



# THE PUBLIC EYE

**MARGARET SULLIVAN (MSJ80)** QUESTIONS STORIES, READERS  
AND EVEN HER EMPLOYER AS THE NEW YORK TIMES' PUBLIC EDITOR

STORY BY GLENN JEFFERS (BSJ01) • PHOTOS BY RAY WHITEHOUSE (BSJ12)

## MARGARET SULLIVAN IS ON DEADLINE.

IT'S FRIDAY, AND EDITORS ARE GOING OVER HER TWICE-MONTHLY COLUMN THAT APPEARS IN THE SUNDAY REVIEW SECTION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES. THIS WEEK'S STORY: WHY THE GRAY LADY FAILED TO COVER THE PRE-TRIAL HEARINGS OF PVT. BRADLEY MANNING, A U.S. ARMY INTELLIGENCE ANALYST CHARGED WITH LEAKING HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF SECRET DOCUMENTS TO WIKILEAKS.

Sullivan blogged about Manning two days earlier, wondering why The Times passed on the opportunity to hear him speak publicly for the first time. She acknowledged that the oft-considered “paper of record” — the same one that published the leaked documents, not to mention the Pentagon Papers in 1971 — did publish a story from the Associated Press.

“But it has not sent a staff reporter,” she wrote that Wednesday. “The national security reporters Scott Shane or Charlie Savage would have been great choices, but certainly not the only ones.”

Criticism like this has defined Sullivan's first few months as The Times' public editor. Since taking over the job last September, the former Buffalo News editor has come out swinging, writing almost daily about The Times and how it covers the news of the day.

She's explored the reasons why the paper called the presidential election 25 minutes after the AP, why it uses the term “illegal immigrant” in stories, and why, every once in a while, a scathing review is devilish fun.

“The online presence, and I think the consistency, has increased the visibility of the job,” Sullivan says from her third-floor office, located in the paper's main newsroom. “I knew that The Times really wanted to do that in the online world, and I wanted to do that, too.”

But she has also taken The Times to task. She openly questioned new CEO Mark Thompson's role in a sex-abuse scandal at the BBC, where he previously served as director general, and criticized Jerusalem bureau chief Judi Rudoren on her social media posts.

As for the Manning coverage, Washington bureau chief David Leonhardt responded that covering the pre-trial hearings was unnecessary. “As with any other legal case,” he wrote in an email, “we won't cover every single proceeding.”

And then there was the time she called out Nate Silver, the nation's foremost political forecaster, for betting that President Obama would win re-election via Twitter. “It's ... inappropriate for a Times journalist, which is how Mr. Silver is seen by the public even though he's not a regular staff member,” she posted Nov. 1.

Cue the 500-plus comments. And the tweets. Don't forget the emails.

Most came to the defense of Silver, whose data-rich

predictions are considered sacrosanct come election time. Others went after Sullivan, questioning her intelligence and news judgment. The next day, Sullivan fired back on her blog, *The Public Editor's Journal*, acknowledging all arguments yet reiterating her point: Betting on the news raises the idea that journalists have a personal stake in the story. And that compromises their objectivity.

“I didn't realize how high-profile [the job] would be,” she says. “It's been a very public role so far. I guess that's why they call it a ‘public’ editor.”

To his credit, Silver tweeted the same day, “FYI: I think Margaret Sullivan (@sulliview) is a terrific Public Editor.”

“I love the way she has run this beat,” says Andrew Beaujon, a media critic and blogger for The Poynter Institute. “A lot of times, public editors can get caught doing boring stuff like, ‘Why wasn't this on page one?’ And I've really been impressed with how little she gets involved in that stuff and actually goes into media criticism of her paper.”

Nearly 400 miles northwest of Manhattan, in the cold, wind-whipped city of Buffalo, N.Y., Jeff Simon says he isn't surprised. He still remembers the young journalist who walked into the arts department in the summer of 1980.

A native of nearby Lackawanna, Sullivan had returned home after four years at Georgetown for an English degree and one at Medill for her master's. She had the idea of working for her hometown newspaper and with the help of a professor's recommendation she landed a summer internship at the Buffalo News.

“She had all the poise in the world,” says Simon, then the paper's movie critic and now its arts and books editor. “She always said she was scared, but I've got to tell you, maybe it's true, but it never showed.”

Sullivan soaked up information like a sponge. She took instruction well. She was personable. Those innate abilities snagged her some big features as an intern, says Simon, including a piece on Harvey Weinstein, a local concert producer who'd end up making a name for himself out in Hollywood (Yes, that Harvey Weinstein).

At the end of the summer, Sullivan was offered a full-time job, working in the business department. She spent a year on the beat, learning as she went along, she admits. Talking to people came easy. She was a voracious reader. A strong writer. Medill provided her with a strong reporting education, but there were some things she had to learn on the job.

“I had to learn to be a newspaper person,” she says, “how to deal with a beat, how to deal with sources, how to deal with angry sources, and the only way [was] to live through it.”

