

Panel Wrestles With Media Culpability and the Corrosive State of American Politics

October 11, 2022 **by Dan McCue**



Former CNN President Jeff Zucker, former MSNBC President Phil Griffin and SiriusXM and CNN host Michael Smerconish during the unconvention in Philadelphia. (Photo by Dan McCue)

PHILADELPHIA — From a purely media fanboy perspective, it was the kind of session one circles on an agenda weeks before the event.

Scheduled to join SiriusXM POTUS channel host Michael Smerconish on stage for an hour at Friday's Un-Convention at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, were two of the kingpins of the modern television news age.

One, former president of CNN Worldwide Jeff Zucker, has spoken to no one publicly since his abrupt departure from the cable news network in February.

The other, former MSNBC president Phil Griffin, has been almost as tight-lipped since telling his bosses he felt it time to “hang up his cleats” after the 2020 presidential election.

Griffin had been with the fledgling cable outfit at its inception and later made all of the major decisions that made it a progressive juggernaut from launching “The Rachel Maddow Show” and “Morning Joe” to hiring Lawrence O’Donnell and Chris Hayes.

Though he too seemed to have sailed off into the sunset — after all he had other well-publicized interests, including investing in a sports bar on New York City’s Upper West Side — there were rumblings — soon to be confirmed by the man himself — that he was beginning a new phase of his career with the aforementioned Rachel Maddow.

But what really made the mid-afternoon session a draw was that the two men had agreed to offer their insider’s view of the state of American politics and the impactful role of the media in shaping its current dynamics and dysfunction.

At the outset, Smerconish, who continues to host a show on CNN as well as on POTUS, explained why he was uniquely qualified to serve as a moderator for a panel consisting of these two men in particular — each had hired him, he said, and neither had fired him.

“There was a period of my life, a five-year period of my life, in the 2000s, when I was the principal fill-in radio host for Bill O’Reilly on his radio show “Factor,” and I was the principal fill-in host for Chris Matthews on “Hardball,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s amazing to think about,” he continued as some in the large live audience of about 750, chuckled at the irony.

“I

Michael Smerconish (Photo by Dan McCue)

would do my morning show, then I would do ‘Reilly’s radio program, and then I would do “Hardball.” I used to joke that I would walk from the Fox News building on Avenue of the Americas to 30 Rock and wasn’t sure if I was going to get shot in the chest or shot in the back,” he said.

A wave of laughter rolled toward the podium.

“But as I was going between those two worlds, I very much wanted to have a television program of my own. I think the ego of it had consumed me,” Smerconish admitted. “The trouble was, there was no room in the inn at MSNBC.

“And Phil said to me one day, ‘If you get a gig elsewhere, I will let you out of your contract.’ And thankfully, that call came from

Jeff. And I said, ‘Okay, now there’s one fly in the ointment. Phil needs to honor what he told me years ago.’ And he did.”

Media to Blame?

Over the course of the day-long Unconvention, an event he masterminded and put on in collaboration with the Bipartisan Policy Center and Unite America, Smerconish said repeatedly that there are many reasons why the nation has found itself in “this polarized ditch.”

But as he ticked off his list, citing factors such as gerrymandering, self-sorting, lack of campaign finance and others, it was the polarized media that consistently came up as the worst influence of all.

Listening to Smerconish recite his list one last time at the start of this panel, Zucker immediately disagreed.

“You’re already shaking your head,” Smerconish said.

“Yeah, shockingly, you’re wrong,” Zucker said, offering up a good-natured jab.

“Look, I think everybody’s looking to blame somebody for why we’re so polarized ... and the media is the obvious, easy target,” he said.

“The media is not perfect, but I don’t think the media is why we’re polarized,” Zucker continued. “I think there are three main reasons why we’re polarized. One involves the media, I think that’s Rupert Murdoch. That’s number one.

“Number two, I think, is social media, where you can anonymously attack your opponents.

“And three is gerrymandering, which allows people to go to Congress and never really have to compromise or talk to those on

the other side of the aisle ... they can just appear on Fox News or MSNBC, or whatever their favorite outlet is, without ever having to consult or compromise with anybody.”

