part of the regulatory battle that I chart in the book. And by the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, there's a triumph across the political spectrum. And I cannot emphasize this enough. It's not just

Republicans. It's Democrats who are very much a part of this conversation and are pushing through deregulation. And they're arguing that the consumer interest is the public interest. Mark Fowler, the head of Reagan's FCC, said it very powerfully and very clearly when he said, what interest the public is the public interest. And this is a shift away from these ideas about delivering information, the civic responsibility of news organizations that really dominated and allowed them to have so much power during the 1960s. So I think if I'm going to play cable executive here, which I wouldn't want to play because of business model structures, struggles that we'll get into, obviously, though, but I'm going to play cable news executive, they'd say, what are you talking about? We obviously have entertainment content. But at the same time, we've obviously advanced the public interest. Like think of CNN in the 1990s, you see the Gulf War for the first time. It's available 24-7. All those guys in the 60s were great, but they're only on for one to two to three hours a night. We've brought it 24-7. Help us unpack the claim that you're asserting our current news media ecosystem doesn't reflect the public interest in a way that the prior model for all its flaws may have more.

Yeah, I don't want to romanticize this moment where we were so well informed in the 1960s because of TV news, and that is not accurate at all. TV news in the 1960s is 22 minutes. It was very deferential to official sources. There's a tight collaboration between broadcasting executives and people in the White House. And it's very elitist. It's very centered on a white, liberal male elite perspective. And so it's very exclusionary. And it was not the full picture. But there is this expectation that media corporations, news television corporations, had to produce some type of public affairs programming. And so they do this in bits and pieces. Again, there's a very small news section, but there also are documentaries. And so there is this, it's kind of always over their heads that they know and people like Newt Minow as the FCC chairperson makes it very clear that he's going to be watching and to see if these major networks are upholding this public responsibility that they have.

And so ultimately, this does kind of shift away. Regulations are pulled back. It allows for new voices. It allows for new types of programming to come in. But there's not this expectation that the news has to inform and it becomes more focused on entertaining. And I think that understanding of the news does not necessarily change. And so people think that they're turning in to CNN or Fox or MSNBC and that they're getting information about the world around them today. They're getting that kind of old fashioned idea of the news. But in fact, overwhelmingly what they're getting is entertainment. And that can inform, that can be presented in a really compelling way. You can have coverage of breaking news. And I think cable news has played a really important role in uncovering certain things and documenting certain things. But the line between entertainment and informing always tends to veer more towards entertainment. And that's a historical

development. And I think something to be useful here is for you to unpack the history here because someone's probably going to wonder, well, why was this even up to the government in the first place?

FCC's role, the regulatory structure. So how about you take us to 1948, Astoria, Oregon, from Oregon, so fun little shout out. So how does the rise of cable as a technology specifically play into the dynamic you're discussing? Exactly. So television emerges on that you're getting your television signals on the broadcast spectrum. So they're coming over the air. And so the idea is

that broadcasters are renting basically. They're using this public space. The air is owned by the public. This is what the FCC determines. And so there can only be, there have to be some rules about who can use what spectrum. And that's how they regulate licenses. And so the kind of deal, if you will, that the FCC crafted for broadcasters is that they could have this spectrum. They could rent this public space. They could use this public entity. But they had to also serve the public interest. What that was was really up in the air. It was not very clearly defined. And so that ultimately becomes defined later on. Initially, cable was just a technology that allowed broadcasting to extend its reach. And so in the book, I talk about Ed Parsons, who is an engineer in Oregon, and his wife wanted access to the Seattle broadcasting signals. And they lived in a town, Astoria, a small town that was far away, and they couldn't get access to those signals. So he went on top of a hotel, you know, found a way to get those signals and then used a coaxial cable to then bring that to their TV set. And so that's really, it's a very basic function in terms of accessing signals. And initially, the FCC saw cable as just a way to expand broadcasting. They didn't envision that it would offer something different, that it would offer perhaps its own programming, that it would offer a very different business model that ultimately develops later on when people are frustrated by the monopoly of the big three networks and kind of this exclusionary nature of their programming, both entertainment and news.

