

ISOJ 2018: Day 2, Afternoon Keynote Speaker

KEYNOTE: A Conversation with Marty Baron

Chair: Joshua Benton, Director, **Nieman Lab at Harvard**

Keynote Speaker: Marty Baron, Executive Editor, **The Washington Post**

Joshua Benton: Thank you for doing this, Marty, and coming this way. I don't think you need much introduction to people. People know what you do. I have lots of journalistic and strategic questions to ask you, but my inner-beat reporter requires me, I think, to say, The New York Times published last night a story stating that the new soon-to-be owner of The LA Times was interested in hiring you away to The LA Times. Someone in the story said he'd reached out to Dean Baquet and to you. "He'd swing for the fences, and I think that's a good strategy." First, congrats on being a fence. [laughter] Any interest?

Marty Baron: No.

Joshua Benton: OK. [laughter] Fair enough.

Marty Baron: I love The LA Times. I spent 17 years of my career there. I hope for the best for them. They deserve it. Incredibly, there's so much talent there. But I'm happy where I am.

Joshua Benton: Great. One of the big questions that The LA Times is going to have to face is one that The Post had to debate over time, which was how much to be a local newspaper versus how much to be a nationally focused paper. I look back at Katharine Weymouth, the publisher who hired you, wrote in 2008 that the point of The Post was to be for and about Washington, addressing our local readers' core needs, making sense for local readers of the world around them. And certainly there's been a shift away from local towards a more national focus, which makes a huge amount of business sense. But as someone who's worked at great metro papers, is there any part of you that is—I don't want to say—concerned, but misses what comes from having a strong local investment in a local newspaper? I know you still have one, but is there any part of you that regrets that national shift?

Marty Baron: Well, uh, no. [laughter]

Joshua Benton: All right. Two for two. [laughter]

Marty Baron: Look, I mean, we still — I'm glad you mentioned that we still have a large local presence. We haven't reduced our local presence at all. So, we're still very much rooted in that community. And I think it's important that we remain

rooted in that community. They are our most loyal readers. They read the most. And we want to hold onto them and actually continue to grow our local base.

Look, I spent most of my career in local journalism. I think it's incredibly important. I worry about the crisis. I do believe that the crisis in local journalism is the biggest crisis that we have in our field today. So, I'm deeply concerned about it. I can't say that I know exactly what the economic model should be. I think each news organization is going to have to figure out what works for them and experiment with a lot of different things.

I have a feeling that it leans very heavily toward subscriptions and not with advertising. Not that they can give up on advertising, but that they're gonna have to develop a subscription base. But it also fundamentally depends on having something journalistically that people feel they absolutely must be reading every single day.

Joshua Benton: Right. Right. I think I need to mention our president at this point. I went back through tweets involving your newspaper over the last few months. Amazon and Washington Post, of course, is his favorite statement of, like, "the fake news Washington Post." That's sort of cliché at this point. Amazon's chief lobbyist, the guardian of Amazon not paying internet taxes. On Thursday night, President Trump issued an Executive Order saying that the post office should review its financial relationship with Amazon, which is, of course, controlled by Jeff Bezos, who owns The Post. Do you have any concerns internally or have there been discussions around ways in which The Post itself might be at risk of some sort of federal intervention of the sort that is apparently happening to Amazon? You don't have TV licenses to mess around with as President Nixon did, but just what's the thinking inside The Post on, you know, the extent to which you're at risk.

Marty Baron: We haven't had those discussions, actually. I mean, I think our view is that we should just continue doing our jobs as we're supposed to do our jobs. That we're not going to be distracted by a tax on us or a tax on our owner or a tax on our owner's other commercial enterprises, which are entirely separate from us. I think it's important to remember that, you know, the president provided absolutely no evidence that we're doing lobbying on behalf of Amazon. That's because there is no evidence. And you know, these are just absolutely false allegations.

But, you know, we.... I don't speak for Amazon. I don't do any work for Amazon. Nobody gets paid by Amazon. Nobody has done a lick of work for Amazon. We have plenty to do journalistically. That's what we are doing. That's what we are going to do. And I think it's important that we not be distracted by threats and attacks and things of that sort. And so, we just continue every day doing what we're doing.

You know, the president has said from, you know, day one, his first day after he took office that he was at war with the media, and, but, you know, maybe he's at war with us, but we're not at war with him. We're just doing our jobs.

Joshua Benton: Right. Right. Yeah. I like that a tax on Amazon could both be attacks and a tax on Amazon. They both fit in here. [laughter]

Marty Baron: Oh, that's interesting, yeah. I meant a-t-t-a-c-k-s.

Joshua Benton: OK, very, very good.

Marty Baron: Let me see if everybody....

Joshua Benton: Mobile phones will get you all the time. You have certainly said many times, as you just did, that, you know, you don't view The Post as being a force for opposition or being at war with the president. Your work is doing your jobs.

