Yvette Cozier:

Hello, everyone. My name is Yvette Cozier. I'm the Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice at Boston University School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us for our latest Public Health Conversation Starter. Today's conversation is part of our SPH Reads series. SPH Reads is a school-wide reading program hosted by the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice. And it aims to encourage critical thought and discussion among members of the BUSPH community and is centered on a carefully chosen thought-provoking book.

The selection for fall of 2024-spring 2025 academic year is Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right by Arlie Russell Hochschild. In conjunction with this year's book selection, I'm having discussions with leaders on the themes of political divides, class, and race. Today I have the privilege of speaking with Michael Serazio. Dr. Serazio is an associate professor in the Department of Communications at Boston College. His research interests include popular culture, political communication, media, and sports. Dr. Serazio is a former staff writer for the Houston Press, and his work on media and culture has continued to appear in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, and more.

Thank you so much for being with us today, Dr. Serazio.

Michael Serazio:

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

Yvette Cozier:

Great. Great. So to start off, can you share about your background and your passion for writing on media, culture, politics, and sports?

Michael Serazio:

Sure, absolutely. So when I'm an undergrad trying to figure out what to do with my life, I settled upon writing as a source of incredible meaning and purpose and passion. I found that what the psychologists call flow, where you kind of just disappear into the work that you're doing and time sort of melts away, I found that I experienced that when I had the opportunity to do research and reporting and writing. And so coming out of my undergrad doing a master's in journalism, originally I thought my career

would wind up being one of journalism. I did that for a few years as a magazine writer, but I realized that my favorite part in reporting a story was when I got to call a professor somewhere and talk to that person about this sort of big picture. What does it all mean? What's the real large scale story here? So I went back, got the PhD, and pursued a career in academia.

Topically, the things I've been fascinated by have always been the media. I find that the power of the media is incredibly interesting and dynamic and important to understand. The media is in some ways what gives rise to our ideas. It influences our relationships, it impacts our politics and who we vote for. It impacts our consumption habits, how we shop. And really the relationship between media and culture has been something I've been fascinated by for decades now.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah, yeah. No, the media is an important part of our lives and it seems that we're in this struggle for either marginalizing it or removing it altogether or amplifying it. So we struggle where that all fits.

So certainly within media is sports, and in the context of this book by Dr. Hochschild, I came to think about sports as this entity of media that so many of us engage in. You either love sports or you don't, right? But so many of us engage in this, and yet it seems to split along political fault lines. If we look at US history, there's a history of segregated sports, certainly the exclusion of women from sports. The Boston Marathon was just recent. And it's hard to believe or to remember that in my lifetime, women could not run the marathon and they actually had to run it illegally and sometimes be physically forcibly stopped from running, from running. And then of course, today we have much of the debate around transgender athletes. So can you talk a little bit more about this history? How did sports become that place and where are we today?

Michael Serazio:

Yeah, I mean, the intersection of sports and politics and culture is a completely fascinating one. It's a fraught one. It has interesting moments across the decades. Broadly speaking though, let me frame it this way. The kind of core tension when we talk about sports and politics is often between sort of two ways of thinking about this. On one hand, because sports is a form of pop culture, people like to see it as escapism. People like to look at sports and see it as kind of an escape from the

problems that plague contemporary American life, whether it be individual problems in one's own life or kind of collective problems that we face. And so there's often, throughout the decades, there's often been a pushback from fans and media alike that sports and politics shouldn't mix or don't mix. And you hear this vocalized most famously in recent years, you had the Fox News host, Laura Ingraham telling LeBron James to just shut up and dribble, which is the kind of embodiment of that.

But it's not just the media that often push that "let's keep politics out of sports." It is fans as well. So I did a survey about five, six years ago now with a colleague in political science, looking at the relationship between sports and politics among the American public. And by and large Americans themselves, just generally speaking across backgrounds, don't tend to want sports and politics to sort of intersect. They hold on to this notion sports are an escape from American life. I happen to believe despite that longing that the opposite is true. I see sports as a mirror for American society. I think that in some ways sports tells us what America is and what America could be or should be as much as anything else. And so we've seen this tension over the years.

If you look at the arc of sports and political history, it's usually narrated like this. The story usually goes in the 1960s, you had athletes like Muhammad Ali, Tommy Smith, and John Carlos. Sprinters for the US, Bill Russell, who were active in political matters in civil rights matters, Ali protesting the Vietnam War, things like that. That was the kind of high-water mark for athlete activism. And then what you really had in the 1980s, 1990s and two thousands was athletes like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, for whom we did not really know what their politics was. Michael Jordan had a famous line where he was asked to endorse a candidate for Senate in his home state of North Carolina. And he sort of famously said, "Republicans buy sneakers, too." So there was a kind of way in which athletes themselves wanted to distance themselves from any kind of politicization. What you started seeing really in the mid-2010s with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement was athletes getting much more visibly involved with activism, with fighting against injustice.

