Podcast Transcript

ECC 150: The Intersection of Media Literacy, Free Speech, and Journalism in the Digital Age

[00:00:00] **Matt:** Well, hello and welcome to another edition of the endless coffee cup podcast. As always, I'm your host, Matt Bailey and bringing you digital marketing education and what's involved in this incredible industry. Now, those of you that have been longtime listeners, you will know our next guest. He has been with us numerous times.

[00:00:20] **Matt:** And in fact, Nolan, I think you and one other are tied for the most appearances on the endless coffee cup. So please welcome Nolan Higdon, Nolan, how are you doing today?

[00:00:31] **Nolan:** I'm doing well. Thank you for having me back on. It's been way too long and I want to know the name of this person who is challenging me for supremacy as a guest on this program.

[00:00:40] **Matt:** Yeah, we could have a little battle royale afterwards. I think that would be a lot of fun. That could be great. But I noticed, so we've been going back and forth and I love reading your sub stack and I'll, give you some feedback off of that. But one of the things I noticed on your latest email to me is there is a doctor In front of your name and congratulations on that.

[00:01:04] **Nolan:** Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

[00:01:07] **Matt:** Hey, anyone who goes through that and subjects themselves to that amount of scrutiny and work, it's a congratulations in order.

[00:01:17] **Nolan:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that

[00:01:20] **Matt:** For those that are new to the podcast Nolan is a professor of History, Media Studies, and Education. But usually we have talked about media studies. You've been involved with a number of books and that is a lot of what you write about as well. Could you just tell us a little bit about, what got you into studying media, journalism and then how that has worked out in the books that you've written and maybe highlight a couple of titles for us.

[00:01:50] **Matt:** Okay. ever since I was a young child i was always interested in History. Two of my grandparents who are still married and alive, came from Ireland and

[00:02:03] **Nolan:** they used to just entertain me with stories about World War II, what it was like being there and what they did. And so I got this interest in history that was piqued by a bunch of great teachers I had. But, around the time I got to college, I wanted to study history, but I was really, obsessed with the lies around WMDs that got the United States into the Iraq war. And I had a great history professor who talked to me about

[00:02:27] **Nolan:** the history of lies of getting people into war. So I want to study that, but I also want to study news media's role in it. But I realized I needed to know more about news media. So that kind of took me down the media studies path. And then I was looking at these fields of how do you prepare a population so they don't fall for media lies like they did in WMDs.

[00:02:46] **Nolan:** And that's when I came across the field of media literacy. And to understand what media literacy was and how it fit in the larger frame of the United States, I had to study education and understand that. And so I just bounced from one topic to the other. I've always seen how they intersect, but it was just curiosity really piqued my interest in the three and to this day, I mix all three into the things I write.

[00:03:12] **Nolan:** So, no followers of my sub stack, some sign up cause they're interested in media, some cause education, some history, but they get all of the above and really add a historical framework to everything I think about. So I'm the annoying guy when, someone says, well, Oh, who could have predicted this would happen?

[00:03:27] **Nolan:** I'd be like, well, actually that happened in 1819. And I'm that guy.

[00:03:32] **Matt:** I love it. That's great there's always a foundation for something and when you know the history of it and so I think that's a valuable trifecta, you've been involved in, I don't know how many book projects, I've got a few on my shelf, those of you on video, if you're looking behind Nolan, there, there is a plethora of, publications behind him.

[00:04:04] **Nolan:** Just really researching, writing. It's always very fun.

[00:04:08] **Matt:** Well, and one of the things I absolutely love and through our conversations, I think once you said something like, you're hard to peg and, I felt like it was the same with you that, what I love about your writing is you're not falling into a traditional political category.

[00:04:29] **Matt:** And I think anyone who is really focused on media literacy and media education. I'm finding that the more people I meet like that, the less easy or the more difficult it is to realize you just can't peg someone that, Oh, you're a progressive, you're a Republican, you're, this or that, because there seems to be a much wider understanding of issues, but also realizing

[00:04:59] **Matt:** very few people are single issue type people, that there's an incredible variation of what people believe, why they believe it, and I might feel this way on this issue, but I'm opposite on this issue that you just can't pigeonhole people. And that's one of the things I've loved about, you and some of the organizations you're with and how you've been writing is,

[00:05:22] **Matt:** you definitely have a, like anyone, we all have bias, but you really speak to both sides of things and work through that and help people to understand how to see that.

[00:05:32] **Nolan:** Absolutely. yeah, like anybody else I have strong political views on policies and individuals and things like that. But the thing I always think about, and I know you and I have talked about this both off air and on air. And I think this is a reason why we've been able to collaborate all these years.

[00:05:48] **Nolan:** if you're guided by principles, I think that transcends party. So, I have a principle to truth. So, I call out lies where I see them, even when it's the folks I wish were in office or it's related to the policies I wish were passed, I just, my principle is truth. My principle is anti censorship.

[00:06:06] **Nolan:** My principle is free speech. So that means sometimes I stand up for people I disagree with. I was just, watching a documentary last night on Alex Jones, who is in an awkward way, hugely responsible for launching a lot of my writing career. That was the first major piece I wrote was taking down Jones.

[00:06:24] **Nolan:** And this is about 10 years ago. But when there were threats of censoring him online, I was one of his biggest defenders, even though I think he's a complete liar and fraud. I just said, no, my principle is to free speech and anti censorship and regardless of who the target is, I won't stand by it.

[00:06:42] **Nolan:** And so I think what I try and advocate for people is just maintain those principles regardless of the party. And then it becomes a lot easier to understand the world. You're not trying to defend a side you can't defend because the evidence isn't there. Instead, you just defend truth where you see it and defend other principles that you value.

