

ISOJ 2019: Day 2, Afternoon Session
Covering an Online President: White House Press Corps in the Age of Twitter

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- **Yamiche Alcindor**, **White House correspondent**, **PBS NewsHour**
- **Kimberly Atkins**, **Washington correspondent**, **WBUR**
- **Jonathan Lemire**, **White House reporter**, **Associated Press**
- **Eli Stokols**, **White House reporter**, **Los Angeles Times**

Evan Smith: All right. So Rosental was asking me to fill the time so I'm going to go ahead and introduce the program that we have today and introduce our panelists and then they'll come out. We'll sit down, we'll get started. We're going to talk for a while. We'll take your questions. This would be the grand finale of this great conference once again giving Rosental a big hand for what he put together.

So I am Evan Smith. I am pleased to welcome our four distinguished guests to Austin folks. I really like and especially admire excellent journalists all carefully chosen and perfectly suited to answer the question that is the premise of this session's title. What is it like to cover the first truly online president? In our lifetimes, journalism has surely changed and politics has surely changed. The art and science of being a political reporter has surely changed. And both sides of the bad aspect of being a political figure, covered by the press, the offense and the defense, have surely changed. God knows the White House and its relationship with the press has surely changed. Whether merely for now or forever remains to be seen. Sitting squarely at the center of the confluence of these changes is Donald Trump who always wants us to talk about him and so we will. What does his utilizing or some would say weaponization of the online space to conduct the serious business of the United States mean for the work we all do. And for the public we all serve. That is our question today.

So let me introduce our panelists. We'll have them come out altogether and we'll sit. Yamiche Alcindor is the White House correspondent for the PBS NewsHour. She is also an NBC News and MSNBC contributor, come on out. She came to the news outlets from The New York Times where she was a national reporter writing about social issues and politics particularly the intersection of race and politics. A native of Miami she has an undergraduate degree from Georgetown University and a master's degree from New York University. Kimberly Adkins is a senior news correspondent for WBUR Boston's NPR station, reporting on national political news from Washington D.C.. She too is an MSNBC contributor, previously she was Washington bureau chief of The Boston Herald. A native of Detroit, she's a graduate of Wayne State University, Boston University School of Law, Boston University School of Communications and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Jonathan Lumiere is White House

reporter for The Associated Press and an NBC News and MSNBC political analyst. He's covered Donald Trump all the way back to June 2015 and the Trump Tower kickoff. He previously spent more than a decade as a reporter at The New York Daily News covering the 2012 presidential campaign City Hall and the 9/11 attacks. He is a native of Massachusetts and a graduate of Columbia University. Finally Eli Stokols who is White House reporter for The Los Angeles Times and an MSNBC political analyst. He previously covered the Trump administration and the 2016 presidential election for the Wall Street Journal. He's also been a reporter at Politico. He's a native of Irvine, California has an undergraduate degree from University of California Berkeley and a master's degree from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Please welcome our distinguished guests. Give him a big applause.

Thank you for being here. Very much. So let's begin this unintentional meeting of the Columbia University Alumni Association. Yamiche and I are left out of this sadly. By asking you whether the job has turned out the way you expected. Substantively what you cover and practically how you cover it. Is it different Eli from how you thought it would be?

Eli Stokols: Well this is the first time I've been a White House reporter so I didn't- I covered the Obama administration, the Bush administration like some of the colleagues who we work with at the White House.

Smith: But you covered him.

Stokols: I have. Yes I have a suspicion that what we're doing with this administration is little different than what our predecessors experience in terms of the way the days play out and the sort of the- I mean, yes it's different than any other White House before. But having covered the campaign, having followed Donald Trump, it's about what you expect in terms of the complete lack of process and internally the fact that you can try to report around and figure out what he's going to do. But at this point I mean maybe at the beginning people advisers would say oh yeah he's gonna do this he's getting out of the Paris Accords and it would come true or sometimes it wouldn't. We're at a point now where you talk to most people and they say I think he's gonna do this but I don't really know. I mean it is very much an imperial presidency now. Much like his businesses were.

Smith: Right.

Stokols: This is a guy who just has a very small circle around and doesn't trust anybody wants to be the focus and that's how that's how this administration runs and I think that you know on Election Night 2016 when we realized he was going to win I think most of us were surprised.

Smith: There's really no playbook right for that. I mean the fact Eli says imperial presidency we also hear chaos presidency and in some ways this has been chaos journalism. Has it not for the last two years?

Kimberly Adkins: Yes because the major way that it's different in my experience is you could sort of get into a rhythm covering other administrations from the White House on down. I've covered you know from school boards all the way up and each one you sort of understand that you get into a rhythm you get you understand how things are going to play out. You can plan- you could do things like plan your week in a way that with this presidency you absolutely cannot because you don't know what's coming one day to the next. One of the fundamental differences about this administration covering it as a journalist that I found is that in the past I realize now I could take for granted some certain things like I could take for granted that information that I got from the White House unless there was some glaring reason to believe that it wasn't true was true I could do things like look at a transcript that was provided and not question it in a way. Now you see officials and you talk to officials who you know sometimes are telling you something that's not true. You know that it's not true. And you know but they know that you know that it's not true.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Adkins: But they're still telling these things to you. And you have to make completely different judgments as to how you use information. I mean I won't take a transcript from any administration source without actually having seen the person say that tape the person say that or see a video of what exactly that person says.

Smith: You have to fact check the fact check.

Adkins: You have to fact check everything and you can't take anything for granted which creates a lot more work and also really changes- I mean I am currently and for the last two jobs that I've had have been a one person Washington bureau and I have to be very careful about how I allocate my time because I cover a lot of things. I stopped going to White House briefings because I just found that it's an exercise in futility.

Smith: Well I want to come back to the way that the White House- that's a good thing to look forward to. The concept of the White House briefing today and how that works. John, Kim describes the new normal but really it's the new abnormal, right? There's nothing normal about it except for the fact that we've normalized this abnormal aspect of all of our jobs.

Jonathan Lumiere: Right and also Kim the cancellation of the White House press briefing-

Adkins: Right, It solves the problem.

Smith: Ceased to exist basically right.

Lumiere: But yeah there's no question, we've never seen a president like this before, we've never seen the administration before, never seen Washington run like this before. This is exactly what Donald Trump has always been. Here's a thought that the presidency would change Donald Trump. Instead Donald Trump has changed the presidency, at least temporarily. This is how he ran his business. It's how he ran his campaign. Right. You said I was there from day one.

Smith: You're a tabloid reporter in an era when Donald Trump was a celebrity a fixture of those.

Lumiere: I covered him at times at the New York Daily News just about Donald Trump man in the news, New York celebrity who weighs in on this or that. Donald Trump on Celebrity Apprentice and so on like that and stuff that we would care about to a degree. And he has not changed. He still cares about the same things he cares about being in the news. He cares about generating headlines. He doesn't necessarily care if they're good or bad headlines. He just wants to be talked about. And we've had as a news media had to adjust to that and we have had- and I think it has been a struggle at times to try to sort of recognize how we cover this. How do we accept that what he is saying cannot necessarily take it at face value and we really fact check every word he says. One thing we get a lot is whether we've had previously had Oval Office interviews with him or we've had moments where we've encountered him in the you know in his pool spray. We've got a gaggle of reporters or a chance to talk to the president whether it's at home or on an international trip. It's like well why don't you, he said something that's not true readers will say or people on Twitter will opine, like why do you not stop him? You can't actually interrupt everything he says he is still the President of the United States and you have to have a balance between holding him accountable but also like he is still the president what he says to some degree even if it's not true is still news and has to be covered and it has to be covered in the correct way.

Smith: Yamiche, you're the one who kind of came from the outside to the inside right. You had been a campaign reporter, you covered the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump campaigns in 2016 but you were not a White House reporter until you became the correspondent for The NewsHour in January of last year.

Yamiche Alcindor: Yeah I spent most of my time covering Bernie Sanders in 2016. So I covered the tail end of the Trump campaign. And for me I remember when I started getting into political reporting I had this thought where, ok before I was covering breaking news and hurricanes and natural disasters and I'm going to a subject matter where there's schedules and people know everyone's going to be and there's kind of a way that people are going to cover politics and that's

kind of blown up. It's almost like covering a hurricane every day because every single day you have no idea if the White House schedule is going to change. You have no idea if there's going to be an impromptu briefing or an impromptu moment where the president's going to say something. I think I would agree with pretty much everything that they said, which is that you have to not only fact check everything but I also think that media organizations are deciding what's worth fact checking because you can't fact check everything. And I think now we're realizing that you also can't fact check every Tweet, every Tweet doesn't matter. I think in the first six months news organizations were struggling to figure out how to cover the president's Twitter. I remember back in the day I had never covered President Obama but we all made a big deal if it was signed B.O. Remember those days? Oh Obama really typed that one out! That seems hilarious. But I also think that as someone who wasn't covering politics to me I wrote a couple of stories about this. President Trump for a lot of people in this country feels like someone that they know, either your uncle or a teacher or someone that kind of feels like someone who likes reality TV, who eats fast food who doesn't always tell the truth sometimes, but who is still kind of popular and charismatic and people kind of like to listen to him. I think he's a reflection of America in a lot of ways. And I think that we're I think we're all learning a little bit more about America as we cover President Trump.

