

Informed & Engaged Ep. 14 - English

[00:00:52] Hi, everyone. Good afternoon and welcome to the 14th episode of Informed and Engaged. Today, I'm thrilled to have the finest award-winning journalist from Michigan. Steve Henderson and Nolan Finley. Steve and Nolan.

[00:01:14] I first met them about four or five years ago in Detroit when over a what was billed as a whiskey hour. They use this as an opportunity to bring together different views of what was happening on the ground and different political perspectives to the major challenges and major opportunities in the city of Detroit. This has grown into the Detroit Civility Project, which is a new effort which has allowed Steve and Nolan, who bring very different political perspectives but have managed to really have great conversations with each other and to facilitate great conversations, among others, with different different views. And they have facilitated many, many conversations over the last year with the Detroit Civility Project.

[00:02:13] And here we are the day before the first presidential debate. And one of the key questions that we're going to talk about today is the national media getting it right. Are the polls getting it right? Both Steve and Nolan are journalists on the ground in a key battleground state in Michigan. And they're going to tell us what they're hearing and what is to their perspective. So first, let me tell you a little bit about Steve and a little bit about No. One. Steve is a Pulitzer Prize-winning former editorial editor of The Detroit Free Press, who is the founder and the editor in chief of Bridge Detroit, which is one of the most exciting new, not for profit journalism organizations in the country.

[00:03:05] So with Bridge Detroit Bridge, Detroit is not only committed to delivering great reporting for the people of Detroit, it is committed to informing that reporting by truly listening and really being on the ground and listening to what it is, the information, the reporting that people in community really need.

[00:03:29] Steve is a very busy person. Steve also has morning, a morning, a morning radio show on WTT and Knowland. And Steve, as I mentioned, they have many projects together, including a community affairs show called One Detroit on Detroit Public Television. Nolan has been at the Detroit News for more than 40 years.

[00:03:59] And for the last 20 years, he has been the editor of the editorial page and one of the most well-bred columnists across Michigan.

[00:04:09] So please join me for what is to be a lively, a robust, but a completely civil conversation about what is happening in today's politics. In the final weeks of the of the campaign. So, Nolan, let me begin with you.

[00:04:37] So so the national media certainly got it wrong last time. So did the polls. The polls, the most recent polls that I saw today had Joe Biden up by almost 10 points in Michigan. Michigan remains a key battleground state. Does that does the poll findings, does that what is being recorded out of Washington in New York? Is that consistent with what you're hearing and seeing on the ground?

[00:05:13] Well, as you mentioned, a lot of the national media, a lot of folks got it wrong in 2016, including you and me. So, you know, we're very cautious and very cautious this time about how to read what's going on. Donald Trump should never have won Michigan in 2016. Hillary Clinton should have never won. And Donald Trump should not win in 2018.

Based on what we know about the state, its history in presidential elections and everything else, but we all saw what happened in 2016. I've been trying to listen more this time and watch things a lot more carefully this time before launching off into prognostication. That may not hold up. I still think it still feels to me like anything can happen here. I don't believe there is a 10 point lead, but there very well could be. Race also could be tight or Trump could be ahead. I mean, there is a lot of enthusiasm for the president. I wrote Sunday seeing yard signs everywhere, a giant yard signs. I think you mentioned you saw the same thing near your home. That may mean a lot may not mean much at all, because I believe Donald Trump is driving turnout on both sides of the ticket. I don't think there's a lot of enthusiasm for Joe Biden in Michigan, in metro Detroit. There was not a whole lot of. Enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton. Four years ago. But I don't think there's this high negatives for Biden this time, as we saw for Clinton last time. And if you look at what happened here in 2000, 18 or Democrats just turned out in droves and took seats they never should have touched. I mean, I don't know that conditions have changed that much in over the last two years in terms of Democratic enthusiasm to vote. I think what has changed over the last few years is Republican enthusiasm. Both has increased. And so I'd be very hesitant to put Michigan into one column or the other at this point.

[00:07:27] Thank you, Nolan. And just before the start, the show began.

[00:07:31] Steve, we were talking about turn out and it's Nolan said the president is driving turnout on both sides of the aisle. What has to happen for Joe Biden to win?

[00:07:49] Well, you know, as no one said, 2016 was an anomaly and a lot of ways in Michigan are at least something we hadn't seen in a really long time or before.