[00:07:01] **Matt:** I love that and, if you don't mind, I want to dig a little bit into that, Nolan, because it's one of the things, and I keep seeing surveys, I keep seeing interviews, and it seems like less people agree with free speech now than maybe 20 or even 40 years ago. Why is free speech such a, kind of a two pronged question?

[00:07:24] **Matt:** Why is free speech such a important issue and why is this valuable? Why is it so distinguished in our culture?

[00:07:35] **Nolan:** Yeah. I, think. Free speech, I really believe in the exchange of ideas. And even though I teach in higher ed, I know we're going to talk about higher ed in a minute, I'm not a higher ed absolutist. I tend to think that you talk to the average voter, they may not be able to articulate in scholarly language, the reality of what's going on in the world, but voters typically get it.

[00:07:57] **Nolan:** They, typically have an experience. So they typically understand the world in some deep, meaningful way. So when we suppress speech we lose an opportunity to share those ideas, to find that community, to find that connection. And there's a lot of problems with censorship. And one of the big ones, and I think this is one of the things a lot of folks are facing right now in particular, I think the left has gotten bitten by this one.

[00:08:21] **Nolan:** It's easy to make a list of things we wish we didn't have in the culture. Like I wish there wasn't hate speech. I wish there wasn't racism. I wish there wasn't sexism. If I could wave a magic wand, I would get rid of them right away. But the deeper question, and this is the one that people need to wrestle with, is who do you trust to get rid of those speeches?

[00:08:41] **Nolan:** Who are you going to empower to monitor and moderate speech? And who do you trust to only get rid of those things if they promise to and nothing else? And I think that is, is a more pivotal question that I would post to these people who are advocating for censorship. So. you'll hear from the rights about, national security issues.

[00:09:01] **Nolan:** That's why we have to censor content or maintain the stability of society. And you'll hear from the left, how we never had free speech and that marginalized communities and urban protected under free speech. And there's valid reasons to support all of those arguments, but I still think they come back to the idea of who do you trust?

[00:09:18] **Nolan:** Who, if you're an anti racist, do you really trust the United States government? To be an anti racist institution. I don't want to spend the rest of this podcast going through its history, but counting black people as three fifths of a person, Japanese internment Flint water crisis, you go down the list here of historical events, I wouldn't trust government did over industry.

[00:09:40] **Nolan:** We find a lot of in big tech, for example, a lot of algorithmic bias, particularly racist bias and algorithms. Do you trust them? And then we have all the cases of where once government or big tech has been allowed to censor, they've censored content that's threatened their power, threatened their profit motive, not necessarily things that are bad for the culture.

[00:09:57] **Nolan:** So for all those reasons, I am a free speech absolutist. I do believe the good idea is win at the end of the day when you have free speech. I do believe that even people with the, or institutions with the best intentions will make a situation worse when you allow them to censor content.

[00:10:15] **Nolan:** But returning to the other part of your question about why do I think it's prevalent now an interesting thing has happened in the digital era. And the digital era occurred while we were already in a very hyper polarized time. Starting with Reagan, we didn't talk about the other side in terms of, Hey, I disagree with your policies.

[00:10:33] **Nolan:** We talked about the other side of you're going to destroy my way of life, right? This was Reagan's message. Liberals are destroying the country. And liberals took that up to say the same about Republicans. And in the age of big tech and particularly web 2. 0 and social media,

[00:10:49] **Nolan:** we were allowed to customize what we saw, who we engaged with. We were able to block who we didn't want to hear. And I think it's been really toxic for the culture. You hear a lot of people talk about white fragility, right? That white people lack the stamina to talk about race. I think that most of the country lacks the stamina to just hear that they're wrong or things they disagree with.

[00:11:10] **Nolan:** Like they just don't have it anymore. And I think the digital era is, highly responsible for that. And so I think a lot of people are looking for quick fixes. Why can't we just kick all the white supremacists off social media? Why can't we get rid of hate speech? And that, that sounds easy on the surface, but this is where I say it came back to bite the left.

[00:11:30] **Nolan:** I think a lot of these Gaza protesters were the very same people who probably advocated for that type of censorship. And now they find themselves the victim of censorship themselves. A very powerful lobby is suppressing their, free speech and their rights. And this is what they advocated for against another side over the last 10 years.

[00:11:47] **Nolan:** So it's a very messy situation in that sense.

[00:11:50] **Matt:** Yeah, I look at it very similarly to the filibuster issue, depending upon who's in charge in Congress. We need it, no, it's terrible. We should do away with it. We need it. And, one party integrates it and then the next party uses it. And yeah. It comes down to exactly,

[00:12:09] **Matt:** who's going to manage this? Because they can't even agree. When they're not in power, this is an important tool when they are in power, this is not an important tool. We don't need it. So great example. And I think to your point, with social media, we have not had to be challenged.

[00:12:28] **Matt:** In large part with opinions you can turn it off. You can walk away. You can not follow people. You can block people. And so the ability to maybe articulate a position, even you don't want to hear anyone else's, but you've also never been challenged to articulate what you truly believe or understand about something in a situation where you just can't turn that person off.

[00:12:53] **Matt:** And so that lack of face to face, where you're trapped with someone and you have to talk with them. I think that has contributed to it as well.

[00:13:03] **Nolan:** I think, yeah, that's a great point. And I often get questions from folks about like, how do I talk to people I disagree with? I would say one of the best things to ask people is to defend their viewpoint rather than attack it. Just say Oh, I had never heard that. What evidence do you have to support that?

[00:13:17] **Nolan:** And you can plant a seed that you don't have that, evidence. And, also I think bringing up different interpretations is also very important. So I was speaking a moment ago about the demand to censor racist content. Sometimes I'm, astounded at how one thing is interpreted as racist and something that I think is racist is not.

[00:13:37] **Nolan:** And I think a prime example of that is the origin of COVID. A lot of social media sites suppressed the lab leak theory, arguing that it was racist, but, the official narrative was essentially that and Glenn Greenwald's talked about this, that Chinese people eat weird meats and unsanitary markets, and that's why they get viruses.

