Day 1, April 21, 2017: Morning Session – 9:30-10:45 a.m.

Fact checking:
The international trend of verifying public discourse

Chair: W. Gardner Selby, Editor, **PolitiFact Texas/Austin American-Statesman**

- **Laura Zommer,** Executive Director & Editor-in-Chief, **Chequeado, Argentina**
- **Alexios Mantzarlis,** Director, **International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter**
- **Craig Silverman,** Media Editor, **BuzzFeed**

Laura Zommer: I would like to take a trip through time with you. Let's set the course of our flux capacitor for the year 2013 and until now, a country located in the south of the south. Why this year? Because in 2013, the government officially stopped measuring poverty because allegedly it was something too complex to do. After the most recent change in government, poverty was measured again and the record shows that three out of ten Argentinians are poor. Many official statistics…[unintelligible]…price were obliterated when real inflation rose more than 25% yearly. Preliminary statistics weren't published because insecurity was rising and that made government popularity decline.

So, back to 2013, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, our former president, is part of a ferocious confrontation with the main media outlets. So, she openly accused them of lying and showing a false reality, fake news. Media outlets, on the other hand, accused her of the same. After a few years, outlets start to lose credibility, as you can imagine, among a sector of the population. And the President started to lose credibility among other sectors. Public debate is polarized. Everyone reads, listens, and watches networks that prove they are right, while the country is still unable to solve our main problems. After several years, neither media outlets or Cristina are governing. Polarization is. Sounds familiar?

My name is Laura. I'm the Editor of Chequeado, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to improve the quality of public debate in Argentina through fact-checking since 2010. We were the first one in the south hemisphere when data and fact checking wasn't trendy or a guarantee of money or fame but of enemies.

I come from that Argentina that I just told you about where the official statistic agency was terminated[?] in 2007. In the south of the south it seemed that things always arrived a little bit late than in the countries of the north. For instance, 4G only arrived two years ago; however, in this case, it was different.

The dynamics that we are witnessing with Trump and the presidency of the United States was a reality earlier for us. So, I can say I come from the future. [laughter] And I would like to tell you what we learned while doing this for the past seven years: fighting with polarization, institutional lies, populous, and the decadency or perhaps the end of traditional media outlets.

Together, we have found, not without entrance[?], that we believe are some answers to deal with these problems that keep globalizing. Would you like to hear them? Yes? OK. We have found that in a context in which media and government are fighting to see who's right, audience lose focus. And instead of reasoning, they pick a side to follow, almost blinded. Because of this, we have decided that the key is to educate the audience even though it's not easy, immediate, nor necessarily sexy.

This is why we have taken a decision that seems to be contraindicated. We have opened everything. Absolutely everything. We haven't only opened our battered donors or data [that] we base our fact checks on and are linked, obviously, in every article, we have opened our metric to such a point that we explicitly mention it in every article. That is to say, we explain to the audience how we do what we do.

We also do more than that. Somehow, we are opposite of Coca Cola and its secret formula. We teach whomever wants to learn how we do what we do. Yes, to whomever—journalists from other outlets, independent journalists, citizens—we give closest talks on developed technology. Now, for instance, we are working on how to make part of the fact checking automatic, so that more people can do what we do.

I understand that teaching other media outlets how we do what we do may sound odd. But you know what? What we learned is that several hundred journalists in practically every main media in Argentina have taken our process, are writing in our network, and now they know how to do their work by opening our relevant data. As there are plenty of fake news and lies around, there is work for everyone, as you can imagine. And we still fall short.

During this time, we also learned that we can leave an emotional monopoly to those who deceive. We do not believe that seriousness is the same thing as credibility. In fact, we know that people base their decision regarding what to share on social networks on their emotions. That's why we [use] our brains thinking about how to use humor and other elements that appeal to emotion to explain how we tick without underestimating the audience.

For instance, we made these type of gifs. He's Macri, our president, and he's a no-position parliamentary. And last week in Buenos Aires, we used this experiment that I want to share with you today to confront the idea that we live in a time of the post-truth.

[Video plays. No audio. Just music.]

[Applause.]

OK. We want to invite you to replicate this experience in your respective cities. And we'll help you to do it. What we think [is], the answer to this complex concept does not lie in thinking serious or traditional media, but it's just fake news created by populous missionaries[?] or people trying to be funny. If we propose the problem in this manner, we will have lost before even starting. The challenge is that we can rescue from the good journalists to establish a new reading contract with the citizenry that believe in a new journalist—more open, collaborative, less arrogant, and precise.

Let me tell you something else about tendencies. Tendency is realized on audience preferences. We are fact checkers—Chequeado, other 12 outlets in Latin America making fact checking, and more than 100 worldwide—have been working for many years earning more enemies than attention. So that one day when these tendencies pass, leaders and media are the same, but much better, much more open, honest, respectful of the audience and the citizenry.

I'm just finishing. Just one paragraph. I told you I came from the future. Something I can tell you about the future is that it's not as ripe and beautiful as we would like to imagine, but it's definitely better and more rational now than if we hadn't dedicated the seven years to systematic fact checking what leaders and analysts says and to awaken citizens so that more – that now are more aware and in more…[unintelligible].

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Alexios Mantzarlis: Hi. How are y'all doing?

Audience: Great.

Alexios Mantzarlis: So, I get to go after Laura Zommer and before Craig Silverman. I'm like the lousy ham in between two really fantastic pieces of bread. So, my name is Alexios. I'm here to talk to you about fact checking in 2017. And if you're thinking, *wow, he really half-assed his job coming up with a title for the session,* you may be partly right. But I want to talk about fact checking in 2017, because I think we are in a specific place. We are in a place, in a moment, where we do need to take stock, where we do need to realize what has worked, what has not worked, and that we are in that moment because 2016 happened.

And I don't need to explain to a room as well informed in the trends of journalism as this is, what happened in [2016], but I do want to make sure that we spend the rest of this panel and our conversations about fact checking dealing with it in a nuanced manner. And this has not been something that I've seen in commentary of the role of facts and fact checking in journalism.

