

ISOJ 2019: Day 2, Morning Session

Keynote speaker: Matt Thompson

Chair: **Jay Rosen**, journalism professor, **New York University**, and director, **Membership Puzzle Project**

- **Matt Thompson**, editor-in-chief, **Center for Investigative Reporting** (and a contributing editor at The Atlantic)
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Jay Rosen:

Matt Thompson: Fifteen years ago, my friend Robin Sloan and I created this little short film that came to be called EPIC 2014. The anniversary of this little movie was one of the occasions that brought me to this podium today, and thank you to Rosental and the University of Texas for including me, this is such a special event.

I've always described EPIC as a brief history of the media, set ten years in the future. And so now it's the future, so how did we do?

For context, we created the first incarnation of the film in early 2004, right around the time a little site called The Facebook opened up to undergrads at Harvard. YouTube wouldn't exist for another 3 years, which meant the version of the movie we put online was a Flash movie. It was the first viral thing I ever had a hand in making. It was translated into French and German and Polish and Basque and Chinese, and mirrored by sites across the world, because that's how people dealt with online video before YouTube came around.

After the little snippet I just showed, EPIC goes on to make a number of predictions, all framed as *faits accomplis*: Google combines its services — Gmail, Docs, Google News, etc. — into the “Google Grid,” “a universal platform that provides a functionally limitless amount of storage space and bandwidth to store and share media of all kinds... Each user selects her own level of privacy. She can store her content securely on the Google Grid, or publish it for all to see.” The

movie goes on to say that Microsoft would buy the then-hot social network Friendster. Google and Amazon join forces, forming Googlezon, and checkmate Microsoft's ambitions with a platform called EPIC:

Quote: "The 'Evolving Personalized Information Construct' is the system by which our sprawling, chaotic mediascape is filtered, ordered and delivered. Everyone contributes now - from blog entries, to phone-cam images, to video reports, to full investigations. Many people get paid too - a tiny cut of Googlezon's immense advertising revenue, proportional to the popularity of their contributions."

Unquote.

Sound familiar? We updated EPIC slightly the next year in 2005, and Apple played a larger role. The interface for EPIC, imagined two years before the launch of the iPhone, was a hyperpowered mobile device we called the "WiFipod."

We got plenty of details wrong in our speculative future, but all that is to say, in the years since EPIC was released, we've gotten the same question, a few times over. "How does it feel to have told the future?"

I can't speak for Robin, but I have an answer: It feels bad! We didn't want to tell the future. The movie was intended to be a warning. The 2014 version ends with this ambiguous statement: "But perhaps there was another way." When we showed the movie, we usually followed it up with a conversation about how we might avoid this future.

We were working at the Poynter Institute at the time. Every week, journalists would come to learn hallowed secrets from masters of the trade, handed down for generations. No one seemed to be aware that our world was about to be royally upended. The things that were happening with Google and Friendster and Microsoft and Amazon and what-have-you were treated as though they were in a domain outside of journalism, and that anyone who really cared about reporting could just put their head in the sand and nosh on that shoe leather or whatever, and that they'd be fine. Just watch out for the cocoa butter cops. 'Cause, you know, sand.

They were not fine. This is not fine. This is as bad a time for the press and truth and democracy as I think has existed in my lifetime. We teeter on dystopia — an antidemocratic panopticon in which we've bartered privacy for commerce, and real information for comforting chaos. A billionaire has bankrupted a news organization. A U.S. President now labels the press the enemy of the people. A leaked stylebook apparently from a white supremacist website reflects more social media savvy than many social media guidelines from news organizations. And a good chunk of the public thinks that journalists did as much as anyone to bring this all about.

And this is what I want to spend the rest of this talk on. See, there is one major thing I now think we got wrong in EPIC 2014 and 2015. I think we started the clock way too late. And we focused on a technological story, at the expense of a political one.

Tom Rosenstiel made this point yesterday, but it can't be said enough: By the time Robin and I made our little movie, trust in the press had been steadily withering for decades. The 2000s and 2010s would see that trust shrink to historic lows, but the long trendline was really clear. And yes, this correlates with a broad decline in trust in institutions, but the longer I've been in this profession, the more I think leaning on that correlation lets us off the hook.

I want to make the case that that the period taught to me as the golden age of the press was in fact when the seeds of its undoing were laid. That while there is much to learn from that "golden age," there is a whole lot to unlearn, and that many more valuable lessons lie in the era that came before it. I don't believe we can invent the future by looking backwards. But I don't believe we can improve the future unless we can genuinely understand our history. So let me take a clear-eyed look at the period before EPIC, and then let's brush away the cobwebs of a somewhat deeper past.

From the time I began my career, I was told the history of our industry this way: there were the dark ages, and then there was Watergate, and that began a golden era of the professional press, when news organizations, flush with cash, aflame with public support, sent correspondents into every nook and cranny of the globe,

uncovering injustice, giving voice to the voiceless, and fostering world peace. We all watched Walter Cronkite, who spoke universal and unquestioned truths, and represented everybody. Then USA Today and cable news came along and made everything about photos and weather maps and, soon enough, millennials, marking an end to the age of the linotype machine and the pica pole. And what, after all, is public discourse without pica poles, I ask you?

I exaggerate. Obviously every journalist of the period would acknowledge problems, but I was definitely told that the late '60s through the early '90s was the golden age of the press. Yet when I started working for news outlets, around the country, I more often encountered skepticism from our communities than appreciation, after this so-called golden age. I felt that lack of trust seeping from the public everywhere I went.

I could be out in Southwest Fresno, reporting on a predominantly black neighborhood that was thrilled because they were getting an ATM — the first access to banking services they had since the neighborhood dried up, after being cut off from downtown by a highway; thanks, redlining and white flight! —and people would look at me like, “Huh, we don’t see none of you around here too often.” (They meant journalists, by the way, not black people.)

