

## 26th ISOJ Covering Trump 2.0: Challenges Facing Journalists in Washington, DC

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- Chair: Evan Smith, co-founder, The Texas Tribune, and senior advisor, Emerson Collective
  - Eugene Daniels, president, White House Correspondents' Association, senior Washington correspondent, MSNBC, and incoming co-host, MSNBC's "The Weekend"
  - Elizabeth Kennedy, White House editor, The New York Times
  - Ashley Parker, staff writer, The Atlantic
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**Summer Harlow** I was waiting for the music to die down. Okay, all right, now it is time for our next panel, which is an awesome follow-up to our previous one. This is called "Covering Trump 2.0: Challenges Facing Journalists in Washington, D.C." Our chair is Evan Smith, who is the co-founder of the Texas Tribune and a senior advisor for Emerson Collective. So let's bring up our panelists, thank you.

**Evan Smith** That last one was for you. Great, okay. Thank you for that introduction. I'm Evan Smith. I'm a senior advisor at Emerson Collective. I'm the co-founder and former CEO of the Texas Tribune. I'm so happy to be back at ISOJ again, and especially to share the stage with three excellent journalists who wake up every day focused on how best to cover this administration and the extraordinary moment we're in. All of us in this room know the fire hose of news is turned up to the highest setting at all times these days. The obstacles placed in the path of reporters searching for the truth have never been more numerous or more formidable unless, of course, you luck out on Signal. And they include credible, persistent, unprecedented threats to press freedoms. Efforts to undermine faith and trust in journalists and journalism have been underway for nearly a decade, and they've mostly worked, probably longer than that. We're at an inflection point. What do we do? How do we think about this critically important work? Is keep on keeping on enough of a plan, or is it time for a new strategy, and a new set of tactics? Our distinguished guests won't be allowed to leave until they tell us. Let me introduce them. On my left is Eugene Daniels, the newly minted senior Washington correspondent for MSNBC, and later this spring he'll add the title of co-host of the network's Saturday and Sunday show, The Weekend, alongside Jonathan Capehart and Jackie Alemany. He previously reported on the White House for Politico and was co-author of Politico Playbook. This year, in the most chill time to have the gig, he's also president of the White House Correspondents' Association. Fun fact. Yes, clap for that, that's fine. Fun fact, he grew up and played high school football up the road from here in Killeen, when his father, a lieutenant colonel in the Army, was stationed at Fort Hood.

**Eugene Daniels** And have a Texas tattoo on my ribs to prove it.

**Evan Smith** Which he told me he will not show us. I asked. To the left of Eugene is Elizabeth Kennedy, who just began her fifth year as the White House editor at the New York Times. Previously she served as the Deputy White House Bureau Chief for the Associated Press, working closely with its White House and congressional teams to guide coverage of national security, law enforcement, and election security. She was also the AP's deputy international editor in Washington. Before that, she ran AP bureaus in Bangkok, New Delhi, Beirut, and Nairobi, reported from Somalia, Burundi, and Kenya, and was an editor in New York working with reporters on the 2004 presidential campaign.

Finally, to the left of Elizabeth, my old pal Ashley Parker, back in Austin. Always glad to have her here. Staff writer at The Atlantic. A three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. She previously spent eight years at the Washington Post, where she covered all four years of President Donald Trump's first term, was White House Bureau Chief during President Joe Biden's first two years, and covered the 2024 presidential campaign as the paper's senior national political correspondent. Before that, she spent more than a decade at the New York Times, where she covered the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns and Congress. She's also a political analyst for NBC and MSNBC. This is a very high quality panel. Give these guys a big hand. Thank them so much for being here.

So Ashley, having made my one Signal joke of this panel, I do want to actually seriously ask you about the last week at the Atlantic. You and yours have had quite a time since the publication of that story.

**Ashley Parker** Yes, I mean, I had absolutely nothing to do with it.

**Evan Smith** That's okay, that's all right.

**Ashley Parker** And in certain ways, is Jeff had nothing, right? I mean he was just a sort of passive recipient to war plans, but what's been striking to me in this moment, having covered Trump since 2015, in some form or fashion and in this world, and I'm sure Elizabeth and Eugene feel this, everything moves so quickly, right? I mean, and some of that is deliberate. I was talking to people in the administration who were explaining the first day in office. And this will return to the Signal stuff, but they were saying, look, we went in, he gave three speeches, right. He gives his address, his inaugural address. He addresses a congressional luncheon. He goes into the Oval. He takes more than 100 questions from the media. He goes out to balls, which need to be covered. He signs 26 executive orders, a bunch of them are on immigration. He pardons or grants clemency to all the J-6ers, and they say, "This is deliberate." Because they said, "If we had only done the executive orders on immigration, the narrative from the media would have been you guys are horrible people, you're trying to separate families, you're anti-immigrant, you're racist." But they said their attitude was like, "Screw you, you have to choose. You can either go all in on pardoning the J-6ers. You can go all in on the immigration executive orders. You can cover him at the balls. You can cover his speeches. But you can't do all of it, and that's the point." And that sort of set the tone, and I feel like we've all been scrambling to figure out what to cover, how to cover.

And so what was striking to me, going back to Signal in this moment, was this thing that almost never happens in Washington, happened, which is there was a story where the world sort of stood still, and everyone in the country was aware of this Atlantic piece, where Jeff Goldberg was on a Signal chain with all the top national security administration officials about war plans. And then there were two hearings that were pre-scheduled, but where you had Ratcliffe and Tulsi Gabbard already set to testify. And again, this thing that never happens in Washington, or it feels like, everyone was captivated across the country just watching these hearings. And I feel like it is so rare in this moment, in this day and age, in this administration, for sort of the world to stand still over a media story about an administration. And that has been the most striking thing about this to me.

**Evan Smith** Eugene, Elizabeth, I'll come to you with the same thing in a second. Eugene, what did we learn about the White House this week? What did you learn about the White House from the reaction from the fallout from the aftermath of this?

