

[Transcript] The Realignment / Supercast Ask Me Anything Teaser | Why Rome Matters, Ben Smith Reaction, What Happened to Andrew Yang?, RFK Jr's Presidential Campaign, Tucker 2024?, and the Threat of Nihilism

Marsh from Saga here, welcome back to the Realignment.

Hey everyone, welcome back to the bi-weekly Realignment Supercast, Ask Me Anything slash Discussion episode.

The way it works is that if you are a full subscriber to the Realignment, five a month, 50 a year, 500 for a lifetime membership, you get access to the full discussion and the ability to input your questions, comments, et cetera to the episode.

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Okay, I wanted to kick off this episode before getting into a bit of discussion on the Ben Smith episode we did yesterday by reading a listener comment about a previous Ask Me Anything discussion we had.

If you are not a full subscriber, the quick summary of the discussion was Saga and I were talking about ancient Roman and Greek history and we're very, very dismissive of the topic, we're not particularly well read on the period and we said that listeners should really focus on 18th century and 19th century, 20th century history instead.

One of our listeners said, Jaha actually wrote a great response in and this sort of sets the standard for audience response.

So I want to read this response and it also kind of inspires me to a better job of not just dismissing things casually on a podcast. So here is the comment.

Disagree with the comments on the AMA on Roman history and found it uncharacteristically reductive.

There's definitely a cringe Ryan holiday type person that's weirdly only into Roman history at the expense of a broader syllabus.

However, we only have to look past that cringiness is that every influential person involved in the creation of the systems of democratic government since the fall of the Roman Republic has used the events involving Caesar, Cato, Cicero,

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Augustus, Cleopatra as a framework to thinking about restraints on the executive and legislative branches of government, not limited to the United States. Sager mentioned reading about the birth of the French and American nations. Instead, the Federalist Papers are written under various pseudonyms that are from the cast of characters of the fall of the Roman Republic. That's not just a historical nod for the centuries. The Roman story was very much top of mind for the founding fathers as it relates to the rise of well-meaning tyrants and the arming of other parts of the government with the tools necessary to contain them. Two books that love in the period, if you guys have the broader listenership or interested are Tom Holland's Rubicon. It's a bit pop history-esque, but it's very readable for anyone with no context. And Adrian Goldworthy's Augustus, about the creation of the Roman Empire in its early days. Though I share the feedback, thanks for continuing to put out a great stuff. Happy to be a subscriber. So yeah, like I said, it's easy during these episodes to get a little casual and just dismissive of things, but I appreciate people who will hold us accountable. I'm definitely gonna check out the books that Sid suggested. I'll also mention Sid has a great sub-stack called Snapshots. You should check that out if you found his incisive skewering of Sager and my overstatements particularly helpful. All right, Sager, let's discuss a little bit before we get into the paid exclusive section of the discussion. Yesterday, folks heard our episode with Ben Smith about just the rise and fall of social media driven digital media, BuzzFeed, Vice, Gawker. I said this at the start of the episode, but just like the best book timing of all time

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that this came out the week that Vice declared bankruptcy.
Obviously, Ben would have some inkling
of the fact that BuzzFeed news was gonna get shut down
because he was the editor-in-chief,
but just that coinciding really just spoke
to how precarious the situation is.
I do wanna discuss with you though,
the place where the podcast ended,
which was just me asking Ben like,
hey, look, what's your advice for young journalists?
A lot of people in the audience send us questions about this.
So I wanted to talk about this a bit.
His answer was like get scoops
and I actually just really disagree with that framework.
I'll get into my kind of beef with that,
but I'm just curious like what you thought
about that last section.
Like what would your advice be?
Like what's your conception of this?
So I understand where Ben is coming from.
Ben grew up in the 2008 era.
The reason he thinks scoops matter
is because at that time,
publishing the scoops on the internet
genuinely was interesting and revolutionary.
So Ben got his start at Politico in 2008.
So whenever he would get a scoop,
it would get a ton of traffic
and it would get a lot of eyeballs
because there wasn't as much attention
for genuine like new-ish type of information.
Politico kind of invented what I call the scooplet.
That's what other people,
like little mini-bikes of information
that are meaningless to 98% of, 99% of people,
but useful to the 1% of Americans.
So anyway, understand where he's coming from.
That said, I do not believe
that that will make or break any new person in media
and I'll give you a reason why,
which is that the,
and actually I talked to him today on breaking points.

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Here's the deal, like all media today, information in and of itself is a commodity. And what I mean by that is in the eight, basically the day that Twitter was invented, X is happening, no longer is a purview of the news. As in like two planes just hit the World Trade Center. That used to be an actual monopoly on news networks, newspapers. Now it's just out there. So what's the story? What do news organizations do? What do you and I do? What do I do at breaking points? What do New York Times do? We explain it. We add a little bit of context. We're like two planes out of the World Trade Center, CIA, officials, suspect, Osama and Laden. That's one type of news. Here's where they animated the 9-11 hijackers on 9-11. Who are the people that they met? These are all derivative, all of this is news, but it's not how you used to think about the news. So I just think that he's kind of wrong in that he doesn't understand that all media today is explanatory journalism, effectively, because we're all basically working from the same set of facts. So if I go on the front page of the New York Times, for example, four proud boys, including ex-leader, are convicted in Jan 6th sedition case. This is not something that they have a monopoly on. That's public information. So why would I even want to read this? Okay, so I'm reading. Well, it's not just public information. Anyone could put it out there, right? So like, I could sort of sub-stack right now and post that exact story. Well, more what I'm saying though is that that story, the facts of this story are released by the US government, by the US Department of Justice.

