

ISOJ 2020: Day 3

All the president's attacks: Coping with governments that weaponize social media and campaign against independent media

Chair: [Kathleen Kingsbury](#), editorial page editor, The New York Times

- [Sérgio Dávila](#), editor-in-chief, Folha de S. Paulo, Brazil
 - [Peter Erdelyi](#), senior editor, 444.hu, Hungary
 - [Anna Gielewska](#), political & investigative reporter, vice president of Reporters Foundation, Poland
 - [Juan E. Pardinás](#), General Editorial Director, Reforma, Mexico
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Mallary Tenore Hi, everyone, and welcome to day three of ISOJ online. I'm Mallary Tenore, associate director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, and I'm delighted to be introducing our next panel.

Before we do, I just wanted to share a few quick housekeeping notes with you, and remind you that this panel will be interpreted into Spanish. So if you would like to watch it in Spanish, just click the interpretation globe in the meeting options down below and select the Spanish-language channel. I should also mention that we are streaming this to YouTube in Spanish and in English. So we will be posting the links to those YouTube channels in the chat feature of Zoom. And if at any point you have any technical issues with Zoom, you can just click on those links and watch the live stream. Lastly, I want to encourage you to ask questions to the panelists, and you can do so in the chat feature on Zoom. And we'll be sharing those questions with the panelists, and we'll do our best to answer them. So you can also share highlights on social media using the hashtag #ISOJ2020.

So now I would like to introduce our next panel, and this is going to be an incredibly relevant and important discussion, in which you'll hear from a stellar group of international journalists from Brazil, Hungary, Poland and Mexico. And they've been doing incredible work in the midst of great challenges. Together, they'll talk about how they're coping with governments that weaponized social media and campaign against independent media. So now I'd like to turn it over to our moderator, Kathleen Kingsbury, who's the editorial page editor at The New York Times. Thank you, Katie.

Kathleen Kingsbury Hello, thank you so much for being here. I'm Katie Kingsbury, the editorial page editor at The New York Times. In 1787, the year the American Constitution was born, Thomas Jefferson famously wrote to a friend, "We're left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government. I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Well, that's how he felt before you became president, anyway. Twenty years later, after enduring the oversight of the press from inside the White House, Jefferson was less sure of its value. He wrote, "Nothing can now be believed, which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself become suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle."

Ironically, Jefferson's very discomfort illustrates the need for the right he helped to enshrine. As the American founders believed from their own experience, a well-informed public is best equipped to root out corruption, and in the long haul, promote liberty and justice.

In 2020, some of the most damaging attacks against free press are coming from government officials, and they are particularly threatening to journalists in nations with a less secure rule of law than the United States. Nations like the ones where our panelists today come from, Brazil, Mexico, Poland and Hungary. Last year was the most dangerous year for journalists on record, with dozens killed, hundreds in prison and untold thousands harassed and threatened. And yet reporters around the world continue to do the hard work of asking questions and telling stories that you otherwise wouldn't hear. That's the work we plan to discuss today. We'll get to some questions in a few minutes. But first, I'd like to welcome Sérgio to say a few words.

Sérgio Dávila Hello, thanks for this introduction. I start my participation by thanking Rosental Alves, the man with the plan and the International Symposium on Online Journalism for inviting me. Of course, I'd rather be in Austin, but the pandemic is keeping us from being together. So I say a warm hello to my colleagues on that Anna, Kathleen, Juan and Peter. To answer the question of this panel that brings us together here today, how to cope with governments across the world that attack independent media and weaponized social media, I have two answers.

The short one is by working. The longer one will take about ten minutes for me to answer. Jair Bolsonaro is the president of Brazil. He was elected in October 2018, in the heels of a conservative wave that elected Donald Trump in the U.S. two years earlier and that led the United Kingdom toward a Brexit the year after that. This wave has brought to light the importance of social networks in the political process and the improper use that can be made of this technology, otherwise extremely useful.

Folha de S. Paulo started a more systematic coverage of the then-candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2017. At that time, he was a mostly unknown congressman with a mediocre record and extremist opinions, running an improvised campaign in which he visits only the airports of the main Brazilian cities and held rallies right in the middle of the arrival lounges. Small crowds would gather around him and welcome him by shouting the word "myth," which he later incorporated into the campaign.

Since then, Folha has published a series of articles that scrutinized his conduct as a congressman, as a candidate and later on as president. To mention just a few, our reporters have found out that he and his family of politicians had increased their equity at a pace not compatible with their earnings as civil servants. We discovered also that he used to hire ghost employees for his cabinet. And our main scoop was that businessmen who supported him were responsible for the mass spreading of fake news through WhatsApp against his opponent during the second round of presidential elections, something which is against the Brazilian laws.

As you all probably know, Brazil is one of the biggest client of WhatsApp worldwide, with over 100-million users, second only to India. It is the most popular of social media here. That scoop, the mass spreading of fake news, by the way, was all marriage of Patrícia Campos Mello, who has just been awarded with the Maria Moors Cabot prize for her investigative work. Folha has a great tradition of independent and critical journalism, regardless of who is in power, whether the right wing, or as is the case now our left-wing

party. Folha was the newspaper who uncovered the Mensalão scandal involving then-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to give just one example.

So the newspaper is constantly targeted by those in power. It is part of our culture as journalists to deal with attacks from presidents, ministers, governors, mayors, senators, congressmen and businessmen. The President Jair Bolsonaro, however, has elevated the intensity, and the frequency, and even the ferocity of such attacks. He did that with the help of a very well organized network of collaborators with relentless acting on the main social network platforms, but mainly on WhatsApp. It is run by one of his sons Carlos Bolsonaro. Investigations have pointed out that there is, quote, "hate cabinet" unquote. This is the nickname of this machine led directly by government employees who are connected to Carlos. This hate cabinet has among its preferential targets, political opponents and the independent press. And in the independent press, Folha de S. Paulo has a special place in their hearts.

