

## Ben Swann and Independent Journalism

Guest: Ben Swann

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***Ben Swann (BenSwann.com) has won two Emmy Awards and two Edmund R. Murrow Awards for his work in broadcast journalism. He currently runs the Truth in Media Project.***

**WOODS:** It's interesting that even though we travel in exactly the same circles, and have exactly the same audience, we've never met or spoken before, so I'm glad to have you here. I think people are more interested in you and your career than they are in asking about the specifics of the reports you've done. I want to balance both. First, I want to let you tell people about your Truth in Media Project.

**SWANN:** The Truth in Media Project. The idea behind it is we are really working to cut through that left-right paradigm in media. Clearly, we believe there is a false Left-Right paradigm in politics that people have bought into. It has now translated its way over the past couple decades, specifically about 15 years, into media. There's the false Left-Right paradigm in media, and unfortunately when it gets into media, creeps into media, there is a lack of truth being reported, because everything is being reported through this lens, through this filter that's happening either through a Left paradigm or a Right paradigm. We're working to break that down, and so far so good.

We're enjoying the challenge of it. It is a challenge, because people are so used to this. Tom, I absolutely believe that most viewers or listeners or readers, when they go to media, they go there in order to have their worldview validated, not to learn. When you go to media to be validated, you either run to those on the Left or on the Right who you think best represent your worldview, so you can hear them echo back to you what you already believe in the first place. Breaking through that is quite the challenge.

**WOODS:** You seemed to come completely out of nowhere to most of us. All of a sudden, holy cow, we've got this guy on an actual TV station who's saying things we would want the country to hear. Had you been doing this before the Ron Paul campaign, but we in the rest of the country didn't know about it? Or did Ron Paul change your way of thinking? How did you get started in all this?

**SWANN:** What's kind of interesting is I had moved to Cincinnati. As you mentioned, I worked on the border prior to coming to Cincinnati for most of my career and covered the drug war, but after moving to Cincinnati we started this thing called Reality Check. It was only in existence for about ten months before the campaign. We needed that time to build it up, and it was growing steadily. Then when we hit the campaign, started talking about issues, some of the things that most people would consider insane to talk about in the local newscast—like delegates and how many delegates candidates have—it was happening to these different caucuses around the country, and when you start reporting on those things, obviously we grew tremendously during that time, because we were the only ones. Not because we were the best at it, but because we were the only ones at it. When no one else was talking about it, it's pretty easy to have a pretty strong market share.

So we were able to do that and then beyond that just continue to grow the brand of talking about issues that we felt were being ignored. It was through that process that I began to really understand the Left-Right paradigm. I didn't understand it myself before that. I was trying to talk about truth and realized how viewers saw things and other media saw things. It was really the tainted worldview. Breaking through that—it's kind of been a journey for me.

**WOODS:** Who have been your important influences in that journey?

**SWANN:** I think people such as yourself. You were the first person I ever heard talk about this thing called nullification. I said, "What are they talking about?" And I started to understand that process. By the way,

this past weekend we were doing some events in Idaho, and Michael Boldin was out there as well. He spoke extremely well about this concept of nullification and what the process looks like. I thought he did a marvelous job of explaining it.

**WOODS:** He's the best. Yeah, he's great.

**SWANN:** He's fantastic, and so people like you, people like Dr. Paul—obviously he's had a huge influence. For me it's really been kind of a process of—I'm not a libertarian. I'm not a capital-L Libertarian. I'm a liberty-minded constitutionalist; that's what I refer to myself as, because I don't actually belong to the party. But I would say that there have been a lot of libertarian thinkers who have dramatically shifted my worldview, and not just shifting it. I'm a recovering neocon, so I tell people that. Full disclosure here.

**WOODS:** You and me both.

**SWANN:** When you step through that door, as you know, it's like the whole world opens up, and you see things very differently. It's this process of believing in liberty and having to break through, again, those paradigms that really challenge your world-view.

