

ISOJ 2019: Day 1, Afternoon Session

Keynote speaker: Millie Tran

Chair: Kathleen McElroy, director and professor, School of Journalism at University of Texas at Austin

- **Millie Tran, deputy off-platform editor, New York Times**
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Kathleen McElroy: So, many many moons ago when I graced the New York Times and I was the blog liaison, I was liaison for the software developers which means they'd say something and then I go to an edit and go "what they really mean is..." and that was considered like "wow crazy" and then when I did work with blogs people like "you're working with blogs? WordPress?".

So, fast forward seven or eight years and now we have a deputy off-platform editor and a global growth editor after being director of global adaptation at BuzzFeed? Millie, come up here and explain to us what you're doing.

Millie Tran: I have prepared remarks because I wanted to take you through my entire brain and they're on my phone so I'll see your tweets. So, only tweet nice things to me please, and as Kathleen said, what does off platform even mean? And as I was thinking about this presentation I knew I had to start with explaining what my job is which luckily or not I'm used to.

My last two roles were a director global adaptation at BuzzFeed and global growth editor at The New York Times, both of which were the first time either of those organizations had those roles, and then a few months ago I started a new role that we were trying to figure out, deputy platform editor. So, I always know it's a good move when I have to explain my job title so I'll start there.

So, the easiest way to tell you what off platform is is to tell you what it's not. So, for that at the times we call on platform and on platform at the Times is our home page, it's our app, newsletters, and push alerts. I actually listen to Meredith Artley keynotes as all several others to parents and she showed and this amazing chart

with like a red core and like gray bubbles around it representing all the other platforms and they're definitely parallels there right?

I actually can, I'm mobile! I forgot, my phone is mobile. OK, so I listen to Meredith Artley's keynote, she had this amazing chart, there are definitely parallels in how CNN thinks about their core and then off platform. On platform is that red core for us, it's what we control, it's our destination, it's our brand and it's our house, and you need to get your house in order first.

Luckily, we have an amazing team that does all of this work, but the pendulum swings. I remember writing a Nieman lab prediction for 2018 about how news organizations need to focus on their brand, and that is the core of what you do that's your platform, that's what you own and control.

So the one I wrote for 2019 however was about how there's no magic only work which I'll explain more later, but for now think about how often you hear about how home pages are back after being dead and back after being dead, and innovation doesn't have to be big and flashy, right?

And it's a continuing process of gradual improvement. Things change, but slower than you think, and mostly cyclically. So this is an incomplete list of what I work on and what my team works on. So, what does that look like day to day? And why is off platform so important? So, off platform is so important is because our editorial approach and our news judgment is slightly different on an off platform right?

So, which I'll illustrate in a bit once I talk you through what a typical day looks like, but success off platform requires you to be educated and understand how you reach and communicate with different communities, right? You can't just parachute in on any given topic and you need to prove that you've done the work and understand this communities. You need to be native to the platforms, you need to be able to speak the language of those communities whether literally or not.

I had a lot of experience there when I was at BuzzFeed working on global adaptation as well, and then just as an aside my former boss at the American press

Institute Tom who you heard from earlier and he's thought about being platform orthodox versus platform agnostic for like I looked it up is in 2009, so it's like a decade ago it was prescient then and still relevant now, so you should google that.

So, the value I hope to bring in this role is two things, to deeply understand the news value of the New York Times and to also deeply understand all these communities off platform and the opportunities we have to reach those communities. So, I'm constantly translating connecting making decisions big and small every single day, and so we're still translating things and connecting things.

So what that looks like every day it looks different every day to be honest, but I'll show you one example to illustrate that, and the types of decisions that me and my boss Cynthia Collins who I believe is one of the smartest people at the New York Times that we make every day.

So, after the State of the Union address in February and you might remember this photo of Nancy Pelosi clapping at President Trump is easily like the photo of the night, and people were sharing it. It quickly became a meme, like reach meme status. Everyone was memeing it and it wasn't on our home page and it wasn't on our front print front page the next day.

