



Anne Carlson, Podcast Producer

Podcasts aim to increase empathy for opinions of others

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Anne Carlson, Janis Clay (executive director), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Paul Ostrow (chair), Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: Audrey Clay, Dan Loritz.

Summary

Attorney, digital media specialist and podcast producer Anne Carlson describes her podcast series, "[The One Thing We Can Agree On](#)," as an attempt to increase the level of empathy for other people's opinions. In the series, Carlson has interviewed people who voted in the 2016 presidential election for Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Jill Stein or Gary Johnson, as well as some nonvoters.

She started the interview podcasts because she realized on election night that she hadn't talked to people who voted for Trump and that it was dangerous not to speak to people who don't think the way she does. In the podcasts, she's interviewed people about the election, why they voted as they did, and what their beliefs and values are.

Carlson expresses concern about how many voters in the 2016 election based their decisions on who they perceived the candidates to be as persons, rather than on their policy positions.


She has completed 35 episodes in her podcast series, with a total of more than 1,400 downloads. She speculates that most listeners are probably younger than 40 years old.

Biography

Anne Carlson is an attorney with Tessneer Law Office in Cambridge, Minn. She is also a digital media specialist, Qualified Intellectual Disabilities Professional and podcast producer. Since January 2017, she has been producing a podcast series called "[The One Thing We Can Agree On](#)."

Carlson earned a J.D. degree from Mitchell Hamline School of Law in May 2016 and a B.A. degree from Concordia College in Moorhead. She grew up in Lindstrom, Minnesota.

Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The Civic Caucus interviewed Anne Carlson, attorney and digital media specialist, about use of social media and other digital platforms to disseminate public-policy information to a broader audience.

Discussion

Carlson began producing her podcast series, " *The One Thing We Can Agree On* ," in January 2017. Carlson said before the November 2016 presidential election, she was confident Trump would not be elected. She realized on election night that she hadn't talked to people who voted for Trump. "I didn't feel until Nov. 8, 2016, that I had anything to learn from talking with them," she said. "It was dangerous of me not to speak to people who didn't think the way I do."

She mentioned the 2008 book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* by Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, which posits that people today are less willing to find commonality with those who don't think like they do, so they're moving to where other people will agree with them.

Carlson said after the presidential election, she started reaching out through Facebook to people who voted for Trump. She decided to host a series of podcasts, which are radio shows available to download from the internet onto smartphones or computers. Her first podcasts were 20 minutes long, but she's lengthened them to 60 minutes. She has interviewed people about the election, why they voted as they did, and what their beliefs and values are.

"My goal in the podcasts was to increase the level of empathy for other people's opinions," she said. "Otherwise, people will move to surround themselves with like-minded people. On Facebook, you can click to not listen to people or media you disagree with. Hillary Clinton voters didn't think they could learn anything from Trump voters. But if they listen to the podcast, they'll understand where a person who voted for Trump is coming from."

She decided to start with Trump voters and told them that whatever they said would be considered correct; she wouldn't fact-check them. She said the first Trump voters she contacted were anxious to participate in the podcasts.

She's had seven podcast conversations with Trump voters. "They all made arguments that, even if I didn't agree with them, I could understand," she said. Many said they thought Hillary Clinton was untrustworthy. She continued the podcasts with Jill Stein voters, Gary Johnson voters, Hillary Clinton voters—both people who liked her and people who hated voting for her—and nonvoters. Some interviewees were friends of hers and others she reached out to through Facebook.

Carlson learned that the campaign didn't inspire some people to vote, because they saw Trump and Clinton as very similar. "No one was promising that life would be any better," Carlson said.

A Civic Caucus interviewer asked how much people based their voting decisions on whether they liked the candidates. Carlson responded that the issue of likability did come up, especially with Clinton. Some people wouldn't vote for Hillary Clinton because of the Monica Lewinski scandal with Bill Clinton. "The sins of Bill Clinton became the sins of Hillary," Carlson said. Of the 11 Hillary Clinton voters she's talked to, all but one said they voted for her only because she wasn't Donald Trump.

So far, Carlson has completed 35 episodes in her podcast series, with a total of more than 1,400 downloads. She speculated that most listeners are probably younger than 40 years old.

Is there a relationship between the weakening of political parties and the individualistic way of looking at things? A Civic Caucus interviewer posed that question and said he's concerned about the polarity of what Carlson has described and the idea of political parties, which used to collect a view that was shared widely. "Parties have less relevance today about how we move ahead," he said. "Our culture is moving toward more angry, chaotic, individualistic views."

"You're suggesting that the parties don't have relevance," Carlson responded. "I would say in this last election, it really did come down to who is Hillary Clinton as a person and who is Donald Trump as a person." The interviewer interjected, "This is exactly the direction the world seems to go, without any discussion of the platform."

Carlson said, "I agree and it's dangerous. I see that. I think the 2016 election embodied that. I hope we move in the direction of talking about policy."

Carlson spends roughly 10 hours editing each podcast before it appears on her website. She said she edits out things that don't add to the conversation, like "verbal crutches," such as "um" or "like." Each conversation lasts up to two hours and she ends up cutting out about half of it. On her website, she writes a headline for each podcast and includes several quotes from the conversation to show what the listener will be hearing about. She gives each interviewee 24 hours to review the podcast before posting it on her website.

When asked whether anyone else is doing anything like her podcast series, Carlson said she hasn't seen anything like it, although there could be something out there.

It's valuable to interview someone who's knowledgeable about an issue to get a real understanding of it. A Civic Caucus interviewer made that remark and pointed to *Minnesota Issues*, a weekly public-affairs program on Twin Cities Public Television that ran from 1976 to 1987. University of Minnesota Professor and former Minneapolis Mayor Art Naftalin produced and hosted 500 installments of the program during those years.

The interviewer said it was a very interesting way to learn how the major players felt about various issues. He said Naftalin clipped newspapers and carefully prepared questions for the program. "Trying to work out a method for getting well-informed people is very valuable," the interviewer said.

"I'm not suggesting that all of the people I'm speaking with are well-informed," Carlson said of her podcast series. "But it's also worth listening to those people."