Sullivan did, and later covered public education and regional government. After a stint as a columnist, she moved into a leadership role, first as an assistant city editor, then as assistant managing editor for features. But while she climbed up the ranks, Sullivan's byline would creep up in the paper now and then, most times in the arts section. She frequently reviewed books, says Karen Brady, a former News columnist who still writes book reviews for the paper and is a friend of Sullivan. “It makes me sad she wasn't doing more [writing].”

After an extensive search, the News promoted Sullivan to managing editor. Flowers from local women's groups blanketed Sullivan's desk, celebrating the accomplishment. She was the first woman to hold the job. Two years later, when longtime editor Murray Light stepped down after 20 years, Sullivan got the nod. Oddly enough, fewer flowers. “There was much more recognition when I became M.E.,” Sullivan says. “I guess it was expected at that point.”

Sullivan took over a staff of 180. And for the next 12 years, she dealt with the demands of daily and enterprise journalism, a shrinking print circulation and the ever-looming scythe of budget cuts and layoffs. She did well. Buyouts kept the number crunchers at bay. She developed an investigative desk and a new initiative to grow the News over several online sites. She focused on stories highlighting city issues, such as poverty, public education and economic development. The paper won several community-service awards.

Then came August 2010. A party at City Grill, a popular restaurant in downtown Buffalo, erupted into a fight on the street. Shots were fired. Eight people were injured, four of them fatally. Everyone involved was black.

It was the most violent act in decades and after a week, authorities still had no leads on a suspect, let alone a motive. News reporters had unearthed the criminal records of seven of the eight shooting victims, and Sullivan decided to run the story on the front page. Above the fold. “No one understood what this was about,” Sullivan says. “It seemed like an important piece of the puzzle. Who was at this party? What was the context?”

The story caused a backlash with Buffalo's black

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community. A protest was held outside of the News building. Copies of the paper were burned. Sullivan called a local community leader and offered to meet with members of the community to explain the story. They set up a meeting at True Bethel Baptist Church on the city's mostly black East Side. When she showed up, at least 700 people were at the church, waiting for her.

"Most [editors] would have gone with a phalanx of attorneys and bodyguards. She went by herself," Brady recalls. "She let the people tell her what they thought, and she answered their questions. She was always open."

Sullivan learned that the community resented the News as much as they did the story. They saw bias in terms of coverage and a refusal to report on economic inequalities that skewed along race lines. Sullivan responded by creating an advisory council to deal with these issues. They continue to meet with the News' senior staff to this day.

"She was unafraid to defend the paper and the work of her staff," says Brian Connolly, News managing editor. "[The story] happened that way because we're human. And the way she handled the situation ... it made me very proud to be at the News."

But with hindsight in mind, Sullivan the public editor is a little more critical of Sullivan the editor. "The info was legit and reported with sensitivity, but the timing?" she says. "It really didn't have to run on the front page on Sunday. Live and learn, huh?"

When she first read that Arthur Brisbane was leaving, Sullivan couldn't help but make some calls.

The Times' public editor since 2010, Brisbane had tracked the paper as it grew its brand online — virally, via social media, on mobile apps. And, as he wrote in his final column, what astounded Brisbane the most was, "how thoroughly The Times newsroom appears to have bought in to this strategy."

As for Sullivan, Brisbane's job was something she wanted. She missed writing full-time, and the idea of monetizing journalism began to wear on her. "It's really hard to be the editor of a newspaper these days," she says. "I was privileged to be the editor of my hometown newspaper. A big paper, too. But I did it to the best of my ability, and I was ready to do something different."

After two arduous rounds of interviewing, Sullivan landed the job with the understanding that she would not only focus on this expanding world of Times journalism, but be out there blogging and tweeting as well. The public editor would join the 24-hour news cycle.

"It's a lot more high-tempo than what Brisbane was doing," says Beaujon, the Poynter critic. "A public editor can't weigh in once a week and still fulfill their mission. People are going to be talking about NYT journalism, and it's right for them to have someone in the fray."

#### A SAMPLE OF SULLIVAN'S (@SULLIVIEW) TWEETS

DEC. 18

Adam Lanza, Asperger's and a Misleading Connection With Violence nyti.ms/R3Efgx #nytimes #journalism #newtown #autism

DEC. 18

N.Y. Times getting another price hike politico.com/blogs/media/20... via @POLITICO

DEC. 18

NBC's Richard Engel freed in Syria after being kidnapped; NYTimes participated in news blackout. Details: nytimes.com/2012/12/19/bus...

DEC. 17

Cory Booker: New York Times Story 'Factually Wrong' huff.to/U5aLhY via @HuffPostMedia

DEC. 17

I made an ugly spelling error when tweeting this good piece early today /gigaom.com/2012/12/15/its... It is \*provocative\* not provactive. Ugh.

DEC. 17

Errors in Newtown Shootings Coverage Reflect Growing Pressures nyti.ms/UDYcYj #nytimes #journalism #newtown

And so, Sullivan treats the position like a beat, as if she were working the cop shop or covering the Mayor from City Hall. Her colleagues are her sources, their words her stories, be they in the paper, on NYTimes.com or posted on Instagram.

