

National Security Group Lunch Transcript

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From Benghazi to Brennan—Grading Media's Failure

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CHARLES JOHNSON:

Thank you for having me. I'm – I'm a big fan of the Center for Security Policy. I've been following their work for quite a long time and I'm very happy to be here. I do a lot of work on both domestic and foreign policy issues but I got my start as a journalist on the foreign policy front. I had exposed a professor at my school at Claremont McKenna, a notoriously conservative liberal arts school, and they had brought somebody by the name of Bassam Frangieh who was saying one thing to Westside Jewish homes about peace in English and then the next day giving interviews in Arabic about how the Jewish state should be destroyed and in support of Hamas and Hezbollah. So I caused a big fundraising problem for the school by actually – by translating his work and I've been off to the races ever since.

I think if I may, you know, kind of speak from experience in the foreign policy side of things, we have – we have a problem of getting our message out to the wider community. There are many things that we know to be true that the rest of the country does not know to be true because we have not gotten – done a good job of actually going out and building the coalitions necessary to actually win these issues and I think part of the problem is obviously we have mainstream media bias. Obviously, they are not inclined to actually cover our issues. You see this most notoriously with Benghazi, but I think part of the problem is also with the right media that we've spent a lot of time doing media criticism and not enough time doing media production and that's something that I've tried to – tried to fix in my own work.

I think where we're actually facing in many respects is a cold civil war and I don't say that lightly. I mean – and I think our most important weapon in this cold civil war is credibility. And to my likes, there's no credibility without seeing and no credibility without actually seeing the documents, seeing the video, seeing the actual docum – you know, documentation. And I think we can never really shame the left-wing media into doing the job that it doesn't want to do – and the right wing media, I don't think will ever actually win. So I – I would say that we should seek not to replicate the media with its mirror bias but we should seek to replace it by doing actually good work and so what I – what would help me with – a lot of you have very important information that needs to get out to the wider public and what would help me is if you started thinking in terms of leads.

A big problem I have is when I deal with people who are national security types – and forgive me if this is – applies to some of the people in this room – but they are especially verbose. They can't distill it down to a – to a – to a lead – I mean, even if you think in 140 characters – I mean, you know, it would be great if we could all write Proust but we can't. We've got to get it short. We've got to get people's attention. And what I like to do when I do my research is I like to look for unguarded moments, the moments in which there are hot – hot mics, the moments in which they're the early parts of people's career.

For instance, when I published Susan Rice's pro-Robert Mugabe dissertation earlier this year, I went back and I found out that she was a Rhode Scholar. I then had somebody go to the Rhode Scholar place and digitize all of the important dissertations that are there and then the next – the next most important thing of all this is the timing, right? You cannot – with a lot of this work, you cannot win if the other side is controlling the parameters of the debate. So for instance, what I like to do is I like to look for video, for archives, for dissertations for early moments in people's career. This is actually very helpful like when I exposed – when I published now-CIA Director Brennan's dissertation about how there are – too much freedom is possible, the problems of – he was a very pro – pro basically censorship and dictatorship – when I published that, it was – you know, we published the entire dissertation and then we took from that the relevant bits to kind of cause trouble.

This can be done on many different levels. This can be done all over the place and what I like to do with my research is – you know, you mentioned that I work for two competing sites, the Blaze and the Daily Caller. What I do with them is I have a deal where I get a percentage of the traffic so I can have a feedback from the actual community. I mean, there's a lot of very good research that the national security community does but they don't know if it's actually being read and so I can actually see from my traffic how much, who's reading what and actually arrange my work accordingly.

And so I've had – you know I've had hits like I worked on the Robert Menendez story, which of course – there's still more to come out on that. I've just been kind of busy selling my book on Calvin Coolidge, so I apologize. But there are all kinds of ways we can get these stories out to a wider audience and it's all about the timing and it's all about getting picked up larger. You know, kind of moving along, I did the Hagel front group with Iran stuff, which is a lot of fun. I did the Code Pink – Code Pink met with our acting ambassador with Pakistan and he described drone policy to the Code Pinkers and there's actual video of that and they took that.

So I mean I don't really want to – I mean I could talk about some of the other stuff that I found, some stuff I'm still working on but I kind of would be more interested in kind – in – if there are any questions or anything, we can go from there.