But the photos that are top Instagram posts of I think in the past two years. This was a social story and the Times can and should be in on that conversation in a way that's comfortable with the ethics of the New York Times, and we actually did write about it and that story did well. However, one of the joys of being at the Times is that it just so happens that Doug Mills our photographer took this photo and he's one of the best in the world.

So we were able to supplement that story that we put up quickly that night with a little back story about how he took it and kind of what his thoughts were. So, it wasn't just about Nancy Pelosi clapping, right? It was that moment, but it was about the photography and how we did that work which is why it's so important to understand our platform and to be able to juggle these two modes.

And also, the reason why it's important off platform is that people might not already trust you in the same way they would if they would go to the New York Times home page. So, why am I telling you all this? Who am I? There are really only three important things you need to know, not important, but relevant things you need to know about me in the context of this presentation.

And the first is that I'm obsessed with how people get and share their news, but really what that means is I think deep empathy and conviction, I believe strongly that news organizations are the foundation of a strong democracy. I also believe in sharing news and information as a way to connect with other humans and your friends and family and communities, and it is really my time at the American presence that kind of cemented this obsession. We did countless reader surveys about how people get their news and how news organizations were changing and adapting to the digital climate.

The second is that I like to peer around the corner and anticipate how things are going and how things are changing. So, I did a lot of that at BuzzFeed when we launched the BuzzFeed News app and then in building the global adaptation and translation team to really understand how news and information travels globally and on social mobile all that.

And finally, I am a systems thinker and what I mean by that is like not only to understand individual parts, but kind of how all those parts work together and other forces that influence that. So, I think a lot about networks and how multiple systems work together and what better place to do that right now than the Times where I'm learning this big organization and trying to understand how those pieces fit not just in the context of the New York Times, but also kind of the media ecosystem at large and just kind of the moment we are right now in news and media.

So, all those experiences I just shared I think about them as like layers and inputs to kind of what we're doing now and where we are now. We're in a pivotal point with social media and platforms right now. We're in a moment of great debate over here in the U.S. and around the world over platforms, and what we've seen is that a lack of oversight comes with great consequence.

So, while this critical work is happening at the Times on our business side and throughout the organization in my role specifically in the newsroom I have to be a responsible steward of the risk and value and the limitations of each platform while also continuing to emphasize all the great value in journalism that comes from these platforms and it's how we reach and learn about our readers.

So, I think it's really easy to sit on one side or the other and demand regulation which we should do in different ways, but from where I sit I'm negotiating the value in this risk every day in decisions big and small, so all those decisions can be consequential for good or bad. Here's one example of the Midwest floods. So, this was a great story on the ground coverage, we sent a reporter and a photographer.

Nebraska was our top state for readership and along with other states in the Midwest we don't usually see that, and the reason that the story reach Nebraskans because that's not our usual readership is through these niche communities. We saw shares from farmers and local groups and others, and Nebraska is not our top state for readership so through social we're able to kind of light this fire and (sorry for the nature metaphor) light this thing and then have it spread through these niche communities.

So you know, this example is a lot about distribution, the next example is about coverage. So Nipsey Hussle's dad, his funeral was yesterday and it is a big deal. The New York Times actually has more readers and subscribers in California than New York which we are surprised by. So, Nipsey was a rapper based in L.A. who's known both for his music and kind of philanthropic ventures around the community in L.A. There's a big deal that he grew up and still lived in that community.

This is our coverage from yesterday and since his death. My question is if Nipsey would be as covered a story as it is for the New York Times 10 years ago if not for all the signals we got from search and social? What we saw was this was one of the most search and most interacted story of 2019 so far, and I think if you don't use those signals you'll never see those blind spots.

So, we saw all these signals from search and social showing demands for more on him. His work, his community, and the outpouring of grief after his death. There's a group of 4 of us in the newsroom who deliver this audience update at our 9:30 news meeting and that's such a great way to kind of pull in all the signals and have it not just influence distribution, but also your news judgment and news value of certain topics that your audience may demand which is replicable to newsrooms of any size.

