

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HEADLINERS LUNCHEON WITH  
SENATOR BEN SASSE (R-NE)

SUBJECT: SEN. SASSE'S BOOK: *THEM: WHY WE HATE EACH OTHER*

MODERATOR: ANDREA EDNEY OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, HOLEMAN LOUNGE,  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 1:00 P.M.

DATE: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2018

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**ANDREA EDNEY:** Hello everybody, and welcome to the National Press Club, the  
place where news happens. I'm Andrea Edney. I'm an editor at Bloomberg News. And I am  
the 111<sup>th</sup> president of the National Press Club.

Before we get started, I'd like to ask you, if you haven't already, to please silence your  
cell phones. If you're on Twitter, we do encourage you to tweet during the program. Our  
handle is PressClubDC, and please use the hashtag NPCLive.

For our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences, please be aware that in the audience  
here at the Club today are members of the general public, so any applause or other reaction  
you might hear is not necessarily from the working press.

And now, I would like to introduce our head table. Audience, please hold your  
applause until everyone has been introduced. So starting from your right, we have Lisa  
Matthews, who is the video assignment manager for Washington at Associated Press and she  
is co-chair of our National Press Club Headliners Team. We have Sarah Wire, who is  
Congressional correspondent at the *Los Angeles Times*. We have Dan Freedman, who is a  
correspondent in the Washington bureau of Hearst Newspapers.

Coming in from this side, we have Ellyn Ferguson who is a reporter at CQ Roll Call  
and a member of the National Press Club Headliners Team. We have Maureen Groppe, who  
is the Washington correspondent at *USA Today*. We have Philip Brasher, senior editor at  
Agri-Pulse.

Skipping over our speaker, but just for a moment, we have Betsy Fischer Martin, who is the executive director of the Women and Politics Institute at American University and, also, she is co-chair of the National Press Clubs Headliners Team.

So, today's guest. If the past couple of months have been any evidence, electoral politics are not for the faint of heart. And since his election in 2014, Senator Ben Sasse, Republican, from Nebraska, has not been shy to speak his mind. Only two years after his election to Congress, he surprised the nation and his party by deciding to not endorse Donald Trump for President. Even after that election, he has continued to question administration policies – from border issues to the trade war with China.

Perhaps this willingness to face issues head on is due to Senator Sasse's background. In contrast to his legal-minded Senate colleagues, Senator Sasse holds a doctorate in American history and wrote his dissertation at Yale on the religious right's response to the attack on activities like school prayer in the 1960s. That dissertation was twice as long as the book that we're going to be talking about today. But it did win him some very prestigious prizes.

Senator Sasse has also worked as a management consultant, held several positions in the administration of George W. Bush, and taught at the University of Texas at Austin. It was in educational administration, however, where he found his most high profile success prior to his Senate run. Before Senator Sasse turned 40, he turned around the foundering Midland Lutheran College in Fremont, Nebraska, his hometown. Over five years, Sasse rebranded the school as Midland University. He balanced its budget, he increased enrollment, and he expanded athletic and performing arts programs. He also set up a four-year graduation guarantee.

So in the Senate, Senator Sasse also works to make things better. He sponsors bills addressing everything from Congressional workplace misconduct and anti-corruption to Presidential tax transparency.

Today, he's here to talk about his newest book – and I would remind everybody in the audience, this is his second in less than two years – this book is called, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other – and How to Heal*. As traditional communities weaken and divisions threaten to become more prominent than the things that bind us together, Senator Sasse is bringing us some thoughts and ideas on how to reverse that shift and bring us back together as a country.

Speaking today, Senator Sasse will talk to us on what it would take, in his words, "to pass along a country as great and free and opportunity-filled to the next generation as we were blessed to inherit from our grandparents."

So some of you in the audience here today already know this, but I am especially pleased to welcome Senator Sasse here to the Press Club because he represents a state that is near and dear to my heart. My dad is from Nebraska. My parents met on a blind date in Nebraska. I spent most of my childhood vacations going between Humboldt and Omaha.

And completely coincidentally, truly coincidentally, my husband is from Nebraska, from Omaha.

So everyone, whether you have a Nebraska connection already or not, please join me in welcoming Senator Ben Sasse to the National Press Club. [applause]

**SENATOR BEN SASSE:** Thank you, Andrea. There's so much that I want to talk about that isn't officially on our agenda, but it feels like she gave us 15 jumping-off points. [laughter] One of which, she mentioned that I wrote a 520-page dissertation. There's an old joke among humanities PhD students that you write a 500-page dissertation because you didn't have time to write a 200-page dissertation. That's what I did in my under-edited project.

Up here today, we've been talking about dead-animal Twitter. I would like to follow that lead, if we can follow that a few times in question-and-answer. So if I could tee someone up to please ask about Twitter, I think Twitter is going to be relevant to some of the things we're going to talk around a little bit in my comments today. Dead-animal Twitter wasn't something that I thought we'd get to go to, but I have a seven-year-old boy, and we live in the country. We have three dogs, which is a sign of people who make bad life choices. We also may or may not have outdoor cats. We probably do, but if there are members of the Audubon Society here, I'm not going to claim that these cats are fed by me. But they deliver dead animals to our front stoop every morning, and my seven-year-old and I think that this is something the world needs to know about. So that's the main reason that I'm on Twitter. [laughter]

You also said that the purpose of lunches like this is to try to make news. I want to be a good guest; I'm grateful for the invitation. Betsy, thank you for having me; Andrea; the rest of you. But I want to say that why I wrote this book, frankly, is because the obsession we have with short-term news I think might be crowding out whatever we should define as the other thing, the other side of news. We consume lots of information, and I think wisdom literature might be the alternative to news, but not exclusively. And so, my goal is not to say I have to duck making news, but I do hope that I can persuade you that some of what's broken in our time and place is claims of things like a 24-hour news cycle, which I'm going to posit over the course of our time together, doesn't actually exist; there is no such thing as 24 hours of news that 320 million Americans actually need. And that means there's a tension between the ways we consume and the ways we might get to a sense or recover a sense of an American "we."