[00:08:03] And there are a couple of different dynamics at work. One was the vote in McComb County, which is the sort of northeast suburbs of Detroit, which are pretty Working-Class Blue-Collar in a lot of ways, and kind of a bellwether for working-class and blue-collar votes, not just in the state, but in the country.

[00:08:28] This is the home of the Reagan Democrats. That's where that that phrase was coined in the 1980s as Democrats who crossed over and voted for Ronald Reagan for president.

[00:08:39] We saw them in 2016 after having voted two times for Barack Obama very strongly. We saw them switch and vote for Donald Trump. And so that was unexpected. It was not that there was nothing in the polls that said that that was going to happen, the numbers that it did. So that had a lot to do with it. And then the flip side of that, of course, is the vote in Detroit, where you have, you know, an overwhelming Democratic advantage. Any Democrat who's going to win the state of Michigan really needs a very strong turnout here in Detroit. And if you get it, you're likely you're likely to win in 2016. There were twenty thousand fewer votes cast for president in the city of Detroit than there had been in 2012 or 2008. And so the combination of the undervote in Detroit and the switch of votes in McComb County delivered a very narrow victory, 10000 votes statewide to Donald Trump. You know, I think if you're Donald Trump, that's a that's gonna be a hard trick to repeat. I think he probably he has a good shot to win McCollum County again, but probably not as heavily as he did in 2016. But more importantly, the motivation to get voters out in Detroit is just going to be much more, much more a focus of the Democratic side. Voting has already started here in the city of Detroit because one of the things we did in 2018 in Michigan, this is start no reason absentee voting, you can vote absentee if you

just feel like it. And that means there are early votes being cast by people who are not showing up on Election Day.

[00:10:48] The number of people who have gone to these, they've got boxes set up around the city to collect ballots the first day that they were open. There was just a real crush of people. They are now talking about how to make sure that there are there are officials near those boxes to make sure that they're available to people and that the lines don't get out of control and things like that.

[00:11:13] So early signs is that you're going to have a strong vote in Detroit, which, you know, Joe Biden absolutely benefits from. But put as no one said, you know, anything can happen.

[00:11:26] And I think this year has taught us all not not to predict what's coming tomorrow. Right. Let alone in in 40 days. So I would say Joe Biden has a clear advantage. That's what you're seeing in the polls. But if he can't get voters out the way that he needs to, then he won't win.

[00:11:49] And Jennifer, I'd add to that, you've always got to be careful with the poll people. I think this year, I mean, Kaito had a survey out, said more than 50 percent of Americans are afraid to say publicly who they're voting for. And that's 77 percent of Republicans say that. So, you know, you can't get as good as good appeal. And I think as journalists, we've got to get out there and start making assumptions about how people are feeling, how people vote and start actually talking to people. I saw a piece, some move today on by the AP on The New York Times tech story that said, well, this will hurt Donald Trump. A blue-collar workers, blue-collar workers won't like this on and on about blue-collar workers without ever voting one.

[00:12:39] And, you know, I think we might be here making some of the same mistakes we made last time into not getting out and doing the legwork.

[00:12:49] You know, like we've talked about this over the years, about the deep cuts at the Detroit News that the Free Press and when you and I began working as reporters, we were out there, you know, covering meetings. We were there at the school board meetings, at the city council meetings, at the water authority meetings and. And how are journalists, how are journalists doing? Local journalists in Michigan at the news. How are they doing that kind of reporting when there have been so many cutbacks?

[00:13:24] Well, the cuts are one thing and then the coverage restrictions are another. It's hard to get out and talk to people face to face. There's fewer opportunities to meet people where they live and work and interact. Obviously, you know, we don't have the resources. No one has the resources anymore to snap elections the way we used to, where there is a reporter with the Democratic candidate and a Republican candidate. And, you know, we're following both all over the state in every race. As a reporter assigned to that race, I mean, that's, you know, 70s and 80s. That's not the two thousands and thousands and twenties. I mean, it's been a long time since we've been trying to stretch fewer people across more beats and more stories.

[00:14:15] So, you know. But, you know, the technology does help. And, you know, we've made some tremendous gains in technology and that's mitigated some of that. But we're not getting out as far and wide as we used to in terms of talking to talking to the people.

[00:14:35] And in terms of technology, one of that really innovative approaches and Detroit, of course, is outlier media, which has played a major role during combat and really helping capture through text messages and text message exchanges, people's questions and people's concerns.