Every city I worked in had a different pejorative nickname for its newspaper. I grew up with the Orlando Slantinel. The Fresno Bee was sometimes the Fresno D-Minus, or the Fresno E for Effort. In Minneapolis, when I worked at the Star Tribune, folks from the area would say [MN accent] Oh ya, you’re working for the Red Star now, are ya?

The Red Star. That’s the one I want to stick with. When I brought these nicknames back to my elders in the newsroom, this is the defense they tried to arm me with: <derisive laugh> *Oh, we get it from both sides.*

Both sides. The naivete and arrogance embedded in that defense is, like, heartwarming, to use a Southern compliment. It’s like, *bless your heart, no wonder no one takes you seriously, you think there are only two sides.*

And furthermore, you think that earning the enmity of everybody is secretly a long-term strategy for restoring trust. *If we just keep pissing them all off, eventually they will love us again.* Or the slightly more nuanced strategy of the national press: *If we learn how to piss a giant portion of them off in a way that leaves the others feeling really self-satisfied, then maybe those others will sign up for memberships!*

The Red Star. I wanted to know where the nickname came from, particularly given that any actual would-be socialists among my friends considered the Star Tribune fully an organ of the business class. And so I looked into my paper's history, and I uncovered a media ecosystem from a century prior, from the alleged dark ages, that was unlike anything I've ever encountered in any city in the country.

As media scholars, many of you will know this: In the early 20th century, before the advent of television news, newspaper penetration approached 130 percent. That is, the average household at one point subscribed to 1.3 newspapers. That high-water mark was in the 1940s, but I want to take us to a little earlier than that: 1920, almost exactly a century ago. That was the year the Minneapolis Star was born.

There were a bunch of papers in the Twin Cities at this time — St. Paul and Minneapolis each had major dailies, there was an Irish Catholic paper, a Jewish paper, a black paper. But in 1920, the city's first Socialist mayor, Thomas Van Lear, had just left office, and he thought there was something missing — there was no outlet that spoke for or to the city's farmer-laborer class. If you know Minnesota, you know the farmers and laborers loom large in state lore. Its extension of the Democratic Party is, to this day, the Democrat-Farmer-Laborer Party, the DFL. So Van Lear teamed up with a local labor journalist named Herbert Gaston, and the two scrapped together some capital to start this newspaper.

I'll quote from their founding argument in the first edition of the paper. Right up front, they're responding to the criticism that they intend to make a "class publication," a criticism they say "shows that many persons are unconscious of the fact that almost without exception the existing dailies are themselves class publications of an extraordinarily dangerous and insidious kind, and that all of them are political in their nature and effect. Political policy, industrial policy, social policy shape their editorial expression and tinge and corrupt their news

columns ... The control over the commercialized city press is a financial control, and financial control is notoriously concentrated, notoriously irreconcilable with the broad public interest.

“But the Star is not to be a class publication, nor are its interests primarily political. They will extend to every phase of human life and will be directed toward bettering conditions social, economic, and moral — where its influence can be used effectively — as well as in the channels of political issues.

“But the Star WILL BE ‘political’ in this sense — that it does not despair of the improvement of political conditions and political institutions. It will stand for the improvement of political conditions and political institutions by political means. It will set itself steadily against violence. It will seek to promote those reforms most likely to avert the dangers of destructive revolution. It will set itself to the task of combatting repression, persecution, and exploitation ... It will not seek by lies to allay discontent where discontent is real and well founded; nor to gloss over and deny evils where genuine evils exist.”

“Primarily the Star is going to be a newspaper, a newspaper which endeavors to report the news accurately and to give those who have an interesting, pertinent and sincere opinion to express, a chance to express it. In doing that it will especially want to open its columns to those whose point of view and whose argument or defense has never been presented fairly hitherto.”

Whatever you think of the Star’s founding argument, step back for a moment, and consider the media ecosystem here. I’ve been a journalist in Boston, in St. Pete, Florida, in Fresno, California, in Columbia, Missouri, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in Washington, D.C. I have never lived in a city where the media were truly plural, where the city spoke to and about itself in so many different voices, and when you could choose a paper that spoke to and for you, and used the tools of journalism to create accountability for your polity’s interests in the public sphere.

I spent some time in this ecosystem, just because I wanted to feel what it was like, when the arguments the media gave voice to over the direction of a city were as

rich and vibrant as the arguments we now only attend to on the national level. I can tell you: it was very different.

On the day the Minneapolis Star started publishing, Thursday, August 19, 1920, the story that got the most ink in the paper was electric street car fares. To the Minneapolis Morning Tribune that day, this was, like, a mildly notable issue, occasioning a brief report that St. Paul was going to act on an expert's recommendation to raise street car prices from 5 cents to 6 cents. I can just bet you that if I spoke to the editors there, at that time, they'd be like, "Listen, we've covered the street fare hike, we all knew this was going to happen, we've been covering it in the run-up to the vote, and we can't dedicated 20 inches to it every day."

But to the Minneapolis Star, this was a huge deal, a 20 percent fare hike that hit lower- and middle-class workers far harder than the automobile-owning gentry? While the Tribune dispensed with the issue in a few paltry inches, the Star went deep that day on coverage: from straight-ahead news reports, to impassioned editorials and columns. And it was back the next day. And you can be sure it was loud on the issue in the aftermath of the fare hike.

It was fascinating to see that issue on the front page of that paper that day. Because if you go to Minneapolis to this day, you will find that the city's lack of a viable public transit infrastructure outside the very limited light rail, is a huge deal, a hindrance both to employers and to residents. And many of those residents will tell you that the city once had a thriving electric street car system, but that a conspiracy between corrupt politicians and automakers brought an end to those street cars. Transit scholars will tell you that there are only elements of the truth in that story, that the demise of street cars in the Twin Cities and across the country was a more nuanced, complex issue than even the Star did justice to.

