

Angelo Carusone **President, Media Matters for America**

Media Masters – July 2, 2020

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Angelo Carusone, president of Media Matters for America. Educated at Fordham university in New York, he became a political organizer and activist campaigning for left-leaning causes. He spearheaded the StopBeck.com movement to attack the advertising revenue of Glenn Beck's Fox news show and brought together more than 700,000 people in the #dumptrump campaign, which persuaded Macy's and other businesses to end their association with Donald Trump. In 2010, he joined Media Matters for America, a progressive media monitoring service as campaign director and rose to be appointed president at the end of 2016. Angelo, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for having me.

Now you're the head of the, and I quote, "The most dangerous organization in America." According to Bill O'Reilly, is that a badge that you wear, frankly, with some pride?

Yes. Well, for two reasons. One, I mean the amount of, I mean, the role that Bill O'Reilly played in American media, cannot be overstated. I mean, for decades up until 2017, but prior to that, for literally decades, Bill O'Reilly was the single largest rated cable news program. I mean, he had three plus million viewers every single night, had an enormous amount of political influence, because of that and because of who his audience was. So when a guy like that says the most dangerous organisation in America, it can only mean one thing, right? Is that you can rival or check his power. And at least as far as he's concerned and that's exactly what happened. So I wear it with a badge of honour, partly for that reason, because it speaks to the influence that we've been able to have on the landscape, even though we are by no means as large as Bill O'Reilly was. And then the second reason is, because for somebody that bad to say that about you, then it must mean you're doing something good. I'm a believer in, to an extent, of judging people by who their enemies are. And I think O'Reilly is a good enemy to have.

I mean, that's quite a feat for a modestly funded non-profit who's 80 employees spend a lot of time watching cable news at their desks.

Yes, it is. I mean, there's a lot of things that we do, that's quite a feat. I mean, I say all the time and it's not just in my fundraising pitches, I genuinely believe this to be true about Media Matters, is that pound for pound we are probably one of the best investments that anybody can make, dollar for dollar, because our annual budget fluctuates anywhere between 11 and \$13 million a year, depending on the year. And we probably have, on average, we estimate between 200 and \$250 million of earned media impact. By that I mean, if you try to assess the value of the coverage that you created or generated, that wouldn't have happened without the research or the work that we did, that's just a huge return on investment. So yeah, I think it is a good illustration of that. So that's one testament to it. And then the other part is, for as scrappy as we are, we've held a lot of really bad people accountable, but basically people that would otherwise been totally immune to any pressure or accountability. So from Glen Beck to Bill O'Reilly, Alex Jones, we've expanded and have done some work internationally as a result of that. I think, I do genuinely believe that for as small as we are, the impact is there. And then honestly, the impact is really just a reflection of what happens day to day. I mean, for an organization our size, we live monitor 55,000 hours of programming each year, which means that somebody's sitting there listening to it as it's being broadcast and summarizing it and sending around flags and then doing rapid response work. And then we archive and analyse about a million hours on top of that. So, there's a lot of work that we do in addition to just the publishing content and holding people accountable that really actually goes into trying to impact or influence the larger media conversation. So I do really think it is a big feat considering how small we are by comparison.

And for our listeners that aren't familiar with Media Matters, could you just talk them through the origin story? How you started it and what the organization is today and how it goes about it's business?

Yes. Media Matters has a very interesting history. So the organization was founded in 2004, and it was actually founded by this former right wing media hitman. He was a journalist on the right, that's what he called himself, in the late eighties and nineties. And he was responsible for manufacturing, truly. And that's how he would describe it. Manufacturing smears about democratic politicians, including Bill Clinton. He was right in the mix of when Hillary Clinton had made that comment about, that there was this vast right wing conspiracy that was trying to target her and her husband. She was referring to in part, of this operation that this guy was a part of. And what ended up happening is, in the late nineties, he had a bit of a conversion and he wrote a book. He wrote many books, but in his last book, it was supposed to be an attack on Hillary Clinton. And as he was writing it, it was still a sharp elbowed book by no means, but when he released it, it wasn't as bad as people wanted it to be, his peers. And they started to malign him for not being hard enough on Hillary. And he started to think more about the work that had been doing. He was gay and he couldn't come out of the closet. Even though it was a little bit of an open secret amongst some of his friends, people like Ann Coulter and Laura Ingram. He certainly couldn't be out about it, because they would reject him and ostracize him. And what ended up happening is he had a conversion moment and he wrote a big expose, called *Blinded by the Right*, that tracked how he got into the right wing echo chamber to begin with and then what that experience was like inside. And then what it was like on the other side and what ended up happening, as a result of that book is, he wrote that book right at the end of the nineties, right around 2000. And it served as a blueprint for the