So I'm grateful for the invitation. We're here to talk primarily about the book. I know in question-and-answer we'll end up in some other places as well. But I want to tell you something about the structure of the book so that then I can dive deeper on one-third of it.

So I structured this project, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other – and How to Heal*, around the collapse of traditional tribes; the rise of, or the ramping of political tribalism, or anti-tribes; and then the third third, which comprises nearly half of the book, is a constructive

argument about what do we do, what does it look like to recover habits of rootedness in a digital age that is increasingly whispering to us "you can be rootless."

I think one of the fundamental tensions of the moment in which we live is that the happiness literature is starting to tell us things that people who have had grandparents have probably known for millennia, which is that most everything that drives whether or not humans are happy is intimately connected to place. The four biggest drivers of whether or not you're happy, statistically, are:

Do you have a nuclear family?

Do you have a few deep friendships? Not Senate friendships, "my good friend the colleague from such-and-such state" whose throat I'm about to tear out in our debate on the floor, not social media friends, but actual friends. Do you have friends, number three.

And statistically, the number one driver, the number correlate with happiness is: Do you have meaningful work? Do you have important vocation? Do you have a sense of calling? Do you have coworkers? That is the number one driver of whether or not people are happy. Not, do you make a lot of money; not, is there a coworker who's three cubicles down that talks loudly and annoys me; not, does my back or do my knees hurt at the end of the day, but, do I think somebody needs me? Do I think my work matters? If the answer to that question is yes, statistically you're almost certainly happy. And if the answer to that question is no, you're very, very unlikely to be happy.

And fourth, do you have a theological or philosophical framework to make sense of death and suffering? Do you have a worshipping community?

Family, friends, meaningful work; all three of those are highly tied to place. And sort of worldview questions about death and suffering; partly tied to place through a worshipping community. Three-and-a-half of the four drivers of happiness are about rootedness, and we're living through a digital revolution. We're living through a moment where we are constantly told we're bigger than place; we can just traipse across, we can skim across the surface of place and we can be anywhere.

But it turns out, the more that you think that the world is so flat that you don't actually have to have roots in a place, the less likely you are to be happy, the more likely you are to actually expand the denominator of potential unhappiness because of news we take in from afar and the investments that we make less in the place where we actually live.

So I wrote this book because of, I think, this implicit tension between rootedness, which drives happiness, and rootlessness, which is one of the byproducts – both for good and for ill – of living through a technological revolution. The digital revolution that we're living through isn't something that came about last year. We're decades into the digital revolution, and my guess is we're many, many decades or a century away from figuring out what it looks like to have transitioned from a world that's mostly about atoms, which is what almost all of our ancestors through all of human history have known – physical, material, stuff and place –

to a world that's heavily driven by bits. And those bits are going to drive economic output bigger than anything the world has ever known. We're going to have more high quality, low cost stuff than anybody in all of human history.

And yet, it seems strange that we could live at a time with the greatest material prosperity ever; middle class Americans are the richest people any time and place in all of human history. And yet, we have lots and lots of anxiety and discontent. And if you want to sort of make this precise about something that is closer to a news hook, we're going to have our third year of declining life expectancy this year in the US. We've never had this before. We didn't have good data on life expectancy during the Civil War; we probably had at least three years of declining life expectancy during the Civil War. But since we've been measuring things like this for a century, we've never had three years of declining life expectancy. And right now, we have ramping deaths of despair – overdoses, opioids, suicide. Things like that have displaced car accidents, which, on mortality tables from 80 years until five, six, seven, eight years ago, car wrecks were always the biggest driver of death, particularly among anybody under the age of 60 or 65. And now we're displacing those deaths with deaths of despair. That's a weird thing to be paired with so much material surplus.

So I wrote this book to talk, part one, about the decline of the natural tribes, the good tribes, the tribes of place. We have a statistical collapse of the nuclear family, particularly among the 70% of Americans that have the least educational attainment. We have a rapid decline in friendship. I graduated high school in 1990; the average American had 3.2 friends in 1990. The average American today has 1.8 friends. I'm defining this, again, in an Aristotelian sense, somebody who loves you. It's not a transactional relationship; it's that if you see someone who's your friend and they're happy, you're happy. You don't choose to be happy, you just are because you love them.

When my kids hurt – I have 17- and 14-year-old daughters and a seven-year-old boy – when one of my kids hurt, I don't choose to hurt; I just hurt because they're part of me. I love them, right? A great friendship is like that. It's like somebody in your family. We've had a halving of friendship in America in the last 27 years.

At the level of work, we have rapidly declining average duration at a firm. Average duration at a firm in the 1970s – I was born in 1972 – average duration at a firm for a primary breadwinner in the 1970s was two-and-a-half decades. Average duration at a firm for an American today is 4.2 years, and getting shorter. What does that mean? It means it's much less likely that you have lifelong coworkers. Guess what? Males in particular are terrible at building new friendships after age 25. And so, if you don't have the built-in chance to have coworkers that you just work next to on the assembly line for decade after decade after decade, it's incredibly unlikely that males replace relationships after 30, 35, 40, 45.

And as we have more mobility in the economy, not for everybody, but as the economy becomes more mobile in a digital economy, over time a lot of males have this atrophy of relationships. When you ask middle-aged and older men who their best friend is, 60% of them say their wife. When you ask middle-aged and older women who their best

friend is, 29% say their husband. [laughter] There's a lot going on there. There are a whole bunch of cultural war fights we have.

I have a friend, a couple who live down the road from us in rural Nebraska, and the husband, who is a big stockbroker, announced that he's retiring next year. And his wife's standard line is, "Oh, no, he's going to have twice as much time and make half as much money."

But there's just so much about the way relationships develop over the course of life that when you don't have coworkers over life, it means you have less sense of a shared project and we're meant for "we."

So all of these natural tribes are atrophying. That part one of the book. Part three of the book is constructive stuff – what do we do about it? And hopefully in question-and-answer, you'll help lead us there.

