

ISOJ 2023: Day 1

Panel: Lying in politics, weaponizing fake news and attacking journalists: What have we learned so far and how to react to the infodemic?

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 - [Sérgio Dávila](#), editor-in-chief, **Folha de S.Paulo (Brazil)**
 - [Khaya Himmelman](#), reporter, **The Messenger**
 - [Glenn Kessler](#), editor and chief writer, **The Washington Post's Fact Checker**
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Anya Schiffrin Okay, great. So being wedged between the party and that last extremely impressive panel, obviously, that was a hard act to follow. But I think I'm here to bring good news. The title of this panel is "Lying in politics, weaponizing fake news and attacking journalists: What have we learned so far and how to react to the infodemic?" I'd say we've learned a lot, actually, and that there's a lot we can do, including to address the problems of the previous panel. I think it largely is a question of political will, but the solutions are out there. Since 2016, I think, when myths and disinformation really kind of rose to the popular consciousness, journalists have been extremely active on the front lines. They took it personally because journalism believes in fact-checking and accuracy and scientific method. So journalists have done an enormous amount to try to combat the problems of mis and disinformation online and attacks on journalism. This panel really represents some of those efforts. We have people who have exposed the problem and documented it, and found patterns and explained it. We have people who have worked in fact checking and creating a culture of truth and verification. Also, I'm hoping Sérgio will answer the key question of how do you rebuild trust after Bolsonaro leaves office?

I'm just going to go back a little bit and go through this slide. My most popular class at Columbia University... I'm at the School of International and Public Affairs. I just discovered that Glenn is one of our illustrious alumni, and Khaya, of course, is Barnard and the journalism school. But I teach a course called Policy Solutions for mis and disinformation online. What I started to do in 2017 was build a taxonomy and analytical framework to understand the solutions. I divided them into demand and supply side, which for all you communication scholars in the room I know is not exactly how we think about two-step flow and processing of information, but I found that it was easy and it made sense to my students. The demand side solutions are the solutions which affect the demand for mis and disinformation. Those include things like media literacy, where we're trying to boost discernment and help audiences become more critical and thoughtful about what they consume and what they forward. Also, building trust in media, explaining our methods and the processes so that people again understand what the differences are. I also think that in some ways covering mis and disinformation, whether you're an academic or a reporter, is also aimed at raising awareness.

On the supply side, I divided it into two categories. So there are supply side interventions which try to create better and more reliable information. So that would be philanthropic of

quality journalism, public supporting/public service broadcasting, all the measures that governments have taken around the world since 2019. That would be again reporting in an accurate way. The attempts by the big tech companies after COVID got started to do things like give reliable information. If you search, Bill Gates and microchips, you might get a panel that tells you this is where you can get a COVID vaccine. This is a WHO website with reliable information. So those are all supply-side interventions that are aimed at boosting the supply. Then the other form of supply side interventions are the ones that try to downrank or block poor-quality information. That could be anything from Dominion Voting Systems suing Fox, or the fake news laws that many people have alluded to in the previous panel, or I would say the Digital Services Act in Europe.

The point is there's a lot of interventions out there. Countries are choosing and organizations are choosing the ones that they think make the most sense for them. We have a lot of Brazilians in the room today. Brazil is obviously in the middle of big policy discussions, cases coming before the Supreme Court... So I think mostly what we're going to be talking about... I think, these are largely demand-side interventions, but I think they're critical. I think that I'm going to... I won't talk more about our... I finished a long paper about fighting propaganda in the 1930s, there's a lot of similarities and maybe we'll get to it later. But Clyde Miller, who founded the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, said that because of the First Amendment, combatting false information with accurate information is the American way. I think a lot of what you're doing is actually that, so take it away. I think that we've got Khaya coming first because I thought your work exposing would make a great place for us to start. Thank you so much for having us.

Khaya Himmelman Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here. Okay. So I'm going to be presenting two case studies based on reporting that I've done to help illustrate how best to combat fake news. So here we go. The first one is understanding the misinformation environment, understanding that misinformation often starts in small, obscure places before it goes viral. The second one is knowing when to expect misinformation, being aware that misinformation often follows a very consistent pattern.

The first case study is on Shaye Moss and Ruby Freeman, who were two Fulton County election workers who filed a defamation lawsuit against *The Gateway Pundit* in 2021. *The Gateway Pundit* is a far-right news organization and a frequent purveyor of misinformation. *The Gateway Pundit* wrote a series of stories on these two women, alleging that they were involved in a voter fraud scandal involving suitcases of illegal ballots. So the rumor was debunked very quickly, but they doubled down on this story, this news organization, and they continued to write stories about these women. They actually wrote a story where they name them explicitly, and the rumor went out of control from there. It reached right-wing circles and it actually became a talking point for Trump, who named them explicitly in his famous phone call with the Georgia secretary of state. As a result of this rumor, these two women feared for their lives, their professional reputations were marred, and they received death threats. So it was a very powerful case. The takeaway here is that, again, misinformation often starts in these very small dark corners of the internet, and it's really easy to underestimate the power of something like *The Gateway Pundit*. Most people might not have even heard of it, but it's really dangerous. If we want to get ahead of misinformation, it's important to cut it off at its source and correct the record before it goes viral. These rumors don't exist in a vacuum. They develop in this misinformation environment, and sometimes understanding where it develops is just as important as the actual rumor once the rumor becomes a talking point for the former president.