**Eugene Daniels** I think it was a relearning of the doubling down, tripling down, quadrupling down and the circling of the wagons, right? Because at the very beginning of it, they copped to it, they said, you know, the NSC told Jeff, "Hey, this is real. We're not happy about it. We'll look into it," kind of thing.

**Ashley Parker** Which side note, I was kind of stunned by. That they just copped to it.

**Eugene Daniels** I was surprised. Yeah. They immediately said, "Like, this is a thing." And then they uncopped.

**Evan Smith** Well, they copped, and then they un-copped.

**Eugene Daniels** Uncopped. And then it became, "Don't trust Jeff because Jeff is a discredited journalist." He is not. As many of you know, he is not. He's a great one. And then, it went to, "These aren't war plans, they're attack plans, and they're not even attack plans. Nothing was confidential, it was secret, but not completely secret." And they went back and forth, and now they're kind of at the space where it is, "We're too focused on it as the media. Nobody in the country cares about it," which isn't true. It doesn't, for them, it doesn't tell you anything about how we operate, and they want to move on. I think that's the thing that always happens every time there's a scandal in Trump world. And what I found really interesting was that Mike Waltz, who started the chat, is the one that's getting all of the hits, and taking the hits, even from President Trump himself. And he said, "You know, Mike Waltz did it, but he's a good guy. You know, it's okay, he learned his lesson." But Pete Hegseth, who put all of the information in there, the Secretary of Defense, kind of isn't, right? He's being supported in a different way. And so all of those kinds of dynamics tell you something. There is a lot of irritation within the Trump world writ large, whether that's in the White House or outside of it, that a head has not rolled, and likely isn't going to. But what's really interesting is that President Trump seems to be more irritated that it seems that Mike Walz had Jeffrey Goldberg's phone number in some way, shape or form.

**Evan Smith** That his contact was in his phone somehow. I mean, Elizabeth, this idea of the Trump administration always wants to move on from the thing to the next thing is true. This has had a little bit more hang time, hasn't it?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** It's definitely had more hang time, despite their really kind of heroic attempts to try to change the subject. I think it was yesterday, although time is sort of a flat circle, so I don't remember exactly when it was. Trump got up and gave a speech about tariffs in a sort of desperate attempt to like, let's talk about something else. But I also found that wonderful scoop from the Atlantic to be a very pure sort of distillation of Trump's desire and strategy of just bending reality to his will. "If I say that this information is not classified, and no big deal, then it is not classified, and it is no big deal. Period. End of story." Everyone closes ranks around him. There were sort of whispers that I think that we definitely picked up on, and I know certainly the media picked up on about okay, he's kind of all in for Hegseth, but he's maybe a little bit annoyed with Waltz. But I think for the most part, for people looking at it from the outside, this is a pretty unified administration. They all just decide what we say is the reality, and that's the story that we're going with. I mean, we can't say it enough, these were secret military plans that by any kind of national security measure could have upended a mission, American lives were at risk. There was really no question about how sensitive and serious this was. The White House is, you know, taking a strategy of semantics about it. "It was not classified. It was classified. It was a battle plan. It was a war plan." But the reality is very striking about what happened in that group chat. But again, the White House has just decided that "We say what the reality is."

**Evan Smith** And one of the differences, this time, we'll talk about this over the next hour, from this administration to last, is that there are no apostates in this administration. The closing of ranks is easy. Everybody is falling in line. There were people in the last administration the first time who might have actually said on the side, "You know, this is bad, this is terrible, break ranks." No one is breaking ranks this time, Ashley, right?

**Ashley Parker** Yeah, and that's exactly right. Also, picking up on what Elizabeth said, to me, that's one of the most striking differences is this sense that he can, you know, Norman Vincent Peale, he can bend reality to his will. And that's what we're seeing, and in part that's because he's surrounded by people who will allow that to happen. But I think he has learned the lessons of the 2020 election, which he lost, and the lessons of January 6, which was a deadly insurrection and attack on the US Capitol, is that if he repeats something enough, he can get enough of the American public to believe it. And there is now a huge portion of the American public who believes that he did not lose the 2020 election to Joe Biden, and who believe that January 6 was not a big deal, or it was a day of love, or as Steve Bannon recently told me, a "fedsurrection," right? Because he repeated it, and repeated it, and repeated it, and repeated it. And I think the lesson he took from that is that he can go into the White House, and he can bend reality to his will. And a lot of the, it turns out, a lot a democratic society functions on sort of norms, and niceties, and social constructs. And the thing he understands now, that he didn't understand in the first term or wasn't willing to do, is that a lot of them, it turns out, you can run roughshod over. And you see that on every level. That they are talking now about if you don't like judicial rulings, you'll just ignore them

**Evan Smith** Right, or impeach the judges.

**Ashley Parker** Or impeach the judges, and Eugene can talk more about this, but even, I mean, I remember, you know, there were instances in the first term where he would try to ban a single journalist because he didn't like their reporting or what they had said on television, and there were people around him in his White House who would tell him, "You can't do that, right? You can't. There'll be political backlash. You know, the First Amendment. You'll pay a price. It's not worth it." And now what he's learned is that like the White House Correspondents' Association doesn't actually get to choose who's in the pool, and there doesn't need to be a pool at all. And so we're seeing him push the boundaries to the absolute outer limits in a way we did not see the first term because I think of that belief that he can bend reality to as well.

**Evan Smith** And the guardrails that existed turn out to be made of paper, and he can just break through them. And there are no consequences, and he goes, "Oh, I can do this." Right?

