

## ISOJ 2022: Day 2

### Lightning sessions: Online journalism and press freedom in Asia and Latin America

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Chair: [Ann Marie Lipinski](#), curator, Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard

- [Bao Choy](#), independent journalist, Hong Kong
  - [Pranav Dixit](#), technology reporter, **BuzzFeed News**, India
  - [Jorge Caraballo Cordovez](#), journalist, Colombia
  - [María Lilly Delgado](#), independent journalist, Nicaragua
  - [Patricia Laya](#), bureau chief, **Bloomberg News**, Venezuela
  - [José Luis Sanz](#), correspondent, **El Faro**, El Salvador
  - [Natalia Viana](#), cofounder and executive director, **Agência Pública**, Brazil
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**Ann Marie Lipinski** This connects so much to the discussion that Borja and Jorge just had. They're really connected, and they could have all sat here on the panel and had and a really rich conversation. So we'll try to maintain the quality of the one that just occurred. We're going to be talking about, from a group of journalists, two now and then five right after them, who are living challenges to their work on a daily basis. Some more than others. But I wanted to just frame this a little bit. Maybe some of you follow the work of Freedom House, and if you don't, I really think you should, because they do really extraordinary analysis of kind of what's happening on the stage from across the world, from the perspective of what's happening to democracy. And I really want to frame this discussion in that context. This isn't just something that's happening to journalists. I think sometimes we personalize this. We make it about our industry. This is something that's happening to democracy, and the data are really clear. Whither goes journalism is how goes democracy. And when you see challenges to what happens to the press, you're going to see a faltering or even failing democracy in a country. So just keep that in mind.

The Freedom House tells us that media freedom is deteriorating around the world and has been over the past decade, that in some of the most influential democracies in the world, populist leaders oversee regular attempts to crush the independence of media in their countries, and that the impact that that has on democracy is what makes it truly dangerous. But we're also going to talk a bit about how we can see reversals of this. The condition of the state of the press and freedom in your country today is not necessarily what it was last year and isn't necessarily what it's going to be next year. That can be both encouraging and discouraging depending on where you live. But we hope to spend a little bit of time talking about kind of how to address some of these challenges.

I think the reason we're here today is that Rosental was part of a conversation that we had. He's on my advisory board at the Nieman Foundation. And at our last board meeting, I was observing that in the ten years I've been in this job, what is so obvious and really alarming to me is that I have journalists today coming to Nieman, who, when I started this job, were coming from countries where freedom of expression and press was pretty healthy, and today is not. And the list of that countries has been growing. And it was really just sort of as I took stock of this past decade and thought about that, it was a personalized view of

this kind of meta discussion that Freedom House has brought to us. And some of the journalists we're going to be hearing from today will represent that.

I also want to say to the U.S. journalists in the room in listening today, this is also about us. This isn't just something that's happening out there to international journalists. Our own standing on the world press index from Reporters Without Borders is not particularly healthy. We're something like 44th on a list of 180. I think if you ask the average American kind of where do you think we stand on this, we would think we do much better. We don't do that. Well, we're up one over the last index, but, you know, still on, I think, shaky ground. And the last thing I want to say there is we're also this leading exporter of a tool that has been used to repress journalism around the world. One of our leading exports, you know, is this term "fake news." We've seen it just in the last couple of weeks, employed to a horrible end in Russia where, Putin called out fake news as the reason for this new legislation, which can get you 15 years in jail for using the word "war," because that would be fake news. We've seen it in many other places where we with that phrase have given succor to despotic regimes who would look to leadership in this country to help them repress their own press situations. So I just think it's important to keep that in mind.

So we're going to start today in Hong Kong and India, where we will hear, and I hope you read the extensive bios about our speakers in the program, we'll hear from Pranav Dixit from India and from Bao Choy from Hong Kong, both of whom are Nieman Fellows this year. And they'll give us a sense of what's going on in their regions, and then we'll have a little conversation about that. Take any questions you might have. Then we'll move on to Latin America, where we'll look at that region with five other journalists, and then take your questions about the entire subject. So thank you so much for being here. And, Pranav, we'll start with you.

**Pranav Dixit** Hi, everyone. I'm Pranav Dixit. I'm currently a Nieman Fellow at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, and I'm also a technology reporter for BuzzFeed News based in New Delhi, India. Thank you so much for having me, Rosental, Mallery, everybody here. And frankly, it's a bit alarming to find myself on a panel talking about press freedom in India. As Ann Marie just pointed out, this wasn't a country that was usually included in these lists just a few short years ago. But over the last seven or eight years, it's true that India has steadily become a difficult place to report from. We have been inching towards authoritarianism, and that has meant that although the space for free speech and unbiased journalism hasn't completely disappeared, it has certainly reduced much faster than anybody anticipated. Just this week, a prominent Indian journalist called Rana Ayyub, who is a columnist with The Washington Post and who is known for being critical of India's Modi government, was stopped from boarding a flight to London at Mumbai airport. Ironically, she was traveling to a conference at the International Center for Journalists to give a speech about intimidation of press in India. Last year, the World Press Freedom Index, published by Reporters Without Borders, ranked us 142 of 180 and called India among the most dangerous places in the world for journalism. Naturally, our government disputes this characterization like they do many other things. We are also the world's second most populous country with 1.4 billion people. And for many decades we've had a media ecosystem to match. We have more than 17,000 newspapers, 100,000 magazines. We have nearly 200 television news channels, and we have hundreds of big and small websites, both in English and our regional languages. But over the last few years, being a journalist in India who asks questions has meant putting a target on your back. My peers in the country have been threatened, intimidated, jailed, shot at. Their bank accounts have been frozen. Their sources of revenue have been choked off. They are subject to unprecedented harassment on the Internet. Last year, six journalists in India

were killed on the job, and in 2020, some journalists in India were prosecuted for independently reporting on the coronavirus pandemic and publishing information and data that did not match the government's own numbers. There was also an investigation by The Washington Post and other publications last year that revealed that at least five journalists had their phones infected with Pegasus, which is an Israeli software that that country sells to governments around the world. Again, our government has never admitted to buying the software.