This second case study is on the East Palestine train derailment. So after the East Palestine train derailment in February this year, there was very little government instruction about what exactly needed to be done, how concerned residents needed to be, how dangerous the situation was... In the absence of clear government instruction, misinformation flooded the scene. Conspiracy theorists stepped in and spread rumors. They were all sort of the same, but they alleged that the danger was far greater than was being reported and that it was being deliberately misreported on behalf of the Biden administration. So it's not surprising that misinformation flooded the scene after the East Palestine train derailment. It's often the case that after these unprecedented events, natural disasters, a January 6, shootings or any sort of tragedy like that, it's very easy for conspiracy theorists to step in when details are still murky and/or when the government doesn't respond quickly. It's in this environment that people often can't even differentiate between fact and fiction because the events that they themselves are experiencing seem unbelievable, and misinformation spreaders will take advantage of this moment. Again, understanding this pattern can help us be less reactive, we don't necessarily have to be surprised every time a misinformation campaign happens after an event like this, we can know to expect it.

So in conclusion, fake news is not going anywhere. It's here to stay, unfortunately. But there are things we can do to get ahead of it, being, again, less reactive to it, knowing the patterns, and knowing the environment can help us respond quicker. Sometimes it seems a little doom and gloom — so much misinformation — but it's still our responsibility as reporters to seek truth where we find it and to hold purveyors of misinformation accountable. Thank you.

Anya Schiffrin Bill, did you want to...

Bill Adair You bet, and I'll actually build on your excellent slide, Anya. I thought your point about the ecosystem is really important that to look at not just the role that fact-checkers play but to look at everything that's being done, because I think that's what we need to think about misinformation in a big global sense. So just a couple of points I want to make today. One is that fact-checking needs a reboot. Fact-checking is failing to reach the people that need it the most, and I say that as the founder of *PolitiFact*. We started *PolitiFact* in 2007, and we have this naive idea, at least I did, that people were going to come to our website and find the truth. Of course, the problem is that the people who come to the website aren't the people who really need it. So all along, we have tried to find ways to get the content to the people who really need it, but that's not happening. In fact, the people who really need it actively dislike fact-checkers, and so we need to find ways to get the content to them.

So enter this new opportunity at this moment, and I hope you saw the tremendous panel this morning on AI. Generative AI gives us a whole new opportunity to get accurate content to people. It also, unfortunately, gives the bad guys new ways to get false information to people. So we're in a whole different environment that we really just discovered in the last few months, and we have to think about a whole new battlefield. But at the root of it, the individual fact check still matters a lot. I'm glad to be sitting next to Glenn and Khaya, both of whom have, in the case of Khaya, worked and, in the case of Glenn, work at news organizations that when they create fact checks, make what's called claim review. This is a structured database that we helped create with Google, that is an open schema, which is a database that generative AI will be able to draw from and can draw from to find accurate content. So all these mistakes that are being made that we can make generative AI smarter.

One other important point I want to make, which grows out of a report that we just published in the Duke Reporters Lab, is local fact-checking. So we studied local fact-checking in 2022, and we found that despite this general impression we've had that fact-checking has been growing, that politicians are being held accountable for what they say, that isn't happening at the local level. Just a couple of scary numbers. Fewer than half of the governors had even a single statement checked by fact-checkers. Only 33 of 435 U.S. representatives were checked. That means only 8% of U.S. reps were checked — who knows what the percentage was for the people running for those seats. Out of 7,386 state legislative seats, only 47 were fact-checked. So we need a lot more fact-checking at the local level.

So I'll end with one more point. AI allows us to create more fact-checking in some very creative ways, and one of the things that I asked the panel this morning was how can we break out of the old way of thinking in newsrooms to do things in new ways. I think we need to do that with how we hold public officials accountable.

Anya Schiffrin Bill, I interviewed a lot of fact-checkers for my PhD thesis on solutions for mis and disinformation, and in many parts of the world, certainly not the U.S. under Trump, fact-checking gave politicians pause and they were sometimes a little more careful about what they said because they knew they could be fact-checked. So in that sense, it's a little bit like the sort of watchdog or scarecrow role of journalism. So I did want to just flag that. I know Glenn has prepared remarks, but I bet you're going when you talk about the effect... So in other words, I think I'm more cheerful than you. Rather than failing, I would say evolving, and there can be deterrent effects.

Bill Adair I'm with you, and I am not pessimistic about its impact. We just need to infuse it with some new energy and new thinking.

Anya Schiffrin Great. Okay, Glenn.

