

Ben Swann Returns
Guest: Ben Swann
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Ben Swann (BenSwann.com) has won two Emmy Awards and two Edmund R. Murrow Awards for his work in broadcast journalism. He currently runs the Truth in Media Project.

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WOODS: Anytime I'm going to have you on, everybody has a million questions they want to ask, so in a few minutes we'll turn to some listener-supplied questions. I want to talk to you about things you're reporting on these days, things that are current, things that are going on that people can find out about at BenSwann.com and through your various social media outlets.

I almost hate to bring up the subject of Chris Christie and ruin everybody's day, but it has to be talked about. And to me it's kind of great that Chris Christie is coming down a couple notches, because to see him as the front runner for 2016 was just too much. Now we'll get Jeb Bush instead, I suppose. Tell us about not so much the traffic issue, but you guys reported way in advance, when everybody else was treating it as a non-story, the issue of the federal investigation or the whole issue of the Sandy funds and how they were spent and the commercials and everything. Can you fill us in on that?

SWANN: Absolutely. You were right. We were talking about this back in August even before the feds were investigating it, and it was a non-story to a lot of folks. They acted like, well, this is just picking on Chris Christie and leave him alone, and he's fine. This is what everyone does. Now all of a sudden it's a legal issue. Here's the back story. When the "Stronger than the Storm" ad campaign was put together with Sandy relief funds we reported that Christie's administration had used it like a campaign ad. They put the governor in the ad. They put his family in the ad. And they were running it during the campaign season. It's not being investigated by the inspector general's office is simply this. Because \$5 million went to this "Stronger than the Storm" campaign ad.

Whenever you have these ads that are out there, you obviously will put them out to bid. Different companies will come in and bid on them. There were two companies who bid on doing this ad campaign. One of them came in around \$2 million, a little more than that. About \$2.5 million or so. And then the other one came in around \$5 million. So you have these two competing agencies, one significantly more expensive than the other. As we reported, the Christie administration chooses the much more expensive company to put together this campaign. When you dig into why, we don't know absolutely why. Here's what we see. We see two things happen. Number one, the company that did get the bid, MWW, actually made far more political contributions than the firm that lost, Sigma Group. Sigma Group hasn't made any political contributions, left or right. MWW usually donates to Democrats, but in this case they actually donated to the Christie campaign as well as many of their employees.

Secondly, when they went in to sit down and come up with their proposal of how they would do the ad, MWW said we think that the ad should feature the governor and his family, and they should be front and center in the ads. The Sigma Group said we think the ad should be about New Jersey and the recovery and not include the governor. And because the governor was not in them, that company did not get the bid. Do I know for sure that's why they didn't get it? No. But here's what we know. We know that a company that charged almost twice as much in taxpayer dollars agreed to put the governor in the ad, and that's ultimately the company that got the bid.

WOODS: So the investigation, then, is going to try to get to the bottom of what the motivation was presumably behind hiring the one company over the other. Again, I don't know how you go to motive on a

question like this, but as you say, it seems highly suspicious.

SWANN: And certainly when you're talking about taxpayer dollars that are going to the Sandy relief efforts. At the end of the day there was a lot of back and forth about whether or not taxpayers should even be bailing out folks who had suffered damage. This is a state issue, not a federal issue. Why are taxpayers federally paying for this? When that money does get to New Jersey, \$5 million is spent on TV commercials saying, hey, we did well. Hey, everyone feels good. There was controversy to begin with, but when you're talking about such a significant price difference between the two, and really the only difference between them appears to be, again, political connection and the fact that they were willing to put the governor in the ads.

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WOODS: Before we get to any other issues, what do you make of the fact that we have been seeing in the polls, at least up until maybe recently, that Christie really has been dominating in a lot of states. I think, by the way, this is the earliest I've ever seen people being asked about presidential races. They were being asked all through 2013 whom they favored. What do you make of the fact that he kept showing up as number one or number two in state after state? Haven't we already had Bob Dole, John McCain, Mitt Romney? Is there a problem with the learning curve here?

SWANN: I think the difference is this between Bob Dole and a John McCain and a Chris Christie. Chris Christie has this kind of swagger about himself where he comes off as a tough guy. He doesn't put up with nonsense from anyone. He'll take on the unions and a lot of the Republican primary voters really like that about him. They feel like he's a strong candidate. That he's a strong guy. I think the more you look at Chris Christie's background, and we've actually been doing some work on this as well in terms of his track record. Brit Hume said on FOX News a few days ago that the reason that Christie's getting picked on is because, he's so, number one, "masculine," and number two, "has this muscular attitude."