But perhaps most worryingly, most of India's mainstream and legacy press has caved under pressure and has stopped doing its job of holding power to account. Primetime TV news now doubles as propaganda for the government and labels anybody who questions or dissents as anti-national. That's like the favorite term that they throw at everybody who disagrees with them. And what this means, really, is that the burden of doing actual watchdog journalism has now fallen to small independent newsrooms like the Caravan, Scroll, The Wire, Newslaundry, fact-checking organizations like Alt News, and all of these are mostly supported by donations from readers. And although their stories often do have the impact, compared to the legacy of mainstream press, they often have limited reach and resources. So that was just sort of a birds-eye, big-picture view of what's happening with India's press. It's a privilege to be able to do this on behalf of thousands of journalists in my own country who do not have platforms like these to voice their opinions. And like I said earlier, although the space for free speech in India has reduced significantly, it's not completely gone yet. And the more we talk about what's happening at forums like this, the longer we can keep it that way. So thank you very much.

**Bao Choy** So thanks for having me today. It's my honor to be here to share my stories. So I believe I have a presentation, and I would like to start telling my story using this first photo. So you may recognize someone standing in the middle wearing a mask. This photo was taken in November 2020, before my first trial in the courts. Journalists standing next to me were holding banners and slogans, with words like "journalism is not a crime to support." As journalists in Hong Kong, it's very hard for us to believe that in one day in our city, journalism will start becoming a crime. But it happened. I was arrested in 2020 for an investigation that I made on political misconduct and a social movement in Hong Kong. My charge was making false statements when assessing to a perpetrator. On one day, five police officers suddenly knocked on my door, and I was arrested. This trial lasts for almost half a year, and I was convicted finally. I was still very lucky that I was never put into jail, not like the many others.

This was taken three months before my arrest. After the enactment of a national security law in Hong Kong in 2020, more than 200 police officers raided the Apple Daily, one of the best-selling newspaper in the city. Its founder Jimmy Lai was arrested. The newspaper persisted to run a bit longer, almost close to a year. But after that, more editors and columnists were arrested. The company's assets were frozen by the authority. The media has no choice but to be forced to shut down.

The crackdown on independent journalism didn't stop, despite criticisms locally and globally. So just last December, another independent newsroom Stand News was raided again by more than 200 police officers. Its chief editors and directors were all arrested. More than 100 boxes of journalistic materials were seized. You can see the blue boxes. It was like they used two trucks to seize all of the journalistic materials. And the gentleman on the left was the chief editor. He is Patrick. He is a gentle and humble person who always believed journalism can make our world a better place. I have worked with him. It

has always been very heartbreaking to think about his two-year-old daughter who has to grow up without the presence of the father.

So until this March, just like within a year, at least ten people in the media industry were arrested under the charges of colluding with foreign power to endanger national security, publishing seditious materials, and seditious intention, etc.. So there is almost no presumption of innocence regarding issues relevant to national security. Bail applications were all delayed, and then they were just put into jail without any trials.

To summarize and give a wider perspective of what happened to Hong Kong in just one to two years, I would say journalists nowadays face more violence, harassment and arrests. And this was the photo taken in the citizen movement. You can see that the police officer was pepper spraying journalists very close and with a very strong smile on his face. So that's the hostility between the authorities and the journalists nowadays in Hong Kong. Authorities always criticize the media as spreading fake news like another export to Hong Kong. Our access to public data is restrained, and it has become illegal when you access a public investigation for journalism purposes, and a lot of access to public data was restrained by new legislation. The public broadcaster has turned into a mouthpiece. Pieces of foreign media are targeted quite always. And more legislation on fake news, national security, and even crowdfunding are coming soon.

But they are not new things. It is the same autocratic playbook happening around the globe, around the world, not just in Hong Kong. But still, the intensity and the rapid speed of the collapse of press freedom in our cities should be alarming to all of us here. Press freedom is never free, and we always have to pay a high price for it. It will require eternal vigilance. The media associations are quite pessimistic about the future of journalism in Hong Kong. Of course, there are not many reasons to be optimistic honestly speaking. Yet we are still there. Hopefully we will be still there. We're hoping our work can shine light on the voiceless and the oppressed. Thank you.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Thank you so much, Bao and Pranav. So in both of your situations, it wasn't that long ago. It feels like about a week ago that things were pretty comfortable for journalists from this perspective. I mean, you know, journalism was challenged in both Hong Kong and India by a lot of the dissolving business models and all of that. Those were the things we were worrying about. And then pretty quickly, the conditions you've described occurred. And I know it wasn't overnight, but it was pretty fast. And I'm wondering if you can each kind of pinpoint a set of issues, or maybe it was something as simple as an election? Someone's in office, and someone else isn't. But some set of circumstances? And I know very historic circumstances in Hong Kong, perhaps. But can each of you sort of give us a sense of when things went from a sense of normalcy about press freedom to the state that you are challenged by now?