I want to focus for our 25 or 28 minutes that I'll consume before we get to question-and-answer together, I want to focus on the middle third of my book because it relates to being in a venue like the National Press Club and before an audience of people who are doing a job which celebrates the First Amendment; so, the five freedoms of the First Amendment: freedom of religion, speech, assembly, protest and, of course, press. And so, being in a place like this, I want to talk a little bit about the media, but not necessarily in the shorthand ways that we're used to talking about the media in our political discourse. I want to talk about it a little bit more broadly and look at some of the economics of our moment as well.

So even though I don't usually speak from notes, I'm going to speed through seven theses because I know we'll run out of time. And so, I want to tell you my seven theses that are about the rise of anti-tribalism, and particularly I mean by that not just political tribes, but news media consumption tribes. Because I believe there are really only two kinds of communities; when you think about what is a community, there are communities of place and there are communities of idea. Do you sit next to somebody? Is your body near somebody else's body? Do you live in their neighborhood? Do you work at their workplace? Do you worship in the pew next to them? Are you sharing the same household with this person? There are communities of place and there are communities of idea. And because of the digital revolution through which we're living, communities of place are in collapse.

We could spend lots of time, and hopefully if you haven't picked up the book, you will. I travel through a bunch of the data about what it means that place is being undermined in our time.

But since humans are social animals, since we're relational animals, we need to be a part of tribes. We need to be a part of a group. We need to feel like there's a place where everybody knows your name and where you belong. And so, if you have less place, you're likely to have more attempts to make community of idea. But it turns out almost all the economic incentives of our time to mediate distance– and so when I say media here, I mean

something broader than just reporting; I mean the mediation of being a part of a community that isn't just people who live on the same block or work at the same workplace. When you mediate a distance between things, it turns out almost all of our economic incentives are to anti-tribe rather than constructive tribe – what are you against, rather than what are you for.

And so, I'm going to give you seven quick theses, and then I'll go through them a little slower. And then when time gets called on me, hopefully I have said something provocative enough that you'll want to keep talking about it in question-and-answer.

Thesis One: There is no "we" in American media consumption today. There is no "we" in American media consumption today. The reduction of barriers to entry has meant we've gone from a world where almost everybody had a local newspaper and maybe a sense of one national newspaper or regional newspaper and three broadcast channels to a world where barriers to entry have fallen so rapidly that today 93% of American households have access to 500 or more broadcast or cable channels. In that world, it means that almost everybody is a part of smaller, more fragmented audience niches, which means that the incentives – again, not every reporter does this – the incentives inside media organizations are toward fan service, not pretending that you have a chance at speaking to a 70% audience; there are no 70% audiences. Almost everybody is writing or broadcasting for some subset of a 1% audience. And so, almost all the economic feedback loops are toward an intensification of saying things that you presume your audience needs to hear. Or wants to hear.

Number Two: My point that I made earlier, there's no such thing as a 24-hour news cycle. Better said, there's no such thing as 24 hours of news, that the media and America needs. Chyrons are lying to you. Before you even get to the question of whether or not the substance in the headline at the bottom of your cable news channel is true or false or accurate or biased, it isn't true that everything that's being shouted at us from cable news channels is breaking. [laughter] Most of it is not breaking. And most of it isn't news that you need.

Number Three: The obliteration of straight reporting versus editorial or commentary is a really big deal, and we don't pay nearly enough attention to it. We know that cable TV has been swallowing print for decades, but there would be an argument, 15 or 20 years ago, that perhaps the Internet could foster a culture that returns to some of the virtues of print media, which is more deliberate, is more dispassionate, and is more amenable to thinking about that distinction between straight reporting and editorial or commentary. I think the way the Internet is actually producing news, though, is much more like cable than like print, and I think that has huge consequences, not just for a republic of 320 million people – getting back to a "we" – but for the way the subsegments underneath that 320 million think about what "The Media" is. I don't really think there is a thing that is capital-T-the, capital-M-media. And yet, I think the public increasingly does think about a world where there's such a thing as a New York- and Washington-based mainstream media, to say the least, and they conceive of it as a group that fits in one of the tribes.

Number Four: Every site has a temptation to become a clickbait site. Even the best journalism in America has, by virtue of headline testing, economic incentives to become a clickbait site. And that accelerates the feedback loops that lead to a lot more confirmation

bias in the way we consume information. So when there's a lot more information in the world, you might assume that that would mean that we'd end up with a lot more shared news. I think the likely outcome of where we're headed now is toward a lot less shared facts because of the way we consume.

Number Five: One of the effects of fragmented consumption is the rise of a Manichean conception of politics where almost every issue can be thought of as good-versus-evil. I'll just give you one data point on it here before we go back through this more slowly later. In the last quarter-century, we've gone from 14% of Americans conceiving of the other political party as evil to 41% of Americans thinking of the other political party as evil – a tripling in a quarter-century of people who think when we disagree on politics, it's not that Republicans and Democrats or conservatives and progressives think there are unintended consequences of the choices that people on the other end of the spectrum from me might make, but that they're actually ill-motivated. That's a new thing, and it doesn't bode well for a republic.

Number Six: More and more of our politics is becoming symbolic. At one level this seems to me to be a necessary consequence. Or maybe necessary is not the right word, but a fairly certain consequence of more and more identity politics. But I think there's more going on than just that. So I want to unpack at some point later in our discussion, I want to unpack something that maybe could be made amoral more easily, which is the difference between country preferences and city preferences. And by that, I mean there are great things across the history of humanity about living in a city; there are all sorts of things that come with density and scale – there's higher quality music and arts, and there's professional sports teams. There are great things about being in a city. There are great things about living in the country. We live in the country, and lots of it is about nature for my family. And so, we spend a lot of time in the out-of-doors. There are virtuous things about loving the city, and there are virtuous things about loving the country or nature.

But I think one of the skews you could lay over American politics right now is a belief that we need to think about urban versus rural as good versus bad, or bad versus good. I don't think that's healthy for us. Many of you saw the reports yesterday that the two dominant variables, if you tried to understand American polarization right now, are gender and educational attainment. So we end up with a kind of stereotypical view of a younger woman, highly educated, probably living in a city, and an older, less educated male, probably living in the country. And this is one of the ways that the data analysts would say you can visualize or depict polarization in American life. Lots of the ways that we divide the electorate or we divide the culture end up value-laden. I want to try to pick some that don't have to be value-laden, and it seems to me I could argue either side of a debate about what's great about living in a city and what's great about living in the country.

