

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

HOW CRITICAL RACE THEORY CHANGED AN ELECTION & WHAT DEMS COULD DO ABOUT IT

LAURA FLANDERS: What's it gonna take to win elections in 2022? From the contest for governor in Virginia to school board races across the country, opposing what its critics called critical race theory has, for many candidates, been an effective way to defeat Democrats at the polls this year. Does that justify the conclusions drawn by so many in the media that Democrats therefore need to stop talking so much about racism and history and face electoral reality and even white anxieties more soberly in the year ahead? Or is there a different way to report on the CRT story and the last elections? To consider all that and more, I am delighted to welcome Sara Lomax-Reese and Mitra Kalita, directors respectively of WURD Radio in Philadelphia and Epicenter NYC in Queens, New York. They, collectively, are the co-founders of URL Media about which you'll hear more in a minute, and they've been hosting monthly Meet the BIPOC Press episodes right here, all year. Also with us Maximillian Alvarez, editor in chief at The Real News Network in Baltimore with whom we've also collaborated on a few episodes this year. With all that by way of introduction, welcome all three. I am very glad to have you with me.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thanks, Laura. It's great to be here with you again. And URL Media stands for uplift, respect and love, and it's a network of Black and Brown, high-performing Black and Brown owned media outlets from across the country. WURD, my outlet and Epicenter, Mitra's outlet are two of the nine media organizations that are currently a part of URL Media network. And we come together to share content, to increase our reach and to share revenues.

LAURA FLANDERS: And The Real News, Max, just for people that haven't heard about it?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: We produce a lot of different types of media, video based reports, podcasts, text reports, and we're really dedicated to lifting up the lives, voices and struggles of everyday people who are so often forgotten by or ignored by the mainstream media, which includes workers, which includes people who have been victimized by the prison-industrial complex, and people fighting for a better world around the globe.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right. So, Mitra, coming to you, Epicenter NYC started as a community media operation and yet here you are now in this network that you've co-founded with Sara and on the day or maybe a couple of days after the election, you write a newsletter in which you reflect on your perspectives on that November vote. Can you go back there to what you were thinking and what we were hearing from the members of your network, Mitra?

MITRA KALITA: Sure. So here in the Epicenter, on the Tuesday night of election day, we were making history. Our first South Asian city Councilman is from here in Jackson Heights and Elmhurst. And so I was at a party on election night at a gay bar on Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights' iconic strip that's one of the most diverse strips, not just in New York City, not just in America, but in the world. And it's euphoric, right? Because of the new face of New York City government. And my phone wasn't really working, like the reception wasn't great, and people — because you're at a campaign party — are starting to buzz about Phil Murphy might not be winning in New Jersey. And I was like, what? And so I stepped outside as the journalist I am, and I saw what's happening in the rest of the country. And there could not be too stark contrast between this feeling in New York of representation at last. And when I look on my phone and of course I go to Twitter first, I confess, and it's just this feeling of what's happening.

LAURA FLANDERS: Hold that, then Sara, what about you? You're in Philadelphia, with some wins and misses, you know, wins and losses there too.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, same feeling because obviously Philadelphia is right on the border of New Jersey. And so the idea that nobody was really paying attention to the New Jersey governor's race, it was like assumed that Phil Murphy would win. And I had been really paying attention to the Virginia governor's race because that was so concerning. It got tight right at the end. And the fact that they called it for the Republican, I was just, you know, I was really floored. In Pennsylvania, you know, Philadelphia is a predominantly Black city. It's very diverse and it is the driver of the state really from electoral politics. And, but the middle of the state between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, they call it Pennsylvtucky, it's like Kentucky in the middle of the state. It's very red. And so if Philadelphia and Pittsburgh don't really show up and activate, the state oftentimes goes red. And so that's what we saw on Election Day in early November is that the Republicans had a big day and a lot of the themes that we're gonna talk about today in terms of critical race theory were very much present in the conversations that kind of flipped some of those statewide elections to go in the favor of Republicans.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, Max, is any of this resonating for you?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: In the immediate wake of these elections and the kind of high profile loss in the Virginia race immediately, right, this became a question of messaging for the Democratic establishment. It's like, how did we screw up our messaging? Oh, the Progressives are the ones to blame, people who talk about race are to blame, people who are trying to solve the systemic issues of over-policing and brutalization of Black, Brown, Indigenous communities. They're the problem because their message is alienating voters. When the thing that is kind of hilarious to me is that progressives and leftists alike are all saying like, look, this is not a real, really a question of messaging. If you want to beat back the messaging that is apparently strong