**Pranav Dixit** Yeah, absolutely. So, I mean, I think it's important to remember that we were even in, I think, 2005, never particularly high on the Press Freedom Index. I think we were at 106. We're 142 now. But I think in 2014, when our current Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected to power in a pretty landslide victory and then was reelected in 2019 with another majority, I think sometime between those two elections, you could sort of feel the vice tightening quite rapidly. And as you pointed out in your talk, not just for journalists. Anybody who was a dissident, an activist, standup comedian who made jokes about the government, cartoonists. You could feel that more and more it was starting to not be okay to say things. And one of the first places that you started noticing this visibly was social media platforms, which had largely been places where you could see anything without

much backlash. And then quite quickly, you couldn't criticize the government on Twitter without a hundred trolls coming after you. So I think sometime between these two elections. I think I would point to that period as when things changed.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** And, you know, we know from following the situation that Maria Ressa has faced in the Philippines and establishing Rappler, that a lot of the sort of aggressive, the trolling, the other attacks on her personally and on Rappler, were orchestrated in a very sophisticated manner by the government with the use of Facebook and other forums. Was it your sense that this was highly orchestrated coming from the government, or was it a more organic shift culturally in India?

**Pranav Dixit** There's no solid proof that it comes from the government, but it is certainly highly orchestrated and highly targeted. You have to understand that the rise of this government has also dovetailed with the rise of the Internet and social media in India. And this is a regime that has been very, very good in harnessing WhatsApp, and Facebook, and Twitter to really get its message across. So I think more and more, those spaces that were previously free, you could tell that there was a system and an entire ecosystem that was exploiting loopholes and exploiting the policies in these platforms to go after people who they didn't like.

**Bao Choy** So in Hong Kong I remember in early 2000, we were ranked 18 in the Press Freedom Index, which was pretty impressive. Right. And nowadays we are 80. So it's a drastic drop in the ranking in regards to press freedom. So I became a journalist in the early 2000s, so it was really the most beautiful time. We could really work freely. I never had a sense of what censorship looks like, or what self-censorship looks like. And we were very free to travel to mainland China to cover important issues, human rights issues. And we almost thought we were the ones who were able to bring voices and stories out of China, which was not that bad at the time, but still very repressive compared to Hong Kong. But then I think after the democratic movement in 2014 and the social movement in 2019, the central government decided a much stronger hand against Hong Kong. To look back in the past, I think the press freedom relies a lot on self-restraint of the government. It may be very sarcastic to think about that, but I mean like in the past we almost pay nothing for press freedom. And then when the government decided to take a turn on the approach using more authoritarian playbooks, then we have no chance to resist at all. So that is really pretty alarming, I would say. You can imagine like in the quite democratic places like Hong Kong, it will just like disappear in a year, which is really very quick.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** I'm going to ask a question. I'm not looking for some Pollyannaish response. I want a really candid response from both of you. What are the chances of improvement in the near term? We have seen historically that there are countries where press freedoms diminish and then they're restored again over time, or at least made stronger or more healthy. Historically, we know those are possibilities. But I want a really candid, if I can, assessment from each of you about the prospects for that in the near term or in your careers, even, if you can think out that far. And what is it potentially that could help turn things around?

**Pranav Dixit** So the one sort of silver lining over the last seven or eight years that has happened is really the rise of small, independent newsrooms in a country like India and the rise of what seems to be viable crowdfunding models that support those newsrooms. They're a fraction of the size of some of our biggest newspapers and television channels, but those are the people who also do a good job of harnessing spaces on the Internet to push back, and to bust propaganda, to fact-check. That gives me hope. And just talking

about these issues in forums like this on the Internet with other people, I think those things go a long way in keeping that space that is shrinking alive. I don't know if there are any long term predictions for how this can suddenly improve. I don't see that happening overnight suddenly.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** And do you feel like you have allies in India outside of the journalism institutions? Are there others who are outside the industry who are really worried about this?

**Pranav Dixit** Yes, there are people who are human rights activists. There's environmental activists. There's people in the tech space. There's lawyers. There's many other communities who are equally worried about what's happening to free speech broadly, journalism particularly. There are certainly allies who we can reach out to, and that goes a long way too, I think.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Wow. prospects.

**Bao Choy** It's a very tough question. I do not have an easy answer. I think I will go back to the very basic one. I think we just need to have more persistence. As you just said, it's not just a problem of press freedom. It's a problem of democracy. It goes side by side, together. So it's a pity that right now in Hong Kong, the civic society is diminishing, and people are kicked out of the city. But I do think that the authorities always try to use fear to paralyze us. Well, we have to use maybe is a little bit more persistence in a difficult time, and hopefully the times will come. And then there may be better hopes. I'm not sure. It's not a perfect answer, but I cannot think of any other things other than that.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Thank you. So what we're going to do is invite Latin America to the stage. So, I think we'll start in the order probably that people are seated. We have three more Nieman Fellows up here as well. The invite list was Rosental's. I didn't stack this, but a really extraordinary group of five additional journalists to help us explore this issue. And we will ask each of them to give a brief set of comments, and then we'll open it up to a further discussion. So we'll start with Jorge. And please just briefly introduce yourself, and again read their extended bios.

