

Meet Me in the Middle Ep 06 Transcript

Announcer: From Curtco Media, what are you gonna do about.

Bill Curtis: Welcome to a media focused edition of Politics. Meet Me in the Middle. I'm Bill Curtis. We've always had a fascination with media. It's watchdog role in American politics, and especially these days. We're going to deep dive into the politics of media. Today's media biases and some of media's pivotal victories, as well as some catastrophic failures. There are four of us here at the table today, firstly, of course, my co-host, Pulitzer Prize winning historian, author, worldwide lecturer and walking encyclopedia of everything political and historic. Ed Larson, how are you doing? Ed.

Ed Larson: Thanks very much. Great to be here again with you.

Bill Curtis: Joining us here from the office right down the hall, Stuart Halpern is a media movie entertainment executive and innovator. He built the Movietickets.com brand as head of marketing, and he also co-founded Hollywood.com. And in full disclosure, Stuart is our general manager here at Curtco Media. Thanks for sitting in today, Stuart.

Stuart Halperin: Thanks for including me.

Bill Curtis: And now our Hot Mike guest. He's been a media critic, producer and lecturer since the 1980s. He was founding director and associate professor of the Park Center for Independent Media at my alma mater, Ithaca College. He also founded the media watch group Fair in 1986. Jeff Cohen has produced a number of documentary movies. He's written books like Cable News Confidential, and he's been a commentator on CNN, its rival, Fox News, as well as MSNBC. Oh, and his columns have been published by major newspapers, well, everywhere. Welcome, Jeff. It's nice to have you.

Jeff Cohen: Great to be here. Since I've heard I'm on the hot mike, I'm going to be very cautious.

Bill Curtis: So let's start with this. You were one of the producers of a new documentary that has been called A Horror Film of the Most Realistic Kind. Tell us about the concept behind corporate coup d'etat.

Jeff Cohen: Well, the movie looks at what's happened in our country in the last 40 years, where big, politically powerful corporations have taken control of economics, politics, the media to the detriment of most citizens, including many who voted for Trump. The movie attempts to answer, how did we get to Trump? And the main villain is Big Corporation.

Bill Curtis: So it's not Trump. It's the big corporation.

Jeff Cohen: Right. In fact, we argue in the movie that Trump is just a symptom of this horrific disease called corporatism.

Bill Curtis: Clearly, corporations and private interests have a whole lot to say about how this country runs.

Jeff Cohen: And there is so much anger out there. And we talk to all these individuals in Ohio who had voted for Trump, lifelong Democrats. And they were telling us that, you know, they gave up on the Democratic Party. They just wanted to throw a wrench into the into the motor.

Bill Curtis: Ed?

Ed Larson: I grew up and spent my entire youth in just the part of Ohio you're talking about. I didn't think the Republicans were going to nominate Trump, but once they did, I was convinced he was going to win because I was from Ohio and Ohio was key and I didn't see how in a world that Hillary was going to win in Ohio.

Bill Curtis: Deep diving back into media for just a moment. Jeff, I would like to know how you feel about the concept of media becoming the story.

Jeff Cohen: I think it's a good thing. I believe more people need to be skeptical media consumers. If you don't know who owns each of these news outlets, then you're kidding yourself. So I like it that media is the story. Like you need to know.

Bill Curtis: Tell our listeners who own some of these news outlets.

Jeff Cohen: Well, CNN is owned by AT&T. MSNBC is owned by Comcast. These are supposed to be the left wing or liberal channels. But those two owners, AT&T and Comcast, are working day and night, hand in glove with Donald Trump and the Trump administration to end Internet neutrality, a free and open Internet.

Bill Curtis: It certainly doesn't seem like CNN is pandering to Donald Trump.

Jeff Cohen: When's the last time you saw a CNN deal with the issue of net neutrality? They'll attack Trump and Fox News will defend Trump, but on none of these channels will you see a discussion of how corporations really dominate the political system and the economy.

Bill Curtis: ,Ed, jump in.

