

## ISOJ 2021: Day 5, Workshop

### How to work towards a news ecosystem that cleanly separates news from opinion

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**Mallory Tenore** Hello and welcome, everyone. I hope that you have been enjoying the twenty-second annual ISOJ. Today is our last day of the conference, which is hard to believe. Before we get started with our workshop, I just want to share a few quick notes and also give a special thanks to the Knight Foundation and Google News Initiative for sponsoring this year's ISOJ. We wouldn't be able to do this without their support. And I want to remind everyone that this workshop will be simultaneously interpreted in Spanish thanks to support from Univision Noticias. So if you're tuning in via Zoom, just click on that interpretation globe, select the Spanish channel, and you'll be able to listen to the Spanish interpretation. And if at any point you have any technical difficulties with Zoom, we are streaming this session to YouTube in both Spanish and English, and so we'll pop the YouTube links in the chat so that you can access them.

And so now I'm really excited about today's workshop, which is going to focus on how to work toward a news ecosystem that cleanly separates news from opinion. And as we all know, this topic is increasingly important at a time when opinion and journalism are often mixed together on social media, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. So we'll look at how to separate out news from opinion, and why that matters in terms of news consumption and our media ecosystem. So leading today's workshop will be Kate Harloe, a strategist and researcher at the News Quality Initiative, News Q, where she leads the project's review panels of journalists and scholars who study news quality online. So I'm happy to welcome Kate and our other workshop speakers who she will introduce. Without further ado, take it away, Kate.

**Kate Harloe** Hi, everyone. I'm going to get us started today by introducing this workshop and our presenters. Thanks so much, Mallory. My name is Kate Harloe, and I'm a journalist and strategist at the News Quality Initiative, which is a project of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the Craig Newmark School of Journalism and supported by Hacks/Hackers. With me this morning is Connie Moon Sehat, the director of the News Quality Initiative, who will be helping to moderate the questions and the workshop. And here to present today is Subbu Vincent, director for the Journalism and Media Ethics Program at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, and Patricia Lopez, longtime journalist and editorial board member at the Star Tribune in Minnesota.

So I'll start with a little background on why we're here today and go over what we're planning to do with the session, and then I'll hand it over to begin the presentation. So at the News Quality Initiative, our aim is to think about how to elevate quality news online. And we do that in a few different ways, one of which is through our review panels, which are groups of journalists, technologists, and academics who we convened to research and

constructively engage on those questions. Last year, we welcomed our first cohort of panelists which thought about this question through a number of different lenses. We had one panel focused on local news, one focused on science news, and one focused on opinion journalism. Subbu and Patricia were members of our inaugural opinion panel and lead authors on the panel's recommendations, which are published on our website, and we can drop that link in the chat today. Today, they're going to lead a 15 minute instructional presentation that overviews why opinion journalism matters to elevating quality news online, what some of the challenges are, and the panel's recommendations for how to meet those challenges. We want to acknowledge the contributions of the other wonderful panelists from last year who are also authors on those recommendations, which included David Agraz, who is an engineer at Google/YouTube. Leona Allen, who is deputy publisher at The Dallas Morning News. Jon Allsop, who is a columnist at the Columbia Journalism Review. Rochelle Riley, long time columnist at the Detroit Free Press. And, Rebecca Traister, who is a contributing writer at New York Magazine. One final note before we get started today is that the aim of this workshop is really to be as interactive as possible. We are, of course, a little bit limited by technology. This is a webinar, but we really want to encourage you to use that Q&A function. Our aim today is really to put forward the ideas of these journalists and to get as much feedback as possible to engage the audience and to have a conversation with you. So please don't hesitate to ask questions throughout the session. We'll be monitoring the chat during the presentation and after. We're going to reserve a significant amount of time later in the presentation to really engage with your questions, address them, and put them to the presenters.