If you look at the guy's record, anybody who crosses him, anybody who says something he doesn't like, his administration goes after them. He's gone after Democrats in New Jersey. He's gone after Republicans in New Jersey who just said little things that were deemed critical, and therefore he works to get them to lose their seat through redistricting or to pull finances. This guy has a pattern of behavior—if you think that Obama is vindictive against whistleblowers, you think that this Obama administration, which is the worst in U.S. history in terms of going after whistleblowers and leakers. I think you would be hard pressed to be able to compete with the Chris Christie administration in that respect.

WOODS: Ben, I wonder, again, you can't know motive for sure.

SWANN: Right.

WOODS: Do you think it's a coincidence? I haven't been following the story closely enough, but is it a coincidence that right after this traffic scam gets blown up before the public—for political reasons they created traffic in Fort Lee and all that—just around the time that breaks, the federal government announces that it's going to investigate the disbursement of the Sandy funds. Is that a coincidence? How did that come about?

SWANN: That's a good question. That fact of the timing on it seems very interesting, but remember again the Sandy relief questions started back in August. It's not a new case. The inspector general's announcement of the investigations certainly seems like it was timed awfully close to the bridge scandal. Whether or not one was prompted by the other to say let's go ahead and make this announcement now, I don't know. I really don't know the answer to that. I would agree with you. The timing seems odd, but again, this is an investigation that really should have been going on for months now.

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WOODS: Let's talk Rahm Emanuel now, and electronic cigarettes. I have no idea what an electronic cigarette is or what the point of it is or how it works, but apparently people like them. First of all, tell us what this thing is, and then tell me what's going on in Chicago with them.

SWANN: An electronic cigarette is called an e-cigarette. It's a battery-powered device that simulates tobacco smoking. They vaporize liquid. It contains a little bit of nicotine in it, but mostly they release flavored vapor and in most cases just flavored vapor. E-cigarettes are becoming much more popular with Americans who are trying to wean themselves off their smoking habit. There's no scientific evidence at this point that the vapor that's emitted from these e-cigarettes is dangerous. Basically, there's no proof that there is any secondhand smoke issue with e-cigarettes. None whatsoever. However, in Chicago that's not enough, because Rahm Emanuel is pushing now for the new rules to say you can be banned from smoking with those electronic cigarettes indoors. They want to force people who use them to stand outside of restaurants and bars and other buildings near other cigarette smokers, because this is the Clean Indoor Air Act. Again, this isn't smoke being emitted from an e-cigarette. It's vapor. It's water, essentially, that's being emitted. What you're trying to do is break your habit of smoking and Chicago wants to make you go stand outside next to the smokers.

WOODS: What do you think motivates this? Of all possible things to focus on, this has got to be dead last on the list of priorities. I can't think of anything other than just the pure thuggery of enjoying making people miserable. Am I being too cynical? What could possibly be behind this? It's obviously not a health concern.

SWANN: No, it's not a health concern. Yet as part of this Clean Indoor Air Act that Rahm Emanuel is pushing as part of that also, all electronic smoking devices have to be sold behind store counters, which they say will make young people less likely to start smoking an e-cigarette. Why would a young person start smoking an e-cigarette? If you're going to start smoking, you're going to start the real thing not the fake things. I agree with the term thuggery that you used. I think part of it is the mentality that says we have to police every bit of your behavior. It has to be controlled. We can't allow anything to be left up to chance. It's just this ongoing case that we have in this country of this nanny state mentality. We have to control what you do and how you do it, and even if it just has the appearance of being something we don't like we've got to monitor it, restrict it, and control it.

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WOODS: Ben, the irony of this is that every time we catch the slightest glimpse of the personal lives of these people, we find out that they are involved up to their necks in every imaginable vice. These are the ones who are going to lecture us on how to lead our lives.

SWANN: Exactly, because it really comes back to this mentality, and you're going to have to forgive me for using the phrase. I need to use it correctly here. It is a fascist mentality. When you use the term fascism—now hear me out; this term gets misused all the time. George Orwell said very well at one point that the term fascism was utterly meaningless, because essentially people substitute the word for bully. Real fascism is this belief that there is the corporate, and there is the individual. And the individual never trumps the rights of the corporate, meaning the collective. Yet someone has to rule the collective. That's what we've created in our modern America, this American fascism that says individuals have no rights. The collective has rights, but when the collective has rights and the individual doesn't, guess what? The collective doesn't have rights. They merely are used to enforce whatever whim dear leader decides to impose upon us. I agree with you. You have all these folks who claim to be looking out for the best interest of the public and in their personal lives they live however they want. But they want to be able to dictate to you'll what you eat, when you'll eat, what you'll smoke, if you won't smoke, where you'll stand, where you'll sleep, everything.

