



## Policy on Purpose

### Episode 6: Journalist Soledad O'Brien

**ANGELA EVANS:** I'm excited to have with me today on our podcast, "Policy on Purpose," Soledad O'Brien. And as an award-winning journalist, author, entrepreneur, philanthropist — just an amazing young woman, really.

**SOLEDAD O'BRIEN:** I love that you said "young." Thank you, thank you.

**EVANS:** Well you are, compared to me. It's all relative.

Soledad is going to be our commencement speaker. She has graciously agreed to share some of her thinking with our graduates. This will be our 48<sup>th</sup> graduating class today. So Soledad, when we do these kinds of podcasts, what we're trying to get is getting down to the core of policy and for people who have worked in policy and different facets of policy, how they feel about it. Obviously, we're in interesting times.

**O'BRIEN:** And by interesting, you mean crazy.

**EVANS:** Crazy, interesting, confusing — you know. People aren't sure where things are going, whether we go to the past, whether there's a different future — so there's a lot of uncertainty in the air. Of course, we're trying to train students in public policy. So how do we approach that? We train a lot with data and a lot of assumptions that people use on the data. Can you tell us? You're a leader in news media, and news media depends on data and information. How do you value that? And how do you seek out sources that you feel are really important and are reliable to you?

**O'BRIEN:** Yeah, so I think one of the big crises we're having right now is exactly that. There was a time when you would never put somebody on, let's say, a panel if they didn't have some kind of credible experience that would add value. Now, you might agree with them. You might disagree with them. You might feel that they reflect exactly how you feel politically, or you might feel like, oh my gosh, this person completely on the other side of the political aisle.

But there's always the sense that they had a value because they had served as the ambassador to China for 15 years. They had done the job, so there was a certain amount of credibility. And I had found that often now, in media, adding to a lot of the chaos that I think people feel, is this sense that it doesn't really matter your resume. It really is what are you going to say. Will you throw a bomb into the conversation? Are you willing to go over the top? Are you willing to be insane? Are you willing to just make up facts? Are you willing to be a character, if you will, and it's been described that way by some

people, a character in this play versus actually having thoughtful people who don't have to agree, but certainly should be having true conversations, I think, in journalism.

Most of the work that I've done in documentaries are always around some policy — the policy and the data undergirds the narrative, the personal story that we're covering. So we're telling the story of a person, but underneath it is a real policy issue that we're trying to dig into. And so it has really concerned me, and I think it's going to be a real challenge for the students who are graduating today. How do they — we're in this flux! We're in a shift, and how do you make sure that you are thinking about policy and thinking about serving the public using actual evidence and real data and facts? It's a problematic time, and I think sometimes the media actually is somewhat guilty in not necessarily helping the situation.

**EVANS:** I think you've done something very important, because another thing that happens here is we can go to data. We can go to evidence. And what our students need to do is not only assess that evidence for accuracy and reliability, but also, how do you translate that into what you said.

**O'BRIEN:** It's so critical!

**EVANS:** A narrative that people can understand.

**O'BRIEN:** If I had a dollar for every public policy or public affairs institution that produced a really fantastic report that was bound and delivered somewhere and didn't get out to people — right? If you're doing all this great research but it doesn't actually live, what's the point? And I think for me, a lot of my work over the last five years or so has been trying to help organizations connect history and data and studies to actual human beings who need to understand the information. We're in a time where we have more access to information than ever, and yet there's so little information that actually gets to people in many ways. And so I do. I think this is another challenge for your students, now professionals as they head out of graduation today, to really think about how they can have a voice, a realistic voice in the world that's not just, here's a study, check. I've done this study.

**EVANS:** Exactly, exactly.

**O'BRIEN:** It has to impact people. And some of that too, I think, is you actually have to be able to use that and engage with people and collaborate with people. It can't just be about throwing facts at each other. It has to be about saying OK, we know and we agree on these data points. How do we get to a solution? Often, I think we look at problems and we like to pick apart problems. We don't really focus on what is the solution that we're trying to get to? Again, I say that as a journalist, but also as a citizen. I think our government does that as well.