[00:11:43] **Smith** Is there a difference here between the way you covered or would have covered a person like the president for print versus television? So we have a TV reporter principally. I mean nobody is any one thing anymore. You're all on television for instance but we have a TV reporter. We have a radio reporter. We have a print reporter and we have a wire service reporter. So we have four different types of reporters. I'm wondering if there is a difference in the way that you cover this president for TV versus for print.

[00:12:10] **Alcindor** Well as you mentioned this is my only President I've covered ever so I've only been covering it for TV. But I will say that I mean obviously TV has restrictions on time. So one of the biggest lessons that I learned was just this idea that you might have 12 hundred words in print to write about all the different nuances and things that happened. I think of just talking about what happened this week. This idea of bussing immigrant detainees into sanctuary cities. There was a whole thing that you can do in print where you have contexts where you can talk about the rallies talk about maybe even interview families of immigrant detainees and in TV if you have a half or two minutes you really are covering the president said, well the news broke, the White House said that night that this is loaded and rejected. Said it again that morning. Then the president said he tweeted, actually that's not true we're still looking at it. And then he said actually in the Oval Office we're really looking at this. This might be a really great idea. So you have, you know, I think there's a little bit less context for TV because you're just trying to move things along but you also have to be more efficient. So I think I love TV in some ways because you do get to learn you at the best TV reporters give you some of that context and some of that nuance while also making it short and sweet.

[00:13:21] **Smith** So Yamiche is reporting for everybody because the News Hour is for everybody and the wire service the Associated Press and other wires are also for everybody because your stuff could run all over the country. You're writing for a national audience.

[00:13:33] **Lumiere** Right and certainly the biggest difference between covering for TV or print for me is I wear a lot more makeup on TV.

[00:13:40] **Alcindor** And fake eyelashes?

[00:13:41] **Lumiere** Once a while.

[00:13:43] **Smith** You're revealing secrets that we don't know about MSNBC.

[00:13:48] **Lumiere** But I think that the AP you're right is that we were writing about this president for the country and for the world. So there's a degree of sometimes we have to in a broader sense or make sure we rely on those context paragraphs because we want to be. It's not necessarily like a Politico where you kind of understand who the audience is and they read it or to employ those wonderful people. But you know they certainly have a Beltway centric viewpoint at times.

[00:14:10] **Smith** You are writing for a mass, maybe the most mass audience.

[00:14:13] **Lumiere** That's right and you know we also do is is that because the wire has always been what it is we're in some ways we're more adept and well adjusted to cover someone who makes news so immediately the Twitter aspect of this is that's sort of what we've always been is trying to move quickly and move fast and sometimes and very brief if we need to. But even for us the speed of this president, the way he careens from headline to headline, the way he changes the story so many times in a single not just day but our hour. It's not a news cycle anymore, it's a news minute. A former adviser has said to me once that like he's concerned he's not looking to win that news day. He's trying to win that moment that actually that interaction. He is so certain he wants to change the Kyra on the bottom.

[00:15:00] **Smith** And as you say the wire service mentality or approach is perfect for that.

[00:15:05] **Lumiere** It is. But there are other challenges too. I will say one thing that we've come across is that yes certainly we're moving towards an AP News alert right at just one hundred and thirty characters whatever might be you know we're trying to capture what he said but sometimes what he says is not true. Well you say something where he says something that requires that feature. So that's been adjusted for us so we've had to learn on the fly that we're trying to be fast.

We're trying to get it out to the global audience as quickly as we can but we can't just regurgitate what he says because that could be very misleading.

[00:15:34] **Smith** Now Kim is your audience in Boston blue America. Yes you are. Your audience is California bluest America. Right. So rather than these you know-Yamiche and Jon are thinking about the country you are primarily focused on your slice of it and in particular they're not Trump it's not Trump country. Kim right that's it.

[00:15:54] **Adkins** It is not. I mean but it's but it's also not Massachusetts and New England isn't quite as homogenous as they get credit for. I mean you have a lot of people- there have been changes there. For example the Republicans that they sent a Republican to the Senate not too long ago and the Republicans who were.

[00:16:14] **Smith** Just reelected a Republican governor.

[00:16:16] **Adkins** Right. A Republican governor you have a section of the south shore of Massachusetts people who are familiar with Trump country and a lot of ways and the people who have challenged folks like Elizabeth Warren's challenger or who didn't really come close but he was full on MAGA. So you have pockets of that throughout there. But you also have one thing that is interesting working for a local publication: a local news organization. I keep saying public occasions because I came from newspapers. You think about how these things impact you. So one thing that happened this week with there is this town Somerville in Massachusetts just north of Boston which has a very vocal open self-described sanctuary city by the mayor. So when Donald Trump engages in these types of rhetoric this type of policy has a direct immediate effect. And you have people at the White House who will engage you know locally with these folks and you're really bringing those voices in or when different policies come up a lot of things. Right. Talks about health care we talk about what Mitt Romney did in Massachusetts. So it's a way of sort of talking about the local impact of not what the policies and the rhetoric coming out of the White House are, how that's working, that's my job in that. And then on the MSNBC side it's a much broader, more analytical view toward places like Massachusetts. But understand kind of put this all in context for folks who aren't within the Beltway what this means.

[00:17:47] **Smith** And Eli- I like the analogy that the Somerville thing is great because in the moment your job is going to pivot off of exactly how what you cover affects- you have sanctuary cities in California, Eli You know the first line of the story about the president's plan was we're going to dump all these undocumented folks in Nancy Pelosi's district up in San Francisco right.

[00:18:08] **Stokols** Right. And I think you know for the L.A. Times which is having to say a sort of revived growing organization out.

[00:18:14] **Smith** People on the way back up.

[00:18:16] **Stokols** You know we've added a lot of people really trying to figure out what the paper is. And I think you know it's in this spot between being a large regional paper and a small national paper and trying to figure out which stories do we have to chase where our resources best spent. It's not so much that when you've covered Trump and you think well my audience is a bunch of California liberals so I can really I can really hit him hard here right as more thinking. OK. Immigration is a story that really matters to our real point right. That's a place where we're going to go hard and we've hired a person in our bureau in D.C. just to focus on immigration related stuff and the White House reporters work with her a lot. We also have an environment environmental reporter covering climate change so we work with them a lot. You're really trying to figure out when you're covering something that the presidency of Donald Trump is so over-covered. I mean you turn on any cable network right now. You are gonna hear Trump there's there's no room on cable news anymore for poop cruises or for I mean you remember that when the cruise ship was out at sea. I mean that like dominated CNN's coverage, that doesn't make that doesn't break through now, Donald Trump is his ratings. And so you're competing. I mean everybody can write the same story about his tweets. And I think as we point out we do that less now. We've adjusted to that. Everybody can run fact checks and point out that what the president is saying is not true. And it's still important to do that because he is the president, has the loudest megaphone in the world and you have to point out when he says things that are not true. But you also have to look at this really competitive overcovered beat. How do you add value and that can be that can be a challenge when you have a president who every day is throwing dozens of tennis balls for us to chase?

[00:19:56] **Smith** Well you know, Yamiche, Jon said correctly that it's not even everyday any longer. It's every hour or so every minute. We used to talk about the 24 hour news cycle as an innovation. Now it's like a 24 second news cycle is it not. I mean we're at a point where nothing gets any hang time on television on the front page of papers. And these are stories that in another era would have been dominating the news for days. They happened and we pushed them aside five seconds later. That's got to change the calculation doesn't it.

[00:20:25] **Alcindor** I think it changes the calculation, but I also think news organizations are getting better at finding ways to follow up on that. Look, I'm thinking at some point I'm going to read a really good story, possibly my panel might not have the time to do it myself but there's going to be some sort of good story about what would the resources mean to take. What would it take to actually bust these immigrants to sanctuary cities? Where does that money come from? What would that actually mean from an actual functional logistical point of view? I think there's ways for us to follow up on that and I think that's the power of having multiple news organizations looking at the same thing. I think there's someone in the newsroom somewhere across the country saying we need to assign someone just to that story. So I think newsrooms are

getting smarter about not just letting the president dominate what we end up talking about. I think we are about three or four years into almost every week being about the subject that President Trump wants to talk about and that I think as news organizations we're starting to think, ok well how do we back away from that? Remember everybody remembers Infrastructure Week happened like five or six times and journalists were like It's not infrastructure we like it's just that.

[00:21:32] **Stokols** It's always infrastructure week.

[00:21:36] **Alcindor** Ad the infrastructure has still not happened. The infrastructure bill still hasn't happened. So I think that journalists are getting better at that.

[00:21:43] **Smith** Kim has this change in pace , the kind of Indiana Jones outrunning the boulder aspect of political journalism, is that about him or is that about it? In other words if it were not for him, would this change be something we'd be talking about? Is this specific to him or is this really about how journalism has changed the news creation and the news consumption environment?