But the thing is, reading this coverage, I started to care about this story. I just got a dose of what it would feel like to be in a city that spoke in so many different voices to itself, and it was electrifying. I began to see why people would subscribe to 1.3 newspapers, on average. That flora of coverage on the local level represented a far more interesting fight than our endless wranglings over the stasis of federal politics

today. If this street car thing feels wonky to you, trust that it felt vivid to me. I wanted to keep reading, to see what would happen; I found myself rooting for the Star, to dig deeper, to tell us what would happen with the street cars, to keep up that coverage as private automobiles quickly started to build market share among predominantly white, middle-class car owners who didn't need a green book to get around, and began to decamp from the city's urban core into suburbs, redesigning the metro area to favor highways and surface parking, severing poor black neighborhoods from the city center, and the banking, jobs, and nightlife it contained.

But instead, although the Star managed to build an audience, it was frozen out by advertisers from the city's business class, and went bankrupt in 1924. There's more than one way for a billionaire to bankrupt a news organization. Big newspapers were nothing if not cash-rich, and like any cash-rich industry, newspapers went on a massive M&A spree over the course of the 20th century, during their "golden age." The family that owned the Minneapolis Morning Tribune, bought the Star, the Minneapolis Times, and the Minneapolis Journal, and in 1982, all the papers get rolled up into my paper, the Star Tribune.

I suspect that in every one of those acquisitions, the voice of a distinct paper was dimmed, and the city's media ecosystem became slightly more monocultural — one view of truth, one sense of news judgment, one company with a somewhat expanded subscriber base, but that spoke in less and less clear terms to or for a particular polity. And I bet the business-minded readers of the Minneapolis Morning Tribune did not like it when their paper acquired the Socialist Star. I bet they started to detect a miasma of liberal woolly-headedness infecting their previously sensible breakfast reading, and their coffee tasted more foul as they read the headlines: "Oh, see it's been going downhill ever since it acquired the Red Star. I don't even know if I should keep subscribing."

Not incidentally, as all those papers bought each other up, in the golden age of the press, as the chains that compose our industry grew larger and larger, it grew more and more possible for a weakened business model to fell hundreds of papers at once. How does this story relate to EPIC 2014? If I were to remake that movie today, I would have to draw the frame much wider. The road to 2019 did not begin

in 1989, when Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web. It did not even begin, I'm sure, after the last Gilded Age, when socialist mayors were running cities and starting newspapers.

But the road *from* 2019 must be able to imagine 1920. Envision what it felt like to have media — plural media — that spoke to you and on your behalf. If we've learned too belatedly that advertising is no longer an endless money pump, and we're to rebuild an industry on market mechanisms like philanthropy and membership, then we must recognize this new industry will be built on passion — our passion for our audiences, their passion for the work we do, a tangible sense that they are caught up in something larger than themselves, and that that something is democracy. The public will only support our work if they perceive that doing so is a more effective way of participating in our democracy than sharing something on Facebook.

Journalists inculcated in the values of the golden age tend to instantly make a few illogical inferences from this point: for example, that I'm arguing for a partisan press. That particular leap reflects the same type of naivete about our politics that marks the "both sides" defense: if you don't understand at this point that the conflicts within America's political parties are as significant as the conflicts between them, I really don't know what to tell you. Like, have you been following politics?

Or people ask if I mean to make journalists advocates. And to that I say journalism inherently involves some advocacy, whether for particular news judgments, or for a fair-minded, fact-driven pursuit of truth as the best vehicle for democratic accountability and progress between elections.

We must recognize that as journalists, we are political actors. If you contend that a mutual peace is a precondition for mutual prosperity, that is a political position, and the reverse is as well. If you downplay the strong and striking tension between the two, you're indulging your naivete at the expense of your regard for truth. We are political actors. We share a desire to procure for the public the fullest and fairest airing of relevant truths, but we must understand that the premises we deploy to pursue those truths influence the facts we decide to uncover, the stories

we decide to tell, and the perspectives we decide to foreground. If we consider to perceive ourselves as outside the democratic system, the public will continue to increasingly perceive us as detached from it, and therefore irrelevant to it. We can be independent of parties, but we cannot be independent of the public. We must represent the public, and we must be perceived as doing so.

And that is why we require an ecosystem. We cannot speak to or for our many overlapping polities — or equally represent the public’s competing interests — with one voice. Let me echo a prior panelist this morning, Jim Brady: “The days of competition driving action need to end.” When I heard Tom’s anecdote yesterday about Brit Hume and Peter Jennings editing one another’s scripts, because they each came from such different political premises, I fully believe that the edits made the scripts stronger. I also wonder, though, if it didn’t mean that over time, Brit Hume felt a bit less trustable and authentic to white conservative men, and Peter Jennings didn’t feel the same to white liberals.

When I hear Tony Haile’s question about the other 98%, and when I hear Nieman Lab’s Josh Benton reminding us what a tiny percentage of media consumption now accrues to journalism, the conclusion that I draw is that journalistic truth is badly losing the attention game. Media has captured a larger and larger share of the public’s time, and journalism is capturing less and less. We will not be able to compete with Netflix and Instagram on the grounds of pure entertainment, even if our storytelling is, as it must be, absolutely top notch. We must recapture a long-moribund ability to activate the public’s passion for its own democracy, by reflecting on ourselves, in many voices, a willingness to both stoke and reflect that passion. If we don’t downright excite the public with our work, if we don’t tell stories that feel at least as true and relevant as *Black Mirror*, and also have an impact in the real world, then we will lose to *Black Mirror*.

I’m here, and I’m at the Center for Investigative Reporting, because I saw a powerful opportunity to help to cultivate a genuine ecosystem. Right now, so many journalistic resources are going to reporting on the last vanishingly small scrap of competitive terrain. We’ve got this lopsided situation where hundreds of journalists are eyeing the White House like a hawk, while our 3,000 criminal justice jurisdictions languish in twilight.

Can we learn the lessons of the Panama Papers and ICIJ on the domestic scale, to cover giant, impossible stories like climate change, mass incarceration, and under-prosecuted financial corruption from a thousand vantage points? Can we invent a media ecosystem so relevant that 130% of American households see themselves in the news? That would be the best of times. If that's the press you want to build, here I am, let's build together.