And I think what I'd love to understand here, because the technology, this is such a technology driven story, especially if we're going to engage with the how maintainable was that pre 1970s pre Nixon status quo, separate from individual political decisions that he would make. So when you're describing renting the airwaves, is there a limit to this? I mean, the language you're using is even correct. Is there like a limit?

So for example, on the internet, like zeros and ones, like there's there's no limit to the number of sites you could have on the web. So it would be kind of strange to be like, well, CNN, you're renting this space on the internet. Was there a limit to the number of broadcast signals that a NBC or an ABC or a CBS could get access to before cable?

Yeah, so that's such a great question. And you're renting is not like that kind of involves like an extra like you're paying money, right? But in fact, they did pay money for accessing the broadcast spectrum. And there are there's a sheer limit. And so the broadcast TV is operated on the VHF spectrum, the very high frequency spectrum. And only a few people can to get a clear signal, you can't have 20 different people trying to, you know, broadcast on that signal. And so it's very it's a technological aspect. And you're right, it's about it's about technology that there are only a certain number of broadcasters who can use that signal to reach television viewers. And so initially, it really starts with radio and TV kind of follows in the same regulatory structure as radio, because you know, radio is wireless broadcasting, but over just audio. And initially, in the 1920s, there's there's all of this confusion about who gets to use the spectrum. And so that's where the FCC kind of comes in to say, okay, you get to use the spectrum during in this particular spectrum during these hours, try to just trying to create some clarity. So people can actually get their programs and their ideas out there.

Yeah. And that's such a helpful explanation, because I think it's easy to read your book or the Atlantic article I'm linking in the show notes and kind of say, well, why was the government even putting their hands in there? You could think about that from a left, right or center critique perspective. Well, because to your point, there's was kind of a public goods problem,

there's a limited amount of space. And obviously, if there can only be three or four channels, the question of the degree to which these channels serve the public interest would actually be a logical way of determining who actually gets the spectrum, right? If you're doing, you know, garbage TV circa 1934, I think there's a much stronger argument for NBC to actually take that spot. You're thinking about it that way. So that's actually super, super helpful. So then let's talk about the 60s in terms of the various different sets of folks who were very much unhappy with this status quo. So for example, like in your piece, you describe leftists weren't happy with this. You had economists who weren't happy with this. Conservatives weren't happy with this. And then finally, people in favor of free expression weren't in favor of this status quo.

You could take those are like in whatever order you want, but what was like the central critique of that 60s, what we kind of think of as a heyday now?

Yeah, it's really interesting because they could all really kind of agree on the critique that this network television model was exclusionary, that these big three corporations, which had these affiliate relationships with local broadcasters. So they provided all the programming that local broadcasters then would, you know, get a beam out on their signal to tell our living rooms across the country. And so it's these big three corporations that are dominating what Americans are consuming, what they're what they're watching, the advertisements even that are getting

on, you know, economists would talk about that this is really limiting the business potential of small businesses, because you've got these major corporations that are buying ad spots, and there's only a limited amount of advertising. And so their criticism is that this is a monopoly that does not reflect the diversity of opinion and ideas and potential programming.

And this is at a time I really I think the another key component here is know that this this frustration with the limits of access to television is coming at a time when TV is seen as increasingly important to political power, to gaining political power to winning elections, to getting your ideas out there to pursuing social change, whether it's on the left or on the right, that across the political spectrum, people see TV as a means of political power, and they're being excluded from having access to it. So it really becomes intertwined with political debates in really significant ways during the 1960s. And this is where we can bring big political figures into the picture. You've got LBJ, Nixon. So LBJ is, you know, great society addition to this dynamic would be public broadcasting, you know, PBS, public television, where, you know, I actually got my start and finally enough, like I got interested in politics, I watched like the news hour, you know, with my parents, so obviously I'm going to shout out PBS and the work they do there. But the critique that Nixon would make of this is that operationally, essentially, you know, PBS is elite liberal television programming, adding that as the fourth station, quote unquote, isn't going to address the conservative side of the diversity argument. I guess what I'd ask you, studying this history and kind of looking at a polarized America, was there ever any world where you could successfully build a public option, like literates in the name of public option for the dispersion of public interest television, that didn't inevitably become, you know, polarized. Because once again, like I said, he's run an NPR, but you know, PBS, but it's in New York City. It is an institution that's going to favor people with college degrees and graduate degrees. At a structural level, it's going to lean left. So it'd be kind of difficult to imagine how you would structure