[00:22:08] **Adkins** Yeah I think it's all of the above. I mean it's certainly being driven by this president who has completely upended the way the presidency is covered. But I think it also very much reflects on the news industry as a whole and different news outlets. I mean I came from a daily tabloid newspaper which happened to have been filed for bankruptcy and sold and lost 70 percent of its staff. And I was the White House reporter and you know we have no budget. We had no anything.

[00:22:43] **Smith** One woman show.

[00:22:44] **Adkins** I was a one woman show in Washington. And so I would try to do some of these stories. Hey, I want to see how this policy might work or play out. And I would pitch that. My editor would say that's great. And then Trump would tweet. And it's a good cover for that. And there was literally no bandwidth for a paper like us to compete and we were- I was at the Boston Herald there's the Boston Globe which had a whole bureau right. It was really hard to compete in that way. And it's a lot better now than when I am at an NPR affiliate that has a budget that has a full staff. That is, it has editors that will give me time to flesh out a story and really get to beyond the daily tweets and really get to how this policy is going to impact people. And that's been a really big change. But not every news organization has that luxury and I think what you're seeing is a lot of people just trying to stay ahead trying to stay on top. But a lot of good journalism is happening right now. I mean you guys there are a lot of publications who are taking time talking. Now you see the stories out of the Times or The Post and it's like what

would after talking to 32 administration officials over you know about this really gives you a deeply reported pet portrait of what's happening inside this White House. I think it depends.

[00:24:05] **Smith** You make a good point. Eli, Kim's making the point that the economic distress of the business trickles down to the bandwidth and the human resources available to chase some of the stuff that might get you off of the treadmill. Right The Times and The Post are great examples but there are exceptions that prove the rule right. There are unusual cases; maybe the L.A. Times will be another one of those cases very soon as you say you're hiring everybody that the Atlantic is not hiring at the moment right. But in the typical newsroom the ability to do that is just not there.

[00:24:38] **Stokols** Right. But you're also seeing you know this moment and I think television really plays into that because we're all on television several times a week if not several times a day. You see this sort of moment and it's played on television which is the medium that matters to the president. But you see on television there's almost the celebration of reporters covering this White House to the point where every story is played as if it's a huge Woodward and Bernstein scoop and everything is Watergate. And you sort of lose the sense of proportionality. I think one of the I mean that's partly because this is aberrational in the entire American experience. And we're in this crazy cultural moment and everything is shaken up. And so it's hard to sort of in real time make the right decisions as far as resources and coverage. But in terms of economic incentives, I mean with the exception of where Yamiche works, we're all working to make money, you're working for public television. And a lot of days-

[00:25:31] **Adkins** I work for public radio.

[00:25:32] **Stokols** OK, you're right, so two of us.

[00:25:35] **Smith** Also he's a non-profit also buddy. You were this close.

[00:25:43] **Alcindor** It still matters though how many people are watching.

[00:25:51] **Stokols** But you know my point is that on the whole the economic incentives for- I mean I've heard Jeff Zucker say you know when we stopped covering Trump people change the channel and so I think that applies not just to television.

[00:26:03] In other words he's right that he's the best thing that happened to the news and Trump is right and he ratings politics and everything.

[00:26:08] **Stokols** I think that's one of the things that is hard. You know you want to go off and do enterprise. You want to not follow every tennis ball that he throws out there and yet you

know. I mean I've been in a situation where editors in the morning will say Oh you don't need to cover that. And then throughout the day you know the tweet and then throughout the day it will kind of grow into something and then it becomes a big story and it's like that's a story the editors want you to end up back in this. They want my name on it. They don't want Jon's name on it right. They're paying us to cover the White House so they don't want to take it as a wire copyright. So then sometimes you get taken off of your enterprise story. Your stories are great. I'm just sad. For my editors. But the point you know so the point is sometimes even if you have the right intentions I think the economic model for a lot of these for my paper and everybody who's not on this panel. But it's hard to sort of, you know, step back and say OK I'm going to do this.

[00:27:01] **Alcindor** I think we can also say something that maybe is. The president is still an interesting thing that's happening. I remember covering that Bernie Sanders campaign. And you're working like everyone else on the campaign. It's 17-18 hour days. I remember having like I used to dedicate one hour a day to TV because I like TV and it relaxes me. And then I would probably get off the bus and get to this hotel and have like a 5:00 a.m. call time. So it's like midnight and you're looking at literally five hours, maybe four hours. I flip on the channel and there will be a Trump rally going on. And I'd find myself just staring at the television and it's not my beat. This is not something that I'm covering. I'm literally taking this as a viewer and I just back up and what's happening? What did you say? And to me it's just it's the nature of it. That's why it's interesting. So as much as it's people can say you know we. The president is being covered too much. There's actually the fact that like even when he was a candidate he was interesting. And now that you see a president who you know has so much power saying all sorts of things I mean when they were floating taking away birthright citizenship. These are these super important topics that even if they're being dealt out on Twitter there is actually governance. He's governing on Twitter so you can't ignore the tweets either because when you change the transgender policy for military and that's a tweet it's a big deal for a lot of people.

[00:28:20] **Smith** It is like that Twitter feed you know a statement from the president and I mean this is actually the fact that it comes from him matters. You talked about 17 hours to say I want to ask you to view the time that you're working because we know you from television. Maybe first we see you sometimes first of the day on TV and we see you sometimes last of the day on TV. This is a very different job than it would have been a generation ago in many respects but in that respect what would you say on average, kind of a snappy answer, how many hours a day are you working to do this job?

[00:28:54] **Lumiere** I mean there are days where it can be working starting at 6:00 a.m. for a TV show but even if you're not you're up-

[00:29:01] **Smith** You are watching other people on that right.

[00:29:02] **Lumiere** Exactly right. So I mean these days can be 12, 14, 16, 18 hour days.

[00:29:09] **Stokols** Yeah I mean you never really shut off and the funny thing about President Trump is that you get the daily schedule and it says oh the president has his briefing at 10:00 a.m. or whatever and he has a little thing at two. But you know by now that he does most of his damage or that that makes the most news. I think it would be most noteworthy when he's unsupervised, so early in the morning when he's watching TV or late at night. So you just executive take on all the time. I mean you make plans to go out to dinner and then you know you wind up looking at your phone like a jerk the whole time because that's when-

[00:29:39] **Smith** Kim you made the point about the White House briefing right about this being meaningless. The fact is that the mechanics of covering this president are both less structured and weirdly more structured because you know that anytime as Eli says a bomb could go off write a journalism bomb could go off. .

[00:29:56] **Adkins** And that affects everything else right. I mean I spend a good amount of time on Capitol Hill too. And in response to all of this you will then have members of Congress who you know are doing things and you're running around chasing them to get reactions or different things so every day you literally in the morning. My routine is generally speaking in the morning at seven or eight o'clock. I'll e-mail my editors and say hey this is what I'm working on today and invariably by noon that has changed it's completely changed. It's totally changed.

[00:30:25] **Smith** John you talked about the cancellation of the White House press briefing. That is abnormal. Compared to previous administrations right there was a little bit more standard way of operating in terms of the White House press corps. Is that necessarily a bad thing? Is access to the staff in that context overrated? Is anything coming out of those briefings?

[00:30:46] **Lumiere** I mean the answer is we are always going to want more access to officials so that the answer is yes we want the press.

[00:30:53] **Smith** Do you have less access to officials because the staged theatrical White House press briefing is no longer?

[00:31:00] **Lumiere** Well I think that there are a couple of things at play here. First yes there are amendments for the White House press briefing felt like he was being turned into a television show where whether it was the press secretary and the blindfold him or sometimes even some of the reporters in the in the seats you know they more than sometimes we're trying to like to become part of the story become part of it. And that's not that that's not what those things are meant to do. But there are you know the Trump administration is sort of notoriously slow for

engaging with you know if you have questions and sometimes it can be very basic things like What is this bill about or what's the president doing tomorrow, things like that.

[00:31:35] **Smith** Noticeably slower than previous.

[00:31:37] **Lumiere** No question. Much much slower and you know and part of that is born from the press from people who work in the White House being sort of afraid to get out ahead of the president because they might be contradicted at any time. This is a great example this week of course the sanctuary city busing example where they said to reporters this is not an active under active consideration. And the very next day the president tweeted that overall he said they were. Looking at the White House press consultation is a firm believer in these press briefings. We feel like there's a chance it's not just for us but for the American people to hear you know they're representative of the government. You know they're paying for that building they're paying for that podium. They should be able to get their questions answered in terms of and it's not just doing this I mean the palace intrigue but like it's policy that impacts a lot of Americans or international policy it affects the world. So yes we would still like that to happen. There are of course other ways to interact with Trump officials to get answers other ways other by other means. But I think the briefing as flawed as they may be is something I think we still want to prevent.

[00:32:32] **Smith** One of the criticisms was when the briefings were happening on a more regular interval because what happened is there were sort of semi regular briefings and then it sort of dropped off to the point where there were weeks and weeks with no briefing. These people say OK there's a briefing so Sarah Sanders gets up at the podium and then some say she simply lies, doesn't tell the truth, doesn't give facts that are usable in the context of journalism. Maybe not having a briefing is actually better than having to do that.

