

**Meredith Dake-O'Connor as Interviewed by Robert Mather
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RM: You were at Breitbart News early in its history. How did Breitbart News transform the expectations of conservatives for their news?

MDOC: One of the first ways it transformed expectations was speed, more specifically, speed with context. If you were made aware of something newsworthy, chances are you could read it on Breitbart early, if not first, with a flag planted on opinion and context. It wasn't always opinion, but there was definitely an expectation that you were reading Breitbart because you wanted *Breitbart's* reporting, not just news. There was also a get-it-up first mentality. If Drudge linked to someone else or Fox had reported it before we had a post or video up, we were too slow.

Conservatives rightly got used to reading stories on the Breitbart sites that were nowhere else. No story was too small, or too big, to tackle. If there was corruption or injustice, Breitbart would cover it and his websites broke a lot of stories – stories that still impact today and stories that occupied the highest levels of power. I'm not going to pretend that Breitbart covered every Republican/conservative scandal. Breitbart once answered that criticism, I honestly can't remember if it was in private or in public, by saying if you're looking for coverage of Republican/conservative scandals, you have dozens of cable channels and websites to do that. We were going for news the big boys weren't covering for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which was their bias.

Another expectation was how Breitbart, the man and his websites, directly engaged the culture and the world of entertainment. There was an effort to write about things people who weren't news junkies were talking about. And not only that, to have really compelling writers write about things people who weren't news junkies talked about. And lastly, to talk about culture and entertainment without insulting someone with conservative views. Before everyone and everything had a platform, there wasn't a lot out there in pop culture and entertainment that didn't have a slight edge against conservatives. It was a place for people to gather, people who disagreed, without being hostile and talk about fun things. That was Big Hollywood. It was meant to be fun.

Speaking of fun, that was another expectation. Andrew was often referred to as a "happy warrior," and he was. And he expected the same from all of us. If you were writing about something or someone you disagreed with, it was expected that you do it with a smile - certainly in the early days. We were the pirate ship of original trolls, laughing at ourselves and those who couldn't take a joke. There was great news – news you wouldn't read anywhere else. And there was a joy that you wouldn't get anywhere else, either.

RM: Please tell us a little about Andrew Breitbart's personality and vision. What is his legacy for conservatives?

MDOC: For this I'll direct you to one of my columns I wrote about Andrew.

<https://www.breitbart.com/the-media/2013/02/28/the-art-of-war/#>

I was a pretty good writer once, ha, and I don't think I can improve on this. A notable excerpt:

"The week that Andrew died was the same week that we were working on the relaunch of Breitbart.com. The new setup was very different than the old, and we spent hours in training learning the ins-and-outs of the technical infrastructure. During one of the many 10-hour days, I remember Andrew looking over my shoulder at the fake webpage I had created for practice. He seemed very pleased with it and asked me several questions about my methods. He was nervous about the launch, but he could barely contain his excitement about the new features and paced around the room smiling.

Later that week we were watching the Academy Awards on a projector in the office. Andrew was doing a "*Mystery Science Theatre: 3000*" type commentary on the affair. After the initial raucous laughter had died out, everyone gave at least a courtesy chuckle to all his jokes. During a portion of the show when they were showing clips of movies only people in LA or NYC had seen, Andrew made a joke that happened to really tickle me. I have a loud laugh anyway, but no one else was laughing, so it was really loud in the echoey office. I saw Andrew's head pop out of the cluster of people around him (even when it was just the editors, Andrew was always surrounded) and look right at me. He had the biggest smile on his face. It conveyed something like, "Aha! I got one!" I realized that he was happier with me then, for laughing at his joke, than he was with me the whole dang week I'd been killing myself learning the site.

People remember Andrew Breitbart as the warrior, the one who would walk—no, run—towards the fire with reckless abandon. But he was more than that. He was the ultimate happy warrior. He loved to get into the middle of the fight, but he was having a ball while he was doing it. And when the fight was over he would yell, 'Let's all go to Applebees!'"

Primarily, Andrew was a joy to be around. He had an aura of laughter. Reflecting, now that I am older and have more life experience, he had an aura of compassion, too. There really was no one in life who Andrew wouldn't talk to. He was generous with time, genuinely interested in everyone he met. Stories tugged at his heartstrings.

But Andrew was also a fighter. And he took arrows and attacks from the left that no politician would dare take. (Well, until perhaps recently.) If there was anyone

who ever played 4-D chess with the media and the left, it was him and it sometimes drove us all insane.