Two things can be true. Post-truth can be a bullshit term. It can mean nothing. And we can look at why I think that in a moment. But fact checkers can also face great challenges. Right? We can have both those things being true at the same time. And we need to have both those things being true at the same time in order to actually make fact checking a little bit better. And I'm not going to spend time on this, because I'm going to get shouted at [about] my time limits. And hopefully we'll talk about it—what happened in 2016—in the Q&A afterwards.

But, so both these things are [Spanish], but, so we would ideally have a really like scrupulous analysis, an attentive research of, what happens in fact checking? Which headlines work? Which do not? Do they matter? Do readers care? Are they reached? But what we're getting most of the time, instead, is this kind of meme, this law *nothing matters anymore*, this *omg, facts are dead*, which is fine in the settings of a comedy show, but is not what we should be getting in media analysis, in trainings, in think pieces about the role of fact checking in journalism.

If you are like me and read headlines, you'll have seen—and hopefully the articles, too—you'll have seen this all over the place, right? Not just in America. Everywhere. This sort of, *we have entered a post-fact era*. And I am calling bullshit on that. I'm calling bullshit on it because of two studies. I'm a fact checker, so I bring my sources.

The first study, I would bet most of you in this room know or have heard the term *backfire effect.* This is a concept that was found in 2006 by some researchers who seemed to suggest that when you correct people, not only do they not change their mind, they actually retract into the false belief even more. They more doggedly believe that. So, those informed are in their standing of fact checking for the decade since, and you can still find it in editorials.

What you don't find in editorials was that just last year two researchers tried to replicate a study and failed across the board. They took 36 different topics. They asked 8,100 participants, "Do you believe this?" They fact checked them, and then asked them again, "Do you believe this?" And lo and behold, the curve went down. We went from a state of greater with information to a state of greater information. Fact checking works.

And what happened this year was that study was sort of corroborated by another study. And I would draw your attention to the bottom right of this graphic, the dotted lines in the Trump column, so specifically related to Trump. Journalists obsess too much about Trump, but for fact checking, he is an important case study, right? He butchered facts throughout 2016.

So the researchers presented voters with four pieces of misinformation peddled by the Trump Campaign. And, you know, the red-dotted line are Trump supporters. They were asked, "Hey, how much do you believe this?" And they gave a certain score, five or six. Then they asked non-Trump supporting Republicans how much

they believe it. The score was a little lower. And then they asked Democrats, the blue-dotted line, and that was even lower. So far, some conventional wisdom.

What happened next may surprise you about some of those quick baited headlines promise. Whether they were corrected immediately or whether they were corrected one week later, everyone's belief score went down after being told that the claim was false, if it was a Democrat, if it was a Republican, if it was a Trump-supporting Republican. Fact checking changes minds.

When you read that the Trump voters just don't care about facts, that is an *angsty* liberal commentator's take. It is their sloppy way to explain away a political phenomenon by saying, "Those people just don't get facts if they bit them in their ass." And that's not true.

And so, I want to close my presentation [with] if you meet a fact checker who tells you all is well in the realm of fact checking, run for the hills. Preferably the hills that Gardner was saying before. Don't trust them. There's a lot that should change. There's a lot that needs to be done in fact checking.

I see three rising challenges. The first is that around the world in a lot of countries, fact checkers are perceived to be part of the same media ecosystem that failed to be truthful to date. Right? Whether they are within, like I say, media outlets or whether just for the fact that they've been around so long.

And so, one thing at the International Fact-Checking Network try to do is we have a code of principles. Yes, code of principles are not new. But we actually ask signatories to subject themselves to external vetting processes that we'll see whether indeed their methodology is public, whether indeed they have a corrections policy, whether their funding and organizational status is clear, whether they link to all of their sources.

The second challenge is that—and this, we would need more research on this—but it seems like the very sources of fact, so fact checkers never tell the readers, "Trust us." They sort of pass it up to the primary sources of facts that they collect in their articles. If those sources of facts of academia, research, science are also under attack, then we're in trouble. Then the whole edifice risks crumbling down.

And so, what I think fact checkers will be able to do or have to do is sort of take the next big leap forward in terms of transparency of sourcing. Ten years ago we were the first ones who would be linking, hyperlinking to every single source. That was new. Now, that is no longer new. Fake news sites link to their fake news sources. So, we need to think. And we're working on ways in which you can annotate primary sources, provide additional information, context, caveats, what their biases may be, what you do and don't know about them that can sort of obviate this issue.

And finally, and the great Craig will talk about this in greater detail, I think that fact checkers are under- and ill-equipped to counter misinformation at the scale and in the formats that it presents itself right now.

And I won't touch on it, we'll talk about it later, but I think obviously partners of the network have been working with Facebook. That has had mixed results. There are also all kinds of solutions like trying to target stuff that does well or that has high engagement through mosumo[?]. I think part of it is what Laura was mentioning before is to stop thinking of a fact checking site as a place where you come to find out the truth or the verdict for a single specific thing, but where you come to learn how to do it yourself. And that was hard learn at the inaugural International Fact-Checking Day. We had a high school lesson plan for high school teachers to teach fact checking, and that reached more than 100,000 students around the world.

So, if you take nothing else from this short chat, it is that you should think that facts matter, that we should not waste our time with trendy, philosophical, para-philosophical future of news buzzwords, but that we should get in the trenches. Get our hands dirty. How do we make fact checking matter? How do we make fact checking better?

Because across the world, even basic facts of what share of the population is immigrants, or of a different religion, or in the UK before the Brexit Referendum, do you know that you direct elect European parliamentarians? People don't know basic facts about our society and our democracy. That is a problem. We need fact checking more than ever. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Craig Silverman: Hi, everyone. I'm Craig Silverman. I'm the media editor at BuzzFeed News, also known as a delicious piece of bread apparently. [laughter] And you are a delicious ham, Alexios, so thank you for that. So, we've spent the last year or so really building up our focus and attention and training internally to start tracking and countering online misinformation at BuzzFeed. This is an area that I've been working in for several years doing research and reporting. And so, I want to share with you some of the things that we've learned, some of the things that we see. And because I work at BuzzFeed, I made a list. [laughter] And there's also one gif in this presentation as well. I would also like to say that.