So in that vein, we are now going to start a quick poll to get a sense of the audience's views on some of the topics that we're going to cover today. So I will hold here a little time, about 10 or 20 seconds, for you to fill out the questions to this poll, and then I'll hand it over to Subbu. Great. Well, I hope that gives you a little bit of time to read through the questions and answer them, and now I'm going to hand things over to Subbu Vincent, who is going to kick off our instructional presentation.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** Hi, everybody. Thank you for signing into this session today. It's just been awesome. And I want to thank ISOJ and also all of the sponsors as well. We're going to talk about how to work towards an ecosystem that can separate news and opinion. And we use the word ecosystem in a particular sense. I know that word is thrown around with a lot of gay abandon. We mean in the sense that news publishers are upstream of the platforms and the search platforms, as well as the social media platforms. And the public is downstream of the platforms, and they discover news and experience news on the platforms. There is an ecosystem and a supply chain that goes in that order. And when we say separate news and opinion, we mean that it's got to be a separated label for the whole ecosystem. If it's just the publishers, it doesn't work. If it's just the platforms without the publishers cooperating, that goes even worse. So it has to be the whole system in one sense.

Just as an outline, we'll talk a little bit about the actual problem of distinguishing between news and opinion. We'll also go through some examples of what happens now when you're experiencing news articles on feeds. This could be on Apple news. It could be Facebook news. It could be Google News. It could be Twitter and so on. So we will show you some screenshots, and what that actually means. And then I will actually kind of talk to Patricia, and she'll go over what we recommended in our inaugural opinion. And then we'll open it up for you folks.

So just to clear up the terms itself. The word "opinion" is not the same as what we use in the news. Opinion itself, if you folks already know the classical use of the term, it means a view or judgment formed about something, but it's not necessarily that it's based on fact or knowledge. It can come out of value. It can just come out of liking or disliking something. It can be a psychological feeling that drives an opinion. Opinion journalism, on the other hand, usually has a mix of point of view, persuades people, informs, entertains, challenges. It's fact based. The accuracy news value still applies. But most importantly, it's journalism itself. It's part of journalism. News publishers, they also publish opinions from expert columnists, people with lived experience, journalists who have been covering an issue for a long time. All of those folks coming through the opinion streams that come out of a news publishers. And one key thing that connects information and opinions is what I mean, Habbag Arendt, the famous political philosopher who actually wrote a very detailed set of articles on lies, and she's actually made a really interesting one-line thing on "How can you have an opinion if you're not really informed." Opinion journalism serves to both inform people as well as let opinion go out into the world.

So if we look at the problem itself, on social media, in particular, you've got opinion of the general kind that all of us share. It's part of human expression. In fact, opinion is the most natural form of human expression that we always speak and you mix fact with our opinions, and feelings, and all of that. So on social media, what exists is what we call mass opinion. Everybody just shares views. Opinion journalism itself collides with opinion, in part, because you're dealing with claims of all kinds, unproven claims, hyper-partisan claims, misleading claims, deception, lies, pseudoscience, conspiracy. All of those things can come on the personalized news feed between friends and family. And on the same news feed, you're going to get articles, news articles, and you're also going to get opinion journalism of people that are being published on the news platforms that are being shared. That causes confusion to folks. It also allows people to take opinions of opinion journalists out of context and share with each other and compete. And it's a completely hyper-partisan space, where this is actually ongoing. The other challenge is journalists are on social media on their own, and as part of authenticity, they say things. Like we actually say things online, and then we may be seen to be opinionated about something. And that has implications for the news publishers. Some publishers are open to it. Some publishers are not. And there have been ongoing controversies about that, as we all already know.

Now, that apart, there is the fundamental challenge just with the word controversies in journalism, and that also shows up in opinion journalism that comes out of the publisher. And one way to understand just the word controversy is to look at Daniel Hallin's book. It's there in our paper. When you get the link to the paper, you'll see that we've actually referred to it. There's a mark that Daniel Hallin, who's a journalism historian, actually proposed in the 80s as part of his book on how the Vietnam War was covered. It's called Hallin's Sphere. You'll see there are conflicting circles here in your screen. The actual core of the sphere is what's called the consensus. That means everybody in society already agrees. Journalists actually know that. They don't think there's any controversy at all. The sun rises in the east. That's just settled, so there's nothing much to say about it. The Earth goes around the sun, settled, nothing much to say about it. And then there's the sphere of legitimate controversy, and that's where the facts are not settled. The science is not settled. Multiple opinions, multiple perspectives and lived experiences exist. So there are chances for all of the viewers to actually come up. Then there's the sphere of what's called deviant, and that really means just completely outside those two spheres. And that's, for example, you take the flat-Earth approach. The flat-Earth theory is floating around even now on YouTube. If you go to social media, you'll find a lot of those kinds of posts that are anti-science, that are not rooted in what what actually is. Those kinds of views exist there.

