Day 2, April 22, 2017: Afternoon Session – 1:30-2:15 p.m.

Keynote Speaker: Melissa Bell, Publisher, **Vox Media**

Chair: Jeff Jarvis, Professor and Director, **Tow-Knight Center of Entrepreneurial Journalism, CUNY**

Melissa Bell: Thanks so much for having me here today. As you can see, I have a little bit of an actual literal crutch to help me through this speech. [laughter] A few people have asked. I had an old boxing injury that I had to get fixed in a surgery a month ago, so I'm on the mend. This actually looks bad, but I am doing really well, so I'm going to try to put the crutch down for the speech, because my doctor says I need to work on my muscle strength, but if I start to wobble, don't get nervous. I'm learning slowly how to walk again. I thought it would add to a little bit of like the visual excitement. [laughter]

So, today, I'm also doing something new for myself. I am going to try to give this speech without any slides. Usually I rely on funny GIFs to get me through the talk. I did not realize that we were going to be in a room with this gigantic screen though. So, [chuckles], I sort of feel like I chose the wrong speech to start off on. So, because we have this giant screen, and my face is going to be on it for hopefully not the whole time, but it probably will be.

I want you instead of picturing me and Jeff up there, I want you to picture something else. I want you to picture a dog. I want you to picture a cute cartoon dog with big, googly eyes. He has a little Fedora hat on. He's sitting at a dining room table. He's about to drink a cup of coffee. He looks very calm and happy. He's smiling wide. And he's engulfed in flames. And he says, "This is fine." If you can't picture that dog, then you obviously did not go on the internet in 2016. [laughs] Because this panel from a K.C. Green comic was everywhere in 2016. The GOP used it to describe the Democratic Convention. Democrats used it to describe all the Republican Party. [sighs] We used it to describe the reaction to the refugee crisis, to the U.S. election overall, to the terror of ISIS. We used it to describe our sadness around Prince's death. We used it all of the time.

Today, I want you to picture that dog up there. And I want to use it to describe the media industry. We are the dog, and the dog is us. Things, we keep saying to our-self, are fine, but things are not fine. In 2017, we started off with a presidential administration that called the media the opposition party. It turns out…. Sorry, just to pause really fast. Walking is tiring! [laughter] I did not realize. I'm going to go back to my crutch in a minute.

OK. So anyway, we started 2017 off with a presidential administration calling us the opposition party. We saw the rise of fake news purveyors building strong businesses in Europe and in the U.S. We also had earnest news organizations debate over whether they could call a lie a lie. Things are not fine.

We have leapt past a single medium that we're trying to figure out—the desktop websites—to a three-dimensional chess game of Amp, Instant Articles, Apple News. We are trying to design for Amazon Echoes and VR headsets. We are trying to make sense of all of those live apps that we saw from China the other day. It is a whole brand-new world out there. And we are having to figure out change at a rate we've never seen before.

We also have no idea how to pay for it. Digital ad dollars are being split up between Facebook and Google. We are left with a small piece of the pie. And often that small piece of the pie is getting caught up in fraudulent ad exchanges and advertising agencies that are too slow to adopt new standards. We are seeing ad bots and ad blockers rise.

We are not making headway with subscriptions. We're seeing some movement on them, but not near enough to invest in the ambitious journalism projects that we want to invest in. Things are not fine.

Not only that, tech companies are actually building the publishing platforms that we should have built years and years ago. They are building it without consulting us oftentimes. They are favoring instant gratification and shares over debate and inquiry. They are rewarding instantaneous streams of knowledge—of content, rather than researched, dedicated knowledge. We are creating a massive amount of information out there with very little to guide people to understand what we are trying to tell them.

Finally, to misquote Sally Fields, people do not trust us. They really, really do not trust us. And even worse, they are starting to actively avoid us. Instead of building products that enrich their lives, we are building products that depress them. And this is not a new trend.

In 1974, the Pew Research Study started to ask the population of the U.S. if they felt that the media was doing a good job at fairly informing them. If they trusted us, in other words. After Watergate, 76% of the population felt like we were doing a good job. That's pretty good. They seemed to think that we were doing our job well, that we were pursuing facts rigorously, and that we were reporting them fairly. That number last year was 32%. If you asked people on an age scale, under 49—people under the age of 49, only 26% of the population thought we were doing a good job.

[Hears ring tone in the audience.] Is that Joey's phone? That's okay. [laughter] It's just 1:00, Joey. Sorry.