So, one of the first things to realize about this is, it is a very complex problem. There's a lot of different forms of misinformation we see. And there's also a lot of different motivations as to why people are creating them and why people are sharing them.

And this is a really informative slide from First Draft, which outlines seven different types of misinformation and disinformation. And you can see that it ranges all the way from satirical things meant to be funny or social commentary that maybe gets misinterpreted all the way up to people consciously creating and spreading false things. And at that end of it, that's sort of—you know, everybody here is about fake news—that's sort of where I reserve the term fake news, for things that are 100% false, created knowing they were false, and also for an economic motive. Because I think if it's false and its ideologically driven or politically driven, it's propaganda.

And this, the thing for me about this slide is, it just reinforces how complex it is. And for the average person to navigate a world where this kind of stuff is coming at them, it's really difficult. And I think it's also difficult for newsrooms. And we need to build these skills among everyone to try and counter this.

So when I talk about motivations, what do I mean? What are some of the different things? Well, here's an example of somebody who's, you know, an average citizen on Facebook. This is from Hurricane Sandy. They saw this amazing image and they wanted to share it with people. They say, "Nature is so beautiful, so powerful," and they share it. And this has been shared hundreds of thousands of times. And the arrow is pointing to the moment where he realized, "Oh, wait a second, this is actually not a real image," and felt really bad about it. But this shows he had a genuine motivation. He wanted to share something with people. Turned out to be false. He felt bad about it, but it's already out there.

This is kind of the opposite. These are two people who helped to spread the Pizza Gate conspiracy. And they dug into those WikiLeaks emails from John Podesta and decided that references to food were actually references to child sex trafficking. And they helped spurn this up. And they knew what they were doing. They were trying to create this, and they were trying to turn this into something. And so that's a malicious motivation versus a person who had a more genuine motivation. And it's all mixed up, and it's all out there, and it's all spreading.

The other thing that we're seeing…. And we've made an effort for all of our bureaus, all of our correspondents, to make countering and tracking misinformation a part of their beat and what they do. And we've just seen over and over again that the dynamics we saw really come to a head in 2016 in the United States are really in place in a lot of places around the world.

So, a few examples of stories. One that I did with our Europe editor, Alberto Nardelli, we looked at top performing content on Facebook about Angela Merkel in English and in German. And we found in both cases it was very far right, often completely false stories, that were getting the most traction. And we saw that there was actually a very strong network in Germany of far-right Facebook pages that were spreading this stuff and getting it propagating. And they were far ahead of people on the other side in terms of getting their stuff to spread.

We saw in Japan a guy, who actually read the story that we did about teenagers in Macedonia, writing often false pro-Trump news [and] decided, "Hey, let me try that in Japan and see how that works." So, sometimes you're trying to knock it down and it actually inspires people, which is, you know, a frustrating thing. So, he tried actually playing on the divisions between Japan and South Korea, some of the perceptions between those two countries. He counts himself that it performed well. He didn't earn a lot of money, and then ended up feeling kind of bad about the whole thing when we tracked him down and talked to him.

Another example is a very popular political party in Italy that had two sites that present themselves as news sites, but often had very false information. They were connected to the political party as well.

And it's really all around the world. This was a great story by a correspondent of ours about Myanmar and how the Muslim population is being targeted there with misinformation. A lot of rumors and false claims that are really meant to create divisions, religious divisions in the country, and exasperate them.

And this is something we see again and again and again. And it leads to the next point, which is that misinformation feeds off of polarization in society, whether it's political or religious [or] other areas. And it also feeds off of, of course, our biases. We love to read information that aligns with what we already think. We love to be told that we're right in our views. And we consume that information more intensely when we're given it.

And here's an example of this. These are two nice, young Canadian teenagers that I wrote about last August. They realized, one, as the quote shows, that you can make stuff up online and it will do pretty well. They had a nice little business going with three fake news websites when I found them. And they realized that they had a special combination that worked for Canada, but also globally. So one part was our very handsome Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the second part was weed. And so they basically created hoaxes every day about Justin Trudeau and weed. So, "Justin Trudeau smokes weed." "Justin Trudeau caught selling weed." "Justin Trudeau opening weed dispensaries all across Canada." And they kept doing this and turning these things out. And then they started doing some Trump stuff as well, because that worked. And they just went with what worked. And they played off of people's beliefs, and they really exasperated, and put this stuff out there, and got it to spread a lot. Their best month was about 12-grand Canadian. They showed me the AdSense receipts.

Kind of more seriously though, we have a lot of data, particularly in the United States, that shows people are becoming more polarized. That space in the middle where people might switch and vote for candidates from the other parties seems to be kind of collapsing. That space for shared debate in some ways seems to be collapsing. And so, this is a real effect that people are absolutely exploiting.

And a big thing that we saw in 2016 that we tracked a lot of was, literally, in some cases, I think, hundreds of sites being launched that were of this hyper-partisan mode, on the left and the right, really about demonizing the other side [and] really about creating headlines that will get people to click and engage with [them] on Facebook. And this is a graphic from Jonathan Albright at Elon University, where he kind of mapped out these ecosystems. And the ones in red are right leaning, the ones on the left are liberal leaning, and you can see in the middle is the mainstream media, where they often take the reporting from mainstream media and then use that as the basis to create their partisan narratives around it.

And this is where the polarization meets kind of our media-of-the-moment with algorithmic filtering and other types of networks that are out there. They are being manipulated and they are being gamed in order to create stuff that gets a lot of engagement.

And we did a study, because we wanted to see, OK, in this hyper-partisan world, what's really performing well? And the takeaway from this chart here is pretty simple. We fact checked about a thousand posts from three hyper-partisan right-wing sites and three hyper-partisan left-wing sites. And that red part there shows that content that we checked and rated 'mostly false,' actually had among the highest median shares. So the more misleading and false your content was on these partisan sites, the more shares you would get on Facebook, which is kind of the king of the metrics there.