organization, because Bill Clinton in his last few months in office, had actually started handing copies of the book out to people, because it really validated a lot of the stuff that they had been saying there was this witch hunt after them. And when it was all done, he felt so bad, all he did was profusely apologize to people. And a lot of people who he hurt basically said, "Well, you have to... You can't just apologize. You have to fix it." And so his contribution was to say, there needs to be a watchdog organization out there that tries to untangle this very well-funded, well organized, right wing infrastructure, that is solely dedicated to manipulating and distorting the media conversation. And in 2004, he founded it, that's when it started. And then there were all those terrible attacks on John Kerry, who was the democratic nominee. There's a guy that won the medal of honour and they attacked him as a phony soldier, really maligned his service, all kinds of stories about how he faked all the things that he did to earn it. And what it basically did was put a fine point on the need for some kind of an institution out there, that was monitoring the influence of this deep funded, well organized right wing operation. That's how we started. And that was the organization's organizing principle all the way through 2016, to be honest. And it's not that we haven't changed. It's not that we've changed our core critique, I think the core critique remains the same. What's different now is, the information landscape is so different. And so what we do now is... It's not as simple in a way, it used to be Conservatives and Liberals. And the landscape is just so much more complicated and nuanced than that now. There's bad actors increasingly on social media, that don't really adhere to one political ideology. Sometimes they'll burn the left sometimes they'll burn the right, but their disinformation is just as damaging. And so we've taken our years of experience and tried to recalibrate a little bit, to think about the challenges that we're dealing with now, in a more modern information ecosystem. But that was our founding and it really does give us an interesting core and a backbone.

And what is it about Fox News that's so singularly dangerous in your view?

The two things about Fox that make it uniquely destructive from my perspective, is that one, is its mission. And then two, is its content. And so, on one on its mission, Fox News was started, even though it didn't actually get off the ground officially until the nineties, when Rupert Murdoch launched it with Roger Ailes, Fox News actually started decades earlier, as a plan that Roger Ailes developed. He was Richard Nixon's media consultant, and he was responsible for all kinds of political misinformation then. But one of the things that he drafted, was this memo that outlined the need for some kind of dedicated conservative news operation, that could use the veneer of journalism as a weapon to not just smear political opponents, but to shift the larger landscape that all the conversations take place in. That you could literally use it as a cudgel to force newsrooms to shift their coverage, in response to false balance or to inoculate themselves from critiques that they're too liberal. They start to give more credence to conservative ideas. And so it started decades earlier, as a memo. And when Rupert Murdoch gave him the chance to develop it and design it, that turned that idea into practice. And then the content is uniquely destructive and what they do is lie. And that is a powerful weapon when you have the emperor of news. It's one thing to have a perspective or a bias and a lot of times, as a watchdog you have to critique bias, because you want that to be present, but lying is not biased. Intentionally distorting and misinforming people is not bias. It's deceit designed to achieve some larger objective. And the net effect of all of that, has been

to move much of American society, not just to the right, but into a place where we are much more tribalistic. And Fox has largely contributed to this. We see the other side as an enemy. And their role in really crafting and creating that cannot be overstated. I mean, what they've done in terms of not just moving the ball and the entire landscape and conversation far to the right, but every day, just the damaging lies have real material effects. And we saw it with the pandemic, in the very early responses to it and the lies that they were telling then, we saw it. And all designed for larger political purposes. And that to me means that, for me, this is what got me into all of this in the first place, and why I stopped there is that, part of what drew me to the work was that it doesn't matter what the issue is. It could be a political campaign or a policy fight, a culture debate, a local issue, a national issue. The way that the news media is treating it is dealing with it, is going to influence and shape the outcome. And so what Fox does is, they're like a person with their hand on the thermostat, they can raise the temperature or lower the temperature, depending on what suits their objectives and their interests. And there are very few channels or outlets that have that power. And certainly none of that size that have an agenda, that they're trying to drive and implement as a result of it. And so they are uniquely dangerous. And now you can dig into the content to the individual personalities, to the hosts, but when all is said and done, there are few things that they have not contributed to making a worst problem for American politics and also abroad.

I mean, as a Brit speaking to you, from the glamorous location of Milton Keynes in southern England, most Brits marvel at Fox News, in terms of just how it even exists. It's something uniquely American. I mean, we have the opposite in our country, that our TV news is very restrained and by law has to be politically balanced. If they have someone from the conservative party on, they have to have someone from the left. And similarly, particularly our tabloid newspapers, it can be a bit crazy from time to time, but not at this level. It seems to be the flip side in America, that your TV channels can get a bit crazy and your newspapers are restrained. But I mean, I still don't quite understand why someone can watch Fox News for the truth. Do their viewers think that they're getting the truth, then? Or do they think that they're getting... Are they aware that they're participating in choosing the lens through which they view the world?

It's really interesting. That's a good question. I really tried to understand that over the years. And the one thing that's helpful in thinking about it is... Their slogan for the longest time up until recently was fair and balanced. And a lot of people misunderstand what they mean by that and what the audience means by that. The assumption was, which makes sense, is most people assume that it meant that they were asserting that their coverage was fair and balanced. And that's actually not what it meant. If you actually asked Fox viewers what they thought that meant, they did not think it meant that the coverage itself was fair and balanced. What they actually interpreted it to mean, was that Fox News was balancing the scales of the larger media conversation, that everybody else in the media had a liberal agenda that was pulling us increasingly to a place of liberal utopia. And what Fox was doing was balancing the scales. And why that's an important distinction and it helps answer your question is, when you think about how most Fox viewers believed that to be the case, and that's what Roger Ailes meant by fair and balanced, but he said it too. And that's what Fox personalities meant when they would talk about the slogan. When