WOODS: Ben I want to do a sort of greatest hits thing with you, because some of the listeners of the

program follow you very closely. It's kind of like Brian Regan, the standup comedian. My wife and I went to see him, and at the end of his act he takes requests from the audience. He can't understand why people would make requests of a standup comic. "You've heard the material before, so why are you requesting it?" People, though, are interested in some of the work that you've done in the past. Somebody raised with me that you've done some work connecting the U.S. government with some drug cartel. Can you tell me about that?

SWANN: There's actually quite a bit of evidence of this. The drug cartel situation in Mexico is kind of interesting, because when you look at a map you can break up Mexico into cartel territories. There's about five or six different cartels that were geographically positioned throughout the country of Mexico. In 2006, when Felipe Calderon became president of Mexico, you saw this push by Calderon to win the drug war and to push the cartels out of Mexico. What actually happened was that the military began to go into different communities and different cities and declare this war against cartels, but they would only fight one side in each of these cities. There was a drug war taking place between the resident cartel and then another cartel called the Sinaloa cartel, and then the military would come in to fight as well. But they would never fight Sinaloa.

What you found was throughout Mexico—and I did a lot of reporting on this back in 2008, 2009—was this push by the military to get rid of any rival cartels to Sinaloa. That's what was actually happening down there. A few years ago, I think it was 2011 maybe, there was a case in Chicago where a high-ranking official with the Sinaloa cartel was on trial. He began making accusations through that trial that it was actually the U.S. government that was pushing this idea of supporting the Sinaloa cartel over the other ones in order to create one super cartel through which they could win the drug war or control the drug supply flowing into the United States. There's a lot of evidence, again, on the Mexican side that the Mexican government was also supporting Sinaloa. There's evidence. There's no smoking gun per se, where you can say we can definitely prove this. There is a lot of evidence out there that our government and the Mexican government were working with the Sinaloa cartel to try to create a super cartel in Mexico.

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WOODS: Again, as you say, you can't necessarily prove this and that, but my view is given what we do know about things the government does, one thing we know for sure is they wouldn't be held back by moral considerations from doing these things. That we can know for sure. If they're not doing it, it's not because they've reflected on it or they've flipped through an ethics book or whatever. It would only be because they don't think they can get away with it.

People are curious to know if there is some metric by which you can measure how the work you're doing as an independent journalist is cracking through beyond the Ron Paul, libertarian sort of circles. Even if you're just reporting to those circles you're doing a tremendous service, because then we can take what you've done and spread it around ourselves.

SWANN: Here's the thing. Is there a metric for it? I don't think there's one yet. I think what we're starting to see is that there is a shift right now. I know this for a fact among a lot of the networks who are trying to figure out how to reach this audience. I've had some conversations with some of those networks who are saying, how do we connect with these viewers? The problem is they don't want to necessarily do what it takes to connect with them, because they still want to control the message and the outcome and would prefer that you weren't paying attention. But you are. So I would say for us, there isn't a metric yet, but we're really working to break through that.

What we're finding is there are different ways for us to get our content to the mass market. That's what we're developing right now. Hopefully within the next few weeks and months that will become much clearer. That the content that we're putting out is having an effect, because it's reaching more people

through mainstream channels. As that happens, I think what you'll see are more networks and more news content trying to emulate what we've been doing.

WOODS: If we're dealing with people who are new to what you do can you explain quickly what kind of content are you putting out on what sort of topics, and how often are you putting it out?

SWANN: What we're trying to do is really break through what we call the left-right paradigm, which is a false paradigm in the media. The idea is to approach stories talking about them from the perspective of liberty and the idea that the individual has rights and that the media has a responsibility to stand up for those rights, especially against government or corporate encroachment. That's what we really tried to do, was focus on stories that deal with your rights as an individual, the rights of the citizenry, and what it means for you to take back authority within whatever sphere you're operating in. That may be your local community. That may be your state. It may be within your own household. We're really trying to push that forward.

One of the tactics that we use, we're doing a couple of different things. We have different forms of media that we're putting out. We're putting out radio vignettes now. We're putting out short-form videos that are two minutes to three minutes long, and then we've got longer pieces that we have on Roku channel four, called the Truth in Media Project. Those episodes which we just finished up our first season of will hopefully be on Hulu very soon. With that content what we're trying to do is focus on bigger picture stories that media really hasn't covered.

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WOODS: Is your Truth in Media project BenSwann.com? Is this all Ben Swann, or have you got other contributors?