And so, we see that direct relationship. And people are exploiting these algorithms to make this stuff move. I think this quote sums it up pretty well: "Whoever has the most people, and activates the most effectively, determines what truth is." That's kind of a frightening statement, but these are really tight networks for propagating information, which sometimes can be true and sometimes can be false. And they're able to push it out there to their audience, and an audience that is increasingly polarized.

The other thing that we have found out is that this is absolutely, in 2016, misinformation about American politics became an international business. That's the thing that…. That was my big takeaway from the election. And here's an example. Here's a Facebook page supposedly about Trump. A very grammatically incorrect quote from Clint Eastwood here talking about liberals. From a website called True Trumpers. And this is run by a guy in the Republic of Georgia. And when you actually click through this and go to the site, where's the article? Can you find it? Here it is. So, that's the article. It's the headline. And the rest is ads. You scroll down the page, there's more ads. This exists to get people on Facebook that image and that headline. And once they're there, it's monetizing them. That's the business. And it's growing. And it is global. And we see people around the world launching these kinds of sites.

We also did a study looking at sites that publish 100% false information, so not hyper-partisan, but, you know, 100% hoaxes. And we found that some major ad networks are helping monetize these sites. So, we have an ecosystem here that is enabling misinformation from a financial perspective.

So, the last thing to note is that, you know, you go to the effort, you debunk something, you put it out there. This is a story done by a colleague of mine about a Facebook page pretending to belong to Tiffany Trump. [It] had this image of Donald Trump and Jesus in a really warm embrace for Christmas—or, sorry—for Easter. People were sharing it like, "Whoa, Tiffany Trump, that's an intense image," you know? So, we debunked it. It's like, "There's no evidence this is actually her page." And so, I shared it. And this was the response from one Trump supporter, "So?

Wonder who'd be hugging you? Oh, right. Satan." I had to say it like Church Lady from Saturday Night Life, if you remember that. [laughter]

So, yes, you debunk it, you do the work, and some people aren't receptive to it. But as Alexios pointed out, you know, it's not a losing game. Maybe I couldn't reach her, but other people may have been able to. And so, there is an opportunity to fight back against this stuff. And as much as my presentation is probably depressing, the things that I've outlined, I appreciate that. I realize it. The fact is that having looked at this area for several years now, more progress, especially in North America and probably Western Europe, has been made in the last three to four months than in the past three to four years.

Suddenly, people are engaged. The platforms realize they have a responsibility in this. Governments are waking up to it. Journalists and newsrooms are waking up to it. So, it's starting. The battle is starting. But I think that's the most important thing is to realize that we're at the early stage of really combatting this stuff. We need to work together.

I think Laura's presentation was amazing in talking about openness and in looking at the future and how we combat this. And we do need to have a cooperative effort. It is an area where I think news organizations can set aside some of the competitiveness and actually work together, as we're seeing being done in France. And I think that's that opportunity to actually combat this stuff. So, thank you.

[Applause.]

Q&A Session:

Alexios Mantzarlis: I've never seen this before in my life. I don't know what you're talking about.

W. Gardner Selby: There are a couple of things that…. Your talk actually got me remembering another one, so I'm going to gobble up this question, and then I want anyone to jump in after Craig. You get the first shot at it. But during the election season…. You two especially made me think, it's really not the Trump election. It really wasn't the fake news election. It was the Facebook election. But let's set that aside for a minute. As a voter, as a journalist, watching the news coverage out of Washington, mainly, and on the campaign trail, no one could be unaware that at some point in the year a series of news stories busted that were along the lines of this organization that we don't know much about has just released a bunch of emails that purport to be from the campaign chairman, campaign manager for Hillary Clinton, and we don't know if these emails are real or not, except the Clinton campaign says they're not, but we're going to go ahead and print them. That was a major news story. Every major news organization went ahead and wrote whole day-after-day stories about emails that were, in a word, unverifiable.

Now, number two, this story, the key word in this story is not about deep ties to Russia. It's not about a Russian hotel room. It's not about the decision by BuzzFeed

in January this year to share the dossier that somebody had pulled together about Donald Trump. And it wasn't about Axios either. [laughter] But the key word on that BuzzFeed post about January 17th of this year, that I noticed in taking another look at it this week, [was] unverifiable. We could not verify. Unverifiable.

As somebody who was in the thick of that, to some degree, your organization, could you talk about the decision to go ahead and run with something that's unverifiable and present it so that everybody gets to read about that Russian hotel room? Or if you want to, stretch to the other issues, the unverifiability of all of those emails that no one in this room probably thinks those emails weren't so, but you just don't know, because you can't check it out.

Craig Silverman: Yeah. So, as a framing thing, I didn't know we had the dossier and I wasn't involved in the decision to publish it. I don't say that to dodge it, because I certainly have stuff to say about it. But I don't know the inside—the inside decision making, except that our Editor-in-Chief, Ben Smith, I think, has actually been very good about going out publicly and explaining that, which I think you have to do if you make a decision that is certainly one that's going to create a lot of debate. So, I think a couple….

The way I think about it, first of all, is when I look at it…. And I literally got off a plane, looked at Twitter, and was like, "Hey, what's going on?" when it had been published. And so when I looked at it, my sense of how Ben kind of made the decision is that once that CNN report…. So, apparently, we had the dossier for at least weeks before that, and we had sent reporters around the world trying to figure it out. [We] had some stuff that [we] had more confidence in than others, I guess, but I don't know the specifics. And it seems to me that when that CNN report came out and said, "This dossier has been walked in and the president and president elect have been briefed on it." And at that point, I think it was also known that John McCain had walked it into the FBI director. At that point, I think Ben Smith's view was, "Well, so the public now knows there's this explosive dossier about the man who's just been elected president. The intelligence agencies have briefed the two highest ranking people in the country. And now we know that that's happened," his view was, "we can't keep this document from the public now." His view was simply that there's two tensions there. Well, this is my read on it. There's two tensions.