you think about it like that, not that the coverage itself, not a reflection of the coverage, but rather a description of the role that Fox News plays in the landscape. Then it starts to take on... It starts to explain what the viewers are doing when they watch Fox. It starts to take on an ends justify the means mentality, right? Because here you're saying, our goal is to balance out the larger media landscape. And therefore we have to do things sometimes to achieve that balance. And so the standard you should hold us by, is not by whether or not our coverage holds up against itself, but whether it is balancing out what is the larger liberal media conversation. And when you measure it by that, it starts to make sense, because the people that view it and watch it are participating in a bit of a political... They're making a political choice, that it's a reflection of their ideology. And what happens over time and this is the second consideration is, the typical Fox viewer is not watching an hour or two of Fox News. They're watching four to six hours a day, maybe more. And what happens over time is you start to get a little foxed up. The propaganda starts to shift your entire worldview. And there have been horrible stories about this, of family members just being essentially brainwashed, and it's slow, but it happens, because it starts to distort the entire world, the way that you see the world. It is not an accident. I mean, one of the things that Roger Ailes did when he was running the network was really fixate on the lower third, which is the text at the bottom and all of the B-roll footage that you see, and it is designed to reinforce a worldview, and so part of what happens is, is that you sort of accept the idea that because of the ends justify the means approach, that there are going to be some things that Fox does that may be objectionable, but hey, they have to. They have no choice because everybody else is worse. And then once you're there and you sort of sink into it for a while, you yourself get a little lost. The Fox viewer would tell you now that only Fox News speaks the truth, and when you call them out or you can get them to acknowledge little discrepancies... And this is where I think it illustrates how you can reconcile your question about do they believe they're getting the truth with what they think. They would say that regardless of the individual facts of individual claims, that even if those individual parts get debunked, that what Fox is presenting is a truth, that the world view is a fundamental truth, and everything else is just kind of-

It's a kind of an emotional truth, independent of the actual facts.

That's right. Exactly.

For all Media Matters' success... I'd be very interested for you to go through them and take our audience through them, but is there a what we would call a backfire effect, that doesn't this all go to feed Fox News's notoriety, and almost boost its audience? I mean, it's great. I'm very grateful you're holding them to account, but I've worked in politics myself for many years, and sometimes I learned that you can't reason someone out of a position that they've not reasoned themselves into.

Yes, no, I think about that. I have three measures of success there, to assess whether or not we're making it worse or better. So, the first measure is the role of Fox News in the larger information landscape, and one of the things that they were able to do really well was take totally manufactured nonsense and inject them into the larger political media conversation, and then get other reporters to report about them and talk about them. Essentially, they could infect the conversation with lies or

misinformation, and it happened so regularly that there was actually a term that we described the Fox cycle, and it followed a very consistent pattern of putting a piece of misinformation out there, attacking other journalists for not talking about it because they were liberal bias, other journalists pick it up and start to give it a credence, so it starts to infect the larger media conversation. The original information is ultimately debunked, but it doesn't matter because at that point it was too late, and it happened. And this is the part where one of the measures is, what is their role and how much of an effect is it going have? Back in 2009, the White House press corps would still consider Fox News to be serious journalism. In fact, if you criticized Fox News, other reporters would chastise you as being unfair. They would say, "Sure, you can dismiss some of their personalities. A little too out there, but Fox News is hard news, is real. They're very good." And that's not true. That's demonstrably not true, actually. So, one is, there's no doubt between then and now, over the past few years, that there has been a recognition by others, by their peers, that what Fox News does is distinct. And that matters. It matters because they're less likely to infect the conversation with misinformation. One of the ways that you can deal with the effects of lies is to quarantine it, to inoculate it, to inoculate others against it. And so that's one effect, and there's no doubt between then and now, there's a massive landscape shift, and that took a very, very large amount of time. It took the phone hacking scandal really becoming socialized here in the States, it took the Glenn Beck work. It took a constant steady drumbeat of reinforcing and quantifying the misinformation from Fox News. It took effort and pressure. So, that's one measure, is, are we stopping Fox News? Are we blunting or limiting Fox News's destructive influence amongst others in the media, such that they aren't able to distort the conversation even more? And that measure is yes. The second measure is, can we stop them from growing? Can we make Fox News so toxic that it can't expand? And I'm very proud of the work that we did when the Murdochs were trying to take over Sky, Sky News. We couldn't speak to the media concentration questions in the UK. There were other groups that understood that better and were speaking to it better, but the one thing that we did was submit a steady drumbeat of filings regarding the proposed takeover of Sky News by Fox, by the Murdochs. And ultimately, the Competition and Markets Authority had called us to testify specifically on the question of Foxification. And one of the things that was clear, we had a model already. We saw what happened when the Murdochs took over Sky News in Australia. Their coverage changed, even though it didn't seem likely, and even though they gave assurances on some of the big things, especially around climate change, it changed. And so that deal was scuttled. And there are other examples of Fox's influence being limited or blunted, but I think that makes a difference, because Murdoch himself is a... Fox is an extension of Murdoch, and to the extent that you can limit or stop that expansion of Fox's footprint, that is a mitigation of a potential harm. So, that would be the second. My objective is not to persuade their audience, that I think they're gone, right? People that are so brainwashed that at this point are not persuadable. My measurement of success is, can I limit or blunt their harms and effects? And then the third thing, real quickly, that I would just say on how I would measure success is this. Fox News is enormously profitable and was so even more 10 years ago. And what scared me a lot... Because in the States, we are commercial media. We don't really have a robust public media at all. We are commercial media. Everything is about what is most likely to make money. That is the properties that get stood up, and those are the things that get scaled. And what Fox News demonstrated was that a potent combination of demagoguery and disinformation can be translated into really high ratings, which you

could then commercialize. And one thing that scared me is that... And this, I think, goes back 10 years ago, is it was very clear that if we didn't do something about the business model that Glenn Beck represented, then what would have happened is not just that you would have seen more Glenn Beck-type people on Fox News, but you would have seen other versions of Fox News popping up, because you wouldn't have had a line in the sand with respect to the advertisers and business interests. And so, to the extent that we can erode or undermine the perverse incentive that fuels Fox News, such that you don't create more copycats, that's a net benefit, as well. So, you're right. I don't know if it helps the audience itself, because I think they're largely too far gone, but I do think it... Those are the ways that I think about, okay, how does this work have any effect on the broader landscape? And those are the measurements I use.