Glenn Kessler Yeah. So thank you for having me here. I've been running *The Washington Post's* Fact Checker for more than a dozen years. The Fact Checker initially started in 2007, incidentally, at about the same time as *PolitiFact*, and both organizations had the same concept: ratings of statements made by politicians. At the Fact Checker, we use a Pinocchio scale with four Pinocchios being the most egregious misstatement. Now, the Fact Checker was originally created for the 2008 election just for that. So it was shut down after Barack Obama was elected, but editors noticed continuing traffic for old fact checks as people Googled for information, and they asked me to revive it as a permanent feature in 2011. When I started, the bread and butter was the same as before. Fact checks of discrete statements by politicians. My background is writing about public policy, foreign and domestic. So I designed the fact checks to be guides to complex policy debates. The politician's statement was merely a jumping-off point to unravel a difficult policy issue. I've found over time that the more complex an issue is, the more susceptible it is to misleading claims by politicians.

Now, it turns out that 2011 was also a consequential year for social media. The number of monthly Twitter users doubled in 2011 and then doubled again in 2012. The number of monthly Facebook users increased 50% in 2011 and reached 1 billion in 2012. That shift in the delivery of information or misinformation also changed the nature of fact-checking. Increasingly, readers were not asking me for fact-checks of statements they heard the president say on television. Instead, they wanted to know if something was true that they

discovered on social media. Politicians started using Twitter to deliver political messages. At the time, the maximum length of a tweet was just 140 characters. So that often led to facts being twisted or left to decide. You wouldn't believe how many times I heard a flack blame Twitter's character limit for a misleading tweet.

Eventually, of course, misleading videos made their way into social media. These videos were snipped or framed in a way to generate outrage and produce a viral moment. This led to another level of fact-checking. Then Donald Trump was elected president despite an avalanche of falsehoods that have been relentlessly fact-checked by *The Post*, by *PolitiFact*, and by other news organizations. Now, was that a failure of fact-checking? Not necessarily. Trump's secret sauce was that he repeated lies that his supporters already believed. Millions of illegal aliens cross the southern border every year. Thousands of Muslims in Jersey City cheered the September 11 attacks. That sort of thing. Trump had been a careful listener of right-wing radio, and before Trump, an ordinary Republican politician would have rarely made such an outrageous statement. But for the hard core of the Republican Party, Trump sounded like a person who was finally telling the truth.

The Trump experience, which included a project at *The Post* where we counted more than 30,000 false or misleading statements made by Trump during his presidency, has led to some rethinking of fact-checking at *The Post*. The challenge we face going forward is that the people who would learn from fact-checks are most likely to tune us out — just as Bill said. People on the right love to circulate fact checks of people on the left and people on the left love to circulate fact checks of people on the right, but they ignore or dismiss fact checks of ideological brethren. So while we continue to issue Pinocchio ratings when appropriate, we are also publishing articles that outline what the truth is. For instance, on the eve of the 2012 election, we published an article titled “The Truth about Election Fraud: It's rare.” So rather than get mired in fact-checks of specific election fraud claims, I instead took a broad look at documented instances of election fraud and showed how few cases there were. That article attracted a large audience.

I'm also increasingly tracing the flow of misinformation, something that Khayla talked about. One thing that has been relentlessly fact-checked was the claim that athletes are suddenly collapsing because of the COVID vaccine. It had been repeatedly documented as false by fact-checkers around the world. So I took a different approach. I showed how the story had its roots in mysterious Austrian websites with ties to that country's far-right populist party, the Freedom Party. Those stories were then recycled by right-wing media in the United States. The article I wrote continues to attract a large amount of traffic a year after being published. Similarly, I trace the false claim that there was new evidence Hillary Clinton had spied on Donald Trump. It had appeared all over right-wing media, but I found it had started with an anonymous Twitter account that had mischaracterized a legal filing. This approach appears more effective in engaging readers than just slapping Pinochios on politicians that had repeated the claim.

Now, the rise of AI will pose a new challenge; I'm sure. At *The Post* we tested some claims in chatGPT and found that relied on fact-checks and it produced some reasonably acceptable answer six out of ten times. Now, three out of ten times it was pretty sketchy, and one out of ten times it was completely false. We tested this using the chat function on Bing, which Bing actually will let you see the sources, so we were able to examine what the sources of information were. In one case, it was *PolitiFact*, and in one case, it was me, so that wasn't terrible. But yeah, of course, fakery is going to emerge in ChatGPT, and I'm sure it's only a matter of time before it's weaponized to spread false information.

Anya Schiffrin Glenn, I think that your point about tracking the sources and the Austrian website is really important. I think we want to end the idea that fact-checking, as you said, isn't just claim review, but looking for the origins and the transmission. I would also say... Khaya and I were just talking about the financial motivations. One of the most important pieces for me was the piece that *The Post* published years ago — maybe you wrote it — about vaccine disinformation and how it was a hedge fund guy in New York and his wife who had funded those first videos on YouTube that spread. I think it's too easy for people to say like, "Oh, there's these weirdos out there. Isn't it strange?" and much more important to kind of systematically figure out what are the financial motivations. Some of these very small messaging apps now that want to start doing payments platforms and payment systems, That's when we can get in and regulate when it hits up against the banking sector. So I think as journalists, the reporting and the broader view that you're espousing a fact-checking, I think is very significant. Will you be doing more of that? Like the Austrian article that you mentioned?