One is, absolutely, it's newsworthy. Absolutely involves important public figures. Absolutely involves national interest. So, those are all checkmarks of like, yeah, you publish this, because it's hugely, hugely important. The other side is, it's unverifiable. We don't know what's true and what isn't about it. And typically, in journalism, I mean, obviously, you try to stand it up as much as you can, but we do often publish things that are unverified. And we try to flag them to the audience.

I did a research project looking at this, about how news organizations cover rumors. And I found in a lot of cases, frankly, they report them as if they're true. They don't tell readers they're unverified. And I think for Ben it was like this column

outweighed that column, because the urgency importance and the fact that it was already disclosed….

Gardner Selby: Excuse me. But I think all that's public. We know that.

Craig Silverman: Right.

Gardner Selby: You said you had your own thoughts on it. Tell us your thoughts.

Craig Silverman: Well, that's my thought is that it's the tension of the two things. It's that, you know…. And so, looking at it, one, the fact that the discussion that came out of it was about the ethics of publishing something that's unverified, of all the hundreds of rumors that we analyzed back in 2014 in that research project, there was no discussion about any of those, because, I think, frankly, people were misled in a lot of the cases. And so, I was happy to see that there was, as a result of it, a legitimate debate about, do we publish unverified information or not? And I didn't see that a lot beforehand. I think there were absolutely legitimate criticisms saying we shouldn't have published it. There was a surprising amount of support, I found, actually, over time, having published it. But to me, it came down to these two core tensions of journalism: newsworthiness versus unverifiability. And Ben felt that one was heavier. And I can certainly see that.

For me, it was really interesting to see the reaction, where I saw some people actually arguing, "Well, journalists never publish unverified information. This is outrageous." And I was like, "Dude, like, we did a whole research project. We do it all the time, and we don't actually tell people that." So, that piece of actually labeling it, I think, was really good. That doesn't mean it was necessarily done perfectly. And there's legit criticism of it. But I was actually happen to see for once a debate about, "Oh, this is unverified information. So, what do we think about that?"

Gardner Selby: OK. Is there something, Alexios? Do you think fact checking can't get to certain things? I mean, these two examples, the emails and the….

Alexios Mantzarlis: Yeah. I mean, I think, uh, moving swiftly on from BuzzFeed, like, I think the unverifiability is an enormous challenge for fact checkers. You know, some of the biggest issues of the campaign or some of the most far spread were stuff like, "Hillary Clinton has a body double," or that kind of stuff. Proving or disproving is really hard. What do you do? Like, do you go and find like every middle-aged blond woman in America and ask her, "Where were you yesterday during this time?" You can't. So, unlike the atrocious unemployment is 28-40-50-100% stuff, which you can point to stuff, you can't point to stuff with unverifiable stuff. So, that, I think, is a challenge. I may, like, volcanize Laura's response and say that once again they come from the future. Chequeado and others in Latin America have used the rating…[Spanish]

Laura Zommer: [Spanish]

Alexios Mantzarlis: Or…[Spanish]…in their case. And I think to show that we don't know stuff is just as important as that we do know stuff. And I've seen it across the media. You know, NPR's breaking news box says, "We're going to get stuff wrong." And maybe Laura wants to talk about why they chose…[Spanish]

Gardner Selby: I did notice and tweeted last week a fabulous fact check by Chequeado. OK, this is not earthshaking. D.C. doesn't care about this. But you went back. One of your reporters went back and very carefully determined that the science on whether chocolate causes acne is inconclusive. It's inconclusive—that myth that we all talk about maybe around Eastertime. Fabulous article, by the way. But it turned out that the original story that suggested the link was, as you pointed out in your fact check, sponsored by a chocolate company. Right? Quite a story.

Laura Zommer: [laughs] Yeah.

Gardner Selby: All right. Well, let me give you a chance to jump in on the bigger issue. Yeah.

Laura Zommer: About the qualification on…[Spanish], in our case, it was the only way for something during eight years, all the statements about security were… [Spanish], because we don't have statistics about that. Then when the Ministry of Justice said that crime was increasing or going down, it was just that. We published the article just to make people to be aware that they can believe it or not, but it was just not a fact or not a comfortable fact.

Craig Silverman: With the research study, we found a lot. We rated things either true or false or unverified. And a lot of them ended up after months of research still be unverified. We didn't know where they ended up.

Alexios Mantzarlis: As fact checkers, we may carry a responsibility for this conception that—this misconception that there is a scale and everything will fit on that scale.

Gardner Selby: I believe in that.

Laura Zommer: Obviously, obviously, people ask us all the time to decide and say it is true or it is false. Why don't you say that? Because I can't do it and I don't want to lie to you. It's just that reality is more complex than we want to [think].

Gardner Selby: It's a great acknowledgement. And I have to announce here in full disclosure that the Truth-o-meter that you all hear about sometimes, it's not an actual machine. [laughter] In the case of PolitiFact, very carefully designed from the very beginning. It's three editors who have not been involved with the research and writing of the article, who discuss what the rating of the fact check should be. The reporter doesn't get to decide the rating. It's the three other editors. Do you have that Gohmert clip? Let's try that. Let's see if this works. This is my excerpt from C-SPAN, so it's probably fantastic.

[Wrong video plays briefly.]

Gardner Selby: All those who want to watch the attorney general…. Oh. All right. Here we go. Talk Louie. Representative Louie Gohmert represents….

[Video plays.]

Louie Gohmert: No, I actually have had personal experience with PolitiFact. And I used the word earlier today, hacked, political hack, in an interview, and that's what I think of PolitiFact. They shouldn't be called PolitiFact. They ought to be called Politic-Hack.

[End of video.]