**Eugene Daniels** Yeah, I mean, part of it is also poisoning the well of truth, right? So if he's saying what he wants for a long time, the people who love him will believe that, but then other people might not believe anything, right? And that's also part of the process. And so we as journalists, when we come to folks with real information, verifiable information that we know to be true, that our lawyers have looked at and also know to be true, people won't believe it because the well is already poisoned about truth. And those guard rails have just been norms. What legal obligations, or what legal bounds do people have to be able to go into the Oval Office, right? The Associated Press is in court currently fighting about that because of viewpoint discrimination, which is something that you can't do. But the White House in their, and they started going through the process of this court case, they kind of

copped to viewpoint discrimination, which is the actual legal thing that you're not supposed to be able to do. And they're not arguing that they didn't allow the Associated Press into the Oval Office or into any other events because they didn't like that they called it the Gulf of Mexico versus the Gulf America. They're saying, "No, that is the reason, but we can do that." And I'll never forget it was the 19th of this year, January, and I was talking to someone who had literally just got off the phone with a person who was going to be in the DOJ. And they said, "Get ready." Because the person that was going to be in the DOJ, they told them, "Get ready because we're going to stretch the bounds of everything." And they say, "Everything legal, cultural"? They said, "No, everything. We are pushing the bounds on everything." And they said, "You guys aren't going to be able to stop us because you don't know how to battle that." And I think that, to me, kind of, and then we saw it immediately, as Ashley was saying on the 20th, that has continued since then.

**Evan Smith** You three have all had experience covering Trump and his previous administration, first time, so you actually have a reference point. And on the one hand, I'm tempted to ask you what you learned that was useful for you this time. On the other hand, this seems like such an aberration, what's going on right now, even compared to the first time, that I wonder if that comparison is apt? But Elizabeth, you first. If you think about leading teams covering that first administration in that White House versus now, what are the similarities, and what are the differences?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** There are a lot of differences, actually. I mean, there's a lot of differences. He's much more empowered. He's much more confident. He is far less distracted by the Russia investigation and all of this. He feels that he has a real mandate. I mean he won this election fair and square, and by, you know, it wasn't the landslide.

**Evan Smith** And he even won the popular vote.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** And he won the popularity vote. I mean, he won this selection, a big portion of the American people voted for him. He has learned a lot of lessons. I mean, I think I can speak to the lessons that we as journalists have learned, but he has also learned a lot of lessons. He has learned, as Ashley and Eugene said, that a lot of these rules are really just norms. And he is definitely willing to push beyond it. I mean in terms of the separation of power, I mean he's already challenging the judiciary. You know Congress's spending power he's challenging. He was just out saying that although Congress has appropriated all of this money, you know, he's just not going to spend it because he doesn't want to spend any money on immigration and this sort of thing. So I mean he has learned a lot of lessons about what he can get away with. I would say that that is kind of probably one of the main ones. And I think as journalists, I mean, I think that we need to approach it, and we are approaching it with an open mind. You know, what is he trying to accomplish? What is he doing that is working? What is doing that's not working? But I think for the lessons that we've learned as a team, I think we have to keep in mind what their strategy is, and their strategy, as Ashley was saying, is a flood the zone strategy. They're also trying in more explicit ways to guide what we say, which is part of what they're doing with the AP. Fundamentally, that's what that is about. So every day it does seem, in certain ways, we're running around. There's a million stories, and that is true, we have to cover that. We need to be part of that and give people that information. It's important in every way, but we also need to step back and keep our eyes on the big stories, the big changes, how Trump sees power, how he's changing the American presidency, any inklings of corruption, the relationship with Elon Musk. I mean, these are big, meaty issues, and I think the danger is being, you know, pulled down every day into the minutiae, which I don't buy the argument that that isn't important. I don't buy the

argument that we shouldn't be paying attention to these things. We do need to be paying attention to them. But they do add up to something bigger.

**Evan Smith** Actually, this is the fundamental tension right now. On the one hand, you want to keep your eye on the stuff that's really important. On the other hand, you don't want to be complicit in being desensitized to some of the stuff that Elizabeth is talking about. I mean the fact is that he is running through all of the things that we all took for granted in previous situations like this. We can't as the press, in the interest of keeping our eyes on the ball, shrug our shoulders at that stuff. Right? The framing of stories has got to acknowledge how aberrational this is.

**Ashley Parker** Of course, and one thing on that, which is interesting, and this was true at the Post sometimes, my editors would ask for a weekend story on whatever. And I would say, hey, hey. And I would say, "But I've written this. I've written this. I've written 10 stories on this." And my editor would correctly, smartly, and rightfully say, "You know, so much has happened, I think there would maybe be real value in just pulling it all together and synthesizing for readers what's going on with the perfect call with Russia." And so I would begrudgingly do it, and then that story would sort of go gangbusters because it is hard to follow this stuff, and that's what readers are craving, right? Something that pulls it all together, and explains the details, and the scoops, but why it matters, and in what direction this could go in. So I agree with that. This is one thing that I think is largely the same, but a little bit different that struck me was, so I covered Trump's 2015, 2016 campaign for the New York Times. And right before I left for the Post, he had won. So I left the Post during the transition, and he had won. And the New York Times, and I have to assume this is true for newsrooms all across the country, I can just speak to the Times, because I was there then, nobody knew what to do, right? You had a bunch of editors and reporters who had not expected him to win, who had never been to a Trump rally, who had never spoken to a Trump voter, and who didn't even have Hope Hicks' number in their cell phone, right. There were like four of us at the New York Times who knew anything about Donald Trump and his movement. So Maggie Haberman and I, we had covered Trump, we were called to the D.C. Bureau to do a brown bag to explain this new leader to the editors and reporters there. And it was like we were explaining aliens to a bunch of sociologists desperate to understand. And everyone kept on trying to apply the sort of normal Washington framework to him, right? Like it would be, he did this thing, but then he tweeted out this other scandal, and is that because he's playing four-dimensional chess, which is what often happened in Washington, right? Mitch McConnell or Chuck Schumer is doing one thing to make someone else do another thing so that in two weeks they can jam something through. And the answer was like, no. He is literally, he is trying to win, and he's a consummate real estate deal guy and showman. He is trying to win the minute, the hour, the week. He is trying to win over whoever is directly in front of him in that moment. That is who he is at his core. And so they would say, they would say like, "Well, what do you mean?" He told the Dreamers, he brought the Dreamer into the Oval Office and he told them, "You're the best among us. I want to staple a green card to your diploma." But then he brought in the sheriffs, and he tells them, "Hey, there's some Dreamers in the outer Oval. We could just deport them all." Like, you know, everyone said, "That makes no sense." But if you understand Donald Trump, it does make sense because he's in front of the Dreamers, wants to win them over. Now he's in front the sheriffs. And when there was that tension, which you often saw in the first term, he would always retreat, almost always retreat to where the far right base was. So there would be that tension, and then he would move to where that base was. And I think that is still largely true. He's trying to win the day, the minute, the hour, the group in front him, but the one thing I have been struck by on tariffs and on some of these economic things, is he's sort of spoken a couple times with a

more long-term view in a way that his administration, fellow administration officials, won't. There might be some short-term pain. And he's also said, you know, at one point, I was very struck by, he said, "Look, the Chinese think of things in centuries and millennia, we think of things in quarters." And so, it's interesting to kind of watch, is this an evolution of a man who is learning patience and learning to play the long game because in general that has not been his strength