**Jorge Caraballo Cordovez** Hello, everyone, and thank you, Ann Marie. Thank you, fellow fellows, José Luis. It's a pleasure to be here. Very shortly, I'm from Colombia. Thirty years ago, we were the worst country to be a journalist in the world. Like the conflict between the Medellín cartel, drug traffic cartels, and the government made it impossible for many journalists to do their job. A hundred journalists were killed between 1980 and 2000, in 20 years, two decades. But the index, I think, for the Freedom of Press is not only how many journalists are killed, which is a tragedy, but the impact that that threat has on the industry and the country as a whole. So many journalists had to leave the country. Many journalists abandoned the profession, or they just self-censored because it was not safe to do and to tell what was going on. And things didn't change, even in the early 2000s, a lot of journalists were still being targeted, and killed, harassed in the cities. But then we started a peace process that you could say started in the early 2000, first with paramilitaries and then with the guerrilla. And things started changing. Journalists are not being killed in the volume that they were being killed. And this is a very hard phrase to say, because each death is a huge loss, but it's not the same. However, we're still one of the most dangerous, or one of the countries with the lowest Freedom of Press index in the world. And why is that? I think that the thing is that all that environment, all those threats, all that danger, it still has repercussions on the way journalists work in Colombia. Right now, fortunately,

Colombia is a country in which the peace agreement allowed more diversity of voices to emerge. So you will see a lot of new digital organizations publishing stuff that are necessary, and that's amazing. But there's a huge problem yet. It's very concentrated in wealthy families. Three families own 60% of the market, and it's still very concentrated in cities. If you are a journalist in a small town in Colombia, you cannot say what you need to say. Even if you know it. Because you are not protected. It is not safe. Indigenous media organizations, they know that they cannot say what they need to say because they are targeted or killed. Same with Afro Colombians, or with, yes, small towns in the country. So there's a lot of silence. There is a huge, this is called, like black holes in the country. We know what's going on in the cities. I'm a journalist in a city. I can report and be safe, but not if I just step out of them, step out of the capitals. And that's a huge problem.

But to end with a positive note. There's a great project that I urge you to look and to search. It's called La Liga Contra El Silencio, The League Against Silence. It's an alliance of many media organizations in Colombia. What they do is that they create this safe environment in which, if you are a journalist in an area of Colombia in which you are not protected and you have a grave denouncement to make, you can go to them. They will publish your piece without your byline. They will pay you. It is not in your byline because you don't want to be targeted, but the information they're reporting will still go out there. And it will be published in all the newspapers of this alliance, which are dozens. So those kind of solutions are helping us still get the information and keep journalists safe. So that's what I wanted to share and happy to answer more questions. Thank you.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Please welcome Natalia Viana from Brazil.

**Natalia Viana** Hello. Good afternoon. Thank you very much, Rosental and Ann Marie, for bringing Brazil to this very important discussion. I'm Natalia, and I'm an investigative journalist and co-founder and director of a nonprofit investigative journalist agency called Agencia Pública. When I was born in 1979, the military dictatorship had just signed an amnesty law, which allowed for hundreds of exiled opposition leaders to come back home. When I was ten, the Brazilian society convened in a beautiful constitutional assembly that allowed for the first time for historically excluded groups such as indigenous peoples, workers and women to have a say. I was raised amid a thriving democracy that I, like most people, took for granted. When Jair Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, I started having nightmares that army officers would knock on my door and take me to a prison somewhere. The nightmares were a reminder that Bolsonaro was elected in a country that never really punished the crimes of its military against its people, and that Bolsonaro got 55 million votes praising the dictatorship and promising to bring back the generals to power, which he did. The very election of Bolsonaro was an act of violence. It stated that a big chunk of the population my neighbors, my uncles, my aunties condoned political violence and that is a journalist's worst nightmare. Under Bolsonaro, for the first time in 20 years, Brazil has entered the red zone in the ranking of the press freedom by the organization Reporters Without Borders. Bolsonaro's administration has pursued criminal investigations against at least 17 journalists, columnists and communicators. Bolsonaro himself is the biggest bully of journalists. He committed 150 verbal attacks against the press in just one year, according to the National Federation of Journalists. And this created an environment that promotes attacks on journalists every day by his supporters. The attacks are worst on women journalists, and they are harder on teams of independent media outlets such as Agencia Pública, which I co-direct. Bolsonaro's administration has also funneled public funds for allied media influencers, and extremist bloggers, and YouTubers who support him. You all have seen this story before, not only in countries in Latin America, but also here in the U.S. under Donald Trump.

The future of Brazil is going to be decided in the October presidential elections. Bolsonaro is using all the power he has to get reelected, and he has a good chance. It's the second largest democracy in the hemisphere. If its would-be autocrat reelected, believe me, this will affect the entire region and embolden the U.S. outright, and that's not the only risk. Mimicking Donald Trump, our President has already said that the elections will be fraud ridden, and he repeatedly attacked the Supreme Court, casting doubt on the democratic system and in the elections. There is a real threat of a January 6 scenario happening in Brazil this year. Bolsonaro and his family have received support from Donald Trump and his allies. His son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, was at Michael Lindell's conference to spread the big lie last year. Steve Bannon has said that the Brazilian elections are the second most important elections in the world, and Brazil has become the second largest market for extremist social media such as Gab and Gettr. The U.S. ultra right knows the Brazilian elections are a key political event that can help shape their future. But it seems that the U.S. tech companies and U.S. media are not paying the attention they deserve. Brazilians clapping.

