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)

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 donations 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.