The hardest thing about Andrew is that you really couldn't predict exactly how he would respond – how he would want his websites to respond. We certainly had a general understanding of his beliefs, but his tactics changed constantly, instantly, and often drastically.

I wish more of his joy in news and in life was his greatest legacy, but while there are still many who carry on that torch, his greatest impact was showing that you can take the hits. You can take the criticism. He talked about that once (emphasis mine):

“Who in the Republican Party is going to come and defend me, you know, when I’m accused of bad things or things start going bad? That’s the thing that kinda has me fearful is that *I’m starting to realize that the infrastructure of the right, the reason why we fight so hard is because they don’t fight hard enough.* They are representing a group of people who are the majority in this country. The people who are the far left in this country are like 5-10%. They are able to control it because they fight to win. And the Republican Party should represent 55% of this country. But to me, it seems, it’s fighting to protect its own hide.”

I think there’s a pretty direct line from that mentality to today. But more importantly, he was a man of joy and loved his family more than anything else in the world.

RM: How has political journalism changed since you began your writing career?

MDOC:

I’ll speak broadly on this first:

At the start of my career, journalists sort of loathed the guerilla-style raw reporting those of us at Breitbart tried to perfect. We were activists, but we also wanted to do great journalism and shed light on under-covered stories of corruption. We were the pirate ship of happy warriors, combating a growing age of media and social media manipulation (the scope of which we could not even conceive at that time). But we knew we were unique. We had no intention of being ABC News. We knew we were activists with a point of view doing acts of journalism in an industry that had left half the country behind in their reporting. I don’t think any of us ever wanted the majority of media to be remade in our image. We were a necessary spoke in the wheel of free press, which had become unbalanced. At least, that’s how I always saw it.

Traditional journalists were given beats to cover, often intentionally avoiding topics that they were passionate about or personally an activist. Today that is flipped on its head. Now kids go to school and major in climate science and minor

in journalism because they are passionate about combating climate change through journalism. We now see the majority of young reporters who are activists first, reporters second. As someone who lived that life, it is filled with perilous blind spots that not only damages your reporting, but can also drive yourself mad. This is why I ultimately left that atmosphere and pursued mainstream journalism.

I'm so disheartened when I see young (and old) journalists' twitter and insta feeds these days. I think a lot of us made the choice to be activist journalists to influence the industry to be better, not turn the industry into us.

This isn't all on editors and journalists, either. I had the privilege to sit in many executive meetings with heads of global news organizations. I think a lot of executives of media organizations saw the Breitbart model as a profit-generating model, and pushed for this change. I think the executives won this hard fought battle with a lot of really great editors and reporters fighting this change. That executive involvement is universal, by the way, from what I've seen. I have yet to encounter any media organization that doesn't have business people or executives (many of which have little-to-no editorial experience) attempt to get involved in the editorial process and decisions.

There has been a major cultural shift in journalism that I believe manifests differently based on generation.

First, the younger reporters:

We now have a generation of young people who have been taught to value intersectionality over facts and view "silence" as the literal equivalent to violence. And they are showing up in newsrooms. And they are activists before being journalists. And the intersectionality/privilege/silence mentality is a heavy, painful burden that must influence and contextualize all reporting, regardless of how much it actually resembles reality. And I want to emphasize this is a painful, heavy burden they have been conditioned to carry. When it is challenged, when their reporting is pushed back on with relevant facts and arguments, it causes great mental distress. That distress binds the hands of a lot of good editors and colleagues, who now have to make their coworkers "feel safe" before they are allowed to help them become better journalists. I had multiple friends who were in various mainstream newsrooms recount Election Night 2016 to me, with young reporters crying at the outcome, asking to go home instead of do their job. (It wasn't just young reporters, either.)

I don't know where this train ends, but I fear for this industry – my industry – that I have fallen in love with and want to be better.

We also have an older generation of journalists lamenting the loss of the gatekeeper age. Nearly every single person in the U.S. can "report" on a story unfolding in their hometown with the technology in their pocket that used to take tens of thousands of dollars in resources to achieve. With that has brought some incredible innovation in reporting, not just technologically, but in the craft. It has also, sadly, brought resentment.

This is incredibly visible in the age of Trump. Columnists, self-proclaimed thought leaders, and the most prestigious of journalists knew their opinions mattered. They knew people listened to them. They knew they were influential. And almost universally they told America not to vote for Trump, that Trump was dangerous, and over and over they declared his campaign to be finished. They printed their front pages early and congratulated themselves before their election night coverage began.

And then he won.