Former CNN President Jeff Zucker (Photo by Dan McCue)

Smerconish pushed back.

“When you say ‘Murdoch’ you really mean Fox,” he said.

“Largely I do,” Zucker said.

“Okay, so not CNN. Not MSNBC. Fox.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, well, assuming Fox to be the most culpable, are you saying there’s no culpability on the part of the others?”

“I think I started by saying that the media is not perfect by any stretch. There are a lot of issues with the media, which I acknowledge,” Zucker said. “But I don’t think, by and large, as a business proposition day in and day out that either CNN or MSNBC is pushing misinformation and disinformation. That’s the business model upon which [Fox’s] entire premise is built, which is really harming America. And I don’t think that’s happening to CNN or MSNBC.”

[The Well News later asked Smerconish why Fox News wasn’t represented on the panel. “Roger Ailes is Dead,” he said, referring to the Fox News founder who died in Palm Beach, Florida in May 2017. “He’s who we would have wanted to hear from.”]

Though Smerconish appeared to cede to Zucker’s point, he continued to push back, suggesting “a perspective and attitude and ideology” had been pushed by CNN and MSNBC in the past.

Now it was Phil Griffin’s turn to disagree. Before he offered his opinion, however, he asked Smerconish to describe when he believed the partisan divide started.

The benchmark the radio and television host often uses on the air is 1988 — the year Rush Limbaugh’s radio show went into national syndication.

“Then, in the mid-1990s, Roger Ailes took that playbook and brought it to Fox,” he said. “And, then, in my telling of this, we had MSNBC, which struggled for a while ... You remember, Phil Donahue was the guy who couldn’t gain any traction. And all of a sudden, I think you said, ‘Hey, here’s what we need to do. We need to not go as far as Fox goes, but we need to do from the left what they’ve been doing from the right.’”

“But if you look at Rush Limbaugh and you look at the beginning of Fox, there was already an audience for that and it had been there for some time,” Griffin said in response.

Asked when he thought the divide opened up, Griffin offered “1776,” a response that inspired loud applause from a crowd that could see Independence Hall through a glass wall from their seats.

“You see, America is not a homeland. It has been bastardized to be called a homeland, but what America really is is an idea. It is the idea that all people are equal. That all people are free. And that they all have opportunity.

“But this notion was in conflict from the beginning, the way America grew up. We were in total conflict. We had this idea of America and what really America was. And for some 240 years, we’ve been struggling with that.

“So to say that the media, which has reported on this conflict all along, is responsible for it ... when it’s so much deeper and ingrained in our country ... I don’t understand,” Griffin said.

Can You Sell Centrism?

Moving on, Smerconish went on to note that 42% of respondents in a recent Gallup Poll said they were neither Democrats nor Republicans, but considered themselves Independents.

Turning to Zucker, he asked, “Can you sell centrism?”

“Sure, I sold you,” Zucker said.

But Griffin wanted to go further, asking Smerconish for examples of a centrist network or newspaper that doesn’t exist today.

“What would that be like?” he asked.

“Well, it will sound self-congratulatory ... because I think I’m well suited for it,” Smerconish said.

“I agree,” Zucker said. “But the reality is there are not 25 of you — in terms of being both centrists and good and capable broadcasters, to fill out the staffing of that network. There just aren’t enough people who are in this territory.”

“But if you did have those people, would that network succeed?”

“I don’t know,” Zucker said.

“Why, because passion doesn’t rest in the middle?”

“I think there’s a lot of passion here,” Zucker said, acknowledging the audience. “The reality is, I don’t think there’s enough good people, like you, to fill out that network. And I’m not sure there’s enough day-in and day-out passion to have that succeed.

“But it’s certainly a noble idea and worth trying to do,” he said.

Griffin latched on to the idea of how a centrist network would cover the news.

“Let me ask you a question. Big issue. The 2020 election,” he began. “Some people think it was fraudulent, corrupt. Other people say, I’ve seen all the court rulings, in both red states and blue states It was a legitimate election. Would you have that debate on your so-called middle-of-the-road channel?”