enough to kill your candidacy, there's one easy way to do it, deliver for working people. Actually improve people's lives and then point to your record and say like, look, whatever the media wants to tell you about how bad we are, has your life gotten better under us? If you have messaging — that's the biggest, the best message that you can possibly send to voters.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, not so much the messaging as the actual delivering of quality of life changes for voters? What a concept. Sara, to you.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I kind of disagree with Max that I think messaging is absolutely critical. And I think the Democrats, because they have so much more of a diverse constituency, they're not just, they can't just have one note around racism and white supremacy, which I think plays really well on the Republican side. They've gotta be much more complex, nuanced, and really talk to a very diverse and complex array of people. And it's hard to just come up with one message that's gonna hit home for all of them.

LAURA FLANDERS: Michelle Goldberg wrote an interesting op-ed in the New York Times where she said, you know, the quality of schooling is the issue, meaning that the condition of our public schools, the gaps in our public school systems are so great right now, economic, you know, pandemic related and every other kind. If the Democrats and Progressives don't shore up those schools, that gap is gonna be something that right-wing ideologues can just drive a Mack truck through. Mitra, coming to you on this. Where do you stand on the messaging versus the reality we're living in needs to change?

MITRA KALITA: I mean, I think messaging is everything, but I think the demographics, both of voter turnout, as well as the reality of this country, which is still majority white, necessitates some type of — yeah, I don't know if it's Max's worker language or coalition building, but clearly a white vote has been alienated and there needs to be some way of inclusion that is not, because I'm looking at 2022 on the midterms and I'm just saying, look, just on the numbers game alone, ideologically, this can be a big tent, right? This can be a big tent. And I think many of us who looked at the vote from Election Day are saying, oh, geez, like, are my kids not gonna learn Black authors? Are we not gonna learn basic civil rights history? So, meaning there's such a fundamental backlash that for some of us, it's just like, no, no, we just need to get back to like 1993 and like multiculti times. And so I wanna be clear that the backlash is not just sliding to kind of pre-Trump or, this is pretty fundamental. And then the other thing I would say on that schools, I think this was a backlash against all the change that a country has been through, which is profound, which definitely for a white population is not the norm. You know, I could say as the child of immigrants, like upheaval, leaving a former life behind, like that's kind of par for the course for us, right? So COVID, and the reinvention we've had to do in our communities is not that it's been easy, but it's perhaps a little bit more natural. I think there is absolutely a demographic in this country that is looking around at their kids' schools, which feels like the

most stable. If you think about what's been the constant between my life, my kids' life and my parents' life, pretty much school, that you'd go in the morning, come back in the afternoon, that's the only thing. So just think about that upheaval. I think people were voting against change, I don't think it was just critical race theory and the teaching of it in schools. I think it was in reaction to pronouns. I think it was in reaction to a climate of diversity in our workplaces. I think it was —

LAURA FLANDERS: It might've been in reaction to Terry McAuliffe saying parents don't play a role. It's like, wait a minute, we just spent an entire year homeschooling.

MITRA KALITA: Teaching our children, exactly.

LAURA FLANDERS: I know that you and Mitra don't absolutely lockstep kind of agree on all this.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah. Well, I think that historically, white people have, and particularly the political class has been very adept at dog whistles, racial dog whistles, and what we're seeing with critical race theory and those kinds of things, they harken back to Willie Horton and the attacks on affirmative action and the welfare queens, you know, all of these things that Ronald Reagan and different people have trotted out to mobilize, I think, a white population that identifies around whiteness more than anything else. And I think that that is not new. I think that they just have a different acronym, CRT, right now to get behind. And I think that when you can communicate and articulate and package something, so that kind of white suburban moms, it resonates with them, you're teaching my children in school that their history is negative and it's oppressive and they're bad people. Oh no, no, no, that's off the table. And I think that when you can tap into that demographic, because that's like the swing, I think the swing demographic. And I think that the kind of the Republican masterminds have really been masterful in tapping into that vein. And it's, I think it's so untrue because what I think everyone who is interested in equity wants taught is truth. Let's just tell the truth.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, how do we tell the truth in the multifaceted way that you are talking about, Sara while holding the reality that Mitra points to, which is there's a lot of anxiety in what is still a majority population hanging on by their fingernails.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Honestly, the true history of America is actually quite barbaric.