**EVANS:** I think one of the things that we talked about earlier is ensuring that our students focus on the right problems, but it doesn't stop there. It starts there. That's the beginning. And then once you have that, then it is what kind? And we're talking about solutions or options, and are they feasible, and who's had input into that. So a lot of our structure of how we teach and how we're trying to prepare this set of students who have actually said, "I'm stepping forward because I want to be in the middle of the most complex problems, and I want to solve these problems." I think we have to say to these students directly that this is what you have to face. You hit it right on the head. You have to face all of these factors. You have to bring them together. You have to be the glue. And then you have to take it out and not just stay inside. It has to make a difference.

**O'BRIEN:** And understand that there's many points of view on solutions. Someone told me a great story, and I'll probably mangle it in the retelling, but they were talking about — it was at a philanthropy conference. And they were telling the story about how people were standing a river, and they saw babies were falling into the river, and so people immediately mobilized to grab the babies out of the river. And then someone said, wait a minute. We should go upstream and see where are the babies falling into the river. Then there was this whole group of people who were like, oh, the solution actually is not just grabbing babies out of the river. The start of the solution has to be where are they falling into the river? We should stop that. And then someone else said, well actually, maybe we should be teaching babies how to swim. There are all kinds of ways to think about solutions. It's a fable, obviously. I know real babies aren't dropping into rivers, but I probably should have started with that. But I always —

**EVANS:** That's a good example.

**O'BRIEN:** I love that example because it really was all about what kind of solutions are going to be the solutions that really work. And there's some short-term, medium-term and long-term solutions. Also, some of those solutions are going to go back to the people who are being served as whether or not they're relevant. Having a solution that actually doesn't work, having a surgery was a success but the patient died, that kind of a thing. That actually does happen a lot. So I think it's also about collaborating with communities to make sure that the solutions are actually effective solutions for the people who lived there. They're not just imposed upon people.

**EVANS:** I think that you've hit on another very important thing. Because you can get wrapped up in the study and the excitement of really trying to pick things apart. And you can say this is what I think the problem is, but if you go to the people that you're trying to help, that might not be what they see as the most important thing.

**O'BRIEN:** History is littered with projects that never really got off the ground because no one thought to include community voices. And if you don't, you're pretty much destined to fail.

**EVANS:** It's just interesting, just in our short time together, just a few minutes and a few minutes upstairs, how you really hit a core of what we're trying to do in public policy schools, and it's essential.

**O'BRIEN:** I think it is because it is the essence of what it means to bring solutions to the world, right? We know. In a way, journalism I think takes many of these same pieces. We like to think about here's the story. And then someone says, well actually, hey, I'm here and I think you might be wrong.

**EVANS:** Yes.

**O'BRIEN:** You know, when I started working in TV news, women's stories were considered very fluffy. Education was like a woman's story. It wasn't what we would consider to be the A block story. That wasn't a community help center opening. That was all the light stuff. And now we know, over time, that those are the elements that make life livable for people, that those are actually the big issues that matter to people. Child care was considered this sort of ridiculous issue. And certainly, from a journalism perspective, no male reporter who was a big deal would be like, listen, I'm going to get into that child care story. But when you actually talk to people about what is an insurmountable problem or something that is really standing in their way, it's child care often. And so I think we've seen some shifts in

journalism because people have informed us. And even the coverage of minorities or underserved populations, people have gone into tell the story, and people will say, actually, our story is this. We have a story to tell. Maybe just give us the mic actually. We have something we want to share about our community. And I think that's been a real shift in my time, from starting as a reporter 30 years ago to now.

**EVANS:** One of the things we talk about a lot too is not only trying to get out there and walk in people's shoes and listen to them, but how do you navigate to people who have very different opposing positions?

**O'BRIEN:** Yell at them. That always works. If you just scream at them as loud as you possibly can, usually you wear them down. (*crosstalk*) You would think that that was the answer because that's kind of how people engage today.