But in 2016, we ran an interview with Dean Baquet, Executive Editor of The Times, asking how he had—how his perception of the job of an editor has changed in the Trump era. And he said, "I think that Trump has challenged our language. I was either Editor or Managing Editor of The LA Times during the swift boat incident in the John Kerry election 2004. Newspapers did not know—we did not quite know how to do it. I remember struggling with the reporter trying to get him to write the paragraph that laid out why the swift boat allegation was false. We didn't know how to write the paragraph that said this is just false. We struggled with that. And now I think we just say stuff. We write it more powerfully that it's false."

Would you say that the Trump experience, both in the campaign and the administration, has changed any of the ways that you think about your role as an editor of a major news organization, either in resource allocation, how you use language, how you approach, you know, fact-checking verification?

Marty Baron: Uh, it's hard to say. I mean, I feel like we've always had to do accountability work. And I think that that's especially true these days, but it was also true during the Obama administration, and we did that. I think that people are under the misconception that we somehow had a particularly warm relationship with the Obama administration. I don't think he gave our news organization an interview just one-on-one since this year in office. For the last two years that he was there, we tried persistently to get an interview with him, and we were denied every single time. And yet, he continued to give interviews to what he deemed—what seemed to be friendly media.

So, you know, I mean, I think that our job is to continue doing accountability work. And if that means saying that something is false, then I think that we should just say that flat out. Maybe we're more willing to do that these days, because if somebody makes a false statement once, maybe you're willing to sort of just let it slide, but if they repeat those falsehoods over and over and over again, and then engage in persistent dissemination of falsehoods, then you feel like, well, it's absolutely your obligation to make clear that this is what's happening. I think that, you know, we have a fact checker, and we've doubled the size of the team, and they're busier than ever.

Joshua Benton: Much work to do.

Marty Baron: So much work. And they've documented 2,400 falsehoods—more than 2,400 false or misleading statements by the president since he took office. And the average is at about six a day. And, uh, so, you know, we'll keep that up. But the fact-checkers also applied to other people. It's applied to democrats, and applied to people outside of the—outside of the political realm as well.

So, I don't know, I think fundamentally our job really remains the same. I mean, the environment is different, because the president is attacking us consistently. He's trying to demean us, dehumanize us, denigrate us in every conceivable way, and to threaten us. And we haven't experienced that this way since probably the Nixon administration. But—but we just have to keep — you know, it sounds boring, but we just have to keep doing our job every single day the way that it's supposed to be done.

Joshua Benton: Along those lines, you are on Twitter, and I'm curious that you were on Twitter when you were at The Globe, The Boston Globe. You are still. And of course, we all know about the Spotlight story and the sort of vitriol that The Globe and others, you know, faced as a result of that reporting from some quarters. How does the sort of what you see in your mentions on Twitter and the pushback and the attacks that you see versus previous jobs that you've had or previous times?

Marty Baron: Well, I'm a lot less active on Twitter now than I was before, mainly because I'm so tired of the toxic atmosphere on Twitter. I think it's... I mean, I've done my... I try as best I can these days to avoid the snark that I think has infected the whole atmosphere surrounding news. I have low tolerance for snark. And a lot of the commentary that you get on Twitter is just, you know, people who are trolling you. And it's not constructive. And so, and it doesn't put me in a good mood. So, uh, I don't know what real benefit it has for me to sort of be all that active. So, I tend to stick to journalism issues. I don't—I don't—I don't go much beyond that. And so, I don't know, I'm just trying... I find the atmosphere to be really, as I said, toxic and uncomfortable and unproductive, so I really have limited my activity on Twitter.

Joshua Benton: Good advice for everyone—limit our activity on Twitter. Not advice that I follow. But after President Trump was elected, there was certainly a narrative and facts to back it up that there was a bit of a Trump bump in the media industry subscriptions. Even if The Post is not as open as I would like sharing its digital subscription numbers, it certainly went up across a variety of platforms. There's sort of a competing narrative now around Trump fatigue and the idea that the overwhelming amount of news and the pace of news has led some people to sort of check out. I'm curious what you see in the audience data that you see or, you know, to what degree is the Trump story tiring people out or is it still exciting people and generating subscriptions in large numbers?

Marty Baron: Yeah. I mean, I think the Trump—the so-called Trump bump was bigger than that. I think that people became much more concerned about the quality of news out there. They were concerned about the falsehoods and the crackpot conspiracies theories that were being spread. And people came to believe, certainly with the current political environment, that if they didn't support quality news, that there would not be quality news coverage. And they are absolutely right about that. If we don't have subscriptions, there won't be quality news coverage. I think that's just absolutely true. And so, people wanted to show their support for the kind of work that we do and, particularly, for work that holds people accountable—powerful people accountable, including the president.

Our pace of growth in subscriptions—and I'm not going to be as sharing as you would like me to be, but just to preempt a question—but is that it's growing at a very nice pace, really.

Joshua Benton: Very nice. All right.

Marty Baron: Very nice.

Joshua Benton: I'm probably chart that out later.

Marty Baron: We're very happy.

Joshua Benton: In a very nice, eh, rate.