[00:15:00] And, Steve, how we spread Detroit, we've worked with outlier media to tell the stories that come from that way of listening.

[00:15:10] Yeah. Alaya was one of the partners that helped us put together. Bridge Detroit.

[00:15:17] And since we've launched, there's been an effort to try to continue that work and figure out how the information they're getting can guide our reporting. One of the things that has been true, of course, since we launched Broadbridge, Detroit, is that the overwhelming concerns among Detroiters about Cauvin covered is it is a very different animal in this city than it is in lots of other places.

[00:15:51] The number of losses that we've had, I mean, there's no one in this city who doesn't have somebody that they've lost. I know eight people who are dead since March 15th because of code. And that's a small number compared to a lot of folks.

[00:16:10] And so that has really dominated outliers focus this year and it's damaged the things that people are talking about. And it's not just the health concerns. It's the other things that have come with it. It's the economic concerns. So the housing issues that have come up because of Cauvin have really just crystallized how much of a housing crisis we were in before this started, which I think a lot of people were not necessarily aware of the jobs picture here in southeast Michigan. I mean, the number of people who are just not able to work or whose jobs have gone away, which pushes them further into poverty and despair, that the work of both Outlier and Bridge Detroit since Koban started has really been focused on those things and trying to, you know, trying to lift up the stories that Detroiters themselves have to tell about all of these things, you know, fronting Detroiters stories. And in particular, you know, the other thing that's really happened that not everyone is talking about is the violence this summer in Detroit has just been at a level that we have not seen in recent years, more shootings, more murders than we are even used to in a city where that's that's just a part of life. And so some of the effort has been to also really focus on what's going on, what's happening that's causing that and what are the effects of it. Just a few weeks ago, average Detroit, we published a story that fronted the stories of mothers who have lost children to murder in the city. That's a story that comes directly from people themselves, the Detroiters themselves. The things that they're experiencing and gives them a platform that, to be honest, they didn't have before the media. Other media hasn't really focused on it from that side of things. And so we continue to try to figure out our way forward with not just outlier, but lots of other partners here in Detroit trying to make sure that that the stories that Detroiters have to tell themselves are the ones that are getting air.

[00:19:00] Tell me how that Detroit Civility Project is working and how it may how you're helping facilitate conversations around these important policy issues and perhaps some way from the politics. And that's just driving polarization just to get at some of these policy solutions. And you've been writing as the columnist and as the editor of the editorial page. Knowing for so many years, how is that Detroit Civility Project helping these important issues get addressed?

[00:19:43] Well, it's a small effort. We hopefully it's the big things in our in our community. And we're not trying to resolve all the disagreements. We're not trying to bring everybody into one place. But what we are trying to encourage people to do is not lose their minds over politics and not find it so easy to hate people who don't agree with you because we know what that leads to. You know, that sort of hate leads to dehumanization and then that leads to all kinds of bad things in our society. And, you know, I've come to believe anything is possible in terms of things going bad and going wrong. When the cove it hit, we didn't know how we would continue this project. We had just basically started with the help from Delta Dental Plans of Michigan. We've got this underway in January, I believe. And then, of course, had to shut it down in terms of in-person sessions in February. But we very quickly found that this Zoom format works very well for this ability project and that we really do find it to be. You know, it sounds funny, but more intimate than the in-person sessions were and greater participation, greater engagement and, you know, basically we're just trying to, based on what we've been able to do together over our relationship over the last on that dozen years, trying to to show people that you can have disagreements and passionate discourse without with people who disagree with somebody you disagree with, without sort of. Letting that deteriorate into something very negative and very hateful that you can be friends across the political divide. And we need people to have relationships across that divide because what we have to have is a productive discourse that leads to pragmatic solutions. And you don't get there if you're just standing there in your own self-righteousness, screaming across the divide, calling names across that divide. This has really been an awful year for civility. And we're just trying to make what difference we can in this community. And, you know, we've actually now started doing it across, you know, outside of Michigan, across the country, talking to groups. So, again, Zoom makes it easy.

[00:22:24] And how do you address systemic racism in your conversations when you have the president of the United States running a very clear strategy to it's very, very clear to not only his base, but that beyond his base. How do you address that? I remember I still remember, Steve, the front page editorial that you produced when you were editorial page editor at the Free Press after I think it was then candidate Trump called on the Muslim ban. And of course, a Michigan has a very large Muslim. Community. So so how do you just talk about racism?

