



TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE AMERICAN CONVERSATION

“Facts are stubborn things,” John Adams, one of America’s Founding Fathers, once famously remarked. For **Alan Murray**, life after *The Wall Street Journal* means a pursuit of pure facts, as he takes up his new role as **President of the Pew Research Center**. His mission there, he says, will be to harness Pew’s powerful research capabilities and deep insights to drive a more pragmatic discourse, especially in Washington, DC, where he has spent most of his career.

Here he talks to Brunswick’s Darren McDermott about the erosion of the nation’s political dialogue and Pew’s role in helping to restore it

What drew you to the Pew Research Center after a career in journalism?

I spent most of my career in Washington and over 25 years I watched the steady decline in the ability of well-intentioned people from both parties to come together and have conversations about getting things done in the public interest. I had often thought that if I was ever going to go into the nonprofit world to do something, what was it that I cared about enough? It is attempting to address that serious rift in our civic culture.

The Pew Research Center is one of the very few places that has maintained the ability to speak to people on both sides of the aisle. It has done that by focusing on facts. As the folks here like to say: 'It's not a think tank, it's a fact tank.' We don't do advocacy. We don't make policy recommendations. We don't take sides. We don't get in fights. We don't do punditry of the sort you see on MSNBC or Fox News. We just provide facts because we believe that at the core of democracy is trusted information.

How can better facts improve the democratic process?

An educated citizenry requires a steady diet of trusted facts. One of the things that has happened in our society is that – and I'm sure you've had these experiences – it is sometimes hard even to have a dinner table conversation about politics or public policy without people violently disagreeing about things that should be matters of fact. Part of it is because they get their information from such disparate places, which has made it more difficult to create a factual base. Having an organization like Pew means that at least we can say, 'Folks, here are some facts. Here are some things that we ought to be able to agree on. You can have your debate but let's start from here.'

How have changes in the media landscape affected this dynamic?

We did a study of the election last year and compared it with four years earlier. It showed that a much larger percentage of the narratives in the press were driven directly by the campaigns, as opposed to being developed by in-depth reporting. So, clearly, the news media are becoming more spoon-fed, in part because they just don't have



ALAN MURRAY

Alan Murray became President of the Pew Research Center in January 2013, after a distinguished career in journalism of more than 30 years.

Before joining Pew, he was Deputy Managing Editor and Executive Editor, Online, for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Murray spent a decade as the *Journal's* Washington, DC Bureau Chief and then served as Washington Bureau Chief for CNBC where he co-hosted "Capital Report with Alan Murray and Gloria Borger" and also wrote *The Wall Street Journal's* weekly Political Capital column.

Murray has a bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of North Carolina and a master's in economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

boots on the ground. If you're the person wielding the spoon you may think that is a good thing, but I think it is reasonable to ask whether it is the best thing for democracy.

There's a discussion about partial attention – a theory about "peak attention" – where people just can't focus because they have so much information, they need screening criteria. How does Pew help Washington with its "attention deficit disorder" when it comes to information?

That is a really interesting question. I think a lot of it is just about getting the right information to the right people at the right moment. I think part of the trick is about becoming much more aggressive about injecting information into the dialogue at the right moment and that is where social media tools become incredibly valuable.

You know, the evolution of Twitter to me is just one of the most fascinating stories of

"NOT A THINK TANK, A FACT TANK"

The Pew Research Center has, over more than two decades, built a reputation as a nonpartisan, "just the facts" research organization on a mission to educate Americans on a range of topics.

The Pew Research Center started life as the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, the polling arm for the Times Mirror group, and was eventually taken over in 1996 by Pew Charitable Trusts, which remains its financial backer.

In 2004, Pew consolidated its work under seven "project" headings, each of which has a significant communications component: 1) People & the Press 2) Excellence in Journalism 3) Internet & American Life 4) Religion & Public Life 5) Hispanic Center 6) Global Attitudes, and 7) Social & Demographic Trends.

Pew Research Center's parent company, Pew Charitable Trusts, is backed by the Sun Oil Company fortune. Pew partners have included the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and news organizations, including *The New York Times* and *The Economist*.

our times because it started as this totally frivolous – 'What are you doing?' 'I'm making a ham sandwich' – kind of meaningless chat tool. And it's evolved into a pretty high-end tool for communities of interest to share information. A lot of people who don't use it in that way don't understand this ... It's a *discovery* tool. We get a lot of traffic to our deepest reports through Twitter.

Given your background, do you want to change what Pew does, or how it does it?

I have launched a six-month strategic review, but some things are pretty clear. This organization has no peer in its relationship with traditional media and its ability to get its research placed, [but] clearly digital dissemination is a big part ... We're in the process of creating a new blog that will help us disseminate this vast set of data we have. Also, our major tool has been telephone survey research [but] people are doing a lot

with online polling. So, with online tools becoming more and more powerful, we are launching a major effort to figure out what our next generation of polling will be like.