So I wanted to close saying that here in this room, there are several Brazilian journalists, including Rosental, me, who are willing to talk on and off the record about the situation on the ground. Just this week, a draft law was proposed to criminalize fake news but excluded politicians from being penalized. A new draft anti-terrorism law aimed to make it a crime to promote acts that are ideologically or politically driven. A pro-government congressman proposed another law that establishes a national registry of NGOs that receive foreign money. There is a lot getting busy right now. And as editors and journalists who care about democracy in the world as well as in your own backyard, please pay attention and cover the elections.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Thank you. Thank you, Natalia. Now we'll have Patricia Laya, who, like Pranav, is reporting on her home country, in this case Venezuela, but is doing it for a U.S.-based news organization. She's bureau chief for Bloomberg. Patricia.

**Patricia Laya** Hi, everybody. My name is Patricia Laya. I'm a reporter from Caracas, Venezuela, and it's a real honor to be here. Thank you. When we talk about Venezuela, we talk about a country that is wrestling with the erasing of its history. For the past two decades, Venezuela has been ruled by an increasingly authoritarian government that has tried to exploit the media to impose their version of the truth and their pursuit of total dominance. In less than ten years, more than 110 Venezuelan news organizations, this includes newspapers, news sites and radio stations, have been forced to close. This is according to the National Press Syndicate. But most notably, the government has been able to do so under the protection of the law. This includes recent blanket censorship laws, such as the so-called anti-hate law passed in 2017, that threatens journalists with up to 20 years in prison for broadcasting messages they consider as promoting hate and intolerance. These incremental measures are important because they provide authoritarian governments with a veil of legitimacy. Since this anti-hate law was passed, Reporters Without Borders have registered a record number in arbitrary arrests and violence against journalists by the police and intelligence services. This has helped place Venezuela among the lowest ranks of press freedom in the region, with only Honduras and Cuba occupying lower positions.

Just in the past couple of years, Venezuela's last independent newspaper El Nacional has gone from a staff of 1,000 to about 20. On top of being regularly attacked and sued for its critical coverage of the nation's crisis, it also faces regular shortages of everything from ink



to paper. As a result, newspapers are no longer circulated in half of Venezuela's states. This added to very limited access to the Internet and recurring power outages means a quarter of Venezuela's population live in informational deserts and are completely isolated from news about their own reality. But still Venezuelans have persisted. Innovative grassroots journalism initiatives such as El Bus TV, what you see here, have emerged, where independent journalists get on city busses and balconies with megaphones to share the news of the day, reaching thousands of people that would otherwise depend on state media for all they know.

These challenges, circumstances of censorship, and fear, and harassment have resulted in an almost forced and anticipated transition to digital news in our country, and this is led by local outlets such as Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, and Armando.info. But they continue to face increasing challenges every day, starting with the fact that the state is our main advertiser, which means many are forced to rely on crowdfunding initiatives to survive. On top of that, there's been an essential blackout of economic data for the past years, meaning journalists are left in the dark to estimate the magnitude of the nation's crisis. The Maduro government also regularly blocks access to news websites during politically sensitive times, such as near elections or where opposition politicians are giving speeches. This forces readers to jump through hurdles of VPNs to access any sort of news and makes it near-impossible for these outlets to reach their audience. While foreign journalists are often deported, local journalists are imprisoned or forced into exile through a barrage of lawsuits. Out of hundreds who have been forced to leave their homeland, just a lucky few are able to secure journalism jobs elsewhere. I will close by saying Venezuela should be a cautionary tale to countries in the region and beyond on how media can slowly succumb to authoritarian powers. But that's not to say that we believe all is lost because it isn't. The Venezuelan diaspora, now more than 5 million strong, could and should have a big role in supporting local media in the way that Venezuelans who remain in the country can't. Many journalists like me continue to work there despite huge challenges because we believe in the power that journalism has to give people ownership over their own destiny. In the face of oppression, the only answer for us is to do more, and better, journalism. Thank you.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Thank you, Patricia. And now please welcome our Salvadoran journalist, José Luis Sanz.

**José Luis Sanz** Hi, well I'm Spanish and Salvadoran-ish. I've been 22 years in El Salvador, and 21 years in El Faro. Most of you know El Faro. It's a 24-year-old native online news outlet based in El Salvador, and we specialize in investigative journalism. Over the years, we have faced threats and security issues for years, but the situation now is worse than ever. With the President Nayib Bukele, that has put us in a situation that we didn't expect. Usually, in El Salvador that we would never be in this situation obviously with Mexico, obviously with Honduras, and now obviously with Nicaragua. And suddenly, we were feeling that we were going in the direction of all these fellow countries. Bukele is a highly popular president who arrived in office in mid-2019. In May 2021, he illegally removed the attorney general on the constitutional court, so he will now have full control of all the state institutions and the judicial system. And he will probably be re-elected in 2024, because 80% of the Salvadorans support him. That's the context in which we work and relate with this government, a government that has destroyed any way for citizens to demand public information, and it has advanced an alternative version of reality.