Thank you.

ISOJ 2019: Day 2, Afternoon Session

Keynote Speaker: Matt Thompson

- Matt Thompson, editor-in-chief, **Center for Investigative Reporting** (and a contributing editor at The Atlantic)

Rosental Alves: Welcome back. This is great to have you here. And we're going to go straight to the two hour keynote and I'm going to ask Jay Rosen to introduce Matt. So Jay. I'm going to do this Saturday Night Live style. Ladies and gentlemen Matt Thompson.

Matt Thompson: So 15 years ago my friend Robin Sloan and I created this little short film that came to be called Epic twenty fourteen. The anniversary of this little movie is one of the occasions that brought me to this podium today and thank you to Rosenthal all the University of Texas for including me. This is such a special event. I've always described epic as a brief history of the media set 10 years in the future. And so now it's the future. So how did we do?

[00:01:02] **Thompson:** For context we created the first incarnation of this little video in early 2004 right around the time that a little site called The Facebook opened up to Harvard undergrads. YouTube wouldn't exist for another three years which meant the version of the movie we put online was a flash movie. It was the first viral thing I ever had a hand in making. It was translated into French and German and Polish and bask in Chinese and mirrored by sites across the world because that is how people dealt with online video before YouTube came around.

[00:01:35] **Thompson** I'm going to show just a snippet of it a couple minutes to get a flavor of it. Well I have much to say. This is from the 2015 version of the movie Epic 2015 as I'll say we've made an updated version a year after the original one launched. We made an updated version just because the view is moving so fast we like to get the news. .

[00:02:25] **Thompson** Yes. We also had a more optimistic ending. Yes. The movie ends.

[00:02:33] **Audio from Epic 2015** Imaginable in an earlier age. I just watch. It was the best of times. It is the worst of times in the year 2015. People have access to a breadth and depth of information unimaginable in an earlier age. Everyone contributes in some way, participating to create a living. Breathing. Media escape. However the press as you know it has ceased to exist. The Board the state's fortunes have waned. Twentieth century news organizations are in after.

But not too distant past. The road to 2015 began in the late 20th century. In 1989 Tim Berners Lee was a computer scientist at the CERN particle physics laboratory in Switzerland. Invents the worldwide web. Amazon.com was founded in 1994. Its young creator dreams of a store that sells everything. Amazon's model which will come to set the standard for Internet sales is built on automated personalized recommendations. A store that can make suggestions. In 1998 two Stanford programmers unleashed Google. Their algorithm echoes the logic of Amazon. It treats links as recommendations. And from that foundation I was the world's fastest and most effective search engine. In 1999, a .com named pirate Babs. Unveils Blogger, a personal publishing tool. Friendster arrived on the scene in 2002. There are hundreds of thousands of young people rushing to be populated with an incredibly detailed catalog of their lives, their interests and their social network. So. After this little snippet epic goes on to make a number of predictions all framed as fit the complete Google combines all of its services Gmail Docs Google News etc into the Google grid a universal platform that provides a functionally limitless amount of storage space and bandwidth to store and share media of all kinds.

[00:04:52] **Thompson** Each user selects their own level of privacy. She can store her content securely on the Google grid or publish it for all to see. The movie goes on to say that Microsoft would buy the then hot social network Friendster. Google and Amazon join forces forming Google's on and checkmate. Microsoft's ambitions with a platform called Epic, quote, the evolving personalized information construct is the system by which our sprawling chaotic media scape is filtered, ordered and delivered. Everyone contributes now from blog entries to phone came images to video reports to full investigations. Many people get paid a tiny cut of Google's on's immense advertising revenue proportional to the popularity of their contributions. It Sounds familiar. We updated Epic slightly the next year in 2005 and Apple played a larger role in the interface for Epic 2015. Imagine two years ago, I'm proud to say, before the launch of the iPhone was a hyper powered mobile device, we called the Wi-Fi iPod. We've got plenty of details wrong in this speculative future but all that is to say in the years since Epic was released we've gotten the same question a few times over. How does it feel to have gotten so much right? I can't speak for Robin. But I have an answer. It feels bad. We did not want to tell the future. This movie was intended to be a warning. The 2013 version ends with this ambiguous statement. But perhaps there was another way when we showed the movie we usually followed it up with a conversation about how we might avoid this future.

[00:06:30] **Thompson** We were working at the Poynter Institute at the time. Every week journalists would come to learn hallowed secrets from masters of the trade handed down for generations. No one seemed to be aware or talking about the fact that our world was going to be royally upended. The things that were happening with Google and Microsoft and Friendster and Amazon and what have you were treated as though they were in a domain outside of journalism and that anyone who really cared about reporting could just put their head in the sand and nosh on that shoe leather and whatever and they'd just be fine. Just watch out for the cocoa butter cups

because you know sand. They were not fine. This is not fine. This is as bad a time for the present truth as in democracy as I think has existed in my lifetime. We teeter on dystopia an anti-democratic Panopticon in which we barter privacy for commerce and real information for comforting chaos. A billionaire has bankrupted a news organization and a US president now labels the press the enemy of the people. A leaked stylebook apparently from a white supremacist Web site reflects more social media savvy than the social media guidelines of many news organizations and a good chunk of the public thinks that journalists did as much as anyone to bring this all about. And so this is what I wanted to spend my talk on. See, there are a few major things that I think we got wrong in Epic 2014 and 2015. First of all I think we started the clock way too late and we focused on a technological story at the expense of a political one. Tom Rosenstiel made this point yesterday but it can't be said enough by the time Robin and I made this little movie that trust in the press had been steadily withering for decades. The 2000s and 2010s would see that trust shrink to historic level lows. But the long trend line was really clear. And yes this correlates with a broad decline in trust in institutions. But the longer I've been in this profession the more I think that leaning on that correlation lets us off the hook. I want to make the case that the period taught to me as the golden age of the press was in fact when the seeds of our undoing were laid. While there is much to learn from that golden age there is also a lot to unlearn and there are a lot of lessons in the era that came before it. I don't believe we can invent the future by looking backwards but I don't believe we can improve the future unless we have a genuine understanding of our history. So let's take a clear eyed look at the period before Epic and then let's brush away the cobwebs of a somewhat deeper past from the time I began my career. I was told the history of our industry this way.