That destroyed every image they had crafted of themselves as being important and influential. And not only that, but small organizations for whom they had no respect called it right. It was a massive gut punch to their crafted reality. And thus started the endless conspiracy theories and baseless allegations – the vast majority of which have been proven false. But we still have an edge from the older generation of reporters when they talk to the American people. They haven't forgiven America for not listening to them. And anyone who disagrees with them is no longer a voting body that needs to be covered and understood, but one to be looked at with disdain.

Looking at reporting today I'm not seeing an industry that has learned lessons from 2016, that is trying to understand and accurately cover how America will vote. I see a group of activists trying to influence how America should vote.

Believe it or not, there are greater challenges facing the journalism industry than just bias against Trump. But they are so vast it is hard to tackle concisely. At the beginning of my writing career, everyone wasn't a political junkie. Everyone didn't spend hours of their life scrolling news feeds on social media and constantly consuming content. With the advent of the 24-hour news cycle, we had created an event and invited everyone to become addicts. Now we have an hour-by-hour news cycle (or even less), and it has broken our brains, because our reporting changed to get people addicted.

I cannot tell you how many conversations I sat in with executives asking how we can "gameify" our coverage, essentially making it as addictive as Candy Crush. I am not joking, news apps (remember those?) were being designed to get people addicted to them, just like mobile games. But instead we're addicting consumers to end-of-the-world scenarios and salacious headlines.

I have not seen, as of yet, the journalism industry as a whole adapt to the new responsibility before them. They are dealing with a nation of polarized addicts, and instead of suggesting we take a break or see the full context of what is happening in the world, they are pouring us another drink. And I think this comes from two fronts; executives trying to get as many clicks/hits/revenue generation touch points as possible, and a younger generation that truly believes not constantly consuming and confronting every single topic in the world is the equivalent of justifying it. News consumers are asked to be omniscient and omnipresent (and thus responsible for responding/engaging) and news executives are looking to capitalize on it.

It's a cynical state of the media, but I believe it is the reality. It wasn't always this way. I hope that journalism professors and industry leaders work to change the craft of journalism to the new way (and frequency) America consumes news. The future of our country depends on it.

RM: Political discourse has been quite treacherous for the past four years. How do you recommend people deal with political differences among family and friends on social media, at work, and at family gatherings?

MDOC: So speaking about those who are not in the business of discussing this in the public square, I have a couple of suggestions that I personally have started to employ. I was the ultimate activist and political junkie most of my life. And I appreciate all of my friends and professors and family members that tolerated my righteous indignation for years. I have real compassion for people with passionate views who feel the need to shout them from the rooftops. I was one.

Let's start with compassion. Have compassion for their views, for where they are. Something I am learning is often when I see people who are really nasty in conversation or on social media concerning politics, it's coming from a place of great pain – probably from something that is not related.

One also has to establish at the outset of any conversation an agreement that both of you love each other and respect each other, and that, regardless if anyone changes their minds, you will still love each other and respect each other. If those things can't happen, what's the point of a political conversation?

I talked a little bit about this here (<https://www.facebook.com/meredith.dake/posts/10100227339907945>) but one of the hardest lessons I have learned (and am still learning) is try to respect a person's side of the argument, in spite of their ability to argue it. We have a lot of new activists and just generally opinionated people whose diet of information on the most complicated issues of the day is Instagram and Facebook memes. That causes a great loss of nuance, which is where reality lives.

Lastly, I would try to establish the ground rules for the purpose of the conversation. I can listen to opposing opinions all day to learn and internalize and think about them, knowing that I have my established worldview and I am not going to change my mind. I can have a greater understanding and compassion for the other side of the abortion argument, for instance, but I am never not going to be pro-life. So I'm happy to have that discussion, to hear about experience, to discuss statistics, but ultimately the discussion will be full of friction if the person on the other side is coming to the table with an expectation that I will change my mind. Fruitful discussions can happen with an exchange of ideas when I have no expectation of the other party to accept my arguments, simply to listen to them with curiosity and respect. But again, if all parties aren't on the same page with these ground rules, it's hard to have any sort of fruitful or edifying discussion. I am sure you are familiar with the term "emotional readiness." There has to be a shared emotional readiness to have these discussions placing them in the proper context of your relationship.

As far as social media – oh dear. A thing I am trying to do is argue less, and simply speak statements of fact in the kindest, most generous way possible allowing for the vast nuance of the world. Arguing over social media is not done well, especially in a comment-by-comment format. The best discussions I’ve seen online are column-responding-column format.