It's very easy to stoke controversy online when political leaders, powerful people, influencers can say whatever they want on social media, but that doesn't mean it automatically becomes a controversy. So, I mean, determining whether something is actually a legitimate issue or not, controversy or not, has become harder. And we know that journalists are inherently uncomfortable with that kind of problem because you can make mistakes. It's been used to keep the opinions of marginalized people outside in the name of objectivity. But it can also be used to examine whether something is really a controversy or not. So these things become hard because if the issues are not settled in a standardized way with some standards and ethics inside publishers, it will populate downstream to the platforms. And platforms, they are not going to be able to sort the difference between good opinion journalism and a terrible opinion journalism, if it's not already sorted out at the source. So that's part of the problem.

And just to quickly go through some examples of what we found on the feeds as our panelists looked at what's happening online. If you see this Facebook news feed, you'll find the Vox article here. And this Vox article actually was not labeled as opinion on the publisher's site. It actually carried opinion in it. It would have been classified if it applied the normal standards. So it did not have that label on the publisher's site, and also it did not have the label on the platform feed where it actually showed up. To take a different example, this is a New York Post article that also showed up on Facebook news. In The New York Post, this was labeled as opinion. In fact, it was opinion and sarcasm both. It was labeled. But on the Facebook news feed, it was not. It just showed up like a news article. Let's take a third example. If you look at the Daily Beast article, it was actually not labeled as opinion on the Beast, but if you look at if you look at Microsoft News Feed, this is an actual aggregator, they actually labeled it as opinion right here. So it was part of the opinion page. So this is an example of a different behavior. So you'll find all of this happening online at the same time. It doesn't necessarily contribute to a news experience that actually is consistent for us. So at this point, I'm going to hand it over to Patricia, and she's going to speak about how publishers and platforms might address this.

**Patricia Lopez** Welcome to all of you here. You know, we know that our readers are confused about what distinguishes news from opinion, and you can't really blame them for this. It used to be very easy. News was in the news pages. Opinion and editorials appeared in their own section. The wall was real. And now it's all gotten very fuzzy. And we need to, all of us, rebuild some of those distinctions to provide more clarity for our readers on what separates news from opinion. And the best way we can do that is through labeling. Each and every story ought to be labeled news or opinion. You can go through different gradations of this, but the most important one is that dual system at the top that you see. News, and then underneath that, if you have the resources, you can do breaking news, you can do explainers, you can do investigative profiles. Under opinion, you can do analysis, you could do staff opinion, commentary, perspectives. All of those things are fine, but the most essential one is news versus opinion.

And let me just say a word about what is the best way to do this. We believe that you need to develop some standards within your outlet as to how you are going to distinguish news from opinion yourself. What gets which label? Someone in the newsroom, or in the publishing area, the platform, has to be responsible for that. My inclination would be the writer, because I think the writer probably knows best, or the editor working above that writer. Someone needs to take responsibility for offering a brief justification, if necessary, I mean, you don't have to be prepared for this on every story, but if you're challenged by readers, you ought to be able to explain why you consider something news versus opinion. There has to be consistency in this labeling so that readers know what to expect. And for

that, we're going to need to re-educate them a little bit. So we don't have separate sections anymore, but what we can have are places on our websites that explain our thinking. What basically constitutes news versus what constitutes opinion. A little bit of transparency as to how we arrive at those definitions, and preferably a way for them to be a little interactive with this, to comment on why a certain label was given. They may see opinion in a news story where none really exists, and that's where you need to be prepared to explain yourself because that's the way we're going to build credibility with our readers. Right now we've kind of turned them loose in this fuzzy online. Is it news? Is that opinion? We're not quite sure. We need to make those distinctions for them, and it needs to happen at the writer-publisher level. So that then when it goes out to the platforms, it's already labeled.

We'd like to see some consensus, hopefully nationally, and internationally even, on this kind of labeling and the basic description of what constitutes news and opinion. And I'd like to say a little bit about labeling opinion journalism in particular. So opinion journalism is in a slightly different category in that we have some advantages that we've never had before. We can do rigorous fact finding, reported-out opinion, using original documents, and we can link to all of that. That was something that was hidden before, for the most part, when we did opinion. Now we can make it explicit for people. And so we really want to be able to guide readers to opinion pieces that have that rigorous fact checking, that use original documents, and find a way to separate that from other commentary that may or may not. It might be based on polarizing statements or things that are less than true. All of these things wind up getting into opinion, and you don't have to agree with all of it. But we want to find a way to separate them. Interestingly, The New York Times recently decided to drop their op-ed label on non-staff commentary, and instead label those "guest essays," which I guess makes it extremely clear that these are not being written by staff people. And that's one way. That's one way of separating. There could be many ways of doing that.