**Evan Smith** Eugene, what's the difference, as you see it, from the last time to now?

**Eugene Daniels** I think the biggest difference is the people around him. You talked about that a little bit. In the before times, in that first four years, there were people who would literally take things off his desk, or slow walk them from the EEOB, so that he wouldn't get distracted and not want to sign something and do something that in their minds was not politically advantageous for him.

**Evan Smith** They were managing Trump, right?

**Eugene Daniels** They were managing up, which is something that all of us that have editors or jobs, we all try to do. Like you're trying to make them do what you want to do. And I think largely that was because all, most, if not all of those folks that were around him believed that at the end of his four or eight years as president, there would be a different Republican Party. They would go back to the Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, George H.W. Bush, Mitt Romney Republican Party, and so now that is not the case. The people around him, one, do not believe that, because they'd be crazy to believe that that thing is happening. Two, and probably most importantly, they see their job as making sure he gets what he wants. Or they're true believers, right? And so those kinds of people were not really around him, or if they were, they weren't in the jobs that were being blocked out by people like the chiefs of staff, or they were being blocked out by Hope Hicks at times, right, who was very much someone who stuck around, and supported him, and defended him, and defended him from people who probably would harm him politically. That's not happening anymore, right? And so you see the operation now just kind of moving full steam ahead with the things that he wants, and everyone jumping on board. That's why it's so easy for everyone to circle the wagons because if everyone agrees, then that's the case. You know, you think about during the Trump years, the first couple of years especially, all of the infighting that came out because they had all of these different factions. And people planning stories and wanting to shiv each other, that's not really happening, but that's because these people agree with each other.

**Evan Smith** Well, that's why the Waltz thing is so unusual for the last two months, right, is that you finally have somebody who's kind of on the bubble. Ashley, one thing that occurs to me, to what Eugene is saying, is that, you all covering the last Trump term may have had different access issues or relationship issues with people who are close to Trump, whereas right now, everybody around Trump, everybody in the cabinet views you guys as the worst thing in the world. And I'm not sure that everybody viewed you that way, even the cabinet secretaries, right? Like the kind of grievance as a theory of the case has taken over in the second term. And I just wonder if it hamstringing your ability to get stories, to talk to people, or is that mostly for show? And actually, when no one is watching, they are more willing to deal with you.

**Ashley Parker** I think it's a mix. It does feel more challenging to get stories, in part just because they're more disciplined, right? And we benefited from the competing factions in the first term, and we benefited from a president who often, in real time, responded to what

he saw on the front page of newspapers and what he saw on TV. And so that gave these warring factions an incentive to leak, because they knew if Trump read something. Because I would sometimes ask, if you want to make a case on steel tariffs, you know, your whatever level inside advisor, why don't you just walk into the Oval and make it, right? Like, why are you doing this bank shot where you make it to me, and then you hope I get invited on Morning Joe, and I say it on Morning Joe, and then the President sees it? Like you're a top advisor, why don't you just make it the President? But that was how Trump received information. So it is more challenging, although I think there was a myth the first time that being a journalist was just like people were calling like 1-800. It was still in the beat. But there are still people, you know, it's still possible to do the job. There's a public attitude towards journalists, and there's a private attitude towards journalists. And the last thing I'll say, bringing it back to Mike Waltz, is I have been, as Eugene said, it seems like in this moment his biggest crime is that he had a journalist's cell phone number in his phone. And I have been struck by the fact that, and again, this is because everybody is performing for an audience of one, which is the president, and you can't apologize, you can't admit mistakes, you can't broker any resistance. When in doubt, double down, and when doubling down doesn't work, triple down. But I have been stunned that Mike Waltz didn't just say, "Of course I had Jeff Goldberg's cell phone in my phone. I was a member of Congress. Part of my job was to talk to journalists, to try to persuade them of, of my policies, of my initiatives. Of course I had his number. That's what made me a good Congressman, and an effective advocate for MAGA policies, and for my constituents." And it was a mistake. I mean, how many of us have sent things to the wrong person?

**Evan Smith** Elizabeth, what about Karoline Leavitt, the press secretary? You'd take Sean Spicer, wouldn't you, today?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** You know, I will say about that question about Karoline Leavitt, I think that she, you know, she is doing the job that she was hired to do. And again, to the audience of one question, you know, she in a lot of ways has an audience of one, right? She needs to, the president needs to be happy with the job that she's doing, she's very on message. You know, the White House briefing, and I'm not minimizing the issues with the White House briefing, but that's always an antagonistic relationship between journalists and the people speaking for the White House. The White House, no matter who is in it, is there to make themselves look as good as possible, to obscure bad stories, and to spin. That's it, like that's the job, right? And so we, as journalists, go into that briefing room. I say we, even though I'm an editor, so I don't go into the briefing room, don't kill me.

**Eugene Daniels** In spirit, in spirit.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** You know, you go into the room with that knowledge, OK? You know the Trump White House is a different beast in many ways, but fundamentally, you go in there looking to push on stories. You go in there looking to, in an attempt to get to the truth, like that's what we do there, whether it's Karoline Leavitt or anyone else.