So, those are some of the benefits that we would have not otherwise have had without social on all platforms. So, where are we and what's different now? So, tabloids have always existed, misinformation has always existed in one form or another, the US uses spread propaganda through the radio that you just have to dial into that.

It took a long time to spread messages. People always shared news and information. It used to be through word of mouth and then maybe you'd like to write a letter, maybe you email and then it was social, right? So what's new now is that the feedback... you'll notice I love frameworks too... sorry I lost my spot. This is the danger of having things on your phone, I'm sorry. I'm scrolling.

OK so, tabloids have also always existed and what's new now is that these feedback loops are tighter and faster. The scales unprecedented and this is something I'm so grateful to have learned and really deeply understand at BuzzFeed. The Internet opens this immense scale, so it's social combined with the rise of mobile which by virtue of being a device we put in our pockets or which may as well be connected to my arm at this point, it has exasperated both misinformation and disinformation and the kind of social sharing that we used to do to connect.

So, that's where we are now. So, you can not only reach more people faster you can reach them in a more personal way than ever. So, what makes this really difficult now is that the usual signals we rely on for legitimacy are increasingly garbage, that's the problem, that's what the rise of misinformation is all about.

So, it used to be that you had a photo and bio on your Twitter account for example and maybe a website or portfolio you might be a real person online. I just think about that New Yorker cartoon of like a dog being like "Hi, I'm a person online" and we obviously learned in 2016 that isn't true. I generated photos, doctor videos, you name it.

It used to be about gathering a lot of signals and weighing them against each other to say is this real or not, but what do you do when most of those signals are bad. So, you understand what cheap signals are, understand that things that are easy to counterfeit, followers can be bought we had a great piece about that, blue checkmarks only go so far so you have to look for solid signals that are hard to replicate.

Taking a long history on Twitter is harder to replicate than making an account with a lot of interactions and faking extensive reporting on a topic is much harder to fake. So it's easy to fake realness now, so we just have to be more careful than ever and that's why it's so important to have that news judgment combined with platform specific knowledge.

So, that's where we are now. Digital media literacy and I guess in a room of academics that's really important, the signs we rely on in the physical world to know what's real in apps and online and I just explain easily manipulated and counterfeit, so how do we help our audiences around the web to understand what we're doing and to build and rebuild that trust?

So, one way we've done this, I talked about distribution and just the news value of certain stories, this is about that transparency that I was talking about earlier in today's panel. It's about showing your work, saying you talked to two dozen former staff members, saying you reviewed a hundred thousand documents, saying you looked at drone footage and interviewed people on the scene, interrogate the rubble on the ground, so you know, these are just small ways we can do this every day.

You'll see it on the Daily and The Weekly, we constantly have reporters going on the daily podcast talking about their work, how they do their work, and you'll see it

on the weekly which starred TV show premiering in June which I think there's something about television and visuals that is really visceral.

So, showing the work we do is so important now because all these attacks against the press around the world and this is replicable, this is just saying how you got the information how you know what you know, news literacy is arguably more important than ever and it's important for all of us to prioritize platforms in which people still get their news and information.

If we're not there that's pretty dire. So, multiple things can be true at once and however many people are leaving social media for privacy concerns, for hyper polarization or just fatigue, we're spending more time on our phones than ever. I'd ask you to look, but I think we're a long time, but you should look at your screen time either on your iPhone or Android and I bet you it's quite similar to this.

The average American is spending upwards of like I think 6 hours with visual media. So, we're increasingly more connected whether or not we're on certain platforms or not. So, what do we do now? That plus the fact that so much happens online, so much potential news happens online means we have to better understand and react and adapt to as news organizations. So, it's about social publishing. It's about distribution, but it's also about understanding this new system in which we're operating and being much smarter and more rigorous about our approach to it.