So, in a sense, you're not going to kill the beast, but you are going to stop it from growing and stop its influence and its pernicious effects from growing.

Yes. I mean, I think there's a way to eventually force them to shift. They are between a rock and a hard place right now. I mean, Fox is unique. In one way, in addition to their content, they, over the years, they understood that they were playing with fire in terms of how extreme they were. And one of the most amazing things, to me, about Fox News is that they are one of the only commercial media companies in the world that doesn't need a single commercial. They could have \$0 in advertising revenue and still have a 90% profit margin. And that's because over the years, what they've done is shifted the bulk of their revenue to these things called subscriber fees, which are every customer, every cable company, when you carry a channel, you pay that channel a few pennies for carrying it. And so if I run a cable company, Angelo's Cable Company, I have 100 customers and I wanted to carry the Media Masters show or the Media Masters channel, I would negotiate with you and I would say, "Okay, for every customer I have, I'll give you five cents." Now, my 100 customers, maybe only 10 of them watch your channel, but it doesn't matter. I still have to pay you so that I can deliver it to them. What Fox News did over the past 20 years is they used a whole bunch of really effective and oftentimes very worthy of criticism tactics to drive those rates up, so much so that they're the second-most expensive channel on everybody's cable box. Most cable channels, news channels, are about 30 to 50 cents in the States. So, MSNBC is about 30 cents. CNN is 70 cents, but that's three channels. Fox News is two and a half bucks a month, and right now they're trying to renegotiate those fees to \$3.50 a month. And that's something that every single person in America that has cable pays them, whether or not they ever turn on the channel. And so, one thing that's happened over the past few years is that Fox has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising revenue. And to your point, they're not dead, which in any... No other cable company that relies on advertisers could survive that. So, I think right now, though, there is a small window of opportunity to disrupt their negotiations with cable companies. They are trying to get such increases that if they can't extract those increases right now, their business model starts to unravel a little bit because they won't be able to deliver a meaningful return to investors. So, do I want to kill them? No, I would like them to be better. And to the extent that I can't make them be better, then I want to make it really, really difficult for them to be as bad and destructive as they are. And I'll just put one more bow on that, just to illustrate the point, because sometimes it sounds ridiculous to think that something so small could have such an effect on something so big, but right at the

beginning of May of this year, the New York Times reported that Rupert Murdoch himself had become so concerned about the work that Media Matters had been doing at chipping away at both its advertising revenue and its larger business interests that he hired a former Trump official, some people from Jeb Bush's campaign, and then a couple other right-wing blogger, reporter types to spin up a secretive unit within Fox News that were dedicated solely to maligning and undermining the work that Media Matters was doing, along with another organization called Sleeping Giants, which is sort of a social media group. So, the same way that Bill O'Reilly was critical of us, the fact that Rupert Murdoch has to hire a special team to try to undermine our efforts means that it has to be having some effect, otherwise he wouldn't try to disrupt.

And why do you think he's doing that, then? Is that purely to protect his position commercially? Because it doesn't seem very journalistic of him to do that, very principled, if that doesn't make me sound overly naive.

Yes, no, it's not. It's certainly not principled. I think they are between a rock and a hard place, and there have been some things that Fox has had to reckon with that they just can't... The one effect of them losing support amongst their media peers is that they don't have defenders, and that means that every time that we publish something, it gets harder and harder for them to sustain the pressure. I'll give an example from early June that is relevant. Fox News got busted fabricating a graphic. They took this person with a gun and they were superimposing him into images in Seattle during the protest, the demonstrations, making it seem like there were violent protesters there with guns, but it wasn't true. It was a person that they literally just Photoshopped into these images. I mean, it was like a Where's Waldo kind of thing, where they just plopped in this character in all of these various scenes. I mean, the outrage against them was intense, so much so that they had to pull the image down and they issued an apology and a correction, which sounds bare minimum for a news company to do. But that wasn't the first time Fox News got busted manipulating media. There have been times where we caught Fox News when they were at attack... And we caught them a couple of years ago attacking some journalists, and what they did is when they put their pictures on the screen for the journalists they were attacking... all the journalists they were attacking were Jewish... they Photoshopped the faces so that the noses were larger. Much larger, like three or four or five times larger than they were in reality. Like, literally Photoshopping images of Jewish journalists to play into antisemitic tropes. But when we published that content, they didn't issue any corrections or apologies. And in fact, most of the media didn't even condemn them for it, which they should have. And that wasn't the only time. So, one example is that when they get weaker, they lose some of that support, they're forced to make a reckoning more and more regularly. And I think his big reason is that this year they're renegotiating 65% of their cable contracts. It's an election year. So, they can't temper their coverage too much, otherwise they'll risk the wrath of blowback from Donald Trump. And, I mean, if I was Rupert Murdoch, I would be a little bit nervous. Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, they were forced off the air. Alex Jones, who's this prominent conspiracy theorist, was basically de-platformed because of the work that we did. NRATV, which is... it was the National Rifle Association's major media operation... was essentially shuttered last year in large part because of the work that Media Matters had been doing. Those are some pretty big scalps. Donald Trump, I mean, I managed to campaign against him in the past and was successful.

