

## Journalism's Woman of Steel – Margaret Sullivan

By DANIEL DEVINE  
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New York, NY—If you are in the news business but neglect journalism's principles of truth-telling, fairness and integrity, the media columnist at The Washington Post may come for you.

Margaret Sullivan has been doing that since 2016. Her writing is direct and polite. But don't mistake her style for lack of substance.

Sullivan's work is underpinned by a steel-like determination to protect her profession's guiding principles. She uses her national platform to criticize fellow journalists, including idols and icons, regardless of what may come back in return. The bigger the issue, the harder she punches.

Bob Woodward, one of her idols, appeared on Sullivan's radar screen upon the September 2020 release of his book "Rage." In the book, the Watergate reporter disclosed that then-president Donald Trump knew of the unique dangers of COVID-19 earlier than previously understood. Woodward apparently had sat on the information since early February 2020.

After politely giving the author an opportunity to defend himself, Sullivan said, "Still, the chance — even if it's a slim chance — that those revelations could have saved lives is a powerful argument against waiting." Her language is simple, the implication is damning.

A week earlier Sullivan called out Andrea Mitchell of NBC, Judy Woodruff of PBS and Norah O'Donnell of CBS. The three, along with other leading female journalists, have participated in an annual networking dinner that included political figures. To Sullivan, the women were blurring the line of professional distance. "Girls' Night Out," Sullivan said, "should be retired."

Prior to joining the Post, Sullivan was also a media critic at The New York Times, but with an exacting twist: in her role as public editor from 2012 to 2016, Sullivan only covered her fellow Times' reporters.

Often that involved denouncing the overuse of anecdotal evidence and anonymous sources. Her writing attracted public backlash from Times' reporters and editors—envision an internal affairs detective from television cop shows.

Recalling those experiences in a 2020 phone interview, Sullivan said, "I don't miss the tension."

On the phone, Sullivan's speech is direct and polite. She is reluctant to talk about herself. Her children and journalist mentees are preferred topics. Her tone is upbeat.

A Google search using keywords "Margaret Sullivan" and "journalist" produces over 8 million hits, including links to YouTube videos of Sullivan being interviewed by Dan Rather or Katie Couric. Most often she sports a dark suit, accented by a colorful blouse or silk scarf.

She speaks in the same professional and polite manner when talking to Dan Rather as she does in an interview with an unfamiliar reporter on the phone.

Sullivan's presentation, however, masks how hard she can hit with the written word.

The columnist's writing style was on full display in a 2019 column about Fox News' coverage of the administration of then president Donald Trump. "Chris Wallace is an exceptional interviewer, and Shepard Smith and Bret Baier are reality-based news anchors," Sullivan said. Pleasantries exchanged, she lowered the boom, describing Fox as shameless, destructive, unethical, racist and fearmongering. Finally, Fox is "an American plague," she wrote.

Sullivan is a velvet hammer.

"She tells it like it is," Sophie Kleeman, 29, said of Sullivan in an email. Kleeman is a digital editor at Insider and one of several young reporters being mentored by Sullivan.

"Telling it like it is" involves the use of social media as an element of Sullivan's reporting.

Discussing how to best leverage social media, Sullivan recently said: "Maggie Haberman at The New York Times has very strong presence, but she is nothing but factually based. The fact that she amplifies in a pointed way is fascinating. The more we go down that way, the better. Not obnoxious. Not cutting. Not snarky." In other words, focus on facts and be direct.

Sullivan attributes much of her success to the 32 years she spent at The Buffalo News, the last 12 of which she served as lead editor. She is the only woman to have held that position in the paper's 140-year history. That experience, particularly as a woman, galvanized her inner strength, she said.

"I did know the many difficulties of being a woman in a male-dominated field," Sullivan said. "I would add that it was often difficult to balance the demands of a high-stress job with being a wife and mother, as well as the daughter of a widowed elderly father."

Sullivan grew up in the Buffalo suburb of Lackawanna, a hometown she shared with the now infamous and abandoned Bethlehem steel plant. During that childhood and the early years of her journalism career, she witnessed firsthand the decimation of the steel industry and the resulting financial ruin. That background continues to resonate with Sullivan.

"I'm born and bred in Lackawanna ('The Steel City'), and proudly spent decades as a reporter and editor in the Rust Belt, in one of the US's poorest cities," Sullivan tweeted in 2019.

She was responding to an accusation that she was oblivious to what was happening outside the playgrounds of the coastal elite. In 30 words she disarmed her attacker, presented her credentials and self-identified as a byproduct of The Steel City.

The veteran journalist's career path began in her childhood home. Sullivan's brother David, on break from college in the early 1970s, engaged her in a conversation about career choices. At the end of that talk he pointed at his sister and said, "Journalism."

"It was like the 'plastics' moment in *The Graduate*," Sullivan said on the phone, referring to a moment in the famous 1967 movie when the main character, played by Dustin Hoffman, was told by a family friend that he should pursue a career in plastics. In the moment, her brother's career advice seemed as random to Sullivan as the plastics career advice did to Hoffman.