things differently. Like how do you think about that dynamic? It's a really great question. And there are some really brilliant scholars on educational television and public television that would say, absolutely, there is a possibility because there is a lot of effort, there's a lot of interest in educational television, something that was, and it was framed initially as educational television, and then the name kind of emerges as public television. But the idea the same is that if you're not bound to commercial pressures, like, so, you know, public television emerges as something that's different from the networks that, again, across the political spectrum, not only were they exclusionary, but they were focused on profit, right? They're focused overwhelmingly

on entertainment and not enough on educational and public affairs programming. And so there's a lot of support for this. You know, major foundations like the Ford Foundation invested a lot of time and money into studying this and kind of coming up with these alternatives. And so I think that's, you know, there's, and like thinking about kind of the ideology that this is inherently liberal, actually, I think that the scholarship says that that's not true as well. Because there's, I'm on the scholarly advisory board for the American Association of Public Broadcasting, their archive, the AAPB archive, which is amazing. And they've got some really incredible exhibits that actually show conservatives are taking advantage of public or educational television in the 1960s. William Buckley's show, *The Firing Line*. I worked on *Firing Line*. I worked on *The Reboot*. That was my, that's my origin story. So that's fun. Yeah. So, you know, I think that conservatives recognized educational television as well. And they tried to use it to their ends also.

So the question then is, and this is the key framing of, I think, a lot of your scholarship in this space, we've discussed the technology, we've discussed the critiques across the spectrum of that status quo, like what starts happening in the 1970s? Because I think the really key thing I want to pull out from reading your book is that if we just try to tell this story as the inevitable march of technology, we're going to miss the very specific policy choices, I think, made in good and bad faith. They were then made over the next, let's just say, 70s and 80s. So the next two decades, bring the, like, Nixonian to, like, Reagan administration decisions that were made here into the picture. Yeah. This is something I found so fascinating is that when you start looking at the policy discussions about cable and cables deregulation, you know, I argue that Nixon plays a really key role because he kind of changes these conversations about, you know, this network monopoly and what's the problem and what are the solutions. So, you know, everyone could agree that it's too bottled up, right? That there needs to be more access, more diversity of perspectives. But Nixon sees the solution very narrowly. He actually sees the problem very narrowly too. He does think that it's elitist, but he thinks it's biased. He thinks it's liberally biased and liberally biased against him. You know, so he's combating his memos. They frame it as the network news problem. And so he's, you know, he's not worried about entertainment or programming as much, although he does pay attention to shows

like all in the family that can be critical of him and his base. But he's framing this as a problem in the news. It's a problem about liberal media bias that's out, you know, the TV networks are out to get him. And then he sees it as only one solution, deregulation. We need to turn to the marketplace. Again, there are a variety of different options that were floated out there, you know, nonprofits, foundation funded, you know, public options, all of these, but Nixon

focuses in on we need to the marketplace and deregulation is the solution.

And then sorry not to interrupt, but just to be precise, that doesn't mean turn

CBS, NBC, ABC into nonprofits. But what you're saying is if we now have, because this is what they're faced with, it's 1973, we now have this cable situation, we can add channels that's not merely just about transmitting the status quota people. What would that be? So like put the nonprofit alternatives like in that context. So like, would that mean that new channels would have to be like nonprofit? Like, what does that mean?