Only 26% of the population thought we were doing a good job. If you divide it on partisan lines, only 14% of Republicans feel like we are doing a good job. [sighs] Things are not fine.

And it's only getting hotter in here. OK. I actually want to stop walking. That was a terrible idea. [laughter]

OK. So, we are stretched thin as an industry. We are anxious and on a razor's edge with major threats to our business. The fact is most news organizations aren't near the size they were a decade ago. The newer organizations are just starting to reach scale. We haven't staffed up in the local news industry in the way that we were 10-20 years ago. The work we are called to do can be emotionally and physically exhausting. And don't even get me started on the shoddy state of what passes for news on television today. Things are not fine.

So, what do we do? Sit back and enjoy our cup of coffee? I will never tell you not to sit back and enjoy a cup of coffee. In fact, I highly recommend it. But I also recommend that we get angry. I started to get really angry about six months ago. The fact is, I got really angry at myself.

Three years ago, myself and a few of my friends decided to start Vox in an effort to seize the problems of the news system, to seize the opportunities that the internet provided us, and try to solve the broken news system that we saw. We knew there were problems. We knew that we weren't figuring out a revenue system that worked. We knew that we weren't figuring out guides for readers. We knew that there was a service that we were not providing as a news industry. And we set out to solve it by starting Vox. Investors invested in us. Vox Media wanted to work with us.

We launched a product within nine weeks. And we grew an audience rapidly over the first five months of existence. Since that day, we have only seen more and more audience come to us. Our product is qualitatively and quantitatively better every single day. By any measure, this should be success. But six months ago, I started to feel like a failure. I started to feel mad at myself. I started to feel incredibly frustrated. And the reason why was all of the reasons why—what I've been talking about this whole time, so I hope you were listening. The news is still totally broken. I had not fixed the news. I had not solved the problems that I set out to fix.

I realize that it was naïve of me to think that I could fix four years of declining trust—four decades, sorry—four decades of declining trust in the media in three years. I had in my head this idea of, it was the meddling kids and their dog, too, trying to solve all of these problems all at once. But the truth is, it did not feel good. We knew the problem existed, but we were not doing enough.

I also got mad at the media industry. The media industry was not reacting fast enough. We weren't taking things seriously. We weren't seeing the problem ahead of and trying to come together and solve some of these problems. So, I got angry. And I think people should be angry, too. And in fact, over the last six months, what you have seen is a lot of anger happen, a lot of acknowledgment that there's problem. There's more and more people talking about the media industry, not just as commentators in the media industry talking about itself, but audience members, politicians, technology companies.

We're finally facing the fact that we have a very real problem ahead of us. We're finally noticing the flames all around us. So, we need to stay angry. We need to stay serious about the problems that we have. We need to start really questioning ourselves every single day and saying, "What can we do to make things better?"

I have some ideas, but again, they are just some ideas. Most of them are questions. We have to solve these questions. We have to solve these questions together. We have to come together as an industry and start to really think about what we can do.

The first thing is, we need to start paying attention to our audience more than points we rack up in our ComScore score cards. We need to start treating our audiences not as cynical combative trolls, but as curious people trying very hard in a very overwhelming news environment to make sense of the world around them. We need to stop waiting for the audience to come back to us. We don't have an allotted date after dinner with them to sit down for an hour and talk about the news every day. We don't show up at their front door as much as we used to. And they don't show up to our door as much as they used to.

We also need to stop blaming the audience for this. We need to stop blaming the audience for not treating the news as if it's their civic duty to engage in it with us. It's actually our job to make the news interesting, to make the news a product that people want to use. It's our responsibility to think about how we can make this appealing. We have to ask ourselves, how can we help audiences seek knowledge? We can't just expect them to listen to us. We need to actually want them to come on a journey with us, so that we can deftly guide them towards understanding. How do we build news products to do just that?

We also need to stop ignoring the emotional impact of an overwhelming, never-ending cycle of oftentimes very depressing news. Right now, we have 360-degree splendor of all of the terrors around the world at any time we want at any day of the hour—at any hour of the day. We can see the suffering in close quarters everywhere. [knocks her crutch over] There it goes. Sorry about that. See, this is what happens when you don't have slides. You just need strange, like, crutches. So, what can we be building to

help reduce that anxiety? To help reduce that anguish that comes from the stream of content we are inundating people with every day?