[00:13:57] **Nolan:** And I'm like, that's really racist

[00:13:58] **Matt:** That's much more reasons. Absolutely. Yeah. a lab leak implies that there's smart people doing things.

[00:14:05] **Nolan:** Exactly.

[00:14:07] **Matt:** I, yeah, that's exactly that one of the same stories I followed with because it was trying to replace a narrative with a worse one and justifying it that way. And yeah, it's hilarious when you just sit down and think about it. And not sure who came up with that talking point.

[00:14:28] **Matt:** But to your point, even asking someone why do you feel that way or why are you passionate about this? Rather than, as you said, attacking learning it, what is it? And, usually you'll find that there is, that's one thing I love about when you can get to, we all want the same things.

[00:14:51] **Matt:** It's just that we're interpreting how to get there differently. And so when you get someone's story, I think there's more empathy that, ah, now I understand why you're coming from that standpoint or why you're so strongly that way. I think, yeah, listening has just been a lost art in our modern culture.

[00:15:15] **Nolan:** Pick up on something else you said there, I think is really important, which is that and you said this also in the face to face side of things that human element, that connection is, critically important. I think a lot of, I guess more right leaning folks online felt comfortable, for example to talk about how something like the Sandy Hook shooting didn't happen and the parents, kids didn't exist and they were all actors. I can't imagine you doing that to the face of one of these people who lost their child in that tragedy. It's really easy to do through a screen and it's whatever.

[00:15:48] **Nolan:** It's a fun little conspiracy narrative. We can weave and explain and find videos and pictures out of context, but to actually look one of those people in the eye, someone who's lost a child in that tragedy. I just, maybe there's a handful of people. I just don't think the majority of people who engaged in that nonsense would actually do that to their face.

[00:16:04] **Nolan:** And I think it's a prime example of what you're speaking to when you recognize the humanity in someone, you can't treat them like that. You're forced to respect their humanity. If you have any dignity and who you are as a person or integrity.

[00:16:17] **Matt:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's I think that's part of even the, media literacy that they've been bringing into schools is, would you say this to someone to their face? when you see some comments that have been made and we dealt with this, even on the marketing side, when we would get a negative review and I would work with the company that they, of course they wanted to just respond and just lay into this person, whatever.

[00:16:46] **Matt:** And my first advice to them was pick up the phone, pick up the phone and call them. And I would say, the majority of the time, nine out of ten times, the person would simply say, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be so mean. I just didn't think anyone heard me or I didn't think any, it would go anywhere. And so when it was then, not even a face to face, it was just a verbal phone call,

[00:17:11] **Matt:** immediately they would back off. And it change what they had said and it would soften so much of that. Behind the screen, it's easy to be angry and face to face. It's a much different story.

[00:17:25] **Nolan:** Yeah, we have a version of that in the education sector as well. I think students sometimes mistake like email communication for social media. But

once you ask them like, okay, I think we should talk about this either, whatever, even on zoom or in person, their tone totally changes.

[00:17:42] **Nolan:** They have a much more softer tone and they're more focused on the issue at hand versus the, attacks and their tone, is, much more inviting. So I think that's a great piece of advice for all sectors of our community and country to try to get that, real time synchronous communication that I think could absolve a lot of people of

[00:18:04] **Nolan:** some of these behaviorisms that are like, shall we say less than desirable?

[00:18:08] **Matt:** Well, it was funny. I was just reading an article the other day that was they said whenever they get an email that requires more than five minutes to read or processed or anything like that, they immediately reply with, can you give me a call? And take it to a phone call and they said immediately it shortens.

[00:18:29] **Matt:** But most people get nervous because they actually have to talk. And it just helps with that processing that rather than just dealing with it in text, let's hear each other. And so you get more than nonverbal. You get the emphasis, you get the tone. And they said it's really been helping their day by moving things more to a phone instead of constantly the back and forth on email.

[00:18:55] **Matt:** So to your point, yeah, that more of that communication interface widening open.

[00:19:01] **Nolan:** Yeah, I don't know how you feel about him. I've been a big fan of his, but I don't know if you've read any of a Cal Newport's books, but Cal Newport he wrote a great, many great books, but one of his arguments is about, and I love this, how we used to email around work and now we work around email. And I was like, so solution like you're describing there, I could see that being a very advantageous for, especially for companies trying to make money where time is money.

[00:19:24] **Matt:** Brilliant. I like that because that's exactly what has happened in, that's one of the things we, I was talking about someone the other day and I told him, yeah, in France, you can't email after 5 PM. You can't email on the weekend. I says, probably one of the nice French things that I would absolutely integrate in our culture.

[00:19:42] **Matt:** It's people make jokes all the time, but that I think we need that. Absolutely. Well, one of the things I wanted to ask you about is, and this was in your sub stack the other day and moving where we're going, but that I did not realize that media literacy was picked up so quickly in Europe as the digital age, as we entered that and the US lagged behind in digital and media literacy.

[00:20:09] **Matt:** How did that happen? How did Europe get such a headstart on that? And I guess we're seeing the effects of it. As being behind when usually we think we're in front of the world when it comes to tech.

[00:20:20] **Nolan:** Yeah, absolutely. The US is has always played with the idea of adding media literacy. It's its 1st major kind of push was actually during World War 2 prior to the US entering. But the media literacy of the time which was run by the IPA not the Bayer, they were called the IPA.

[00:20:40] **Nolan:** I think Columbia university is where they were housed. But they would basically trying to spot fallacies, like basic critical thinking stuff. They were worried about the fascist propaganda from Italy and Germany and elsewhere. But by the time the US entered the war in 1941 we saw a problem that consistently happens with media literacy in this country, which is the government wants you to be media literacy about propaganda internationally, but they do not want you to be media literate about their propaganda. There was a lot of pressure put on the IPA and it eventually closed the result, but from there in the sixties and seventies due to the, art movement there was media literacy about putting art in schools. So let's teach students how to be art and understand our, and it's, that was somewhat successful.