I think when it comes to algorithms, algorithms can be great, but there is a danger for publishers of over personalizing them. We want readers to be surprised. We want them to expand their horizons. We want them to challenge their set way of thinking. And all of those things happen when your news feed is not completely tailored to you. You know, predictable is boring. We want to be able to surprise people with stories that they didn't expect, both on the news side and then in opinion with things that they're going to disagree with. We do that regularly at the Star Tribune, and we get a lot of heat for it. But it's good to challenge people with different ways of thinking. And that is something that only comes when you don't have feeds that are too tailored. There's confirmation bias, a danger in that. The other thing we'd like to see is a top-level opinion tab for all the news feed listings. And hopefully that won't be too difficult, but there should be a way on your news stories to guide people to opinion that is related to that topic.

I want to talk a little bit about expanded bylines, so another way that we can build credibility is through, and some outlets are already doing this, expanded bylines that can speak to the experience level of the staff writer to their topic area, the years that they've had either in journalism or on a specific beat. All of these things will add a little bit of credibility to what the writer has to say. And, you know, we think that that is very helpful. OK. I think that we might be out of time, so I'd like to turn it over to some questions now.

**Connie Moon Sehat** Great, thank you so much, Subbu and Patricia, for walking us through the paper. I just want to invite the audience to ask any questions that you might have in terms of just clarification of the presentation. We also wanted to pose another question to you as the audience, which is, what are the questions that you think that we as

a community need to be asking in order to move recommendations forward like this one? Should you agree that news and opinion, that it's really important to keep divided? So we look forward to those questions from the audience. So let me just go ahead and maybe just open it up then to some of the ones that we're hearing. One audience member asks, "I think the bigger problem is that there is insufficient public distinction between actual news and opinion outlets and extremist propaganda or non-fact based opinion outlets like Fox News, Newsmax, et cetera. So how can we do that better? And where then do we put the CNN, MSNBC primetime hosts?" Do either of you want to bite first?

**Patricia Lopez** Well, I'll just say I'm not sure that we can do the labeling for those outlets. It's not like there's some international rules about what constitutes news versus opinion. This is something where at first we're going to have to rely on outlets to do it themselves. As for organizations like Newsmax, it would be great if we could police that sort of thing, but we just can't. I mean, part of that is the freedom of the press. I do think, you know, hopefully, the outlets that do decide to do this will gain greater credibility and trust with their readers, and that's how you're going to build it, brick by brick, by reliably labeling pieces, news or opinion. You can only do what you generate, or what you decide to publish. We don't yet have a mechanism for determining what another outlet publishes and whether or not they decide to observe those distinctions. But the more we build these definitions, the more readers come to expect them. Hopefully they will be wary of pieces that are not labeled.

**Connie Moon Sehat** Subbu, do you have some thoughts?

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** Yeah, I feel that this is an important question, and I'm glad it came up. It's upstream of the opinion panel itself. We looked at opinion journalism coming out of news publishers, and I think this audience member is absolutely on the ball. This comes to the level of what is journalism itself, and what is news? And that's been the cultural problem where definitions get fought over. Ideally, if the people who are practicing responsible journalism can all push up the reputation of journalism, because of the responsible practice, because of the education around what it is, then it's easier to fight back and create boundaries around people who are not doing journalism at all. Those who don't, and yet claim to be doing news. That boundary is not really established because in culture speech is part of culture. News is part of culture. The occupation of journalism arises in culture, and that makes it hard for how to set the boundaries so that people who are basically doing garbage, or doing conspiracy, or doing nonfactual commentary, all of them get actually accounted for in the media ecosystem. I think the platforms have a greater responsibility here than even mainline news publishers or new local news publishers, in part, because the platforms have to make a decision on how they're going to separate. And that has to do with what I call journalistic behavior. They have to be able to understand what is journalistic behavior and what is not. And it's not an easy problem.