We also need to stop thinking that audiences don't know the definition of objectivity. We once had a monopoly on information and the distribution methods for that information. I'm sure that it was a very lovely time to be a news broadcaster when there was only three channels of news out there. That is not the way it is anymore. That system let us get too comfortable in our monopoly. We rallied around the idea of being truth holders, instead of being truth seekers. We used editorial judgment as a code for what we think is important and what we think you should know. We praised this idea of objectivity to the point of sanctimoniousness. But ask any person of color reading a report largely construed by white people and they will tell you this is a hollow narrative.

It also left us wide open for people like Roger Ales to stroll in and create a company like Fox News, where he could tell half of the U.S. population that *he* was building a fair and balanced news product, because wink/wink, the rest of us are not fair and balanced.

We have to ask ourselves, what happens when we start to face our on biases? We have to start to think about, how do we build news products that show our work? That make our evidence part of the product? That treat our efforts as building long-term relationships with our readers, rather than just expecting them to blindly trust us on one-off visits?

If we constantly ask what holes we have in our coverage, if we constantly talk about the choices that we make in terms of what we're covering, if we take people along with us on the journey of our work, what will that change in our news product?

What if we get to know our audience and let them get to know us? It's one of the reasons at Vox Media we are so keen to invest in talent like Kara Swisher and Nilay Patel, or Matt Yglesias. We want them to treat their work as a conversation and a quest for knowledge, rather than reading a book report.

We also need to stop competing over diminishing returns. The media has long enjoyed being an industry employed with lots of people who love competitive, fierce battles over scoops and sales deals and building better technology systems, but we have much bigger competition out there than just other news organizations. Instead of fighting over the same stories, we need to amplify each other's work. We need to push to discover new stories.

I often think about what happens when there's a breaking news story such as Ferguson and every single news organization rushes to send more journalists than there are people on the street. What happens when you start to think about the other areas that we're not covering?

We're seeing that happen now with partnerships forged with companies like ProPublica and the Texas Tribune. We're seeing the work of the ICIJ awarded for the Pulitzer because of their collaboration across countries. This is exciting to me. This is encouraging to me.

I also am excited about the open-source projects that we're working on, such as the Google Amp product or Quartz open sourcing their Chart tool. One of the things that I'm most proud of that Vox Media did over the past year was build a product that our readers probably will never know even exists. What it is, is an ad technology platform called Concert. And we did this to build a better ad service for our business and for our users. We wanted to invest in a product that most people had not invested in over reducing load times and building better experiences that weren't just relying on disruptive ads. And then we did it in partnership with other news organizations. We first partnered with NBC. We recently started to work with Conde Nast. This is a collaboration, an open-source collaboration for us to build a better offering to users, rather than just competing over diminishing revenue returns.

Finally, we have to be seized by sense of purpose. We have to know who we are and what we're trying to do. We have to constantly challenge ourselves to be building something that actually is solving a problem. You see this in The New York Times and The Washington Post trying on new mottos for the first time in years. They're trying to say who they are and what they are doing for us. I actually think that this is—that one of the reasons why it was easier for magazines to transition to the digital age was because they knew that sense of competition on a newsstand relied on really letting their audience understand that they had a point and a purpose.

We think about this often at Vox Media with our eight brands. We ask them to say, who are their audience? What is the problem that they're solving? What are you trying to do each and every single day that matters? We think about it in terms of our scale. You can scale shallowly across trying to reach every single person in the country or you can start to build products that really deeply matter to certain audience segments, whether it's a team brand for SB Nation, our sports site, or it's the deeply reported healthcare coverage that we do on Vox.

We need to push ourselves to go deeper, to matter, and to make a difference every single day. This job and this work are too important. It is also the best job and the best work that I can think of. It can't all go up in flames, and I don't think we are going to let it. So, thank you very much.

[Cheers and applause.]

Q&A Session:

Melissa Bell: I didn't fall.

Jeff Jarvis: You get congratulated for more than that.

Melissa Bell: Thank you. That was the most standing I've done in a very long time.

Jeff Jarvis: Bravo! Right? Bravo! [cheers and applause] I asked…. Who was it? Um…. There was a tweet I wanted somebody to…. Danielle Ortiz. Somebody retweet that tweet so we can it up here, the reaction. Oh, it is already. We can't see it, but it is. Yay! Brilliantly said. That's a manifesto for fixing journalism. I think what you've said is really important and I hope you can watch the stream, and I hope you publish what you just said as a post. I think it's important.

Melissa Bell: Thank you.

Jeff Jarvis: My friend, Carrie Brown, who is here, said that, I quote her, "The first speaker to really confront the problems in journalism today, rather than just patting ourselves on the back as Rome burns and we say, 'It's fun.'" So, but you're the solution, damn it! Right? You're it.