A recent study by the Brazilian Association of Radio and TV Broadcasters has shown that professional journalism in Brazil has been the target of four million negative tweets in 2019. That means 11,000 attacks per day or seven per minute. Of those attacks, 3.2 million were launched by conservative profiles. Another survey by the group Reporters Without Borders, has shown that only in the three first months of 2020, President Jair Bolsonaro had verbally attacked or offended the press 32 times, an average of one attack every three days. Fifteen of them were directly nominally at journalists, five of whom were women. Patrícia Campos Mello, according to this report, one of the favorite targets. And according also to the report, she's one of the main preferential victims of what they called the Bolsonaro system. In February, President Bolsonaro suggested that she had traded sexual favors for the information using one of the articles that uncovered the spread of fake news on the WhatsApp. Quote, "She wanted to give the whole," unquote, said the president on his way out of the Palácio da Alvorada, where he resides, making a shocking pun with the word "whole" in Portuguese, which in Portuguese can be interpreted either as a scoop, as a journalism school, or the female sexual organ.

In the same place, in another occasion, President Bolsonaro got out of his official car with a comedian by his side, who was dressed just like him, imitating his voice and gestures and asked him to speak to the press in his place. In the now famous cabinet meeting of last April 22, whose recordings had been released by a justice of the Supreme Court for continuing offenses to the members of the court, Bolsonaro calls this newspapers, pardon my French, "that shitty Folha de S. Paulo," and says that whoever from his team got praised by the newspaper would lose their job.

We have a collection of such insults. I will show you just one minute selection of them so that you can get the idea. (Plays video.)

So I'll go back to the initial question. In an environment such as this one, what can one do? When I say environment, I'm not talking just about the constant attacks by the president without the power that he has in the presidentialist system, such as the Brazilian one, but also about one of the most severe economic and pandemic crises that the world has seen, with almost 100% of the newsroom working from home. And at a time when the business model of journalism finds itself at a crossroads. What can one do in such an environment? Or better saying what did Folha do?

Well, we took some actions. First in agreement with the main media companies, we stopped covering the arrival and exit of the president at the Palácio da Alvorada, where he

resides. Besides the provocations, such as the comedian one that I just mentioned, in a text from Bolsonaro himself, the journalists start to face harassment by a group of the president's supporters who visit the place daily, something that compromises the safety of the journalists. Second, in the first time in the hundred years of history of this newspaper, we allowed one of our reporters to sue the president. Patrícia Campos Mello filed a lawsuit against Bolsonaro and one of his sons, specifically regarding the sexual innuendo made by the president. Her lawyers have been assisting her in the process, and the newspaper is paying all the expenses, of course. It was not an easy decision for us to take with all the implications to it, but we decided that it was necessary.

Also, since the government was refusing to release timely and accurate numbers regarding the infections and deaths by COVID in Brazil, the main newspapers in the country have joined forces to form a never-before-seen pool to collect their own data, which is currently being used by everyone as the official number. Such an association, bearing in mind it's in an extremely competitive environment such as the Brazilian press, is something entirely new.

On top of that, just a few weeks ago, we have released a campaign in defense of democracy. Folha has rescued historical role that we played in the late days of the military dictatorship in the '80s, by then defending the return of the direct elections. And we launched three actions. We have put together a free course taught by specialists and named that the younger audience to explain what was the Brazilian military dictatorship. This initiative was a result of the realization that over half of the Brazilian population now had not yet been born when the dictatorship ended. So far we have 80,000 people registered for the course. We launched our website, a sort of dictatorship 101, explaining how vicious that regime was. A regime, by the way, that is defended by President Bolsonaro every chance he has. And in a more symbolic action, but with meaningful institutional impact, we have changed our slogan, which is "newspaper at the service of Brazil" to a new one, "a newspaper at the service of Democracy," a phrase that will remain in our headers until the next presidential elections in 2022. And last but not least, we have reinforced the psychological and legal support for our team to reinforce security and training for how to behave and how to react to social media.

The readers have rewarded us so far. It is too early to talk about the Bolsonaro bump, but the fact is that our digital subscriptions have skyrocketed in the last two years. As each attack from President Bolsonaro, the pace of new subscriptions multiplies by five and sometimes even by 10. Most of the new subscribers are young people who had never read newspapers before, let alone, paid for that. In April, our record, we had 73.8 million unique visitors on Folha's website, that represents a third of the Brazilian population. Whenever possible, I repeat to my young editorial staff, where half of the reporters are under the age of 30 years, that we do not oppose the government. That is not our role. We must report on the government with exemption and independence, as we have done with all the previous presidents since the reestablishment of the Brazilian democracy. But I also say that we must act without fear. To quote Martin Baron, executive editor of The Washington Post, who visited us at Folha two years ago, "We are not at war. We are at work." And we are not planning on leaving anytime soon. Thank you.

Peter Erdelyi Hello and thanks for having me. My name is Peter Erdelyi, and I'm a senior editor and director at 444.hu. We are an independent news portal in Hungary, founded in 2013. We have around 500,000 daily and three-million monthly readers, and we won numerous awards for our investigative journalism.

Let me start by giving you some context about Hungary and show you a picture. There's a 10-square meter cordoned off area designated for journalists in the Hungarian parliament, as well as in the nearby office building. Reporters are not allowed to interview MP's practically anywhere else in the buildings of the National Assembly. This makes questioning politicians and officials in the corridors of power physically impossible. It's not always easier to ask questions outside the parliament. One MP from the ruling Fidesz party had local police investigate journalists for harassment after they asked questions about his hometown as they follow the story about his hidden assets. When a German camera crew traveled to Felcsút to report on the hometown of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, local police showed up checking IDs, patting down journalists. Before Fidesz took power in 2010, Hungary had one of the most progressive freedom of information laws in Europe. But after journalists used Freedom of Information requests to uncover corruption, the laws were changed, and now state institutions can charge thousands of euros just to determine if they are able to comply with requests.