[00:32:59] **Alcindor** I think I would I would echo what Jonathan said which is that in the White House Press Corps Association and White House Correspondents Association believe that briefings matter and they have having a set time to sit down and have the American public hear the question watched the administration engage with media is important because even if you say even if Sarah Sanders says something that's not true. You don't have to hear- you have to say oh well there's a helicopter going by so maybe she didn't really hear the question or maybe you know there was some confusion there because there were so many people jostling. I mean we've gone to the point now where most of that information you see on TV from gaggles as we call them, we've been saying gaggles which is basically a group of reporters questioning an official, is happening maybe 30 feet from the briefing room. So we're talking to Sara Sidner as she's walking back into our office and we could literally just go into the briefing room and actually have a conversation. I think the key thing to remember is it's a lot harder to dodge a question if you one are sitting in an actual space where everyone has heard the question and everyone's

waiting for your answer. Also I think the idea that other journalists can follow up if Sarah Sanders doesn't say something. It's a lot easier to do in a briefing so I think at first the White House press corps was getting criticized and criticized for not asking and not pushing Sarah Sanders on questions. I think we we started to see over the months and months and months that if Jonathan asked a question and it wasn't clearly answer that how he just were asked a question then maybe I would ask it and someone else would ask if it's an important question then Senator Edwards might say this the fate of my answering it and maybe we'd finally get something that's a little bit clearer.

[00:34:33] **Smith** There is something lost or something missing.

[00:34:35] **Alcindor** I think so.

[00:34:36] **Smith** In the disappearance for now or forever of this instant.

[00:34:40] **Lumiere** Just very quickly realized that you're actually right. It's the setting; it 's just these wild scrums in the driveway where senators jet or whatever officials. It's much easier for them to dodge five questions as opposed to sitting in a briefing room. Let's be fair President Trump does engage with reporters and takes more questions from reporters than his predecessors. He does that.

[00:34:57] **Smith** The fact is all the criticism he is more available to you all on a kind of catch as catch can bases there as an Obama was right over here.

[00:35:04] **Lumiere** So he is. He takes questions in the Oval Office he takes questions every time he leaves the White House. He goes up to the south lawn and you read the background as you said the helicopter rotors going so it's sort of hard to hear but that's part of it. He takes questions but he takes them in settings often not all the time but often where he's able to kind of just not do the ones he doesn't want to. It's harder to sort of pin him down on something because it's not in a controlled setting.

[00:35:29] **Adkins** It also makes it more likely that you can get a question. I mean like I said. I will sometimes go when he meets with some other head of state and there will be some sort of press. Those are valuable to go to because you never know when he will take questions or some other sort of press availability where you've all seen it. At times it turns into this hour and a half long thing you'll get up there start having fun and then you might actually get to ask a question. I think that's important to know. It's also important to note that other administrations have not exactly been press friendly. I mean this isn't a situation where the White House has been really open and responsive to the press and all of a sudden you have these people who are shutting down press briefings and telling reporters things that aren't true. I've never seen this level of

lying but it was really hard. I mean when I am a little older than some of the folks up here when I first went to Washington it was the George W. Bush administration and it was fairly easy to get questions answered like it. You know I don't understand this legislation. Can you talk about this or this policy that's coming out and somebody would talk to you and give it to you ? Even if I was in the background you'd have something to get a better understanding of. Fill out that story that dropped dramatically in the Obama administration where they switched to doing things like blog posts and other things that made them look very open and transparent but they actually weren't really talking to us that much. You didn't actually see him very much right. No. And you didn't see him. I mean I never asked Barack Obama questions but up to the lead up to his actually getting into office and I never got a question to him during the actual administration, it was not really easy. So it's changed but it's always been a struggle and a challenge for the press.

[00:37:07] **Smith** Whereas you are, you cannot escape President Trump. The fact is you see his face, you hear his voice. You cannot get your eyes off him because his face is never not in front of your eyes. It seems like every day all day.

[00:37:20] **Stokols** Well I was the poor person who was the print poor a couple of weeks ago and it was the day when the head of NATO was visiting. And so they have a couple of sprays scheduled during an expanded meeting and so you think OK we're going to go into the expanded meeting. No. As soon as the president is sitting in the Oval with the director of the visit , the president of NATO, secretary general of the U.N. Secretary General NATO sitting in the oval and we've all seen this many times, the president has some foreign leaders sitting next to him. He brings the press into the Oval and he just starts talking about the news of the day he's holding a press conference he's holding the other person hostage. In this case they're talking a little bit the NATO guy about burden sharing but that's you know so you think OK he just talked for twenty four minutes he talked about immigration he talked about all the news of the day the Muller report etc.. Turn off your tape recorder. Twenty four minutes. You go back out and you think OK well the spray we don't need to do the spray in the cabinet room because we just did- no we're doing that too. And it's repetitive and it's the same thing. It's like he sees caterers and he wants the audience and you know I will agree with the other three reporters on this panel that we don't want to see the briefings go away. I would say that my feeling is that's generally more for the next administration than the current administration because I think the current briefings in their form. Yeah maybe it's helpful for the country to to see Sarah Sanders stand up there and not be able to answer the same question over and over again and reporters now are very good at following up on one another's questions in the room so that that becomes apparent over 15 minutes or however long the briefing is that there are certain questions she can't answer. But on the whole that is an opportunity for her really to condescend to the press to perform for the audience of one that is the guy sitting in the Oval. And we don't really get a ton of information out of it. I would just say you know we all want access to officials to the president right. We've all talked about you know if you get the president and off the record you get him in a gaggle.

Keep him talking. Right. You hear every reporter say he got to keep the president talking. Well that is not really that big of a challenge with this president. And I often sit there and he never keeps talking and you have to wonder at some point yeah he's accessible. Yes he's doing several interactions with the press sometimes in a day. But you have to step back sometimes and ask yourself what is it worth? He's flooding the zone with the same talking points most of which are untrue. And so you have to question whether the access.

[00:39:45] **Smith** But Jonathan, on this point he can answer the questions he wants to answer and doesn't have to answer the questions. The great illustration of that the other day was that he was sitting with the secretary general of NATO but he was sitting with somebody when Assange was dragged out of the embassy and he was asked about WikiLeaks and he said I don't know anything about WikiLeaks. And there was not an opportunity really to get in there and say but. But then somebody asked him about the Masters tournament and Tiger Woods and he talked for two minutes uninterrupted about that. That wasn't really an opportunity for Jonathan to press him on. The Wikileaks Assange stuff because it wasn't really a formal setting where you could get a second question and then ignore and pretend to hear not something.

[00:40:28] **Lumiere** That's a case obviously where his evasiveness didn't prevent the stories I've written that he of course said I read WikiLeaks every night.

[00:40:35] **Smith** Everyone showed the same clip reel.

[00:40:36] Right. The final six weeks of the campaign. But yes that is harder. He's only held a few what we consider formal press conferences since he took office. Now he does do ones with foreign leaders although those really scaled back to in recent months the two and twos as they're known where it's two American journalists and two foreign journalists each year a question of each head of state. There you know he really wants to find the zone he wants to be on TV. He you know he wants to have his image and his voice that he wants to get in the settings that he prefers. And those are often these sort of informal ones again. To his credit he's taking questions but it allows him to sort of dodge much more agile than he would if we were in a formal setting. And these pool sprays are great examples where he will know we were Eli. They were both in the pool in Vietnam, in Hanoi, a few months back or so when he had a summit with Kim Jong un and we asked questions and he answered questions about the summit. But when a question was asked to call it right he received no he refused to take it. He then tried to bar the press from coming into the next event or Saturday.

[00:41:43] **All** But it took some for someone (inaudible).

[00:41:46] **Smith** Yamiche I've heard a couple of people up here talk about lying and no surprise right that people have mentioned lies. Is it your job in the context of your service as White House

correspondent for The NewsHour to fact check to counter stuff that you believe or know not to be true? Do you consider that part of what you're there to do?

[00:42:10] **Alcindor** Yes.

[00:42:11] **Smith** How would you grade yourself at doing it? Are you good at it?

[00:42:16] **Alcindor** I'm biased toward myself obviously. I would say I'm doing a great job. But I think the viewers of PBS hopefully think that we're doing a decent job because I think that between myself but also between our anchor Judy Woodruff and the people we bring on guests to try to maybe sometimes deconstruct things that he said that aren't true, that are more complicated to really explain to people if he said something like. Climate change is a hoax made up by the Chinese maybe instead of me just saying actually that's not true. China didn't make up for climate change. What I should do is bring on a guest to explain what this report from the president's own agency says about climate change. But I think it's our service. I think as a reporter our service is to explain to people what's true and what's not. And I think it's also to make the smart decisions on what we want to pick out because the president says 10 things that aren't true. But we know we find that two of them are things that are going to really impact the lives of American people. And the other ones that you know here I always think about the first controversy of this presidency or at least the one that I think of as the first one was when he was talking about the fact that his inauguration crowd size was bigger than President Obama's. So he wrote about, you know, everyone wrote about it and we talked about it and he still basically says it sometimes if he's in a mood yes he does. Is it really worth fact checking that vs. every single time. Yeah it really was fact checking that every single time or even more even now is more fact checking at all when there are other things that he said about transgender or about the impact of climate change or about economics or about other things that I think at least in my own mind you have a bigger impact.