Marty Baron: And I'll elaborate a little bit more. It's right on target.

Joshua Benton: OK. [laughs/laughter] Wonderful.

Marty Baron: So, there you go. I hope that's precise enough for you. But it's—it's going really well. So, we think that people are continuing to be interested. I think where fatigue comes in is just the number of alerts. I think people are incredibly—they feel high anxiety with all these alerts that they are getting. So, we do get some blowback that, "Please don't tell us so much what's happening. That we have to know it, like, right now." Because we get all—they get upset about it.

Joshua Benton: Right.

Marty Baron: So, we have to—we have to watch our alerts and make sure that we're not overwhelming people with news that, in some instances, they'd just rather not know about immediately.

Joshua Benton: When the Apocalypse comes, like, why bother with the alert, you know? It's not gonna matter.

Marty Baron: Well, that's true. It will not matter if that happens.

Joshua Benton: It's hard when you mention this sort of environment of misinformation and disinformation, it's hard to mention that without thinking of Facebook, given that Facebook is currently in a moment of significant public pressure and perhaps governmental pressure to reform its ways in a variety of ways, some of which touch on the news business, some of which do not. What are the things, if you were suddenly.... If you had Mark Zuckerberg and were able to tell him, "These are the five things that I want or the three things that I want from you and from Facebook to help the news business and to help the health of our information ecosystem," what are the kinds of things you might want?

Marty Baron: Well, you know, I'm not—I'm not sure I have a list of five things.

Joshua Benton: Two things?

Marty Baron: I think that they have to.... I think that they have to recognize that human beings have to make judgment calls. I think there's something fundamental there, is the idea that everything is going to be decided without human involvement, that it's going to be some sort of algorithm that's going to do this, or it's going to be machine learning that's going to make all these decisions, or whatever it might be. That ultimately human beings have to make value judgments and they will have to take the hit for that. If, you know, if Mark Zuckerberg says, as he did during his testimony, that they are responsible for the material that's on their site, well, then they need to assume responsibility. And you can't just have the revenue without the responsibility. That's pretty much what they've had to date. I do think that they are taking this seriously for whatever reason. Certainly, political pressure is a major factor there, and probably almost certainly the dominant factor there.

But they, uh, they're gonna have to make judgments. And they are gonna have to take hits from politicians who don't like the decisions that they are making, from people here who may disagree with the decisions that they're making. But just like us, we make decisions, we make value judgments, we get flack for those decisions, but that's just part of doing the job. That's called editing. And they're going to have to do some editing and make those decisions.

I've never understood.... And it's not just Facebook, but you take like YouTube as well, so with Google. But I've never understood why when there's a major event, let's say a mass shooting, why there isn't a — they don't immediately organize a task force of people to say, let's say with YouTube, to see what are the most highest ranked things on Google, on YouTube, and then take down the ones that are clearly false. Just immediately do that. I don't.... That's not difficult. It's just not difficult. Put together a team of a few people. Monitor it. And then evaluate them quickly and then not let them surface to be the top five out of six YouTube videos. This is not very complicated, but it does require exercising human judgment, rather than having to sort of apologize afterwards that, "Well, we just didn't know, and then we finally caught up to it. And yes, it was up there for six, seven, eight, 24 hours, whatever it might be, and now we've fixed it." It doesn't need to last that long.

Joshua Benton: Particularly in cases when it's obvious that there's going to be a potential for large amounts of misinformation.

Marty Baron: Right. And I think Facebook can do something similar to that.

Joshua Benton: Yeah.

Marty Baron: It's respond to the news, you know?

Joshua Benton: That's a great idea. Speaking of gentlemen who own large technology companies, Jeff Bezos, the owner of The Post, you've said many times that he is not on the phone with you ordering stories about, you know, what's happening in a suburban county or anything like that.

Marty Baron: Anywhere, anything.

Joshua Benton: Yes.

Marty Baron: By phone or email or text or through any — through telepathy or any other means. [laughter] No way, no how.

Joshua Benton: All right. Well, that changes my vision of the Amazon product map. That telepathy is not the way that he communicates with you. But he has certainly, as you and others have said, has been involved on the product side in providing input in, say, the new tabloid app when it comes out or things like that. I'm curious if he has given any input that you found valuable on a broader editorial strategy perspective. So not this story or this story, but, you know, for example, I've seen him talk about the shift from a local emphasis to a national emphasis. What has he said to you about those broader issues?

Marty Baron: Well, the one that you just mentioned, that was the first strategic decision that was made. It was a fundamental strategic decision, is that the strategy that you described that was for and about Washington that made sense for a period of time, but it didn't make sense for the current environment. That the internet had taken away a lot of things. It inflicted a lot of pain on our industry, but it also offered some gifts. And the primary gift that it offered was free distribution. And why would we want to suffer the pain that the internet inflicted without taking advantage of the gifts that the internet offered? And that we were in a particular position to take advantage of it, because—to be national and even international.