[00:08:57] **Thompson** There were the dark ages and then there was Watergate and that began a golden era of the professional press when news organizations flush with cash aflame with public support sent correspondents into every nook and cranny of the globe uncovering injustice giving voice to the voiceless and fostering world peace. We all watched Walter Cronkite speak universal and unquestioned truths and represented everybody then USA Today and cable news came along and made everything about photos and weather maps and soon enough millennials marking an age to the era of the Linotype machine and the pike pole and what after all is public discourse without pay. Pulls I ask you. Obviously every journalist would acknowledge the period would acknowledge problems but I was definitely told that the late 60s through the early 90s was the golden age of the press.

[00:09:44] **Thompson** Yet when I started working for news organizations around the country I more often encountered skepticism just after this golden age from our communities than appreciation. I think that lack of trust seeping from the public everywhere I went I could be out in southwest Fresno reporting on a predominantly black neighborhood that was thrilled because they were getting an A.T.M. the first access to banking services they had since the neighborhood dried up after being cut off from downtown by a highway. Thanks to redlining and white flight

people would look at me like how we don't see you around here too often and even journalists by the way. Every city I worked in had a different pejorative nickname for its newspaper. I grew up with the Orlando Sentinel, not the Fresno Bee. It was sometimes the Fresno D minus or the Fresno E for effort. In Minneapolis. When I worked at the Star Tribune people from the area would say. Oh yeah you're looking for the Red Star in L.A.. The Red Star. That's the one I want to stick with. When I brought these nicknames back to my elders in the newsroom this is the defense they tried to arm me with. We get it from both sides.

[00:10:53] **Thompson** Both sides. The naivete and arrogance embedded in that defense is like almost heartwarming to use a Southern compliment. Bless your heart. No wonder no one takes you seriously. You think there are only two sides and furthermore you think that earning the end money of everybody is secretly a long term strategy for restoring trust. We just keep pissing them all off and eventually they will love us again. And the slightly more nuanced strategy of the national press: if we learn to piss a giant portion of them off in a way that leaves the others feeling really self-satisfied then maybe those others will sign up for memberships. The Red Star. I wanted to know where the nickname came from. Particularly given that any actual would be socialist among my friends considered the Star Tribune fully an organ of the business class and so I looked into my paper's history and I uncovered a media ecosystem from a century prior from the alleged dark ages. That was so unlike anything I've ever encountered in any city in the country. As media scholars most of you will know this. In the early 20th century before the advent of television news newspaper penetration approached 130%. That is the average household at one point subscribed to one point three newspapers. That high watermark was in the 1940s. But I want to take us to a little earlier than 1920, almost exactly a century ago. That was the year the Minneapolis Star was born. There were a bunch of papers in the Twin Cities at this time St. Paul Minneapolis. Each had major dailies. There was an Irish Catholic paper, a Jewish paper, a Black paper, a Swedish language paper. Minnesota around the turn of the 20th century had more than 100 languid hundred non English newspapers. But in 1920 the city's first Socialist Mayor Thomas Van Lier had just left office and he thought there was something missing. There was no outlet that spoke to or for the city's farmer labor or class. If you know Minnesota you know the farmers and laborers loom large in state law; its extension of the Democratic Party is to this day the Democratic Party faint Farmer Labor Party the DFL. So Van Lier teamed up with a local labor journalist named Herbert Gaston and the two scraped together some capital to start this newspaper. I'll quote from their founding argument in the first edition of the paper right up front they're responding to the criticism that they intend to make a class publication a criticism they say quote, "shows that many persons are conscious of the fact that almost without exception the existing dailies are themselves class publications. An extraordinarily dangerous and insidious kind and that all of them are political in their nature and affect political policy industrial policy social policy shaped their editorial expression and tinge and corrupt their news columns. The control over the commercialized city presses a financial control and financial control is notoriously concentrated. The terrorists the irreconcilable with the broad public interest. The start

is not to be a class publication. Nor is interest primarily political, they say. But the story will be political in the sense that it does not despair of the improvement of political conditions and political institutions. It will stand for the improvement of political institutions and political conditions by political means. It will not seek by lies to alter discontent with discontent is real and well-founded. Nor to gloss over and deny evils where genuine evils exist primarily. The state is going to be a newspaper which endeavors to report the news accurately and to give those who have an interesting pertinent and sincere opinion a chance to express it. In doing that it will last especially to open its columns to those whose point of view and whose argument or defense has never been presented fairly hitherto."

[00:14:26] **Thompson** Whatever you think of the Star's founding argument, step back for a moment and consider the media ecosystem here. I've been a journalist in Boston and St. Pete, Florida and Fresno, California and Columbia, Missouri and Minneapolis, Minnesota and Washington, D.C. I have never lived in a city where the media were truly plural where the city spoke to and about itself in so many different voices. And when you could choose a paper that spoke to and for you and use the tools of journalism to create accountability for your policies interests in the public sphere. I spent some time researching this ecosystem just because I wanted to feel what it was like when the arguments the media gave voice to over the direction of a city were as rich and vibrant as the arguments we now only attend to on the national level in the US.