**Connie Moon Sehat** So, yes, we have lots of comments from the audience, so I'm going to start going a little quicker and maybe just pick one of you to answer. But I think one of the things that your presentation did in terms of just highlighting the complexity of the problem was to sort of to point out, obviously, that there's potentially a lot of work that needs to be done both on the platform side, but also on the journalism side equally. So this first question, I just want to quickly direct to Subbu related to platforms, and then to address another question related to a journalism perspective to Patricia. The first one is in terms of platforms, how can we get the platforms to incentivize us? I mean, there's been talk about this for years and sadly, nothing has happened. So Subbu do you have any quick thoughts related to that?

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** Is the question about how can we get the platform to engage in labeling?

**Connie Moon Sehat** Maybe we'll just say incentivize separation.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** So let me give some context on what I know the platforms actually attempted to do. There is a registration system that, for example, Facebook uses for organizations that are doing news to actually register as news organizations. I mean, Google News does the same thing as well, so there already is a way for social media companies to ask for organizations to register themselves. At that point, there is some leverage for publishers and platforms to work together to use the same set of standards. So it's not that the incentives aren't there. The organizational connection in the partnership ecosystem between the platforms and the publishers are there in every country. What's not there is how do you go beyond the simple claim that "I'm a news organization, and I'm registering with my site," and all of that, and from what standard that we actually use. That incentivization has to happen both for the public, and I think each side wants the other to do something. I would like both sides to sit together and actually come up with the consensus of just a minimal basic labeling of news vs opinion and then go from there. And not just for the U.S., but every country.

**Connie Moon Sehat** And then a question for Patricia. I'm going to glom a couple of them together. One question asks, what would be your criteria to set recommendations to separate opinion from propaganda? Another one notices that there's a lot of opinionated words in hard news stories like The New York Times and Washington Post. So one of maybe the larger question is do you think maybe journalists need to be re-educated overall, potentially on words and categories when it comes to journalism?

**Patricia Lopez** In short, yes, I don't think that would hurt at all. There's been a little, shall we say, sloppiness lately in terms of using loaded language, opinionated language. And I'm hopeful that the mere discipline imposed by having to select the label of one versus the other will bring writers back to using more neutral language in news stories and reserving more persuasion language for opinion pieces. That is, you know, a boundary that needs to be reestablished, and some of it is more subtle than others. But if we can at least remove the most overt language, I think that would be progress. And I'm sorry, what was the other part of your question?

**Connie Moon Sehat** It's just really about in terms of like re-education related to language or even genre potentially. Right? In terms of the genre, the form itself, maybe knowing that line between what is opinion versus maybe something like propaganda.

**Patricia Lopez** Yeah, the opinion versus propaganda. One thing we can do in terms of our outlet, we control what we publish, so you don't have to publish pieces that are outright propaganda, that rely on deception, and lies, and misleading claims. We can decide not to publish pieces like that. They are coming in from outside, presumably. So maybe a little tighter rein on some of that. Would there ever be a propaganda label? That would be self-defeating. I don't see anybody ever doing that. So it's going to depend a little bit on the criteria that these new news outlets establish. There can be standards for opinion as well. I mean, not just news, but what constitutes opinion that we are willing to publish, I guess would be the best way to put it.

**Connie Moon Sehat** So then actually, this is a related question to both of you, perhaps, from your experience reviewing the feeds during the panel and noting this like this language, right? That there can be opinionated language and perhaps like AI or crowdsourcing might be able to help in terms of recognizing what's opinion or what strictly fact-based reporting. But taking a step back from your perspective on the panel, what kind of hope would you place in that? Is there any hope that you would want to place in that kind of solution? Or is this, again, maybe, as you were just saying, Patricia, something much more that fundamentally it is about the approach and perspective of the author as an opinion journalist? Meaning to say like, "This is what I'm doing, and this is the label I'm going to put it under."