Melissa Bell: I mean, hopefully, we're one.

Jeff Jarvis: Yeah.

Melissa Bell: There's a lot—there's a lot happening. There are solutions that I'm seeing out there, and they are exciting and interesting. But I worry that we have a tendency to get too comfortable too fast. And it's not a time of—it's not a time of comfort. We can't—we can't stop thinking that we have found the solution.

I was telling Jeff this earlier, about three years ago when I was just starting Vox, he and I were on a panel. And Jeff said that—that he felt like he'd been Chicken Little, for years, running around telling everyone the sky was falling down, and nobody was listening to him. And that image always plays in my mind, because I do think for a long time we didn't listen. We didn't change fast enough. And now, change is happening to us. We can't help but change. So, we have some solutions. We don't have all of them. And if we don't keep changing at Vox Media, we're not going to be—we're not going to be able to continue to create those solutions.

Jeff Jarvis: Let me ask you about one solution that you made reference to, kind of. You said, and I couldn't agree with this more, that we are rewarding streams of content versus knowledge. Wasn't that what Vox cards were meant to solve?

Melissa Bell: Yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: So, what…? And I love the idea of Vox cards.

Melissa Bell: Yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: But then when we get the product out, reality tells you other things, the business tells you other things. I stole off them. They're still there.

Melissa Bell: Yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: But they didn't take over the world, I think, quite the way that you imagined.

Melissa Bell: Definitely not. It was funny, because it was one single solution that we felt would be a massive solve. And the reality of what we faced was that we had to have 17 different solutions, and the solutions had to constantly change. One of the things about Card Stacks, one of the reasons why we weren't able to iterate on them in a way that we wanted to was because of the changes that happened on the internet, where most of the audience was moving to platforms. And so, while we were building and developing and seeing some audience use of the cards, it was tricky to then put the cards onto Amp, Apple News, Instant Articles.

There's not—there's not a reason not to go back and try that again at some point, but really we realized that we had to start to invest in other products as much as we could, you know, with our video work, and our podcast work, and our conference work. It's just everything become split up so quickly. So, you can't have a single solution. And the Card Stacks were not the only solution.

Jeff Jarvis: But I do think…. I do want to see you go back, because I think that that constant stream…. One of my former students, Matt Kiser started something brilliant—I'm sure many of you know—called What the Fuck Just Happened Today?

Melissa Bell: Mm-hmm.

Jeff Jarvis: And he just quit his job this week to do that full time. And that's the stream, right?

Melissa Bell: Yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: But then there is also the need to say, what the fuck do we know about Trump and China or Trump and Russia or Trump and whatever? There is that need for that archive and that explainer. I want you to go back.

Melissa Bell: Let me pause you really fast there.

Jeff Jarvis: Please.

Melissa Bell: Because I think that one that's been really interesting about what we've seen at Vox, in particular, is that one of the things that has worked better than the Card Stack format is the Video Explainer.

Jeff Jarvis: That's right.

Melissa Bell: And so, we put more investment, yes, into the Video Explainer than we did into the Card Stack Explainers. Recently, we just republished a Syria video that we made two years ago. And that work that we did to explain what was the reasons and the people and the geographies involved in the Syrian conflict had not changed that much in two years. We added two minutes more of explanation onto the video. It was a five-minute video. We made it seven-minutes long. But the base of knowledge that we had built out for that video was already there in contextualizing information for 50-million people. That video since then has been watched another 50-million times across different platforms. So, in a lot of ways, that persistent evergreen idea that we had in the beginning is really seeing its fruition in our video work.

Jeff Jarvis: Yeah. I think you adapted to what's possible. In June, I'll go to my other favorite conference, which is Vid Com, where you see that content isn't the destination.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: It's a social token. And by making these explainers, you allow people to pass the truth around.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: Which is important.

Melissa Bell: I love that idea.

Jeff Jarvis: You're doing it. I want to talk about you and your career path here. Because I think that you are the solution, damn it. You're it, right? You're it, not just in Vox and what you're doing. You're it, not just because you're damn smart. You're it, also, because you also have taken a path that I think for our students—many of us are teachers here—is really illuminating where things out to go. You were at Mint. You were at the Washington Post. You've been at Vox up through various positions. But what I think defines you is product.

Melissa Bell: Mm-hmm.