[00:23:21] Well, I mean, you know, one thing that no one and I always say is that civility does not mean avoidance.

[00:23:30] Civility does not mean staying away from topics that we see differently or that we have different passions about. And there's no way to have a conversation about this election. No way to have a conversation about this president. No way to have a conversation about the massive movement that we have seen take place coalesced this year or around police brutality and systemic racism without talking about how it spreads to other parts of our society.

[00:24:04] And so we just do it. And that does not mean that we you know, like I said, it doesn't mean we just get along. I mean, we get after each other and we have real, genuine and deep disagreements about these things. We have things that we just can't see eye to eye on. And there are times when are conversations about this are passionate. There are times when they are angry. There, there are times when those conversations get to the point where it seems like it may be on several.

[00:24:40] And we're not saying that there's anything wrong with that. We're saying people need to be able to do that. You need to be able to confront these things in that way. But you need to be able to do it inside the context of a relationship. That itself is simple. No one and I respect each other. We actually like each other. And even when we get into heated debates and angry exchanges over things, the context of that relationship is more important than whatever it is that we're fighting about. And I think that's an agreement that's understood between the two of us and that we don't you know, we never walk away permanently from the conversation.

[00:25:30] We talked about these things. We argue about these things, but we are always willing to listen to each other and have that exchange without it coming to blow blows or something like that.

[00:25:45] So and what we talk about when we're addressing a group, is you have to or we ask people if this is an interactive that's not a lecture. It's an interactive. Sessions are interactive. And we ask people to, you know, before you get into the really difficult, dangerous conversations, sit out with a person that you'd like to have a relationship with what your views are, keeping your part and try to figure out that person. I mean, even I did this. He hooked us up with the story cause Sarah, several years before, five years ago, and we didn't sit there and.

[00:26:27] Talk back and forth about it. Are different political positions, are policy disagreements. We had a conversation about who we are as people and what it was in our backgrounds and in our values that informed our decision making. What makes him a liberal? Me a conservative. And once you start with that and try to get people to reach an understanding about where the other person is coming from, you do develop a kind of respect, but more importantly, a trust in which you can have difficult conversations because, you know, because it's our point that, you know, everybody comes to their opinions the same way, you know, they take the facts, they take the information, the data, apply their own values and experience to it and come up with opinion. If it's different than mine, if it's different than yours, doesn't make them evil. Stupid doesn't mean they hate America, does it doesn't mean anything, except that, you know, these for the most part are good people who have different experiences and values perhaps than the person that another person does. And you get to that point and people, you know, start becoming more comfortable. And more honest in their conversations, because, you know, as Steve said many times, you know.

[00:27:50] Learning to talk starts with learning to listen.

[00:27:56] Absolutely. And speaking of trust. Of course, there has been declining trust in the news media, especially among Republicans. A recent night Gallup poll showed that there is agreement that the news media is critical. However, nearly half of those surveyed, including both Republicans and Democrats, believe the news media is is biased. And, of course, of course, nearly seventy one percent of Republicans do not have faith in that traditional news media. What how might this ability project what might journalists do to help rebuild trust in journalism?

[00:28:48] Well, I mean, I have different views of this, obviously, coming from a conservative perspective. And reading stories that sometimes set my teeth on edge as well. I think the worst thing we can do as journalists is assume we don't have a problem, that it's their problem, a perception problem. And if we're OK, say, well, it's all right that half the people don't in the country don't trust us. And maybe even more than that don't trust

us, then I think we have a real issue. I think we've got to get back to our are our values and our standards in this profession. I think we have to be one. We have to start making as many mistakes as we make in this rush to be first. I think we need to be very judicious with the use of anonymous sources. I think they've caused us a lot of problems, particularly over the last four years. You know, I just think good, solid reporting in the public interest will.

[00:29:51] Help rebuild trust. I think the worst thing we did as a profession, as an industry is take the president's bait on this war between them. The White House and journalist, you know, we got it all. When did we ever care what a president thought of us? And we seem to be obsessively we care obsessively about how Donald Trump feels about us. I think we just we know how to do our jobs. I think we just do them and do them with the values that have guided this profession. I think we we restore trust, but there's always going to be a certain percentage population that doesn't trust you because they don't like to hear, you know what? People like to hear the truth. And so there's always going to be a percentage. It shouldn't be as high as it is. And I think we've learned that.