Ed Larson: But you're describing it as this is an ideological driven assault. Some people will say it's totally profit driven simply to make profit. That Fox moved one way and MSNBC moved the other way. Now, is there any justification that this was just profit motive in trying to exploit the market?

Jeff Cohen: Yeah, I'm arguing that it's profit driven and there are certain stories if you work in mainstream TV news, as I did. You know, there are certain stories that are off limits, but it's important to know what stories you can cover and what stories you can't. And if you work your way up the chain of command in mainstream media, you tend to be very good at politics and diplomacy and making nice with corporate owners. And you may not be a good, aggressive journalist, whether you work at Fox News or MSNBC.

Bill Curtis: Come on in, Stewart.

Stuart Halperin: I've read some of your writings and you talked about a two on the left, 3 on the right rule. Can you shed some light on that belief?

Jeff Cohen: Well, I was at MSNBC which was supposed to be a middle of the road channel back then in 2002. In the run up to the invasion of Iraq I was the senior producer of the Phil Donahue Show and the management basically took over the show. They had basically dictated us who could get on the air and who couldn't. So they said, if you have one guest who is anti the upcoming invasion, you have to have two that are pro invasion. If you have two guests on the left, you have to have three on the right. At one meeting like this in a big room, bunch of people in the room, a producer was really excited. "I think I could book Michael Moore for Thursday". He is obviously known as a critic of the impending invasion. And she was told you'll have to have three right wingers to balance Michael Moore.

Bill Curtis: So, Jeff, for a minute, let's talk about the dawn of the 24 hour cable news channel, CNN. They were the first, right?

Jeff Cohen: Yup,.

Bill Curtis: Well, they really were built on the back of Bush Senior's Iraq war.

Jeff Cohen: No doubt. They started in 1980. And then when the Gulf War comes, they own the story. They're competing with other channels. ABC, CBS, the broadcast channels that are only covering it episodically. And if you want to cover, you want to watch the war news hour after hour, CNN is the place you go. There's an irony that historians, after all of the coverage and CNN lauded for covering a war like no war had ever been covered before. It turned out that so many of the themes that CNN pounded into our head were false. You remember the hoopla and the excitement about the Patriot missile shooting down Iraqi Scuds in midair. It was a hoax. There were studies done later and found out that the Patriot was an utter failure. CNN is too close to the Pentagon and they've always been too close to the Pentagon. And the first Gulf War really exposed it. The research done right after their applauded, their award winning coverage showed they were giving a lot of hoaxes to the American public. Cheerleading for a war when the facts were wrong.

Bill Curtis: Ed come on in.

Ed Larson: Well, the problem CNN faced when it was founded by Ted Turner was, well, 24 hour news, but people weren't interested in 24 hour news. They wanted to watch baseball. They wanted to watch TV shows. And so when the Gulf War came, they finally had an issue that could keep people turned on all the time. Keep people wanting to watch the news all the time. Now, they needed to put a spin on it, and the spin, of course, would have to be a pro American version, because that's what we'd get the people to watch it. The problem was when the war ended, they sat there and suddenly their ratings plummeted. Until the O.J. Simpson trial came and suddenly you had a celebrity who is caught in this gruesome murder sort of issue. But then they had to turn what was, you know, a trial, that just occurred during part of the day. And there wasn't even a trial for a long time into something that would cover 24 hours, which they did.

Jeff Cohen: But I witnessed it from the inside that management would get glued on a story. And the reporters and the producers are scratching their heads.

Bill Curtis: Saying there's no story.

This doesn't. Well, think about it. Shark attacks. You know, if it's a slow summer, they start doing shark attacks and they've done it summer after summer. Even when these shark attacks don't go up. Again, turning news into an entertainment format. The worst one ever. How many people remember Chandra Levy?

Stuart Halperin: Yes.

Jeff Cohen: Gary Condit. Gary Condit was a relatively unknown Congress member from the Central Valley of California. He had an affair with a younger woman while he was married and she died in random street crime and month after month in the summer of 2001, that's all any of the channels covered. And every night they would analyze where the story stands. They'd speculate about his sex life. How many other women did he engage in in rough sex? It was all mythology. There was absolutely no evidence.