SWANN: Right now it's just me. We have writers on BenSwann.com who are writing articles. They produce the majority of the written text articles there. Then I produce the majority of the videos.

WOODS: I've had a couple of people ask this kind of question. When you look on the spectrum of independent journalism, Alex Jones occupies one end of it. There are people who say we love Ben Swann, because he sticks to the facts. Yet he nails you right between the eyes. You can't deny what he's saying. We don't want him to become too sensationalistic. So what do you say to people like that? I want to give you the chance to respond to something like that.

SWANN: Sure, absolutely. I think the question is: what is sensationalism? I too want to stay away from sensationalism. Sometimes there are stories that have to be covered, and there are people who don't like that idea. They'll say, oh, man, don't even talk about these issues, because they're not stories that we think give credibility to this liberty movement. I'll give you two examples. One is, we did a piece about 9/11 and the recent 9/11 campaign. There were a lot of people, Tom, who were upset that we did that and said you shouldn't have talked about this issue. It just doesn't deserve this kind of attention, because it makes you look crazy.

Listen, the bottom line is, there are a lot of facts that deal with World Trade Center 7, the third building that fell down on 9/11. There are a lot of questions that remain on that. And by the way, the stuff that we talked about in that goes back to a lot of evidence that was false in the NIST report. So that's one thing we were trying to expose. If I had to do it over again, I'd still do that story again, even though there were people who didn't like it. I think it was the intellectually honest thing to do. Not avoid a story, because it carries baggage. 9/11 stories do carry baggage, but it's still the right story to do.

Another one is, we did a piece on vaccine court in America. A lot of people were freaking out, because oh my gosh, Ben Swann's now going around saying this. That vaccines cause autism. Go and watch the story.

We never say that vaccines cause autism. What we do say is that there are multiple cases where HHS through vaccine court has compensated families for vaccine injury when those families have children who have autism. They do it quietly and secretly. We have this whole situation of vaccine court, which is an absolutely ridiculous system by which families are to be compensated. When we put that story together there were people who freaked out. I'll tell you the other part of the story that we never got to share, because it got cancelled, is that Congress, under Darrell Issa, is supposed to be investigating vaccine court. He's trying to call hearings even now. He's trying to put together a process to have hearings about how abusive vaccine court has become to families who have children who are injured by vaccines. He's running into all kinds of walls with that, because there are people who don't want that hearing to ever take place.

I think you have to cover stories that are intellectually honest. We try to do it in the most professional way possible, but also recognizing as we do it that sometimes people are not going to like it, because they're not going to like it. They're uncomfortable with the subject matter. We're not here to make people comfortable. We are here to draw attention to stories that other media won't. Vaccine court is a great example of a story that other media will not even touch.

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WOODS: I think you are very effectively staking out a niche for yourself. It's very hard to do that when you portray yourself as transcending left and right, because usually the way you build up a niche is you identify yourself as being a particular type of person. If you want to get the conservative slant, you go to this person. The libertarian slant, you go to this person. For example, I had a book with Kevin Gutzman in 2008 called *Who Killed the Constitution?* We pitched this book as being beyond left and right. We're going to show that both the left and the right are to blame, and this book bombed. It was like my worst selling book of all time. People want the book that conservatives are supposed to read or the book that libertarians are supposed to read. It's very hard to say: this is something *you* should read. Yet somehow you're able to do that.

Tell me one last thing. Where do you see journalism, let's say ten or 20 years from now? Are there going to be more Ben Swanns out there? Not necessarily doing your content but living a lifestyle like you're living where you're basically just saying to the public: if you think what I'm doing is valuable, then pitch in.

SWANN: I hope so. I really do. I hope that we see more of that. I hope that we see more journalists move in that direction. I can't tell you, Tom, how many times since we started this project we have had people who have either emailed me or have called me who are journalists around the country, news photographers, executive producers, investigative producers, who will say, I wish I could do what you're doing. I just want to let you know that I think it's great that you're doing it, and I wish I could but I'm not going to take that risk. That's how most of them finish it. "I'm not going to take that risk."

I hope there will be, and I think through the advent of the Internet, certainly through the advent of crowdsourcing, which is still a fairly new concept, it's possible to do that. We're actually gearing up to do another round of crowdsourcing for our second season, and we're going to go into some very interesting subjects on this one and some that, again, people may be shocked by. That's okay. What we want to do is we really want to chase after truth. It's hard to do when you're crowd sourced. Vice is a great example of where you get a very wealthy guy who's put together Vice TV, and they're doing really interesting content. But when you launch it on your own, when you're not a wealthy guy trying to do that, it's a much harder process. I'm incredibly grateful to all the folks out there who have supported what we've done and who continue to do so.

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