**EVANS:** It is. There is a lot of yelling.

**O'BRIEN:** Yeah! You know, I think —

**EVANS:**— talking over each other like I just did with you.

**O'BRIEN:** No, this is a podcast. That's how you do it! A congressman, a freshman congressman, said something interesting to me the other day — and I do a public affairs show for Hearst TV, syndicated. And he said when he came to Congress, he was at a meeting to solve some issue. And he walked in — and he runs a small business. He said, I looked for the whiteboard. Like, we're solving a problem, where are we gonna throw — isn't there a whiteboard?

**EVANS:** What are the ideas?

**O'BRIEN:** Right! And someone's gonna do the marker and we're gonna — and he said it really was not about that at all, that everybody was just formulating positions, that there was no solution. He's like, I came here to solve problems. My way might not be the only way, but I have a point of view that might add value to a solution, and he said that there was no whiteboard. No one was there to do what we know you do when you're trying to solve problems. You sit down and say, OK, alright — let's identify.

**EVANS:** Yes, exactly.

**O'BRIEN:** And so I thought that that was really revealing for a freshman Congress member to say, this is not how government should work.

**EVANS:** No, and I think they're stuck in a time that that's really sort of what happens. In the past, when people, they would consider things. They would have hearings. They would talk about things. They didn't have a stake in the solution right then. They were formulating, like you said, creating a solution, understanding the problem. And then they would know that, and they would come together. Now, often they come together at the very end when there is disagreement and people cannot find common ground. So they're there to try to figure it out. Well, there's so much history and so much baggage and they weren't there at the stages when objective kind of observation was okay. Now it's like, get in there and fight for us and get this position. That's another thing we really have lost quite a bit about — is [that] it's OK to consider things, to take your time, to listen — and not to have an answer right away, but to wait.

**O'BRIEN:** Yeah, but in a 24-hour news cycle and social media, that time pressure, I think, has changed a lot. But you know, it's sort of why federal government, in terms of popularity, is low, and why local leaders do well, because they have to solve problems. They have to solve problems or they won't stay in office. I think that they end up being less about positioning and more about here's a solution. And so I think that a lot of the freshmen members of Congress who we interview a lot have recognized that there has to be a better way. It gives me, actually, tremendous hope.

**EVANS:** That's great, though, that they actually recognize, that they want to do something about that.

**O'BRIEN:** Absolutely.

**EVANS:** Because we see, often, we just see 20, 30 members of Congress in the media feed, no matter what media feed. We don't see the other 505 in the background trying to work things out. And that, to me, is very dangerous.

**O'BRIEN:** Midterm is coming, so you'll see them soon.

**EVANS:** Yeah. Right, they'll be out campaigning. But you know, like you, when you go behind and they're really thinking about things and you're talking to them about issues, they're very thoughtful. And one of the things that I worry about a lot is that the image of, of a national legislature is really tarnished by the fact that, you know, we're seeing those kinds of expectations played out in the media.

**O'BRIEN:** Yeah, I think it is tarnished but I also think those things make — you know, it's a pendulum. And it makes people want more and better.

**EVANS:** Mm-hmm.

**O'BRIEN:** I always ask the Congress members who come on my show, like, "God! That job looks terrible!" (*Laughs*) And they actually love to serve. I really think that they like to serve, and they recognize, you know, there is a better way and they have to be part of a solution. And I think there's a lot of honor in deciding that you're going to be part of a solution and not just stand on the edges being like, "Ah, that's terrible, that's awful." So — so I really do, kudos to those who come in and say, "We have to work together."

And, you know, we were just doing, we had a couple of Congress members up the other day on our program who talked about, for freshmen, civility is the issue they've embraced this year. They're going —

**EVANS:** Do they tell you how they're doing that? How they're working through that?

**O'BRIEN:** I think it's literally holding each other accountable for speaking well, for having respect for each other. They don't have to agree. It's not a matter of saying, I'm going to pretend, I'm going to agree with everything my colleague across the aisle says. But it is saying, he's a human being. We're going to assume that this person cares about the country, and we all do because we're here, working toward making things better.