So no one knows what the right way is yet and if they tell you they do they're lying. So, here's my hypothesis for the foundation I think we need to build to be able to start figuring this all out. It's a deep understanding of these three things. It's news and media, how does information travel around the Internet and around the world. It's psychology and human behavior, how does our psychology affect, how we consume and share news and information.

The most useful thing I can tell you is that you should read Daniel Kahneman's book "Thinking Fast and Slow." It's all about our hidden biases and how we make decisions and it's life changing, and then technologies and platforms, right? Do we understand the technology and algorithms behind what's shown to us? Do you

know how and why you see certain things on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram? Do you know how Google surfaces search results?

And I ask those questions both from a consumer perspective, but also as a journalist and also for us working in news or organizations or practice academics teaching the next generation of young minds. So, that's my best guess, that's what we need to kind of build upon to start figuring all this out, but no one knows what's going to happen next. Thank you.

Kathleen McElroy: So, Millie... About 3 dissertation proposals in a year are going to start with: "you know, as Millie Tran said at the 2019 ISOJ conference there are three..." trust me, I've been there, we're all looking for that intro. So, that was really fascinating, thank you so much.

So one thing I want you to clarify, how does the Times really make a distinction between social media an off platform with I guess off platform being the bigger universe?

Millie Tran: Yeah! So, I would say social media is all the kind of big platforms we think about right, it's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. Off platform we think about more broadly, it can be Apple news, it can be Google Search. It's basically anywhere someone may encounter the New York Times that is not the owned and operated platforms.

Also, I should say social as we know we usually think about kind of big public platforms. This is happening right now, but there's going to be a lot less I think one to many sharing a much more one to few, one to one sharing. So, you're seeing that kind of more niche sharing happen which poses a different set of challenges.

Kathleen McElroy: Okay that makes sense. I mean you're talking about challenges and one of the challenges is just being at the New York Times, right? I mean you touched on that a little bit. There's an extra bit of pressure to get things right isn't there?

Millie Tran: Yeah, I've been hiring for our team and someone asked me what was the most annoying thing about being at the Times and the most annoying and hardest thing is that there's a very little room for error, right? There's no margin for error.

You get something wrong and like 20 people will write about it. You delete a tweet and 20 news organizations will write about it, and I think that pressure some people like it others don't, but it's just something we have to live with and it just kind of forces you to anticipate and try your best and hopefully have it be your best.

Kathleen McElroy: Yeah, but I know when I was there a long time ago, another problem was that the Times was like the Queen Mary. It did not move that rapidly or elegantly or some of those challenges still out there even though it's a leaner newsroom.

Millie Tran: So, I've been at the Times for about two years now and I should say even within my two years I feel like so much has changed about how we function as a newsroom. It's really quite incredible. I've never worked at a newspaper or legacy organization before and it's really easy to start things. It's easy to build things when there's there's nothing you have to address, right? And I think the challenge with the Times and a lot news organizations is that you take two steps and then take one step back and it's that constant negotiation and it's culture change, right?

And what I learned about culture change which is a new challenge for me is it's just the grind of day to day work. You just have to put in the work and you have to take the long view. Otherwise it can get frustrating because you think I'm doing this thing why am I not seeing x, y, z.

Kathleen McElroy: You just dropped something a minute or two ago like you know, when I'm hiring people or I'm in the process of hiring...

Millie Tran: Please apply!

Kathleen McElroy: Millie, tell us about these openings. What are you looking for? Who are you looking for?

Millie Tran: This is great! Basically, I think I've watched kind of the flow of people starting as home page editors, and then being social editors, and being mobile editors or app editors, and I think what we're seeing now is what we need our editors. People who have good news judgment, who can write good clean engaging copy, and who love the internet or at least curious about the Internet and all these different platforms.

So, you know I think those are the core values to me. It's like, can you spot a good story? Do you know when to run a story? Can you write well? And do you have that like news value? And also do you love the internet? Are you curious about how people get and share information?