During that same period the Sullivan family sat together in front of the television, riveted by the Watergate scandal. She was positively affected by the role of journalists Woodward and Carl Bernstein, Sullivan said on the phone.

Heading the advice of her brother, succored by a scoop of inspiration from Woodward and Bernstein, Sullivan marched forward.

By 1980, she had graduated from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism with two job offers. One was at The Buffalo News and another at a competing paper. Her father, then a defense attorney in Buffalo, made a case for the former because it was the dominant paper.

"Dominant sounded good to me," said Sullivan.

By the time Sullivan left The Buffalo News in 2012, she was broadly respected in the journalism community. During the last 12 years as lead editor, she was a four-time Pulitzer Prize juror and later named to the prestigious Pulitzer Prize board. Sullivan also served as a director of the American Society of News Editors.

Diversifying the staff at The Buffalo News was a priority for Sullivan as its leader. She started in 2000 with the appointment of Rod Watson, who is Black, to a senior role on the city desk. The move gave Watson the ability to cover previously underrepresented members of the community.

"Before Margaret, only lip service was provided to diversity," Watson said in a phone interview. "I shall always be grateful for her foresight. Readers should be grateful for Margaret."

A 34-year-old Dawn Marie Bracely, who is Black, was hired by Sullivan in 2000 as an editorial writer. Her age, gender and race broke the mold, and it was Sullivan's support that helped her succeed. "Margaret was always good at developing people, helping them spread their wings," Bracely said in a phone interview.

Both Watson and Bracely remain at the paper.

Summarizing her own career in Buffalo, Sullivan said, "It was one of the greatest privileges of my life to be the first female editor of my hometown newspaper."

Despite the success, she was ready for a career change. "I was eager to have another chapter, and I had always thought that the Times public editor job would both suit me and challenge me," Sullivan wrote in an email.

On a personal level, the stars were aligned.

"I was at a point in my life where I could move to New York City in good conscience. I was once again single; my daughter was at NYU; my son was in law school on the East Coast," said Sullivan.

Her father had also passed before the move.

Reviews of Sullivan's work at the Times indicate that she may have been right about being ready for new challenges.

"Times' editors and reporters may not have enjoyed the scrutiny to which she subjected them, but they can hardly deny the positive impact on both the quality of the paper's journalism and its relationship to readers," wrote The Nation's Eric Alterman when Sullivan left the Times in 2016.

While Sullivan moved to her current position at the Washington Post five years ago, she continues to live in New York City. She enjoys life in Manhattan, including occasional visits to some of its famous museums. While Sullivan's residence remained in New York City, her writing style followed her to the Post.

"At the Post, she is a voice of conscience, raising profound questions about false equivalence ('both sides' journalism), evolving notions of journalistic responsibility and how to deal with Trump's domination of the news cycle," Sewell Chan of the Los Angeles Times said in July 2020.

Sullivan's work has been met with disapproval from certain corners of the journalism world.

As just one example, in 2019 she was lambasted for taking the position in a column that "fair" journalism did not include giving former president Trump equal time, advice based on her view that he is often untruthful.

"Her Trump Derangement Syndrome is on display," P.J. Gladnick, a conservative columnist and Fox News contributor, said of Sullivan's column. Don Irvine, of Accuracy in Academia, said of Sullivan's position, "And we wonder what's wrong with journalism today?"

Despite the criticism, Sullivan followed her own advice on the need for balance. In 2019, approximately 32 percent of her columns were critical of the president, wherein 2020 that frequency rose to 52 percent.

People from Lackawanna know that steel must bend a little, or it will break under pressure. The pressure on journalism came from the former president, and she bent the principles of fairness and balance to adjust.

One of the things Sullivan left behind in Buffalo was the ability to report local news. She circled back to the topic with the 2020 release of "[\*Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy\*](#)."

In the book the author makes a strong case that the demise of local journalism threatens our democracy, as the ability to keep local politicians and other people in power accountable fades into the sunset. One of the more striking facts provided by Sullivan is that since 2004, over 2,000 local newspapers have gone out of business. Those are the same papers that historically served as launching pads for many journalism careers.

When asked how that fact impacts the path forward for people entering journalism today, Sullivan said on the phone: "It's not hopeless, it is just harder to achieve. A young person trying to establish a career has to really have passion for the craft, be willing to learn, listen, make some real compromises and commitments—where you live, how much you get paid."

Now in the 41st year of her career, Sullivan seems to be in a comfortable place. In part, that is because she enjoys living in New York City, with all that it has to offer. It also comes from the fact that the challenges of early parenthood are behind her, she said.

Sullivan's son Alex is now a public defender in Buffalo. Daughter Grace is in law school after spending several years in the New Orleans public defender's office. Like their mother and grandfather before them, Sullivan's children have chosen to fight for those with little voice against the powers that be. They have the watchdog gene.

"I'm very proud of my two children," Sullivan said in an upbeat manner to end the interview.

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