We might not agree. But we're going to speak civilly to each other at a time when the national discourse, really, I think it's fair to say, is maybe even at an all-time low. And so even the idea that that's

something that they're considering gives me tremendous hope. I really feel that they understand the issues. And I don't think people want to work in an environment where nothing's working.

**EVANS:** That's the whole point too, that they can change the environment. The people who are in that environment are the ones to change it. And like you say, if they recognize that and they work on it, this gives me great hope, actually —

**O'BRIEN:** Yeah! It really is.

**EVANS:** Because sometimes people don't see that. They don't have time to watch a lot of different news feeds and whenever they go to their favorites —

**O'BRIEN:** But the media has a responsibility too!

**EVANS:** I agree.

**O'BRIEN:** You know, we tend to take the loudest voices. We take the crazies on the edge. We, you know, because you want to make quote-unquote "good TV." And I think that's really problematic. But again, you know, I think you're seeing — when we started our show. So our show is public affairs, once a week, Sunday mornings.

When we started, we had about a hundred thousand viewers. And we, because we pre-tape our show, we found that we couldn't respond to news of the day. So we would never wake up and say, "Good morning! The president tweeted last night, oh my gosh," because we tape a couple of days in advance. So we had to have context. Anything was talking about the First Amendment, our view would be, "So, what is the First Amendment? How does it work? What were the Founding Fathers thinking about when they thought about the First Amendment? What is it supposed to do? How is it supposed to serve people? What is gerrymandering? Why is it even called gerrymandering? And what is it, what are the implications?"

So we had to take this contextual view of the world, of the country. We have grown, we have about 1 million [7] viewers. We have people — the highest number of millennials watching a public affairs — I'm like, they're up watching a public affairs show on Sunday mornings? And that is because I do believe people are actually kind of over the screaming and they like to understand an issue. And so even that gives me hope, that there's a sense of just, "Oh my God, this happened! Oh my God, this, wait, everybody! Over here, there's something else! Oh my God, this!"

**EVANS:** Yes.

**O'BRIEN:** I don't know that that's serving people, certainly. I don't know that it's added value, and I think you see ratings go down at the other time people say, "Let's do podcasts. Let's have thoughtful conversations. How do we dig into issues?" So, again, we're in the middle of a shift and I think any time you're in the middle of a shift it's very chaotic and it does not feel good. But I had a boss many years ago who said, you know, there's opportunity in chaos. And I think that's really true.

**EVANS:** Mm-hmm. I agree, I agree. The other thing I was thinking about when you were talking is that, you know, the first branch of government is the legislative branch. In the legislative branch, in the Constitution, it's supposed to be an informed legislative branch. Informing the electorate.

So we go to the media and say, "How do we do this?" And I think what you're saying is, getting away from now, just reporting facts of something that actually happened, putting them in context of our democracy, of our republic, of our bodies of governing, of the people who govern, is really critical.

**O'BRIEN:** I'm going to bet you \$5 that there was more done, more time spent talking about Kanye's comments about slavery being a choice than actually walking through what's in the farm bill.

**EVANS:** There you go. Oh, I totally agree.

**O'BRIEN:** I'm fairly confident I will win that \$5.

**EVANS:** *(Sighs)*

**O'BRIEN:** Right, you know! Because —

**EVANS:** I agree, but what you said before is very important. The fact that you can take the story that's in the farm bill, you can take that to real people, you can show how the farm bill has tensions in it, and bring it to people. So, sometimes I think we try to simplify things because we think people aren't sophisticated enough to understand, but I really don't believe that. I said, if we believe that, we are done. We are done.

**O'BRIEN:** Oh, I think people listen. I completely agree. People are — when it effects your life, you're very sophisticated. I did a documentary about opioid addiction, and most of the time we were in Kentucky talking to people who, in many cases were, in some cases were middle-class but in some cases were people who really had struggled and didn't have a lot of access. I mean, I would say underprivileged and under-served and certainly not well-educated.