If I was Murdoch, I would be nervous, because when we do seem to sink our teeth into something, there's a measurable effect, and I think that's what it is. I don't think it's a media operation. He obviously has a personal agenda and a political agenda. I think he's doing everything he can to avoid as much accountability as he can as long as he can.

Do you think that a free and fair presidential election can even be held in the current environment?

That's a really scary question. No, I don't. I mean that. I don't. I think that we could get close to something, but I don't. And I really, really believe that. And I don't think it's possible for two reasons. One, the environment that's been created, there is so much fear and so much misinformation out there around election integrity, you know, false claims of ballot box stuffing, and the media itself... It's not just Fox, but the larger news media in journalism have done such a poor job of really capturing just how difficult it is to vote in the States. The long lines, the bad polling stations, all the high jinks that happen with the kicking people off the voting rolls shortly before the election. There has been a pretty consistent trend for the past few years, now decades to make it harder for people to vote. So, that's one part. And there, when you layer on top of that the misinformation, it becomes really hard to sort of align around, like in order for it to be a free and fair election, we would need to have buy-in on the idea that everybody should vote. And one of the things that the right has done is to convince a very large part of this country that not everybody deserves the right to vote even if they have the right to vote. And that's the people on government welfare they're just voting in their self-interest. They should not be able to really vote. It's okay if they can't get to the polling station because who cares, that they cheat, that Democrats cheat, they stuff ballot boxes and they just they've really corrupted the belief in voting. So that's one piece. And the other part is even more dastardly is that 40% of Americans use their social media feed as their primary or major source of news and information. It's really their lens to the world. And I bet that number is only going to go up now because of the coronavirus response. And that's the thing, we're a country that is dealing with a lot of anxieties and scary stuff, but that also means we're more vulnerable. And Facebook has largely been cowed by the Trump administration. I think part of it is because they have similar interests and part of it is just because they were susceptible to right-wing pressure. But what that means is this. Right now, and this is where I say cowed, because they changed a really important election integrity rule. It's one thing to say you're not going to fact check political ads. But one thing that Facebook did in May of this year is they walked back a carve out that they had made for voting protections. And they said, "Well, sure, we're not going to fact check political ads, but we're certainly not going to let people lie or undermine election integrity." And in May, they changed that. They said, "Well, maybe." And as an example, if you were say if you wanted to run political ads three days before the election, targeting maybe old people or vulnerable populations, you could say, "FYI, urgent alert, person at the polling station tested positive for COVID." There's going to be people that don't show up because they see that. And right now, it's not against the rules and right now, Facebook isn't going to do anything about it, and that's bad. So I think the combination of the larger failures in the discussion about voting and election integrity and the avalanche of misinformation that we're facing means that no, we can't, we actually can't have a free and fair election. We just can't.

What's going to happen?

This year, this cycle, it's unclear. I mean it is clear and it feels different that the country has turned on him and as has the media. On the other hand, it's a little scarier because one thing that I know about Trump is that he will ... I mean he is dogmatic and will fight, that he doesn't care about the consequences, and that the story that's not being told really is just that even though he's lost support amongst others, he has the highest approval rating amongst Republicans of any Republican president ever. No one's ever had that support. He's I mean totally supported by the Republican apparatus and that's in large part because of the right-wing media. They keep people online, that's for sure. But what that means is it's like even if he loses, he still wins because the damage will be lasting. It will take a lot of time. So a few scenarios I see is he wins, which is by cheating or because things turn quickly for him, just possible I guess. In which case, we're going to have to do a lot of CPR for American democracy for decades. He loses and he fights it out. And even if he ends up being taken out of office, that's not my fear. It's not that he'll end up not being able to be removed. It's that the damage that's done to our institutions at that point will be permanent, will be lasting. And then, the third thing is it doesn't really matter who wins or loses. The thing that really concerns me is there's this conspiracy group that's sort of emerged over the past few years called QAnon, which is sort of this extremist, connect the dots kind of entity. And they were responsible during the 16th campaign, this is the same sort of cluster of people that went to a pizza parlour in Washington, DC because they were convinced that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex trafficking ring out of its basement and shot it to the floor. This group, they're going to last no matter what and one thing that's ... and they're one example of many groups that just like we saw with the reopen stuff where I mean the Michigan government had to shut down for days because armed right-wing militias basically sent there by Fox News and Trump scared the government so much that they had to close the legislature. I mean so what's going to happen? I think there's going to be a very large part of this country that is not going to be bought into the results and there's going to need to be a lot of repair in institutions. And I'm not convinced still that Trump can't win because you should never discount a demagogue. And history tells us consistently that when there is a rising authoritarian figure, the centre often breaks to that authoritarian figure. And it is something that has always scared me about Trump for the 10 years that he's been a target of mine well before he was on the radar screen for the national media in terms of politics was he believes in this thing called the 10% theory, which is actually something that comes from right-wing talk radio. And the 10% theory is that all you need is 10% of the population to be passionately and fervently behind you. And with that 10%, you can bully or persuade others into support or silence enough at least to take over, to have effective control, and he really believes that. And so even the things leading up to the election will be intense. And his energy and enthusiasm shouldn't be discounted. In his first rally that he did after the pandemic was the venue that he was holding it in in Tulsa, Oklahoma only has 15,000 seats. They had 900,000 tickets issued, 900,000 tickets for an event that only had 15,000 seats. I mean there's nothing that has that kind of enthusiasm so ... And it's not a reflection of popular will, but it's a reflection of intensity. And it's not just intensity that they bring to the table. It gets back to that whole ends justify the means mentality. So it's going to be a slog and it is partly why I'm so angry at Fox and the right-wing media at large because they really sort of helped buttress this mess.