**Patricia Lopez** Yeah. And you need to be able to justify your actions, and I think that's probably the best discipline of all. When I was a political editor, I used to tell my reporters, you can you can write things, but you need to be prepared to defend them. And I think as opinion journalists, we have to do the same thing. We have to be prepared to defend our decisions about language, about context. And in this case, it would be about the label itself. A friend of mine used to call himself the "licensed journalist." It was a column that he had. And of course, the joke was there is no license that you need to be a journalist. Right. We all self police a little bit, and some of us do it a little more rigorously than others.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** Can I jump in on that? I think AI is a very problematic face for human expression, just because of how AI works. People in AI often want lots and lots of labeled articles for the machines to learn what is opinion and not. So unless publishers first systematically label across the board, machines are going to be hard pressed to learn. Machines can tell the difference between the actual tonality, sentiment, opinionated language and so on. But there's speech and expression in text of articles that's different from journalistic opinion journalism, where you actually have quotes. You can quote people. Inside the quotes, you can have opinions. But outside the quotes, of course you are reporting the facts. These are things for AI to understand that it has to upstream of page, of text, into the journalistic practice on the text. And historically, platforms have not been that interested in going upstream from the page into the actual practice. So I would just prefer to go with what Patricia is saying and what we've said, which is start the labeling at the publisher site consistently first before accepting any claims from the AI side on the platform that it can even work. But I think that if the two sides work together instead of training infrastructure for machines to learn, there's a chance that you can automate some of it.

**Patricia Lopez** Here's one thing that I wouldn't mind seeing platforms do this is to give priority to pieces that are labeled, and that would create an incentive to do the labeling so that you would rank a little bit higher in terms of publishing priority.

**Connie Moon Sehat** So this is a great segue to another question from the audience is in terms of that practicality, which actually I've been pausing on this one because I have to think about this. So then would one as a news outlet like validate oneself in a way as a news outlet first before positioning yourself in terms of having an opinion section? In other words, does one, practically speaking, as an outlet need to establish a certain kind of credibility in terms of its news offerings that are non-opinion journalism as well as having opinion journalism? Does that question sort of makes sense? Maybe I'll put it to Subbu first.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** So we have this challenge in mind for both my publications. And this is actually a really good question because it tells you what a news



organization really is like. Unless a news organization has some original report that's coming up because its reporters are on the ground doing reporting, the travel, they check things out, and do the actual stories, interviewing people and so on, that leads to discovery of what's happening. Then as a separate thing, you can do the opinion journalism. If a site comes up tomorrow that says "I'm a news site," and it's only carrying commentary, that to me is a signal there is a problem. I would say the platforms that you see that, take note of that, because you can't just claim to be a news organization, in my opinion, if you're doing only commentary. I'd like to see news organizations do both. There may be organizations that do only reporting because of their models, and they're not doing opinion. That might happen. But the opposite, I think, is actually a problem, particularly in our current ecosystem. But let's see what Patricia has to say on that.

**Patricia Lopez** I think you put it very well, Subbu. I have nothing to add on that one.

**Connie Moon Sehat** So here's another tricky sort of conundrum to think about. Obviously, a number of journalists are not only publishing on their outlets, but they also make their own opinions known via social media. So this is an interesting question then, should a journalist potentially use some kind of label when they're interacting in social media in terms of when they are writing an opinion and another when they're actually trying to state something as a fact-based piece of information?

**Patricia Lopez** Well, you know, Twitter in particular, I think doesn't really lend itself to that kind of formality, and I do see a lot of opinion from news reporters. You know, again, some of this is going to come back to discipline and professionalism. I think if you are a news reporter, as tempting as it may be to weigh in on issues of the day, you risk your credibility when you do that. And you tip your hand a little bit, and I'm old school enough that I'm not comfortable with that. I kept opinions strictly out of my social media contributions until I joined the editorial board, and now I can let it rip. Right? I still get a lot of responses from readers who remember back to my reporting and editor days, and they're confused as to why now I have opinions. And I tell them, "Well, now I'm paid to have opinions, so I'm going to express them." This is something that reporters are going to have to do for themselves. I would hope that they would become reacquainted with the fact that you don't have to weigh in on every topic that you're reporting on and that there is some value in maintaining some neutrality.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** I think there's a range of options for journalists to take on social media, and it has to be nuanced based on understanding of what social media is. And it's fundamentally different from everything else. They are expression platforms. They are platforms to express the thoughts, feelings, emotion, and things tend to trend faster if there's opinions in them. It's just how these platforms have designed themselves intentionally for their business model. So when reporters are expressing themselves, I think we've got to go up the level between opinion and reporting into values. As long as reporters are open about their values and not trying to hide their values. If I am pro-democracy as a value and I'm anti-insurrection because of that, I can be open about it. The problem comes when we assume that the public is not intelligent or we assume the public that has a different value system than us tends to read what we say as opinion, even though we may be seeing it as a spectrum. So it's a value-system conflict where most disagreements come. So as long as reporters and journalists on social media are open about their values and what they stand for, people like that. People like transparency. Then it may be possible to to express yourself, but then that becomes like a settlement between what reporters have to have with their publishers internally, because otherwise there are all kinds of other controversies. I don't think this matter is settled, but I think

we've got to move forward beyond either counterculture or just completely say reporters don't talk on social media at all.