“I guess I wouldn’t have it as a debate, treating one side as having parity with the other, but I’m not going to ignore it,” Smerconish said.

“So you would put on somebody who says the 2020 election was fraudulent,” Griffin said.

“And I, as a journalist, better take them on. But yes, I would,” Smerconish said.

“Why are you giving them a platform?” Griffin asked.

“Because if I’m looking at data that says Republicans believe this, I feel like I’m not doing my job unless I air it ... in a critical way.”

“You know, this question really gets to the heart of your whole thing here,” Griffin said. “I mean, there are two sides to many things. There are two sides when you’re talking about centrism.

“There are two sides when you are talking about whether marijuana should be legal at the federal level.

“There are two sides when you’re talking about whether student debt should be forgiven. But there are not two sides when you are talking about whether or not the 2020 election was legit.”

“But if that position is held by so many, do we not address it?” Smerconish asked.

“I think we’ve got to find out the root of why this is believed,” Griffin said. “I mean, the last poll I saw had 61% of Republicans saying they believe the 2020 election was illegitimate. Why is that? It’s because the leaders who are pushing that idea have gotten plenty of airtime on certain outlets that push that idea.

“So I think that it is dangerous to put somebody on espousing that view when, as a journalist, you should be seeking out the truth.

“Now, I do think we have to bring attention to it. But then I want to bring on experts who know around the country, who have seen what the courts have done, what the election officials have done

... and have them educate people and show them that these claims of corruption in regard to the election just aren't true."

"But I get nervous when the issue becomes one of, 'Are we even going to allow this on our airways,'" Smerconish said.

"I'll give you an example," he continued. "I think the Hunter Biden laptop story was worthy of more airing than it received right before the election. Do either of you agree with me on that? Do you have any regrets?"

"I think the question is, did we deal with it to the degree that we thought was appropriate, and I think we did," Zucker said. "A big problem with the story was the messenger — Rudy Giuliani. I mean, did you at that point trust in the legitimacy of Rudy Giuliani as the messenger delivering the goods?"

"That said, we did look into it. And so did organizations like Rupert Murdoch's Wall Street Journal, which found nothing at the time. And remember, you were talking about the candidate's son, not the candidate himself.

"And Hunter was never arrested," Griffin said. "The Justice Department looked into it, and nothing at all was ever reported until he was the son of a candidate. So I don't think that it qualified as a main story at the time.

"And like Jeff said of CNN, we looked into it, NBC News did. Our reporters met with Rudy. He brought out a couple of pages printed out from a computer. They asked for a digital copy and didn't get it. But I don't think it was a big story before the election because he was never charged."

Zucker then went on the offensive, noting that Smerconish had two shows on CNN between the time the Hunter Biden laptop controversy arose and Election Day.

“Did
you

Former MSNBC President Phil Griffin. (Photo by Dan McCue)

cover it, Michael?”

“No. I talked about it.”

“Did I tell you not to cover it?”

“Definitely not.”

“So why didn’t you cover it?”

“Well I did talk about it extensively on radio ...”

“No, we’re talking about CNN, why didn’t you cover it?”

“I regret it,” Smerconish said.

“I talked about it. I talked about it extensively on radio. But, Jeff is right, I didn’t cover it on CNN ... and I second guess myself. Now, I don’t think it’s a huge story. But I think I look bad, not talking about it more than I did. I think we looked partisan by not giving it some air. I should have said something about the damn issue.”

Trump Remorse

Smerconish then turned to Zucker.

“Do you regret giving Trump as much air time as you gave him in 2016?”

“Of course, I do,” Zucker said. “I’ve admitted this publicly. At the same time, I don’t believe our giving him airtime was why he became president of the United States. I had a lot of power back then, but I didn’t have that much power. But I do think we made a mistake there.”

“Did you try to compensate later?” Smerconish asked. “There seemed to have been a tonal shift after his election.”

“I think on a certain level what you’re saying is fair, but as I said at the time, it wasn’t that CNN was anti-Trump, it’s just that we were pro-truth. And if our coverage came off as anti-Trump because he didn’t tell the truth ... I’m not going to apologize for that.”