Many in journalism media have suffered digital harassment, and smear campaigns on social media, attacks against us, surveillance and death threats. Some women journalists

receive sexual insults and threats of sexual violence on a daily basis in El Salvador now. In 2020, the government audited El Faro's tax records, including a request for the personal info of our individual subscribers, which El Faro refused to provide. We saw on TV that El Faro was under investigation for money laundering. That's false. We are now waiting for any day to be formally accused with false arguments on tax evasion. Last December the government also announced a Russian-Nicaragua style foreign agents law. The law says that any organizations that receives money from another country responds to the interest of a foreigner and requires those organizations to register as a foreign agent and submit to special inspections, although the law doesn't specify the limits of those inspections. The Congress majority has publicly said that the bill was a grant from the national NGOs funding independent journalism. "Those journalists' juicy salaries are over," he said. Last December, an independent analysis found that El Faro devices had been hacked with Pegasus. In 2020 and 2021, at least 22 members of El Faro were hacked, a total of 226 times. This is two-thirds of our team, our administrative manager and even our marketing manager were hacked and were spied on. An expert told that something on this scale costs millions of dollars, millions of dollars of taxpayer money invested in spying on a single outlet. Other media were of course targeted as well. I was the El Faro director at the time, and of course, my phone was spied on too. My phone records, my messages, but also my contacts were exposed. I worried for those contacts because this is an attack against journalism, but it's also an attack against our sources because government has tried in multiple ways to intimate or punish our sources. We know of the use of polygraph to interrogate the staff of public officers. We know people that have been fired from their job in a public institution because their daughter is a journalist. Some of our sources tell us that they never understand that some situations that they faced were retaliation. But at least most of them stand for transparency and keep talking with us.

It was a month since Sunday, and for the next 30 days El Salvador is on a state of exception. After a dramatic spike of insults last Saturday, the government suspended some constitutional rights and civil liberties. At 3 a.m. on Sunday, the government decided that during 30 days there will be no right to association, the period of detention without cost increased from the earliest to 15 days of the and the government is allowed to intercept communications, legally this time. Right now we are trying to keep private messages from sources that would put them and us in jeopardy. I don't see things getting better in the next few years. Exile is a word that is not used publicly yet in El Salvador, but it's happening. There are Salvadoran journalists who are leaving the country already. Now for us, each investigation, of course, takes more time, extra effort. We are, of course, investing a lot of money that we will have security for our team and for our organization itself. We used to have one layer. We now have nine. We are prepared to continue working from a barrier if needed. We are following the lead of our Nicaraguan colleagues in that topic. A couple of years ago, we had a couple of meetings with our readers. One of them, Eduardo, is his name, told us, "no se cansen." He meant do not falter. Well, we'll not. El Faro is here. I will be here.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** Thank you. And last, but absolutely not least, María Lilly Delgado, who's a Nicaraguan journalist, but in exile. She lives in this country.

**María Lilly Delgado** Last but not least, Nicaragua. Thank you for having this opportunity to talk about Nicaragua. I have been a journalist in Nicaragua for the last 20 years. And for the last ten years, I work as a freelance journalist, correspondent for Univision, until last year that I was summoned and questioned by the prosecutor's office controlled by the Daniel Ortega regime. And just because I demand the right to have a lawyer with me, the prosecutor's office changed my condition from witness to investigated in the arbitrary case

against the Chamorro Foundation, an NGO which promoted freedom of expression, freedom of press during the last 25 years in Nicaragua. And now her former director and two former employees are in jail, accused and convicted of fabricated crimes such as money laundering. The prosecutor's office in Nicaragua used this case of the Chamorro Foundation in order to persecute, threaten and intimidate dozens of journalists who, like me, managed to escape the country after imposing repressive measures on me, such as immigration retention and the provision to attend meetings or public places. Between the lines, it is to ban me from doing journalism in the streets of Nicaragua. Right now, journalists are doing what we call in Nicaragua, a kind of catacomb journalism, or *periodismo de catacumbas*. This is a term from the story of Nicaragua when in the late seventies and during the dictatorship of the Somoza, journalists reported the news that the dictatorship didn't want the people to know about the repression, and about how they treated political prisoners. And this is a term that we think that right now journalists are doing a new version of this catacomb journalism. Now online and on social media, anonymous journalists inside of Nicaragua and in exile continue reporting about the severe human rights crisis of Nicaragua.

Just some context quickly. In 2018, the anti-government protests broke out. And since then, we have been reporting about this crisis and how the violent response of the Ortega regime claimed the lives of more than 355 human beings, including also a journalist. The journalist Angel Gahona was murdered in 2018, when he was doing a Facebook Live in a protest. Nicaragua lives in what we call a *de facto* police state. And if you're stunned to see, you know, like a citizen with a blank paper protesting in the streets of Russia, in Nicaragua, people have been detained and convicted just for protesting, and, you know, like having in your hands the national flag. This crisis has provoked almost 200,000 Nicaraguan left the country, and we have been witness of two mass imprisonment in two moments. The first moment was in 2018. Almost 100 people who were released after months of torture. And the Ortega regime unleashed a second wave of repression against all opposition leaders, and all dissent, and critical voices, including independent journalists and media outlets at the beginning of 2021. At the present, there are more than 170 political prisoners in jail, including, of course, seven candidates. They were not allowed to run in general elections, and all of them had been sentenced from eight to 13 years in prison. The legal system of the regime has convicted them of fabricated crimes such as money laundering, conspiracy and undermining national integrity. Three journalists are imprisoned and persecuted, and they have been sentenced to eight to 13 years of prison. Cristiana Chamorro, who is a columnist, is a journalist, a columnist, board member of *La Prensa*, the oldest newspaper in the country, and former director of the Chamorro Foundation. Miguel Mora, who is the owner of 100% Noticias Channel. Both Cristiana and Miguel were aspiring to be candidates for the presidency, and they were detained. Miguel Mendoza is the third journalist. He is a sports writer, and he's recognized for his criticism in social media. This is the second time that Miguel Mora is in jail. The first time was in December 2018, when he was arrested with journalist Lucía Pineda, who is here in this auditorium. Please, Lucía, stand up because Lucía spent six months in prison under the Ortega regime, and they were released in 2019. But in addition, currently, the publisher of the Nicaraguan newspaper, *La Prensa*, Juan Lorenzo Holmann, is also arrested. Furthermore, the Political commenter who also has been convicted and has house arrest.