The Supreme Court of Hungary recently ruled that Istvan Tiborcz, the billionaire son in law of Prime Minister Orbán and recipient of massive EU funds, does not qualify as a public figure. And based on that ruling, his lawyers have already petitioned us to remove an article about him. Over the past 10 years, public affairs have gradually become the private matters of people with power and every relevant law, regulation and practice echoes this shift in perspective. Regime officials and politicians often treat journalists as if we were invading their privacy when we ask questions of public interest.

Let me show you another picture. These were the front pages of 16 regional newspapers, which are owned by the government's Mega Media Foundation one day before last year's European parliamentary election. The headline, referring to the voting next day, quotes Prime Minister Orbán, "The pro-immigration people will all be there, let us be there too." These regional newspapers were once independent and under different owners, but oligarchs allied with the government have acquired them all over the past years. In 2018, every single one of these oligarchs donated the entire media portfolios to the Central European Press and Media Foundation. This foundation now controls 476 media outlets, newspapers, magazines, online portals, televisions and radio stations. Rather than informing the public this integrated media network delivers government communication. These outlets do not feature critical opinions, and nearly all political statements made within them come directly from the government. This media apparatus is used to discredit and intimidate real or perceived opponents of the regime.

The largest advertiser on the Hungarian media market is the Hungarian state, which purchases ad space almost exclusively in loyal outlets. Privately owned companies are also very cautious about where they advertise careful not to upset the government. These methods, economic power exercised through acquisition of media companies and interference in the advertising market are the most effective tools in the hands of the powerful to move against independent media.

Independent journalism is quite literally under threat. This is a post from a far-right publication about the newspaper I work for. The Post is openly anti-Semitic, xenophobic and homophobic. The last sentence reads, "You are not only not press, you have become the biggest enemy of the Hungarian people, and you need to be exterminated from Hungary." Every country has violent extremists. The difference in Hungary is that currently sitting government MPs use their official Facebook pages to share the posts of this extremist site. As public affairs are privatized, so are violent threats and extremist behavior, which is outsourced but still condoned. There's still plenty the government is

willing to do in-house without outsourcing. If a journalist uncovers corruption by the government or draws attention to some injustice perpetrated by the state, or speaks up about systemic problems, or just voices a critical opinion, really, they will get smeared by the governments and all encompassing media machine.

Last year, after I testified before the Justice and Home Affairs Committee of the European Parliament on Media Freedom, I was called a traitor and a foreign agent on prime time TV. When my outlet uncovered shortages of PPs in hospitals when the coronavirus pandemic erupted in Europe, talking heads on the same TV channel called for our arrests. In Hungary, no potential target is too small. No criticism of the government is too insignificant. After a high school student used harsh language at an anti-government rally, she became the target of a concentrated smear campaign with one prominent pro-government opinion leader calling her a "slut" in the media. One outlet published up skirt photos of her, while others reported on what grades she got in school. In Hungary, women generally have to endure a lot more than men.

One purpose for these attacks is to bully people into silence. But such intimidation is not aimed exclusively at journalists. While I don't want to normalize online harassment for professional journalists, at least in Hungary, it's a fact of life. If you do your job, you will get attacked. We have grown a thick skin, and I hope we are mostly unfazed by smear campaigns. But a healthy public discourse goes beyond professional politicians and journalists. We need the voices of teachers, doctors, business owners and your local bus driver. These people are often silenced because they see what happens to those who speak up. Attacks on independent journalists often end up silencing their sources and their audience.

At 444, we have put some protocols in place to cope with these intimidation attempts. Our staff is required to report any threats they receive be it through email on social media or anywhere else, and we notify the authorities when warranted. We have practiced for various scenarios and prepared for what to do if someone heckles you when you are out on assignment or just with your family. These are not perfect solutions, and they won't stop the attacks. But they do help us to keep our reporters safe. Just knowing that there are things we can do helps us alleviate some of the psychological burdens associated with these attacks. Still, some of these attacks go beyond bullying. There is a systematic effort to undermine the concept of independent journalism and deny its very existence. "I am a terminator," the editor in chief of one of the more vicious pro-government outlets claimed in an interview. He was explaining that while he is an editor by title, he views himself as a leader of a combat group that engages in political warfare. This wasn't a gaffe, but a well-thought-out message. Independent media is a ruse. According to this logic, every journalist aims only to further apart this political cause, and everyone who says they are independent and just wants to report the truth is lying. "Yes, we are biased, but we are at least honest about it," is the message from the regime's media.

Late last year, one of our reporters was asked to take part in a public debate with a well-known media personality from the pro-government media sphere, someone who's basically paid to discredit us and undermine the maintenance of our profession. I started my career in the late 1990s, not long after the end of history, when we all thought liberal democracy had gone for good and that its reign would be supported by independent journalism. Back then I think both reporters and readers largely understood the value of independent public service journalism. Not everyone, not always, but there was a wide consensus on what worthy journalism was.

Two things have changed since then. As Internet penetration rose and social media became widespread, the role of journalism became more uncertain. You don't need a lot. You don't need large institutions anymore, newspapers or TV channels to relay information to a mass audience. From this perspective, anyone can be a journalist or at least appear to be one. But at the same time, populist politicians began undermining the concept of independent media in an effort to deflect criticism and muddy the water between propaganda and journalism.