[00:21:26] **Nolan:** But then, in the eighties, you started to get television in the home and people are spending more and more time on their screen, less time reading. This is where media critics like Neil Postman said, we're amusing ourselves to death. And that fear, picked up in Europe. You have many scholars, particularly I'll point out David Buckingham was a great scholar.

[00:21:46] **Nolan:** And they were putting together media literacy curriculum. And it was adopted by The State and in Europe especially starting in the 1990s, media literacy is a part of schools. There's, critiques to make about the level of media literacy, but there was something there, at least they took it seriously and it created a foundation where when new technologies emerged like cable and eventually the

internet and then smart devices, they already had a foundation for adding that to schools.

[00:22:12] **Nolan:** But that's where the story diverges in the US we were still trying to define media literacy by the early 1990s, a US definition was highly influenced by the work of Buckingham. But one of the problems that those advocates of media literacy ran into here in the nineties was twofold. One, there's a traditionalist belief in education that says Don't have students watching films or sharing their feelings through art, have them reading Shakespeare and, knowing the classics and all that.

[00:22:40] **Nolan:** So there was this elitist sense amongst educators that it would water down education to bring that stuff in the classroom. But the other thing, which I think is more important in this one, we're still semi, well, not semi, we are struggling with America has a decentralized education system.

[00:22:56] **Nolan:** Local school boards have so much influence over your school way more than the federal government in a lot of respects and state governments. And that's a good thing, I think it's some level, but it can obviously be a bad thing with these. Don't say gay bills and things like that. But point being to get media, you don't have a media and education czar who can put media literacy in all US schools.

[00:23:17] **Nolan:** You have to go by district, and then debates will ensue about what type of media literacy you're teaching. Then there's also in the state, comes from my dear colleague, Alison Butler. You also have to train teachers to teach media literacy. So even if you get it in schools, who's going to teach it.

[00:23:32] **Nolan:** And, all those problems have really made the US struggle. Also the US has, since the eighties gone through a lot of austerity measures, so they're cutting budgets. And what happens is companies say okay, you don't have money for education. That's all right. We'll come in.

[00:23:49] **Nolan:** Pepsi says, let us put Pepsi machines all throughout the school. Don't let Coca Cola in. And we'll buy you a, new video board for your gym. Mac says, okay, take all our Mac books. You can use them in the classroom. So corporate media literacy starts to dominate the little media literacy that's offered in the United States.

[00:24:07] **Nolan:** The story finally shifts in 2015, 2016. There is a fear about, it's fake news that what I call a moral panic over it. And a lot of people start to take media literacy seriously and state by state, it depends, we've got States like California that kind of have empty rhetoric about media literacy, but at least rhetoric that's better than most things.

[00:24:25] **Nolan:** And then, but then you have like school districts like Los Angeles thanks to the work of folks like Jeff share, who's a friend of mine and collaborator. Who got it in LA Unified School District. There's some work in Massachusetts and things like that. So America is where Europe was in the late eighties in terms of getting media literacy into schools, but that's how we got passed up.

[00:24:47] **Nolan:** And I think you see a lot of well meaning educators and parents and school administrators struggling right now because they have a narrative about what these tools are. Smartphones are bad for education, but you've got, 20, 25 years of students who are raised on just the opposite, and so they're, trying to negotiate that in these spaces.

[00:25:09] **Matt:** Yeah. That's, it's a very interesting debate. I find myself really square in the middle of it, with a teenager in high school in college and debating, the smartphones in schools. And going through that with my advisor.

[00:25:26] **Matt:** School administrators like what's our policy? I think Ohio is going to ban them in the next two years, but now it's up to every school district what they want to do. So, and I have to stress that the parental involvement is you cannot just assume the school is going to take care of your kid.

[00:25:43] **Matt:** You've got to know who's on the school board, what they're doing, what are their plans? What are their philosophies of education? I do enjoy seeing people active. I don't enjoy seeing all the videos that hit the, internet about these school board meetings. to me, at least I'm like, someone's interested that right now that's where we need to be is just get interested in what's going on.

[00:26:06] **Matt:** Silence.

[00:26:09] **Nolan:** surveillance education on surveillance in schools. And one of the things I found like most fascinating is we looked at some of these schools who had done bans on phones or like they have a cubby.

[00:26:22] **Nolan:** You have to lock your phone in during the school day. And my assumption, I'm not a parent. So maybe that's why I have this assumption. My assumption was that the students were the ones that were going to freak out. And you were going to end up with a client, like a mutiny in the classroom, but actually the data said the opposite students found it more enriching, learning, connecting.

[00:26:39] **Nolan:** They liked it. It was the parents who were irate and said, no, I want to be able to contact my child whenever. What if there's a tragedy, like a school shooting? I want my student to have their phone on, and so it was actually the parents who pushed back, not the students.

[00:26:52] **Matt:** Absolutely. That is what most of the data is showing. And even one of my daughters is starting a college this fall and the provost was telling us that they had one girl first few weeks of school, her mother texted her over a hundred times. And eventually this girl dropped out because of the anxiety of, I have to answer my mom all the time.

[00:27:18] **Matt:** She just couldn't deal with that. The mother couldn't deal with the separation that the daughter tried to put the phone away. But then she goes three hours without responding and the, it was the mother that was upset. So yeah, it's beyond the kids. They're the ones that grown up with it all their life.

[00:27:35] **Matt:** But also their parents have grown up with it all that child's life. And there is a method of parenting that has been implemented here. That is not the healthiest.