Bill Curtis: You got to make some news entertaining. Otherwise, who's going to watch?

Jeff Cohen: Well, I'm willing to argue that every journalist wants an audience. But what's happened in media today, in the last few decades is pure fiction. It's often pure fiction. It's stories that aren't news that become the news of the day for month after month. And you know, when the Condit story ended September 11th, 2001. Here you had this evil guy. He was the face of evil day after day, this Congressman Condit, whose only sin was he had an affair. Finally, he was replaced as the villain in TV news by Osama bin Laden. They were speculating about him being involved in a murder up till the Jets hit the Twin Towers and then like it had never happened. Gary Condit disappeared from view. And then later we learned it was street crime and the guy confessed. The woman, a young woman he had an affair with, was jogging through the park in Washington, D.C. And we know who the killer is.

Bill Curtis: So we can't really let that go without taking a moment and talking about that September 11th, 2001, because the announcers on 24 hour news cable channels and the consumer here in America and the people down the street in New York City were finding out about what was going on all at the same time.

Jeff Cohen: No doubt. I mean, again, that's where cable news. I mean, they all went 24/7. The broadcast networks went 24/7 news. And you could argue that in the first few days it was real news. It was real journalism. Later it became cheering for. I remember the talk show host. "Let's attack someone. God damn it. Why haven't we attacked any country yet?" Because we didn't know who had done it. So, you know, it went from journalism and news to can we stir up the next war?

Bill Curtis: I don't think we can proceed and talk about something like CNN covering the Iraq war without going back to CBS, covering the Vietnam War and actually putting the war in our living rooms back in the 60s and early 70s.

Jeff Cohen: Yeah, I mean, I have a critical view on that. That in 1964, 65, 66, 67, there was almost no debate on CBS News. They were cheerleaders. Walter Cronkite would admit to you. He was a cheerleader and he was embarrassed by what he did in those first years. And so many people of my generation went over and died thinking it was a good war. But you're right, it did bring death and destruction and the lighting of villages on fire with a zippo lighter into people.

Bill Curtis: it put us into foxholes.

Jeff Cohen: No doubt it was different. And then the important thing for Cronkite is, he does a documentary where he says, you know, we're in a quagmire. We aren't winning this war. The Pentagon isn't telling the truth. And President Johnson then says to one of his aides, after Cronkite finally turns on the war, if we've lost Walter, we've probably lost the country. And it was a turning point in the Vietnam War and helped the opposition and helped the end of that war.

Ed Larson: But if you look back at Walter Cronkite during that period, the model, the idol of these people was Edward R. Murrow. He made his name being very pro-war.

Jeff Cohen: The difference between Murrow and World War Two and Cronkite and Brinkley and Huntley in Vietnam War is by 1965, one year after the Vietnam escalation, there were anti-war demonstrations, the first sit in, the first teach in University Michigan, 1965. So occasionally that debate about Vietnam War got into The New York Times, but it didn't get on the news.

Bill Curtis: So you mentioned that classic statement that if we've lost Walter Cronkite, we've lost America.

Jeff Cohen: Yes.

Bill Curtis: What I'd like to know from you is did you think that media was really a reflection of America or was America a reflection of the media?

Jeff Cohen: I think the media are so dominant that America becomes a reflection of the media. It's totally true today where you choose your side. I'm a Rachel Maddow fan. I'm a Sean Hannity fan. I really think in a society as media dominated as we are, that the media, that the public's attitudes basically grow out of the media that they consume.

Bill Curtis: So when we come back in 15 seconds, I'd like to talk to you a little more about media and the making of a monster. But we'll be back.

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Celeste: Whatcha gonna do about it?

Bill Curtis: So I'd like to go back to 1960 for a moment and talk about the debate between JFK and Nixon. And how that really shaped the election and that was a media moment wasn't it Jeff?