I mean your relationship with Trump dates back to your 2012 campaign to force Macy's to dump Trump clothing. He threatened to sue you for \$25 million as I recall. I mean not many people have beaten Trump in an actual head to head fight like you have. Are you particularly proud of that?

I am really proud of that, and it was terrible and awful at the same time because what concerned me about Trump then was here was a guy that was very clearly aligning himself increasingly with the more extremist parts of the right-wing media. And it wasn't just that he was aligning himself with them. He was doing something that nobody else was doing, which was that he was taking parts of these different right-wing groups that were otherwise disconnected and helping build some connective tissue between them. So he'd pluck a conspiracy theory from this pocket of the fever swamps, and he would take that talking point from the right-wing radio today, and he would mention that thing from Fox and Friends, and he would weave it into one seemingly incoherent rant, but actually, all three of them loved it. And he was helping cross-pollinate these groups in ways that they otherwise were somewhat isolated from each other. And he had massive commercial appeal. He was in all these Macy's commercials and he had a partnership with Macy's. It wasn't just that he sold his clothes at Macy's. Macy's was actually a partner with him in developing a broader Donald J. Trump clothing brand. He had TV shows and obviously, that meant he had advertisers. And he was pushing the birther thing a lot and that was a concern. And then one of the things that often gets forgotten, but was an example and maybe portends what happens in 2020 is the results of the election in 2012, that night. He was actually with Mitt Romney. Mitt Romney had asked him to sit with him when the results came in. It's something that everybody forgets, but he was with Mitt Romney that night. And when the election results came in, obviously, Obama had won the popular vote, won the election, won the electoral college, too. Trump, when he was leaving, sent out a tweet that said, "Barack Obama loses popular election, but wins the presidency. We should have a revolution in this country. Now, in addition to being wrong, it also was a pretty quick and a fast call to arms, and that was a flash point. So to me, the Macy's thing was it really picked up steam after that. I had been organizing to get Macy's to fire him for a while, but that was another flash point in it. And as it picked up steam, the kinds of things that he did were smear me. He would call reporters and tell them that I faked petition signatures, that I signed the names myself. He would call reporters and tell them that I was being investigated, that I was being looked into, that I had questionable ties, that my family might've been in the mafia, I mean just wacky stuff. And the thing is that reporters would update their stories. And at the time, I remember just thinking, "Oh, this is so frustrating." And I worked at Media Matters, I was only there for only two years. And then, I was talking to my, then he was my boyfriend, we got married a few years later, but I would say to him, "This is awful. I just can't keep up. He's just calling these reporters and they are changing the stories, even though they wrote the story perfectly fine the first time." And that tussle lasted for two years and it was a quick lesson in one, his tactics of media manipulation and just how influential brute force can be. The thing that I learned quickly and I think it's an illustration sometimes of inverting stuff is to always try to seize the ground as best I can and to ... people think all you do ... The best way to be Trump is to be mean to him. No, not necessarily. You can't just ... That's not always the best way, but you don't have to do it the dumb way either. When I was doing my demonstrations outside of Macy's, I knew he was going to attack them as

being small. And the reason they were small is because they were right around Thanksgiving. And so, that part of New York City is closed off, very restricted. You can't really have a very large demonstration. So I knew it was going to be weaponized against me. So when I was telling reporters about the story, I told them that my protest had an exclusive guest list. And so all the headlines read, anti-Donald Trump protest has exclusive guest list. He lost his mind. He spent more time talking about how the people there weren't really that exclusive than he did smearing me at that point, that it kind of showed that there's easy ways to get under his skin that are also effective in reinforcing the narrative. And the end result of it is that despite how much he pushed back and fought, he lost. And it was a really powerful lesson that I've consistently drawn on.

Do you think that the Democrats know how to beat Trump? I mean you were talking about the 10% strategy earlier. Is it that the coalition against him is too diffuse, too many different moving parts, and he might come through the middle as it were if the opposition is divided?