And one of those was we were in the nation's capital, first of all. We had the name, The Washington Post, which is a name that can be leveraged to a national and even international level; whereas, the other places I worked, you know, The Miami Herald, The Boston Globe, The Los Angeles Times, very difficult to leverage those to a national level. Maybe impossible to do so. And finally, that we had a history and tradition and identity. We didn't need to go searching for an identity. The modern day identity of The Washington Post was shaped at the time of Watergate and the

Pentagon Papers. It was this business of shining light in dark corners. And that that's who we are, and that's what we should do. And so, we didn't need to go have a retreat to decide, who are we? What do we want to be? Thank God. So....

Joshua Benton: It would have been in a nice place though.

Marty Baron: What's that?

Joshua Benton: The retreat would have been in a nice place though.

Marty Baron: I hate retreats. [laughter] I like to go to a nice place without being, you know....

Joshua Benton: With whiteboards.

Marty Baron: With the whiteboards and all that stuff. It's like it's wonderful outside, and then you have to sit there in a room for hours on end, and it's terrible. So, we didn't have to do that. So, that's one thing. The other was the idea that we had to recognize that aggregation was happening in the world, and that the question was, well, how do we respond to that? And it was one of the questions that Jeff asked me early on is, you know, "You do this big investigation, and you spend months on it. You spend a lot of money on it. And then, somebody comes along and in 15 minutes, they've rewritten your piece. They've picked out the best nuggets, and they get more traffic than you do. How do you respond to that?" And, you know, so I said, "Well, you know, number one, we should aggregate them. And number two, we should aggregate ourselves." And I think I gave the right answer.

Joshua Benton: Thank God.

Marty Baron: But, you know, because we have bloggers now on our staff, who are immediately looking at these big investigations and trying to pull out and come at them from different angles, and that's a way of aggregating ourselves. Not just repeating the story, basically, but sort of developing that story in a new way. And so, we do that. And we also aggregate others. We created very early on an overnight team called—that puts out something called Morning Mix. They work the enviable hours from like 10:00 at night to 6:00 in the morning. Occasionally, we let them come in at 9:00 at night. And they're scanning the whole universe out there looking for stories that we haven't paid attention to. Maybe we should have. We missed. Then, they're trying to find great angles on them. There's still time for them to do reporting, but they are also aggregating as well. And that's been a significant driver of traffic for us.

And we're using... We then extended that to do that during the day with the General Assignment Team that is looking at the sort of open conversation that takes place on social media. You know, in the old days, you'd sit in a bar, and if somebody in the adjacent booth was saying something, you know, you'd get quiet and want to listen in. Or, you heard something at the water cooler or your friends, and you'd say, "Well, that's a really interesting story. Maybe we should do that." Well, now,

everybody has that conversation totally in the open. You can listen in on the entire world's conversation. And why shouldn't you? And find out, well, what are the stories that [are] intriguing people? What should we be paying attention to? And so we do that.

Joshua Benton: And to that point, yesterday, Post PR put out a release noting that The Washington Post had 89.7-million users in March, according to ComScore. This marked a 7% increase from February, 4% year over year. And I like that the press release didn't say, "And we beat The New York Times," but there was a chart immediately underneath it that showed visually that....

Marty Baron: It's funny how we do that, isn't it? [laughter]

Joshua Benton: Yeah, really sneaky.

Marty Baron: Really. We're incredibly subtle. I'm miffed that you noticed.

Joshua Benton: And I do think, you know.... I'm glad to hear you say that, because to the extent that I would credit the sort of high/low strategy that The Post has been able to pull off, you're competing at the same level as The Times or The Journal on big investigations and coverage of the administration, but you also—I just picked a few headlines off—you also publish stories like this single cartoon about school shootings that's breaking people's hearts.

Marty Baron: A great cartoon.

Joshua Benton: And promotes its new mayochup and sparks an international controversy. And of course, "I am tired of being a Jewish man's rebellion," the story that got a little bit of....

Marty Baron: Oh, let's ignore that one.

Joshua Benton: Yeah, OK, fair enough. [laughter]

Marty Baron: That wasn't—that doesn't fit into your high/low.

Joshua Benton: OK, fair enough. The Atlantic wrote a story in 2016 noting that at least at that time The Post was producing about 500 staff-produced stories, graphics, and videos a day versus 230 at The Times and 240 at The Journal.

Marty Baron: Yeah, I don't know that those numbers are accurate. I don't think they are exactly accurate, but we're, yeah....

Joshua Benton: But certainly been able to embrace being webby in a way that, I would say, your competitors are not.

Marty Baron: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Look, I mean, I feel like.... I mean, one thing, by the way, that Jeff said to us early on is, "Don't be boring." So, we

endeavor not to be boring. And some of those stories that you mentioned, excluding that last one that you mentioned which was a mistake—

Joshua Benton: Yes.