But it is truly OK to not engage – to move to the other side of the room when the politics start, to scroll by when you see someone post a meme that is so nasty and petty it makes you want to throw your phone across the room. Especially in today’s age where it’s more likely than not that the person you see on your facebook feed posting stuff that makes you want to scream is someone whom you haven’t seen, hugged, or sat down and had an in-person conversation with in several months. The nastiest and most terrible comments I’ve seen during all this clearly come from a place of fear and of pain. Pray for them and scroll on. And maybe text them and check in.

RM: Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have all been accused of censoring conservatives. How crucial will control of information be in this election? How important is it to establish other channels for disseminating and consuming unfiltered information?

MDOC: I shared a compelling news story from Daily Caller on my Instagram story not that long ago. I just had a screenshot of the article with the headline. A follower of mine went to Google and put in the headline with “Daily Caller” in the search bar and Google did not pull up the story in their results. He tried multiple searches to get it and could not do it. Finally he had to go directly to Daily Caller and search for the story internally to find it.

(Side note: There are SO MANY interesting insights on this – which I consider to be typical – user behavior on how people use the internet. Maybe another time.)

It is crazy, and concerning, that a first-hand account of a story that was dominating the news cycle that day was being filtered by Google. I can barely imagine on a larger scale the amount of information manipulation that is happening millions of times a day.

I would say that this is an incredibly serious problem, but for this election in particular a little less so. Trump has many ways in which he talks directly to the American people without filters or context. So for Trump himself, any sort of censoring or even blatant attempt to mischaracterize comments is easily circumvented for those who go looking for a larger picture. And I think more than just the typical Trump voter goes looking for information past the headlines when it comes to Trump’s comments.

What we have right now are these information channels that began flirting with curating content based on what they believed the USER wanted to see and read. They have now taken that mechanism and are curating content based on what THEY want the user to see and read. However, there are ways in most of these information channels to turn off that personalized curation and there are tons of search engines and social platforms popping up every day that are fighting this

controlled content curation. This is a problem that is going to correct itself with innovation, hopefully, but it is imperative on us, the consumers, to find these mediums and support them. The greater short-term (and perhaps long-term) issue is the clustering of content. Right now, we have a voting base that is voting on two (or more) totally different knowledge foundations. They aren't reading the same stories or watching the same channels, so there is no longer a decision-making path of having a shared common knowledge and then coming to different conclusions. In many ways this is a broader cultural phenomenon that could tear at the foundations of our society. We're not even consuming the same entertainment or pop culture anymore. There are 100s of shows on multiple streaming platforms to choose from. We are losing a common culture of art. There are so many benefits to that; more stories are being told, more art is being made. However, if it's not shared by the culture at large, it just breaks the country into further factions.

I don't know what the solution is, I just know that as a society we're going to have to learn how to have a common culture without shared information consumption. I don't see the information channels shrinking any time soon.

RM: Given your experience with an early internet radio show on BlogTalkRadio, what role do independent websites, blogs, and podcasts play in informing the public?

MDOC: Innovation will be the thing that helps solve the problems I laid out above. More importantly, independent innovation. There's a well-known political commentator who talks a lot about the "death of expertise" and is generally cynical about the information age. I feel the exact opposite. I love the information age, and while it shows some real failure in government and media, I love that we have a body of people reading studies on the effectiveness of masks and how disease spreads through water droplets. This is what these independent channels can do. They can give people access to niche expertise immediately. But as mentioned above, it comes with the danger of losing a shared knowledge base, which further fractures the culture.

These independent channels of information do not have the same problems I listed above, such as the executive interference. There's no advertising exec or vice president or even an activist editor looking over their shoulder making sure their coverage fits with the narrative. This allows for more stories and better education for all. It also serves as another check on our government's power. Politicians no longer just worry about the local three stations' FOIA requests, there are 100 bloggers in every town who have the power of the internet and they are willing to use it.

RM: From your experience, what are some of the lessons that came out of how the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) innovatively handled grassroots bloggers?

MDOC: CPAC was really the first in the conservative movement to challenge the media status quo. The RNC eventually followed after them, in many ways. The bloggers lounge was one of the first times that niche and aspiring writers and commentators had access to figures that were previously only given to the largest organizations. This created an explosion of exposure and information. Different questions were being asked to top officials, and the staff that surround these figures began to see the power of social media and alternative media. It also took the point-of-view of the questioner out of the DC-East Coast media complex and gave it to a far broader audience. It allowed more obscure political figures (“the obscure caucus” as some joke) to have some time in the spotlight (however dim the actual light was). It was a lesson in speaking directly to people where they gather, versus asking people to tune in to hear you.

It also created an incredible networking opportunity for these niche individuals to meet. Now you had small-time bloggers in Iowa and Kentucky learning FIOA lessons from watchdog bloggers in Illinois, all discussed over copious amounts of alcohol.