**WOODS:** It's funny that you mention that you consider yourself a liberty-minded constitutionalist, because I was asking people on my Facebook page—[facebook.com/ThomasEWoods](https://www.facebook.com/ThomasEWoods)—what should I ask Ben Swann? Somebody said, "Where does he fall on the libertarian spectrum? Is he an anarchist? Is he a minarchist?" Some libertarians want to rip each other's hearts out over questions like that. Let me ask you: why do you think other journalists get things wrong? Is it because they have an ideological bias? Is it because they have a material interest? What do you think is the problem?

**SWANN:** I think there's a couple of things at play. One of the forces that I think a lot of journalists run into is the problem of groupthink. So you have this mentality built into newsrooms across the country of what is acceptable and what is not, and the shortcuts-of-the-brain mentality, where rather than really digging into stories and looking at why things happen the way they do, they merely talk about what happened.

I explain it to people this way. The reason I think Ron Paul struggled so much during the debates was, number one, because no one would ask him a question. Number two, when they did finally ask him something, it took him a long time to answer. One of the reasons it would take him a long time to answer, if you go back and look at how he answers debate questions, it's because almost every time he was asked a question, he had to correct the question in order to give a correct answer. It was because the question was coming from a flawed understanding. So he would try to explain, "Well, the reason that we're in the position that we're in is because. ..." And he'd have to correct the question in order to give the answer.

I think that's what happens in media a lot—we're asking the wrong questions. It's not because the journalists or writers or producers or anchors or whoever are doing a poor job of researching. It's because they're not researching at all. We have these almost archetypes that are built into the business that we talk about, and we talk about them in such a way that they're almost a given, a fact. Many times they're not. They're this skewed worldview that becomes groupthink. I hope that makes sense as I say it. It might be a little bit confusing, but I think that's one of the big problems we have in media right now, is that we're not basing questions or reporting on fact. We're basing it on an assumption or an archetype.

**WOODS:** I agree with that. And it's not just the media. The average person, if he has an ideology, is simply looking to have that ideology confirmed by whatever source he's consulting. Maybe all of us are guilty of that to one degree or another, but it definitely gets in the way of finding the truth. Speaking of finding the truth, this is quite astonishing to me: you apparently landed an interview with Barack Obama. It must have been after he had become president, since you asked him about the constitutionality of his kill list. Is this true, and if so, how did you land that?

**SWANN:** It is true. It was actually during the 2012 campaign. Obviously, Ohio was a huge swing state, so all of the candidates in the campaign had come through regularly. Every single week they're campaigning in the state of Ohio. It almost becomes a joke around the state; it feels like they're running for president of Ohio, because they're in so many cities. The station that I worked for at the time, FOX 19, put in their request to interview the president. The way the campaign is set up, they were actually pretty smart about this. If he came to Cincinnati, no Cincinnati television station could interview him, but they would offer interviews to reporters in other cities. The reason for that is because they know that if a sitting president comes to town, every station in town is going to talk about him. So in order to maximize exposure across the state, you allow stations from other markets to come in and interview him one on one. And now you get the most bang for your buck when he comes to the area.

**WOODS:** Got it.

**SWANN:** That's how it works. What we did was we put in our request, and it turned out he was, over Labor Day weekend, going into Toledo, Ohio. They called us up and said, you guys are on the list. You guys have moved up. By the way, I learned later on that the reason we got moved up and got on the list was that the week before, I had interviewed Governor Romney and Congressman Paul Ryan together, and went pretty hard on them, especially on the issue of the delegates from Maine having their credentials stripped from them.

Some of the staff people in Ohio saw that interview, and they were excited about it. They thought, "Well, hey, that's great. He works for a FOX station, and he was hard on those guys, so he must like us."

**WOODS:** Right. Awesome, awesome.

**SWANN:** They moved us up and said come on down. I went up there to Toledo and interviewed the president. Got five minutes, which turned into seven and a half, but it was some pretty tough questions. Not for the sake, by the way, Tom, to shock people, or trying to get these gotcha interviews, as Sarah Palin calls them. For the sake of reporting these important questions that I thought the American public—that nobody else was asking. So I got a shot at asking them.