And I would credit, I mean I mentioned LeBron James a second ago. I would credit... To some degree the Black Lives Matter movement starts with the murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida, and you had LeBron James and several other members of the Miami Heat donning hoodies as part of a kind of social media message about the injustice of that, in the aftermath of that tragedy. That cycled through the 2010s, obviously you

have Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the New National Anthem. And it really crescendos around 2020 or so where athletes are becoming much more involved in political matters. Specifically we're talking about racial injustice for a large portion, but we'll talk in a second maybe about women's rights in sports as well. So it'll be interesting to see in the second Trump era how that plays out and what that looks like in terms athletes wanting to engage in political topics.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah. No, and you mentioned a lot of these folks who really stepped up and thank you for reminding me about the Michael Jordan comment. But as you said, sports fans want the separation of sports and politics. Yet when people like Muhammad Ali and Colin Kaepernick got involved, man, did it just take off. The fire and the backlash. And so again, this is supposed to be one of those unifiers, but it's almost like it's kindling in a sense. It can ignite at any moment. But just back to the idea of sports being one of those unifiers, Ethan. And what is the potential for more unity in today's sports?

Michael Serazio:

To me, that's the incredible cultural power of sports, particularly at this moment in history. So one of the arguments that I make in one of the books that I wrote and other pieces of writing is that I actually think that sports is unifying on a religious level. So if you look at the trend lines in America today, you have, Pew statistics estimate maybe 60 or 70 million Americans are what's called religiously unaffiliated. They have sort of no affiliation to religion, and that's been a growing share of the population over time. One of the things that I would argue, that I have argued, is that sports fills that spiritual vacuum. I think that that's one of the unifying features. Sports, if you look at sports, it has the texture and it has the structure of so many kind of religious aspects to life. Sports furnishes the language of belief, sports gives us feelings of moral judgment. Sports provides us with these systems of meaning-making. And I think that they're particularly unifying given the kind of cultural landscape that we live in.

The defining, I would argue, the defining feature of our cultural landscape nowadays is fragmentation. Everybody has an algorithmically determined bubble of information that they're getting and what's coming through on your cell phone, social media feed is completely different from what's coming through on mine. This is true in pop culture. This is true in political information. Sports, on the other hand, is still a kind of monopoly

of mass culture. And this is especially true for something like the NFL. I mean the NFL these days routinely dominates 80 to 90% of the top most watched broadcasts in a given year. It's like the only reason to have TV these days is the NFL basically. And that is still a kind of mass culture phenomenon that is still something that puts everybody on the same page, tells what time it is, connects people across really different demographic backgrounds.

And so to me, that is the incredible, that unifying power of sports is so... Unifying power is so hard to come by nowadays, and sports is one of the very few things that delivers. It's one of the very few things where a large proportion of the nation is consuming the same content at the same time. And sure, I mean, you can say that that divides people because they're rooting for different teams, but that's a playful division. I mean, sometimes it's serious, but that's a playful division relative to the divisions that we tend to see in say, politics or other aspects of society. Where there's real serious, I mean, my favorite team versus your favorite team, we can sort of jokingly hate each other. We just are joking about that most of the time. So I do think that there's a real religious impulse underpinning sports. I think through sports, we really think, feel, and act spiritually, and it has that unifying aspect that people crave, I think, in our modern world because we're so fragmented otherwise.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah, and I don't know what the Nielsen numbers were, but from last Thursday night and the NFL draft through Saturday, we knew where so many eyeballs were.

Michael Serazio:

Absolutely. It's a dominant, it really captures our attention. It captures the nation's attention, really nothing else culture-wise these days.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah. No, absolutely. So another aspect of sports is sports radio, which is this very unique creature, it seems like. And so what role does that play in either unifying or dividing society essentially?

Michael Serazio:

Yeah, so it is funny. I grew up listening to talk radio in all of its forms, whether it be sports talk, political talk radio. And even though on the political talk radio side of things, the politics skew very differently than my own. For my whole life, I've tried to consume lots of political media that I happen to completely disagree with. Just because I find it interesting to understand you can't understand where people are coming from until you figure out what information sources are feeding them. In terms of sports talk radio, it's very interesting. Because one, there's a few things that sports talk radio has presaged or influences it's had. One is the kind of participatory culture within media. So if you talk about the 20th century, for the most part, for most of the 20th, almost all of the 20th century, when you consumed media, you were just sort of a passive recipient of it. You were just sitting at home watching the Cosby Show or Seinfeld or whatever, and it's not like you were contributing into that. You weren't participating, you weren't taking part in that.