I think by today in Hungary, at least, this debate, battle process, whatever you want to call it, it's over. There are hundreds of thousands of people, especially those who became adults during the past decade, who don't necessarily know what independent public service journalism is or that it even exists. Our job, therefore, is not just to report the truth, but to tell our audience who we are and why we do things in a certain way. It is our responsibility to show them that we are different and that we are fulfilling the principle of telling the truth. And in my opinion, a public debate under certain conditions could be a good opportunity to do that. I'm not suggesting it's necessary to respond to every attack or engage with every troll on Twitter. But I do think journalists and independent outlets in general should do a better job explaining some of the basic tenants of our profession and engage more with our audience and our critics. You are not going to persuade the high-level government troll that your work is valuable or your goals are legitimate, but that's not the point. If you're smart, if you prepare and practice, then having a public debate with one of these cynics might just persuade some people from your mutual audience, and I think that's worth the time and the effort. Thank you.

Anna Gielewska Hello, everyone, thank you for having me. My name is Anna Gielewska, and I am most currently a JSK fellow at Stanford, and back in Poland I'm the vice chairman of Reporters Foundation, and the co-founder of VSquare Platform, which is a website for independent investigative journalists from the V4 region.

And so let me begin with the question. "What can be done in order for you to win, Mr. President?" asked an anchor of the so-called public broadcaster who was interviewing President Andrzej Duda before the presidential elections in Poland, which took place just a few days ago. And this is just an innocent example of what the state media in Poland has done in that campaign. For many, the propaganda media handed a victory to do that in this supertight run as he eventually beat the opposition candidate, Rafal Trzaskowski, just 51 to 49. So the audience could have learned during the campaign that Trzaskowski's supporters want to destroy polls, that he himself is a German and European Union agent, and that he represents the interests of the LGBT community, which was portrayed by Duda and the propaganda media as the biggest enemy of the Polish family. And the goal was obvious to instigate and heat up emotions and mobilize supporters using fear and hate. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, some of this reporting was charged with xenophobic and anti-Semitic undertones, and President Duda himself used inflammatory, homophobic language.

And I was born at the end of the communist era in Poland, and I have never faced anything like this before. But my mom, who was a solidarity activist and my colleagues who better remember communism propaganda, say that what is happening now is just like it used to be in the '80s. Poland, like other central European countries, is experiencing some of the most significant challenges to democracy since the fall of communism in 1989. The country that used to be called as the "great example of a democratic transformation" now is struggling with fundamental freedoms, including press freedom, which has dramatically decreased since 2015, from the 18th to 62nd position in the latest

Reporters Without Borders Index. So public attacks on media by prominent politicians and promoting hate speech against journalists have created a hostile environment for independent reporters. Calling journalists as foreign agents is the new normal. And this is actually exactly what our Hungarian friends had told us a few years ago to expect.

By constantly diminishing the stories they don't like and refusing to answer questions, populist politicians become immune to any scandals. As they always repeat, "This is just an attack on us by the bad media," and they use financial and legal threats against reporters. They limit access to public information. They fuel pro-government media with money from state-owned companies, and they organize disinformation campaigns on Facebook and Twitter, hiring troll, and using propaganda and disinfo playbooks. And now, after the presidential elections, the ruling party has secured its power for the next years. And one of their first announcement is to fix the media by introducing a new law to carry out the business normalization of the sector and its opposition to instilling the independence of the private outlets, especially foreign publishers.

We established Reporters Foundation to support investigative journalism in Poland and to work on cross-border stories as a part of some international networks. We also ran VSquare, a platform where we publish stories with our partners from Hungary, Czech, and Slovakia. I think and see that this Polish landscape sounds familiar to many of us. The biggest problem is that the populists and propagandists across the globe, from Central Europe to the U.S. to Brazil and South America are just more effective than journalists by showing a simple, primitive word, finding enemies, heating up fear and increasing polarization, not respecting any rules. They just changed the societies. And they got a powerful tool. Disinformation and propaganda campaigns on social media platforms that boost their manipulative effectiveness. And this has resulted in a situation where, for many, there is no clear difference between organized disinformation and reliable information. Like no clear difference between independent journalists and propagandists. And amid growing polarization of the societies, no one seems interested in the truth anymore.

We tend to repeat that journalism is so much needed, but at the same time, it is so little valued. It's like a public good with not much public support. And our challenge is how to change it for the better.

So I think there are some directions we we can explore more. First and quite obvious, it's an international collaboration and support, so the stories can attain a broader impact, and it's harder to silence journalists in their countries. Then legal support of the international organizations, and not only journalistic organizations, but also, for example, advocacy organizations. Then money, of course. And I mean here not only money for stories, but also for strengthening the organizational position of the independent outlets, their leadership and sustainability. Maybe we should discuss more ideas of a global fund for public interest journalism. Another direction that I would like to highlight here are cross-sector partnerships, a stronger cooperation with watchdog and advocacy organizations, academics, outside experts, especially in investigating and exposing disinformation campaigns. That is actually my special focus in the last year at Stanford. I have worked on the project in this field and collaborated with Stanford Internet Observatory and would be more than happy to discuss it more in the Q&A part.

And I think we also need a serious discussion on ethics, especially on how to approach the biggest tech platforms that boost populists across the globe. And for example, to what extent journalists can cooperate with platforms when at the same time investigating them

and their role in spreading organized disinformation. I think this discussion somehow just started in the ad business with launching Sleeping Giants. It's the paid for profit campaigns. And the question is, what is the media responsibility at the intersection of tech, information and disinformation? For sure, there is significant role for platforms themselves that probably might only be solved on the policy or regulation level, but this is another story. I think that we also need something like anti-propaganda, anti-disinformation playbooks as a response to propaganda playbooks, and understood as something more than tools for verification and fact-checking with more focus on impact and reaching different audiences, and also finding new ways to reach that new audience and to promote quality journalists among them.