[00:15:11] **Thompson** I can tell you it was very different on the day the Minneapolis Star started publishing Thursday August 19th 1920. The story that got the most ink in the paper was electric streetcar fares. So the Minneapolis Morning Tribune that day this was like a mildly notable issue. Occasionally a brief report that St. Paul was going to act on an expert's recommendation to raise street car prices from 5 cents to 6 cents. I can just bet you if I spoke to the editors there at that time they'd be like listen we've covered the street fare hike we all knew this was going to happen we'd been covering it in the run up to the vote and we can't dedicate 20 inches to it every day. But to the Minneapolis Star this was a huge deal. A 20 percent fare hike that hit. Middle class workers far harder than the automobile owning Gentry while the Tribune dispensed with the issue and a few paltry ish inches. The star went deep that day on coverage from straight ahead. News reports to impassioned editorials and columns. And it was back the next day. And you can be sure that it was loud on the issue in the aftermath of the fare hike. It was fascinating to see that particular issue on the front page of that paper that day because if you go to Minneapolis to this day you will find that the city's lack of a viable public transit infrastructure outside the very limited light rail is a huge deal a hindrance both to employers and to residents and many of those residents will tell you a story that the city once had a thriving electric streetcar system but that a conspiracy between corrupt politicians and automakers broke Bratton into those street cars. Transit scholars will tell you that there are only elements of truth in that story that the demise of streetcars in the Twin Cities and across the country was a more nuanced complex issue than even the started justice too.

[00:16:51] **Thompson** But the thing is reading that coverage, I started to care about this story. I just got a dose of what it would feel like to be in a city that spoke in so many different voices to itself. And it was electrifying. I began to see why people would subscribe to one point three newspapers on average. The flow of coverage on the local level represents a far more interesting fight than our endless wranglings over the status of federal politics today. If the streetcar thing feels wonky to you, trust that it felt vivid to me. I wanted to keep reading to see what would happen. I found myself rooting for the star to dig deeper to tell us what would happen with the street cars to keep up that coverage as private automobiles quickly started to build market share among predominantly white middle class car owners who didn't need a Green Book to get around and began to decamp from the city's urban core in the suburbs redesigning the metro area to favor highways and surface parking severing poor black neighborhoods from the city center and the banking jobs and nightlife it contained. But instead, although The Star managed to build an audience, it was frozen out by advertisers from the city's business class and went bankrupt in 1924. There's more than one way for a billionaire to bankrupt a news organization. Big newspapers were nothing if not cash rich. And like any cash rich industry newspapers went on a massive M and A spree over the course of the twentieth century during their golden age. The family that owned the Minneapolis Morning Tribune bought The Star, The Minneapolis Times and the Minneapolis Journal and in 1982 all the papers got rolled up into my paper, The Star Tribune.

[00:18:20] **Thompson** I suspected and every one of those acquisitions the voice of a distinct paper was dimmed and the city's media ecosystem became slightly more monocultural. One view of truth, one sense of news judgment. One company with a somewhat expanded subscriber base but that spoke in less and less clear terms to or for a particular polity. And I bet the business minded readers of the Minneapolis Morning Tribune did not like it when their paper acquired the socialist star. I bet they started to detect a miasma of liberal woolly headedness infecting their previously sensible breakfast reading and their coffee tasted more foul as they read the headlines. Oh see it's been going downhill ever since they acquired their red star. I don't even know if you should keep subscribing. Not incidentally as all those papers body each other up in the golden golden age of the press as the chains that compose our industry grew larger and larger. It grew more and more possible for a weakened business model to fill hundreds of papers at once. How does this story relate to Epic 2014? If I were to remake that story today I would have to draw the frame much wider. The road to 2019 did not begin in 1989 when Tim Berners Lee created the World Wide Web. It did not even begin I'm sure after the last Gilded Age when Socialist mayors were running cities and starting newspapers. But the road from 2019 must be able to imagine 1920. Envision what it felt like to have media plural media that spoke to you and on your behalf. If we've learned to belatedly that advertising is no longer an endless money pumping where to rebuild an industry on market mechanisms like philanthropy and membership then we must recognize that this new industry will be built on passion. Our passion for our audiences, their

passion for the work we do. A tangible sense that they are caught up in something larger than themselves and that that something is democracy. The public will only support our work if they perceive that doing so is a more effective way of participating in our democracy than sharing something on Facebook. Journalists inculcated in the values of the golden age tend to instantly make a few illogical inferences from this point. For example, I'm arguing for a partisan press that particularly reflects the same type of naivete about our politics that marks the both sides' defense. If you don't understand at this point that the conflicts within America's political parties are as significant as the conflicts between them I really don't know what to tell you like you have been following politics. When people ask if I mean to make journalists advocates, I say journalism inherently involves some advocacy whether for a particular news judgment or for a fair minded fact driven pursuit of truth as the best vehicle for a democratic accountability and progress between elections.

[00:21:00] We must recognize that as journalists we are political actors. If you contend that a mutual peace is a precondition for mutual prosperity that is a political position and the reverse is as well. If you downplay the strong and striking tension between the two you're indulging your naivete at the expense of your regard for truth. We are political actors. We share a desire to procure for the public the fullest and fairest sharing of relevant truth. But we must understand that the premises we deploy to pursue those truths influence the facts we decide to uncover the stories we decide to tell and the perspectives we decide to foreground. If we continue to perceive ourselves as outside the democratic system the public will increasingly perceive us as detached from it and therefore irrelevant to it. We can be independent of parties but we cannot be independent of the public. We must represent the public and we must be perceived as doing so and that's why we require an ecosystem. We cannot speak to or for many overlapping politics or equally represent the public's competing interests with one voice.

[00:22:00] Let me echo a prior panelist this morning if I can find them, Jim Brady. The days of competition driving action need to end. When I heard Tom's anecdote yesterday about Brit Hume and Peter Jennings editing one another's scripts because they each came from such different political premises I fully believe that the edits made the script stronger. I also wonder if it didn't mean that over time Brit Hume felt a little bit less trustable and authentic to white conservative men and Peter Jennings didn't feel the same to white liberals. When I hear Tony Hill's question about the other 98 percent and when I hear Nieman labs Josh Benton reminding us what a tiny percentage of media consumption now accrues to journalism.