Glenn Kessler Oh, yeah. Yeah. No, I think it's a fun bit of reporting, too. So it's enjoyable to do. But I think it also helps people understand that these things don't come out of a vacuum, but there are bad actors out there that have reasons for spreading this misinformation.

Anya Schiffrin That's right, and it's amazing how people don't know that. You know, six, or seven years ago, my students thought I was a weirdo because I cared about online mis and disinformation. Now everyone is confused: "Oh, there's all this stuff. I don't know where it comes from." So when you can send them a *Washington Post* article saying, actually this is where it came from and this is how it's spreading and this is who's making money, it's incredibly informative.

Sérgio, I know that Brazilian journalists have been really at the forefront of getting together during election time, fact-checking together, and breaking down barriers. We've seen that in Ecuador, we've seen that in Mexico, Argentina. To me, that's a very Latin American response because we're not seeing regulation in most of Latin America except for Brazil. So I think you are going to show us a video that was going to talk about some of what the Brazilian journalists have been doing. Then I am going to pin you down to talk about rebuilding because seeing how countries deal with electoral or post-election return to democracy, I think is also really important. So thank you very much. Please come. Thank you.

Sérgio Dávila Well, first of all, it's great to be here. Thank you, Rosenthal and your great team. Thank you. And, colleagues, it's an honor. I ask you to bear with me because my English is a little bit rusty, but I'll try anyway. Well, as Anya said, I'll try to wrap up what happened to the press in Brazil under Bolsonaro. Yeah, Rosenthal tried to fit that into a headline. It's the biggest title of a panel here. Well, I try and summarize the panel's theme through Bolsonaro's attack on media in Brazil. Starting, of course, with *Folha de S.Paulo*, the newspaper I run, and one of his most frequent targets. *Folha* has been doing critical reporting on Bolsonaro since at least 2017, when he was a long shot from being a serious contender. These are some of our scoops on his assets, the first one, and his attacks on his former wife, the third one, and the main scoop that companies were paying for a massive attack on his opponent Fernando Haddad, spreading fake news on WhatsApp. Brazil, as you know, is the largest country of WhatsApp users behind only India. Since he chose *Folha* as his main target, we put together a video with the best of Bolsanaro or the worst of Bolsanro's attack on *Folha*. What you are going to see are interactions between

Bolsonaro and Folha reporters, and statements that he made on the newspaper ranging from 2017 to 2022.

Video Transcript No Folha de S.Paulo! Folha de S.Paulo usually starts full on. The root of all evil is Folha de S.Paulo. To begin with, you guys from Folha de S.Paulo need to start over again at a decent university and do a good job of recruiting. I have determined today the cancellation of the Folha de S.Paulo subscription in areas pertaining to the Executive Board. So you don't want this newspaper to shut down? I don't understand your question. What paper? Folha de S.Paulo. Folha de S.Paulo. Folha de S.Paulo. You people from Folha are doing a filthy job. Filthy! I've made a concession, talking to you here. You do a filthy job with Folha de S.Paulo. It's not funny anymore talking about Datafolha here. Not Datafolha. Datafake. Datafake. Next question. Folha de S.Paulo? Next question. Oh, from Folha de S.Paulo? Next question please. Are you going to keep Fábio on ar Secom? Are you from Folha de S.Paulo? Look at the Folha de S.Paulo reporter... There's another video of hers out. She wanted a scoop. She wanted to put out. It's that big scandal, Folha de S.Paulo. It's a ghost, I don't know what... You think you're entitled to call me a liar? That information is a lie. That information is a lie... You are repeating that information. Folha de S.Paulo. There's never any good news with them. With this story of me not having a problem getting a hard-on, Folha jumped right on it. Sex. Erectile dysfunction affects around 70%% of men of Bolsonaro's age. Lula, my source is IPEA and yours is Folha de S.Paulo. For crying out loud, Lula! I send stuff to Folha and they ignore it. They keep harping on the same subject. That is Folha de S.Paulo. Concluding, today I want to praise Folha de S.Paulo newspaper. Congrats, Folha de S.Paulo. Folha publishes and everyone republishes.

Any Schiffrin Sérgio, you did the attacks help your circulation?

Sérgio Dávila Initially, yes, but then we experienced the Bolsonaro bump as you did with Trump's bump. But then we had the same effect, after he left office. I mean, it was like this. Yeah, initially, yes. But initially we planned this as a piece of advertising, but then we thought it would be too aggressive. It would be playing by Bolsonaro's rules. So I just showed this in events like this. By the way, the full video is already running about 10 minutes now. So if anyone want to see the whole piece, I can send it afterwards.

Of course, these attacks on Folha and other media outlets had an impact on the whole news environment. Starting on reporters, we saw an increase in violence against journalists during Bolsonaro's term. The same was true on advertising. A lot of advertisers were afraid of what government could do to them if they print advertising on Folha, and that was an issue as well. Intimidation of journalists. Another problem. The main target of Bolsonaro when attacking journalists, were female reporters such as Patrícia Campos Malu and Vera Magalhães. By the way, both are here today. He did that through threatening slander. Since Patrícia was the editor of the main scoop during the 2008 campaign, she became the main target. One of the newspapers... So I'll give two examples when I say a campaign. One of the newspaper's WhatsApp numbers received 220,000 threatening or hostile messages from 5,000 different numbers.