**Evan Smith** I want to come to you as the president of the White House Correspondents' Association, specifically on the question of that room and access. The threats to journalists at the moment, lawsuits, weaponization of the FCC, we're going to defund PBS and NPR, I mean all the things that we've heard, the access issue is in some respects to me the most concerning, right? AP's Julie Pace will be here in a little while on the stage with me. AP was in a hearing yesterday trying to get back their access, arguing that free speech is at the center of the fight here. But as Ashley alluded to, there's a secondary issue, which is that the White House has now said we're going to take back control over deciding who



gets to be in the room, right? We're going to decide who's in the press pool, who gets to cover events. That used to be the purview of the Correspondents' Association. Can you talk a little bit about the status of that right now? Because again, as aberrations go, that's a pretty big one.

**Eugene Daniels** Let me take off my MSNBC hat, and put on my WHCA one. That is where it was a few weeks ago. Nothing has changed. And for a lot of people, trying to explain to them why it is important for White House correspondents and the people that are covering the White House to have control over who's in the room, it's not that intuitive. And so this is the reason why. Because at the end of the day, the people that are being covered should not choose the people that are covering them. Point blank period, right? That is, at its simplest, the distillation of what we're dealing with. And, him in his first four years and presidents for a very long time, decades, have allowed that relationship to be what it is because they knew that they are stronger if the people who are asking them questions are people who are well informed, people who are best sourced, people who are talking to the people that are around them in the Oval Office, right? That has always been a strength for presidents and administrations. And frankly, they don't want to deal with the BS of having to coordinate all of those things, right? Why would they want the young people that work for them to have to spend all day figuring out who needs to go in this pool? That was something that the WHCA did, right? And we will continue to fight to be able to do that later.

**Evan Smith** But it went from being a process issue to a substance issue.

**Eugene Daniels** Right, and so there's two different issues. There's the pool issue, which is one thing, and the issue with the AP, which has, you know, both have created a chilling effect within journalism, right? And the AP issue is that the AP did not want, made an editorial decision, that because they are a global entity that covers, you know four billion people I think a day read them, or they reach that many people all around the world, that Gulf of Mexico was what they were going to call it. To be very clear, there are a lot of news organizations that are still calling it the Gulf of Mexico. Some of them are using the AP style book, but some of them made their own decision to do so. And the White House going to, any White House, going to the AP, the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Atlantic, MSNBC, going to an institution, and saying, "We are taking something away from you because you won't do what we say." That is a problem. That is the problem that's going on with the AP. And that's why they, the AP, and us, worked behind the scenes to try to figure out, to try to give them an offer, and figure something out here. But the White House continued. And the AP did their lawsuit. We did our, we did an amicus brief. We've been showing up to the court case because it is important that the American people know this isn't just about the Associated Press, and Julie Pace did this in a Wall Street Journal op-ed earlier this week, where she talked about that, you know, today, it's the APm tomorrow maybe it's another news organization or maybe it's someone else. So that's the slippery slope

**Evan Smith** So, Ashley, I have a question for you on that. So, civilians normally don't think about the Associated Press. But this story has gotten, speaking of hang time and sort of visibility, I think that there are sort of average people outside of our world who are talking about this AP story. And the question I've gotten from a bunch of people is why didn't the entire White House press corps walk out? Why haven't every reporter and every organization in solidarity with the AP, I know this sounds like something that only Aaron Sorkin would be able to script, right? Why hasn't everybody said, if you do this to the AP, you could do it to all of us. We're walking out on this. Why not?

**Ashley Parker** Let's kick it back to Eugene briefly.

**Eugene Daniels** I'll take part of the question, and part of the reason is.

**Evan Smith** But I do want to come back to Ashley.

**Eugene Daniels** Ashley's not getting off easy, it seems. Part of the reason is the people that are doing the work every single day in the White House that have hard passes, the editors, those are not the people that are making that decision. And I think that's something important for the American people to understand, right? Going into the White House on behalf of your news organization, you are not making the decision to boycott something. You are not making the decision to walk out. As someone, who's tried to work and get collective action, I am not talking to Ashley Parker typically with those conversations, right? I'm talking to people way above them. And so that is something, if people want to be upset about those kinds of things, it is not the reporters themselves, their editors even, that deserve that ire. And at the end of the day as I've said in public statements is every news organization has to make decisions for themselves right? I have a certain decision that I would make if I was in charge, I'm also not in charge of any of these organizations, and the WHCA, we don't tell people what to do. That's not how we try to operate and bring people together. But if they don't want to come.

**Evan Smith** But you understand the instinct that some people have in thinking there should be some kind of big response?

**Ashley Parker** I get that, I mean, I'm going to punt a little that part of it is above my pay grade, but to answer a different question, in the first term, there was a lot of talk of, sort of a similar version of, they're lying to you from the briefing room, why don't you just walk out of the briefing? Why do you cover the briefing? And my personal view on that was, you know, it's our job to cover the White House, and any time I have the ability to get access, I want that level of access. And it doesn't mean I needed to take what the press secretary told me as truth, and I had the ability to give it context and nuance and tell my readers, you know, Sean Spicer said this, that's a lie, and here's why my reporting shows that's lie, and that helped advance the story and helped advance the public's understanding of the story. It was also the same thing, there was this other movement of why do we cover the Tweets? In my view, on why do we cover the Tweets, is the Tweets were, in that moment, they were statements from the President of the United States, and they were a window into what the President of the United States was thinking in that moment and in that matter. That meant something.

**Evan Smith** Yeah, one difference between then and now is no one is questioning whether the stuff he says on social media, Truth Social, is news. Now it is news. No one questions that. So let me ask you about the name calling. Since we're talking about features of the first and particularly the second term. You work for MSDNC.

**Eugene Daniels** No, I work for MSNBC.

**Evan Smith** You work for the failing New York Times. You work as of this week for the Atlantic, which is going out of business, right? Not true.

**Ashley Parker** I also used to work for the Jeff Bezos Washington Post, which at the time was an insult, but now may be a term of endearment.

**Evan Smith** Now, suddenly, it's a compliment. Ashley, the other day, we were talking backstage about this. The other day he attacked you personally by name, in a Tweet, as incompetent or whatever it was. And it was over the fact that you requested an interview with the White House, and he came back and attacked you and said, send somebody else, not that incompetent Ashley Parker, effectively, right?