**Connie Moon Sehat** And so I feel like one of the things that we're doing when we talk about potentially what kinds of transformation might need to happen in both journalism and the platforms is sort of like the transformation of opinion journalism, perhaps, right, as it engages now in this new space. And so one question noting Patricia's nod to The New York Times's recent announcement about retiring the op-ed is an interesting question. So this change to titling it "guest essays." I guess a question for you both in terms of thinking about now and the future of opinion journalism, for example, do you think that other publications might follow in their footsteps? Is this something that could create something larger related to the future of opinion journalism? Thoughts from you both in terms of that?

**Patricia Lopez** Well it certainly could. We certainly could do that. At the Star Tribune, we've chosen to use labels such as commentary or perspective rather than guest essay, but we do believe that there should be a way to separate staff commentary from non-staff commentary. Because there are different levels, frankly, of rigor, and fact finding, and evidence base that we use for our own pieces as opposed to those that come from outside.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** What's interesting I found about The New York Times's announcement this week, I think it came out on Monday or Tuesday, and I'm like, "Wow, we have this. So this is going to come up." The word op-ed has a history that the public doesn't understand or know. Our publishers haven't assumed the importance of actually explaining all of that. So the opinions editor of The New York Times explains the history of that word op-ed in a useful way. I wish that was done when the op-ed was invented and kept that way, but it wasn't. So it merely said it was "opposite the editorial," and it was external opinion, columns, and so on. So while they may be retiring that term, that term itself, I don't think they are retiring opinion journalism. So it's a technical thing. And as long as they are labeling their articles and as long as platforms can tell that this is The New York Times's opinion journalism piece versus this is a reporting piece, the fundamental practice is still the same. So if other publishers want to retire the op-ed term because it's not really standing its ground in today's chaotic media environment without explanation, it's one less headache for people to worry about, at the very least.

**Connie Moon Sehat** Well, I'm going to pause here, actually. You may remember that we had a poll at the beginning of the session, so we were thinking about rerunning it. But in fact, there's actually quite strong consensus on this poll. So I thought I'd just read out some of the responses. I just find it interesting for us all to share. So the first question we asked the audience was, "Should all articles that carry persuasion be labeled opinion?" And of those who answered, 72% of them said yes, 19% said no, actually, and then 13% said this is impossible. So I'm going to ask you to hold that one in mind for a second, because I think I'd like to come back to that one. The second question we asked of the audience was, "Do you believe that news readers appreciate the separation of news from opinion?" And then in this case, in fact, 91% of the audience said, yes. They do believe that readers appreciate that separation. The third question, "Do you believe opinion journalism is different from any opinion online?" And in this case, 81% of the audience agreed. Yes, they feel like it is different or believe that it's different. And then finally, in terms of kind of our strongest response, "Do you agree that more clearly labeling news and opinion would help improve the overall quality of news online?" At the time the poll was taken, we got 100% yes. So hopefully that sort of can reflect back to us all as a group as interactive as we're able to be, that there is a strong feeling here that some separation

really would be improving the overall quality of our news experience. But I just want to come back to this original first question in the poll, which did have this response from folks in the audience who are like this is impossible that all articles that carry persuasion be labeled opinion. And I wondered maybe if you had any thoughts you wanted to share with that, or maybe let me ask it in another way, kind of categorically speaking. We know of the category of analysis and why analysis may be very hard to sort of think through like is that opinion or is that news journalism? And so just wanting to kind of say, like, practically speaking, are there these cases where this really just can't be done? And maybe Subbu first?

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** The way I start with that, is that I'm not embarrassed about having to label something as opinion if I was an editor. It's actually a good thing to call something that's part persuasion in it, an opinion. Because it's opinion journalism, people seek it out. People are sometimes looking for opinions. They actually find it, so make it easier for persuasion to be fun, like why is this policy better than something else? So we shouldn't actually hesitate to have a standard that identifies persuasion and says "call this opinion." As long as it's opinion journalism, fact based, evidence-based, the lived experiences of people, it's good. What I worry about is attempting to do that in AI. Those are tricky issues. But I think editors and reporters at any news organizations, they can tell the difference between what's persuasion and what's not. They're already good at language. So I don't see a problem in that as long as there's an agreement to actually have a standard and just implement it. What do you think, Patricia?