Just go back. You saw that in video, but it was hard to catch because it was in Portuguese and it was very fast. But we also experienced online sexual harassment led by Bolsonaro and his sons against Patrícia. The president made a joke using a pun with the word furo in Portuguese, which means both scoop and anus, implying that the reporter offered sex in exchange for a scoop. He said that on live TV.

Of course, Bolsonaro's effect had an impact on transparency as well during his four years in office. The Brazilian equivalent of FOIA was virtually dormant for four years. The same happened regarding the COVID coverage that was either of his main targets. At some point during the beginning of the COVID in Brazil, I think March or April of 2020, the government decided to simply cease to turn public the official numbers for COVID. Instead, they created this so-called scoreboard of life where the administration would release only the number of survivors, not the number of people who died of COVID. So that led to an unprecedented decision for the main media outlets in Brazil to put together their data teams and start scrapping ourselves for the numbers. This quickly became the de facto official death toll in Brazil. For years the numbers were released by the consortium twice a day, and we stopped doing that only two months ago when the government under Lula started releasing the trustworthy numbers again, facts again.

Then the final intelligible scenario against democracy. Of course, like his American mentor, Bolsonaro also tried to mess with the presidential elections that we had in 2022. We even had our version of the Capitol attacks that happened exactly one year and two days after the U.S.

Answering what Anya asked, what about news after Bolsonaro? Looking forward, what do we do from now on? We have a president committed to democracy, but an opposition leader that is not going anywhere. A strategic silence, I don't think, is an option. It doesn't matter if we don't report on them, they are not going anywhere. The same with reporting on extremist movements that have consolidated in Brazil is also essential. How do we do that? I think that we have to do what we always did. We have to keep doing professional journalism. In the case of Folha, what we have been doing for the last century. That's journalism that's based on... critical, plural, nonpartisan and independent journalism. Thank you.

Anya Schiffrin Thank you so much, Sérgio. Have media outlets made... I know that globally there's been a large movement of community engagement and trust with journalists, and in the post-Bolsonaro era, have Brazilian journalists done new efforts? Have they talked to people and said we're back or we're different or we're changing our practice or we're going to be different next time. Did you all feel that the change in government was a chance to kind of do a reset with audiences at all or we don't have to be as partisan? Sorry, I have the mic.

Sérgio Dávila Well, actually, the shorter answer is no. We kept doing what we do best. It's going after the facts, going after the stories, pursuing the stories even regarding this current administration, and trying to get the best version of truth that's available — the most accurate version of truth that is available. I start to see a movement in part of Brazilian society that I think you saw here in the U.S. as well, that we shouldn't report on Bolsonaro and his cronies. For me, this is kind of a magical thinking. If we close our eyes, they will go away. Well, they won't to begin with, and I think that's more effective if we keep reporting on this group and this politician... That's what we've been saying to our audience. I'll give you an example. In the second round of 2022 presidential elections in Brazil, it was the most close outcome in the last decades. It was 51% for Lula and 49% for Bolsonaro, and one of the things that, according to what we heard from Bolsonaro's campaign afterwards, that helped move the needle towards Lula — he won with less than 2 million votes — was a scoop that we have that fully ran days before the second round. It was a very solid scoop saying that Bolsonaro was planning this year, if he was elected, to change the rules for minimum wage and Social Security. We heard from Bolsonaro's people that this is a scoop between other facts, but this scoop was one of the things that

moved the needle towards Lula. So what's the lesson here for us? We have to stick with professional journalism. I think these four years in Brazil and the six years here in the U.S. was the biggest stress test for professional journalism. I think that if we change the rules and we change what we do best, then they will win. We can change how we do things. They have to change how they act.

Anya Schiffrin Sérgio, thank you so much for that. Really interesting. Some questions are coming in from people online and I want to kind of expand on them. So I think I have one for each of you. Glenn, I was very curious to know what the discussions are at *The Washington Post* given that elections are coming up in 2024. Are people saying, gee, we better not amplify Trump or are they taking more the Sérgio view that if we try not to amplify we can't make this go away? I thought your phrase of magical thinking was very telling. What's the discussion at *The Post* like?

Glenn Kessler Well, I mean, we obviously cover Trump. I mean, Trump is going to be a very strong candidate for the Republican nomination, and, in fact, if you believe the polls, he's solidly ahead to win the Republican nomination. If he wins the nomination, he is as good a shot as any to become president again. So obviously, we have to cover Donald Trump. If there's a rethinking, it's that we're trying to be more strategic about how we cover him. He says lots and lots of things on his social media site. He makes all sorts of speeches that are outrageous. The trick is to find your shots and find out the moments to highlight and examine that. So I have purposely stepped back and not done many fact-checks of Trump. I need to find a moment when it makes sense. So one I had done late last year because it was actually a policy issue, he was saying he had a policy that he was going to execute drug dealers. So I wrote a piece that explained why all the facts he used to justify such a draconian policy was made up and based on fantasy. It seemed like a way to get into talking about Donald Trump. He's actually... I don't know if people have seen this, but he has this TV channel on Rumble where every day he posts like a new policy position. So we're carefully tracking those to find and to write about him in terms of his policy objectives if he became president. So, to treat him seriously, but not to give him the blanket coverage about everything.