[00:43:54] **Adkins** Kimberly as a viewer though I have to tell you it drives me crazy when I hear him say something over and over just as an American. I hear him say something over and over that I know is not true. And to let it go uncorrected. There's just something that messes with my brain that no one will call bullshit on this. And the example that I always come to personally is when I hear him say I won the votes of women in the 2016 election. He did not. He won the votes of white women and the 2016 election. And I hear this over and over and over and he says it and it often goes uncorrected. And I know that journalism to you misses this point. There's only so much you can do and so many times you can do it. I must have heard him say it 50 times. What the hell are we supposed to do about this?

[00:44:38] **Adkins** I mean he says a lot of things like how he's the greatest president for African-Americans ever and all these other things. He says he makes-

[00:44:46] **Smith** Suppose that's a subjective statement although not really.

[00:44:48] **Adkins** Right. Look, I think it's true. I mean if we spent all of our time correcting what he said we wouldn't have any time for any other substantive journalism. I think that overall journal journalists get a bad rap for not doing enough of it. I think we do a great deal of it. We were certainly doing a great deal of it before the election and I think the election a lot of people blame the media saying that we didn't check this guy out enough or we didn't count-

[00:45:19] **Smith** You have said (inaudible) .

[00:45:20] **Adkins** I don't know what we were supposed to do because we were really doing that along the entire way. I think the results of the election evidence something different. I don't think it was because people didn't know who he was. I think he was doing more to show everyone who he was than we could possibly do. But I also think it depends on the medium. I mean I get frustrated. You say you get frustrated watching television. I get frustrated sometimes on Twitter. When you see and I understand that there's the limitation of two hundred and eighty characters but you will see Trump says blah blah blah in a tweet and it goes out and I'll sometimes retweet, end quote and say which isn't true. You know I feel like people see that and think that the press is just mimicking where most of the time even in that tweet when you click on this story and you look they give context and they show they say what is right and what is incorrect about that statement. But it's really hard with the 24 hour cable news cycle and it's really hard with Twitter. There's so much information and there's so much counter information and bad information you got. I mean I muted my mentions a long time ago on Twitter. But the amount of times that I get people responding to me or making comments on my story telling me that what I'm saying that I reported factually is not true is amazing. And I just think how can people just deny the fact that they see in front of their faces. But they do. It's this flood of information and misinformation that makes getting to that context if you're not careful of how you cultivate your news source is really difficult.

[00:46:53] **Smith** I wonder if it's a strategy on the part of the administration. Is he crazy or crazy like a fox? I mean they know that they're lying basically without consequence. The consequences for telling lies that are clearly provably false lies like I've won the votes of women in the last election are basically next to nothing. Well why stop doing it?

[00:47:14] **Stokols** And they are. I mean like management culture starts at the top right. So if you see the president the president believes he's getting away with it. That's his M.O.. Of course the people who work for him in order to please him and say the things you know to sort of perpetuate his alternative realities they say those things they also realize that we're in an era where people's own idea of truth is completely subjective. They can get away with that and I

think you know in terms of fact checking I mean that's just one of the things that we deal with every day how much to fact check how much. And I think every time he lies- I mean I talk a lot about these sort of self-fulfilling prophecies that I see around Trump or that Trump creates. And one of them is with the press. He tells everybody the press is his enemy. Well every time he's making these false statements he's almost forcing the press into this tut tutting mode of you know quote tweets that's actually not true. And you see it over and over and over again. And what do we look like on the whole? We look like a bunch of arrogant you know schoolmarmish people correcting the president and that plays into his whole pitch to America that you know you see these elitist overeducated journalists they're just always telling you that you're wrong. And it just plays into this.

[00:48:21] **Smith** Even if you're right the perception is that somehow you're not behaving in a way that's fair.

[00:48:26] **Stokols** And you know I don't think we can sit here and think like that if not everybody believes us. Well I guess we'll just have to start fact checking. I mean you can't be totally you can't be focused on what is the result what what does the electorate do. Where does public opinion move after you release the story? You can't really worry about that. But it's one of these things that when you're trying to figure out where to spend your energy every day it makes it difficult because you feel like this is really important. And you're also conscious of how it's going to be perceived and how it's going to be used against.

[00:48:55] **Smith** I'm conscious Yamiche of Marty Baron the editor of The Washington Post when the president started to hate tweeting at the press saying something to the effect of in response to that our job is not to go to war with the president. Our job is to go to work. Our job is to do more and better journalism and not to engage with this guy. You know it's got to be hard.

[00:49:15] **Alcindor** I think it's hard but it's the job. There's no other way to do the job but to do the work. I think that that's just what you have to do. I think the moment you start thinking too much about this being about you or your personality or what people think about yourself you lose sight of what the job is and to me journalism was something that was outlined in the Constitution. So there just I feel a great responsibility and I think a lot of journalists who get into journalism feel a great sense of responsibility. I will say this though you're talking about this idea that the president says he's won the vote of women. I would say as a journalist there are a lot of times that I'm reading stories or watching people on TV talking about the suburbs. I'm talking about evangelical suburban voters when they really mean white suburban voters. They really mean white evangelical voters. There are so many times where I think if we're going to say oh the president saying women we also have to figure out well are we also explaining to people what we mean by suburban voters. Because 99% of the time you're talking about white suburban

voters. Yeah. So I think that that's something that as much as we need to look at what the president's rhetoric is we should also be looking at the way that we cover politics in general.

[00:50:22] **Smith** You make an excellent point. Does this question Kim of what the president says and how he says it on race to pick an example. I mean we have two excellent African-American women who are journalists. The president has attacked women. The president has been awful in many instances on the question of white nationalism on race generally. Is it difficult as one of a few women of color in the press corps to regard this president the way you would regard a different president in this environment? Do you have a harder time personalizing it or being fair?

[00:50:57] **Adkins** That's it. That's a good question. I don't believe it. I mean I can do my job I see as being fair and I think I do a pretty good job of that. I don't believe that it is harder for me as a Black woman. It is a challenge on the job for a lot of reasons, one of which I mean you're talking about making these claims. If you recall during the campaign for example when the President was making his pitch to Black voters saying I believe a quote was, what the hell do you have to lose? And then when he talks about any substance about Black voters he talked about Chicago and the crime and how we're gonna fit. So what he was actually doing was dog whistling to nonblack voters saying hey don't worry we're going to crack down on these crime ridden places where these people of color live and we got it. And it was when and at that time I was doing commentary on television actually for Fox News and I would point out that this was actually not a pitch to Black voters because that's important when people say. But now he's reaching out he's doing what he's doing outreach to Black voters to say no that it is not. The flipside of that though is I feel like no matter what I'm covering or what I'm writing about two things happen. One, there's a certain number of the audience, readers and viewers who are going to make assumptions about my political leanings or views based on my race and gender. I am not enrolled in any party. I haven't been for a long time. I've covered politics too long and I've seen how both sides make the sausage. But people don't know that by talking to me I've done political commentary on Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, I've worked for a conservative newspaper, a more liberal. I mean it's just, I do the same job in all of those places. And so that is frustrating because people will question me or assume that I'm biased just based on my race and gender. It is also frustrating and as much as I enjoy doing television commentary is when something happens. It happened to be about to happen when he made his comments on Charlottesville so that was just serendipitous that I had to give my first take on that. But whenever he talks about the whole country, when he's talking about issues of race and things like that, I feel like my phone blows up. Asking me to come in and do commentary on MSNBC and I get frustrated by that because the news analyzes the political analysis of what the president is doing, I'm happy to do that. I'm happy to go and talk about that. I mean at one point it's funny it was actually when the president called my friend, Yamiche saying that her question was racist and I was on TV that whole week like I was with everybody. She went out of town. Then they had to call me to come in and

explain this over and over and over again about the president calling this Black reporter racist and that's very frustrating to me honestly with all due respect to the producers at MSNBC who I do like because that's something that Jon should be able to give that analysis. That's something that Eli should be able to give that same analysis. And I guess because there aren't a lot of us, sometimes by default they will turn to us to do the same thing that happened at my paper at the Herald if something would happen. I would write like one piece and they would put it against Howie Carr who was this white conservative columnist and it was just pitting against each other or sort of framing it in a way that's like you know, I can do Syria analysis too. I can talk about that. I can talk about the Middle East. I can talk about the 2020 Dems. I don't always have to be the one to explain to the country that the president is doing or saying something.

[00:54:46] **Smith** The last time we were together Yamiche here in Austin was right after the president referred to, among other countries, Haiti as a shithole country and your family is from Haiti. And I remember asking you at the time if you felt in some way different because of that in the moment because but I guess we all have to depersonalize the news do we not?