**Ashley Parker** Effectively, yes

**Evan Smith** And he had attacked you before. I mean, it's not the first time this has happened.

**Ashley Parker** No.

**Evan Smith** He's never attacked you by name before? I thought he had.

**Ashley Parker** No. You're correct, he had attacked me before by name.

**Evan Smith** Does this matter to any of you? I mean, the sort of the nine-year-old name-calling, it's just schoolyard stuff. Does it actually ultimately matter, and how do you respond to it, more importantly, from the standpoint of your coverage?

**Ashley Park** Interestingly, I thought a lot about the first time he attacked me in his first term. He attacked myself and Phil Rucker, I think, as nasty lightweights. This time, he attacked myself and my colleague, Michael Shearer. I felt bad, though, because if you read his attack, he's clearly attacking me, and Shearer's sort of like a casualty of being associated with me.

**Evan Smith** Collateral damage, right.

**Ashley Park** Yeah, exactly. It's like a drive-by of [unintelligible]. But it felt very different, and also in general, the first term I remember, he would also attack my and other reporters' reporting, not by name always, but it was clear what story he was referring to. And I remember the first time he Tweeted out an attack, not by a name, but on a story. I remember where I was, oddly, it was 11 a.m., and I was in a liquor store. But it was because I was going to a dinner that night, and I was picking up a bottle of wine on my way into the office.

**Evan Smith** It's a good detail.

**Ashley Park** I remember my heart dropped because for a President of the United States to go after a story, which would happen maybe once or twice in the Obama administration, once or twice in the Bush administration, it meant that you had gotten something wrong. And so at first I was like, oh my God, what did we get wrong? Who did I talk to? I need to go back, and triple check, and quadruple check my sources, and I'm so sorry I brought shame on the Washington Post. And I quickly learned it didn't mean you got anything wrong. It meant that you got everything precisely right. It got under his skin, and he was coming after you, and often times, two or three days later, he would send out another Tweet that made clear that the premise of your story was absolutely correct. But to finish, the first time he attacked me by name, first term, I remember because it had, again, I didn't, the big concern of course is are there threats for you, are there threats for your family, and luckily there was nothing credible. So after that, it was kind of this wonderful

moment where I got to hear from everyone in my life, right? Like the guy I had gone to homecoming with, freshman year, reached out. My younger sister had friends from sleep-away camp reaching out. I got to catch up with everyone in my life, right? I heard from 200 people, and we all caught up and then moved on. This time when he attacked me, I really didn't hear from that many people, and I was kind of curious why I wasn't getting this great catch-up moment. And I thought about it, and I think it's two-fold. One I think is Truth Social does not have the reach that Twitter did, for whatever reason. I think that's part of it. And I think the other part is in this moment now, 10 years into the Donald Trump show, in a moment where he is deporting people without due process to El Salvadoran prisons, and shuttering whole agencies, and maybe touching, or Elon Musk maybe touching entitlements, when things that are happening that have actual real world consequences for real world human beings, the idea that he doesn't like a journalist is kind of like no new news, right? It's new that on Monday it was me, and that he used whatever slur it was, but it's not going to move people. Who cares.

**Evan Smith** Somehow, Elizabeth, him calling Maggie Haberman, Maggot Haberman doesn't really mean anything in the context of everything else going on, right now?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** I take your point. I know we're laughing at Ashley's story, and there is a humor to it. And talking about the name calling, I think it must be horrible. I mean, I just, I feel like I just want to say that. Like, it must be horrible. To your question of does it matter, I actually think it does matter.

**Evan Smith** Say more.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** Because what is happening, the strategy behind it is, it is name calling, and that is part of it. But he's also just trying to discredit the media. He's trying to tell people, don't believe them. Don't believe them, okay? And I think that is why it matters. I also, just as a human being, I feel like it must be very difficult. I mean, I know again that we're laughing, but to get attacked by name by the President of the United States, it can't be easy. That is intimidating. So the second reason why it is, I think, a very important thing, again, is it's another way to create a disincentive for factual, aggressive reporting on the American presidency, you know? And it sounds silly, oh, the failing New York Times, oh, this, that, and the other thing, but there's actually huge weight behind it, and it is meaningful.

**Ashley Parker** And I should add briefly, I think when I make light of it because that's kind of the only way, for me, you can deal with getting attacked by name by the President of the United States. But I also felt lucky that in every instance I've been attacked by him when I was at the New York Times and I was with the Washington Post and now that I'm at the Atlantic, I always felt like I had the full support of my institution behind me, and that makes a tremendous difference. And I cannot imagine what it would be like to be attacked if you did not have the backing of the Times, or the Post, or the Atlantic behind you.

**Evan Smith** And this is really where Elizabeth's point is dead on. Not every organization has the wherewithal to support their journalists in that same way.

**Eugene Daniels** Right, well, many of them don't even know how to do that, right? Like, you know, we're all from big organizations, right. When I was at Politico, it's a big organization, at MSNBC, still a big organization. Like they have security teams at some of these places, people that are always there looking at things. And a lot of news organizations can't afford to have that. And so if someone does get named by President

Trump or by someone else, and you spend a couple of weeks being yelled at and called names and all of that, a lot of reporters just feel alone. And so I think what we do as their colleagues is like, especially for those of you that like, the first time that the Trump war room tweeted out a picture of me during the campaign, Maggie Haberman texted me, right? And she was like, I've been through this. How are you? I know this sucks.

**Ashley Parker** Maggie and I have been texting back and forth this week obviously.

**Eugene Daniels** So there is a little bit of a fraternity, sorority feel. It's like, oh, come on over to the sad side. And I think part of it is you have to laugh to keep from crying. Because earlier this year, I had weeks of when it was around the WHCA making statements in support of the AP and against what the White House was doing with the pooling, it wasn't particularly about my reporting. It was about me as a person. As you guys can tell, I'm Black. I am gay. They have, some folks have, issues with that. That's their problem.

**Evan Smith** And do you feel like you're more of a target? I mean, I stand to reason you were more of a target because of that.