Again, our teenaged daughters and a seven-year-old boy, when they get into a heated debate at the dinner table, one of the things that Melissa, my wife, and I regularly do is we make them trade positions. If you're so sure you're right about something, then for the rest of dinner, you have to argue the opposite point to the one that you hold. It would be useful in



our politics to find some things that clearly have deep cleavages that are starting to play out in our politics and try to get people to argue the opposite side.

By the way, America's now 82% urban/near-suburban. So the divide in American politics isn't necessarily about people's experiences of dense city versus rural country, but it may be about some of the value assumptions of living in those kinds of places. Lots and lots of the people buying the three bestselling vehicles in America – which are all four-wheel-drive pickups; by far the two bestselling vehicles in America are the Ford F150, for decades, and the Chevy Silverado, for decades – lots and lots of those people don't live in the country; they live in the suburbs, right?

So there are value choices that we're making and those symbolic politics are being expressed inside our political life. I live in Nebraska and commute every week, and when I'm home on weekends, it is amazing to me how much of the grassroots feedback I get from Nebraskans are about cultural and symbolic and consumeristic preference issues and, for the discussion today, anti-media sentiments, rather than policy or legislative discussions. Policy and legislation is discussed among my constituents when they come up to me and approach me in a restaurant or at a sporting event. Policy and legislation, far less than a discussion about the national media, for instance. I think we should unpack some of why that is.

By the way, bracket this and go to a completely different topic for a second. I probably should have said this at the outset. I said that you all celebrate the First Amendment. We should just say as a people – and this is 320 million Americans – it shouldn't be red state/rural people versus urban/blue people. It shouldn't be Republicans and Democrats. The free press is not an enemy of the American people. [applause] The free press are people who are living out a First Amendment calling in an America that celebrates the First Amendment as the beating heart of what we do together. Those five freedoms, including the freedom of the press, mean that most people in this room have a very important vocation to try to do reporting and do press and do journalism for the American people. That doesn't mean we shouldn't also have really important debates about things like the collapse of the distinction – in my view, collapse – between straight reporting and editorial/commentary; again, I think driven more by the way we consume cable news and now increasingly Internet news that maybe we don't reflect on together as a group.

And seventh, and finally: I think right versus left is not only not the only way to think about the spectrum of American life, I don't even think it's the primary way we should be thinking about the divides in American life right now. I think a far more useful – and that doesn't mean good – useful hermeneutic on what's happening in American life right now is the intensification, the obsession with federal politics to crowding out all other domains of life – economics, culture, local politics.

Many of you have seen the study that was done, Hidden Tribes, that came out maybe three, four weeks ago. And a number of folks have written very good analytic pieces on it. But it divides the American electorate into seven different cohorts. One of the most interesting takeaways from it is, about 14% of Americans are almost completely addicted to federal politics, but they're 8% on the pretty far left, and there's a rising group of now 6% on

the pretty far right that are addicted to federal politics. David Brooks helpfully called it the rich, white civil war. The other 86% of Americans, the continuum that they care most about is really not necessarily right-versus-left on legislative and policy preferences. It's why does Washington, DC-centric discussion have to swallow everything else in American life?

There was a point where for about six months in my fieldwork in Nebraska – I kept notes on this – the most commonly asked question I got in Nebraska was, "Why does ESPN seem to be about politics all the time now instead of sports?" It's like, I'm a US Senator, why are you asking me? I mean, I'm a football addict, and ESPN is probably the only reason we've turned our TV on for most of the last two decades, but it was a very strange thing, and I'm not making any comment– this was, by the way, before the kneeling controversy; this was about six months, a year prior to that, where the most common question I got in Nebraska was about ESPN's broadcasting and why politics seem to be crowding out so much of sports. I think this is a helpful loop back to where we started with the number of channels.

So those are my seven quick theses. I know you're eventually going to give me the hook. And I'm going to go through them in as much time as you'll allow me to, but I want to get a few facts out there in common about some of these seven points

The first is, in the mid-1950s, *I Love Lucy* had a 68% share. When there were only three options for what you could watch every week, 68% of American households were watching *I Love Lucy*. That told you that probably 98% of people were familiar with Lucy and Desi as characters. And if you had a spat with somebody at work about a project, if you were divided about politics in the bleachers at some sporting event, there was always a way to return to some bit of common data. In the last 18 years, the most-watched serial programming in American life is in 2014; for three weeks, *Sunday Night Football* hit a 14% share. The two most-watched cable news programs in America right now are Sean Hannity, number one; and Rachel Maddow, usually number two. They're at 3.2 million and 2.9 million views, which is 1% of the public and nine-tenths of 1% of the public.

We act like, we, in Washington, DC, act like people are consuming politics at this deep, constant, intense level. And I think there is a deep desire in America to not consume politics like this, but people don't really know what to do because we don't have any substitute data that we can go to as an alternative that gets us to "we."

The obliteration of this distinction between straight news reporting and editorial/commentary leaves me very worried about the moment when we have a deepfakes attack. And we are going to have deepfakes attacks soon. I spend about a third of my work life, a third of my work week dealing with cyber and intel issues. And at the top levels of the US intelligence community, there is a deeply held view that we sit on the precipice of a perfect storm. Three things are true right now:

One, though people have always tried to sow misinformation campaigns in your enemy's tent since the beginning of time – there's a whole bunch of Old Testament wisdom literature about sowing discord in your enemy's tent; people have always tried to have attacks that are Trojan horses – but in the past, it's been really expensive to tailor spying to a place

where you have a prostitute or a business partner or at least a bar or a restaurant or a hotel lobby. Now, we can tailor our intel in ways with the digital revolution that's never been possible before.

And you have, second, Russia willing to do that tailoring because they have a collapsing domestic economy and they need to figure out ways to unite their public at home, and they want to do it by creating a bad guy abroad. And so, Russia is terribly clunky at the misinformation campaigns they do against us, but the real fear in the intelligence community is that China sits right behind Russia running scout team offense, looking at everything that Russia's doing and getting better and better and better for the moment when they want to do this.