Jeff Jarvis: And I think that defines editorial going forward. I think editorial should be renamed product. And product, not just in terms of making things,

but product as in being the representative of the public, the user, the market, the community, to the company.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: So, talk for a moment about your philosophy of product, and then how you got into that in your career path.

Melissa Bell: So, I guess my philosophy around this is that I really do agree with you—news is a product. We have to be thinking about how we're creating the news product of today. We don't have a solution to it yet, even though people think differently, but we don't. We're still figuring it out. That's why it's actually the most interesting time to be involved in journalism today, because we get to experiment and invent the product in real time. But if we are not thinking about it as a product that we are not trying to think about holistically, then we are going to miss parts of it.

We have to be thinking about it in terms of, what's the technology? What's the revenue? What's the content that we're putting in there? What are the experiences users are—how users treat it, how users find it, how they move from different parts of it to different parts of it. All of those things are still yet to be discovered. And so, I think that the product development process, to me, is a questioning of the user first and foremost. You start saying, what is the need? Where is the hole in the market? And then, what can I deliver in that?

Vox Media started ten years ago as SB Nation, which is our sports brand. And it started because a blogger in San Francisco was frustrated that his newspaper was not covering the Oakland A's. They were giving all the coverage to, uh, the Giants? [laughter]

Woman: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: [laughs]

Melissa Bell: I'm not so good at sports.

Jeff Jarvis: I'm there, too, yeah.

Melissa Bell: So, but he knew that this was—that he could deliver a product for an audience that needed that information. And he built a blog with the technology that was available. And it has grown into a massive company, because he started with what the users were not getting. So, you have to think about that all of the time—what a user is not getting—and then build from there.

Jeff Jarvis: Pause there for one second. I agree with everything you just said. And we're stuck with the word *product*, but I actually hate the word *product*. Because it makes it seem as if it's a finished thing.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: I prefer *service.*

Melissa Bell: Yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: I think you look upon this as a constant, on-going, evolving service to the user.

Melissa Bell: I mean, I think because I've been involved in product development, I think that for a lot of technology companies, the product is never finished. And if you are a good product developer, you are iterating all of the time. You know, Facebook is constantly pushing things out to their platform all of the time. And we don't know it sometimes, and we sometimes really know and react in a big way. So, if you are doing product development right, it is a never finished product. You don't wrap it up in a bow and then send it out and put it on a shelf. It's going to be something that you always have to be changing.

Jeff Jarvis: So, when you decided to get into journalism, what did you think you wanted to be?

Melissa Bell: I wanted to be a magazine writer.

Jeff Jarvis: Ha-ha. Long form.

Melissa Bell: I wanted to be Susan Orlean, yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: Yeah.

Melissa Bell: I still do. She's so cool.

Jeff Jarvis: And then you got into product. How did that happen?

Melissa Bell: So, I started…. I mean, it started off when I was a kid. You know, I was lucky enough to have a dad that was super interested in the internet. We were on Prodigy when I was 7 or 8, and I loved the sound of the old dial-up modem, and I thought it was so cool that you could have the entire Encyclopedia Britannica on this computer. So, I grew up with the internet. Like, I think that my sister didn't. My brother did. He only knew the internet. My sister did not. So, I was right on that beautiful, strange line of before and after. So, it was always a part of my life.

So when I got into journalism, I really thought of the internet as sort of my play space always. It wasn't until 2010 when I came back to the U.S…. I'd been in India for four years, and while there I had a podcast, and a blog, and all, you know, while I was still working as an editor and writer. I came back to the U.S. in 2010, and I started working at The Washington Post. And I walked into a very devastated newsroom. It had recently undergone, you know, a massive change where the digital side and the print side came together. And they'd gone through a series of cutbacks. There was a huge loss of confidence, a huge concern about what their revenue was going to be. And I went in there thinking that I was going to be a writer. I was hired to be a print reporter.

And pretty quickly, one of my mentors, Raju Narisetti, said, "You need to help us figure out this digital journalism thing." And he pushed me into working to start a blog at The Post. And I quickly realized that we had a horrible, horrible technology system to create blogs. You opened up this system and it had like three yellow highlighted blocks of text to show you where to write. It was like the most…. It, like, sapped creativity. It was like, you'd open it up, and you'd just be like, "I don't even…. I don't want to do anything." And so, a part of what I realized is that if I wanted to improve our blogging, I had to improve the technology or else we were going to fail. And just because I grew up on the internet, I was able to, like, know that. I could see that with, like, other organizations and other platforms. So….