Still, the job makes things a little awkward for the new kid, Sullivan says. Her new colleagues have been welcoming and responsive (she's the fifth editor since the position was created in 2003, so there's no need for acclimation). Still, she tries not to surprise. She talks to staffers before and after she posts, maintaining those lines of communication. "But there is something weird about it," she says. "I'm both here and separate. Like, 'oh, here comes the public editor...'"

The good news? She's enjoying the city. She lives in Manhattan's Flatiron District, near Chelsea. And once she's done studying in Florence, Sullivan's daughter, Grace, will move back to her dorm room at NYU. Her son, Alex, a third-year at Harvard Law, is still a train ride away. The move from Buffalo, much like the job, has been both crazy and stimulating.

Her contract is for four years, with an option to renew for two more years. Sullivan hopes she'll still be at The Times, covering the paper of record, writing for a living. But all she can see right now is the next column in front of her, the next blog entry she's about to post. "We'll see how it goes," she says. She pauses, then adds, "See if anyone's still speaking to me in a year."

GLENN JEFFERS IS A CHICAGO-BASED FREELANCE JOURNALIST.

## NAMES TO KNOW | THE NEW YORK TIMES

By Matthew Kitchen (MSJ10)

### David Barstow (BSJ86)

Investigative Reporter



The types of investigative stories David Barstow writes usually end up as Oscar winning thrillers starring Matt Damon or George Clooney, but The Times reporter is too busy covering race riots and tobacco litigation, outing a major government agency and uncovering a scandal at one of the world's largest companies

to worry about casting.

Barstow started his post-Medill career in Rochester, N.Y., and Green Bay, Wisc., before spending 10 years at the St. Petersburg Times in Florida, where he earned three Pulitzer Prize nominations between 1997 and 1998.

Barstow then headed over to The New York Times in 1999, where he's worked as a reporter on the metro and investigative desks for more than a decade.

"I think I have one of the best jobs in American journalism. That's why I've stayed for so long. It would be crazy for me to give it up."

The round-the-clock hours are grueling when he's following

a lead, but Barstow's story about the death and injury of workers whose employers were knowingly violating safety laws earned him the Pulitzer for public safety in 2004.

Barstow earned a second Pulitzer in 2009 for investigative reporting when he discovered that the Department of Defense was recruiting military officers to "shape terrorism coverage from inside the major TV and radio networks," but says he's most proud of a story he wrote in April about how Wal-Mart had covered up a bribery scandal at its foreign subsidiary in Mexico.

"The quiet thrill of it is when you pour your guts into a story for months, sweat over all the details, go to incredible lengths to nail down every fact, and then you wake up one Sunday and there's your story, leading the Times."

But beyond the accolades, Barstow admits that the reality that he's affecting lives is the most satisfying product of his work.

"It is deeply moving when folks call up in tears after the story is published. They almost can't believe that someone actually listened and took the trouble to tell their story. Those phone calls are even better than Pulitzers."

### P.J. Joshi (BSJ94, MSJ94)

News Editor for DealBook blog



A Medill education is good to have when applying for jobs in journalism, but news editor P.J. Joshi got her start as a reporter because she had something graduating students now take for granted: an email address. Even more importantly, she could explain new concepts like

email and the Internet to the average reader.

"It was a little serendipitous. I never thought I'd be a tech reporter in 1992, but I happened to have an email account, and I happened to know the way colleges used the Internet at the beginning."

Joshi went from writing stories, answering "what is email?" and "what is the web?" at the Milwaukee Journal to covering everything from tech news and telecom to corporate fraud and economic development as a business reporter for Newsday starting in 1997.

Joshi moved to The Times in 2006, and since March has served as the news editor for the DealBook blog, a financial news service founded by Andrew Ross Sorkin, best-selling author of 2009's "Too Big to Fail."

"I don't think people realize how much diversity there is in business coverage ... The problem is that a lot of journalists fear numbers, but if you have an interest in explanatory journalism and can communicate that to your readers, then you can have a great career."

### Stuart Elliott (BSJ73, MSJ74)

Advertising Columnist



Whether it's the scripted universe of "Mad Men," the commercials that pop up during the breaks, or the DVR we use to race past them, Stuart Elliott covers every angle of the advertising world for The New York Times.

After writing about the industry for more than two decades at the Detroit Free Press, Advertising Age, USA Today and The Times, it's the variety of stories that keeps Elliott excited about covering the constantly evolving industry.

"Advertising covers so much territory. It's about business, it's about entertainment, it's about celebrity ... There's always something new coming along, and advertising tries to reflect society, so it really keeps you up to date on everything."

When Elliott is done pumping out stories for the paper, he contributes to the Media Decoder Blog, writes a weekly advertising newsletter, and works with the Times video team to integrate stories for the web.

The self-described pop culture junkie has also appeared as an expert on shows like "Nightline" and "20/20" and for special programs on Showtime, VH1 and the History Channel.

"I just always wanted to be a reporter and was very lucky that I had a chance to do so from the beginning. It's been a great ride."

MATTHEW KITCHEN WORKS AS A WRITER FOR NBC SPORTS AND CONTRIBUTES TO ESQUIRE.COM.