And the third variable of the deepfakes revolution that we sit on the verge of is simply the fact that we are so divided. Whether the issue is race, geography, gender, guns, urban/rural, there are so many different variables that you can pick scabs about. When you get audio and video – which we're going to get inside the next five to ten years; maybe we're going to get it inside the next five to ten months – when you get audio and video that looks like a figure in American life did or said something that he or she didn't say or do– imagine, during the Kavanaugh hearings, if the day after Dr. Ford's testimony you had had a situation where video appeared where it looked like Brett Kavanaugh was partying at Yale 25 years ago; you had some grainy Betamax tape. Or imagine if you got fake audio of Chuck Schumer huddling with Michael Avenatti and other attorneys trying to plan a strategy for how to role out different attacks. Where will the Walter Cronkite be in American life that can stand up and tell the American people, "Actually, we've consulted these folks in the IC and this audio is fake, this video is fake."

As we collapse the distinction between straight news reporting and editorial/commentary reporting, I think we will rapidly spiral toward a world where the assumption is that almost everyone who's speaking in this moment is an advocate. And in that moment, I don't know how you actually bring the American people back together.

I'll give you one more stat and then I'll let you have the podium back for questions. One more stat that I think we need to have in common– actually, I want to do six of them and I know I'm not going to get away with doing that [laughter] since I promised.

**MS EDNEY:** Pick one; we might get to more of them.

**SENATOR SASSE:** The general public has a 67% response rate to the question "do you trust the media right now." I think people who have the important calling that you have need to wrestle with why that is. I think some of that – I'll acknowledge here, most of what we're going to talk about is non-partisan – some of that is political bias inside big parts of the media establishment because of shared background; meaning that folks who work in journalism are far more likely to live in one of two big Eastern cities and to be much more highly educated than the American people and to make a lot of similar assumptions about political and legislative priorities. But I think lots of it is actually these structural questions about the way we're consuming information. And in a world where most people who work in

media organizations – again, that's not to say the same thing as being a direct reporter – most people who work in media organizations have structural incentives to get the people who came to your website yesterday to come back to your website or your newscast tomorrow.

And in that world, it is much easier to say the things that you know because algorithms yesterday got the clicks of the 1% audience that you had than it is to try to say things that would translate the complicated world we're living through with this digital revolution to a 70 or an 80 or a 90% share of the electorate.

I've heard people in both broadcast cable and in New York magazine publishing make the exact same quote to me: There are only two kinds of stories that we run now. We run stories to make the people who love us love us more, and we love to run stories that make the people who hate us outraged. Because if we can create a viral moment, even if it's negative against us, the odds are we're going to get a lot more eyeballs and a lot more clicks. And that's the best strategy to get an intensification of the 1% of people we got to sell soap to yesterday.

I think there are a whole bunch of structural things happening in the way we consume media right now that make it a lot more difficult to recover a sense of 320 million American people that are one "we." And we'll talk about it in the order that you see fit.

Thanks for having me. [applause]

**MS EDNEY:** Well, thank you very much. You can keep the podium. So you've presented a lot of big ideas here; there's a lot that we could definitely unpack. But since we're in Washington and we are having this conversation in Washington, one of those two cities that you mentioned, you did say that there's a general obsession across the country with federal politics. And I know you touch on this in the book; you say this is a newer thing, and you, as I, do not recall this obsession to this level at the time that we were in high school, for example. If I'm getting that right from the book? Yep.

So can you talk a little bit about that? How recent do you think it is? And just as importantly, or more importantly, why? And what do you think would need to change for that to change?

**SENATOR SASSE:** Yeah, thanks. So I do believe that the rise of anti-tribalism is a response to the collapse of these traditional natural tribes, which is the tribes of place that have historically given people a sense of "we." When they atrophy, you need a new sense of "we." And having a shared enemy is not a good enough sense of "we," but it's at least a common experience that people have. Again, *I Love Lucy* wasn't meaningful content, it wasn't important, but it was broadly shared. When 68% of households are tuning in to that, there was a sense of something that everybody had as common grammar. We don't have any of that common grammar right now.

So when you have half as many friendships, when you have a statistical collapse of the nuclear family – again, Robert Putnam has done some very important work – that the

most important to America's divide is essentially the high attainment educational mobile class, which is about 31% of America. If you grow up in a house where either Mom or Dad graduated from college, you're in the upper 31% of America. And if you grew up in a house where you had one parent or if you had two, but neither of them graduated from college, you're in the 69% of America. And in that 69% of America right now, the fatherlessness crisis is an epidemic that's hard probably for you all to write about, because what's the news hook to write about it today, but it's infinitely more important than almost anything else that we're talking about in the city.

When you look at the collapse of these traditional tribes, it means people look for groups to identify with that are farther away because they don't have the local ones. And right now, we're being served lots and lots of content that's mostly oppositional content instead of aspirational content. And so, I think the ways that we consume media and the download speeds that followed the introduction of the iPhone in 2007 continue to exacerbate this curve.

**MS EDNEY:** So a lot of this is obviously, a lot of the news that is produced is produced because people want to read particular types of news, right? When we're talking about clicks, we're talking about choices that people are making and the types of things that they read. So how do you think education plays a role in this? You talked about education and upward mobility here. So do you think that there is something we should be doing at the high school level or junior high or elementary school level to help our citizens become more informed and critical consumers of news, which could perhaps help them get to a place where they're clicking on something that's more than sensationalistic?

**SENATOR SASSE:** Yeah, thank you. I do think that one of the questions that all of us should be asking our kids and ask our teachers if they're asking of our kids is, what's your definition of news? Why do you need it? And if you didn't have it for seven days or ten days or 14 days, what exactly would you lose? So when you go camping for a week, and you come back and you try to figure out what do you need that you missed, who would ever actually go back through some of the most clickbait-y short-term sensationalist sites, that some of us occasionally go to, to figure out what they published seven days ago? We all know that that's obsolete; it's ephemeral. And it's passing; it's not important content.