[00:55:09] **Alcindor** I think I think it's the way you do the job. I think the moment I might think that this is kind of true in every industry I have friends there were Wall Street bankers I have friends who are lawyers there are gonna be times in your life as a student and for people that people are gonna say things about you that you know not to be true about yourself and you can't say well I give up I'm not doing this presentation anymore I'm not going to be with this client because they said something to me that I found offensive. At the end of the day I'm there to do the job. I will say that I check my tone and I have a small group of people like my mom and other people that I'll call if I feel frustrated. I remember when Mark Sanford said something that to me I had to pause and think about and it was when we're talking about birthright citizenship and he said something to the effect of Haitian babies shouldn't just be citizens. And that literally is me like I would not be American if it wasn't for me being here because both my parents were born in Haiti, my dad still lives there. So I had to check my tone and say, is this really what I need to give analysis on? Maybe I'm okay on the subject because to me it's like well what am I going to say I'm not going to say oh well maybe you know we should look at both of these and really look at those Haitian babies and see if they're worth it. I think they're pretty worth it right? But I think it really is one of those things where if you're in fact checking people there's a way to fact check and say he's an idiot. Look at what he said. And there's a way to say let's just look at the substance of what this means and why he's saying this and why this is important. I think that there's a big way that you can check your tone and I think journalists really should be checking their tone because I'm not here to be a Black Lives Matter All right mull. I think that a lot of people who look at me with my natural hair and my afro and say this girl clearly is an activist who just kind of wiggles her way into these news organizations and I'm here to say like, no I'm not a Black Lives Matter mull.

[00:57:00] We could do more up here but let's get people from the audience. Yes there is one here. Mallory I'm going to let you all just tell me what we need to stop.

[00:57:08] Okay. You just give me the sign.

[00:57:12] **Audience Member** Hello, I'm Evan, I'm from Montenegro, I'm not from America, but I have some questions regarding Trump and our profession. It's a question if Trump says the lie. Is it still news? Because we know that it has to be true. And the other question is if he sold it like a hundred times is it still in the news?

[00:57:36] **Smith** John we made the point earlier that if the president says something because he's the president right. It's news, right?

[00:57:43] **Lumiere** Yes it is. It has to be covered as news. We have to cover it in a way with context and fact checking and sort of explain why this is not true or it's only partially true whatever it is. But you also hit on something that he does all the time. He doesn't tell a lie once, he tells it a hundred times and that's part of what he has always done and it is what he did on the rally stage every night during the campaign where he convinces himself perhaps but certainly his his supporters of a different truth I have an alternate fact of a different reality. And they start to believe that they can't because he's also painted the media as being biased against him. So therefore there's that plant that seeds doubt in people's minds. Well maybe he. Maybe they're wrong. Maybe he is right. One of my favorite Donald Trump faxes. And this predates his career in politics Trump Tower his flagship building on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. He listed it as 68 stories tall. It's 58. There's no argument it's 58. But he just skipped 10 floors when he did it. It goes from like two to twelve. And he did it just because he wanted to be the tallest in that part of Manhattan. And that is something he has carried over with him ever since. And it's ours. Challenge to what he does that even though we know there are plenty of people out there who aren't going to believe us we still need to be the ones to provide that fact check that context the actual truth.

[00:59:07] **Audience Member** Hi Sergio from Brazil. I can see you like a lot of similarities happening in what's happening now with presidents. They like each other very much as well. And I just wonder if there's some talk among Brazilian journalists like how can we get past all the noise all the lot they talk about all the time and just focus on the content of the stuff they say that turns into actual action on policy which matters the most right. If he talks about 58 or 68 floors doesn't matter as much as building the actual what or the stuff. Like how can you deal with that?

[00:59:48] **Stokols** Eli, that's been a consistent problem in this administration. You all know I'm sure you've done everything you can to focus on stuff that really affects people's lives but the bullshit does tend to crowd out the substance does it not?

[00:59:59] **Stokols** Sometimes you just have to deal with the bullshit. You had to write during the shutdown after the shutdown. He's talking about finishing the wall. We did several stories saying you're not finished, you haven't started it. You know we had to get to people at the border patrol and to talk to people at Homeland Security and to ask for the actual data on completed wall and money spent and look at budgets and point these things out. So I think if you have to deal with it I don't spend too much time on this. But as Yamiche said, our tone matters a lot because if you're fact checking and correcting it's important. But I think it's important to do that with evidence. I think it's you know to have supporting evidence you can point to and say this is from the government itself. Right and also to do it in a way where you don't seem emotional about it and then just to say look this is the reality.

[01:00:47] **Smith** I think Kim made an excellent point that Twitter sometimes is not the best means for you to police your own tone.

[01:00:54] **Adkins** Correct.

[01:00:55] **Smith** Right.

[01:00:55] **Adkins: Sure** and yes.

[01:00:57] **Smith** If you're correcting things for instance on social media or kind of on the fly you can often be you can solve a problem by creating another problem.

[01:01:04] **Adkins** Sure. Twitter can be dangerous. And there are some journalists who engage in more. I mean I will do tweets that I consider analytical that's not just the who what where and and some go even beyond that. And really getting into advocacy or other things can be a double edged sword. But I think at the end of the day the best way to do the best thing that we can do is to do the work and show the work. And if the president says climate change isn't real just show the work how it is real. If the president says something that is factually wrong and also gives analysis as to why he's saying these things if he is doing divisive rhetoric it's because he believes that politically that's advantageous to him because that stirs up his base and that's going to help him win re-election. I think to explain and just put the facts out there and show our work is the best thing that we can do in the middle.

[01:02:10] **Smith** Let's go from the one behind you.

[01:02:14] **Audience Member** You used the phrase that Trump throws these hundred tennis balls at you and you know you have to go on using them. And I was curious like now that he's been president for so long. Have there been instances where you guys have done something different and maybe you know outplayed him in his game?

[01:02:29] **Stokols** I mean I think I came up with the others. I think it's mine. I think we've all talked about these tennis balls. But I'll take a stab at this. I think the most obvious thing is his Tweets. We all have the Twitter alerts on our phone and you go back to 2017. We would have, at least in the newsroom I was in, I think most I know about we'd have people who were on the handle early morning Tweets because every morning somebody would have to write up that the president of the United States is saying all this crazy stuff on Twitter. And now we just don't do that nearly as much and so I think you know whether it's normalizing or whether it's just sort of the passage of time. I mean I think we're in year three here and I think you just sort of get used to it.

[01:03:07] **Smith** You still have Twitter alerts for his Tweets on your phone?

[01:03:10] **Stokols** I'm sure we all do.

[01:03:11] **Adkins** I do not, I turn them off.

[01:03:13] **Adkins** I'm like the exact opposite of Kim in that I bought an Apple Watch that buzzes sounds. It's actually unhealthy but I don't know how to do the job. So I don't know a job without being hyper focused on that because if he's changing US policy or he's arguing with North Korea you know on Twitter how do you not pay-

[01:03:35] **Smith** That's why he makes policy

[01:03:38] **Adkins** Yeah I mean. What I mean I obviously look at the feeds but I just had enough of at 5:30 in the morning being awakened by Donald Trump's tweets.

[01:03:46] **Smith** Also John I noticed today he actually I mean not just today but I noticed today reminded myself today he started he doesn't have a Twitter thread but he uses but he's also weaponized the ellipsis.

[01:03:59] **Lumiere** Oh yeah.

[01:04:00] **Smith** He'll tweet about something and he won't finish his thought. And so there's an ellipsis and I'm like come on.

[01:04:06] **Lumiere** announced a major change in U.S. policy. That's a thought. Thirty four minutes later you're like.

[01:04:12] **Smith** What happened?

[01:04:14] **Lumiere** Where are we going? But it's impossible not to. I mean you've got to imagine my phone's Red Sox scores and Donald Trump twins. I mean you know what he has said. Yes we can ignore we've all learned how to handle them better but you still got-

[01:04:28] **Smith** Do you think he knows what he's doing with Twitter? Because as clumsy as he sometimes seems, I went to look at the tweets with the ellipses today. I was trying to find the second half of the tweet because and when I noted when I went to his page- Mallory , can you put that thing up that I sent you? I noticed today that the video of Elan Omar where they've intercut the 9/11 footage with her remarks screen grab this. He has now pinned that tweet. Yeah. So it's one thing for him to simply tweet this video out. It's another thing strategically for him to pin the tweet. I mean I wonder if he knows what he's doing. Oh he absolutely does.

[01:05:10] **Lumiere** And there have been you know he has tweeted far right groups in the UK and other places and there've been times where they've tried to explain it away like oh he wasn't quite sure what that was. But there are other times it's very deliberate. This is a great example. But he knows what he's amplifying. He knows what's with buttons he's pushing and I want one side that we haven't really got to yet is the idea that he's also he's weaponized us that he's placed the media at the center of his story in an unprecedented way. The idea of the enemy of the people that we are the media is labeled that not only is that just an extraordinary thing for a president and states to say but it's also a dangerous one is a lot of comments about how her life here is probably but you know he could be endangering this congresswoman with his rhetoric but you know I think there are a network anchor network reporters who travel with security.

[01:05:57] **Smith** You think he's legitimately endangering all of you.

[01:05:59] **Lumiere** Have been I think there's an argument to be made that that is actually true there have been violence against newsrooms you know since he has taken office and there've been people who have tried to carry out threats in his name against his political enemies who at least have told him toward authorities law enforcement that they were inspired by what he had said.