Jeff Jarvis: So, you left The Post.

Melissa Bell: I did leave The Post. Sorry, Jeff.

Jeff Jarvis: Now, The Post aside, it has wonderful people like Joey there, and it has Jeff Bezos as inspiration and funding. So, let's make that an exception to all rules. Let's make The New York Times an exception to all rules. The vast—and I won't go internationally. Let's just talk about what we know, is American newspapers. American daily metro newspapers. Any hope?

Melissa Bell: Yes. They—there's…. Yes, there's hope. There is…. I still think that they move too slow. And I think that The New York Times and Washington Post move too slow in some areas, even if they do have the benefit of a safety net for the revenue model. I think that we all have moved to slow. So, there is hope for it. There's a need for it. There's an audience that wants it and demands it. But we have to be smarter and faster and more thoughtful. And we need to be excited about this.

I think that one of the problems is that you see people—it's been a hard transition for people. And I think that that emotion sort of fear has gotten in the way of embracing change. And so, my hope is that you start to see some real energy. And I think that you do. I think that you guys heard from some folks this morning.

Jeff Jarvis: Mm-hmm.

Melissa Bell: The Dallas Morning News is doing some really interesting things.

Jeff Jarvis: Yes.

Melissa Bell: I actually do, you know, I admire some of the changes that happened at The LA Times in the last few years. Like, there's some really interesting stuff that's happening, but we've got to all move faster.

Jeff Jarvis: So, I'm about to put up a post that I've been working on for months. If I ran a newspaper, which would never happen, but trying to say, put my money where my mouth is, and okay, what would I do tomorrow? And don't leave Vox. You're needed there. Let's imagine tomorrow that a new order comes in to rescue—I don't know—Tribune Company, and you're in charge. What do you do?

Melissa Bell: The first thing, and I think that this is, like, this *is* happening at The New York Times, I believe. And this is something that is not my own idea. This is Marcus Broccoli, former editor in chief at The Washington Post. He really wanted to do this. You stop hav-…. There's no more jobs that are putting together the print paper except for a small desk that is the print desk. You treat the paper as if it's a platform, in the same way that you treat Facebook or Twitter or Amp or YouTube. Any of those things. They are all platforms that you put your content on. And so, you have a team that is dedicated to helping to program the paper? But then everyone else is responsible for creating good stories. And you have to completely stop people thinking about A-1 is the most important marker of success. You have to start to get people…. You know, I think The Boston Globe just announced that they were going to make people come to work earlier. And it's like, they're coming to work at like 9:15. Like, that's not—that's not early for most people who work. That's still like a very lovely start time for people.

Jeff Jarvis: We're in the shower with the damn internet in the morning.

Melissa Bell: Yeah, yeah.

Jeff Jarvis: Give us that, yeah.

Melissa Bell: At 6:00 a.m., that's when we start to see…. That's when we start to see readers jump online, is at 6:00 a.m. And if you're thinking that 9:00 is an early start…. It's good that The Boston Globe is doing that, but a lot of news organizations, you still have people coming in at 11:00 a.m. And that's…. If you're not even there working at the same time as you are supposed to meet your audience, then that's real trouble. It's because you are still on the evening setup for paper. So, that's the first thing to do.

Jeff Jarvis: That's all good. Now, get angrier. Now, channel yourself to being pissed off! There's no time! We've got to save the country! What do you do?

Melissa Bell: Um, with The Tribune Company?

Jeff Jarvis: No.

Melissa Bell: Just in general.

Jeff Jarvis: No, now, just the whole damned industry. Now that you've fixed Tribune, fix the whole fucking industry. [laughter]

Melissa Bell: I mean, honestly, I think that we just…. We, first of all, have to start…. I really do think that there's something around our issues of like not admitting biases. I think it's totally obnoxious that we don't get into this conversation. And the problem is, you know, so I have cousins on one side of my family that are arguing vehemently their beliefs in certain, certain topics that happen, news events that happen, and then cousins that will argue with them about the same news events, but they have different sets of facts. They actually both are not wrong. They just…. We've somehow managed to create a system where there is literally…. I mean, this is the problem where we have people who believe two separate fact systems in this country. If we don't deal with that head on, and we don't try to think about how do we bridge that gap…. I don't have the solution for this. I mean, I think the best thing that we can do is be honest about that and start to build relationships with people and treat them not as if they are idiots for having different fact systems, but try to start to understand why they have come to those conclusions, start to engage in—and listen to them. Then, we're going to be in trouble. We're going to continue to stay in a state where 14% of Republicans think that we do a terrible job. That they only watch Fox News. That Fox News continues to be—to say that they are a news organization, but really they use entertainment systems to create an engaged entertainment channel. But that, to me, is like the fundamental problem that we have.