MAN:

Alright, thanks. Thanks Charles. Let me just start with something you just mentioned about trying to be more active. Obviously, one of the, I think most glaring examples of the establishment media not paying attention to detail or facts or the truth for that matter is the whole lack of coverage on Benghazi.

CHARLES JOHNSON:

Sure, sure.

MAN:

How should that have been handled by alternative media and in conjunction with think tanks, many of which are around this table – how could you and colleagues here have made that a story that would capture the conscience of the country at large and not just a few enclaves here and there?

CHARLES JOHNSON:

Well, it's surprising to me that even today we don't know the names of the Benghazi survivors. We don't even know if they were contractors, it's surprising – I mean there's a lot of sort of unanswered questions here. We don't know the timeline really – we know bits and pieces of the timeline. I think the problem that the right was hoping for is they were hoping that this would be a silver bullet to take out Barack Obama. They would finally be the – you know the gun that we could – the bullet for the gun that we could use to actually make it like Carter in 1970 – you know 1979, 1980 all over again.

It didn't quite work out that way and part of the reason I think it didn't work out is that we on the right – in the right media spend a lot of time criticizing the coverage or the lack of coverage rather than supplying our own. I think there's an appetite for it today. I found out – just recently I heard back from the filmmaker, the guy who made the Innocence of Muslims film, he's in a federal prison – I finally tracked him down – a federal prison in Anthony, Texas and one thing I want to go and do is – and I'm raising money for us to go out and actually go and interview him on camera in the federal prison because obviously this started with – this allegedly started with a video, let's hear what he actually has to say.

We actually allowed the New York Times to dominate this issue because they're the only ones who's actually who have ever even interviewed him and of course they have their intendant [PH] biases. So I think what we could do – I mean another good example is if we go to things like the Hagel nomination, obviously I think the right messed up terribly, my old friend Ben Shapiro with the friends of Hamas moment. I had a whole slew of information that I was going to present on Hagel which of course was all useless because we know, we've got to get our facts right and I think this is something that we've got to think – I have a thing I call the grandma test, right? My grandmother is an 89-year-old woman. She is a political liberal and she watches about two or three channels neither of which I watch or care – you know, care to even sit down and watch – but if she – I try and think about how can I present something

in such a way that she can actually understand it. And I think the problem with say, like the Benghazi thing is we didn't have a narrative that was succinct and clear and had we worked more on getting information out there, I think we could have done a better job, same thing with Hagel as well.

MAN:

Is there – just to follow up for a minute because I'm sure you're aware there is now an initiative of course that this Center has been working on it that Congressman Wolfe has been trying to get special investigation committee for Benghazi. The Speaker of the House is essentially sitting on that. That's his call. What is the most effective way to use [OVERLAPPING VOICES] your disposal to bring that into full sunlight and perhaps get some results and answer then the questions that you started – your comments by addressing?

CHARLES JOHNSON:

That's right, I mean I wouldn't – I always love leaks so of course – you know anyone here could supply them, but I think the trick with a lot of this stuff is the right has a very – you know we file a FOIA, we do an investigation. We have a very – we're playing sort of a defensive position, right? What we should be doing is if we – I'm told – one of the things I've heard and I've not confirmed this yet, I've been working on trying to confirm this – is that the survivors are actually contractors, they're not in fact – they don't – they actually – they're worried about losing their contract with the government and that's why they're not coming forward.

Now, if I were the Darryl Ises [PH] of the world, I would say to them – or the Frank Wolfes [PH] of the world I would say would you want to be a source or do you want to be a target, right? And that's – I mean that's how I would approach the issue. Instead I would – I mean we can file FOIAs, we can have you know committee hearings, all which are important but we kind of already I think lost when we get to that – that stage. I just kind of, you know – a good example of that most recently is we have the hearings of course which were important on the Muslim Brotherhood involvement but the other side was prepared for all of this and had we been you know – how we gotten prepared the journalistic background – you know backgrounds and all this stuff, had we actually gotten the material out, say, six months, a year ahead of time to prepare who these people were to get the bloggers, the others are actually out and interested on this could've been a bit more effective I think.

MAN:

Yes, right here. Wait for the microphone so everybody can hear you.