Anya Schiffrin Presumably, the policy of the day is a sort of trial balloon to see what gets response from his followers.

Glenn Kessler Yes, I think that's part of it. I also think Trump recognizes that he can't only be like a candidate of grievance, or at least his staff realizes that. But these are actually videos where Trump himself is directly addressing the camera and saying, "This is what I'm going to do, and here's my policy ideas." While his speeches continued to be mostly grievance, he does seem to be suggesting that he understands that as a president you need to have policies that you want to implement.

Anya Schiffrin Unfortunately, we know from the Philippines that executing drug dealers or whoever can be very popular; I mean, look at Duterte's approval ratings. So I'm going to combine a couple of questions for Bill before I turn to Khaya there. Okay. let me just combine here. Artificial intelligence, you've said that it can help fight mis and disinformation or be a good tool for fact-checking, but isn't AI part of the problem? So how would you control it? And then ditto social media. Can it be used to help address the problem or in fact is it the main vector? And I would just add, I saw Santiago Lyon is here and will be doing a content provenance breakfast tomorrow. My impression from talking to people like Gordon Crovitz is that the platforms and the messaging apps could actually do a lot more themselves if they wanted to. That watermarking and some of the content provenance

things that Santiago and Truepic and Mounir Ibrahim and others are working on, really could go a long way to kind of labeling and preventing. So I guess I'm combining a few different sort of technical fixes to my question.

Bill Adair You bet. Great questions. So the first one AI — problem and solution. Yes. Problem, I think, we're only beginning to see it. I remember attending a variety of sessions about how deepfakes and deepfake videos were going to be the big problem in like 2011, 2012, 2013. It took really until now for deepfake videos to really get good, and they're actually not that good now, but they've gotten pretty good, particularly still images. Those images of Trump getting arrested before he was actually arrested were pretty powerful, except for the whole finger thing. So AI will be a huge way that the forces of evil spread misinformation. It can also be an incredibly effective way to combat misinformation because it can help us detect the misinformation and it can help us clone fact-checks and deploy them quickly where they're needed. So this local fact-checking problem, we can use AI to generate new fact-checks from the misinformation at the local level. We have a concept we call half-baked pizza, where the AI will generate a written fact-check. It'll be reviewed by a human fact-checker to make sure that it's accurate and that it doesn't contain those mistakes. Think of it like the half-baked pizza you get at Costco, and then we put it in the oven, and it goes to some local area that does not have fact-checking. So I think it can be part of the solution, and we have some other ideas like that, too.

Social media is the same way. You know, social media right now is both things. The problem and this is what we call the Uncle Bob problem... The problem is that we're not reaching Uncle Bob who's falling for these things, and that's something also that perhaps can be addressed by AI. Then the final question had to do...

Anya Schiffrin I feel like... Well, I can't even remember my final question, but I want to say this all super interesting. Is this all in your new report?

Bill Adair So the new report deals just with local fact-checking and is really about the problem and read it and get depressed. It's just appalling how little local officials are being held accountable for what they say.

Anya Schiffrin Well, good. But I like your optimism about AI. This is great, and this is not what I've been hearing lately, so I'm even happier. I know the audience want to ask questions, but I can't resist asking Khaya something. You said that you've worked for outlets with different political perspectives, and one thing I think about all the time — and I'll probably have to talk a little bit about — is the different partisan takes on the problem of mis and disinformation. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit, did you find that your editors or publishers had different views at the different places where you were depending on their politics?

Khaya Himmelman Different views on fact checking?

Anya Schiffrin Yeah, or just the problem. We're seeing these attacks on academics that are studying the mis and disinformation. Hearings in Washington, saying it's not really a problem, and it's a woke culture thing. How did you experience these different perspectives on the problem in your offices?

Khaya Himmelman Fact checking... Well I guess I only fact-checked in one newsroom. It wasn't really presented as a partisan issue. It's just facts are facts. Things that are wrong are wrong. If you can prove that it's wrong, then it's wrong. It sort of went above politics. I

worked at a center-right news organization and I think we got a lot of questioning people who thought maybe we were spending too much time fact-checking the left, not the right, and vice versa. But it didn't really come up as an issue.

Anya Schiffrin So they accepted the idea that fact checks were essential?

Khaya Himmelman Oh, for sure. Yeah, it was a big part of it.