So, you know I was saying that in looking to hire, I'm not really looking at like have you been a social editor before. I just want to know if you've been an editor and are curious about social.

Kathleen McElroy: Ok maybe I could apply.

Millie Tran: Yeah, you would be great.

Kathleen McElroy: OK, but I only have about 40 apps... Actually I have about 80. Tell them how many apps you have on your phone.

Millie Tran: I think it's like almost up to like 350 maybe 400. I'm an information maximalist, I don't get overwhelmed with more information, I just believe in having good filters.

Kathleen McElroy: You must! So, another thing that you brought up is that some of the things the Times does that smaller outlets can do the same thing, you brought up one example what are some of the other things?

Millie Tran: So, I think because I worked at the American Press Institute where we worked with newsrooms across the country my constant mission is to say what can we replicate, what can we share. We even did this at BuzzFeed when we were launching the news app. We were constantly writing about our process of launching the news app, what we learned.

And I think a lot of times these lessons are very replicable and I think it's about understanding how things work and then applying it to your specific newsroom or community or audience, right? I think we know what the best practices are. Tom's going to love this, but I also like www.betternews.org is amazing. It has so many resources about kind of best practices for the newsroom.

So, I think a lot of that knowledge is there and to me it's really about the day to day execution and like executing really well on those. The two examples I shared were what about taking in signals from search and social and kind of using them and applying your own organizations news value to them, and then the other one was about kind of reaching niche communities or new audiences that you don't already reach, and those are applicable to any news organization.

Kathleen McElroy: Well, it works well. By the way, we will be taking questions if you want to start going to the side to ask Millie something.

Millie Tran: We have a ball, or cube I'm sorry.

Kathleen McElroy: Oh, OK.

Millie Tran: Oh my God. This is really terrifying.

Kathleen McElroy: So, if you had someone who could spend the next two years of his or her life researching something, what would that be? Someone who would you know... they'd be using theory, a literature review.

Millie Tran: I feel like I'm in Black Mirror, what are you laughing at? So, I should say in undergrad I wrote my senior thesis on cyber war. That was almost a decade ago and I feel like I was way ahead of the curve.

I'm sorry to miss it because I could be cyberwar consultant, but I think right now my current obsession is truly how people spread information. I think that there's this shift that we're going to begin to see about from like public sharing to more community sharing or smaller groups and smaller walled gardens. If you think about WhatsApp groups or Facebook groups that's where a lot of the misinformation starts. Like you think about the story about measles and vaccinations, a lot of that is happening in smaller closed communities and that's a challenge because it's hard. Like, how do you research that better?

Kathleen McElrot: We can figure that out.

Millie Tran: Yeah it's great. I would love to read that.

Kathleen McElroy: Who wants it? There you go. Oh nice.

Audience: I have a question about technology and tools. So, when you are watching the signals on social for news demand sharing this information with your your newsroom for news coverage topics and also measuring the feedback loop that you're getting like what are your favorite sites or tools or technology that you're using to watch and measure.

Millie Tran: I actually did a New York Times post about all the tools I'm using, but for social we use CrowdTangle, we used News web, also Twitter and Facebook obviously. For a search we're using Google Search a lot. There's so many tools. Obviously Chartbeat is something we use a lot too. We use great internal tools too.

Getting the information is not the challenging part, right? The challenging part is synthesizing and analyzing and saying like this is worth it, this is not, this is what I'm going to send to an editor and say it's worth pursuing or worth covering more deeply.

Audience: I want you to expand on your one to one communication thing because as a social person one to one is the hardest to get into and be authentically in there not like: "hi, I'm a journalist I'm going to invade your WhatsApp conversation and

it's totally all on the record now. Definitely just keep saying what you're saying." I think there's a lot of pitfalls to that. I'm curious to what you think journalists role is in that versus just the publics in general.