Yes that's right. I mean I think the right has an advantage and Trump obviously has an advantage because yes, they have the right-wing media. We shouldn't forget that Fox News is Fox News and then, there's Talk radio. I mean Rush Limbaugh still has 15 million listeners, 15 million listeners, And that's just one show and they obviously have social media as well and they dominate online. So the right-wing echo chamber helps because what it does is it can create, even though they might have radical differences in certain perspectives, they have a similar core and set of touchstones that helps keep things somewhat aligned. And Trump can obviously take advantage of that. So they have an advantage. The other part is the right, obviously, they consume media a lot differently as well. So those things are two advantages that shouldn't get lost. But no, I don't think the Democrats have figured that out yet. I think that they still have this perspective that somehow the stuff that you learn in elementary school is going to ... that people will eventually come around and that country over party really persuades people. And it does not persuade Republicans, will not, no, it doesn't. If it did, he wouldn't have the support that he does. He would not have the level of support that he does because they would put their country above their party at that point. And so as a result of that though, I think because Democrats by and large feel that way, there is this belief, and this is where it overlaps a lot with the media that I see amongst Democrats, that they believe that there's some referee out there, that they could do just appeal to the right ... that the media is the referee. And yes, the media should be a truth vigilante. They should be a referee for facts, right, and they should. So I'm not saying the media is not important there, but they seem to be under the impression that there is this referee that's going to call balls and strikes. That's going to say, "Oh, that's out of bounds. So therefore, there's a yellow flag for the Trump people or that or that." And that is the problem, that they are appealing to an arbiter that doesn't exist and that never did. And they have this fantasy that if they just appeal to it enough that once that ruling comes down, that they'll get the support that they need. And yet the thing that I always point out as a counter to that is most of the things that Democrats want are wildly supported in terms of popular opinion. Gun control is wildly supported. They can't get it done. We can't get it done. Reproductive health, we are a pro-choice country. We're a pro-choice country. We are. Every measurable indicator, we're a pro-choice country, and yet every single month, every single month, the access to abortion shrinks. It gets

harder to have an abortion every month, right. And you could go right down the lane there. So most people want access to basic healthcare. They do. And yet Democrats can't seem to get it done. And I think partly, and it gets to this question of winning that they seem to think that there's some third party arbiter that will issue some ruling, and therefore, that'll happen. And in fact, it's not. It's about power. And I'm not a Democrat. Obviously, I'm a liberal, but hands down I'm a liberal. I'm not a partisan so it makes it a little easier for me to criticize, but that's my broad critique is that they seem to believe that there's an arbiter that doesn't exist. And I have yet to see ... There's all kinds of the things about worldview and I'm not one of those big people that thinks you just need to have the perfect message. I think that's just too convoluted and too contrived and something that too many consultants have relied on for so long that they've actually lost touch with a lot of the people that they need to persuade. I do think they need to articulate a worldview and a vision that has a little bit more clarity than just we're not Donald Trump. And the ability to drive it through. I think people like to see some fighting and that's not always clear. Everything is often very milquetoast. And I think to your point, because they feel like their constituency's so broad that they have to offer something that is so watered down. And that's true sometimes. Sure. But it's not broad when it comes to gun control. It's not. It's pretty clear. It's overwhelmingly supported, Americans want this, and they can't get it done. And so when you have that many consistent anti-democratic things happening, small d democratic, then I think the Democratic party really needs to ask themselves, "Do we understand how to leverage power right now, even if it comes to..." And I think that's an important question to ask, because they're facing a demagogue, finger wagging against somebody that's willing to pull tanks into the street is probably not going to be the most effective strategy.

Recently you identified a link between Fox News, Facebook right wing groups, and the US anti-lockdown protest groups that have sprung up. Could you tell us about that?

One of the things that happened in the States is we... I think it also illustrates some of this stuff I was mentioning before about the landscape and how Facebook is going to be a vulnerability for us, especially around election integrity and voting, is that when the States were putting in place lockdowns, there were these groups that popped, these reopen groups, that's what they were calling themselves. And they were mostly private communities. They're closed Facebook groups, closed walls. And the two things that we discovered as a result of that were one, Facebook went out there and said, "Look at us. We stopped all of these groups on Facebook." And they were lying. We caught them lying red handed. We attract 73 of them, 10 or so were public, Facebook shut those down. But they left all the ones, the really big ones that were actually closed, they left those up. And we were in them, so we were able to see that they were breaking all the rules and we had to actually go to the governors to get them to say to Facebook, "You told us you took all these groups down, but you didn't." And that was an example of the news media totally repeated Facebook spin at first, until we actually were able to show them the receipts of all these groups. The larger thing within that that was happening though, is that Fox started to get involved, and what they were doing was promoting the events. And I understand the tension between the protest that followed the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, and all of the anti-police brutality and racial justice demonstrations that happened, and people saying, "Why were those okay, but the lockdown protest weren't okay?" I think it's