Well, so there were some some ideas that emerged in the late 1960s, in the 1970s about public access, right? Like, so should should, and there are even ideas about cable emerging as a common carrier, so that more people could have access, and they wouldn't have to, you know, sell their programming to a company, but rather would have access to the medium itself, without having to go through kind of a cable operator, right, that wanted to make money on programming, and on subscriptions. So there are all of these different ideas about cable TV can be something different. That what what is cable going to look like? That's what if it doesn't just extend broadcastings reach? What if it actually provides a different model for how TV is produced and consumed? And and so again, all of these different ideas are floated around in the wired nation. The writer Ralph Lee Smith, you know, really argued that the government needed to build this wired infrastructure

just the way they built the the highway system during the 1950s and early 1960s, that they, you know, they needed to make sure that everyone had access to this. Well, that's not what happens. Ultimately, private companies develop it. And this is again, this comes out of Nixon's Office of Telecommunications Policy, where they're thinking about cables, cable as a solution, that we need to have more competition to broadcasting. So let's expand, let's let cable provide that competition. And, you know, private businesses will build the infrastructure, will sell their programmings, and will try to forge a business model that's fundamentally different from broadcasts and that can challenge the pocketbook of broadcast. And that's exactly what cable does.

You know, broadcast relied on advertisements to to underwrite its operations. Cable companies rely on subscriptions that they've got individuals that will pay a monthly subscription. So it's not quote unquote free TV as broadcasters would call their TV. It's something that you pay for every month and you can pay for better programming. HBO, right, is something that is you pay even more. You pay your basic cable subscription, then you pay more to get HBO. And so this is really what Nixon and his OTP envisioned when they said let the marketplace triumph. It's let competition, let cable provide a private business alternative and see if people will pay for it and then see what happens. You know, it's really interesting just because in the way you're telling this, I kind of think, oh, hey, like, you know, a lot of that promise was filled by YouTube.

You know, we're going to post the video of this on YouTube, no one's going to, you know, I don't have to get anyone's permission to that. I mean, actually, I kind of actually do. And this is kind of getting at the heart of the question. To what degree has the internet fulfilled some of that early promise? Because like I just said, I'm just going to be able to upload this episode, but at the same time, that's not publicly owned in terms of the everything from the infrastructure by which like I'm getting my, you know, Wi-Fi right now, I'm using, you know, Google Internet at the same time like YouTube is owned by Google. So how to what degree has the internet fulfilled that promise like 30 years after that report? I think that that's that's a really good

question. And I, you know, cable and the internet come together in really powerful ways by the late 1990s. And that is a product of the telecommunications act of 1996 that allows now mergers between

these major media industries of, you know, kind of different mediums can now come together. And so I think that, you know, cable was really central. It built that wired infrastructure that we now rely on for to get our internet. But then I think that the internet does and does kind of create these opportunities for anyone to, you know, to have their show, right? Anyone to have a TV show on YouTube. And so I think that that's absolutely there. But there's still our corporate dynamics that shape whose voices are elevated. And, you know, you can have viral videos, right? But you there are also, you know, algorithms that go in to some of these, you know, how these companies structure whose voices are prioritized. I would also add that, you know, something like regulatory policy like net neutrality plays a role too, that, you know, we all can have access to this internet and big corporations can't pay more to get a different tier. And so I think regulatory policies are still very much shaping how we understand the internet as well. And something I'd like to know is given the fact that aside from the very specifically Nixonian dynamics of his attack on the big three networks and seeing deregulation as a means of doing that, there are people across the ideological spectrum who agreed at this agenda. So to what degree was the decentralized corporate status quo probably always going to happen, if not in 73 in 77, like the Carter administration did plenty of deregulation in other categories as well too. How do you kind of see the kind of, I don't know, timeline going either way? Yeah, there are these deregulatory impulses that are very much at play in the 1960s and the early 1970s across the political spectrum. And one of the things that I found really fascinating to kind of get back to some of the archival work and these policy discussions and how they unfold. And this is something, again, that begins with Richard Nixon's Office of Telecommunications

