

The Role of Political Experience in Journalism

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Chris Matthews has been following American politics since the first Eisenhower campaign. He has engaged in U.S. politics professionally, working in the U.S. Senate and the White House and serving as top aide to Speaker of the House Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill, Jr. In the late 1980s, Matthews switched to full-time journalism, serving as Washington Bureau Chief for the San Francisco Examiner. He began his career on television in 1994. Three years later, he launched Hardball, which was the title of his best-selling handbook on real-life politics. He has been on the air every weekday night since. He is the author of six best-selling books. His most recent is Tip and the Gipper: When Politics Worked (Simon & Schuster, 2013).

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: You began your career in politics, working as chief of staff to Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Tip O’Neill. How does your political experience impact what you do today as a journalist? What is the interplay between those two fields?

Chris Matthews: Well, I was a speechwriter at the White House for President Carter. I had a very good experience inside American politics, especially when working for Speaker O’Neill, because I was there every day. Every day began with him using me to find out what was going on everywhere—in the U.S. Democratic caucus, in the world. He would start every day as a vacuum cleaner of sorts, asking, “What do you know, what did you hear?”—he wanted to know everything. And my job was to answer those questions and to give him some ideas and language for our daily press conferences. I knew him pretty well, and

he trusted me. And, of course, we were up against Ronald Reagan all those years. You really can't get a better experience in politics than that. So in terms of what I've been writing about and talking about for the last 20 years on my show, *Hardball*, I think I have a pretty good sense of what I'm talking about. O'Neill and Carter, of course, retired before I even got into journalism, so I never had that personal conflict of interest to deal with, which would have been difficult. I don't know how you write or talk about someone who you've worked with. You can't—your loyalty is there. Maybe this is an old-school concept, but loyalty doesn't have a sell-by date. And I think people know me as a fairly independent source, but it's always a trade-off: how much information did you take with you, and how much loyalty do you have to dispel? So, I think we're probably better off having a lot of journalists who have had no political experience than having some journalists who have had a lot of political experience. Not to put down political experience—writing a speech, for example, is very similar to writing an opinion column. Peggy Noonan, who now writes a column for the *Wall Street Journal*, is one of the greatest speechwriters ever.

So regardless, I was very fortunate. Early in my journalism career, I was writing op-ed pieces for the *San Francisco Examiner* once a week, and Larry Kramer, an old friend, called me up and said, "I'd like you to be our bureau chief." So I had a tremendous break, and everything else has come from that.

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Journal: Speaking of the journalist's voice, and this being a U.S. presidential election year, how much influence do journalists have, or should journalists have, on public opinion?

Matthews: Well, that's changed. There was a time when R.W. Apple of the *New York Times* or David Broder of the *Washington Post* could put a certain charm on a candidate as somebody to watch. They were not only the gatekeepers, but also the gate openers. I think those days are completely over. As you've seen with Donald Trump, candidates can now just walk right onto the stage and perform for everyone. There are no more out-of-town tryouts—it's happening right in front of you. And there's no intermediary between the candidate and the audience. As we've seen with the Republican Party, there's also no one to say, "This is the official candidate."

Journal: Do you think that the rise of conservative and liberal cable news channels has had an effect on this?

Matthews: Well, let me just point out the difference between a Mark Levin and a Rush Limbaugh, or me and anyone. To be very successful as a broadcaster or host, you need an audience: you have to develop the audience, and you have to keep it. But it doesn't have to be 51 percent of the public's approval. Whereas at some point, a politician needs to get to 51 percent, and even in the primaries, he wants to get to 30, 40 percent. To be a successful journalist, on radio especially, you just need 5 or 10 percent. If you think in terms of rating points, for example, if you get 200, or even up to 300 in the 25–54 age group, you're in a pretty good position. If you have a million viewers every night, you're in pretty good shape. But if you're a candidate with only a million votes, it's a very different story. That's why the media landscape is so polarized. Broadcasts only need to get 5 or 10 percent of viewers. They're looking for a very small, passionate minority. There's also an asymmetry: radio is conservative; cable is conservative; primetime television is liberal; movies are liberal. This type of culture within the movie industry is what the conservatives are countering.

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Journal: There are so many stories in the news today about the challenging conditions journalists encounter when reporting from certain countries. What is your perspective on journalists working overseas?

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Matthews: Well, it's exciting. Bopping around the world and writing a column is really thrilling. Anywhere you go, you can write a column about it: Ireland, France, anywhere. I was in South Africa for the country's first elections in 1994. I was there when the Berlin Wall came down. There's nothing like it. It's emblematic to be able to say I've been there. Take Richard Engel, NBC's chief foreign correspondent. He's in the Middle East all the time. He's been captured at least once. He's an amazing storyteller and a great guy. He's a perfect correspondent.

Journal: There have been countless commentaries that speculate about the "end" of traditional journalism due to the rise of the Internet and social media. What is your take on this?

Matthews: Well, we still need editors. You want somebody who checks your work and makes sure it's factual. On *Hardball*, we are always asking "Where'd you get that [piece of information]?" It needs to be something, like the Associated

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Press, for example, that has a real hardness to it. There's a long history of editing.

Journal: Has social media had an impact on your work at all?

Matthews: It definitely has. First of all, politicians can go directly to the voters, and they don't need an interview to do it. [Donald] Trump does it all the time; [Ted] Cruz does it; Hillary [Clinton] does it; they all do it. The danger of social media is, again, the lack of an editor. Having an opinion before you have the knowledge is far less useful. I always tell people to buy a newspaper, listen to National Public Radio, and put together your opinion yourself. If you just want to hear opinions, that's not a healthy diet. 