Gardner Selby: Ought to be called Politi-Hack. The gentleman is entitled to his opinion. By the way, he was speaking about a fact check that ended up half true. He didn't like that rating. Now, an earlier presenter talked about the importance of his project earlier. Someone catering to and making sure that Nancy Pelosi knew that she was being covered. Whoever wants to jump in. Maybe start at this end this time. Especially in Argentina, to what degree to fact checkers have to think about winning the respect, admiration, support—you fill in the blank—from the office holders, the public figures, who are they fact checking?

Laura Zommer: We all the time are trying to choose during a week a balance of what we fact check. And it's not that we don't publish the statement if they are, I don't know, to ministry and a president that are both in the same week. We publish it, but sometimes in the middle we find other statements to check and to balance. What would we say, that in a polarized context we're not just to be non-partisan, but also to seem to be non-partisan. Because if not, people don't believe us. And the only way to be or to have thing that we want to have is to be reliable for the both sides of this war or this—I don't know—fighting. When we start to do our job, everyone in Argentina told us that it wasn't possible to check or to fact-check media, because the media were going to not—we are not-for-profit organizations. And they told us that no one [was] going to pay attention if we're going to check them. But in the context we work, it was the only way to be legitimate. And we all the time are trying not just to check the statement that government are saying, but also the position. As Craig said, people just like falsies[?] from the president or once most important journalist in Argentina. That's obviously we want to have clicks. We know how to do it. But that's not our business.

Gardner Selby: You have observations that you've noticed in your own realms?

Craig Silverman: You know, for me, I think less about kind of the political leadership. I think our big challenge is, BuzzFeed has a very big audience, but, you know, we don't encompass everyone, and so certainly when we debunk certain things, they do really well, and we think about absolutely presenting it in ways our audience will want to consume it, in ways that they find engaging, so very visual and other things. But I also increasingly think a lot more about, well, how do we

reach the people who don't read BuzzFeed? How do we reach the people for whom this misinformation maybe affects more than our audience? Maybe our audience is less likely to believe it than other folks. And so, really, thinking about that is one of the big projects we have going on right now. Does our brand actually hamper us from reaching certain people? Like, I think there are cases where that's the case.

And then the other thing that we're really engaged in right now…. Next week, we have a video producer starting on my team in Toronto, because we realize a lot of times it doesn't make sense to write an article to debunk something that is spreading virally on Facebook. The best thing you could probably do is like a 30-second video. And so, we're just going to do that. And like, I think part of it is like giving up your ego and stop trying to write something that other journalists will love. Like, what is actually going to reach people? And that often takes a very different form.

Gardner Selby: That seems so smart to me, and seems like that maybe the best way, Alexios, to attack fake news. All this fake news that bursts on Facebook and other social media, it's almost impossible to catch up to.

Alexios Mantzarlis: Yeah. Maybe I'll touch on that. I did have one thing to add to who's on our wall as fact checkers. I think more than the politicians themselves, it's their press officer or communications officer. Like, they need to be tracking fact-checking sites and not want to end it. Like, it needs to incur a cost, right? And the people who know whether this incurs a communication cost is their communications people. What I think happened…. And so, positions will always shout back, get angry, at their hacks. You know, at Chequeado, someone printed the article and tore it apart in front of press release people. You know, you guys get attacked all the time.

But I think what may have happened in 2016 in America, which wasn't great, is that to the attacks, some fact checkers reacted with an equally confrontational approach and so got sort of dragged down into a pit, out of which you don't come out, right? And so to say, "All the fake stuff that Trump said in the past minute-and-a-half [is] outrageous!" That's not what fact checkers should be doing. I don't think that's the kind of like emotionally charged attack lines that we should be having.

In terms of fake news, I hate to deflect, but I think, you know, there was a responsibility with that like clearly on how the news feed algorithm works. Facebook rightly and also smartly, because they were in the middle of a PR disaster, acted in December. We will see when and if they publish data, whether that is working or not, but they have their responsibility on their product. We all have…. I also don't want this to be, though, an absolution for journalists, right? Because a lot of these things, it's like, "Oh, Facebook," and then at the bottom of your article, there's shared these bomb-com stories that are totally fake and all kinds of other stuff that goes through. Sorry, that was….

Gardner Selby: And I think you might be hinting, too, at the decision by Facebook to sort of open itself to nudging fact-checking sites, including PolitiFact and others, about possibly fake [news]. And so when you see a fake news fact check on PolitiFact and some of these other sites, you're going to see a paragraph saying, "We were nudged by Facebook, because it seemed like fake news."

Let's play that audio clip now. And I have a question for you all about transparency. And then if anybody, please, jump up to this microphone over here on the north side of the room, because we're ready for questions—smarter questions than you're hearing right now over at this microphone. This one's kind of….

[Audio clip plays.]

Kelly Shannon: …associated you with the idea of secession or…

[Audio clip stops.]

Gardner Selby: I'm sorry. I should have given you some context here. The question I'm going to ask is, is there a risk or how much a risk is there of giving readers, viewers, voters, citizens too much information, too much transparency, too much of the grit that goes into basic reporting? I'm going to start this sound clip again. This is, to me, a wonderful find of ours years ago at PolitiFact Texas. You may remember that we had a governor named Rick Perry, who's the Energy Secretary now. And in April of, I believe, 2009, there was one of the very first Tea Party rallies occurred outside the Texas capitol. Afterward, the governor was part of that cheerleading. If you ever find that video, you should enjoy that. But afterward, he talked to what they called a gaggle of reporters. Everybody knows a gaggle of reporters. One of those reporters was Kelly Shannon from the Associated Press Capitol Bureau here in Austin. In the back and forth, there had been some signs in the crowd that Kelly noticed talking about Texas possibly leaving the United States, seceding from the country. She asked Governor Perry a question. He gave his answer. A couple of years later, he's running for reelection. The very next year, he's running for reelection. And then from then on, it came up occasionally, whether or not Governor Rick Perry of Texas believes Texas can secede without any kind of going to war with the United States and/or wants to secede—wants Texas to secede. So, I'm going to share [it] with you. We chased down the original sound recording from Kelly Shannon on her tape recorder of the question and the answer. You're going to hear it now.

[Audio clip plays.]