Policy, but it expands in the aftermath of his administration, I think is another legacy, is that he's having economists shape these policy conversations and increasingly only economists where previously they could be people from a range of backgrounds, perhaps lawyers, who are thinking about other metrics of success. But for policymakers and their advisors in the 1970s, and this is across again, it's not just the Nixon administration becomes the Ford and the Carter administration as well. But you're having economists that have more of a say in shaping some of these public policies and they're bringing the economic thinking about market places. And many of these are economists that are trained in thinking about the free markets and the importance of the free markets. And they're bringing this to a range of policy conversations. So a big question I kind of just wonder, especially since you're an academic, what does it mean to be informed? In any type of these discussions, we're going to kind of throw it out there. But what's think of January 6th? I would bet money that aside from the question of whether or not the election was stolen, a lot of folks who were there are probably informed in the sense that they're engaged in the news, have opinions in public affairs, 100%, they most like we voted in that election. So how do we understand like this? Because if we're going to kind of unpack,

oh, like this golden heyday of American engagement, I think we should understand like what we actually mean by informed in the first place. Yeah, it's such a great question.

And I think that when I talk about it with my students, because this is a fundamental question that I think about a lot in my research, I think about a lot in the classroom. When I'm teaching my students about media literacy and how to unpack sources, I think it's looking at events from a variety of different perspectives. I tell this to my students all the time, don't just trust one source, look at the evidence that they're using, look at, I believe facts exist. But look at the facts, but know that they can be interpreted, they can be seen differently based off of people's experiences and where they're coming from. And so to me, I would just say that being informed means critically thinking and really unpacking sources, understanding biases, and then being able to put enough of the pieces of the puzzle together to understand perhaps the stakes of an issue, whether it's a policy conversation, whether it's a restructuring of voting areas, what's really going on? What are the stakes? And then what can you do? Is it about voting? Is it about protesting? If you're not happy with the issue and how it's being resolved?

Yeah. And what I love about that answer is that you are describing, quote, being informed as a, it's kind of like a toolkit. It's a means for like adjudicating throughout the world, because it's also a good response to the cable news executive I was playing earlier, because he or she would say, well, look, even in a Tucker Carlson hit, even in like a Rachel Maddow hit, even in a crossfire debate, you know, which John Stewart is dunking on back in 2004, there are all of these facts. So they could say that we're giving facts, therefore we're informing people, but the question is, separate from treating this like a multiple choice test, which, you know, that's not what civic life is, is this format or style of engagement with an audience actually giving you a toolkit to think through and like, you know, act democratically in any direction. And I'd say the answer to that is pretty strongly not in the great category. So next question would be, and this is just, I don't know how deep your research goes into this beyond just the book, but I'm interested in kind of the causal claim around cable news, specifically playing a role in the fragmentation of America, in the sense that if you look at, you know, the history of the way we tell the story of, let's just say that was contained this to the Western world, Europe, in North America, we'll talk about the rise of populism, we'll talk about Brexit, we'll talk about alternative for Deutschland, all these different like non-statistical parties.

These various revolts have occurred in countries that don't have, A, like archival news dynamic, but B, have entirely different conceptions of media and broadcasting. Think of the British and the BBC. I'm not going to even guess how the French and Germans work or the Italians, but how do we understand like the causal claim around fragmentation if it's kind of happening everywhere across different styles of media formatting? Yeah, that's really, that's a really great question. And, and I think, you know, when I introduced this idea of fragmenting, I, to me, and in the kind of the role of cable news and in the fragmentation of America, I would say that it's cable news develops in a very particular way, in a way that ties it to the business operations of the industry.