LAURA FLANDERS: We, white people should be disturbed. Max, what about, how do you think of even covering this story?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: The working class is an incredibly diverse class. It is the most diverse class because of institutional white supremacy and patriarchy and all that good stuff, right? There's a reason that people at the bottom are, you know, not, you know, like are that, are that diverse and stuff. But the thing that I think we're trying to kind of cover and follow through on is we're trying to kind of hold people in power accountable to the promises that they've made to working people, and also kind of highlight how power to change this system does not reside solely in the pockets of people in Washington, DC or billionaires on Wall Street, right? There are a lot of different ways that working people are actually trying to bring about the sort of changes that we wanna see. There is an incredibly important election going on right now in the Teamsters to decide what the leadership is going to be now that the Hoffa era has officially ended. There is a referendum vote in the UAW, which has a very heterogeneous mix of workers that would allow workers and retirees to directly elect their leadership so that they can have more democratic control over an institution that has been corrupt and that has, you've been investigated for corruption. And so I think one of the things we really try to do at The Real News is do both of these things at the same time, right? One: really hold people in power to account, remind them of the promises they made and kind of expose the shortcomings and the ways that they are going back on those promises. And then on the other side, to also empower people who are watching this to feel like they have a stake in making the change that they wanna see, and that we all have to fight for it. And that we all should fuel ourselves to be active participants in democracy.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that takes me back Mitra to your election night party, where there actually was a different story being told in that moment on a story that your media prioritized in a way that maybe would have been good for the rest of us to pay more attention to.

MITRA KALITA: I do think that the candidates that there is excitement over or that combination of being able to talk about these real quality of life issues, and they happen to be candidates of color who are anchored in a sense of community. And I think there's a question over whether Terry McAuliffe and Phil Murphy are going to get you that enthusiasm in a way that the victories that you're talking about, Laura, they don't look like those two candidates, right?

LAURA FLANDERS: And it does require some of these candidates, another very good mayoral, incoming mayor in Cleveland, it requires people getting to know them. It requires media coverage that goes beyond the horse race, goes beyond the surface layer. I think that that's where this media question becomes such a core question to everything else we're dealing with in this country. Like you can dog whistle all like against your next door neighbor. I mean, somebody can dog whistle all they like against your next door neighbor. If you know that person, it's not gonna work. It's not gonna activate you to hate them through a message, but that getting to know your neighbors part and their potential and the possibility is something media can either

provide or really not provide. Sara, you had a victory in Philadelphia with Larry Krasner, important race.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah. Larry Krasner, the progressive district attorney. We knew that he was gonna win because he won the primary. But he's a change-maker and he is not loved by the FOP. He's not loved by people outside of Philadelphia, but Philadelphia, especially in the Black community, really see him as a champion. And he's done incredible work around really looking at police misconduct in certain trials that were clearly unfair and overturning these sentences and letting people who were unfairly convicted out of jail. So, he's very well respected in many parts of Philadelphia, but I do think that the Democratic machine needs to really look at who they are endorsing and who they are lining up behind in this moment, because both of them I think are kind of, I would just say, they don't reflect the new vision, the new energy, the new experiences that younger and BIPOC people are looking for. And so I think that there's some shifts that have to happen deep within the Democratic Party in terms of who they're getting behind in general.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why do I feel that we really need to have a conversation on our next episode about Kamala Harris?

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thank goodness.

LAURA FLANDERS: But before we go there —

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Where is Kamala Harris?

LAURA FLANDERS: Before we go there, Max, you've done a lot of reporting from Wisconsin, where there was another story on the CRT front, a school board, each member, every single member of that school board, having been targeted by the anti-CRT folks for defeat fought back, didn't run away from the issue and won, are you gonna be reporting on that? Will you report on that? I wanna hear more about how they did it.