For the first time in more than 100 years, Nicaragua doesn't have a newspaper. There are three newsrooms which have been confiscated and taken by the police. *La Prensa*, which is the oldest and the most important newspaper, was confiscated last year, *Confidencial*, which is directed by the renowned journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro, and 100% Noticias were confiscated in 2018, and they are still used arbitrarily by the government and

by the Minister of Health. Right now, more than 100 journalists are in exile, including me. Some of them were threatened by the prosecutor's office, like Wilfredo Miranda, who is here in this auditorium, and Octavio Enriquez. They were threatened to be applied with what they called the cyber law crime in Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, the government, the regime, can determine what is fake news and what is not a fake news, and you can face three to eight years. At least 14 citizens have been convicted with this law.

How do you do journalism under these circumstances? Well, it's really difficult. The news sources speak to journalists as long as the anonymity in the sources are protected because they could be the next prisoners. Journalists no longer sign their articles. And I have worked as a reporter in broadcasting for the past 20 years, you cannot shoot, you know, like with a camera in the streets of Nicaragua. You can get detained. So journalism is done in a clandestine way. And above all, journalists continue reporting on the inhuman condition in which political prisoners find themselves, and worse, their lives are in danger because they don't receive proper health care. Just this last February, political prisoner, Hugo Torres died in the custody of the Daniel Ortega's regime. Torres is a historical guerrilla commander who risked his life to help free political prisoners, including Daniel Ortega himself during the Somoza dictatorship more than four decades ago. This is the national flag of Nicaragua, located in the confiscated building of La Prensa. Many journalists believe that as this flag, which is in rags, as you see, journalists resist and continue reporting about this critical situation because we still believe and defend what Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who was a publisher and a journalist in Nicaragua, assassinated during the Somoza dictatorship, we still believe that without freedom of press, there is no freedom of thought. Thank you.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** We don't have nearly enough time for this subject and to address all the questions that we have. So I am going to challenge everyone in this room to find at least one of these people between now and the end of the day and ask them a question that's on your mind, or ask them to tell you more about what's going on in their regions. Thank you, all. I would like to ask if I could, Rosental? Okay. We're going to cut into the caffeine break a little bit, but you can bring it back into the room. So I think there was an important question asked, Pranav and Bao, while you were speaking. But I want to ask it not just to the two of you, but all of you. And again, let's take lightning literally here. Let's just zip down because I want to hear from everybody on this. And the question is asking, and I'm going to apply this to all of them, not just to Asia, what do you think U.S.-based social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, etc., need to do to stop attacks on journalists, whether it is online abuse, or threats, or the spread of disinformation? Social media companies claim they're doing everything to support press freedom, but they keep failing, especially when the medium is not in English. So I'd ask each of you, if you could, if we had the titans of social media in the room, what's one thing you'd ask of them? You want to start, Patricia?

**Patricia Laya** No, I mean, for me, the first thing that comes to mind is the army of bots that the Maduro government has launched against journalists in Venezuela, particularly female journalists. If there's anything that could be done to stop this. I've been a victim of this. It's something that is obviously meant to stop us, to deflate us. They haven't succeeded, but at times they almost have. So that is something that I would definitely bring to mind.

**María Lilly Delgado** Well in Nicaragua, I have to say that before Daniel Ortega was reelected for the first time this last November in an election that he didn't face any opponent, as we have seen, because they all are in jail, Facebook, how do you see that?

Let me translate "desmanteló"? How can I say? Dismantled, what they call in Nicaragua, like a form of trolls. And it did it just before the election time.

**José Luis Sanz** Well, I understood that behind all this misinformation structure is money. It is an industry. I mean, people getting together and organizing them. I mean, it's an industry. So I think they believe that they are not able to detect the money influx behind this industry, so I will ask them about the real investigation they can do, not only in the front end of trying to identify who's behind each profile. But recognizing that there's money behind it. They can trace money. They can trace those structures. I don't think they are really investing efforts really to treat this like it is a structure of corruption.

**Natalia Viana** Well, I think the platforms should act in Brazil, as they did in the U.S. In the U.S., they were very quick to de-platform politicians that were spreading hate and attacking democracy. They should do the same. They should enforce the policies that they have, here. They should meditate more strongly and really pay attention to the role that they can play in spreading attacks on democracy and subverting our electoral system.

**Jorge Caraballo Cordovez** Yeah. I agree with Natalia. It's like you see here in the U.S. how strictly enforced, or at least somehow strictly enforced, were the rules of the platforms. In Latin America, that's not the case. So that's one thing. But I don't think that there is a technical solution for this. I think it's very, very complicated. And even if you just completely fix that on the social media level, they will find ways to muddy the waters and to, yes, create distrust in journalism. So I think it's deep, and I don't have like a technical solution for that.