So it emerges in 1980, Ted Turner obviously is the first person to, you know, to launch a 24-7 cable network. And he is doing so, he called it the cable news network, because he is tying himself to the industry. The industry recognizes that having cable news is a way to gain favor with elected officials who want to be in TV more and make them more invested in the expansion of the cable industry. And so the deregulatory political environment, our policy environment, is shaping kind of the functioning of cable news, where again, it becomes all about these market metrics that, that cable is now saying that we can make money. We're going to make a lot of money and

the news can be profitable, not as much that the news can, you know, play a role in democracy, but it's about making money. And so I think that's something really to like in time and time again, when CNN was facing economic struggles, cable operators came in. They saved Ted Turner multiple times because they saw this as a political tool to advance deregulation. And so the fragmenting, the kind of this role of fragmenting, this is something that the cable industry brings more broadly to American society, that people can have their own interests, they can have their own news channel, right, they can, but they can also have their own music channel, they can have their own golf channel and not pay attention to these other things. And so it's this fragmenting that allows people to kind of organize in these niche groups based off of shared interests and perhaps demonize other groups that don't share their interests, because it's about kind of cultivating this loyalty to particular lifestyles, particular entertainment values or news values. And so that's kind of the fragmenting that I see as cable, the cable industry and cable news bringing in more broadly, kind of politics as a lifestyle choice and bringing that notion of loyalty. And again, what people today would call tribalism, I think is very much a product of a particular business model that cable introduces. Yeah, and I think the takeaway from your answer and putting it back in the terms of my question would just be that we could understand anti-status quo results in different countries as having, let's say, like a broad unitary story, like we're in this kind of like post-lobalization moment, like, you know, it's after the 1990s, but in specific countries, fragmentation or revolt are going to operate through different contexts. So in the American context, it operated through cable news, like if we're in, you know, the UK would operate in a different fashion, et cetera, et cetera. So last two questions on cable news before we get to your work on Hollywood and politics real quick, which I'm really fascinated by. This episode is coming out in a truly disastrous context for the cable news industry and like the cable format as a whole, like there's this Washington Post article that you were cited in that crazy statistics to divide content play, you know, in 2016, 70% of households with a TV had cable or satellite, now it's only 40%. That's like a wild existential collapse. So given that collapse, two questions, we'll go do them one at a time. First question, now that the underlying unit economics no longer favor these formats long term, they still have some life in them, they're still very profitable, but the formats need to be on the decline long term. Is there an opening for these publicly curated nonprofit public access things if it is just revealed that streaming YouTube advertising, et cetera, just can't actually support a diverse and interested news ecosystem? It's kind of like we're taking us back to that 1970s debate, except this time, there's no clear way for economists to say, no, no, no, like we could give you 24 seven news, everyone just seems to pay X amount of money a month if people aren't even doing that in the first place. Yeah, it's such a great question. And, you know, as a historian, I don't know, you know, I think that we're having really important conversations about what we want out of our media, what we what kind of ecosystem is going to be good for us as consumers, but also can, you know, be good for us as citizens, you know, there's a deep concern about misinformation and disinformation that is used to undermine democratic institutions at this very moment. So I think that these are really important conversations to have and to open up as many possibilities and pathways forward, you know, understanding that there are problems with, you know, publicly funded media, right? Like there are issues and how that has developed. There are issues with public access. That was always this golden democratic promise

that never really emerged, never really caught up with all the hype around it or, you know, never really delivered. There are all of these possibilities. So let's learn from, you know, what they wanted to do, the challenges perhaps they faced in actually executing that vision and kind of maybe think about new possibilities moving forward. And I think that's one of the things that I try to emphasize in the book is that, you know, these are choices. There are business pressures, certainly there are political pressures, and those are overwhelming in some capacities, but they are malleable. And I think that these are, you know, TV emerged as a political institution that, you know, the entertainment, or sorry, the internet has as well, but the future of this, it's very much bound by the political and policy choices that we make today. And so, you know, I think that the future, we just need to be creative, learning from the past and about what works, what didn't work, and thinking about how to make perhaps different choices in the future.