[00:27:46] **Nolan:** I would concur. And I think these tools make it way too easy. Like I, people share their location with their friends and their parents and they can be tracked constantly. And I, to me, it's like really 1984. I don't know when I was in high school, I was always trying to avoid my parents and things like that, but it's weird.

[00:28:04] **Nolan:** It's very, strange for someone, for my generation to see this becoming so normalized.

[00:28:09] **Matt:** Oh, absolutely. I had a friend of mine. We, grew up in the 80s and we would laugh that our parents had no idea where we were, what we were doing. And if you didn't meet your friends at the appointed time, you're done.

[00:28:23] **Nolan:** Sorry. Yeah, you're done.

[00:28:24] **Matt:** There was no way you were going to catch up because we don't know where you are.

[00:28:27] **Matt:** You didn't show up. So it was very different time, but yet how quickly it has transformed but related to that. So you're in the education system and I know there's, I've even had some shows about this where, if you're going to be working in marketing, you've got to be looking at certifications.

[00:28:47] **Matt:** You've got to be doing that. And I'm not a an advocate that he certification supersedes a degree that there's still some education necessary, but what I'm looking at is when kids are coming out, what are they prepared for? What are they ready to do? And you're right in the middle of it. You're teaching media.

[00:29:07] **Matt:** You, I'd love to think that you're preparing journalists, the next generation of journalism. How are you approaching this and what are you seeing in your experience?

[00:29:18] **Nolan:** Yeah. I think there's always been a tension within higher ed and, I think it's really ramped up in the last couple of years or last couple of decades, I should say, as faculty have been really emaciated in higher ed. So 30 years ago, three fourths of faculty were tenure track faculty.

[00:29:37] **Nolan:** Now it's about a fourth to a third. The majority of faculty are so called at will adjunct lecturers little security, they get paid less, benefits.

[00:29:46] **Matt:** Silence.

[00:29:53] **Nolan:** spend less time with their students and also just know less about the institution which means they have less of that participate in governance.

[00:29:59] **Nolan:** A lot more of the power has been ceded to administrators and volumes of data on administrative bloats. And you'll hear, I'm a faculty member. I should say that very biased in this administrative bloat. But at the heart of your question higher ed, at least public education is supposed to be a public good.

[00:30:17] **Nolan:** And it was It's doing two things. One, prepare the populace to participate in a democracy. So have an informed citizenry that can, participate and

strengthen our democracy, but also prepare them for survival in the world, whatever it may be. And I think particularly that's like vocational training and things like that.

[00:30:36] **Nolan:** Also financial literacy, the things you need to live in a capitalist society. Okay.

[00:30:43] **Nolan:** So let's accept the reality of where we live. And so, the tension though, I think comes because since the seventies and eighties, we've treated the public sector more and more like private industry.

[00:30:56] **Nolan:** And the public sector is just not good at being a private industry point blank, but they, treat it like higher ed needs constant growth and it needs to be turning profits and we need to invest tuition dollars. And so to do that, we've relied more and more on advertising to students feel good activities.

[00:31:13] **Nolan:** You're going to get an experience. You're going to get to talk to people in industry.

[00:31:18] **Matt:** Yeah.

[00:31:34]

[00:31:47] **Nolan:** A data driven industry. They measure success by passing grades and degree attainment.

[00:31:53] **Nolan:** Well, if anything, anybody knows anything about basic economics, if you incentivize degree attainment and higher grades is a sign of success. Don't be surprised if you see great inflation which begs another question. Are these students actually learning or are they just getting a piece of paper?

[00:32:07] **Nolan:** And then what happens if they do use that paper to get a job? Are they able to even keep that job? Have they learned any of those skills? And so I think these are some of the Issues that people have started to speak about in the last four or five years during COVID in particular those folks who did go through the college process, who did buy Bill Clinton's adage, you have to learn so you can earn a lot of those folks came out saying I don't know, I think I could have got this job without the degree, or I think I had the skills to succeed without the degree which I think is fine.

[00:32:37] **Nolan:** I think college should be available for everyone, but I don't think it's for everyone to be quite frank. And so you start to see more and more people, I think, push back about the value of education simultaneously. A lot of industries got rid of the BA as a entry point and said no, we don't need someone with a bachelor's to do job X.

[00:32:55] **Nolan:** Or we can train them for cheaper on, site to do this job. So I think all those factors are really hurting higher ed. There's, much lower enrollment. I, again, personally blamed the management of higher ed over the last 40 or 50 years. I think they turned us. Into a character of ourselves in a lot of ways to be on campus.

[00:33:13] **Nolan:** If you're a faculty member in the classroom, you still have a lot of power to give a deep and meaningful education. And that's something that drives me. It's something I appreciate that I'm able to do in the classroom. But increasingly, the pressure is increasing, it's on teachers to do just the opposite.

[00:33:30] **Nolan:** It's a lot of feel good community building, build relationships not that kind of deep intellectual push that I think we used to value.

[00:33:39] **Matt:** Well, yeah, because that's, the classroom, I look at higher ed classroom, the whole purpose of that is to be challenged. It's to develop those critical thinking skills to develop more of that introspective. why do I believe this? What, is driving me those types of things? And I can certainly see, it's the commoditization of education, just like so many other industries, it becomes run by the financials rather than the purpose.

[00:34:07] **Matt:** We're seeing, like Boeing's a great example. It became ran by the financials rather than by the engineers. And we see that in education where it gets run by the administration with the financial bottom line. And to your point, when that's the goal, then the mission suffers.

[00:34:26] **Nolan:** Yeah. I think because what you do is you reclassify students as customers and anybody knows anything about business knows the customer is always right. And so, I think they've a lot of the smoke they blow up the behind of, students I think gives students a warped view of what higher ed is.

[00:34:47] **Nolan:** So they have things now like bias reporting in a lot of campuses where students are expected to report bias in the classroom and no offense to

students, but I'm just like, what training do you have to be able to detect bias? Or they increasingly rely on student evaluations as a way to get information in the classroom.