Anya Schiffrin Because I feel like a lot of this discussion, especially when we look at Brazil and the previous panel, is about the point that when there's polarization, truth is on the front line and journalists are on the front line. I'll just mention that one of the first media literacy programs in the world was at Columbia University in the 1930s, and it was founded by a former journalist called Clyde Miller. Some of his papers are actually here at the University of Texas. He got very involved in the anti-racist education movement, which was also a very big movement of the 1930s, because they believed that racism was the worst form of propaganda. Anyway, end of story. They all got fired from Columbia. They lost their housing, and they got investigated by the precursor of the McCarthy era. So what I'm interested in is I feel like the attacks right now on the whole problem of mis and disinformation, where Republicans are saying it's not even a problem, and it's almost falling out of fashion to study it. So I was curious to know if you've seen that phenomenon and what you think of it.

Bill Adair I just wanted to give a shout out to Khaya's previous employer, *The Dispatch*, a wonderful conservative outlet for making the commitment to fact-checking. I wish there were more conservative outlets that did that. One of the things we've learned from the Dominion case is how fact-checking was not popular at *Fox*, and it would be great to see more fact-based reporting at a conservative organization.

Anya Schiffrin So you have the impression that I do that even saying there's a problem about truth has become a partisan issue in this country.

Bill Adair It's a little frightening.

Glenn Kessler Yeah, that's true. But I mean, *The Dispatch* does really good work with it,, and they're very serious about it. So it's gratifying to see that, it's not just a left or right thing.

Anya Schiffrin Yeah. We're going to watch with interest because Khaya's employer just got taken over by a new company. But you were at *The Grid*, and now you're at *The Messenger*, so you're no longer at *The Dispatch*. Just to clarify. So we'll be watching with interest. And Sérgio, please come in here.

Sérgio Dávila Yeah. If I can just add the Brazilian perspective of fact-checking. We are experiencing a different kind of problem with this current administration, Lula's administration. They are planning to release an official fact-checker agency. That's just absurd, that's just Orwellian if you come to think of it. So that's what happened when... If you have Bolsonaro in power, you deal with a set of problems — a much more serious set of problems — but it's not different when you have a Democratic president that's committed to democracy because they still want to control the narrative somehow. In the case of Lula, they are trying to do this federal fact-checking agency.

Anya Schiffrin Well, this is great timing because a question that came in for you is asking whether Lula's government is going to be more respectful of freedom of expression and of the work of the media in comparison to Bolsonaro.

Sérgio Dávila Oh, yeah, much more respectful. The problems are different from the previous administration. He's not trying to do a coup. He's not trying to mine democracy in Brazil. The relationship between this administration and the press is much more healthy. But it's tense like always, but much more respectful. Yes.

Anya Schiffrin You both grabbed your mic so.

Bill Adair I wanted to make the point that just like Brazil, India is having exactly the same situation. I always take that as flattery, that the government is so impressed with fact-checking that they want to get into our business.

Anya Schiffrin Khaya did you have something to add?

Khaya Himmelman No, I didn't.

Anya Schiffrin We also got a little reminder. I love that we have so many people online watching, saying a good example of the use of AI in fact-checking was developed by Chequeado in Argentina. I saw Laura Zommer here earlier today, so I'm glad there's a shout-out for her. I hope we can keep talking, but I'm wondering if there's questions from the audience. Good. Hard to see, please.

Joy Mayer Hi. Thank you so much for this. I'm Joy Mayer from *Trusting News* and I will add my applause to *The Dispatch's* fact-checking. I'm a big fan. I'm really hoping they can reach Bill's Uncle Bob, and I wonder what you guys have learned about the problem of... I mean, you can slap the word fact-check on anything. Fact-checks are only credible to you if you find the messenger of the fact-check credible, and I wonder what you guys are learning about how to persuade skeptical audiences that your fact-checks are credible.

Glenn Kessler It's a slow process and I think... The biggest problem we face in fact-checking is confirmation bias. People pay attention to things that confirm what they already believe, and fact-checkers are in the business of coming up and saying, "No, no, no, no, no, what you believe is wrong." That's very difficult for people to accept. One thing that I've encountered over the last dozen years is, and this is in part the Trump effect, that increasingly the attacks are... When people don't like the message, whether it's on the right or the left, you get attacked as a way to discredit you as a future messenger. So I have come under tremendous abuse from both the right who didn't like Trump fact-checks and the left who didn't like fact-checks of Bernie Sanders. I believe it's designed to undermine my credibility the next time someone of their ideological ilk encounters one of my fact-checks. I've not figured out a way around that problem.

Bill Adair We do that at Duke with the ACC referees in basketball. So we've actually just had a conversation about this this week, Joy. We had Jocelyn Benson on campus, the Secretary of State of Michigan, and she's starting in the next few weeks what she calls the truth-telling task force, which is a tongue twister if there ever was one. The idea for election misinformation is to get a group of various people who have lots of constituencies to kind of spread accurate information. So now we don't work that aggressively to spread our fact-checks, but as we think about this new age when we do need to combat misinformation in a more assertive way, I wonder if we need to think about different ways

along those lines to spread fact-checking, using sort of trusted voices to reach different audiences. We've mused about — this is a little bit wacky but this would get to Uncle Bob — fact-checks on gas pumps. So you go to a gas pump, and you have a little video that plays, usually, it's an ad. What if you put a fact check there and you had whatever the video was, reaching the demographic that is likely to be using that gas pump? Now, that's kind of an extreme example, but that might be a way to do that. But I think we need to be more creative along those lines.