I actually think, truthfully…. I mean, I said that I wasn't going to talk about the shoddy mess of television, but I do think that we oftentimes are talking about newspapers at conferences like this, and I think that we should be talking much more about television news. And this is one of the reasons why I'm so excited about the work that our video teams do at Vox Media, because they are creating really engaging, informative, beautiful, interesting video products. And so much of our audiences want information in that sense. That's why television continues to be the dominant way people get their information. And yet, we are not really thinking about how can we change news television.

Jeff Jarvis: It sucks. I'm going to come to questions, arguments, or praise from this side. Whatever you want. But I have one more. So, having thought

about…. I've been arguing since the election…. I'm going to come at you with a product pitch.

Melissa Bell: Great.

Jeff Jarvis: All right? I'm going to see if you'll start this…or fund it. [laughter] So, I argued, I think, yesterday or today—I can't remember how often I was at the mike—that we in liberal media—and I'm liberal—abandon the right half of America, they abandon us, and so on. And I think the biggest business opportunity…. And mind you, let me be first clear, there are many, many communities in this country that are under-served and under-reflected and deserve reflection first, but they didn't reflect, like, Donald Trump. The problem we're going to solve with your cousins is a problem we have to solve, I think, by creating new media.

So, how about a new media outlet that is responsible, fact-based, journalistic, but from a conservative world view, if we can define conservatives anymore. I'm not sure we can, right? But that takes that worldview from the heartland, whatever the heartland, that becomes the conservative New York Times, the conservative Vox, conservative Washington Post, but responsible, to counteract the vacuum we left that was filled in by Rupert Murdoch and Breitbart and Drudge and worse. Is there a business there?

Melissa Bell: Yes, that's an audience opportunity. And I think that one of the things that we are trying to do on Vox that's been very interesting to do is to hire writers who want to talk about more of a conservative topics. And you see that there's a big audience there for it. There's an audience demand for it. I think that this is a…. You know, we can get into a political conversation about this, but I do think that there is challenge for the conservative parties to really be able to lay claim to the ownership of their own party's narrative. And it's because their party has a very loud voice in organizations like Fox News and Breitbart and far, far more right-leaning organizations than there are sort of voices within the more middle side of the conservative party. But yeah, I do think that there is a very large audience for that. I mean, I think that Lydia Polgreen put up sort of a spread there, but I think that you can see there's not that…. There's like a big—there's a big hole. There's a huge audience hole there.

Jeff Jarvis: But you're right. The first thing we have to do is be transparent and admit our biases on the left. And I understand why conservatives see liberal media everywhere, because it is, let's be honest.

Melissa Bell: I mean…. Go ahead.

Jeff Jarvis: You're asking a question?

Man: [Inaudible.]

Jeff Jarvis: Sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. You can have one if you want. If anybody wants to ask a question or give praise, come on down. I got plenty. Believe me, I could ask questions all day, as I prove.

Melissa Bell: I think that the thing…. I mean, I think that the thing is that there is…. I think that it's also a little bit tricky, because we usually refer to things as a concrete hole. And I think it's very interesting to start to say, like, there's different voices. We have different voices at different news organizations. And who are these authors? And how do you create…? How do you allow for people to know the talent at different organizations better? So, you can have different perspectives across every single type of race, gender, geographic divide, and partisan divides. I mean, I think that that's really what we need to start to lean into, is to create spaces for people to understand who we are and build products every day.

Jeff Jarvis: Isn't it in the DNA of Vox and SB Nation that I can be a Giants fan or a Jets fan? That's about as far as I go.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: Right? I can be a conservative or a liberal. I can be somebody who cares about this issue or that issue. And we've built something for you.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: Right?

Melissa Bell: Yeah. That's really, like, our—that's what we bet on at Vox Media. We want to create products for different people from different interest areas across the span, whether it's fashion to technology to business and technology to news. That's our main goal. So….

Jeff Jarvis: All right. Now that you've fixed Tribune Company and all of media, fix journalism schools. [laughter] What would we be teaching? What should our students be demanding? What are the skills that they need to come to succeed? To work for you and become you?