[01:06:16] **Smith** Well that bomber for instance. Exactly. Again that's a story that kind of came and went. We don't talk about it under normal circumstances that would have been a much bigger story.

[01:06:24] **Audience Member** With climate change the press finally decided we're going to stress accuracy not balance. And I'm curious why the press just didn't say I will not report something from the president that I know was a lie without correcting it. Why? Things that are simply uncorrected lies.

[01:06:50] **Alcindor** Well some of it I would say is. You have to look at the word report because it's showing the president's speech on TV as quote unquote reporting, but it's also stuff that's happening on live television. So that would mean do we-I would think if you decide that the decision was made nothing left. Unless the president lets me know it's 100 percent true we're not going to report on it. That means you would never be able to take President Trump live. Simply, you would never be able to do that. And the thing is we would never do that because people think the American people deserve to see the President in all his essence in all and whatever he's saying. I also personally believe that when I'm interviewing people I was once interviewing somebody and this goes back to the question of race. I was talking to him about health care as in western Wisconsin was a Trump supporter and I kept talking to him about health and he kept saying well people think I'm racist people think I'm racist. And I kept thinking, why is he bringing up race? Like I don't I almost forgot that I was like Black for a minute.

[01:07:48] I was like well what could possibly be making you want to talk about race? And then I realized that oh I forgot I'm like a Black woman asking him these questions. And finally I said OK well why do you think that people think you're racist? He said, well do Black people don't like to work? And I think all these Black women just love to get knocked up by these Black men and then have their kids and be on welfare. I put that quote in the story because I don't need to tell people what you know about what Black people do like to work like see my byline like you don't really need to do that. And I think that I really think the country deserves to hear this man say that. So I think that I'm a voter that doesn't have the power of the presidency. So I think that people deserve to see the president say the things that he's saying so that we all understand what the president's doing.

[01:08:41] **Adkins** I mean I take the premise of the question is that we're reporting what he's saying without correcting it. I don't think that we are reporting what he's saying without correcting it and without giving context. I think we're doing that all the time I think even when his speeches are carried live immediately thereafter you see in fact the fact checking began. So I think that the press like I said I think we're doing a better job at it than we get a reputation on some networks have decided not to take him alive.

[01:09:10] **All** That's a fact fewer (inaudible).

[01:09:14] **Lumiere** Not to his rallies sometimes the things that the White House will say you know what, we'll you know if he makes spending half anything and that's the way to the finance sector and we'll turn it up.

[01:09:22] **Smith** Professor Alves tells us we have one more question and that'll be your last question.

[01:09:26] **Audience Member** All right. You guys have touched on this a little bit but I wonder if you can speak a little bit more about Trump and the art of distraction. You know, maybe last fall we had the disappearance of Jamal Kashoggi and at the same time Kanye West came to the White House. So how do you navigate what you know what the shiny object is and avoid not knowing his sort of art of distraction in that way?

[01:09:51] **Adkins** Look I think a couple of things I think we as journalists can walk and chew gum at the same time. I think a lot of times when something happens and a big criticism is well why are you covering that when you could be covering that other thing and I'll say well if you go to the website of my news organization you'll see that we covered both things. I think when the president of the United States does or says something as the leader of the free world it tends to be newsworthy and I think covering that isn't a bad thing. On the subject of that. I mean I have written at the time I was at a newspaper I have written about Jamal Khashoggi but I also wrote about Kanye going to the White House in the context of mental health policy and how this president adores celebrity to the point that he was clearly putting someone in a bad situation and with the White House as a stage. I think it's the way that you cover something and report on something because those things do have an impact too. Those things have consequences too. But yeah. Yes, sometimes he does things to distract us. I also think he's accused of doing things as a distraction a lot that isn't you know when he makes comments that are seen as racist or dropping sort of these bombs then they'll say oh well he's this race stuff is just a distraction. What he said about Charlottesville is that distraction. No this is about Charlottesville and other things. He's an asshole country. That's not a distraction. That's a fundamental part of his legacy that if that's who that's who he is.

[01:11:25] **Smith** When somebody tells you who they are, believe them, right? I mean Jon the fact is the fact that something as a stunt doesn't mean it's also not worth covering. Right.

[01:11:34] **Lumiere** And I think sometimes there are moments where it is clearly a calculation on the White House when there's a bad story coming to throw some smoke up about somebody else. We certainly saw that time and time again with the response to mother reporting that Rudy Giuliani did other times though it's not deliberate it is just the president being the president he's an impulsive character who is going to react to what he sees on television and it doesn't you or you know whatever his adviser tells him and it's not necessarily an actual plan to distract you just

sort of happens. That's who he is because of his lack of discipline and a lot of ways. And I do think there were accusations that have improved and gotten better at realizing what stuff we don't need to follow. This is just him being silly. But to Kim's point, use Sampson right. You do a lot of what he does is illuminating even if you feel. This is a distraction. Well actually it is something that's worth covering. You know he reveals himself. Yes. Why without it believe it? You've talked about it on television. Whatever it might be it is our job to take what he says to provide the appropriate amount of context, the propaganda fact checking that the other he is the president I'd state. We can't just ignore him, can we?

Smith It's a great place to end. We have heard over the last hour and a half how great these folks are at their jobs and they are four of the most important ones doing it. And they took time to be here. Please give them a big hand. Thank you all very much. Yamiche, Kim, Eli and Jon, thank you.

ISOJ 2019: Day 2, Afternoon Session
Global roundup: Journalism in the age of authoritarians, populists and polarization

- **Kathleen Kingsbury**, deputy editorial page editor, **New York Times**
- **Cynthia Membreño**, director of digital strategy, **Confidencial, Nicaragua**
- **Susan Comrie**, investigative journalist, **amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism, South Africa**
- **Patrícia Campos Mello**, reporter and columnista at, **Folha de S. Paulo, Brazil**
- **Julett Pineda**, reporter, **Efecto Cocuyo, Venezuela**
- **Blanka Zöldi**, journalist, **Direkt36, Hungary**

Kathleen Kingsbury All right. So I'm going to ask a few questions and then take questions from the audience. So please start thinking of them. I like to always remind people that the definition of a question is a statement that ends with a question mark. So I want to just start. You know one of the things that really struck me was how similar your stories were in a lot of ways. I mean we heard things like fake news and we heard things about bats. We heard a lot about intimidation. We also heard a lot about collaboration. And one of the things that I have been thinking a lot about and you probably heard a lot about it at this conference is this question of its attention and a lot of newsrooms in the United States since Trump was elected. This question of are we the resistance. Are we the opposition? And it really depends on who you ask both in newsrooms and outside of newsrooms. And I'm curious to know what you guys think about that. And so I was hoping to start. We could have each of you talk a little bit about what you're thinking and how you see yourselves in a bunker. I'm going to ask you first because you used the word independent and objective often which is something you hear often in the United States as well.

[00:01:13] **Blanka Zöldi** Yeah, this is very important to us because so many times when I call up people saying hey I'm blanking so from their 36 pack of steel position. Right. And I was like, no I mean they are actually writing stories both about the government and about the opposition if it comes to the wrongdoings that we uncover within the opposition parties. So I think the most important thing is to be fair to everybody. I mean we never received criticism from the government because we didn't contact them for example for comments. And I think what we can do is to actually counter this type of being labeled as opposition activists and pay by sort of showing these kinds of things that we are being fair to everyone.

[00:02:08] **Kingsbury** Cynthia I wanted to ask you. I mean your interaction with the government is so much more of a role than perhaps anyone else on the stage. The fact they've seized your office do you see yourself as part of the opposition to the government?

[00:02:22] **Cynthia Membreño** We as journalists we stick to the facts. Our job is to investigate and to talk to people about what's happening. And I guess I make it out that there is some

confusion because sometimes they don't know the difference between. Perhaps opinion and reporting. And they think that we're just against the current government which is not. I mean it's not the case that we say we're gonna throw you know or take out because we hate him. Now we investigate and we discover that he is as corrupt as other governments that have been cut out. So we just cover the news and that's her job.

[00:03:01] **Kingsbury** So I mean you're also dealing with a somewhat more recent example of this kind of intimidation. You know what, how do you think of this question? You know, have you guys changed all the ways that you're dealing with the government from before?

[00:03:21] **Membreño** Well I think it was for me.

[00:03:24] **All** It's ok (inaudible)

[00:03:33] **Membreño** Not really in the sense that we just do, we just discover the facts but all the media has been very vocal about calling him a dictator. So perhaps that's not what he likes to be hearing. More and more out you know you are outspoken about it and everybody is so they think that we're just making a complaint against him and it's like that's what you are.

[00:04:02] **Patricia Campos Mello** I think the whole objective of this intimidation attempt is mainly by the bots and trolls. Right. Which is very massive be it on Twitter or Facebook is to keep us from doing our jobs. So I thought it's interesting that President Bolsonaro visited your president like 20 days ago. And then the Vice President came and the newspaper decided instead of taking me out of the coverage they said no you're going. So I did cover both. And the Vice President gave me an interview and the moment he gave me an interview you had this evangelical deputy saying you can't talk to the communist reporter you can't talk to the Communist media and they are going to keep on doing this but we have to keep on going so that we're not in opposition. We're going to do what we did in all the other administrations. Just go there and do your job.