[00:22:40] The conclusion that I draw is that journalistic truth is badly losing the attention game. Media has captured a larger and larger share of the public's time. And journalism is capturing less and less. We will not be able to compete with Netflix and Instagram on the grounds of pure entertainment. Even if our storytelling is as it must be absolutely top notch. We must recapture a long moribund ability to activate the public's passion for its own democracy by reflecting in

ourselves in many voices. A willingness to both stoke and reflect that passion. If we don't downright excite the public with our work. If we don't tell stories that feel at least as relevant and true as Black Mirror and also have impact in the real world then we will lose to Black Mirror. I am here and I'm at the Center for Investigative Reporting because I saw a powerful opportunity to help to cultivate a genuine ecosystem right now so many journalistic resources are going to report on the last vanishingly small scrap of competitive terrain. We've got this lopsided situation where hundreds of journalists are eyeing the White House like a hawk while three thousand criminal justice jurisdictions languish in Twilight. Can we learn the lessons of the Panama Papers and ICJ on the domestic scale to cover a giant impossible story like climate change, mass incarceration and under prosecuted financial corruption from a thousand vantage points? Can we invent a media ecosystem so relevant that 130% of American households see themselves in the news? That would be the best of times. If that's the press you want to build here I am. Let's build together. Thank you.

[00:24:29] **Jay Rosen** Thank you Matt. I feel like I should be interviewing you. So many things I want to ask you but when I was researching your career in preparation for this I realized that if there is one person in American journalism who can do literally everything, it's Matt Thompson. I'm serious. He could do pretty much everything. First thing I want to ask you is, why did you take this job?

[00:25:00] **Thompson** My last point speaks to that somewhat. I mean I have loved the Atlantic where it was before C.I.R. for as long as I can remember. And I continue to and I'm still a contributing editor there and it still does. We get it at lending club events all the time but I felt like there was so much there's so many journalists in DC there's so many journalists covering national politics and the Trump administration from that level. And here's an organization that has a dedicated nation. There are pretty much only two I can tell. Weekly dedicated platform for investigative reporting that exists in communities 500 public radio stations almost across the country that has to by dint of having that strategic asset collaborate with newsrooms of every size with journalism's in every place and that felt like at this moment it felt really like where I wanted to be. OK.

[00:25:59] **Rosen** One of the things I heard you saying in your talk is, I completely agree with this, is every news organization has a policy whether it admits it or not whether it knows it or not. So what is going to be the politics of reveal when you are editor in chief?

[00:26:18] **Thompson** Well I think that every newsroom's actions and judgments are themselves political. Like we are implicated in the political system we are a part of it. Political actors try to influence us and try to influence the stories we cover and what have you and we seek independence from political actors. We cannot, I believe, seek independence from the public. We have to represent the public in some sense as I think about CIA hours work and as I think

about what investigative reporting is and should be on some level. It's reporting that does a few things. It must be deep enough to help the country understand some of the dynamics and the systemic dynamics of power that the country is wound up in. It must be trying striving to find important stories about human beings that are on the wrong end of power and bring those stories for the first time into public view in a masterful way. And I think that ethic you know I think for me as a journalist I want to find the most important stories that are not being told and then help those stories get told in the most powerful way possible. And I think to say that is inherently political. But I think is also quite democratically a student right across the Atlantic which I know very well from being a subscriber for a long time and having been meeting for more than 20 years.

[00:27:54] **Rosen** In my mind kind of looks east, looks towards Europe. Even the name The Atlantic. It's sort of about that itself. It itself revealed to me points in a very different direction: California's huge Hispanic population. Seems that you're gonna have to look south more like this conference does. What's one of the interesting things about ISOJ is that it's more of a Southern looking Latin American influenced conference. So how are you thinking about the geography of your remit at the Center for Investigative Reporting?

[00:28:34] **Thompson** Yeah interestingly I think one of the- you know it's funny like when I started meeting with the team and talking with everybody one on one there's this way that folks have a thing you know we've been a lot of different things like there was a moment when sent CIR are merged with The Base Citizen which was this outlet that covered the Bay Area, there was a moment when we launched a spinoff site called California Watch which covered state level politics and then about five six years ago we launched Reveal, this public radio show and those different eras to some of the journalists are now at CIR from each of those different eras and what it means is that we have kind of built in instinctual value for an expertise in doing city level state level national level coverage. And when you dig back into the deep history of the organization you find investigations like this investigation called the boomerang chemical. It was like the second, the second story. I think it's like a big story that came out of the center. And it was about the fact that the EPA and the FDA had been signing off on whether they had prohibited these chemicals from use on American farms and American produce. But then those chemicals were getting exported to other countries where produce was being grown for them to poison those farms and to poison some of the families that tended them. And then the produce would get reappointed to the house which is why they called it the boomerang chemical. It would be like the chemicals were banned here but they'd come back through this back door. And I think the ways in which these different levels of coverage are actually deeply interconnected is an important framework for all of us as journalists to bring to the way that we scope and shape stories no matter what level we're working at. When I was at the Star Tribune we did a wonderful story called The Money Pipeline from Tijuana which was about the fact that if you went at the time you went to Mexico you would see cars driving around with Minnesota license plates on

them because of the interconnections between the two places. We are globally more interconnected and continuously more interconnected than we ever have been before and I think part of the dynamic of undercover uncovering the deep systemic patterns that underlie why we have gotten to where we are and how we unwind the things that are most harmful to the public is recognizing that I really liked in your talk here your your confession that.

[00:31:31] **Rosen** You saw the future of news as sort of a platform or technology story but really we should have been thinking of it as a political story. And I want to ask you to expand on that a little bit in this context and hope you can make that connection. Marty Baron as you may know has tried to sum up his attitude towards the current political crisis by saying we're not at war we're at work. What do you think of that attitude?

[00:32:06] **Thompson** I mean I definitely think that it's a good strong sentiment and far be it from me to question Marty Baron. I think that we're in a different sort of conflict than is typically construed and this is where the technological sphere really does come into it. I genuinely do think that conflict for attention, the battle for attention, is hugely important when I say that journalism and truth are losing the attention game on behalf of democracy. We are in a war. Absolutely. I think we are fighting for every scrap of the public's attention. We're fighting. I hope to deserve every scrap of the public's attention that we can. I don't think it is an astonishing pattern that more and more time and attention has accrued to the media and less and less time and attention is accruing to journalism. It is those two things that signal that we are on the losing end of a war. You know framing it as a war like militaristic metaphor gets us only so far. I think I completely admire some of the immense fantastic storytelling that this era of high fidelity Lux beautiful media has given us. And I think it's important that we as storytellers learn from that from their techniques and their skills. But I do think that right now the truth is on its heels.