RM: As a social psychologist, perhaps one of the most interesting current conservatives is Meghan McCain. She walks into the lion’s den every day on *The View* and stands up for conservatives. She eloquently stands up for conservatives she agrees with and for conservatives she disagrees with. As someone in a profession where I am politically outnumbered “everyone to one,” I have a tremendous respect for her. Is it productive to societal discourse for her to take on such a role or do liberals just ignore her perspective? She effectively inspires conservatives, but does she break down conservative stereotypes by liberals? She plays a pivotal role between the new Trump portion of the party, the old Bush portion of the party, and the moderate John McCain portion of the party. How can we learn from her example as one of the central conservatives of the moment?

MDOC:

Full disclosure: I know Meghan and have hung out with her and her husband socially on multiple occasions.

I, too, have the greatest respect for her and what she does every day. That show needs her. I’m not going to pretend to be an expert of *The View*’s audience so I can only go off what I see on social media and my personal impression watching the show.

I think one of the greatest things Meghan has done is given some liberals a view of a complex conservative person. Meghan has a long history of saying what she believes, boldly. So no one could accuse her of saying anything she does now for profit or gain. She is who she is and no one is going to question that. And because they actually believe that Meghan believes what she says, they now have to confront a person who they know, who they know loves them and respects

them, in a respectful way. They are... not always respectful to her, but that is the ultimate goal.

There's certainly a lot about expressing yourself politically that one can learn from Meghan, but beyond that I think her social media use and how she talks about her life is where the biggest lessons can be learned. It is an art to share your pain, your grief, and your struggles without oversharing and compromising your own privacy on a public platform. Meghan does this expertly.

The other thing conservatives can learn from Meghan is how she engages people she disagrees with, especially conservatives. She has a very, very real reason to despise Trump and to never consider voting for him. And there's not one conservative who could have any argument against her, even with his accomplishments. But I have never seen her engage anyone who says they are voting for Trump because of his accomplishments, or even because they like him, with disdain. It would be so easy for her to make that personal – to take that personally. I haven't seen her do that. The theme of this conversation seems to be compassion. Meghan shows it so well.

RM: Given the McCains' historically complicated relationship with the GOP that became a little more complicated at the DNC, it seems appropriate to probe a little further. It seems to me that Meghan McCain embodies the conflict among conservatives who dislike Trump, like some of his policies, recognize the effectiveness of his work, and dislike the current liberal agenda. Is this a fair statement?

MDOC: Sure, and again, this is a very personal thing for the McCain family – rightly so. Not only is it personal in relation to Trump, but in relation to Biden. She talks about this a lot in her interview with Ben Shapiro (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbuA5gl6tPs>). It's definitely a fair statement.

RM: We have seen quite a few Republicans featured at the Democratic National Convention (Colin Powell, John Kasich, Cindy McCain, and others). We have also seen a strong pitch that Joe Biden is a moderate. Is this a solicitation to moderate Baby Boomer Republicans and moderate Democrats, neither of which are currently influential voting blocks? Will this be effective or will it alienate what is the true progressive base of the Democratic Party?

MDOC: I don't really consider Biden a moderate and it's a hard sell for Dems – especially when you have both Biden and Harris calling it the "Harris administration." Not to mention Biden has a long track record. If anything, I think this was a "return to sanity" ploy by Dems promising compromise and character in office. That might be compelling if every single local and state Democratic government official hadn't just botched their dealing with Antifa and COVID. The negotiating points for the nation's toughest issues have been shifted far left, and voters have yet to show they are willing to come to the negotiating table with a starting point of "let's abolish the police" or whatever extreme equivalent in other issues. It's really a question if voters will tolerate Trump's bluster, because his governance has been largely successful for moderates and conservatives. As far as progressives, they are desperate. They will vote for Biden, if they vote at all.

RM: What is the biggest current threat to American citizens?

MDOC: The greatest threat to American citizens is that there are people out there – entire countries and cultures – who hate America and everything we stand for. They hate our freedom and our diversity and they are actively, constantly planning to tear apart the nation and terrorize us through violence. These are sophisticated enemies who are constantly innovating warfighting for the purpose of eradicating America.

Our second greatest threat is Americans forgetting the greatest threat and not supporting those who stand in the gap on our behalf. We have so many challenges on the home front right now that need to be addressed. And while there are certainly places that America needs to improve, a lot of it has a whiff of sophisticated warfighting. I have faith American citizens will once again look on each other with compassion and selflessness and unite. It's a struggle right now, but "the only way out is through."