Do you foresee a future in which your colleagues at Pew are live-tweeting about political events such as Congressional hearings, State of the Union addresses, and so on?

We're not staffed to do it tomorrow, but I don't see why not. Another really important piece of this is the graphical presentation of data. A good infographic will get 10 to 100 times the engagement of a straight news story. I'll give you one example. We published our 'polarization' study last summer, showing how the polarization of the public along partisan lines had gotten much greater over the past 20 years. We had timelines and published all the questions that it was based on – you can see how each question breaks along party lines.

I want to take that one step further and say, 'Okay, let's create a widget where you can answer the questions yourself.' A group of students could then answer the questions, for example, or you could ask your Rotary Club, then compare your results and see how you line up with the rest of the country. Things like that can be incredibly educational.

The next step – a leap of faith – assumes that a better educated electorate will actually lead to better government.

The research seems to show that new technologies, such as tablets and other mobile devices, have really helped with engagement?

Book readership is up and so is news consumption. In terms of news consumption, mobile devices have made a huge positive difference. The problem is on the news production side, because no one has figured out how to monetize that in order to pay for journalists in the field.

Turning to Corporate America, can its image with the citizenry be repaired after the damage done in recent years?

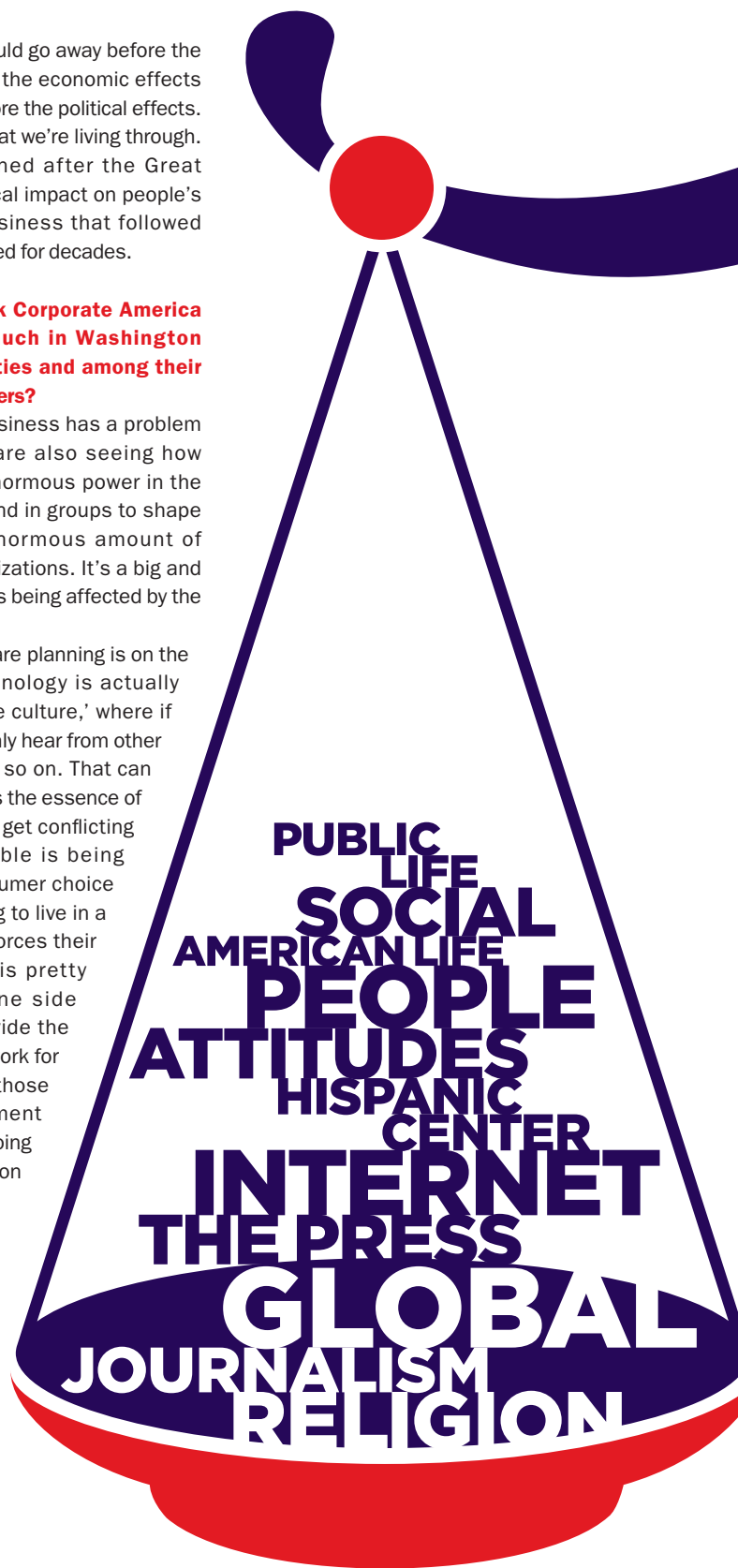
Look, 2008 was a pretty serious event and I think it's created a real problem for companies. I said at the time, and I think events have borne me out, that the financial