Marty Baron: —but the others are.... I mean, look, I mean, there's nothing that says, "OK, there's this great cartoon that really captures—that people are drawn to and is really—and people are sharing it widely." And why is that? What does that say about the public mood? That's as legitimate a story as any other story. And to sort of say that, as some people like to, "Well, it's clickbait," that's not clickbait. Clickbait is a headline that tries to get your attention. You click on it and there's nothing of substance underneath. OK? These are stories—these are stories of actual substance. And, you know, the products that are being marketed to us are things that we should—that we should be paying attention to. And they say something as well. And so, yeah, so we do try to do those stories and find stories that people are—people are interested in. And we, you know, to me, there's nothing—there's absolutely nothing wrong with it. I think there's a lot that's right about it.

Joshua Benton: Yeah.

Marty Baron: Because it speaks to people where they live and not from some ivory tower or some, you know....

Joshua Benton: Ivory tower is nice. You don't need to talk down the ivory tower. I live there. [laughter]

Marty Baron: Yeah, well, not from some ivory tower, not from.... You know, Harvard is the embodiment of the ivory tower.

Joshua Benton: It is.

Marty Baron: But in any event, from some elevated position that we say, "We just can't be bothered with these things that people are actually interested in."

Joshua Benton: No, I completely agree. I'm not being critical. It was just interested in the context of your competition with The Times, in that there are a lot of things that I have a hard time imagining running on The Times, because The Times, I think, The Times self-image is a bit different and more sitting up straight and....

Marty Baron: Uh, yeah, maybe so. And that's fine. I think we should have an identity that's different from The Times. We don't need to replicate The Times—

Joshua Benton: Absolutely.

Marty Baron: —in every way and every form. There already is a Times. So, why do we need to be The New York Times?

Joshua Benton: I'm not being critical.

Marty Baron: So, we can.... No, I'm just responding to your question. I'm not interpreting it as criticism. And so, I think that we need to create an identity of our own, and our identity is probably more populous than The Times is.

Joshua Benton: Which matches lower-priced subscription, broader scale, and a variety of things there.

Marty Baron: Yeah.

Joshua Benton: Yeah. You are one of the relatively few people—maybe the only person—who has been working at two different newspapers when they were purchased by billionaires, sort of swooping in times of comparative difficulty.

Marty Baron: What's the other one?

Joshua Benton: The Globe.

Marty Baron: I wasn't there when the acquisition took place.

Joshua Benton: Oh.

Marty Baron: So, I was, uh.... That acquisition took place at the same time—essentially the same time as when Jeff Bezos bought The Post, so....

Joshua Benton: My apologies. I should fact check Buzz myself. It does seem though—we were talking about local news elsewhere—that a lot of cities are finding that there seems to be a choice. You can either be owned by a chain that is owned by a private equity firm that doesn't seem particularly interested in the journalistic ideals of good stewardship of a local media institution or you can look for a local rich person to hopefully sweep you up. And, you know, we're seeing that works out really well in some cases. We also have Sheldon Adelson buying the Las Vegas paper in some cases. The folks in Denver at The Post are very much hoping that there will be someone swooping in. As you look over the local newspaper landscape, is it really going to come down to that sort of—you're either going to have a kind of terrible financially-focused owner or it's going to be someone powerful in town who wants to buy it up?

Marty Baron: I don't know. I mean, I don't think there's any one answer. I mean, I remember when people said that the only answer was to—they were totally opposed to public ownership, OK? That was until they got private ownership. Then they thought that was the terrible thing. So, you didn't like public ownership? Like publicly traded companies? Wait till you get private equity firms owning you. So, we should be careful what we—what we ask for. So, I think it can be good either way and it can be bad either way. I mean, it can be bad. It can be bad with a publicly traded company. It can be bad with a private equity firm. It can be bad with a one individual owner who doesn't have the right values and has no ideas for how to

actually build a business. But it can also be good under all of those circumstances as well. So much depends on the person who is there.

I mean, we've been incredibly fortunate to have someone who is very much committed to our mission, who has been willing to experiment, finance things that we want to try, and is very long-term oriented. I mean, when I... During one meeting that Jeff had with the staff, he talked about, he used this phrase, "In 20 years." In 20 years. I guarantee you that I have never in my life in this business heard a publisher and owner or anybody talk about in 20 years.

Joshua Benton: It's at best the next year.

Marty Baron: I've heard about the next quarter and the next year and maybe that. That's about it. But in 20 years. And I'm very grateful to have someone who thinks in terms of, "What is our long-term future? Where do we want to be?" And I think that's what we need in the profession. I don't know... I worry about where it's going. I mean, when I was at The Globe, it was put up for sale, but they had then decided not to sell. And there was a private equity group interested. And I did sit in on a due diligence meeting for that, and I was petrified with what I was hearing from the private equity firm. And it was not—it did not suggest a very good future for The Boston Globe had they acquired us. So, I mean, I think a lot depends on the people involved. We've had plenty of instances of wealthy people buying news organizations and they haven't done a good job. And then there are other instances where they have, and they have done a good job. And there aren't enough, probably, wealthy people out there who want to buy news organizations.

Joshua Benton: They're not evenly distributed around the country.