Yeah, and then my last question on this topic would be, how do you, and once again, you're a historian, someone asking you to sort of sort forward, but I'm sure there's a word where you're writing about this book, writing about this topic 10 years from now. How do you just assess like the newly emerging hyper-decentralized kind of post-cable news ecosystem? So something,

honestly, like on this podcast, you know, like I've had senators, I've had members of Congress, I've had, you know, I had the director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau a few months ago. At the same time, the side of me that's rooted in think-tankery isn't quite as optimistic about decentralized formats because something that big cable companies have is the ability to provide cover. I mean, for example, like there's a reason why you don't see seriously interrogative, even like I'm going to say hostile, but like aggressive interviews of public figures on podcasts, even big ones. Because if you're an independent channel, you basically care about the politics you're coming on in the first place. So if I'm going to have Senator Rubio on to talk about his book, I'm going to mostly talk about his book and not like get serious or aggressive because then he'll just never come on again and he'll cut me off. Now, if that happens on CNN, that doesn't matter. They have a massive business model. They have 30, 40 years of brand equity, but I just really just see a real lack of promise given like those structural realities. I think this format's great for interviewing an academic. This is not great for a politician. So I think despite his flaws, I think Joe Rogan is probably one of the only figures because of the size of his platform who could be aggressive with a politician and keep that politician there because they know they need to be there. But guess what? 99.9% of his programming is entertainment and culture-focused. It's not political. If Joe Rogan were political, he would not be nowhere near as successful. So what's just your thought on that? That's just kind of like my thought. But what are your thoughts on it? Yeah, it's such a great question. And I think that that shows that the political appeal of decentralized media for elected politicians or activists that want to get their point across and not be challenged. And that actually is interesting how you describe that. That's why elected officials went on cable TV because initially someone like Tabitha Soren was not pushing back against Bill Clinton when he was on MTV News. It allowed him to really control the parameters of the conversation. It allowed him to actively bypass the Washington press corps who were digging in and asking serious questions, digging, asking him questions of personal and

ethical scandals. He was able to just say, you know what? I'm not going to deal with that. I'm going to go on cable and celebrate it as a way to direct or connect directly to the people. But it was always a way to control the conversation and to have more control over his image and how he wanted to present himself without getting those hard questions. So I don't know that that's an answer to the question. I was asking about the dynamics. That is an answer. The point is, and this is bad for the marketing of a lot of independent creators, what you're really saying here is the dynamic we've been here before and the dynamic of early pre-polarization. So once again, MTV is most definitely like obscene. It's just like this liberal thing. But if it's like the early 1990s, obviously, I think it was operationally going left once again, based in like New York, but I think it was just like this neutral thing. I want to talk to young people. So I'm going to go on MTV. The dynamic there is replicating itself. So, okay, last big, big question because I'm fascinated by this. You wrote a book called Showbiz Politics About Celebrity and Politics and something that I actually kind of get here. And you could take this question wherever you want to go. But I actually get a lot of politicians who after our episodes will say, hey, I'm thinking of doing a podcast of my own. I think it's so cool how I can go direct to listeners, obviously leaning into the celebrity part of it. So this is just clearly a dynamic that's kind of happening here. You just heard once again, as long as you need to go to finish out this episode, but introduce kind of like the Showbiz Politics idea. It's been almost 10 years since the book came out. And how are we seeing as we go into the 2024 election, this Showbiz ideal, like intersectional social media, podcasting, etc. Yeah, thank you. The first book really does kind of explore the collaboration between Hollywood and elected officials. And there are a lot of the same dynamics that I saw again when dealing with the cable industry, that you have Hollywood executives that want to gain political power and in favor with those people who are in office, who are really eager to help Franklin Roosevelt sell his new deal through these really small motion pictures. They're really eager to advise Dwight Eisenhower on how to use TV and kind of integrate, oh, Hollywood is going to help fight the Cold War through these ambassadors of democracy. So there's always that bottom line, that the economic interest is driving Hollywood mobilization. But because of decades of collaboration between entertainers and elected officials that I chart in the book from really the 1920s through the 1960s, I argue that you have the triumph of what I call the Age of Showbiz Politics, where becoming a celebrity, actively crafting oneself as a celebrity becomes seen as a path to political power. And this also kind of goes to the earlier question. This is appealing to politicians because they can use entertainment to hype up their likability, to gain more and more immediate attention to their campaigns, to their policy agendas, without any critical pushback from reporters asking them, you know, what's your stance on this? Rather, they can go on an entertainment show and talk about how they like to play the piano, or they can, you know, be Richard Nixon, he can go on laughing and say, sock it to me as a way to connect with voters. So again, it's a different way of bypassing the political and media establishment and communicating directly in an unfiltered way to voters that gives elected officials more, it gives them more control, but it also makes them more dependent on media and more dependent on television. And so that's one of the things where when I ended the first book, I thought of, you know, the first book really kind