[00:33:36] **Rosen** Yeah. One more question then we'll toss to the cube. Another really cool thing about this conference is that it brings together academics and journalists in one community. And I'd love to know from you in your new role as editor in chief at CIR. What kind of research and work from academics would help you do your job? Journalism professors have a lot of latitude over what kind of research they conduct. If they were going to conduct research that would help you do a better job and help the press rise to the moment, what kind of work would that be?

[00:34:20] **Thompson** I mean so many things I think from just you know sending great journalists, great new young journalists our way. So one of the things the CIR has done recently was convene with with a few scholars something called the mind to mind conference to help connect our reporters with scholars in different domains to have kind of a mutually reinforcing flow of information between the two. And that was that was really one of our data journalists and did draw on the data team to lead this effort and that was really fruitful. I value a lot of time but I mean the fact that you can have a vantage point that is not like crushed by day to day 24 hour

imperatives means that you can sort of like draw the scope wider. There are also sort of scholarly techniques that I think are really useful even in understanding the public. I mean a point that you have made time and time again is that getting a real handle on the interests of the various public policies that are out there is a challenging act it takes a lot of time and investment and it takes a lot of tools from ethnography to anthropology to polling to really get a genuinely textured picture of what does the public most truly care about need. Do some of that in our reporting but it should be connected I think to a deeper picture and one that I think our scholars are most equipped to provide.

[00:35:58] **Rosen** How are we doing? Who has a question for- see one right here.

[00:36:07] **Thompson** Oh man!

[00:36:11] **Rosen** Is that their first failure of the catch box that's happened?

[00:36:14] **Audience Member** Thank you Patrick Butler with the International Center for Journalists. And Matt I'm gonna start calling you the Meryl Streep of journalism because your accents are so spot on. My question is I would love to hear you reflect a little bit on something that came up a lot yesterday in terms of losing conservative voters or readers potential audience because we they perceive us as taking a side and you've talked about you know CIR, if you have a political view it's going to be representing those who don't have a voice in and communities that are not covered very well when we cover say you know immigrants from Central America or Middle East or we cover LGBT communities and things like that we will be perceived as having a bias. Do you worry at all about losing those people?

[00:37:10] **Thompson** I worry about having an ecosystem that cannot speak to all of our citizens with facts. I care as much about there being a healthy media ecosystem for folks who come from conservative political premises as any as any policy that exists. I want that constituency to see themselves reflected in the media and to have journalism that comes from the same values of fairness and accuracy, impartiality transparency honesty independence completeness accountability respect and excellence that I bring to our work. And I think it will require a really healthy ecosystem which is not what I think we currently have. And I don't think that I don't think that genuinely speaking to or for that policy means that. It will inherently push those outlets away from. From stories that the whole nation should pay attention to. You know it's funny. And you know this comes in part from having family in southeastern Minnesota that are you know multi generation John Deere families. And from being written having attended an evangelical Christian school for most of my upbringing. But you know I spoke to a sort of deep red Minnesota voter I know a few a few weeks back about immigration I was wrestling with this or sorry about this question I was wrestling with this question, how does a nation that's ashamed of its leaders think universally? If you walk around the country it was in the middle of a

government shutdown and it's like everybody's ashamed of the nation's leadership. And so how does a nation that's ashamed of its leaders find pride in itself? And he sat in the back for a second. He said well you know you think it's immigration. I think it's affected so many people when it comes to the country and obviously must be doing something right for so many people who want to join us here. And I said that's really interesting because it wasn't an answer that I would have expected and it said you know what you do and what you think about. He's a you know he elaborate on a point. He said you know I feel like the thing is you just gotta respect the process. And you know there are a lot of folks, they're just trying to come over any willy nilly. My relatives came over here from Germany and you've got to make sure that you're following the rules and that the T's and waiting in line. And I said that's really interesting and it's a really unexpected point. I did not expect him to say that immigration is America's beacon to the world. What do you have to say about the argument from many immigration activists at this moment that by moving the ports of entry from the borders to bridges that it has and by effectively creating these static views that that beacon is effectively being shut off and we had a really good and interesting conversation about it. And I think that those conversations are still possible. And I think having not one voice but many will really help make those conversations better.

[00:40:35] **Rosen** We take another one. One last one. One more question. Who has any victim for this? Here.

[00:40:46] **Audience Member** This is not proposed specifically on the topic but two very smart journalists. Is Julian Assange a journalist?

[00:40:52] **Rosen** You're going to have to handle that one.

[00:40:55] **Rosental Alves** 30 seconds to respond.

[00:41:00] **Thompson** I guess I would just print the question back at you. I mean this question has come up in our industry in my time in the industry one of the biggest questions that came up is are data journalists journalists. We've been asking a lot of bloggers and journalists another question that came up a lot. We asked that question around the bounds of like who is and isn't a journalist so often and I want to ask more like what is journalism and what does it imply. What does journalism do that's done by different people? If we can agree on what journalism is then what does it imply when different people do it. How do we know what that implies for my work and what does it imply for our industry and profession?

[00:41:49] **Rosen** I want to close with something that you taught me just now. Matt you said earlier that you can never be independent from the public. Which I thought was really. Brilliant statement. And it taught me that this has been the problem with professionalization of the press in the United States as it eventually began to teach people that they could be independent from

the public. And I think that's responsible for a lot of the problems that you. That you lit upon in this talk. I hope you enjoyed this episode of Fargo.

[00:42:29] **Thompson** (Laughter) Apologies. For all the Minnesotans for my awful accent. minutes. Thank you Jay. Thank you again.