This is not to romanticize my grandmother's news consumption habits, but I can remember in the late '70s or early '80s when my grandmother would be gone for a week, and she'd come back to the farm, she would want to read the local paper that she missed for the last week? Why? There were obituaries in it. There were kids who won sporting events. These were humans that she had actual relationship with.

And I do think one of the challenges of our time— and, optimistically, I believe we will solve this, I just don't know that we'll solve it inside the next two or five or ten years; it might take decades to do this. I think we will recover the habits of rootedness and mindfulness in a rootless digital age that tells us we can be placeless. It's not true. Humans aren't happy if they're placeless. Humans are happy when they have roots.

But you want to think about what kinds of news you want to consume. And right now, digital addiction is an actual real problem. This isn't something that somebody made up because of the last few moments. It's because we actually have lots of neurological research coming in fast. There's a Moore's law that gives us faster download speeds and the ability to consume more digital content quickly, but the Moore's law that we sometimes know of as "you can get twice as much laptop computing power every 24 months for half the expense," another way to think about Moore's law's computing power is just that that doubling curve happens in everything digital.

And we're getting that in neurology right now. We've learned more about the human brain in the last 19 months than from all of human history combined until 19 months ago. And one of the things we're realizing is that when teens are constantly saturated and bathed in digital content, it's rewiring parts of their frontal lobe. The frontal lobe, for females, isn't done until multiple years past puberty now. And arguably, the male frontal lobe is never completed. [laughter] Some neurologists think it's probably a late-20s proposition. But if some car drives by you on the interstate driving 120 miles an hour, you can be sure it's a male and he's under 24. The insurance company algorithms about what to charge you on property and casualty aren't random; they're based on human experience.

But what we're learning about the brain is the rewiring of the brain with digital addictions is fast and it's not good for us. But we haven't figured out how to learn those new shared habits of what it looks like to do mindfulness and rootedness in a digital age.

**MS EDNEY:** What do you think needs to happen in order for people to look to consume information that will make them feel rooted? Because something has to prompt that, something needs to change, right?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I think the collapse of local journalism is a really horrible thing. Because one of the things that local journalism does is it tells our stories of people that have shared place. So shared idea is really important. Theology is *the* most important anchor in my life, and that unites me to people across time and place, not just in my local worshipping community. But one of the things about ideas that transcend place is they lead us to sometimes think that place itself doesn't matter. And since that's not true, one of the best ways to develop those habits of rootedness would be to have shared stories with people who are in your place.

And so, I think the collapse of local reporting is a big and bad thing. It's harvest season right now in Nebraska. And so, when we were at a grain elevator yesterday, where there is so much corn being harvested. Because of the digital revolution, the agricultural revolution continues to ramp. We produce more per acre than anybody in all of human history has ever conceived of as possible. Our grain elevators can't take all the corn. We also in Nebraska had a really wet season, so a lot of people are just late getting some of their crop out.

But when you take all that grain and you go to sell it to the elevator to put it on trains, the elevators are full; they can't take it. And so, a lot of our grain is being dumped in giant

piles next to the elevator. Lots of things happen because of that. One of them is that lots of extra deer come to steal the grain that's not in an elevator. And then you hit them in your car. And so, when you're near a grain elevator and you're talking to these farmers who are harvesting, one of the most common topics is the fact that there's a technological substitution for labor happening in the local community; that is, this huge output is happening, but with lots few labor inputs.

And so, when you're in small-town Nebraska – 93 counties in Nebraska and three or four of the counties are kind of urban around Omaha and Lincoln, and the rest of them are very rural places – people are leaving those counties and there's not a sense you're going to need kids again. Right? And so, people aren't moving back to those counties. And so, we're having massive out-migration in these counties. And the stories that you used to tell that were generational are now aging populations.

And so, you have a combination of the economics of journalism with an out-migration of young people in these communities, and there's an attempt to figure out what does rootedness look like. I think lots of the recentering of America around 100 to 300 metros requires different kinds of storytelling, and we haven't figured out what that suburban journalism will look like.

**MS EDNEY:** So about local press, what do you think can or should be done to restore a vibrant local press? Because there are a lot of reasons obviously for the collapse, right?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I think one thing is, to your point about the symbiotic relationship between the supply side of journalism and the consumption side, some of why a lot of clickbait-y, cotton candy stories are written is because a lot of us read clickbait-y, cotton candy stories. We're going to need to have more of the 320 million Americans embrace the idea that you want to consume good local content. That actually just requires knowing your neighbors more. Statistically, happiness is highly correlated with knowing the people who live two doors away from you. Happiness is not correlated with going from 200 to 500 social media friends, or from 500 to 1000 social media friends. Some of the studies that have been done on this show that once you get to a certain point, there's actually declining happiness as you spend more and more of your time and energy grooming a digital and an online profile which displaces your actual embodied relationships.

Social media is beneficial when it's augmenting relationships you already have, not when it's substituting for relationships that you should have or used to have. I'm sometimes active on Twitter, but I take a lot of Sabbaths and fasts from it because the place is so darn toxic.

**MS EDNEY:** Most recently seven months, right?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I took seven months off of Twitter starting at Christmas last year, and only went back this summer when my wife and I had a long conversation about the

rules of how we were going to conceive of when and where Twitter would be allowed in our lives.

But I really think of my Twitter account as for 20 of my buddies; like, guys that I was friends with in college. We don't live in the same place, but we get together once every six months to two years. We just view Twitter as public-facing email for a small group of actual humans, rather than something that's done for an abstraction that is all these weirdoes in the comments section who tell you in detailed ways the ways they'd like to dismember you.

I think a huge part of what's going to be required is figuring out how to use digital and social technologies to augment relationships of place instead of substitute for them.

**MS EDNEY:** When we're talking about newspapers— one more question along these lines and then I have some other questions for you. We've received so many questions from the audience today; thank you for those. Do you think newspapers should continue to endorse candidates, local or national newspapers? Or does it blend the lines too much and seem partisan to readers who don't always understand the difference between news and opinion pages?