**Pranav Dixit** Yeah, I would just keep pushing them to enforce their own policies more consistently globally. There's been a dichotomy when they talk about non-Western markets because they love non-Western markets for growth. But they don't do a good job of mitigating the harms that their platforms in those countries, and certainly don't do a good job of enforcing their own policies in non-Western markets.

**Bao Choy** I just agree with Jorge. I will have no technical remedies to the situation, but I would imagine it will be much more beautiful if we turn social media into a place of mutual hatred to mutual trust. And I'm not sure whether we can put it into a space with not polarization, but trust in media and a better place for the world too.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** I love much more beautiful, Bao. Okay, so we're just going to do one more lightning round. I was really interested in something you said, Patricia. We think of these problems as being internal to the country. And you expanded the possibility for intervention by pointing to, in your case, the Venezuelan diaspora. And, of course, there's possibilities up and down this row for that. And I'm wondering if you could each say something just a little bit more? Patricia if you could say something more about that, and everybody could say something about that? As you look outside your countries and think about people in this room, or the diaspora, or whatever it is, what kind of help can you imagine, if any, coming from those populations? And I think it relates to a question that we have also from the audience about how do we support the journalists who are not exiled in those countries, still doing that work? So if you could each give us a thought about that, I think that would be useful.

**Patricia Laya** So as I mentioned, I think the diaspora has a responsibility to help local Venezuelan journalists who are struggling with such a deep lack of resources, and I don't just mean this monetarily. You can also share their work, be an active representative of

what they're doing around the world because they really need all the help that they can get. While a foreign correspondent in Venezuela can make thousands covering the crisis, a local reporter earns just a couple of hundred dollars a month. So there's a responsibility for Venezuelans in and out to help carry out journalism.

**Natalia Viana** I think I've said this, but I'm going to repeat it. It's very important that the U.S. media covers what's happening in Brazil. I was a bit shocked when I arrived in the U.S. at the lack of interest, especially looking at the very strong ties between Bolsonaro family and the Trump family, and knowing that these can actually generate repercussions here. So cover Brazil.

**María Lilly Delgado** I totally agree with Patricia. You know, in Nicaragua, journalists are, as I said, anonymous who are reporting. They are our eyes and our witness of what is going on in Nicaragua. And also the reporters who are in exile continue reporting about what is going on. So Nicaraguan independent media outlets who are operating from the outside need not only resources. They need to reinvent themselves in order to be sustainable. They need, as I said, yes, to reinvent in order to connect with other media outlets to republish what is going on in Nicaragua. I think that we need a little bit of solidarity too, because it's really hard to do journalism in our countries. This is really hard.

**Pranav Dixit** I'll be quick. Forgive me for being so cynical about the Indian diaspora in the U.S.. I don't really expect a lot of them to care about press freedom in India. I'm grossly generalizing, but time and again, they have thrown their weight behind the ruling dispensation in the U.S.. There was a Howdy Modi event that happened in Texas, actually, which a lot of Indians showed up to. I would just urge the Indian diaspora to just open their eyes and see what's happening in their own country. I'm sorry. I'm being too cynical, but that's how it is.

**Jorge Caraballo Cordovez** I think something that would be super helpful in this moment in which there is so much anxiety among journalist would be just to talk between each other, like to have a conversation about mental health, for example, and support each other. So like, what if, I don't know if this already exists in Spanish, but what if there is like a Slack channel or like a place in which we could have a continuous conversation between all of us in Spanish or Portuguese about how we are, how can we support each other, what interventions have been helpful? I think that in a room full of journalists like we need to communicate more with each other, and that could be a lot of help, just not only personally, but also in terms of the way we cover what we cover. So that's just one thing that could be good to do.

**José Luis Sanz** I would just add the possibility of building journalistic alliances. I mean, working together to give strength, support, and back up to the local media working on the ground. And I think there is some frivolous distance sometimes with people like Nayib Bukele. The persona is fascinating. And you can see that there's an emotional distance in how the international media treat the leader and how the local media treat the leader. And I think working together we can kind of find a way to explain better what is happening in some of our countries.

**Bao Choy** If Pranav is the cynical person, I'm always the most idealistic person I would say. So in general, I believe in defending press freedom. So I agree with Ann Marie that we should no longer just put it like it is an issue of journalists. It should be an issue of everyone. And I'm not sure how we should do that, but I think everyone can contribute to the defense of press freedom.

**Ann Marie Lipinski** So, thank you for the promotion of the next panel, which is, in fact, about mental health, so stick around for that. Well, I just wanted to say one more thing. One of the things that is pointed out in the Freedom House report, and I just want to share this, media freedom can recover much more quickly after a period of authoritarian governance than some other elements of democracy, such as the rule of law. But it is also subject to rapid reversal. They talk about the Arab Spring, where we saw some very hopeful, optimistic moments that were then crushed in places like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya. And it ends, like democracy itself, press freedom is not an end state that remains secure once it is achieved. It must be nurtured and defended against the forces that oppose it. I think there's work that we can all do on this front. With deep admiration and gratitude, please join me in thanking these people who are on the front lines of that and recommit to doing whatever we can do to support that here or elsewhere. Thank you.