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Chuck Todd: 'Fake news' claims driven by fear

Paul Hyde, phyde@greenvillenews.com Published 6:44 p.m. ET Sept. 1, 2017 | Updated 9:17 a.m. ET Sept. 2, 2017



(Photo: Courtesy of Furman University)

Technology has provided a wide platform for so-called "fake news" and "alternative facts," contributing to an increasingly polarized America, TV journalist Chuck Todd said in an exclusive interview with *The Greenville News* on Thursday.

"This fake news issue is real," said Todd, the moderator of NBC's "Meet the Press."

"It's the weaponization of information," he said. "It's the idea that we are truly having a political war to define what's true and what's not."

Americans often turn to the media for "affirmation more than information," leaving many with diametrically opposed ideas of what constitutes fact-based reporting and truth, Todd said.

As a result, Americans are "returning to a tribal mentality" in politics and culture, he said.

"We've created this idea that the other side is the enemy," he said.

"We're silo-ing ourselves out," Todd added, citing a poll that suggested that 40 to 50 percent of Americans would be upset if their child married someone of the opposite political party.

Todd visited Furman University on Thursday to deliver a keynote address followed by a panel discussion on "Politicians and Media in an Era of Alternative Facts."

Speaking backstage at McAlister Auditorium, Todd said the Internet and social media have provided a wide audience for conspiracy theories and other questionable claims.

"This phenomenon instead of being on the outer edges — sitting on the high end of AM radio — now has been mainstreamed," Todd said. "A radical can feel mainstream themselves because they're comforted by the fact that they've found more radicals who agree with them."

Many politicians, meanwhile, exploit America's political divide for their own self-interest, casting doubt on the independent reporting of the mainstream press, Todd said.

"I wish the public would ask themselves, 'Why does the politician so badly want you to not trust us?'"

Political polarization is also being driven by fear of a changing economy that has left many behind, Todd said.

"The real reason for this divide is that we're going through a massive economic transition in this country," Todd said.

"Some people call it 'the service economy,' some people call it the 'tech-driven economy,'" Todd said in his speech before a sold-out audience in McAlister Auditorium. "That's the problem. We don't have a name because we don't know what it is, what it looks like, and when you don't know what something looks like, that's when fear sets in."

This era mirrors the tumultuous changes that occurred in the early 20th century as the country transitioned from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, Todd said.

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Also participating in the discussion were Katrice Hardy, executive editor of *The Greenville News* and southeast regional editor of the USA Today Network; and former U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, who represented South Carolina's Fourth District from 2005-2011.

Furman political science professor Danielle Vison served as moderator.

'They will eat you alive'

Inglis said American polarization can be seen in the power of activists on the far right and far left.

"Politicians are scared of voters, but they are terrified of the activists within their own party," Inglis said. "The activists will absolutely eat you and your family alive. What you find is Democrats plastering themselves up on the left-hand wall and Republicans plastering themselves on the right-hand wall. So, it's really a crazy time."

Inglis criticized activists who claimed former president Barack Obama was born in Kenya.

"What the activists say is simply not true," Inglis said. "Barack Obama was born in Hawaii. He was not born in Africa. It's up to us to say to those activists, 'Why don't you hush up just a little bit because what you're saying is just nonsense.'"

Inglis also criticized his fellow Republican, President Donald Trump, for claiming that Obama wiretapped Trump Tower in New York.

"It's beyond the pale," Inglis said, as the audience erupted in applause. "It's not like anything you've ever experienced. What do you mean he wiretapped Trump Tower? Do you have any evidence of that? You can't just say things."

'Part of the solution'

The wide-ranging panel discussion touched on the role of local media and politicians as well.

Hardy said a practical problem for local journalists is that many politicians are inaccessible.

"We'd like to have an open, engaging conversation," Hardy said. "What we find with politicians a lot is that they're hard to reach."

Getting beyond the partisan divide requires journalists to seek out independent voices, when considering a politician's tax plan or other proposal, Hardy said.

"I think we have to do a better job of finding those voices that can provide insight on the issue but they're not from the right or the left," she said.

Local media outlets also need to stress their connection to their communities, emphasizing that their employees live in their communities and have a huge stake in their future.

"I think we do a better job of letting our communities know that we are here to serve them and we're going to be a part of the solution," Hardy said.

Healing the divide

Todd said that the major media can sometimes have an urban bias, failing to recognize the diversity of the nation.

"We don't accept the idea that there are different ways that people live in America and that what's good for New York City is not necessarily good for Mountain View, Arkansas," Todd said.

The flooding disaster in Houston, ironically, has healed the partisan divide, if only for a moment, Todd said.

"I'll be honest, I feel like we're in a tinderbox," he said. "I'm oddly thankful for Houston. Houston has brought us together. It's tragic that we have to wait for a crisis like this. Maybe this is a moment we realize that there are larger things in life than political bias and winning a political argument."

The media, for its part, has to end the practice since 1960 of the revolving door that allows too many politicians to become members of the press and vice-versa.

"We've allowed the wall between the powerful and the watchdog role of the media to get eroded," Todd said. "There are people who go into TV news, using it as a launching pad for politics, and there are people who run for office, hoping that it will lead to a talk show. This is messed up."

"I don't think it's healthy for our industry when prominent members of the media suddenly go behind the podium of the White House," he added. "That leads to this cynical feel the public has about the press and politicians. We need to build that wall again."

The media also has to be more transparent about how it goes about its business, Todd said.

It's up to all Americans, Todd said, to bring the country together.

"If we're going to fix this, it's not up to journalists alone," he said. "It starts with every parent in the country. We've got to teach civic engagement. Some of this has to come from you, has to come from the consumer of news, the consumer of politics because at the end of the day, every election result is a reflection of us."

Paul Hyde covers education and everything else under the South Carolina sun. Follow him on Facebook and Twitter: @PaulHyde7.

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