**SENATOR SASSE:** That's a great question. I haven't thought about it much. It seems to me that the editorial page of a newspaper is a defined space, that people understand what it's there to do. It's a different thing than the front page of a paper. When I was a little kid, a Nebraska football addict— we're the winningest team in the last 50 years, in case you're curious [laughter]. We've had a bumpy last couple of years. We're on a two-game winning streak, by the way. [laughter] That followed a six-game losing streak. You're not supposed to know that fact.

**MS EDNEY:** And yet, I do.

**SENATOR SASSE:** But when I was a kid, I wanted to get to the sports section every morning when I got the *Omaha World-Herald* off our front stoop, my dad's requirement was you had to read a story on the front page and you had to read a story on the editorial page before I was allowed to turn to the sports section. The distinction was pretty deeply engrained. I think the bigger problem we face is that — and again, this is not to beat up on particular reporters, either in this room or elsewhere — right now, the incentives, even for print journalists, is often to get on cable news to talk about your story in a format that often has a lot of kind of quippy— not for everybody, but there's a quippy certainty about the way we do cable news consumption that often causes the editorial culture of the cable news format to consume even straight news reporting. And I go back to that Walter Cronkite question, about what happens when there's fake audio and video.

So the thing I want to see is more trusted brands, both actual journalistic enterprises and individual reporters who could be trusted by the American people in a time of crisis. And I think we're obliterating that distinction between editorial and straight news reporting in the national context.



At the local level, endorsing candidates? It seems to me most consumers of the *Fremont Tribune*, the little paper in the 25,000-person town nearest where we live, they understand the distinction between what's on the editorial page and what's on the front page.

**MS EDNEY:** That's great. Okay, I'm going to come to some political questions, if I may. Do you see anyone emerging as a major GOP primary challenger to Donald Trump in 2020?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I think that Donald Trump has basically captured the majority of the Republican Party over the course of the last two-and-a-half years. I think one of the things that's obvious about these two-and-a-half years though is that many of the settled assumptions about what these parties stood for and the sort of core principles of them were held much more firmly than was probably warranted. I didn't know that. I'm a first-time candidate; I'm one of eight people out of— out of the 100 in the US Senate, I think I'm one of eight who's never been a politician before, never run for anything before. And I had a pretty clear sense in the summer of 2013 when I got on a campaign bus for 16 months what I thought the kind of top three or top five or top seven issues that defined a Republican were. And I think that's much, much less clear.

And so, I think the personalization of national politics and the ability to grab a political party was far more possible than I thought, and far more possible than most people thought. And who knows what that means for the future. But I'm the second or third most conservative voter in the US Senate by voting record, but I'm more and more certain of my conservatism and I'm less and less certain of what the Republican Party stands for.

I think neither of these parties has a very clear vision. I think it's very difficult to imagine either a Republican or a Democratic platform committee standing up and articulating a big list of the five to ten major challenges America faces over the next 10 to 25 years. And that's what I care about. I think that the continuum from right to left matters to me, but I care a lot more about past versus future issues. And I don't think the party has that.

**MS EDNEY:** Do you think that somebody might emerge as a serious challenger to President Trump from the GOP?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I have no idea, but it looks less likely to me than maybe many people in DC assume. It seems to me that the Republican Party's electorate is pretty comfortable with the anti- positions that President Trump takes on a lot of issues. That's different than having a shared constructive sense of what our party's for.

**MS EDNEY:** Will you run for elected office again?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I have three little kids, and being the first-time candidate that I am, my wife and I made a deal in 2013/'14, which is we think one of the core problems in this town is, the main, long-term thought most politicians have is with their own incumbency. And we think it would be a lot healthier to be thinking of 10- and 25-year-out issues. So we said for the first four-and-a-half years of my six-year term, we would act like I'm never

running for anything again. And we're going to have a big family meeting; my wife and I'll have an extended date in July/August of 2019 and think what future callings we think we have. But right now, I have the two best callings that I want, which is to be raising three little kids on the road back and forth, and getting to serve the people of Nebraska.

**MS EDNEY:** Sounds like we should have you back in a little less than a year's time.

**SENATOR SASSE:** As long as we're talking exclusively Husker football and the win streak, I'm in. [laughter]

**MS EDNEY:** Maybe, maybe; can't promise. Is there a chance that you would run for President at some point in the future?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I honestly spent 16 months cleaning up then-two-year-old baby vomit off the floor of a campaign bus. And the thought of doing that in 50 states instead of just 93 counties sounds absolutely terrible. So I think noxious weed control board of Dodge County, Nebraska, is a far more probable scenario for me.

**MS EDNEY:** What are your thoughts today on the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh? And what were your reasons for supporting him with your vote?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I think that Judge, now-Justice Kavanaugh's speech on the first day of his testimony— so we did, whatever, 38 hours of public hearings in the first week, so I think day two would have been when he made his speech about the fact that the Supreme Court has no center aisle, there are no caucus rooms at the Supreme Court. And I often use the language of black robes rather than red or blue partisan jerseys that Justices wear. They're supposed to shroud all personal policy preferences they may have now or they may have articulated in the past. Justice Kavanaugh made a really good speech about the importance of the American people knowing that the judges are there to judge, not to be policy advocates. I think that was a great speech. And I want a world where Americans, regardless of whether you vote for Democrats or Republicans, want a speech like that to be given by all of our nominees to the Court.

Obviously, we're in a terrible place right now. The public perceives of the judiciary as a third political branch. That is a bad, bad thing. It's 32 years in the coming, going back to the Bork nomination in 1987. There has been an increasing Hatfields-and-McCoys sense that every next nominee should be the next bloodbath to the end of time. And we already know what it looks like in Venezuela when you have fistfights in the legislature. We know what it looks like when you politicize more and more of government, and when you have a sense in the judiciary that it's also another political branch. That is a terrible thing. And the way that confirmations have gone over the last 32 years leads the American people to presume that the curve is going to continue to decline. And we've got a big problem. And I don't think any of us have a great idea about how we fix it.

Ultimately, the Senate is given by the Constitution two verbs, two charges: advice and consent. I gave advice to the President in the summer of 2018 about the candidate that I thought was the single-best candidate he could have nominated.