GEORGE NICHOLSON:

Alright, George Nicholson [PH], one of the things that bothers me and a very close friend of mine is one of I think the best commentators out there Kim Dozier, which you're probably all aware of. What Stan McChrystal for instance has said now that – and people try to draw him out of what happened with his Rolling Stones interview and he said well, we have to realize how things have changed today is everybody is a journalist. You've got Twitter. You've got blogs and everything else. And what people are more interested in is sensationalism – just like what happened to General John Allen. The hullabaloo about his emails to Jill Kelley, it turns out fact. Every one of those emails he sent out, he cc'd his own wife on it. I certainly have not seen anything in the press about that.

CHARLES JOHNSON:

Sure, well, I'd love to see the evidence for it. I mean I'll print that. That seems fun. I mean one thing I would say is that you know in a perfect world, we'd be able to get the Anthony Weiners of the world on corruption or Eliot Spitzer we'd be able to get on you know, use of the state troopers, instead we have to rely on sex scandals and you know – I wish that it were other. I mean, I tend to be a pretty clean living guy and it kind of grosses me out to go through all the prostitutes that are the – you know that Senator Menendez was allegedly using. You know I wish that it were other but we do have a climate that believes in sensationalism and what do – the way I try to think about it is how do we get them to take the medicine with the cheese, right? How do we get the spoonful of sugar to have the medicine go down and actually get the ideas that are important and it's a trick. I mean, the trick I think most of all is timing. If you get the timing of the story just right – I mean every story needs a peg and if it doesn't have that, it often gets lost.

I've seen that with things – stories that I'm particularly interested in but, yeah I mean – we do live in a world in which everyone has a camera, everyone has a cell phone camera. I use Twitter as a surveillance tool, like one thing I'll notice is if say a campaign office goes dark, it usually means that there's going to be some big shakeup. There are all sorts of ways you can actually get – you know many of the people who send me things – one of the guys I work with all the time who actually helped me find the Code Pink video is a database programmer who works out of Orange County and just finds things and sends them to me so you can never know when things are going to actually come to you and you've got to be much more receptive to potential leaks that way. I don't know if that answers your question but...

GEORGE NICHOLSON:

[UNCLEAR]. Maury Povich used to be an excellent journalist and right now they're just trash journalists on TV.

CHARLES JOHNSON:

Yeah, I mean you see this with like CNN for instance back in the day, you know – this used to be – this is CNN right? That was there and now a lot of their television has become a lot more reality TV based and it sort of like the high – the high establishment has become very low and the low – what I’m trying to do and what others like me are trying to do like with the Hagel stuff, there are basically only five or so actual journalists, they are all in their 20s, that are actually going and doing the stuff with the Washington Free Beacon and elsewhere. What I’m trying to do is build out the ranks of amateur people and actually get them so that we actually have leads, so we actually have standards of our reporting which I think would be – you know there’s – not all that stuff can I think be taught but right now we’re sort of in an amateur – an amateur moment.

MAN:

But to George’s point really, the pressure on young people getting into this business is to succeed at being an info-tainer, really, more than a journalist. What you’re talking about is almost a lost art and certainly not a very remunerative one.

CHARLES JOHNSON:

What I try to explain to a lot of the people who are young, who want to go into journalism is everybody wants to go into opinion journalism, which I think is just a terrible, terrible thing to do because there’s – you know nobody needs a lot of 20-somethings spouting off their opinions. What they need is they need actual evidence, they need actual documents. What I like to do is find the document that people say shouldn’t exist that does exist, right, or the video that shouldn’t exist but is there, because that disrupts a narrative and then you can form something entirely new on that and I think if I were advising kind of younger people who actually do this type of – to do investigative stuff, is start at your college – start at the college campuses. I mean many of the professors there, many of the speakers that come there, they think they were in a comfortable environment. You know you can – in some states you can record them, obviously check your local laws, don’t do anything criminal – but in many – you know that’s how you can kind of get your start, actually producing news. It’s a lot more fun, too, I’d say. Yes?

MAN:

Oh, did you have question? Oh sure.