So each of those directions needs an innovative future into perspective, which is eventually optimistic news, as it means that there is much work for all of us to do. According to the researchers at Pew, Americans say that politicians are responsible for fake news, but mostly the journalists need to fix the problem of disinformation. And I generally agree with this, but with weak media outlets struggling with sustainability, alone they will not cope with this fundamental challenge of our times. Thank you.

Juan E. Pardinás Thank you very much. My name is Juan Pardinás, I'm the general editor of the newspaper Reforma in Mexico City. The threat of being a journalist in Mexico has been altered even before the arrival of the populist government of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in December of 2018. In the previous government of Enrique Peña Nieto, that went six years from 2012 to 2018, around 47 journalists were murdered in Mexico. Most of the cases were journalists working in regional newspapers in areas that have the influence and control of organized crime, which makes it much more dangerous to do the journalists work there than in a case like mine in Mexico City, in an institution that has a national presence and much more visibility. I think the bigger risk for the personal security of journalists in Mexico, the ones that are in the line of fire, are the ones working at the regional level in subjects that are intertwined with that crime.

But even working in a national newspaper has some challenges. In the previous government, the government bought spy software by an Israeli company, NSO. The Software is called Pegasus. And it sends to your phone in an SMS message, and if you click the message, basically, you lose the control over your phone. It's not that they could hear your conversations. They basically know where you are. They could start the microphone of the phone whenever they want. They could start the camera. They could put files or photographs within your phone that you didn't know. At that time, I was not in my current position. I was an op-ed writer here in the newspaper, and I was targeted by these Pegasus threats. My wife was targeted by these Pegasus threats. You think in a country where you have such a threat by organized crime that the government is using resources, very expensive, by the way, it's very sophisticated software, to target someone that is writing op-eds in the newspaper. It's a kind of joke. Jokingly, a friend told me, "Like, well, the people that were spying you, they should ask for a raise because I wonder if it was very boring just to hear your conversations that there was milk in the fridge and at what time your children are ending their evening classes." It was a joke, but it was an invasion of my privacy, the privacy of my wife and also 20 other colleagues that received that software in their phones.

There was a front page news about it by Azam Ahmed in The New York Times, and that was then, that was the previous government. And now with Lopez Obrador, things have changed, but not for good. Every morning, President Lopez Obrador from Monday to Friday has what he calls a news conference. It's really like a monologue with some

questions from very friendly journalist outlets and some questions by established and professional newspapers. And since he started his government in December of 2018, he has been in power by like twenty months. In those twenty months, he has mentioned Reforma and the newspaper Reforma like 200 times in his morning press conference, and not a single time has it been made in friendly terms. I don't know if that phrase runs well in English, but I think he has some kind of an illness with history. History as a disease. He sees everything on the prism of things that happened in the nineteenth century. So he often refers to a Mexican president that was murder in 1913, more than a hundred years ago. And there was a coup d'etat against this president, Francisco Madero, and the press attacked him a lot. So he always refers to this president that was kind of the founding father or one of the founding fathers of the modern Mexican democracy, and he died defending democracy on the coup d'etat. And he refers that he's feeling the same kind of attacks that Francisco Madero had to face one century ago, which is in this line of speech, he puts any critic of his government, any critic of misspending of public resources as an attack to the institutions of the Mexican state. He cannot differentiate from his own person as an individual, as a politician, as a head of state, and the whole structure of the government, of the whole structure of the state. So any critique against him, it's a critique to the state and also to the country. That it's strengthening their institutions.

So if you see the Twitter attacks toward Reforma, you will see that that they push the argument that we are doing these critiques in order to foster a coup d'etat, which is I think it's offensive. As Sérgio was saying with the Folha de S. Paulo, which is a great line, we are here to defend Mexican democracy. Reforma has been a critical newspaper since it was born 27 years ago, and the institution, the company, was formed more than a hundred years ago, and we have this tradition and legacy of critical newspapers. But now doing journalistic work in Mexico in 2020, if any criticism to the government, you become a "prensa golpista." Like you are creating a kind of a social, political context and narrative to push for a change in powers, for breaking the Constitution, for breaking the law, which obviously it's absolutely not the agenda of the newspaper.

And Lopez Obrador won with 30 million people, with 30 million votes. No one ever had received so many votes in the history of the Mexican democracy. The closest president that won with a landslide, it was like close to 20-million votes. No one had ever had total majority. On the elections, he got 53% of the voting. So basically, through a very successful candidacy, 20 years on the making, he destroyed the political system in a Democratic way, let's say. The previous political parties that usually have power and contested in elections were totally devastated at the polls. So his political life, all of his political life, he ran against certain political enemies. All those enemies disappeared from the landscape in the election of July of 2018. So the single adversary that he found on the landscape was the newspaper Reforma. And that's how we became, I would say, an obsession. Because in 20 months, we have been referred by him like 200 different times. I'm amazed of his memory because sometimes he mentions stories that the newspaper published on him that were published 15 or 16 years ago. Myself, I cannot remember what I wrote 15 years ago, but if there was a critical article against him in 2004, he could tell you exactly what the article said. And he brings that into the narrative that we want to reestablish the previous powers, the previous political system, that as I said before, it was very dangerous for journalists, it was very corrupt. But the solutions that this new breed of populism is presenting are not much better and doesn't make us feel any safer.

Just in the past May, we received a call in our sister institution, the newspaper El Norte in the city of Monterrey, it was a threat by someone that said belonged to the cartel de Sinaloa, one of the most powerful organized crime institutions in Mexico. And they say

they're going to bomb the building. So I remember that day having constant threats by the critics, by the head of state, then the coronavirus, and then a threat that you could not minimize. Maybe it was a crazy person just using the phone. And I agree with what we published that morning. But in a country with so many threats and so many killings of journalists, you could not minimize a threat like that. Obviously, all my colleagues and myself were kind of nervous. This was two months ago, more or less. We are now kind of getting back to our new normal on the COVID, and I see the challenges, but I don't see the solutions.