The story of the 21st century has been, we are all now media makers as well as being media consumers. I mean, that's the basis of what was Web 2.0, which now we now call social media. Sports talk radio and talk radio in general was a kind of preview of what that looked like. Because it is participatory, because it is audience driven, it is very populist. And it is polarizing, and it is people's highly opinionated media content.

Half the time you hear kind of either a sports pundit or a political pundit on radio or on cable news, they're kind of just pushing their opinions without really necessarily even believing them half the time. I mean, I don't doubt that Stephen A. Smith has lots of opinions, but I don't believe at all for a second that the passionate opinions that he puts out every day on sports radio and other sports media formats, that he actually himself believes. I think it's just, that's the job, that's the performance.

And so sports radio becomes one of these spaces where you have both audience participation, you also have polarization and content. You're supposed to have a hot take. The value of somebody who works in the media nowadays is less, "Can you get objective information and pass it on to people?" And more, "Can you give people a certain slant, a certain angle, a certain hot take that they haven't thought of before?" And so that has sizable impacts, not just on the landscape of sports, but on news media as a whole. Because you've had a shift over several decades to more opinion-oriented news content. People consume and receive far more opinionated media content, whether it be news or sports nowadays than they would've done in the latter

decades of the 20th century. And that's a dramatic shift, and it has huge impacts on our politics and culture as well.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah. So that's a perfect segue into your most recent book, The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it Real in Media, Culture, and Politics. So as your book, in what you've just sort of said, there's a total lack of authenticity, but there's a bit of performance and media. So can you dig down a little bit more about that? People look at the media and they assume there is representing me or representing you or whatever, but lose that performance piece.

Michael Serazio:

Yeah, absolutely. So the book comes out of an observation, which is, I just happened to notice as the years went on that as a culture, as a society, we seem to be increasingly obsessed with authenticity. I was seeing this come up in all kinds of different realms. "How do people explain Donald Trump's success as a politician?" "Oh, he's really authentic, right?" "Oh, why do you really like that kind of independent coffee shop on your neighborhood street corner?" "Oh, it's just really authentic." "Why did reality TV take off? Why do social media influencers make the money that they do?" "Oh, there's real authenticity there." So you just heard "authenticity" as the explanatory device across a wide range of culture and contexts, and I just was really curious to call BS on it. Because I think that there is, and I argue this in the book, there's an elaborate machinery and a bunch of professional work that gets done behind the scenes that tries to make us believe that the things that we see in media are authentic.

I mean, this is most obvious in the realm of, say, reality TV, but it's equally applicable to advertising, right? Advertisers are desperate for their products to seem authentic. Political campaigns are desperate for their candidates to seem authentic. And so what the book looks at is really a sort of study of how is it that behind the scenes, how is it that the things that we believe are authentic are made to seem authentic by the work that gets done behind the scenes?

And so it's interviews, I mean, I did dozens of interviews with the people who do this work. Political campaign managers, advertising agency CEOs, reality TV casting directors, social media influencers themselves. And it's really meant to think through

how this works, how it operates. And the big kind of context for all of it is social media. That every day, because so many of us live our lives on social media and we spend so much time consuming social media. There's such a desire for authenticity in those spaces, which means that you have to do that much more work to appear authentic on these platforms. And so I just found that dynamic very, very interesting and was sort of trying to unpack it in the book. And it was a fun project and yielded some really interesting conversations that often surprised me at times, in terms of the games that are played that trick us into believing that something's real when it's quite fake.

Yvette Cozier:

So I guess just a quick follow-up is how surprised would each of us be if we were to name someone that we admire in the media or sports radio or political TV or whatever, that we would be shocked to know how they really felt versus what they feed us?

Michael Serazio:

Yeah. The thing is, we'll ultimately never know, right? We're just average folks in the audience, right? And it is completely natural on one hand for us to feel attachment and to believe that we have some sort of connection or that we know who this famous person is or what they're really like. That's a theory that goes back to the 1950s. It's called "parasocial relationships." And it was from the very beginnings of media research in radio and early television.

Researchers would establish that everyday people in the audience, fans, viewers, we really think we know what Beyonce is like. We think we really know what Jimmy Kimmel is like or whoever, and we'll never know. None of us unless we somehow ascend to a celebrity status will ever be able to spend time backstage with these people. But what's fascinating is that one of the ways that we are convinced of who these folks really are is that they let us into the backstage. They show us they have their selfie Get Ready with Me TikTok video that they put out there, and we think we're seeing this backstage version of themselves, but it's just another performed version.