QUESTION:

I really endorse the IE of going and reading the documents and finding new material, of course I would say that because I’m a researcher and you know nothing researchers like more than praise for

researchers, but you know, there's a paradoxical element here that I for example last summer got a – I guess a leak from the UN – one of their internal reports on firearms which sort of called the idea of firearms ownership a gendered mistake and said that you know, you should be against it because you should be against masculinity. Okay? Nice long UN paper on this subject. Well, you know when you put it out there, the response you get – I understand why people do this, but the response you get is literally, that doesn't exist and the words on the paper have no meaning. So, you know, I love the call for research and documents but people shouldn't kid themselves that just because they pull out a great piece of paper that's incredibly embarrassing, that it's going to turn people around because there's an incredible ability people have just to sort of dismiss the actual piece of paper which you've managed to procure.

CHARLES JOHNSON:

No, I mean, fair enough. I mean, I've seen this – I've seen this more often than not where you –people will deny an actual photograph, they'll say this is Photoshopped or this is what have you. I mean the right – the people who are on the right doing investigative work, they have to have their credibility airtight. I mean they have to have a triple standard. I mean, it's entirely unfair but it's entirely the way it is and so what I would say is that most stories should be short. I mean, you shouldn't have more than 800 words and every story should have a picture or a video or something and if you had that, you know that craziness, you could say hey, here it is or here it is on your screen, you know, seeing really is believing and if you do this enough times you can actually be surprised at how you can persuade people and of course you have a humor element too, which is you know – which people like, people like that a lot more than say here's this dry paper that, you know.

MAN:

There's a question down here, [UNCLEAR].

QUESTION:

Yeah, you mentioned making sure your recordings are legally obtained. What happens when two Progress Kentucky staffers illegally record something and Slate runs it anyway. Is there some sort of an ethical standard there?

CHARLES JOHNSON:

One thing I would say is that I can't – I can't go into the details on this but one of the staffers has a long criminal history and you should read all about it in the Daily Caller on Monday. So what I could say is that, yeah, I mean you're going to – you're going to live in a world in which you have the Scott Proutys on the one hand, you know the 47 Percent comment types where he did exactly what James O'Keefe has

done, right – on the right and yet James O’Keefe is in federal probation for three years and he – and Scott Prouty gets a – gets to be on MSNBC and gets to be a liberal – you know, so yes there are ethical limits I think that people should impose on themselves. I mean, for instance, I don’t go after people’s children unless, you know the children become like a big part of the story. The other side doesn’t have those restrictions as you could see with the Sarah Palin, you know, the way they treated her kids but yeah, there are – I think there should be ethical limits. I think that’s something that the profession should discuss and police its own ranks.

But yeah, I mean we live in a world in which the Pentagon papers happen. I mean if you have documents that are illegally obtained as long as you’re not paying – you know paying for it. I mean on the one hand I’d loved to live in a world in which the people who do the Wikileaks of the world were actually executed as traitors, but on the other hand – on the other hand, that’s not the world we live in, you know – you know, I wish there were other but if the Wikileaks stuff comes out and it’s interesting as a journalist, you know it’s my duty to actually cover it and actually make it of use to the audience. I don’t know if that’s helpful. Yes, David.

DAVID:

Can you elaborate on I guess – two points that you covered briefly. Number one is your working method and number two is what people maybe in this room or in Washington in general, think tanks on the Hill can do to even start thinking about how to weaponize some of this information that they have.

CHARLES JOHNSON:

Well, one thing I would say is that every story needs a who and so what I’ll do is I’ll track – I have a list of about 250 people that I track at all times. So I have Google news alerts on them. I will – if there are events in my area and – I live in LA – I’ll go to them. If I have friends who are in the DC, New York area and they’re speaking, I’ll have them go to them and you’ll just record them and sooner or later, they will have an unguarded moment and sooner or later that’s when you can actually be of use. When somebody makes the news, like for instance when Susan Rice was making the news, there’s this program called WorldCat which has a list of everything she’s ever written or been involved with, worldcat.org and you go to that and you can pull up her whole history and so I found her pro-Robert Mugabe dissertation. You can do that with a lot of things and that’s a good way for people who are researchers, who are necessarily inclined to go out and actually go into the field or go in the archives, that’s one way that they can actually be you know, useful. You can get a lot of stuff with a library card and a lot of help from good librarians.

MAN:

Charles, thank you. I want to move along.