of shows how did people become, how did parties, political parties and campaigns and presidential administrations, why did they value celebrities so much? How did this happen? How did TV and image making become so central to political operations? And the book kind of charts out how and why that happened. And my new book now is looking at, well, what happens? What happens when

someone like Richard Nixon sees his television image as central to him winning elections and govern as central to his political power? How does that perhaps shape some of the way he sees new media and the way he thinks about communications policy to make sure that kind of fits in with that vision? And that's really what brought me to the second book as well. So wrap up question that I'm fascinated by. What do you see as the limit to politicians who want to become celebrities and celebrities who want to become politicians? Because I think this is interesting because, you know, JFK is on the cover of your book. And, you know, as someone who's like an amateur JFK person, JFK is interesting case, because on the one hand, he does have the handsomeness of like a 50s, early 60s leading man. And he's stylish. So he's above the norm in looks and style when it comes for a politician. At the same time, he's like very specifically like area diet and like academically oriented. And once again, like, did he write profiles and courage? Like maybe yes, maybe no, but at a key level, he at least could do the press tour and come off as someone who wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning book. Most politicians cannot do that. So kind of treating him and then obviously you have the Kennedy Nixon debates. So he to me seems to be like kind of like the apex of someone who's willing and able to balance both together. And obviously you have President Trump as an example of a celebrity who made the transition, but then you also have the disastrous Dr. Oz campaign in 2022. So how do you kind of see these dynamics playing out as you kind of do see people in both categories, politics and celebrity trying to cross over very concerted? Yeah. I mean, it's happening all the time. And there are always speculations about, you know, who's the new entertainer that is going to, you know, launch a congressional bid or a bid for the governorship or whatnot or a bid for the White House. And so I think it just, you know, I always emphasize the importance of unpacking what celebrity does, right? It can perhaps, you know, someone's celebrity status might get them in the conversation. But I think one of the things that Trump's presidency really emphasized is that you need more than that to govern. I think he showed time and time again that he talked all about his ratings. He wanted to put on a good show, but he struggled to govern because he was so obsessed with what helps you win elections may not always be central to governing. And I think his presidency made that very clear. And even though perhaps it motivated more celebrities to get involved in politics, I think it also has allowed us to ask better questions of those celebrity candidates and to kind of think through, you know, what are the qualifications they would bring? What are their platforms? And so I think that we'll continue to see the celebrities getting involved in politics and politicians wanting to create their celebrity persona because it's central to how they get their media message out there. And it's become so ingrained in the political process. I think the goal as voters, as citizens, is to be able to unpack how celebrity is being used and for what means so that you can kind of, again, gain a better media literacy and understanding the candidates, what they're bringing to the table, and perhaps what they're not. That is an excellent place to end it. Katie, can you shout that showbiz politics and your latest book out for listeners who want to dive deeper? Great. Thank you so much. My newest book is 24-7

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Politics, cable television and the fragmenting of America from Watergate to Fox News out now with Princeton University Press. And my other book is Showbiz Politics, Hollywood in American Political Life with the University of North Carolina Press. Awesome. Thank you for joining me on the realignment.

Thank you so much for the conversation.

Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like the 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. Great. See you all next time.