The question then became how did the network presidents try to balance Trump’s clear drawing power with their belief that they were protectors of democracy.

“What we did was we stopped airing everything he did early,” Griffin said. “Part of that stemmed from feedback from our audience, which said, ‘We don’t want to hear this; this is not

appropriate material. He's not living up to the standards of America.'

Former CNN President Jeff Zucker, former MSNBC President Phil Griffin, and moderator, SiriusXM and CNN host Michael Smerconish. (Photo by Dan McCue)

"Then, when Trump started doing the COVID press conferences, we showed them live for a little while, but then due to the amount of misinformation he was giving out, we decided to record them, watch them afterwards, and cut out and use the pieces that contained valid new information.

"I think it is the responsibility of a journalist to seek the truth solely," Griffin continued. "You can talk about whether you should report on everything that's going on. But I don't think it's

your responsibility to give a platform even to the president of the United States if that president is lying or misleading people for his own gain.”

“I disagree a little bit with Phil on his second point,” Zucker. “I think if he’s speaking and lying and spreading misinformation, you do still have an obligation to cover it because he’s still the president of the United States.”

Forward Thinking

Smerconish closed the session with a lengthy discussion of “what’s next,” not just in terms of the media but for the country as a whole.

He began by noting that nearly every attendee of the Unconvention had turned out for this particular session and that many had traveled great distances to be there.

“And I think I can speak for them by telling you that they are not happy,” he said. “They are not happy with the status quo. I think there’s a feeling among those gathered here that there is an over-representation in the media and in Washington and in state legislatures by the most partisan among us.

“And at the same time, they’re not like the people who are in my orbit, who — and you may say this is a reflection of where I live — are fiscally conservative and socially progressive,” Smerconish said. “Personally, I think that describes most of the country, and my question is, ‘How do we get a voice?’”

Griffin laid blame for the animus Smerconish described on those who have run for and in some cases won elective office going back to Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan.

“Many leaders have found that there’s power in creating fear and creating anger and making people feel that the world is against

them,” he said. “There has been a thread running through American history of just that.

“I mean, going back to Ronald Reagan who said government is not good at a time when it was really working and doing things to make sure people of color and minorities got more opportunities,” Griffin continued.

“Today it’s you against the government and the media and the East Coast elites ... so it’s very difficult to talk about the media as apart from that,” he said. “And on top of what’s happened politically, there’s just been an explosion of media. And it has been for good and for bad. But I still think it reflects what’s going on in the country and what our leaders are doing.”

Smerconish sought to reframe his question.

“I’m not here arguing that there’s parity between the left and the right in the media, because I don’t believe that,” he said.

“I think there’s outsized influence in the hands of Fox News. And a hell of a lot of misinformation has been put out there. So much so that today in the Washington Post, there was an article that said a majority of Republican candidates running for Senate, Congress, and governor, believe the 2020 election was stolen. That’s the Republican slate of candidates.

“So I don’t see parity between the right and left in the media. What I do see is an ideological bias that I don’t think is reflective of the country,” Smerconish said.

“I think you’ve got to hold both sides accountable, to begin with,” Zucker said. “And you’ve got to kick the shit out of both sides.

“At the same time, you have got to recognize that on some things, both sides are not the same. I think that’s the role of you and others in the media, hold both sides accountable, but recognize that on certain issues, like democracy, and the future of democracy, and whether the election was stolen, there are not two sides. ... and there’s no more important story in America today than preserving democracy.”

With that, Smerconish asked Zucker whether he believes Donald Trump will make another run for the White House in 2024.

“I assume that Trump is going to run. At the same, I think it’s going to be very different this time around,” he said. “I think we know a lot more [about Trump] than we did in 2016, and a lot more than we knew in 2020.

“He has done a lot to undermine democracy and that has to be taken into account in the coverage if he becomes a candidate. And I don’t think that anybody should be afraid of that or pull any punches. What I do worry about is that the media won’t be as vigorous as it should be with regard to that,” he said.

Dan can be reached at dan@thewellnews.com and at <https://twitter.com/DanMcCue>.