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All of us, I don't need to read the New York Times to this.
So why should I read it?
I'll read it because they're gonna have a quote
or something in here from some guy.
Let me just read.
Yeah, down they go,
several decisions by the presiding judge, Thomas Kelly,
and they do an explaining job
because they had a guy in the courtroom
who was there who can add some color and some context.
Once again, I think that's great.
Foreign journalism for sure.
Is it a scoop though?
Not really.
And I think that that's just kind of
where modern media is today.
Yeah, here's the second page, Marshall.
This is exactly what I'm getting at.
The second story on the front page of the New York Times.
Analysis, Kremlin blasts were real.
The rest is hazy, maybe intentionally.
So it's like explain your journalism thing.
That's not really true.
I mean, that's not really like a scoop.
It's just adding context.
So everything today is about context.
Ever since information itself became a commodity,
which is essentially free in the public domain.
Yeah, and the thing is in Ben's defense,
you could think of someone like Olivia Nuzzi.
So she's at New York Magazine.
She came to prominence because she hyper covered the,
what was it?
Yeah, Anthony Weiner series of scandals in New York.
She wasn't particularly distinguished,
but she just covers, covers, covers,
and then like goes to the Daily Beast
and continually uplevels herself to the point
where she's appearing in succession.
And then she's also getting a TV show, I think,
an AMC on like journalism, this for that.
That is a specific example of how like one like young person

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was able to get that scoop and leverage from there.
But the general advice that I would really suggest for folks,
and you can really see this playing out,
and you know, you're in my career.
Sagar is just answering a couple of basic questions.
Question number one, where do you fit?
Are you an institutionalist or are you an anti-institutionalist?
I'm an institutionalist.
Therefore, the type of people who are interested in my work
are gonna be people who are like more into the New York Times.
Sagar is an anti-institutionalist.
It means that he's gonna play more
in the independent media space.
I think an advantage that two of us have
is that despite those facts, I could be a think tank dude
and still attend a breaking point show and have a good time.
And you, when you need to,
can go to the White House for a press event.
Most people in our spaces can't do both.
So that's another suggestion.
If you could figure out a way
to swim in both different worlds at the same time,
while still leaning towards one, that's another one.
Point number two, what is your format?
Are you a podcaster?
Are you a YouTuber?
Are you a TikToker?
Are you a Reels user?
Are you a thread poster?
Other than the thread posters,
I'm not really dunking on any one of those different categories
because they're different ways of performing
the quote unquote job of journalism.
So the question of scoop could maybe be like, okay,
like am I the person who's going to an event
and just like live tweeting what's happening
quicker than anyone else?
Like that's a real thing that people would actually do.
One of the people in the book that Ben described,
one of the people that Ben described in the book
as someone who their skill set was whenever
there was a press release of some important event,

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they would be the first one to tweet and summarize it out.

Just always, like they got it down to a science
and all the alerts, they could type fast and everyone.

That was the thing, like that's the way of understanding.

It's not just like scoops and information.

It's thinking to sound like, how does this information
fit into my specific skill sets?

And then lastly, I'd say that a really key thing
is just understanding that just if you're playing
a game of scoop to Sager's point,
you're playing a game of commodities.

And instead you want to be playing a game of differentiation.

So brand seems kind of like, you know, corporate
and kind of like whatever, but brand matters in the sense
of like, who are you and what are you trying to say?

There are too many people who, you know, get part of the,
too many journalists in the big layoffs
that are happening right now are going to leave the field
and realize, wait a second,

I actually didn't really have a brand
other than I was at Vice or I was at Vox
or I was at BuzzFeed.

It's kind of funny.

Substack sent an email out to all of the people
who use the platform that said, hey, if you're a journalist
and you got laid off, come here.

You've talked about this Sager.

I think it's going to happen to a lot of these guys
and gals is that when they join Substack,
they're going to discover, oops, it turns out
that most people were just there

because they were attached to the brand
or like the reach that I had because of said brand.

They actually don't care about me.

They're not going to subscribe.

If they're inbox crowded,
they're not going to definitely pay for me.

So understanding that point is just really, really key.

Yeah, no, 100%.

Very true.

This is a good pivot point
into the gated part of the conversation.

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We've got a lot of really interesting questions today.

We're going to start with one about Andrew Yang, a real blast in the past.

If you'd like to get access to the full part of this discussion, go to realignment.supercast.com or click the link at the top of the show notes.

You could insert your own questions, comments, et cetera.

Okay, question number one, Andrew Yang.