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: We wanna know too. And I think there's something really instructive in a place like Milwaukee, where again, like you take something like Act 10, right? You take the kind of ways that people on the ground, people organizing, like I think it's Black Leaders Organizing Communities or BLOC is a really great organization that's been getting out the vote, that's been educating people. What you see in Milwaukee is I think a really robust sort of grassroots effort by people who wanna connect with their neighbors, by school board members who do make themselves more available to that community and more accountable to that community in the way that you were mentioning Laura. And I think that that is really significant where people feel in a lot of parts of Wisconsin, like they've been abandoned by both

national parties. And so they look to each other for that sort of support and to build the kind of power together, that they're not gonna wait for someone else to sort of build for them. And that's created some really exciting developments in places like Milwaukee.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I look forward to hearing that reporting, seeing that reporting Max, maybe we can do some of it together. I wanna know. I wanna know how they did it. Gosh, I really love talking with all of you and hearing from you. It's been a fantastic year for URL Media, and I wanna thank Sara and Mitra for your collaboration this year. I wanna see it continue. What are you excited about as you look back over the first year really of this network, the URL Media network since it's launch, and are there stories you have in the works for the new year that we should start getting excited about? Mitra.

MITRA KALITA: For Epicenter, our big achievement this year was helping more than 7,000 New Yorkers and their cousins and family and friends all across the country get vaccinated. It would have been impossible without the URL Media network. Meaning when we put word out that we were doing this to TBN24, which is the Bangladeshi livestream, we would instantly get dozens of requests from Bangladeshi cab drivers and restaurant workers. We put this out on Documented via WhatsApp, also one of our partners, we would instantly get similar requests for help navigating vaccines. So, I'm really proud of that. Interestingly, we're in this moment where families are trying to navigate boosters and getting their children vaccinated. It's also opened up a number of questions about the healthcare system that will continue to serve as a resource because messaging on this indeed for public health is everything. So that's something I'm looking forward to for next year. And then I think the midterms, right, despite where I was on election night, there were red victories in Eastern Queens and Southern Brooklyn, across the state, the governor's race here in New York is something that we're definitely watching with close attention. And then nationally, it's not a coincidence that our URL Media network is seeing growth in states like Michigan, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and you might say, oh, well, those are all swing states, but they're swing states because of Black and Brown people. And so we will be certainly keeping an eye on that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Red victories, meaning Republican victories. Not any other sort, just to be clear.

MITRA KALITA: Correct.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sara, to you, looking back on the year of URL Media, you've accomplished a lot.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah. So we have done so many things. This partnership has been amazing to collaborate with the Laura Flanders Show on a monthly basis, that's been wonderful.

But just having regular convenings, one of the things that we did that was really empowering for me and URL is on the WURD Founders Day in August. We all came together, all nine outlets came together and we had a conversation about the network, about how we're covering our communities. And it was an amazing opportunity to see the diversity, the range, the different audiences that we're serving. And it was very validating and affirming to this concept that is under a year old, of URL Media. I also feel like, you know, because we are independent media outlets and there's nine of us, the work that each of us is doing is really, very life-changing and powerful. I know for WURD, a lot of the work that we did similar to what Mitra talked about in terms of vaccine coverage and just vaccine education and trying to debunk the misinformation and disinformation that was rampant in the Black community. Also covering these different trials that have happened, or are in progress now, whether it's the Ahmaud Arbery, the trial about Ahmaud Arbery or the Kenosha, Wisconsin, that trial, and just all of these kind of, these things that happened in 2020 that sparked the Black Lives Matter protest are now working their way through the criminal justice system or the legal system. And so we're following those things very closely and engaging with our audiences to make sure we're in constant conversation so we know what's happening on the ground.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, it's really been a joy to work with you two, as well. And Max as well, we wanna have you come back, do more collaborating in 2022, gosh, I can hardly believe it. We have another year ahead of huge challenges on every front, but an exciting one I think for media. As we say here, you know, the commercial media's role is to deliver audiences to advertisers. And I really deeply believe that the independent media's role is to deliver people to each other and you help us do that. So, thank you so much all of you for participating in this month's Meet the BIPOC Press media round table. Thanks for letting me be here with you. I appreciate it. Have a great one, everybody. Thanks for watching, I'm Laura Flanders.

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