[00:35:05] **Nolan:** No offense to students, but what information do you know about being a professional teacher? it'd be like me going to my doctor and them evaluating, his surgery procedure. I don't know, man, it looks good to me, how do I know? So I think a lot of that has created a barrier between teachers and students.

[00:35:24] **Nolan:** Students think they're there to evaluate the teachers. We just teachers are there to serve the customer or the students in a lot of ways. And Administration has created unique ways, I think, of weeding out people who challenge this dynamic. And one of the things I always point to, and this is where as a white guy on the surface, I get into some trouble, but hopefully if people listen long enough, they'll understand.

[00:35:46] **Nolan:** I think the diversity statement has been actually a homogeneity statement. it's very Orwellian how they call it a diversity statement because their definition of diversity is a very narrow, data driven neoliberal understanding of how diversity matters. Christian Parenti calls it a diversity ideology.

[00:36:05] **Nolan:** He says he's for diversity. Let's diversify everything. let's get more people, more voices, more perspectives, more backgrounds, more regions. But what they have is a diversity, ideology that if you racially gender and sexually diversify the leadership of a campus, the gains of people who share that identity will trickle down to them.

[00:36:24] **Nolan:** It's basically trickle down economics for identity. just trickle down economics, I think it's nonsense. And, but if you're someone who challenges that, it says no, what about like actual diversity initiatives? Like why, not? not all people of color are like milquetoast Democrat neoliberals.

[00:36:40] **Nolan:** There are Republican conservatives, there are far right radicals, there are anarchists, let's diversify what it means to be a person of color. There's no interest in that because those groups will actually challenge the institution. So they just want, their neoliberal diversity and that's it.

[00:36:55] **Nolan:** And so that statement ends up being, I think, really problematic because, and Noam Chomsky wrote about this 25 years ago. He said the whole

application process is through higher ed is a way to weed out people who are going to be a problem for higher ed. In school, whether you're going to grad school or whether you're going for a job, they look at that app and try and find things.

[00:37:16] **Nolan:** So Oh, this, guy's going to be a problem. He's going to call us out on our BS. We want a yes, man. Let's do this. And I think the students are the ones who suffer. I think it would be great for a student to get these radical different views to argue with the instructor about these different views so they could challenge themselves and challenge the instructor and the whole community would benefit.

[00:37:35] **Nolan:** But instead a lot of educators have become comfortable treating the classroom like a rally.

[00:37:42] **Matt:** yeah.

[00:37:42] **Nolan:** what's popular and get some cheers.

[00:37:44] **Matt:** You're making me remember my own college experience and I know specifically I had two professors where I Differed radically with their ideology but being the intelligent 19 year old that I was very assured of what I believed and, anyone that 18 to 24 year old, they know, they'd be assured they're experts in what they know and, but I look at, and through that college experience for me, I got humbled a couple of times, but that humbling was so valuable.

[00:38:20] **Matt:** Because it, prepared me for getting into life. It prepared me for, I may not be right about everything, but those events are still so memorable because they impacted my thinking process my view of self and also the value of others. And so it's so hard to hear what you're saying, because to me, that's what that college experience.

[00:38:52] **Matt:** Yes, it was stuff I've learned, but it was also learning to be open to others views, not be such an idiot about what I believed and get some of those humbling experiences where you realize I'm not as smart as I thought I was. Yeah.

[00:39:14] **Nolan:** spoke up at as the know it all and just got decimated by evidence.

[00:39:19] **Matt:** yeah,

[00:39:23] **Nolan:** You make it very clear. I don't know. yeah, no, I, completely agree with that.

[00:39:28] **Nolan:** But like I said today with the bias reporting and student evaluations, it can be detrimental to your career to put students on blast like that, or challenge them. You might be accused of, bias or contributing negatively to their mental health or whatever. And so I want to be very clear that I don't blame a lot of faculty.

[00:39:48] **Nolan:** These are folks who have bills to pay. They've got children of their own. They just move along to get along to collect the paycheck. But I think in the long run, that's really bad for the students, really bad for the country and really bad for the institution when we normalize that.

[00:40:00] **Matt:** Yeah, absolutely. So what great stories have you seen, maybe some of your students or examples coming through, people studying journalism, media, what are some of the positives and good stories you've seen?

[00:40:15] **Nolan:** Yeah, great question. That's really asked this is one of the ,being a critic of higher ed and teaching in higher ed is a difficult place for me to be in because when I walk onto any campus, the first thing I think of is all the problems with the campus. But once you get in the classroom and you get with those students, that all just disappears.

[00:40:38] **Nolan:** You don't care. The young people today are just, they're incredible. They're hungry for information that they're online all the time, reading things. So they'll, say things like, is this true? Have you heard of this? And I'm like, I don't know who this person is. Let's put them up on the screen.

[00:40:54] **Nolan:** Let's talk about them. And they have a very, interesting worldview. And where I think a lot of at least when I was in college, I remember a lot of discussions about what was wrong with the world, which was important, but there wasn't a lot of solutions discussion. At least in my estimation, the students over the last five, six years, they're hungry for solutions.

[00:41:15] **Nolan:** they want to know what can I do. And so in like journalism courses. they're, I teach them the age old journalistic techniques of sources and how to write a journalism article and vet sources and multiple views and editors.

But we also talk about look, we know most of you are not probably none of you are picking up a newspaper.

[00:41:34] **Nolan:** So how do you get your news? And they talk about social media posts or podcasts or videos. And so I say, okay, let's, take this journalism and let's turn it into those formats and they thrive on that stuff. They love it. And I have them do, I try and keep them local for two reasons.