Glenn Kessler I hate those ads. I never pay attention to them.

Anya Schiffrin Great question. Thanks, Joy.

Mar Cabra Hi, my name is Mar Cabra. I'm the co-founder of The Self-Investigation, which is a nonprofit that supports media with their wellbeing and mental health. I want to bring... My question to this topic, especially because Sérgio you actually showed some very terrifying data of the amount of violence against journalists in Folha de S.Paulo... So the question is to you, Sérgio, what did Folha de S.Paulo do to support the journalists that received online threats? What are your protocols around this topic, and what are you doing to do preventative training to your staff on these topics? I also want to extend the question to the other panelists, especially Bill since you've been doing this for so long. What are the mental health tools and practices that you've seen work and what do you think is needed to really provide all of you the support that you need to do this job well? Thank you.

Sérgio Dávila It's a great question. Yes, we had to act on three different fronts: the legal, security, and mental health. The first one, we reviewed our legal team. Besides our legal department, we have two of the main legal firms working 24/7 for Folha on civil and criminal cases. Second, we offered security detail every time a reporter asked us to do so. Patrícia did and she got security detail for as long as she wanted. The goal was, and is, of course, to have the newsroom always feel safe to do their job. The third, mental health, is the most important or at least the one with the most impact in the newsroom. In the height of the pandemic, which was also the second year of Bolsonaro in power, we hired a therapist. We called her our therapist at large. She's paid by the newspaper, and she would do sessions with reporters — Monday to Friday, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.. You just have to call and schedule a session with her, no questions asked by us, but she will ask a lot of questions. It's been fully booked since we launched this program.

Anya Schiffrin That's great. Human Rights Watch has hired a therapist too, by the way. It's really interesting.

Bill Adair That's a great and important question. I'm not completely current because I'm not currently an editor. I think, particularly for PolitiFact, the most difficult times have been the last few years when there have been really terrible attacks on journalists, including fact-checkers. I do know the PolitiFact editors have been really on top of this. I know there's an emphasis to really have work-life balance. So there's not, this expectation that people work incredible hours or whatever. People can have a life after hours. This goes back to when I was editor, we actually encouraged our reporters to not read social media because... We had a saying: "Twitter is not real life". Because you could get wrapped up in what Twitter was saying about something and it could get you pretty fired up. We felt like if something was wrong, we would hear about it through other channels. I think that that helped a lot.

Anya Schiffrin Khaya, did you want to come in at all?

Khaya Himmelman Yeah, I think on a very basic level, having a social circle outside of media is very important. That seems really obvious, but I think it's not so obvious for people who work in this industry. Also making sure you have... I always had amazing editors. The people I worked with were so supportive and any time I was threatened with a lawsuit or something, I knew that I had people backing me. That was key. I don't know what I would have done if I didn't feel like I had that kind of support.

Anya Schiffrin We've really come a long way in the profession. I remember in the 1980s, if you got into trouble at *Reuters* for your stories, they would just put you on the night shift in Cyprus. I'm not kidding you. You'd have someone who covered Tibet, somebody who covered Turkey — they all just got back there. Things have really, really changed. Are there any last questions from the audience or last thoughts from the panel before I let everybody go and enjoy them themselves?

David Clinch I just have a quick question. Sorry. David Clinch. Mostly for Bill, but for the others as well, too, talking about local fact-checking and the lack of it — I have not read the report so I'm just riffing on what you were saying. Is there a potential market for fact-checking as a service, essentially if a local news organization wants something to be fact-checked that it could be put into the hopper essentially for fact-checkers that are available to fact-check it for them to do that? Or maybe even to have a shared services kind of approach where fact-checks that are done by one local news organization are shared across an ecosystem or a network?

Bill Adair Yes. So there have been a variety of efforts in that way. Chandran Sankaran has a really interesting exercise underway called Repustar — Gigafact is actually the local one. It tries to make local fact-checking really fast and economical, and they're doing it in Wisconsin and Nevada. That's showing promise. It has some limitations. It has to be a yes or no answer. But it's really intriguing.

The idea of consortiums is really intriguing. We're toying with the idea of trying to get together a kind of flood-the-zone cooperative. We tried a smaller version of this in North Carolina, we're considering trying to do this in another state in 2024, where you put so many fact-checkers in a state that you might be able to create what someone called herd immunity; there's so much fact-checking that, along the lines of what you said, that you discourage politicians from lying. So if we could get enough fact-checkers in one place, could we really have an impact? So but that would require the sort of sharing that you're talking about, David. I'm hopeful and I guess I should... I just want to emphasize, I'm hopeful about all this. As the *PolitiFact* founder, I believe that this is critical. I just think we need to find new ways to get it out to people.

Anya Schiffrin Good. In that case, I just want to say what a great first day of the conference. Rosental and Mallary, you've brought together an amazing group. I had never actually met anyone on this panel before, but I've been following all of your work for years, so really honored to have been able to share this. Thank you so much, and now we go to the courtyard in a few minutes for our party. Is that right? Fantastic. Thanks, everybody.