effects of the crisis would go away before the economic effects; and the economic effects would go away long before the political effects. I think that's exactly what we're living through. Look at what happened after the Great Depression. The political impact on people's attitudes towards business that followed the events of 1929 lasted for decades.

Do you think the work Corporate America must do is not so much in Washington but in their communities and among their employees and customers?

Our data show that business has a problem with the public. We are also seeing how technology has put enormous power in the hands of individuals and in groups to shape things, forcing an enormous amount of transparency on organizations. It's a big and complex question and is being affected by the digital revolution.

One study that we are planning is on the degree to which technology is actually increasing this 'bubble culture,' where if you're on the left you only hear from other people on the left and so on. That can undercut democracy, as the essence of the public square is to get conflicting viewpoints. The bubble is being created partly by consumer choice as people are choosing to live in a media world that reinforces their biases ... Business is pretty much lined up on one side of the roster. If we divide the country by those who work for private business and those who work for government and nonprofits, we're going to have a real problem on our hands. ~>





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Given what’s happening to journalism, do you see Pew filling a gap that has opened up in terms of informing the public?

Journalism is shrinking. At the same time, in the think tank world you have increasing polarization. Most think tanks feel the need to ally with one side of the debate or the other. And then in the academic world the process of peer review tends to keep them doing things that are of much more interest to their peers than they are to the general public. So, there is – I think – a need for, a hunger for, solid, trusted, nonpartisan information. It’s just getting bigger and bigger. That’s the space we are operating in.

You have this fight between different media operating models, the “swarm” versus the traditional top-down “pyramid” approach. It will be interesting to see how they fight it out.

I believe that in the swarm great brands like *The Wall Street Journal* will matter. As long as there are people out there who want to know that the information they are getting is reliable, there will be demand for brands that provide them some guarantee of that reliability. But you have to engage differently; you have to be much more proactive. This means profound change in the media

world, in the way journalists think about their job. We never thought marketing was part of what we did as journalists, but now in the swarm you have to make sure that you are getting the right information to the right person at the right time – that is a marketing job. Really, we always were marketing, but we didn’t realize how much we were. Now it is clear.

I guess the same is true for everyone in the digital world: brands have to do the same, Pew has to do the same?

One of the big themes in our State of the News Media report is that the news media has lost its role as the intermediary. Companies, government officials and politicians are finding more and more ways to go directly to the audiences they want to reach, without going through any kind of journalistic filter.

And people differ on whether that is a good or a bad thing?

At Pew Research we don’t take a position on that. We just think it’s a fact. ☺

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Darren McDermott is a Director in Brunswick’s New York office. He spent 18 years at *The Wall Street Journal* as a reporter and editor in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore. He was most recently Deputy Managing Editor of *WSJ.com*.

PEW ON COMMUNICATIONS AND...

POLITICS

- ☞ In the 2012 race for the White House, journalists played a decreasing role in what voters heard about the presidential candidates. Only about a quarter of the statements in the media about the character and record of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney came directly from journalists, while about half came from political partisans. In the 2000 election, half the statements came from journalists and only about one-third from partisans.
- ☞ Obama’s team produced about 25 times more Twitter posts than the Romney campaign. But on blogs, Twitter and Facebook, users were consistently

more negative than positive about both candidates – although Romney fared somewhat worse.

JOURNALISM

- ☞ Nearly a third of US adults (31 percent) have stopped turning to a news outlet because it no longer provides them with the news they were accustomed to getting.
- ☞ A majority of Americans seek out a full news story after hearing about an event or issue from friends and family. Among 18 to 29-year-olds, the percentage that primarily relies on social media for this kind of news already reaches nearly a quarter.

SOCIAL TRENDS

- ☞ Whether as a by-product of overly protective parents, the age of terrorism or a media culture that focuses on dangers, Millennials cast a wary eye on human nature. Two-thirds say “you can’t be too careful” when dealing with people. Yet they are less skeptical than their elders of government.
- ☞ Millennials embrace multiple modes of self-expression. Three-quarters have created a profile on a social networking site, and one-in-five has posted a video of themselves online. But their look-at-me tendencies are not without limits. Most Millennials have placed privacy boundaries on their social media profiles.