[00:41:51] **Nolan:** One I think learning how to report on a local community is, critically important. Don't go for the slam dunk Trump or Biden pieces, find local. But also there's news deserts all throughout this country. So I like to train these universities and colleges to report locally. So the local community has some idea of what's going on in their community, and I have been just thoroughly impressed by these students who are really, bold.

[00:42:16] **Nolan:** I had one, there was a rumor of a sex cult in the community. And I was stunned these, students were very bold and going up to these individuals and people who left it and asking hard hitting questions. And they probably had their own bias. They edited it in a really objective way where they let the multiple sides be heard in this.

[00:42:37] **Nolan:** And so those, types of stories are what keep me going. And I think particularly through the Gaza protests, youth are always ragged on, right? Youth get blamed for everything. And youth blame old people like me for everything. But during the Gaza protests, there was this weird narrative that came out on right and liberal media that what we're doing in higher ed is you know, training everyone to love Hamas and be an anti Semite and all this stuff.

[00:43:02] **Nolan:** But what I actually found by talking to these students is a multitude of diversity of perspectives on what was going on. Some, yes, we're pro Hamas. Some were just pro Palestine. Some were pro peace. Some were anti genocide. Some were Jews who were opposed to what Israel was doing. But also really opposed to a lot of what they saw as anti semitic rhetoric around these issues.

[00:43:25] **Nolan:** And, I think that rich diversity speaks to what this generation could offer us, but we have these narratives that I think just pigeonhole these folks incorrectly, and we miss an opportunity to tap into the value of what these young people are showing us.

[00:43:39] **Matt:** That is, I love it. That is so hopeful for the future and, to hear, especially focusing on that local aspect to, there are stories right here that you can build and it's valuable for people to learn what's going on around them. I think you've said this before that the majority of policies that you live under are at the state and local level. Rather than the national level, but yet that gets 99 percent of the attention. And locally, there's not a lot of information about what's happening. So that's such a critical eye. And I love to hear that you are so positive and upbeat about that.

[00:44:16] **Nolan:** Seemingly meaningless, like a local land deal or something. It could have huge implications for the entire community. If that land is commercial or if it's private, if it's condos, if it's homes, whatever, it could just affect your property values.

[00:44:39] **Nolan:** It could affect who lives in the community, who's coming into the community. And it seems like a, I don't know, banal topic. Who the hell wants to talk about land values and, your tiny town, wherever you may live, but it, really is important. It can play huge levels and, my God, local corruption.

[00:44:54] **Nolan:** You could, get a whole career out of local corruption and pay you. So I think there's a lot of meat on the bone there for folks to dig into if we had the infrastructure and I'm happy that colleges and universities largely allow me and the students to do that work.

[00:45:08] **Matt:** That's amazing. That's amazing. Well, one of the things I wanted to leave with is you're on Substack and I'm going to put a link to that in the show notes, but substack seems to be, just to talk about Substack for a while. I've seen so many professional journalists move to Substack and have been absolutely amazed at what it's done for them, even some who have relied on Twitter for the past, 10 to 15 years I read one, he completely left Twitter and his subset seems to be growing even faster without Twitter.

[00:45:43] **Matt:** I'm still calling it Twitter, X formerly Twitter.

[00:45:46] **Nolan:** Let's take a deal on that.

[00:45:48] **Matt:** And, I guess he'll sue you now if you don't use it well, so what's that experience been like moving to sub stack and starting to develop your, readership there.

[00:45:57] **Nolan:** it's actually been amazingly positive and I have a similar experience of when you just described, I just, I don't know, I was writing these op eds and I publish them in multiple places. Salon this week, San Francisco Chronicle that week, USA Today this week. And I kept having people say Oh, can you send me that when it's published?

[00:46:14] **Nolan:** And I was like, maybe I'll start a Stub stack, people can sign up. And then that way I'll just send everything to that Sub stack and people want to read it, it's free, whatever, just take it. I was not prepared for how many people I don't even know, who somehow came across my substack and, signed up there was a real hunger for this intersection of media history and education that I'm privileged to write about.

[00:46:36] **Nolan:** And it, so I have a positive experience, but I do want to actually flip the interview on you for a second. Cause there, there's something I some, this wheelhouse than mine, but I, started to get the impression I have social media accounts, but I rarely use them. And basically they're there in case somebody goes to say Facebook and wants to find me, they can look me up to find my email to email me.

[00:46:58] **Nolan:** But I started to get the impression that social media was not the lucrative connective venture that it might've been like 10 years ago. I, small things I saw, like Elon charging you for the blue check on X or Twitter. The Facebook, I think one time cut down, so you can only connect like a hundred friends at once or something like that.

[00:47:20] **Nolan:** But anyways, long story short, I started to get the impression that I wasn't getting the attention on social media that I was getting a decade earlier. And I talked to other professionals who had drawn the same conclusion that drove a lot of us to Sub stack. But you're more into the analytics of that.

[00:47:37] **Nolan:** Is that just anecdotal? You guys are, don't know how to use the tools properly, or is that something you're seeing across the industry?

[00:47:43] **Matt:** No, so what you're seeing as a result of the quest for monetization any social media platform is going to limit the exposure of any content that has an external link. They just don't want you to leave because if you leave, you don't see ads. And so, any of them for example, for Instagram, you can't put an external link except in your bio.

[00:48:12] **Matt:** And you can say, go to my bio. That rarely happens. LinkedIn, Facebook anything like that, they are going to limit severely limit. And then we've also seen changes in the algorithm. You're not seeing the people you want to follow near as much as you are seeing what they want you to see. You're seeing what, it's the the algorithm is the rich get richer is basically what it is. I can't remember the specific name of it. That's one thing that Douglas Rushkoff, talks a lot about is just the algorithm is there to make popular people more popular because that brings in more money and it brings in more revenue.