How easy it is for someone to push us for fake news into the public arena. And if someone says, "Well, you plot the murder of John F. Kennedy." And it was, "Well, I was not born by that time." They said, "Well, now you have to prove it." So discussions go into a mindless path that you have to bring your certificate of birth to prove that you didn't try to plot the murder of the U.S. president in 1963. And the conversation, how you walk back these kind of conversations to a rational path where reality is the point of reference of the conversations.

So we've really, I think every generation had its challenges. But as journalists in in the first two decades of the 20th century, we really have a very tough challenge. How do we put reality as a point of reference of the national conversations, of the global conversations? How do we resist these kind of lies? And this means that some points stick, and then you have to defend from these attacks. There was an interesting piece some months, maybe a year ago, in The New York Times about how comedians were dealing much better with Trump than journalists, because they don't have to put up with so much B.S. of the president. They could just go and direct and say, "That's B.S. We should not take it as real." But as serious journalists, we have to publish the statement of what they said. What President Trump says, or Present Bolsonaro says, or President Lopez Obrador says. And then say, put it on arational light and say, "Well, this is not true." It was challenging how comedy could go just straight to the point that this is totally false. This is such an obnoxious idea that shouldn't be addressed, shouldn't be acknowledged, shouldn't have the right to be put in the public arena. And that also put us in a different degree and different challenge that we have to face. But if we see it in a different light, challenge makes life much more interesting. And it's a real honor to share these challenges with colleagues from different parts of the world. Thank you very much.

Kathleen Kingsbury Thank you so much, Juan. And now we'll move to our Q&A.

Hi, everybody. We're still, I think, waiting for a couple of our panelists to join us, but I wanted to first of all thank you all for being here. And thank you so much for the work that you and your organizations do on a daily basis under what are incredibly trying circumstances. I wanted to start with Anna. You said in your remarks, I was struck by the fact that you had learned from the experience of Hungary, and you were calling for more international collaboration on some of these questions. Just given how many similar patterns we're seeing, I'm curious if you have any advice or vision for how there could be more international collaboration?

Anna Gielewska Sure, thank you for this question. Actually, I think that's really one of the main directions for us, because what we've learned when establishing VSquare, we began it like in 2016. And that was the moment when we first really started to follow what's going on in our countries, and then realized how much politicians, populist politicians, cooperate with each other. And, for example, how the Polish government is just following the path of Viktor Orbán. And that was like the beginning of our understanding that we need to

cooperate with each other, so also to investigate how and to what extent populist politicians globally cooperate with each other.

And definitely when we started this kind of networks, of investigative networks, cross-border collaborations, first we are able to investigate more and better, and to expose more. Then we can support each other. And this really means a lot because it's always harder to silence journalists in one country, than like journalists from six countries, let's say at the same time publish the same stories with a different angle. So that's like just for the beginning of some remarks.

Kathleen Kingsbury Thank you. We are still taking questions from the audience. I'm monitoring those questions right now, and I will ask a few as we move on. We don't have all that much time for questions. But one of the themes of all of your different segments was really the role that social media and tech platforms play, and I was hoping we could talk, Sérgio, you mentioned WhatsApp. Obviously, in the United States, we see the effect of Twitter and President Trump. You know, Facebook. And I think almost everyone mentioned this. But can we talk a little bit, really, as a group, but maybe, Sérgio, you can kick us off about what responsibilities tech platforms have in the spread of misinformation?

Sérgio Dávila That's a very good question. We as a newspaper fight about this a lot. In our understanding, all the big new media companies are tech giants, as you will. They are fighting the responsibility of being a media company. They want all the credit, but not the burden of being a media company. And it's what Facebook, and Twitter, and Google, and Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. What they do is they run advertising beside of content. That's by definition the classical definition of a media company.

So, yes, to answer your question, they are responsible for the content that they run, but they don't want to be responsible for that. And I mean, when you have in Brazil such a penetration, a giant penetration of WhatsApp, it's the second largest country in the world the users of WhatsApp. And in the case of WhatsApp, there's an additional complicator. It's a dark social media because it's not a public social media. You don't know what's going on in all the infinite groups of WhatsApp. And they are influencing the elections all over the world. Certainly they are influencing elections in Brazil. And there is really as a journalist, as a newspaper, there's not much you can do about it.

Kathleen Kingsbury I'm curious if others have any thoughts about this? Anna, you talked about maybe an ethical guidebook for these platforms. I'm curious if other people have suggestions for either legislation or other ways to push tech platforms to avoid the misinformation that we see interfering in so many democratic elections?

Anna Gielewska Can I jump in? So, you know, I think there are key dimensions of how we can see the problem of the platforms, because that's a really complex issue. So obviously, it can only be regulated somehow at a policy level, whether in the U.S. or in the European Union. But the other issue I always try to suggest to discuss is what is the media and platform relation? Because platforms will do it as their business, so they don't feel like they have any ethical responsibility. The thing is that there is also a role for the media. How to approach it, and to what extent cooperating with platforms that take our contents from one side, promotes disinformation from the other, and then, for example, invest lots of money, in fact-checking organizations? So this is the kind of issue that we need to deal with more systematically, I think.