Let me tell you that the details that they fully understand about options for helping people who are addicted to opioids. They have their Ph.D.s in navigating a really failed and flawed system. They may not be particularly book smart and have numerous degrees after their name, but they understand the system better than everybody else. And they know where they are not getting served. They fully get it. So I agree with you. We have this sense that "Ah, no one gets it." No, they fully get it. No one more understood the failure of government than people in Hurricane Katrina. Again —

**EVANS:** Yes, you've covered that, yes.

**O'BRIEN:** Not necessarily well educated, but they fully understood where they were — they were not being served and why they were not going to get back into their homes anytime soon.

**EVANS:** Yes. Well, I wanted to ask you: If you were to give advice to students — not just our students who are in public policy and public affairs, but students who are going out, who are very interested in the public good, in trying to improve the public good — what are one or two things that you would leave with them, in terms of what you've seen, in your life and all the accomplishments you've had and all the challenges you've had as well?

**O'BRIEN:** You know, I think for me it always comes back down to data. A lot of what we did in documentaries were to show people — to tell a story but to also say, here's the data. Because I think what the news does badly is just in giving a historical context. So for example, we did a documentary about all the women who served at ground zero, as rescuers. Women came to me and said, you know, there's a bunch of women who worked as rescuers, but they are left out of the story. I said — actually, I

literally said, "Listen, I covered that story, so I don't think so, but I will check, we'll do a search of the data." And they were right!

**EVANS:** *(laughing)* And you were there!

**O'BRIEN:** And I had to basically go back and grovel, right! Because what happened was, all those women were in the story but as victims. As being rescued, they were not reflected in art, their stories weren't told, they were not front and center in news coverage as rescuers. So we went to do this doc about the women of ground zero, and the amount of pushback that I got was so fascinating.

**EVANS:** From whom?

**O'BRIEN:** People would stand up in screenings and say, "So I guess you're saying women are more brave than men."

**EVANS:** Oh my.

**O'BRIEN:** And I was like "One, I don't even know what that means."

**EVANS:** Yes.

**O'BRIEN:** And No. 2, 9/11 had an opportunity for a lot of people to be brave. What are you even talking about? But I recognize that you're going to get pushback, and by having data and by being able to show those stories, you know, there is so much — Really, people would come at us weirdly with so much anger and we ended up doing this documentary, and in fact the way I was able to get it done was I ended the conversation by saying, "Um, do you know how many documentaries I've done on the German shepherds of 9/11? *(laughing)*"

**EVANS:** Yes.

**O'BRIEN:** Why are we even having this conversation? I've done five things on the German shepherds of 9/11, no one gave me any pushback. And then when the doc actually aired, two things happened. One, the doc did very well, partly because we were taking a different look at the story, but also, we — the story of the women of ground zero isn't just the story of women. Right? One of the main characters is a guy whose wife was a police officer who lost her life that day. So I think sometimes you have to show people — like, I know this sounds scary, but let's show you the data, let's tell that story. So to me...solution No. 1, advice piece No. 1, is to make sure you have all the data and the evidence at your fingertips, and again as you say, not just raw data, but narratives that are connected to data. You have to be able to tell people — let me explain, you know, what I think you're missing in this discussion.

**EVANS:** And have a real person that they can relate to.

**O'BRIEN:** Always. And then I think especially for people who care about policy, you have to not forget who you serve. It just...I can't...I mean, I sit on the board of the Rand Corporation. And we make some of the most amazing-looking reports!

**EVANS:** Reports, and yes.

**O'BRIEN:** Oh, and some of them are like 780 pages and I was like wow, no journalist will ever read this. Let me tell you. How do you take this amazing research and information and storytelling and turn that into serving actual people? So my second piece of advice is really to constantly come back to: but are



you serving people? But are you serving people? But are you serving people? And I think if you can kind of keep yourself on that track, you really have the opportunity to make some pretty great change.

**EVANS:** Well, I thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure to —

**O'BRIEN:** The pleasure was mine.

**EVANS:** — to talk to you, and question you and be with you for these few minutes. Thank you so much, Soledad.

**O'BRIEN:** It's my pleasure. Thank you.