**Eugene Daniels** I think so, I think that's part of the job, but I think it's not, it's a new part of the Presidency, for that to be the case. But the way that I try to explain this to people is sometimes when you spend like a week with thousands of people on the internet yelling the N-word or the F-word at you, telling you to kill yourself, saying they're going to come kill you, sending you emails. Sometimes they send letters in the actual snail mail, which I always kind of appreciate that. You spent money to hate me. Yeah, stamp, yes, five cents. Those kinds of things, when you walk out into the earth the next day, you kind of, I don't know, I'm like, hold up, who's around, right? And so, luckily, I have been supported by my news organizations in the same way, where one, in no way, shape, or form does it change the way that I approach the reporting. I'm not meaner to Donald Trump, or the administration, or Biden folks, because Democrats do it, too, to be very clear, in a different level. Or to any president, because of what's happening. So you have to separate those two sides of yourself, kind of like Severance.

**Evan Smith** Well, you're kind of getting at the thing I wanted to ask. Good Severance reference by the way. This is kind of where I wanted to take this, the kind of second part of this, is what's the appropriate response in a case like that, right? I mean, I'm reminded always of Marty Baron, your former boss's admonition that our job is not to go to war, our job is to go to work, right? That the response is not to fight back, but to do journalism. To do journalism, that's what we're there to do. The job is not to call him names back.

**Eugene Daniels** That's what the other people are for. That's what the lawyers are for. That's what the editors are for. That's what the PR people are for. That's what the security people are for. I recently had a meeting with the security team, and what they told me is our job is to protect you and make sure you don't have to worry about any of this. Right, and so when the New York Times has to release a statement in defense of Maggie Haberman or Peter Baker, that's who should be doing that. Maggie and Peter, which they do all the time, they just keep going and doing their job because that's not what we're supposed to do. We try not to become the story.

**Evan Smith** Okay, so we're going to go to, we could do this for hours more. I'd frankly love to do it for hours more, but we're going to go to some questions from the audience that have been submitted. Let me ask this first one, which seems very much on point to what

we're talking about, from Misty Harris. How do you keep your sanity when covering this administration? What can we do as journalists for our own mental health? I mean, this question of self-care in the midst of all this is not, not a thing, Elizabeth. So as you think about your team.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** That's an excellent question. I want to talk to Misty about that. I don't have a good answer. The only thing I can just say about how we're trying to approach work in the second Trump administration as differentiated from maybe how we did in the first, is we're going into this knowing what our lives are going to look like. And it's sort of, we had a pretty good idea, and here we are. I will say just from my own perspective, at the Times, we are lucky we have a nice big White House team.

**Evan Smith** You have how many people on your team?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** We have about nine people.

**Evan Smith** So you can rotate people in and out, right?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** We rotate people in and out, and I had this big talk with the reporters at the beginning of the administration and I said, you know, we're not going to do that thing, where every time something happens, everyone turns their attention to it, and everyone's turning. You now, like, some people are on their bigger projects, some people on the news, and we're just, we're going to really be like a well-oiled machine. But you know, when you're with ambitious journalists, they always want to be on the news and everyone is, you know, so it's kind of hard to organize. But I do think that the key is to keep our mind focused on the biggest stories. People have to take their vacations. People have to live their lives. And, I try to model that by coming to Texas on a very busy day.

**Evan Smith** Oh yes, because your mental health in Texas will be just perfect.

**Ashley Parker** I should add, and this sounds very cliché, but the day, well two-fold. One is when Trump attacked me by name this most recent time, I was out for a run. So like go me, right? Like some work-life balance. And obviously my run gets paused, and I get a million calls, and I have to get on a Zoom with all the people at the Atlantic, where I don't want to put on my my camera, because I don't want them to realize that their new employee is out for a run at 6 p.m. Even though, to be fair, that's a very reasonable time to take a run. But I also have three kids who, to be fair, are not always great for my mental health. But this sounds cliché, but like I walked in the door, and my two-year-old just came running up and gave me a hug. And in that moment, I felt like I'll be okay. I have more important things in my life than the President attacking me, and I'll be fine.

**Evan Smith** That's good. Good perspective. You want to jump in on something on that?

**Eugene Daniels** I mean, it's the same thing. We just got a puppy. Me and my husband just got dog. And he's eight weeks, and I had a crappy day. It was one of those. And I walked in, and he came running, and my husband came with him. And my mom called. I was like, did you guys coordinate this? My mom, who lives in Dubai, called. And those kinds of things really help to put in perspective what we're all doing. Our work is very important and gets more important every year, but us as humans also have to find ways in which to kind of pull ourselves out of it. A good dance party, a good Beyoncé dance party I will say. I did it this week on Wednesday night before I got on a plane here.

**Evan Smith** Is that right?

**Eugene Daniels** I had to have it.

**Evan Smith** I think a Beyoncé dance party could be a thing for the next ISOJ.

**Eugene Daniels** I'll do it right now if y'all turn on some Beyoncé.

**Evan Smith** All right, here's a really good question from Paula, I want to say, it's Maralia. Do you think that the fact that tech platforms decided to be so close to this administration is having or will have an impact on the media ecosystem? Ashley, what do you think? I mean, obviously Musk has been in the center of everything for the last two months and X as a consequence. But we also talked backstage about how maybe is X really that much of a factor out in the world these days? We overstate what its impact is?

**Ashley Parker** Yeah, I go back and forth on how much X moves things compared to Twitter, but I mean, I also think these tech platforms are speech, right? They are speech. That's what some of these lawsuits were about. And if you go on X now, the algorithms are sort of pro-Trump, pro-MAGA algorithms. And that's Elon Musk's right to do. But it's reaching a huge number of people in a very specific, and at times, I think potentially radicalizing way.

**Evan Smith** But is it really reaching a huge number of people? That's the thing that I legitimately do not know. I mean, the old saying was Twitter is not real life. And I wonder if X is real life in the same way. And are we, because we're down in the well and can only see the walls of the well around us, overstating the importance of this as a feedback loop?