okay for people to ask that question. The difference though... There's a few differences, is the timing. In early April of this year, the whole point of the lockdowns were to keep the hospitals from being overwhelmed, was to flatten the curve, and almost none of the curves had peaked at that point. So it was at the most sensitive moment when they started to tell people to go back into the streets. Secondly, one of the biggest pieces of misinformation at the time was that masks weren't just ineffective, one of the things these groups were advocating was that masks actually activated the disease. That was one of the most prominent claims amongst the reopen community was that if you wore a mask, it actually activated the coronavirus inside your body already and therefore would get you sick. So they were intentionally telling people not to wear masks. And Fox News was getting out there every hour on the hour, putting up on the location where the events were going to be, telling people to go to them, saying that this was their right, that they had to, that the constitution was in the balance if they didn't get out there in the streets, that the economy... That the Democrats are trying to hurt the economy to hurt Donald Trump. And people went. And to me, the bigger effect that I saw during that time period was that while Fox News was telling people to do that, they were assuring them that it was okay because they could just pop some hydroxychloroquine if they got sick, because hydroxychloroquine was "A hundred percent effective at carrying coronavirus." That's what they were telling people. They were telling people to go into the streets, not wear masks, and pop some hydroxychloroquine if they got sick. And none of that was true, none of it. And people did it. And that to me... We reopened this economy. The idea that we did not. We did. And that to me is the illustration of, I think, the power of Fox, and a perfect example. In the end of March of this year, there was a Fox news segment. This is maybe about 10 days into the lockdowns. And they had on the lieutenant governor from Texas, and he got on the thing and he said, "Well, you're going to have to let grandma and grandpa die, and they're going to be happy about it. Grandma and grandpa are fine to die. We have to reopen the country now. And that's it. Old people were just going to have to be willing to sacrifice themselves." The response to that, when we published that video, it had 15 million views in two hours. I mean, the outrage that somebody would get up there and say that 100,000, 200,000, a million people need to be willing to die for coronavirus was out of control. And the consensus at the time in the country was nobody is talking about doing that. Nobody. Nobody wants that many people to die. And yet three weeks later, three weeks, it wasn't even a whole month, they went from total rebuke and backlash of a claim like that to actively saying, we have to go all in on a herd immunity strategy, and if a couple hundred thousand people die, that's what's going to have to happen. They managed to make that shift in such a short period of time, and that doesn't happen without an entity like Fox and the right wing getting out there every day and chipping away at it, and those reopen demonstrations that Fox did were an important part of that because they were the turning point. Because what happened is, in the week after those demonstrations ended, and this is where I think Fox is very insidious, they kept pointing back to it and saying, "See? All of those reopen protests happened, and the sky didn't fall. We're all still here, alive. All the scientists, Dr. Fauci, they're all wrong, and we should go full steam ahead." And it really did help shift public opinion by nothing more than brute force and recklessness.

Who funds Media Matters? I know the conspiratorial stuff. Does George Soros... His name is often mentioned. How much effort do you have to put to fighting your detractors?

We did get money from George Soros 10 years ago. We got a million dollar grant. We did. Yeah, we did. We got a million dollar donation from George Soros 10 years ago. But I remind people that in the course of our history, we've probably raised about \$170 million. We're 16 years old now. Probably more than that now 170. Yeah. We're probably like 175, 180 over the course of our 16 years. And George Soros gave us a million of that. And that was a decade ago. And I'm happy to take his money, oh my gosh. I mean, he's an exceptional philanthropist, and he does a lot of good, but we had a program that we were doing at the time that was a campaign that was focused on News Corp and Fox News more broadly, and that's what that program was for, is actually how I got hired. They funded the campaign. Media Matters has never had a campaign operation until 2010. And that's how I got my job out of law school. I sort of forced my way into the organization, and fortunately they had enough money to pay me, even though it was a very low starting salary when I joined. But we got one donation from him, but the reason people, the right says it is that it inspires this idea that we are part of some grand elaborate conspiracy theory. It helps work people up because they spend so much time maligning him. So when you say George Soros, it has a certain effect on conservatives, because they say, "Oh, he's the big villain on the left." But he's not. He's a philanthropist who fights authoritarians. I'm not sure why they're painting him to be the villain that he is, at least on his philanthropic. So that's why they do it, it's a way to dismiss us. But the truth is we're not funded by any one person. It's been the biggest change for me when I moved into this role, was the fundraising side of it. I'm very grateful. We have a lot of supporters. We're not a grassroots organization, although we have got a little bit of grassroots money, low dollar 3 to \$5 contributions, but almost all of our money comes from, from a hundred donors that give us 25, \$50,000 contributions. And it adds up. 15,000 there. I spent probably 35, 40% of my time these days fundraising. Which actually I've grown accustomed to. It's nice to talk about the mission and the work and to get buy in from different constituencies, and the one thing that I've worked really deliberate at, and I'm actually grateful in large part to... In 2017, I started to do more work in the UK. And the reason that I'm grateful for some of those opportunities was it actually made me a better organizational leader when it came to the development side, because in the States, everything is so political, even the things that aren't political are political. And by that, I mean the donors, philanthropists and supporters, they tend to think... They seem to fall on two sides of the fence. You give to conservative things, you give to liberal things, and even if they're not political operations or partisan operations, are they liberal? Then fine. There's a subset of donors that sort of sit in that bucket. And therefore, what happens is when you talk about things, you tend to talk about things oftentimes in partisan terms or a line of partisan terms. Because I had been doing stuff in the UK in 2017 and 2018, it doesn't work the same way there, and it gave me a different perspective on how to think about the work and not try to translate it into partisan terms. And when I came back to the States and we started to think about different donors. People that fund academic organizations and university, so people that are giving \$5 million contributions for fellowships in universities, so why shouldn't they support some of the academic work that Media Matters does? I mean, we're a research operation. And by being able to go to them and speak in ways that... I had to learn how to translate our work, really, and to talk about it differently. It was a good experience. So our supporters are, I would say, mostly liberals and about, let's say, a solid half of them are also political donors. They give to their local candidates, they give to

national candidates. And then the rest are people that really care passionately about issues. So things like reproductive health or climate change or LGBT rights, or they are people that just want some of the academic research and they want the poisoning of the well to stop, and they see the work that we do as supportive of that. So it's a mixed bag. It's a couple hundred people. I'd say it's a core group of like 120 or so that are really our big cluster of supporters, and then we have a few foundations that support us as well.

Angelo, it's been a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you so much for having me. It was a really good conversation.