**WOODS:** I want to go back to your time at FOX 19, and I know that you're out on your own now. That's very exciting, and we'll get back to that. It was an incredibly gutsy move, it seems to me, for you to be in that more or less comfortable position and then strike out on your own.

I have a two-part question for you. First of all, was the attention that you were getting, particularly from the Ron Paul people, viewed as a good thing or a bad thing by the executives at FOX 19? And secondly, did you feel like you weren't being given the scope that you wanted? What was the decision-making behind your leaving? But first I want to know, did they view the attention you were getting as a plus or a minus?

**SWANN:** I think in the beginning it was a huge plus, because when I went to work there, it was nearly a last-place station. We were kind of battling for third or fourth place, depending on the ratings book. By the time I left, we were number one across the board in primetime demos. We grew pretty rapidly. In the beginning it was very positive, and then over time I think it became less positive, because there was a fear of those people. When I say fear, I think a lot of executives are concerned about anything seen as controversial, right? What they would love to have in all media circles is, 100 percent of the people who watch you are happy all the time with everything you say and they're truly fans of what you're doing.

The risk you run, though, when you really start to talk about an intelligent subject—and when I say intelligent, I mean not just car crashes and house fires. Suddenly, you went by criticism. Many of the people watching us loved what we were doing, but they wouldn't always agree. A lot of times people would get angry and feel like when you break down that Left-Right paradigm—"One day I like what you're saying about gun control, the next day I hate what you're saying about due process rights for terror suspects." So

what you find is there's a lot of controversy, but at the end of the day, people want to feel something.

One of the places we struggled was that the station didn't want any criticism over anything. So I think they struggled with that. I also think they struggled with the fact that other media were more critical of what we were doing than anything. I had a lot of stories written about me in publications around the country, in trade journals, where they would essentially slam what I was doing and the questions I would ask were the things we were talking about. The station hated that. That was a huge concern for them, because are we doing the wrong thing? Maybe we're just kind of kowtowing to the Ron Paul crowd or the libertarian crowd. I think there was a lot of angst for them. They wanted to get away from that angst, and that was fine.

One of those things they wanted also was to really move to just talking about hyper-local subjects. Let's talk about city council meetings. Let's talk about county commission meetings. Let's talk about local bridges and roads. We talked about some of those things, but at the end of the day, when you talk about a presidential kill list, that affects every single person living in Cincinnati. The deal is, viewers knew that, because obviously we grew like crazy. I'm not sure management quite understood.

**WOODS:** I can't get over the career you've had up to now. The fact, first of all, that you're able to build up a following of the kind that you have now, such that you thought it was plausible to strike out on your own, is something that very, very few people in your position can say. Yet, at the same time, it must frankly be a kind of a scary thing to be out there on your own. What are the pluses and minuses of the whole thing?

**SWANN:** Anytime you step out on your own, there's risk involved. You're trying to create something new, and in addition to that, figuring out the platform for it. We were very fortunate that we've had a lot of support so far. I think we've turned out some really good pieces. What we're doing is we're producing these five-to-ten-minute-long videos that we're releasing via YouTube and our website. I think we have five more to go for this first set, and then we'll have a full season. We're going to try to place it on Netflix.

We really want to do two things. We obviously want to build a strong brand, but more importantly, we want to influence people. We want to make people think about issues in a way they hadn't thought about them before. It's a challenge, because we're recreating the model here. There are others like Glenn Beck, or even Ron Paul himself, who have stepped out and done these subscription-based models. We've looked at that, but we say, "Well, the problem with that is you're behind the paywall." It's difficult to influence the culture behind the paywall. We're just trying to figure out what it looks like, and there are challenges to it. It's certainly more challenging to go off and start something than just go work for someone and stay in your specific wheelhouse. It's been a great experience so far, and it's been very exciting.

I think the best part about it is we don't just create these videos. We're also working with different groups across the country to create sustainable plans for how to restore liberty on a local level. That's probably been the best part of it. Going around to these different communities and meeting people in Minnesota or in Iowa or in Maine and New Hampshire or Illinois, talking to them about what it takes to restore liberty for their individual lives through county commissions and through mayoral races and the local police departments. That's probably been the most exciting part of it, just interacting with people in that way. But it's been a great experience overall so far.