Kelly Shannon: ...associated you with the idea of secession or sovereignty for your state.

Governor Rick Perry: Oh, I think there's a…. I think there's a—there's a lot of, uh, uh, different scenarios. Texas is a unique place. When we came in the Union in 1945, one of the, uh, issues was that we would be able to --

Gardner Selby: Press pants on fire.

Governor Perry: -- leave, so we decided to do that. You know, my hope is that America and Washington, in particular, pays attention. We've got a great Union. There is absolutely no reason to dissolve it. But if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people, you know, who knows what may came of—may come out of that. So, but, uh, Texas is a very unique place. And we're a pretty independent lot.

[Audio clip ends.]

Gardner Selby: So, there you have it. See, Texas can secede, right? Wrong. But anyway, let me ask you all, as far as, that's an example of some content. I don't know whether we've had 12 clicks on that or maybe, gosh, in Texas, we're 2,000. But especially in Chequeado, you made a point earlier about talking about your transparency. Is there such a thing as providing too much? And how do you make that judgment day to day and give the readers only what they need, really?

Laura Zommer: We, as I told you before, we are not BuzzFeed. We, at least at this moment, perhaps because of our ego, we don't just decide or take the decision of make gifs and small comments for the statement. We try to put on all the information that we can find just to the people that want to consume it. And obviously, we don't stop that. And [we] just [do] the article and try with gifs or videos and other strategies to go far out of the bubble to the people that don't care or don't read about politics or public policy. But I think the challenge is, for me at least, transparency perhaps is bad in the short period, or in the long one, it's the only way.

If you are fighting, like Alexios told you, with the government and you are a media and you are just fighting with the government, the only way to be credible and reliable for people is explaining why you are different. And the only way to do that is to be transparent. Transparent about your problems. Transparent about your challenge. Transparent also about who you are, about [where] your money come from and all that. All the things that we ask the politician and the leaders, we have to do it before. If we are not doing it, then we have a problem.

Gardner Selby: And as you discussed earlier, transparent about what you don't know, what you can't figure out. Craig.

Craig Silverman: So, we do—we do a fair amount of data-driven reporting around misinformation, and so, increasingly, at the bottom of these stories, we have an entire section that outlines our methodology. And in some cases…. And so, for example, on a really small scale, at the end of last year, I tried to figure out, like, what were the 50 biggest completely fake news hits of the year? And so, in order to get there, over like four years, I've been building up a list of sites that publish completely fake stuff. And that's, I mean, it's a little bit proprietary, in a sense. Like, it's from my work in BuzzFeed. I've had it. But the only way I could publish that list was to explain my methodology. My methodology was, like, part of it was

keyword searches, explaining that, and then part of it was using my list and examining best top performing content from there. So, the only way to publish the article was to also give my list to the world. And so, we increasingly, we have these situations where we do a huge amount of data gathering and analysis. And then it's like, oh, we've got all this great info, but now we have to give it away to everybody, or else you can't trust what we put out. So, I think it's essential. And the truth is, I don't think a lot of people go and read the methodology section.

Laura Zommer: No one.

Craig Silverman: And that's fine, but it has to be there; otherwise, you can't support your work. And we do hear a lot from academics and others who really appreciate it. I think that's the audience who really likes that stuff. But the other part is almost—just letting people know it's there is almost the important thing in itself. Right?

Laura Zommer: Knowledge is a blessing.

Gardner Selby: Alexios?

Alexios Mantzarlis: Yeah, I think, I would agree. I think that not only a few people end up going, but in fact, oftentimes, you almost regret doing it, because the people that do go are going on purpose to sort of find something, whatever it is, that is a smoking gun to prove your bias. So like if you share all your data, whatever, something that—and then they'll screenshot and say, "Look!" And so, there's that sort of reticence, but I think—I think it's fundamental, and I think it's what we're investing our time and energy to as well. Like, we want to build better sourcing mechanisms. I mentioned it before.

Like, if it is a plug-in, a library, whatever, that actually tells you, not just, "Hey, I, as a fact checker, link to the Bureau of Labor Statistics," but 50% of the time, I link to government sources. And these sources, you know, 20% is from libertarian think tanks, or whatever, that actually give additional information. That when you link to U.N. data, there is immediately a caveat that says, "Hey, like, this data is collected by National Statistical Office." And so, specific indicators. If it's, say, abortion, a rape, where there are very different laws around the world, you need to be aware of this and this and this. So, I think that's the next step for transparency.

Laura Zommer: Just to avoid the bias that we've got with our own associates, we make a tool inside the newsroom just to track that. And then in each article, we track the sources. And each month, we review if we used it plurally or not. And if not, all the writers are warned not to call every time the same university or the same think tank.

Gardner Selby: That's fabulous.

Laura Zommer: Not only have to be, but all the people must believe us.

Gardner Selby: Yeah, the habit can get you into all kinds of trouble.

Laura Zommer: This is an open source tool.

Gardner Selby: Yeah, I'm coming down. I have one quick question more, and then I'm hoping that y'all have a question or two. You can just walk down and step to the microphone. The video, "Loving Truth," I mean, brilliant, to me. Just as a citizen, I just loved it. It wasn't staged, right? It was real. Those are real people. There wasn't….

Laura Zommer: They are real people.

Gardner Selby: I just want to make sure, yeah.

Laura Zommer: All the people ask us if that couple, that the man put the "I don't care about it," and she goes after and put, "I love the truth." It is also [true]. It's true. It's real. We didn't…. We just put the boxes [out], and we put a camera [out]. And there were not many people. There were just two persons in each. There were three different places in the city. And we're going to try to do this for perhaps an annual event or an international….

Gardner Selby: Did the same thing for the local newspaper. Did the same thing for the local newspaper. "I love the Austin newspaper," or "I don't love the Austin newspaper." I don't want to see those balls necessarily. But it gives me entrée to the question I was thinking about. We all love truth. It's good human nature. If you're in a good mood, you're going to love truth. Now, but is there work to do on liking, respecting, loving the self-designated truth teller? We're self-designated truth tellers, fact checkers. All three of you can speak to this. Or, does that even matter? Does it matter whether we're respected, liked, loved?