**Eugene Daniels** I think that the feedback loop is short. So, you know, when I was at Politico and there was the misinformation that the USAID was paying our bills, which is not true, right? They were paying for Politico Pro, subscriptions. That happened with like some right wing kind of faceless folks on Twitter. Then it got to Elon Musk. That day at 1:30 or whatever it was, Karoline Leavitt from the podium talked about the government canceling all of those subscriptions to Politico Pro. So it is real life in the sense that the people that actually are paying attention to it are the people who are making the laws, changing the laws, pushing whatever, whether they're Democrats or Republicans, pushing something. I think that's why it matters, right? Does my grandmother see it? Absolutely not. Does someone's cousin in Iowa see it, probably not. But the impact on their life will be felt because the people that are making the decisions in Washington DC and around the country in leadership positions are paying attention to those platforms.

**Evan Smith** Okay, let me ask another one. Elizabeth, I'm going to ask this one of you specifically because of your past AP relationship. From Kate Winkle, what should journalists in local markets, particularly those who are relying on coverage of the White House from bureaus or partners like the AP, keep in mind when covering what's going on in Washington for their local community?

**Elizabeth Kennedy** So when a local reporter out in the field is?

**Evan Smith** I mean, for instance, a lot of local news organizations I know have been trying to localize the cuts at the federal level in terms of how they affect their communities specifically. That'd be one example.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** I mean, if I were a local reporter, I would have my, I mean this is kind of like, I don't know if they're asking for a story idea, but like, I think one thing that we will see spin out of all of these cuts is like, because they're happening so quickly, and we're only, we're still quite new in this administration and Elon Musk is doing his thing, but these people out in the country are the ones who will see, much like the people out in the world, will see the effects of the USAID cuts, right? Like you will be the front line of whatever the effects of these decisions in Washington will be. So that's what I would be keeping in mind for sure. Like who are the people being affected by this? Who are the people, like any good reporter out in the field, right? Like who's being hurt, who's being helped, what is the meaning of these policies?

**Evan Smith** And let me stay with you on this for one more second, and give away something that I'm going to talk to Julie Pace about here in a little while, and that is that one of the byproducts of the AP being shut out by the White House is that the AP is a source for many people around the country in their local communities. Many of those communities voted for this administration. Right? And so the loss of AP coverage is a loss of coverage for those communities and those voters. Like this stuff does have an effect at the local level.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** Yeah, I mean, the AP, I thought it was funny how you said most people don't think about the AP.

**Evan Smith** Well, you think about the AP every day because you worked there for a long time.

**Elizabeth Kennedy** No, but people who don't think about it are affected by it. A lot of the news that they receive is from the AP. And it's just kicking them out of the pool, it's an interesting choice when you think about the traditional space that the AP holds in American journalism. Traditionally, the AP essentially is sitting in the front row of the briefing room. And of course the AP is still in the briefing room, but the AP is right there in that kind of plumb position because they are there to represent pretty much all of American media, right? And Julie Pace, will talk more about this, but so many American newspapers and media are part of the AP through this cooperative model. So the idea is that the AP reporter would be there to represent all of those papers, so it is an important decision by the White House.

**Evan Smith** I see from our time, we have time for one more question. Sharon Stover, where do influencers and their roles fit in the news topography from your standpoint? That's a whole other element of this. And in fact, the president is meeting with these folks, they're being integrated into the coverage map, aren't they?

**Ashley Parker** So I think influencers play a much bigger role on the right than they do on the left, and that's something the left is kind of haltingly and frankly quite unsuccessfully trying to solve. But I think one area where you really saw this was when Joni Ernst was considering not voting for Pete Hegseth's nomination. And Joni Ernst is someone who would have had every reason to be skeptical of him. She was a woman who served in combat, and he had previous statements about not thinking women should serve in combat. She is a public survivor of sexual assault, and he was accused of sexual assault and other misconduct. And so she expressed some hesitancy, and sort of the White House made a decision that if we lose, and again, it gets to their doubling down on everything, but they made a decision, if we lose Pete Hegseth's nomination, then maybe we lose Tulsi Gabbard's, then maybe we lose RFK Jr.'s, it has to go through. So they start coming out



against Joni Ernst. But then there's this thing that happens where there's this whole ecosystem that includes influencers, so that includes Charlie Kirk and Ben Shapiro, and the podcast, and all the people, word sort of goes out to them, sometimes officially, that we're going after Joni, right? Like we are going to attack her. So word through official back channels gets to the first layer of Republican influencers of like we attack her until she caves. And then the second and third tier of influencers who are looking for their cues from the first tier see, oh, we're all going after Joni, and they go after Joni. And you see it play out, and the end result is that Joni Ernst comes out and supports Pete Hegseth's nomination.

**Evan Smith** So the influencers have influence, as their name would suggest.

**Ashley Parker** On the right they do.

**Evan Smith** And on the left, as Ashley says, Eugene, they're still sort of struggling something something Joe Rogan of the left something something, like no one knows what to do about that.

**Eugene Daniels** I mean, there's Crooked Media, right, the Pod Save guys, and that's kind of it, right? Like when it comes to people who actually have members from the administration, the former administration, not this one, come on their actual podcast, that's kind of what the left has. Why? It's unclear, right? It's unclear why they can't figure it out. I think part of it is there's so many disparate factions on the left that it's hard to build a audience that will go across the entire left side of the aisle, right? That's something very difficult for them to try to figure out. Look, people who have podcasts are free to chat, and talk about stories, and do all of those things. I think they should do it. There's a lot of podcasts. I'm a big podcast listener. New media, right? That is something that I'm supportive of. Politico, where I worked, is an organization that came up at the beginnings of really everyone shifting to .com news sites and digital news sites. However, there is a difference between a journalist with an editor, and people who are copy editing and working on stories with them, then someone who has a microphone and is just talking. They should absolutely do that. First Amendment, 100%, have your opinions, but my issue comes in when it's being presented as if that is a journalist, right? Or that they're a reporter, it's not the same.

**Evan Smith** My expectations for this panel were high, and they were exceeded. I hope yours were as well. Please give Eugene Daniels, Elizabeth Kennedy and Ashley Parker a big hand. See you in a little bit. Thank you.