Peter Erdelyi Just one thing. For us, this is a very divisive issue, even within 444. There are people with varying opinions on how to approach this. But my perspective is policing speech be it on the end of the platforms or governments that are mandating the platforms to police speech will always be problematic. I'm not saying that there are not things that need to be policed. I'm just saying there's always going to be these problems. I think what platform should definitely do is police inauthentic behavior in terms of someone who's saying something or appearing as someone who they are not. These organized networks that are spreading misinformation. And I think the way to tackle that is to catch the inauthentic behavior, not necessarily the misinformation they are spreading. Because lying itself, I'm not sure that should be disallowed. I think, like, I just don't see how you can police it in a good way. But you can enforce people only representing themselves in a true way and not hiding behind, you know, personas that are not authentic. So this is just my take.

Sérgio Dávila I think, if I can just jump in, that the kind of regulation that Europe is trying, the European Union in trying to do now, is a good answer to this kind of conundrum that we are in. Journalists are not usually pro-regulation as much. But in this particular case, I think it's a start. We are starting to discuss this issue in Brazil right now. We are far away from where Europe is now. But I think you guys are leading the way on this issue.

Peter Erdelyi Just just one thing to add here. There's a discussion. There's an east and west divide, I think, within the E.U. I think many of the Western and more richer countries, the established democracies are in favor of some E.U. regulation or national regulation. They want the government or the E.U. to step in and regulate. Whereas for Eastern European countries, or at least for Hungary, the idea that instead of Facebook, the government is going to create rules on what can be said or not said on Facebook is even more scary. I'm not saying it's good that the way Facebook regulates it. I'm just saying that the prospect that the government is going to step in, that's scarier.

Kathleen Kingsbury I think that there are several of us on this call that can relate to that concept.

I want to turn to a question we have around whether business models that so much of the press still has that rely on advertising, whether or not particularly in countries where the government has so much power around advertising, whether or not that complicates your relationship with the government? The question is specifically about how the government of Mexico has influenced your business, Juan. I don't know if you want to jump in on that?

Juan E. Pardinás Yeah, thank you, Kathleen. Since Reforma started, grupa Reforma started a hundred years ago, the business model depends on the readers and the advertisers. There is a very unhealthy tradition in the Mexican journalism that the Mexican government, no matter which government, this applies for decades, invests money in newspapers, in TV channels, in radio networks to promote things that would be absorbed in more developed democracies, using taxpayers' money to have an advertising that the government is concerned for your safety, that the government built this highway, that the government is always thinking how to improve the connection of Mexico towards the world. This is common in Mexico that the government invests. Locally Reforma for decades has used the model depending on private advertising and its base of readers. Sometimes we have drawn government advertising, but it's not a source that we depend as a business. But for example, in that previous government, one newspaper from the competition received around \$50,000 a day, more or less, on government advertising, and this kind of ran for the whole fiscal year. So I could imagine how many journalists you could hire with

such an amount of money, plus more than one-million dollars a month, close to 1.5 million dollars a month on government advertising. And now these newspapers that depend heavily on government spending are going through a very, very difficult time because with the economic constraints due to the pandemic, now they are really facing the tough reality that the newspapers should depend on its readers and its advertisers to survive.

So we are in a much more comfortable position to brave these waters than much of the competition in Mexico. And there are different points of view here. How many newspapers will survive in Mexico if you take government advertising totally out of the picture? And obviously we are concerned to preserve a rich ecosystem, to have a competition makes us better, to have regional newspapers also it's really important. But what happens when those newspapers depend totally on the budget of the state government? So I think that's an additional challenge for political systems, where it's OK for the government to use taxpayers' money to buy advertising.

Kathleen Kingsbury I'm curious, I want to throw open this question of financial sustainability to the group, because we have a question here from Guatemala and a couple of other questions seemingly from Europe about this question. A financial model that isn't dependent on government funds, and whether or not, obviously, The New York Times, we have found that a subscription-based model is one of the means for our success in a more digital world. So I'm curious, what other people on the panel have found is the way to fund your journalism?

Sérgio Dávila Yeah, well, of course, at Folha we are aiming at The New York Times model, digital subscribers first as a goal. And to go back to the question that my friend, Juan Pardinás was answering. Government advertising was never a big chunk of Folha's year revenue. At its most, it was between 5 to 10%. The three branches of government including state governments and local governments. So we have more than 10,000 private companies advertising in Folha right now. So it was never a big issue when the government said we are not going to advertise anymore in what they call "extreme press," such as Folha. So to be clear on that point. But of course, the model that we are aiming for right now is The New York Times. It is the golden standard model. Right now it is the New York Times model. I think everybody is trying to reach that kind of equation, where you have most of your revenue coming from direct digital subscribers.

Peter Erdelyi We are in the midst of that transition, so we've been relying on advertising. When we began, we never received any government advertising. So the paper started in 2013. The current government was in power back then, and I think they were not fans of us from the get go. So no money. There was no threat of receiving any money from the state, to be honest. And then by 2017, I think because of the government's interference in the advertising market, we realized that we needed to move toward a reader revenue sustain model. And the current pandemic just proposed that a lot because digital advertising revenue, at least in Hungary, collapsed big time. So while we were planning like a gradual shift, being smart and cautious, we are now forced to change some of our sort of basic business models, and we need to rely on our readers more. The only reason we were able to retain our staff and not fire anyone since the beginning of March was because while most of like 70% year on year the advertising money was gone, but we asked our readers to step up. We reached out, and we said, "We are in trouble, and we need your help." And their donations skyrocketed, and that enabled us. We'd had to introduce some cost cutting, but we were able to keep everyone on staff because we got more money from our readers.

Anna Gielewska I would just like to add this, sure, like subscription based model is probably the most desirable. At the same time, would we find it that it might be also a little bit vulnerable to polarization? Because when people are willing to pay, it means they expect a special type of content. And I would just quote Professor James Hamilton from Stanford, who wrote a book on democracy detectives. And he says that there is a gap between what people need to know and between what they want to know and like to know. And I feel like just to focus on this gap, there is still a high need for some independent small outlets to really strengthen their NGO model and to be more like NGOs than media companies. And it means also international financial support from the biggest donors, maybe kind of new global funds for investigative journalism would be like another important source of income for media organizations in the future. Because still like subscription models has also some limits.