Jeff Cohen: A big moment for television. People that heard it on the radio thought Nixon had won the debate. People who saw this young, handsome John Kennedy debating Nixon on television thought John Kennedy had won. So it really was an understanding, there was an understanding there of the importance of television. Now,.

Bill Curtis: Greater than that of radio.

Jeff Cohen: Yes, superceding radio. And it should we should point out, Roger Ailes, that, you know, Ailes a few years later becomes the media adviser to Richard Nixon and says, God damn it. You've got to put makeup on.

Stuart Halperin: Was the issue from your perspective, that Nixon was sweating too much?

Jeff Cohen: For most people's perspectives he just did not look good on television compared to this photogenic young.

Bill Curtis: His five o'clock shadow actually came through his makeup and made him look, you know, pretty homeless-like.

Ed Larson: But if you think about that, before we start saying that poor Richard Nixon was destroyed by the rise of television, he was saved earlier the Checkers speech. Eisenhower already decided to.

Bill Curtis: Tell us a little about the car. We have a young audience here.

Ed Larson: There was a scandal. There was a scandal involving Richard Nixon that he had been taking money and gifts from basically corporate sponsors. And so he asked Eisenhower, just give me one chance to defend myself on television. And he went on television in a sort of a fireside chat, and he gave this talk about his wife's cloth coat and that of all the gifts I've gotten, the one thing I won't give back is Checkers, our dog. And he made this wonderful speech on the media and it was television that saved Nixon. And that's part of the reason I think Nixon got into the debates. There had never been televised debates before. But Nixon thought from the Checkers speech that he was good on television. And it turned out this media, which had caused his survival earlier, ended up proving his demise.

Jeff Cohen: And remember, young people, you can watch the Checkers speech by Googling it. And you know who was the director of the 1960 debates? It was the guy who created 60 Minutes, Don Hewitt here, Don Hewitt. Media history is more fascinating than we thought, kids.

Ed Larson: And then later, Nixon tries to save himself his reputation by doing a media show with David Frost. So Nixon has a sort of a love hate relationship with the media, and we shouldn't view it as he viewed himself as a victim of the media because he consciously tried to use the media throughout his career and he actually often did so brilliantly.

Bill Curtis: So I want to take us back to a couple of special moments in media and get your commentary on it. Everybody here at the table. I want to take you back just a few years to 12:17 p.m. Monday, November 7th, 2016. As CNN announced that Hillary Clinton's odds of winning the presidency had risen from 78 percent last week to 91 percent the day before the election. Wouldn't that be one of media's most embarrassing low watermarks?

Jeff Cohen: I think they embarrassed themselves through the whole campaign. I mean, I live in New York. I've watched the media create this character, Donald Trump, for decades. Fawning coverage in the gossip press, in the business press for a guy who's really an unsuccessful self-promoter. And you get to the point in 2015, early 2016,

where unprecedented in U.S. political history, one candidate was getting more coverage on TV news than all other candidates combined. And you know, in the so-called invisible primary, where the most important thing in during the primary season is getting media attention when one candidate is getting more coverage than all others, there was no Republican who had a chance. So I would argue it was CNN and MSNBC that had a policy of all Trump all the time. If he was late getting to a podium, they would have the camera focused on the empty podium for 25 minutes. And then every word Trump said was on the air. And study after study from Harvard to University Wisconsin has shown that television news especially promoted Trump in a way that there was almost no Republican who had a chance against him. So, I mean, I see Trump as a media creation. Not only Jeff Zucker, who is the head of NBC Entertainment, creates The Apprentice for Donald Trump. Then Jeff Zucker moves to CNN, where he basically mandates it's all Trump all the time,.

Ed Larson: Given what you say. Trump was the one who knew how to create and use the media. So he deserves credit for figuring a way to make the press cover him.

Bill Curtis: Someone describe that to me. How did, did he do this or did the media create him?

Ed Larson: He'd had his own show on television, The Apprentice. It worked well. He knew how to use the media and use the media interest and what would drive the news. And so he knew coming down on an escalator and sitting there at the beginning and attacking immigrants would make him a news story. And the way he held his news conferences and the way he'd attack a New York Times journalist or say this or say that or throw them out, that sort of thing would.