**WOODS:** Suppose somebody said, "This guy sounds really great. I've never gotten to see any of his stuff before." What would be one or two reports you've done, either with FOX or afterward, where you feel like you really put your best foot forward?

**SWANN:** I think the goal here is essentially, as I said, to influence the culture, right? So any way that we can especially reach young people, because this whole message of liberty, this picture of liberty in my mind is one where we really need to recognize there are a lot of different groups out there who have been separated by this Left-Right paradigm who should be working together. We should be working together. So

how do we bring those groups together and find some commonality? We talk about Tea Party groups and Occupy groups. I think Occupy and Tea Party have more in common than most people want to believe. The reason for that is they both have justified anger over problems in our system right now.

They have more in common than they think, but the media's told them that they don't. Working to restore that, I think is important, and I think putting the best foot forward means approaching people in a way that is professional, that has a certain style to it, a certain look to it, that they're accustomed to and that they really like. But they also trust. Tom, it's an interesting time that we're living in. Alternative media's growing so much, right? But at the same time, while it's growing, there are a lot of people out there who are still not considered reputable, so how do we bridge that alternative side with the mainstream side?

**WOODS:** I guess what I mean is if somebody wants to go to YouTube and look at your stuff, what would you hope they would see? What's the best Ben Swann video ever?

**SWANN:** I see what you're saying. There are a number of them. If you go to the YouTube channel, you're going to see this whole playlist. Probably the strongest one that we have had so far—even though I think the quality of it is not quite what the other ones have been, so they've been getting better—is from during the summer, explaining what media was not telling the public about what was going on in Syria. We explained, I think very clearly, who the al-Nusra Front is, who the Free Syrian Army is. We do it in a graphic style that I think makes sense, and I think it's very clear. It's very concise.

Unfortunately, if you go and look at it, it'll look like only a few people have watched it, because we've had to replace the video. Between video and YouTube, over a million people have now watched that video. It's pretty exciting to me that the response to it has been very strong for people who say, "We are amazed at how clear you make this information and yet how little this information is actually out there in the mainstream." I'd encourage people to see that. It gives you an idea of what we're trying to do.

**WOODS:** I find it extraordinary. I think it's one of the only times, maybe the only time in my lifetime, in which the U.S. government clearly wanted to bomb somebody and has backed down from doing it. That almost never happens. And to see the scope of the opposition and to see how utterly diminished John McCain is, how can that not make us feel at least a little bit encouraged after the constant smacking down and depression we feel looking at this world? This was a "point of light," to borrow an expression from George H.W. Bush.

**SWANN:** It absolutely was, and I think that those of us who have been sounding this alarm—I asked President Obama over a year ago during that one-on-one interview about why the U.S. was funding al Qaeda in Syria. At the time, I got a lot of criticism from other media and from management that I work with, saying, "Why are you talking about this? There's no al Qaeda in Syria. This is all crazy talk."

We see now, and you're absolutely right—it does not happen where the U.S. government positions themselves for war and then stops. They don't stop short. It was only because of this overwhelming response from the public. So overwhelming that when the president thought his next play, his brilliant play, was to hand it over to Congress and let Congress be the bad guy. No one thought Congress would back down. Even a Republican-held House was backing down so much that John Boehner didn't want to hold a vote. He was afraid of how it would look when they were defeated, because they were going to lose. So when you meet guys like Thomas Massie and Justin Amash, they are emboldened by that kind of support.

We have a phrase we use often. We say, "Liberty is rising." I think liberty in this country is rising right now, and it is the opportunity for that liberty message like never before. It is incredibly exciting to see the example of Syria and how, as you said, it's unprecedented, that the public would be this informed on something that candidly the politicians continue to not tell the truth about. The mainstream media has not told the truth. They've gone through the same rhetoric that we saw in 2003 on the buildup into Iraq. It was the same rhetoric used in 2013 in the build up for Syria. Yet this time the play wasn't there, so it is an

exciting time in that respect.