Kathleen Kingsbury This is a little bit of a theme of some of the other questions. We have one question around how much international opinion matters to the heads of state in your individual countries and pressure that international media can put on them, as well as a question from India about kind of how journalists could use courts in other countries to help strengthen their positions against some of their heads of state? I'm curious, particularly from people from Europe, whether or not the European Commission or others have been a partner in trying to push back on some of these attacks?

Anna Gielewska OK, so I think international opinion is super important still for the Polish government, even if the officials say it's not, and it's super important on so many levels. We don't have time to discuss deeper right now. But from this international support for journalism to legal cases as well. Usually it works actually against journalists because, for example, the experiences of those of organizations like OCCRP, organized crime and corruption reporting projects, are, for example, that when bad guys want to sue us, they prefer to do it in London, which is much harder for journalism than in other countries. But so there are many issues around this question. But definitely international collaboration, support, response is more than important. It's super important.

Juan E. Pardinás I think that the toxicity of the speech of Donald Trump in the U.S. somehow has diminished the the gravitas of the international press in the public debate in Mexico. In previous governments, an article by the international press really created the fear in a member of government and in the president. Now, a few months ago in a time lapse of 48 hours, El País from Spain, The New York Times, and I think it was The Wall Street Journal, ran a piece with a very similar narrative that the amount of people dying from COVID in Mexico City was about three times the official data. And the response from government from the perspective of a newspaper, it was an absurd narrative as if these three newspapers were plotting together against the Mexican government. These kind of absurd narrative of The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and El País deciding when to publish the story to affect the Mexican government. That would have been seen in the national debate as totally stupid, and now some people really took to discredit these respectful newspapers. And I was kind of amazed how the government and kind of the national and global narrative against institutions like ours permeated the influence of the international press in the Mexican debate.

Sérgio Dávila In the case of Brazil, I would say, of course, the international opinion, the international view on Brazil from the media, of course it matters, but not as much as it should. Brazil, much like as the U.S., is a continental country, so we tend to look inwards more than than outside. So it matters. Yes. But not as much as it should.

Kathleen Kingsbury So we're running out of time. I wanted to end on one question for all of you. I'm hoping we can just go around. What gives you optimism? What kind of keeps you going? What kind of advice do you give to your staff, but just this broader audience you're speaking to today about hope on the horizon?

Sérgio Dávila Well, it's a great question to to end this very productive session. My optimism derives from the fact that Folha de S. Paulo is about to turn 100 years, so we are a 100 years old. And journalism is a little bit more than that. It's, what, 200 years old? So when we think about the Bolsonaro government, or any government for that matter, Trump's administration, they've been around for, what, two, three, four years? And they can be around for another four years, and they should pass. And we will be around for hopefully another century.

Kathleen Kingsbury Peter, do you want to go next?

Peter Erdelyi Sure. So this is not the best day to ask me for a positive perspective in Hungary. The editor in chief of the of the largest independent news portal was just fired a few hours ago, and that's probably a move, or we consider it a move, by the government to change their coverage in a significant way.

That said, I think engaging with our readers is one way for me to feel better about what we do. We get a lot of negativity. We get attacked on social media and in the pro-government press. And you tend to forget that there is a huge audience that listens to you, that reads your coverage, that you provide a valuable service for. Because they are not always, you know, as loud, and you don't necessarily see their feedback that much. But it's worth listening, and it's worth reaching out. We created a closed Facebook group for supporters, but really, anyone can join. You don't need to support us to do that. And it's a really great experience. And it shows you that despite all the attacks and despite all the negative coverage you may get, there are plenty of people who will like you and who trust what you do. And that's what we are in for, I guess.

Kathleen Kingsbury That's great advice. Anna?

Anna Gielewska Yeah, I'm just telling myself that actually there is no time to be pessimistic because there is so much work to do to respond to all of those challenges. So that's my approach.

Kathleen Kingsbury Juan, do you want to close this out?

Kathleen Kingsbury I think it's like people like you who keep me optimistic. Peter, Anna, Sérgio doing this kind of work in different parts of the planet. Just walking out of my office and feeling the energy of the newsroom and my colleagues. I feel that as journalists we have kind of a moral obligation to be optimistic because the premise of our work is that if we shed some light in our social problems and our national problems, that will be the first path to find solutions. So if we lose optimism, it's like we're losing the compass of what we should do, of the essence of our work. And people like you, it's an honor to belong to this profession. Thank you.

Kathleen Kingsbury Thank you, that's a great note to end on. I want to thank everyone here for this excellent panel, and again, for all the hard work that you do every day.

Mallary Tenore Yes, and I want to echo that and just say thank you to each of you for sharing your experiences and your stories with us. This was a really illuminating conversation and speaks to so many of the struggles that journalists around the world are facing with regard to freedom of the press. So thank you to each of you for sharing your experiences about how you're navigating these attacks on the press, both in your respective countries and in your particular news organizations. I appreciated your parting words too about hope on the horizon. So thank you for that.

Before we go, I want to just take a moment to give a big thanks to all the different organizations that have helped make this panel and others possible. So thank you to our sponsors, The Knight Foundation, Google, Microsoft, Univision, JSK fellowships at Stanford, Trust Project and Moody College of Communication for your contributions and your support.

And we hope that you will continue to join us throughout ISOJ this week. Our last panel of the day will be at 4 p.m. Central, and it will be looking at solutions journalism. So you can check out ISOJ.org for more details on that and our other upcoming sessions. So thank you so much, everyone.