Bill Curtis: so he just used outrageousness.

Jeff Cohen: I think it was a it was a symbiotic relationship. Yeah. But I mean, their profits went through the roof. You know, Les Moonves, who is the head of CBS at the time, said there's an election circus going on. The money is rolling in. Keep going, Donald. Stay out there. Donald's role in this race is really helping us. Again, it's what I've been getting at from the beginning of this discussion is that this corporate greed that

you have, these people who care nothing about journalism or democracy controlling our media system. And we ended up with Donald Trump.

Ed Larson: But going back in history, has that any different than the Hearst Newspaper Corp., realizing a war would drive sales.

Jeff Cohen: Or what they did for Joe McCarthy until Edward R. Murrow two years later finally stopped him?

Ed Larson: Well, then the story became bringing down McCarthy and it was just as good a story as raising up McCarthy.

Jeff Cohen: Right and that's what's happening today at CNN and MSNBC. They created, they helped create him. No one else in history was able, no presidential candidate, if you couldn't get to a camera, Donald Trump would just phone it, literally phone it in. He would call Don Lemon at CNN or Charlie Rose at CBS and they would interview him and they'd put a picture of him. No other candidate, Hillary Clinton didn't get that, Bernie Sanders didn't get that. But Donald Trump did. And it was a policy of management. And now CNN and especially MSNBC, they're raking in the profits as they try to be anti-Trump. No one could get on the air on those networks to remind them what a key role you guys played in getting Trump elected in the first place. There were two parallel stories. Bernie Sanders a relatively uncovered unknown senator came out of nowhere on the left and was taking on the Clinton machine and giving them fits. And Donald Trump, the celebrity was coming on the right, having smaller rallies than Sanders. But they covered one of those stories and not the other. There's a famous Tyndall Report where Andrew Tyndall, all he ever did was count the minutes of ABC, CBS and NBC Nightly newscasts for what stories are being covered and what aren't. In the first eleven months of 2015 during the so-called invisible primary period. Donald Trump was covered on ABC World News Tonight, the show my mom and 8.5 million other Americans watched. They covered Donald Trump 80 minutes. And they covered Bernie Sanders campaign, twenty seconds, one third of one minute.

Stuart Halperin: Can we have a quick discussion, Jeff, on the one sided coverage relating to health care, pharmaceutical companies and Bernie Sanders?

Jeff Cohen: Yeah, that there's a there's an old George Carlin joke, actually, one of his more innocuous jokes because he does real social, did real social criticism. He says we have a partial score in from the West Coast, Los Angeles six and no other score. My point is that that joke says a lot about coverage today of very important stories. It's what I call propaganda by omission. There was a point in the Democratic debate where Joe Biden says, Bernie Sanders, your plan of Medicare for all, it's going to cost 32 trillion dollars over 10 years. And Bernie Sanders responds. That's right, Joe. But if you look at government figures, if we keep going the way we're going, it'll be 50 trillion dollars. So it actually saves society money. The next day, I looked at all the coverage and they only had the one score, the partial score from the West Coast, which was how much Bernie Sanders plan would allegedly cost. And they didn't compare it to another score, which is what if we keep going with the current system we have? You have the same thing on climate change. We're always told how expensive the green new deal will be. That other score is how expensive will it be for society if we keep going the way we're going?

Bill Curtis: I wonder if you could explain to me how having, I don't know, Cialis or some other pharmaceutical company advertising on one of these networks would affect the coverage.

Jeff Cohen: How does the sponsor influence? When I went, was being tested to be the permanent co-host of CNN's CROSSFIRE, which was then the biggest show along with Larry King on the channel. The guy who headed the show had me in his office and he said, you know, are you going to be attacking General Electric? And I was well known as a critic of that corporation. Their environmental policy, the tax policy, what have you. And they were the main sponsor of CNN CROSSFIRE. And I think everyone who's on the air knows who the main sponsors are. And the main sponsor of the nightly news is the pharmaceutical industry.