Millie Tran: So, I don't pretend to have any answers to this. I think it's less one to one, but like how many group chats are we in? I feel like my Facebook notification is just like all Facebook group notifications. It's much less like me communicating on my wall or something, but I think what you're getting at is how do reporters come into that, how do editors come into that, and I think that's where you see the value of the reporting really play a role.

The value of really knowing the community you're covering, the value of being able to jump in a conversation and actually truly participate in it versus just parachuting in and pretending to... it's very clear when you jump into a conversation just for the news versus coming at it having done the work, having known the problems deeply. So, I think that and I think the focus on reporters and the things they care about and know deeplee about well is in parallel with changing user behavior. That's that's my best guess anyway.

Audience: Oh hello. My question is how are you helping the audience be prepared to interact with Times journalists? What is the value to them that if they have a closed WhatsApp group to say: yeah I'm going to let this reporter in. I don't have a relationship with them, but I'm gonna go out on a limb? And then how is the Times kind of repaying them and help other than just giving them information, but saying: we trust you too, we want you to have this relationship?

Millie Tran: We talked about comments sections earlier and like truly one of the more delightful comments sections on the Internet is like around our New York Times products, whether it's like cooking or just on our article we have an amazing reader centered team that moderates a lot of those, and one of the amazing things is that there's such expertise in those comments and from our readership, and I think we can probably do more actively thinking about how we can use that a little bit.

So, it's not just a one way street right so I think I think that's one thing. I'm excited to see how this plays out with our new parenting products because that's such an

intimate thing and it's about very personal topics about like how to raise your children, it can be about vaccinations, it can be about education, it's a lot of really personal things, so I'm excited to see how we get that too.

Audience: Hi there! I wanted to ask about the position that you've had. You said previously both weren't like established positions, so I'm just curious how those came about if it was something that like you were pitching yourself for a team or basically like what was the genesis of those two opportunities for you?

Millie Tran: I'm embarrassed to say that I also have a slideshow and presentation on this, but you know... I very much think about jobs as problems to solve and I think with those two roles I talked about whether as the director of global adaptation role or the global growth editor role at the times they are about specific problems that those news organizations were trying to solve.

So, another thing most job list things are a best guess at someone trying to solve a problem, right? So, if you can take that and kind of reverse engineer to say like what are they trying to do, and what is actually the problem they're trying to solve, and how can I with my skills or experience fit into that, and why I may be the best candidate for that, that's how. In the middle of a job posting you can just go straight to the problem and say this is why I'm the best person to solve this problem which I think you may have.

Kathleen McElroy: So, I think that was our last question. Well, I have one question. So, Nipsey Hussle was fairly like a lot of people knew about him, but do you find that you're making sure that you're looking at the social channels beyond like Black Twitter that you're getting real engagement with communities. I guess you could consider Nebraska and underrepresented community in that sense, but yeah, how are you making sure that you're not just getting the same types of voices?

Millie Tran: I think that's where it's really important. I don't know if I emphasize this when I was talking about Nebraska and the flood stories or Nipsey Hussle for that matter, but we send reporters all over the country and the world to talk to

people. We also had this great piece from The Upshot last week about how the Democratic electorate on Twitter is not the Democratic electorate in real life.

[00:36:57] And I think that's really important to remember the limits of platforms and if you go look at Pew's reports about the percentage of Americans on certain platforms, that's where you have to remember you can't extrapolate and that's where I recommend thinking fast and slow because it's all about our biases, and we are prone to think about the small numbers where minority of loud voices can kind of overtake the conversation.

So, that's why it's really important to talk to people on the ground in real life not to say that Twitter isn't real life, it's just a kind of small slice of it. So, again this is why getting the signals is the easy part, it's really synthesizing and understanding the value of each because oftentimes it's like if something pops up on Black Twitter that doesn't mean it's less important because it is.

Kathleen McElroy: And it may not actually represent it. So, you know the African-American population thought.

Millie Tran: You constantly have to take in these signals and apply news judgment which is why I think that's so important and critical to any of these roles.

Kathleen McElroy: Well, thank you so much Millie.