[00:04:55] **Kingsbury** Susan you talk a little bit more about how you've come together with other news outlets and collaborated and tried to expose the information that you have.

[00:05:05] **Susan Comrie** Sure yeah. I mean to a degree the collaboration with Wikileaks was sort of forced on us by circumstances. But it became a really powerful thing for us because we eventually had- you know we're a small newsroom we only have probably about five or six reporters altogether that we eventually had sort of 19 reporters all working together and kind of dividing up what we needed to work on. And that was just within our formal collaboration and then outside of that you still had journalists from other newspapers you know to a degree because of the period that we've gone through. It's built a national collaboration between journalists even

from rival media houses although we're an entirely independent donor funded unit and we work with everyone and everyone kind of understands they were in the same boat when we were cities you know during the state capture period. So I think everyone's come out of that period with a huge amount of that collaborative spirit kind of extends but I think that on the question of you know being treated as the opposition of course that's also what we get told you. You're just the sort of official mouthpiece of the opposition parties. One of the interesting things to us is that we now have some of our municipalities being governed by Coalition governments of opposition parties and you know the old expression of power corrupts. That's led to new forms of new trends and corruption coming out of those places. We still get told that with knowing backing one political party or the other. But I think to a degree that allows us to sort of push back and say look we're reporting on everyone we're going off to everyone. It doesn't stop us from being criticized.

[00:06:52] **Kingsbury** I don't know if I ever caught it. But one of the things that Juliette said in her talk was that she often operates without water and clean water to bathe and electricity. You know at this moment of what is actually a really acute crisis in Venezuela I'm curious to actually ask you about what you know about Maduro's opposition. Do you see that as a hope for a more free and independent media. Or is that more of the same. Can you talk a little bit about how news organizations have been dealing with that question.

[00:07:28] **Juliet Pineda** Well regarding yes the opposition question, it's difficult because if you're going to approach a governmental institution the first question they're going to ask is Oh but you were with the opposition or are you with mature you're with the right or you're with the left and in fact they actually like go into computer or cell phones and log in www.efectococuyo.com affect to check on the latest you've reported and based on that they decide if they want to talk to you or not. But what I see right now is we're in a heavily polarized society and. To mature supporters we're kind of like terrorists but to some opposition supporters like the most radical was we are mature supporters in disguise. So we stand in the middle trying to tell the facts to tell the truth to tell what's going on and either way I mean it's really difficult because it's heavily polarized.

[00:08:29] **Kingsbury** All right, let's take some questions from the audience.

[00:08:33] **Audience member** One of the striking issues that we're seeing is this digital malicious thing in Mexico. We found that at least 15 percent of what happened last year was forms of troll trolls paid people to incite hate. And my question is in that context they only they also inside radicalization of opinion and becomes that you are the enemy of the people by factor two real people that hate you. What do you think you can do as a journalist to be you know against these things?

[00:09:09] **Comrie** Anyway I can jump in with one very quick thing. One thing that we found that shuts trolls down quite quickly. We've started publishing an evidence docket with our stories so we try to put as much of the evidence into the evidence folder as possible. And I think you know shutting down the trolls by just saying here is a link to evidence, please go and take a look if you disagree with anything come back to us and let us know that that's one thing that doesn't always work. Sometimes the trolls will just carry on that.

[00:09:42] **Campos Mello** I agree. Yeah I agree. We had a story that the Museum of Natural History might cancel the ceremony for Bush so not right. So then we tweeted it and then you had several readers saying oh you're fake news are false you hate Bolsonaro and then you just put their official Twitter American Natural History Museum and you don't say anything. No because otherwise a few engage. This is so just put the proof out there.

[00:10:06] **Pineda** I agree with that. You cannot fall into the government's narrative or that hate speech that has happened to us a lot. I remember last year in the same TV show I showed you, the government was saying that we were at 180 workers in Efecto Cocuyo and we're going on a strike because we didn't get paid enough. I mean we are 20 journalists but we're not going to discuss that with them. We just let the facts speak and our work speaks for ourselves.

[00:10:34] **Kingsbury** Alright let's take another questions one there.

[00:10:37] **Rosental** Someone caught this.

[00:10:45] **Audience member** I think we talk a lot in Latin America about journalists being a little bit trapped in a polarizing environment. But I wanted you guys to maybe reflect a little bit on how we as journalists contributed to that polarizing of society itself because we sometimes oversimplify through our own narrative. So in Colombia it happened either in the U.S. you work for peace or against the dead . We've seen it in Venezuela also. So what have you seen? What can we do better in that sense?

[00:11:13] **All** Great questions. Okay. You wanted that.

[00:11:17] **Zöldi** Yes absolutely. We see that in Hungary a lot that depending on what types of news you read you basically live in two different worlds. That's true. And also I have to say that the more left liberal media which is normally against the pro-government media has also contributed to this kind of like language actually to to discredit politicians and and the too much you know opinion in the articles really contributed to this kind of polarization. What I see you can do as personally as journalists in our own articles we always look for the different sides of the stories. What I've mentioned earlier is actually no. You just cannot go and say that I'm not

going to contact the subjects of my investigations before the publication of the article. So all like presenting as much as possible like all of the sites that are appearing in your articles.

[00:12:20] **Campos Mello** Can I just add something? We heard yesterday from a conservative journalist that liberals don't think they have a bias the same way as fish don't think they're what they think the first thing is that we have to admit. Everybody has a bias. So before we write we should examine what and why we're writing it.

[00:12:38] **Membreño** I think also that there's a huge problem in Latin American societies and is that there's no media literacy. And I think if we promoted that perhaps at school in universities and to talk about more how the media industry works and how it is to be a journalist and investigate then I think people would understand more how the dynamic of the profession is. And also to. To be closer to the audiences because maybe in the past the journalist was like in this podium you know and then the rest of the people were just. You know below and they were seen as very powerful people and now with technology we get to talk to people more so perhaps we should just get off the podium and have this debate or conversations with people in which we explain I think we have another question.

[00:13:34] **Kingsbury** Up towards the top. Yeah.

[00:13:36] **Audience member** Hello. I heard from a few of you that some of your audience have made comments about what exactly journalists do and I'm glad that the conversation has turned to news literacy. What are some of the strategies if there are any that you're going to do in order to educate your readers of what journalists actually do?

[00:14:05] **Zöldi** I can answer this question because I do that a lot. I mean we have like annual crowdfunding campaigns. We don't want to overburden our supporters but we for example like they pay a lot of attention to actually explain how we work which we think is a good way to pursue independent journalism. So we actually like rated videos explaining that for example after writing a draft then you go through like you know the hands of a billion people including lawyers and then we actually showed them how our articles look after being fact checked like you know the three page article of it all the footnotes turns out to be like a 10 page article. So you know just to just to make them understand what steps are needed to to have a balanced reporting.

[00:14:53] **Membreño** We recently launched a crowdfunding campaign for the first time and and we had like a group of people that wanted to talk to our director and it was the first time that our director talked like it was because of security reasons we had to do it on Skype obviously but because we used to do these meetings the universities in which we talked about confidentiality. But this was the first time that we actually talked about the political situation and people asked

us how you know how we're operating and how we were working and how we were overcoming the difficulties of working in a dictatorship. So I guess that when you realize that you have to talk to people in a closer way then you broaden the scope of understanding of the audiences and that may work ineffective.

[00:15:48] **Pineda** We we also have crowdfunding campaigns where I think one of our main flagship programs is that we have something called Efecto Cocuyo summer school We just summer school so we go to two universities especially like outside the capital from Venezuela and cities where normally these types of events are not held because of oh yes mostly monetary problems. So we go there and we go to universities and we do not only talk to college students but also to people that are. Currently journalists want to become better and improve their work. So we try to teach them not only tools to look like digital tools or how to do media videos and stuff but also the effects of journalism are we approach different topics related to hot topics that are really hot topics in Venezuela.

[00:16:42] **Kingsbury** Alright I have another question up there.

[00:16:44] **Audience member** Hi um I have a question about Brazil. So I work at The Intercept here in the US but I know that my colleagues at The Intercept Brazil have also been aggressively reporting on the boss of our government and have been personally attacked by him. And I'm wondering if you could speak kind of to the media ecosystem and how newsrooms like traditional newsrooms like yours interact with independent media, digital only media and just kind of how that looks.

[00:17:09] **Campos Mello** Yes I actually live under the head and have been blocked by the president on Twitter. It's like some big deal. I think we don't have the type of collaboration that some countries already have. Like you were saying that there was an understanding among media outlets that you know democracy is what is at stake here. So we should collaborate. I am not sure if we are seeing this yet which is unfortunate but I think we are going to get there because that's the situation. You know it's regardless of you being you know more. Left leaning or forced everybody is gonna be pro free press pro democracy. So I guess that should lead to more collaboration which does not exist yet.

[00:17:57] **Kingsbury** I think that seems like a really great note to end on. I want to thank our amazing panel. Please let's give him one of the five.