Marty Baron: Yeah, and there's sort of a bad history. You know, there's the joke out there that's like, what do you call a billionaire who bought a newspaper? A millionaire. [laughter] So, so, that's been the joke. And so, there are not a lot of billionaires that really want to be millionaires.

Joshua Benton: Right.

Marty Baron: That's not how they became billionaires. So, they get a little nervous given what they've seen.

Joshua Benton: Yeah.

Marty Baron: But those who have good ideas on how to build a business, you know, I hope there are more.

Joshua Benton: I want to make sure that we have time to get to questions. So, but I'll skip over a few of my questions. But is there any part of you that is concerned that the shift towards ever-tighter paywalls poses some sort of risk for that information ecosystem that you're talking about? You know, The Times went

from 20 articles a month to ten to five. The Globe is now at two articles a month. Are we right to be concerned about that and access to news?

Marty Baron: I think no. I think that's the way to go, actually. I think that people are going to have to pay. I mean, the reality is that the advert--.... Look, I mean, we worry about everything. We're the most worrying profession out there. I mean, if it's all supported by advertising, we say, "Well, isn't that a problem, because the advertisers are going to influence your news?" And then if we say, "Well, OK, we're going to charge," then people say, "Well, aren't you limiting access to news?" I mean, what do we want exactly? I'm not quite sure.

Joshua Benton: Money, I think, is what we want.

Marty Baron: Free money with no strings attached. And, "People, just give us your money. Just give us your money." [laughter] Well, sadly, that's not the way the world works. And we need to earn money one way or another. And so, subscriptions has been key to our financial turnaround. It's been key to the success of The New York Times. It's been a huge benefit to places like The New Yorker, I think, and other magazines. I think that it probably is at the heart of what needs to be done at many local news organizations. And I think people need to understand they need to pay. And by the way, that's what people have historically done with newspapers. You actually, in order to read the newspaper, you actually had to buy it.

Now I remember, when we focused more on print editions, that there would always be these people who would — they'd walk up to the box where you could buy the newspaper, and they would sit there, and they would peer in, and they would read the headlines. [laughter] And they would never.... And you'd sit there and say, "Put a quarter in the box!" [laughter] "It's just a quarter. Put it in the box." And they wouldn't. And you just wanted to go up to them and shake them. It was like, "It cost you so much to put a quarter in to buy the newspaper? For God's sakes!"

Joshua Benton: But now it's \$2.00.

Marty Baron: And now we have—and now we have those people, and they just do it on the web. They won't put their quarter in the box. So, I mean, we still need people to pay. And I think that people need—the public needs to understand that if they want to have real journalism, it needs to be paid for.

Joshua Benton: Yeah.

Marty Baron: So, I'm not so worried about it.

Joshua Benton: OK. People want to start lining up? I have one last question for you. If you have questions for Marty Baron. I assume some people do. I could keep on going. It's fine. I don't know that I've ever seen media Twitter happier than the day in November when you published the story about Project Veritas trying to sting The Washington Post by planting a woman who was claiming to be a victim of Roy

Moore and then The Washington Post counter-sting, I suppose, would be one way to put it. It just felt like 10,000 layoffs had all been taken off our shoulders and the media was happy again. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about your role in that and how you learned about it. At what stage did you know that this was going on? And did you have a bunch of glee-filled cackles like I did?

Marty Baron: Well, we were pleased. [laughter] So, uh, the, uh.... We had created, as part of our expansion over the past year, we created a rapid response investigative team. Prior to that, of course, Stephanie McCrummen had been down in Alabama. She had come on.... She had been told that there were—that Roy Moore had sort of gone after teenage girls. She then found them. She talked to them. They agreed to ultimately have their nicknames used. Beth Reinhard, from the Rapid Response Team, joined her in that reporting effort. And we kind of suspected that there might be someday they would try to trap us, because that's what people do these days. And along came this woman who said that she had carried Roy Moore's child, given birth to this child. I forget whether she said she had a.... Anyway, she had his child. And so, she.... Beth had interviewed her and asked her the normal questions that we would ask in order to vet somebody, and she wasn't really able to answer them, and she got—she said—the woman said, "I think you're too aggressive. I want to talk to the other reporter."

And so, at that point, I was sort of informed about what was going on and that we needed to make a decision about whether to do a video of this, and whether we would sort of turn the tables here. And we didn't know that it was Project Veritas at the time. And it was like, "Yeah, let's do it." And so we went from there. And then as you know, from that video, Stephanie was asking her who she was associated with. I have no idea why she didn't ask, "Are you associated with Project Veritas?" But she didn't ask particularly [about] Project Veritas. And then, we were able to see her ID. To verify her identity, we asked to see her ID. So, we had her ID. And then we were able to track down where she lived. And she lived in Connecticut. We looked at where that was. We looked at where the Project Veritas headquarters was. Said, "Maybe she works for Project Veritas." And then, you know, it's like, "Is it okay if we stake her out?" "Absolutely."