Jeff Cohen: So, Jeff, you just mentioned the program CROSSFIRE. So I just reached out, grabbed our producer of this show, Mike, and I asked him to sit in my seat and talk to you for a minute about the history or maybe the demise of CROSSFIRE.

Mike Thomas: One of the things I remember and I think this was 15 years ago now to 2004, Jon Stewart was invited as a guest on the CROSSFIRE with Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala. And they thought, this is gonna be a good time and talk about comedy,

and he took them to task. He took them to task. He basically challenged them to stop hurting America. I don't know if you were around then or,.

Jeff Cohen: No I was long gone from CNN, but I remember the moment it was, it was brilliant. It was the role that political comedians had been playing in our society for a couple of decades now. They can tell the truth where mainstream journalists don't. They can say the tough things that need to be said and mainstream journalists can't or don't.

Ed Larson: And another example of that, of course, going on today would be John Oliver. He takes every single possible opportunity to attack AT&T, which is his corporate sponsor. And he knows that enhances his credibility and helps with his audience. And so does AT&T. Maybe you can get away with it because he's somewhat a comedian. But actually, I think that John Oliver's show has moved beyond pure comedy.

Jeff Cohen: Yeah, it's investigative comedy. He's invented a thing here. But I agree with you. I mean, I come out to L.A. a lot and I've got friends who work in Hollywood. They work for the same companies that I worked for. Often, you know, these giant entertainment companies own the news. In the format of comedy and drama you can often take on the biggest powers in our society. And they are these corporations. I mean, the political comedy that we have in our society today, I think is our saving grace because they can get away with it. These are people that have become the truth tellers. And I would argue it's an indictment of, well,

Bill Curtis: They they, too, are guilty of the one sided view. The error by omission, they certainly don't tell a meet me in the middle of sort of story. They have their opinion and they tell it with a flair that makes you laugh.

Jeff Cohen: Again. I don't begrudge a journalist or a comedian having a point of view. There's no problem with that. I find some of these comedians are more likely to attack someone on their side than Rachel Maddow does. So, I mean, I feel that the political comics are often braver in many respects. What I always would tell my journalism classes, there's something really wrong with television news when the best news shows are on the Comedy Channel. If you want to get longer soundbites of the people, the presidents and the senators and the investigators, these comedy shows give you more, gives you longer soundbites than are on the nightly news. It's sickening, but it's true.

Bill Curtis: So with so much focus on Trump, such overwhelming obsession where every minute of every day you almost change the channel if they're not talking about something outrageous that came out of Washington today.

Jeff Cohen: If you give so much attention to the tweets and the pronouncements that, you know, have a falsehood in every sentence, you're, even on the so-called liberal channels, you're doing a disservice to your viewers.

Bill Curtis: What's remarkable is there is no other news. What happened to the to the rest of the world,.

Jeff Cohen: The news show I listen to religiously. I want to give them a plug. It's Democracy Now, hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez. And they don't cover the tweets. It's not all about Trump. We are only 4 percent of the world population and a news show should cover the news. And that's not what you get from so-called cable news channels here.

Bill Curtis: Well, Jeff Cohen, Stuart Halperin, Ed Larson, thank you so much for today. We got to go. We certainly had a great conversation. I hope you'll come back, Jeff.

Jeff Cohen: I'd love to. This is fun.

Bill Curtis: OK. If you're looking for Jeff. You can click on to Jeffcohen.org, and find out more about Jeff. And thanks so much for meeting us here in the middle today. Have a good day. If you like what you heard, please help us by telling your friends. And, of course, subscribe to politics. Meet me in the middles. If you have time, please leave a review. It really matters to us. You can also check us out at Curtco.com. This episode of Meet Me in the Middle was recorded at Curtco Media's Malibu Podcast Studios and was produced and edited by Mike Thomas. Audio engineering was by Michael Kennedy and our theme music was composed and performed by Celeste and Eric Dick.

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