**Patricia Lopez** I think there's a lot of difficulty in using the word persuasion. So at what point am I informing, educating, and when does that slip over into persuasion? Because it's a spectrum. It's not an either or. You know, someone's article that informs to one person, another person could easily read that as an attempt to indoctrinate or to persuade. This is why this is going to be a process. Right. And part of the discipline will come in trying to figure this out on these stories. Can I defend this as a news piece, or does it do so much to persuade that it needs to slip over into the opinion label? That is going to be the challenge, and I'm not trying to diminish that. There's going to need to be some real soul searching. Some reporters are going to have to maybe take a little bit of language out or something that might just stray a little too far into opinion. It's not a black or white thing. This is something that we're going to have to wrestle with. And it's the doing of it that and being challenged on it by readers over and over again, that is going to help us refine this process.

**Connie Moon Sehat** Just one more final question from the audience, because I see that we're almost out of time, is there from the technical perspective, or the journalist perspective, do you guys have your favorite guides for differentiating between news versus opinionated language? In other words, just as you were mentioning, Patricia, that this is going to be hard work, that we have to figure out how to approach this. Maybe this is another thing for the agenda in terms of looking to the future. How can we sort of share resources or think about, again, what does it mean to be writing opinion journalism and writing news journalism in an online space?

**Patricia Lopez** Yeah, I think that actually would be a good topic for us to get together on in the future, and maybe tackle that specific point to develop a guide to separating news from opinion.

**Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent** So one starting point for that that I've had to use in the past is people who are writing opinion, they take a position. And they're open about taking

a position, and they justify the position either against the policy, or for a policy, or against even a person running for office. All of that. You can tell from the language that there's justification in the language towards an outcome or actually against it. But as a reporter, you will not have that kind of look. You'll not have that sense of reason and argument in it at all. You'll simply have the hourglass. You'll have some form of saying, this happened, this happened, this happened, and here's what different people are saying. Here's the experience of these people. And there are different forms of reporting that. There's not just one form of reporting. But usually you can tell when there's a justification, and that's a useful place to start. But I think I agree with what Patricia said even earlier, unless this is done over and over again in a consistent way, it's in the doing of it that we build a new practice. We will build a practice of identification and education. If we don't even start, we will just be talking about this endlessly.

**Connie Moon Sehat** Well, first thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences on our panel last year. I really want to invite the audience that if you're interested in continuing to collaborate or to kind of continue the conversation about how to advance the division of news and opinion, number one on the NewsQ project, we're launching our second panel into news and opinion. You can see that announced on that site, where we really want to dive in deeper this year with a lot of lovely folks, some of whom are also presenting on other panels during this during ISOJ. So we really do invite your continued participation if you're interested in this topic. Feel free to reach out to us at [Hello@NewsQ.Net](mailto>Hello@NewsQ.Net). But in the meantime, we'll just look forward to trying to push this conversation forward among us all. So really, thank you so much.

**Mallary Tenore** Wow, thank you so much everyone. This is a really great conversation, and I know people must have learned a lot from it. I love all the tips and takeaways you shared. So thank you so much for being here with us today. Really appreciate it.

I think that there's going to be a lot of people who will want to re-watch it after the fact, so this is a reminder to everyone in the audience, we will have this session available on our YouTube page in English and in Spanish. And so we'll be sharing that out so that you can view a recording of the session. So up next, we have about a 30 minute break or so until our next panel at 1:00 p.m. Central Standard Time, and the panel is titled Race and Equity in the News: Reporting in Service of Communities and with the URL (uplift, respect and love) lens. And it's going to feature a really strong lineup of five speakers who you are going to learn a lot from. So we hope that you will join us for that panel. And in the meantime, we hope that you'll check out our Wonder room, where you can interact with other ISOJ'ers and speakers. So we will put a link to that Wonder room chat in the Zoom chat, so you can easily access it right after this session ends. And we also encourage you to check out the pick and post page on [ISOJ.org](http://ISOJ.org), where you can download fun ISOJ graphics and share them on social media using the hashtag #ISOJ2021. So we'll pop a link to that pick and post page in our chat as well. So with that, I'm going to wrap up, and I look forward to seeing you back here again in about 30 minutes. See you soon.