So, we went up there. We saw that her.... We saw the car in the driveway. We were there on Monday when she was to go to work, and then we had a car positioned at Project Veritas headquarters. She starts to leave, you know, it's just like out of the movies or something. But it's, and sure enough, she goes to Project Veritas. And then it's like, "Hey, she entered the building," and it's like, "This is done." And then we're just waiting for the head of Project Veritas to show up.

Joshua Benton: Right. It made a lot of people happy. Made me very happy. A question right over here.

Kevin: I'm Kevin. As we enter this era of increased attention to platform accountability, I'm wondering how much attention are you dedicating to that? Both in terms of editorial decisions about these companies whose names are floating right behind your head, like Google, Facebook, and for that matter Amazon, in

terms of editorial interest, and then in terms of the tools and the different techniques that you'll need to use, which are fundamentally different in some cases from the traditional reporting that you need to do.

Marty Baron: I'm not sure I fully understand the question, but look, in terms of the reporting stuff, we're reporting aggressively on all of these issues of accountability. We have a sizeable technology team and a technology policy team that we've actually expanded in the last year, and this is a primary area of coverage for us. In terms of the, you know, the tools, obviously, we're still on all of these platforms. They're very important to us. We still partner with these organizations in various ways. And, you know, our encouragement to them is that they should — I mean, what we think is that they ought to pay more attention to the news organizations that actually do real reporting, as opposed to those that don't. Those that actually have a record of and a commitment to verification, as opposed that don't. And that, as I said before, requires some editorial judgment on their part. I think some have been willing to do that. I think Apple has been much more—certainly been highly selective about who is going to appear on their platform, and particularly, who's in left of home and that sort of thing. Facebook less so, but beginning to pay more attention to it. And I think Google has actually made—seems to be making really good progress in terms of how it's going to—who's going to be elevated in search results based on a whole bunch of criteria. And I think search results are—at least my impression is that they are getting better in that sense.

Joshua Benton: Yes.

Robert Rivard: Hi, Marty. Robert Rivard from the Rivard Report.

Marty Baron: Hi. How are you?

Robert Rivard: Good to see you.

Marty Baron: I can barely see you.

Robert Rivard: I wonder if you'd share with us how you feel Hollywood did on Spotlight with the great work you guys did at The Boston Globe on the Catholic Church. And I wonder if you think there's more to that story still. And since coming to The Washington Post, whether or not you're digging into that at all.

Marty Baron: Well, I wouldn't tell you what we're digging into, Bob. [laughter]

Robert Rivard: Trust me. [laughter]

Marty Baron: Any more than I would share subscription numbers with you. [laughter] But look, I think they did a really good job of capturing the thrust of how that investigation unfolded. They did a tremendous amount of research. Josh Singer, who was one of the cowriters on that, is a graduate of both Harvard Business School and Harvard Law School. He went through every single court

document. He literally went through all the emails that Walter Robinson, the head of the Spotlight team, had saved. I didn't know he was saving my emails, but—and I might have been concerned about it, but now I'm delighted. So, they just did a tremendous amount of research. I mean, I think it's important to remember that it's not a documentary. It's a movie. So, there is creative license in the movie, but I think the creative license that was used was designed for the purpose of pointing out a bigger truth or a bigger theme that emerged during the course of the investigation.

I do think there's plenty to—that The Globe has continued to do a lot of work on that front. And they did a big series. Michael Rezendes was involved in a big series about a priest who had had kids. And I think one of the key areas continues to be the issue of accountability on the part of—for bishops who were aware the abuse and allowed it to continue. And that's something that the church has really struggled to deal with, and continues to struggle with, and I'm not sure has changed all that much even under the current Pope. You saw that the other day that the Pope actually apologized for what he had said regarding a priest in Chile. And so there's a lot of work to be done there. And the structures that the church, the Vatican, had set up to deal with bishop accountability went essentially nowhere for a long period of time. And then a.... What did he call it at the time? It was some sort of commission that was — it was basically disbanded because nobody had been named to it. Now, they're trying again. We'll see if anything happens. So, yeah, I think there's a lot—there's a lot that could be done.

Robert Rivard: Good to see you. Good to have you here.

Marty Baron: Good to see you.

Man: Next question here going back to your earlier statement that our job isn't to go to war with the administration. Our job is just to do our job. But it seems like we're facing an adversary of a hostile foreign government, a hostile administration, and 40 years of conditioning to view, quote/unquote, "mainstream media" as the enemy, as not worthy of trust, and as has often been written about, to destroy the very idea that there is such a thing as truth. Is doing our jobs enough?

Marty Baron: Well, I didn't say that that was the answer to the broader question that you're asking. I'm saying that that's what we need to do in the moment. No, it's not enough. I don't think it's just going to resolve itself. I think that there are.... I'm not sure I have the answer to how this is going to....