[00:30:42] You know, one of the things I think is really key is the and this is a you know, I think a national phenomenon is that the trust in local news. Right.

[00:30:56] And the relationships that are possible in local news and the pulling away from those relationships that you've seen a lot of local news organizations have to do because of lack of resources, but also kind of double down on in some in some cases.

[00:31:15] And I think that has as much to do with the lack of trust as anything. When I grew up here in the city, in Detroit, people thought of the free press or the news, whichever paper you took at your house as kind of a member of the community. It was there was a personality associated with it. There were faces and names associated with it sometimes. There were people you knew. I think there's so much less of that right now than there used to be. And that makes people it makes people more wary. You know, with Bridge to try, one of the things that we are doing is kind of turning that on its head and saying we're going to start with the relationship. We're going to start with the idea that we're in touch with people, that we are asking them about their lives, and then we're going to try to inform them about things and inform other people about things. And maybe that builds trust in a different way, kind of an old school way. But, of course, there are all kinds of bells and whistles now that we have that we didn't have, you know, 20 or 30 years ago. But I think doubling down on that and saying that you've got to have a relationship with the people you call your readers or your listeners or your viewers is one of the things that media really needs to do to move that trust needle in the opposite direction.

[00:32:46] And Jennifer, you hit it right at the beginning in your opening question when you talked about, you know, back in the days when we were coming up and we were in the community, we were at those meetings. I think that is a crucial element that's missing in a lot of papers, big and small in this country now. We're not in the community. They don't see us visibly there. They read our product, perhaps, but they can't attach a face to the name as often as they did when we were at those kind of meetings. You all think that was essential to build trust and establish a relationship? Many, many papers now don't even have publishers or editors. You know, their newsrooms, their business operations are run out of a corporate office. So you don't even have that figurehead going to, you know, the chicken dinners and, you know, sitting on boards and establishing the institution in a community. And I think you can you can track the erosion of trust to the erosion of presence. Just listening that.

[00:33:54] That absolutely.

[00:33:55] That whole role of community leadership has been lost in in so many communities around the country. So we are open to take your questions. So please put your questions in the chat and we'll get to them. We have a question from Brian Allman who has notes that as we talk about civility, it's quite a challenge. It must be to lead a civility project when at the time the president of the United States is not leading necessarily in the same manner.

[00:34:43] Well, let me say to that, you know, when did Donald Trump become our ideal or who we emulate? What? Well, to be a productive civil discussion sessions we leave starts with sort of losing this idea that you're right. You're all right. The other guy's all wrong. You know, the other person is has nothing to value to add to the conversation. So it starts with losing that self-righteousness, that smartness and saying, OK, I want to talk to this person, not because I want to convert or because I want to preach, because there's perhaps I might learn something or I might gain some sort of understanding. You have to start with that, that some honesty in your goals. And if you're out to convert. I mean, I've been talking to Steve for a dozen years, changed even never well. And I've stopped wanting to it wouldn't be near as much fun if I converted. But if you're out to convert lecture and, you know, you have this smugness, that man, I'm the guy was right. The other guys, all the problems. There's a lot of problems coming from both sides of the political aisle. You can say, well, we'll wait. But, you know, there's depending on who's operating the scale is, you know, how things have come out. I think your goal needs to be an honest conversation that leads to some sort sort of learning something you didn't know.

[00:36:18] You know, I would say that the president's incivility is every bit the reason to try to do something different. And talk about things in a different context.

[00:36:31] One of the things we talk about with this ability project is that, you know, none of us has control over what the president's going to do or how people will react to the president. But what we do have control over are the interactions that each of us has in our communities with people who often we don't agree with. And that's where we're asking people to kind of focus and say, is there a better way for me to have that exchange with my neighbor, who I think doesn't have the right idea about these things, or the person I work who is talking about stuff that I don't agree with a member of my family who I think is nuts because they support this or that. Those are the things that I think each of us can really grab hold of and say there's a different way to do these things and we can screen out some of the things that are happening at the national level. There's no question that this is the most uncivil chief executive we've seen in the history of the United States. I don't think there's any debate about that. I think even his supporters would have to acknowledge that that that, you know, what he's doing is inappropriate. They just don't think it's the most important thing about him. But I think you've got to take that out of the equation in your own life to be able to say, how can I. How can I relate to these these these people in my life who just don't agree with me, don't do things the way I do as somebody else's.