Melissa Bell: Right now, I mean, I think the biggest thing that J-schools can do is to put people to work. Start getting them to do…. You know, you can publish without any…. There's no price of publishing right now. You can put stuff on the internet immediately and it is published work. And people should be doing. The only way to learn is by doing. And teach people by putting them onto—assigning them to cover a story just by using Twitter. Assign them to cover a story just by creating video on YouTube. You should…. We should all be actively engaged in understanding these products and these platforms. And I think journalism schools are still too often teaching people how to make an article.

Jeff Jarvis: I could shut him up in class either. Simon, over to you.

Simon: [Mic not working.] That's actually a great opportunity to praise this whole journalism program.

Jeff Jarvis: I wasn't fishing for that though.

Simon: For Melissa, actually….[inaudible]. So, my question is, and this is something I go back and forth about with Jeff about—incentive structures in the media. You previously touched on it about how maybe profit comes before sort of social good. And how can we change those incentive structures so that more people like you can…? Does that work? No? Hello?

Jeff Jarvis: He's doing the communist party line asking about why we're not spending….

Simon: [Mic is on now.] Well, no, no, no. It's the socialist class line.

Jeff Jarvis: Ha-ha. We do this in class all the time.

Simon: Jeff isn't sure of my political affiliation. So, the question is, how can we change incentive structures in newsrooms, right, in metro dailies, in paper organizations, to be into sort of serve the public more than shareholders?

Melissa Bell: I think that, you know, what I…. I think about the internet as sort of like this—we've gone through different phases. And I think right now the phase that we're in is actually the best time for serving the public, because there is a—there is a very real audience demand for interesting news that tells new stories, like, delivers new information that is actually investigative journalism. I mean, you're seeing real commitment from audiences wanting that investigative journalism. And so, truthfully, the best thing is that I think we actually are at the point where they're starting to create real incentives for that type of work. Just naturally. Because audiences want higher quality work online. So, we're starting to get there.

I think that one thing that we can do, though, is to start to think about the way that we quantify our work. For so long, the way that we've quantified our work on the internet is through page views or through video views. We don't think about engagement metrics. We don't think about how long somebody is watching a video. We don't think about if they've learned anything from that video. We don't know if we, you know, if there is—if there is any impact beyond the fact that they came to a page one time. Could be completely accidentally, but that is the metric that we have relied on too long. So, we need to start thinking about what we're judging our own metrics on.

This is like a very small thing that we did on Vox, but we created at the end of articles, we ask people, "Was this article helpful to you?" And if it was "Yes," then they could share it. And if it was "No," they could send in a tip that explained why that article was not helpful to them. Those emails are some of my favorite things to read, because they—sometimes they'll say, you know, "You didn't include this bit of information." And it actually improves the article, because it's sending in information from people that we should have been looking at in the first place. And sometimes people just don't think that we got the story right, you know, and we can learn from that. But it's improving our work, because we are asking people whether or not they found our work helpful. And so, if you create systems like that, where it's a feedback loop around different metrics than just page views, I think that that's like the real starting point for it.

Jeff Jarvis: And to answer Simon's real question, too, you can do all that and be profitable, too?

Melissa Bell: Yeah, because I think that we actually are making money off quality work now. I mean, this is why platforms want to start working with publishing companies. They're starting to realize the value of quality work. Facebook and Google are trying to work with all the major media organizations right now, because they see audiences engaging on their platforms when there are better search results on the Google search page, when there is more interesting videos on the Facebook site. And we're moving towards a system where 100-million people want to watch a seven-minute explainer on the Syrian war. And that is keeping people. We're seeing completion times on that video. And so, we're at a place where we are starting to see the reward for quality storytelling. And that's amazing that we're in that period. And we can make money off of this.

Jeff Jarvis: I think we do see an opportunity for a flight to quality.

Melissa Bell: Yes.

Jeff Jarvis: I think enough people are angry about this that we can…. Whether it's getting Bill O'Reilly off Fox or starving off the airflow to Breitbart, we're seeing moves toward quality.

Melissa Bell: Right. I mean, you mentioned Bill O'Reilly. The issues around Bill O'Reilly have been known for years. It was until there was a monetary hit that happened that he left the air. So, I mean, I think that that's really important. There is a demand from advertisers as much as there is a demand from audience members to be put next to quality work as well. So, I think this is like a really interesting time for us to be.

Jeff Jarvis: I think you all should feel grateful. I think we were here at a moment of an important speech about anger and what we should be building

here. And that building new things is the way to start to fix it and put out the fire. Melissa, thank you very, very much.

Melissa Bell: Yeah.

[Cheers and applause.]