Man: Oh, damn it! If not you, who? [laughter]

Marty Baron: Well, somebody smarter. But, you know, I think there are things that we can do, that we can try to do. I don't think that.... Well, we're in a tribal atmosphere here. I mean, so it's either you're that tribe or you're this tribe. And if you're in that tribe, I don't believe anything you say. I don't trust you at all unless you're 100% in my tribe. It's very hard to deal with that, that kind of environment. I do think that we need to talk more about who we are. I think that we.... I mean,

there's this conception that people who, let's say, work for organizations like ours, that everybody there is from some sort of coastal elite, which is just not true. And so, I mean, we have people who've served in the military, who've been through combat. We have people who grew up on small farms in Western Pennsylvania or South Carolina. We have people who went to evangelical colleges. We have a person on the staff who grew up in a home of, you know, she was the oldest of 12 kids. She was homeschooled. I mean, we have a lot of different kind of people in our news organization, and we want to have people with—a wide variety of people.

I think people need to understand us. And so, we need to be more open about that. We also need to be a lot more open about our work. That was discussed a little earlier about being more transparent about our work and showing more of our work than we have to date. But I'm not.... And we also need, as a society, we need to foster some higher level of news literacy. We need to train people to be much more critical consumers of information than they currently are. And that is a long-term—that's a long-term proposition, a very long-term proposition. But if we're going to get there, we better start now. That needs to be incorporated into the schools, into middle school, high school, college, what-have-you.

So, I think there are a lot of things that are going to need to be done. Ultimately for us, I think that the question is, is this reporting going to be validated over the long-run? Does it prove out to be true? So far, we're doing a pretty damn good job. You know, the things that were called fake news, guess what? They're all turning out to be absolutely true. Sometimes proven to be true within a day or two of being described as fake news.

So, you know, I mean, during Watergate, a lot of that was.... There was obviously the president at the time, Nixon, was sharply critical of the press. The press was held in low esteem. It was viewed as a partisan. The press's work was viewed through a partisan prism. But it turned out that the president had engaged in criminal activity, and the reporting that had been done was validated. And then the approval ratings for the press went up. So, I think we have to think long-term. But in the meantime, there are these other things that I hope we can do and try to make a difference.

Rosental Alves: We have just one minute, so quick question, quick answer, please.

Becca Aaronson: Hi. Becca Aaronson with The Texas Tribune. I was just wondering how your relationship with Bezos has impacted your impressions of technology and product design in the business of journalism, and how you've carried that perspective into leading the newsroom.

Marty Baron: Well, that's a good question. I think it's.... I mean, look, every time I'm involved in a conversation with him or I'm listening in on a conversation with him, I learn something. It's incredibly instructive that way. And, you know, I think that we're looking at.... I'm not sure how to describe how it affects me, except that we want to try a lot of things. Things want to be easy to use. I mean, obviously,

that comes from Amazon and, like, the idea of one-click. We're still working on, how do we get one-click for a subscription and make that as easy as possible? Simplify the process of navigation. I mean, we created this new, what we call internally, the Rainbow App, the one that's highly visual, and it just totally upended the notion of navigation on a site. And so, it's like, how do you just make it easy and make it as simple as possible? And he's constantly thinking of that, and what's going to be...? What is the impediment? What is the one thing that's just going to cause somebody to pause for a minute and say, "Do I want to take...? Do I want to go to that trouble?" And how do you eliminate that? And you just, that's a certain rigor and discipline that you just have to go through with every single product and say, "Is somebody going to be stopped here?" And if they're stopped, you know they are not going to use it. And so, I think that's something that we think about all the time.

Rosental Alves: One last quick question.

Man: [Unintelligible name] with Spanish Media Company. It was a pleasure to have you in Madrid last year. What's a priority for The Post, volume enrich or loyalty? Because The Post seems to have been trying to do both things at the same time. Yes, subscriptions, yes, paywall, but at very discounted prices, while heavy push toward social media distribution to fight the ComScore fight, I guess, but what's the priority?

Marty Baron: Right. Well, our priority over the last several years, initially, had been to try to improve our reach, because people just hadn't read The Washington Post. I mean, we started way behind The New York Times when it came to being a national news organization. The Times started its national push 17 years before we even—before we even thought about doing that, after Jeff Bezos acquired us. So, we just had to get a lot more people reading us, and experiencing us, and deciding that they liked us, and ideally get them addicted to reading us and get to the point where they thought maybe they would subscribe. We've only had our paywall since 2013, the middle of 2013. The Times had it years earlier than that. So now, our attention is.... We haven't given up on the idea of having large numbers of people read us. You know, the numbers are still quite good at The Post in terms of reach, but what we want is we want to get people to subscribe.

And why do we have tight paywalls? Because we want to get people to subscribe. And we think they should subscribe, because we're worth it. And so, that's what we're pushing for is that degree of attachment to The Post, loyalty to The Post, reading us regularly every day, and feeling that it's part of their daily news habit, and they, therefore, are willing to pay that very modest sum for a high quality news product. And we don't think that we have to price ourselves the way that The Times prices itself. So, but we do have to have a price on getting access to us.

Joshua Benton: Well, I regret that I didn't have time to make a democracy darkness joke, but thank you.

Marty Baron: Oh, was there a joke?

Joshua Benton: There might have been. Thank you very much for your time.

[Applause.]