And it's not to say that any of the people that I just mentioned are jerks or they're inauthentic. I mean, for 15 years I watched Jon Stewart every night on Comedy Central before I fell asleep, and I was like, "I feel like I really know who he is. I like him. I feel like we'd get along if we hung out." It's never going to happen. But there's a natural tendency, but ultimately, I'll never know whether or not it's real or it's performed

because we'll always have a screen between us. And that's always going to be the kind of reality of the fakery is that. And the best celebrities make us believe that they're real and authentic and genuine and down to earth and all this stuff. That's some of the ways in which the best celebrities and the most convincing and popular and lucrative ones deliver that performance. Because it doesn't seem like a performance.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah, so an interesting place that this comes for public health. So the goal of what we do in public health really is to advocate for the most vulnerable. And some can argue that we are not very good at selling what we do and certainly putting that forward. So for students, our current students in public health, as they kind of navigate the world through media, culture, politics, and want to show up with a type of authenticity that might put the target audience to sleep, what advice would you have for them? What is the balance that need to strike between performance for selling the idea versus how their authentic selves that show up to do the work?

Michael Serazio:

Yeah. Well, first of all, your students and the folks in your profession are doing the Lord's work. I mean, that's always been true, but I mean, I think the story of the last five years and the tragedy and the trauma that befell us with the pandemic has just proved how important and essential the work of public health is mean. And I'm very much a lay observer of it, but particularly seeing how it played out during the pandemic makes me respect and empathize what your field does just so much.

I mean, I would offer just some very humble reflections. I often, anytime I'm out of my depth, I always want to properly caveat any presumption of giving advice to populations that are far more knowledgeable than I am in a given area. But I would say, when you think about authenticity and effective interventions and effective implementations of public health with populations, the one thing that I think really, that at least I feel like I learned through the pandemic was just how much tremendous distrust we have in society right now. Particularly institutional distrust.

That we could be reading stories into after the vaccine was already available. And you'd read these stories about people who were still dying from COVID, who didn't believe that it really was a thing, was just heartbreaking, mind-blowing, astounding, tragic. And so I think that all of that was just a big, it was a wake-up call for me. I

assume that in the field you were taking it for granted, that challenge. But again, to realize that there's a tremendous institutional distrust often of science and medicine, and I think the direction that we're heading with leadership on things like vaccinations right now does not portend well.

And there are much smarter health comm scholars who are thinking about this question of how you overcome that distrust and how you make people feel like you are authentically working in their best interests, is a challenge that I know that lots of great health comm scholars are devoting themselves to. And I couldn't possibly begin to summarize or even abridge crib their work. But I think, again, I think it seems as though one of the core challenges and one of the core needs is to figure out how do you earn trust from audiences and populations for whom you have to seem like an authentic representative of their health and their positive futures. And what that looks like and how hard that's going to get when not if the next pandemic rolls around is something that I don't envy those challenges. Because now what we have lodged in memory is just this incredibly, I mean, 2020 in the pandemic was in my lifetime the hardest societal thing that I feel like we've had to go through.

And all of that will be backdrop in ways, I think probably worse rather than better for the next challenge next time around. So I guess the final takeaway that I might offer is that facts and objective science don't always, or even most of the time, win the day. And that's a hell of a tough thing for medicine to have to grapple with. But for people to appreciate and to take the lessons of public health, they've got to feel like there's a kind of authenticity among the folks who are delivering those messages and those efforts. So it's so important, and I'm sure so difficult at the same time.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah. No, it is quite challenging. And I think what I'm hearing from you also is part of that authenticity is understanding the audience. And somehow we have to figure out how to get to know and understand the audience.

Michael Serazio:

Absolutely. That's the key. I mean, in any communication challenge or strategy, knowing your audience first, knowing their prior assumptions, knowing their skepticism, and also just knowing how they get information. It's super complicated to get information out nowadays. The statistic that I often give that I think is most revealing

about previous generations versus now is that up until the 1980s, you could reach 90% of the country if you just put a commercial on one of three networks every single night. Now, there is nothing like that in terms of a centralized audience to get information out nowadays. And that makes it really hard, because the information and the audience portion has to come first before you can even get to interventions, behavioral strategies, things like that, vaccine uptake. It's just really hard. We've fragmented. It's kaleidoscopic, the fragments that culture and society are in nowadays.

Yvette Cozier:

Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I've learned a lot and a lot of things that I had just taken for granted, and I really appreciate your expertise and the lens in which you approach the world. I think it's very helpful for public health students to be able to learn. Even outside of typical health communication, it's communication. All of the issues are still down to what we do, but I so appreciate your time on this and your expertise.

Michael Serazio:

Thank you so much for the time. Thank you for the questions, and good luck to you and good luck to all your students at the school.

Yvette Cozier:

Thank you. You, too.