Laura Zommer: I believe, and I agree with Craig that there are people that don't want to listen to the truth. And they are not going to believe. And they don't care about what we write. But I believe—perhaps I'm naïve or too much optimistic—that they are not the majority of the people. I think that's just a part of the people.

Gardner Selby: Yeah.

Laura Zommer: And we should be more intelligent to present our facts and our evidence in a different way, with emotion, with that that people want to be attraction.

Gardner Selby: So if we get better at it, people absorb—more people absorb it. Is that the essence?

Laura Zommer: Yeah, yeah.

Gardner Selby: Craig, does that make sense?

Craig Silverman: Yeah. I mean, I totally agree. I think sometimes we're a little too self-satisfied. And sometimes that comes out in the way we present the information. We seem like the kind of know-it-all that nobody really wants to talk to at a party. And so, I do think we have to think about how we're presenting the information [and] the tone that we present it with. Do we present ourselves as seeming not only to listening to people, but to taking criticism and responding in ways…. Like, I think too much we fall into the mode of being a one-way operation of, like, "Yeah, we've got the truth here. Take it. Now, we'll move onto the next thing." And that probably hurts us. So, I do think it's something we still haven't figured out the best method to doing this stuff. We really haven't. And we need more research. There's researchers here, you know, figuring out what works and what doesn't work. There's so much we don't know that we can't sit and say, like, "Yeah, this is the way I'm going to do my work," because we just don't have anything to back it up yet.

Laura Zommer: Yeah.

Alexios Mantzarlis: I don't think…. It's nice if people love fact checkers. I don't think they need to love fact checkers. They need to love fact checking. Like, that's… It's the method. It's not the people. If we get that out, then great.

Gardner Selby: All right. Well, thank you. And I do see we have a question.

Jeff Jarvis: Hey, there. Jeff Jarvis. So Craig, I'm delighted you're hiring the video person to bring journalism to the conversation where it hurts. That's critical. You all do God's work. It's really important. But to be honest, sometimes fact checking is boring or hard to read. What experiments are you seeing? What efforts do you think would work to make it more consumable? More readable? More interesting? More spreadable? Pick what you want. Or, is that impossible? Just people who care about facts will do that. It will fit into the larger picture.

Gardner Selby: Y'all think of the serious answer on this. I'm doing stickers. That's stickers. This is exciting, isn't it? [laughter] Anyway, go ahead and jump in on that.

Laura Zommer: We are doing, for example, that gif that I showed. I don't know if you were here. And the gif, we know that there are many people that just read that, and it's okay. They're accurate. They're a really brief of the article. Obviously, it's more work, because it's not that you just finished writing your article and you go home. You have to work with a team just to make a character, an image, that [is] exactly what words [are] used to that small text and all that. But that's our work. We have to do it. There's no other chance.

Gardner Selby: I see some more questions. You guys want to jump in?

Craig Silverman: Well, so just quickly on the point, yeah. So, we believe video on Facebook is maybe the best way to counter stuff. We are going to brainstorm next week of different formats we're going to try in video. We've created some templates that we're going to test. We're going to come up with our data science

team of actually measurement protocols to figure out, you know, what is working, what isn't working. We've been doing a weekly fake news quiz for, gosh, almost a year now. It consistently does really well on our site. People like quizzes on BuzzFeed, so we give them a fake news quiz, and it seems to be working for our audience. The big think I always think about is, like, how do we get outside of our audience? But so, yeah, we try to think very visually, making it more enjoyable, not lecturing. And we're going to see what we find out about the video stuff. And yes, we will share what we learn.

Laura Zommer: An example of France, Alexios?

Alexios Mantzarlis: Yeah, formats is one of the things that we try to talk about all the time at our conference. Recently, you may have seen a piece of Poynter about this. France Info is actually doing a Facebook Live of going in the streets and telling people, "Have you seen this fake news? Did you know it was fake news?" And it's a completely new approach. I think there are several of these attempts. And they work. NPR's live annotation of the debate with the fact checks was their most popular web product ever! Snapchat—the Washington Post on Snapchat's fact check was the most popular snap they did to date. So, but I would also say that actually fact checks themselves are doing really well. PolitiFact did 110-million page views last year. The Washington Post fact checks are continuously at the top. So, I think there is enormous demand for this type of content. We need to be aware of the formats in which it comes out.

Gardner Selby: We're going to squeeze in one brief question, and then we're out of time.

Man: Yeah, I'm from El Salvador. I'm from a media group, traditional media group. And something that keeps bugging me, and I want to say about this conversation, is that traditional media have to be organic about fact checking. I mean, in the clip that Alexios put up there, that there is not post fact checking a world for traditional media. I mean, it's always been part of our organic responsibility to fact check, to make sure that everything is—information that goes up there is fact checked, you know. And what we are faced with is with a myriad with a thousand-million news sources, and some are legitimate. And what we are caught in between is, when we put it up there, when it's legitimate but not verified. And I'd like the clip that Craig referred to in the BuzzFeed page, where, you know, this is not verified—the Trump collection with Russia. But how do we, traditional media, evolve to have your efforts, which are very important, very legitimate, into organic [news]?

Craig Silverman: Yeah. I'll just say one thing really quickly. So, we have a small team in Toronto that does this as their daily job. But we're not the only ones. So, I train people throughout our organization on basic skills of verification, showing them the formats that we find are working, and approaches. So, I think one level is you need to up the sort of verification, digital verification IQ of everyone in the newsroom, and let them know that this is part of their job and part of their responsibility. And it's also an opportunity to demonstrate the skill and the

knowledge and the value of your newsroom. So, I think a training piece and educating throughout a newsroom that this is something we want to do. Then, yeah, they can start to happen organically, but it's got to come from leadership, and you've got to equip them with skills.

Gardner Selby: Thank you. Thank you.

Rosental Alves: All right.

[Applause.]