[00:48:58] **Matt:** So, if it can't be monetized, they don't want to do it. So the algorithms have changed specifically to focus much, more on that monetization rather than let's get good voices. Let's get good content. They can't define good. They just know what's popular. Okay.

[00:49:27] **Nolan:** At least in my estimation the social media culture, say of 2010 is so much different than the media culture of 2024.

[00:49:37] **Nolan:** And the algorithm plays such a critical role in that. I feel there's like less of that what seemed like more authentic communication connection now versus then.

[00:49:46] **Matt:** Absolutely. once surveillance technology, surveillance capitalism took over, it transformed social media. I, look at prior I call it the 2012 apocalypse prior to 2012. Yeah, it was completely different. But then as soon as people realize I have a voice and I am important and I can put a picture of myself and also the narrative shifts to it's me at the center.

[00:50:20] **Matt:** Prior to having a camera, having social apps and unlimited data, it was still more community focused and, you still had a few people that would arise in, some YouTube, things like that. But with the entrance of all of this information, it just made it much more me focused and look at all my likes and look at all this and not realizing it's the algorithm kind of pushing that because well, it's driving ad views.

[00:50:49] **Matt:** So if we can keep you on for another 40 seconds, that's another ad view. And that's how we're going to do it.

[00:50:56] **Nolan:** That's interesting you picked 2012 too. that's, coming after Occupy and the Arab Spring. And I think that's right around the time when all Those in power realize Oh, they can actually use these things against us.

[00:51:07] **Matt:** Well, yeah, that's why I tell people the Mayans were right. it, you, it's the confluence of unlimited data, a native app on the iPhone. Facebook started with an original app and it was terrible. But the new app allowed integration with the phone and also messaging. and then also you had trying to think what was the other thing of it was, but basically what happened is prior to that.

[00:51:36] **Matt:** And from a commercial standpoint, I used to talk about how people would go on vacation, they would do something, they would take pictures. Then when they would get home, they would make a review. They would upload their pictures. Well, now, I've got a native camera and a social site in my phone with data wherever I'm at.

[00:51:56] **Matt:** I'm now giving the review after I check in. I'm not taking pictures and uploading while I'm there. So it's transformed it into a more immediate process. Prior to that, there was separation and you could think about it and you could prepare. Now it's people can post without thinking.

[00:52:15] **Nolan:** What I know one of my favorite examples of that is whenever you look like a Yelp review for a bar, when someone is drunkenly writing their review while they're at the bar, stupid bar dinner won't serve me.

[00:52:26] **Matt:** Yeah, It's sending me out, kicking me out. Yeah. But yeah, to me that's, and that's why I'm, enjoying sub stack is there's no algorithm. I, and to me, I love it because journalists are becoming rewarded for their work, for their writing. there's probably four or five people.

[00:52:42] **Matt:** I just follow so closely because once you find a good writer with good ideas, You wonder what, it's like finding a great steak after, eating McDonald's for 30 years. It's I didn't know food could be this good. And, that's the way I feel about finding some great writers that I did.

[00:53:06] **Matt:** I knew journalism could be good, but now I'm finding some good ones. And so it's not affected yet by algorithm and monetization. So I feel like that's the cycle of social media is, eventually it may happen, but right now I'm enjoying it.

[00:53:24] **Nolan:** Yeah, no, I agree. And with the Substack too, back to our conversation on news deserts. I've noticed how many people have just started a substack talking about their local community because no, no news outlet will. And so some of them just, they only cover city council meetings or others will just post like pictures of like accidents or something that someone sent them.

[00:53:44] **Nolan:** But it's, I think at least getting us turning in a better direction than where we were, heading. So I don't want to, totally be a advertiser here for Substack, but at least in my experience is like yours has been very positive and I like what I'm seeing thus far. But I think you're also right to caution that we've, been here before, all the optimism and promise of a new platform.

[00:54:05] Exactly. Yeah. Part of me and, yeah. We're towards the end here. I'll, leave, my opinion of TikTok yeah, I understand. It's a free speech issue, but part of me just wants TikTok shut down. It just, and I agree. It's made us dumber.

[00:54:24] **Matt:** I honestly believe this has been the one social media that has just lowered the bar substantially. And we've seen results of that. So just on that principle alone, but yes, I do having the government just shut something down because it doesn't like it. You're, treading on some pretty dangerous ground.

[00:54:44] **Nolan:** Absolutely. And I thought what I always found interesting though about the TikTok shutdown is basically all the arguments except the foreign ownership you could make about any other social media platform. So by that logic, shut them all down. If you're going to go that route, not advocating for the government to have that control, but I'm just saying by that logic, right?

[00:55:04] **Matt:** Well, and it's the old joke. The government doesn't like competition. So,

[00:55:09] **Nolan:** so true.

[00:55:11] **Matt:** well, no, and this has just been a great conversation. Always enjoy having you on the show. Always enjoy our conversations. Thank you so much for coming online.

[00:55:20] **Nolan:** Oh, gosh, Matt. It's always a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much. And thank you to the audience for listening. Hope to talk to y'all soon.

[00:55:25] **Matt:** Absolutely and Nolan. Yeah. So I mentioned your Sub stack. I'm going to put a couple of links here, but if people want to read anything you've done or follow you online, we would be a good place for that.

[00:55:35] **Nolan:** it's my name, NolanHigdon.substack.com. So N O L A N H I G isn't good. D isn't David O N dot sub stack. com. And it's totally free. I know some other media folks say that it's free and then they charge you. free. everything is absolutely free. There's not a charge for anything that I produce.

[00:55:52] **Nolan:** It's interviews, videos, guest writers, my stuff and hope that everyone will sign up.

[00:55:57] **Matt:** Very cool, Nolan. Thank you so much. And dear listener, thank you for attending another episode of the endless coffee cup. I finished my coffee very early on this one. I should have had two cups, but I look forward to our next coffee and conversation on the endless coffee cup podcast.