**MS EDNEY:** Who was that?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I haven't named her, but—

**MS EDNEY:** Could you name her now?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I don't think so. Because I probably will be advising again in the future. So I advocated hard for one person, but the President's short list of four was all strong. I think the list that he ran on, by the way, is an important innovation in American life; no one's done that before. I hope future Presidential nominees of both parties do that, run on an explicit list. One of the most important powers a President has is nominating people to the judiciary, and telling the electorate who you'd nominate for the Supreme Court I think is an important innovation. I hope people do it in the future. The President's list was good. He stuck to his list. I'm glad he's done that. And I think all four of his finalists were strong. And ultimately, I spent about 150 hours reading materials and consulting. The FBI did its seventh background investigation, which included another 146 interviews. And I ultimately came to the conclusion that the yes vote was the right vote.

**MS EDNEY:** What do you think the likelihood of President Donald Trump's administration getting a third pick for Supreme Court Justice, what do you think the likelihood of that is?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I'm a data nerd, so as a historian, I would want to consult what the frequency of next vacancy is. But it seems to me relatively high. The President's going to be President for two more or six more years. But even if only two years, we have an elderly Supreme Court.

**MS EDNEY:** And somebody could resign.

**SENATOR SASSE:** Right

**MS EDNEY:** For example. If that happens, who do you think the pick should be?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I have an interesting relationship with the President. [laughter] There are a broad range of topics that we wrestle through. Some things I agree with him, some things I disagree with him on. But my basic tradition has been, I want him, as I think all 320 million Americans should want, want him to succeed in the most important parts of his calling, to steward Article II of the Constitution for this time. And so, I give him advice in private, and sometimes I argue with him in private, and then some subset of the things I argue with him in private I discuss in public. But since I plan to lobby him on future Supreme Court vacancies, I think I'll keep that counsel private.

**MS EDNEY:** Is it somebody who's already on the list that was submitted?

**SENATOR SASSE:** Sorry?

**MS EDNEY:** Is it somebody whose name we've already seen on that list?

**SENATOR SASSE:** Most of my recommendations have been related to the list.

**MS EDNEY:** We are coming super close on time and I wish we had another hour to talk about different things, but you sit on the Senate Judiciary Committee which has oversight over the Justice Department. Do you think the Justice Department is doing a good job supervising the Special Counsel probe run by Robert Mueller?

**SENATOR SASSE:** I do. I think that Robert Mueller is a very important public servant with a distinguished career. And his investigation needs to run its full course.

**MS EDNEY:** Let me throw in just one question about Russia. Do you think that we are doing enough to counter or stop election interference from, for example, Russia or China? And if the answer to that is no, what do you think we should be doing?

**SENATOR SASSE:** The answer to that is no, but we're improving. So a number of good things are happening, one of which is that the secretaries of state across the country have relied on the Department of Homeland Security much more in recent months. In our constitutional system, elections are held at the state level. And you have more and more states availing themselves of a lot of resources from Homeland Security. That's helpful. I think we've done more; both Article I and Article II, to call out Russian interference. There's still way, way too much of it. Putin presides over a thugocracy, and the only reason he can keep his people down is by trying to keep the other kleptocrats satisfied and in power in their horrible agreement they have against the Russian people.

And so, Russia runs disinformation campaigns everywhere. And I think one of the things that the American electorate is going to need to learn over time, and the tech companies are going to need to do a better job of, and of course the US intelligence community is going to need to do a better job of making clear to the American people is how much disinformation is out there.

During the kneeling controversy, for instance – and I cite this one only because this one is now public and most of the disinformation campaigns Russia runs are not always in public – but in the first 72 hours after the President decided to go after Kaepernick a year ago, the two fastest-trending hashtags in social media over the next 72 hours were #StandForTheAnthem and #TakeAKneeNFL. A huge share of both of those were majority Russian.

We have to have an all-of-society, not just an all-of-government sense, but an all-of-society sense that our divisions, as Abraham Lincoln said, are the only thing that could ever lead to our collapse. When you are a free republic, as Lincoln said, basically quoting

Washington's farewell address, our free republic will live for all time or it will die by suicide. Russia and China know that the best way to attack America is to pick at the scabs of our own internal hatreds. And Russia knows that's the only tool they have. They could never, as Lincoln said, drink from the Ohio River on their own; they need us to kill ourselves. And right now, that's the only lever they have. And we have to become much more sophisticated about all the "we" that unites us before the particular policy issues that we should reasonably argue over.

**MS EDNEY:** This pretty much takes us to the end. Thank you so much for being with us here today. I do have one more very short question for you. But first, I'd like to let our audience know about some upcoming events here at the Press Club. On Monday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, we have a luncheon and book event with Doris Kearns Goodwin on *Leadership in Turbulent Times*. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, we have a book event with Joanna Breyer on, *When Your Child is Sick: The Guide to Navigating the Practical and Emotional Challenges of Caring for a Child Who Is Very Ill*. And November 29<sup>th</sup> is our Fourth Estate Awards dinner, where we're honoring Marty Baron and Dean Baquet, the executive editors of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, respectively. We do still have some tickets for that, but they are going fast, so please make sure to get your orders in. And you all know that that is, of course, a fundraiser for the National Press Club Journalism Institute, which does so much good work throughout the year.

So Senator Sasse, thank you very much for being here with us today. We have a small gift for you. We present one of these to each of our esteemed speaker; you are an esteemed speaker. We hope that you use it in good health for many years to come.

**SENATOR SASSE:** Thank you.

**MS EDNEY:** Thank you for being here.

**SENATOR SASSE:** Good to be here.

**MS EDNEY:** And I do have one last question for you, which is, do you think that the Nebraska Huskers really do have a chance of winning against Ohio State this weekend?

**SENATOR SASSE:** Absolutely. [laughter]

**MS EDNEY:** There you have it. Thank you, everyone. [applause] Senator Sasse is going to be signing copies of his book over here to your right. If you haven't purchased one yet, they are for sale just outside the doors. But if you would please line up along here in front of the podium, Senator Sasse can sign those copies of the books for you. And we are adjourned. Thank you, all. [sounds gavel]

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