

## ISOJ 2022: Day 2

### Keynote Session: The role of journalism when democracy is at risk

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Chair: [Borja Echevarría](#), managing editor, *El País* (Spain)

- Keynote speaker: [Jorge Ramos](#), news anchor, *Univision Noticias*
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**Borja Echevarría** Hello. Good afternoon and thanks, Rosental, again for inviting me to this amazing conference. Thanks, ISOJ. Thanks, Knight Foundation. I'm going to go very quickly with introductions. And we have as it was said before, Jorge Ramos, as our guest today. I'm going to define for him in just 16 words, and those are the words he uses in his tour description. Immigrant, journalist, anchor for real America, inmigrante, periodista, conductor del Noticiero Univision y Al Punto. So we have Jorge. Jorge, you can go.

**Jorge Ramos** Borja, muchas gracias. You know, we had a conversation, Borja and I, just the other day, and we were laughing because we have to communicate in English now and nobody is going to understand what we're saying. So anyway, Borja, muchisimas gracias. Thank you, everyone, for being here. And what we're planning to do for the next half an hour, for the next 45 minutes, is just to have a conversation on the role of journalism when democracy is at stake. And before we start the Q&A with Borja, I just had a couple of things that I wanted to say. I think that we as journalists have two main responsibilities. The main responsibility, the most important one, the one that that everyone should be able to fulfill, is to report reality as it is, not as we wish it would be. And in that case, I think our reporter from Japan, from Korea, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua should be able to cover an accident, or a hurricane, or an election more or less in the same way. Just if something is read, we say "17 people died," we say "17." And the basics of our credibility depends on that we are right. It depends on reporting the facts. In other words, going back to the same sentence, reporting reality as it is not as we wish it would be. But the most important social responsibility that we have, I believe, is to question and to challenge those who are in power. Architects and engineers, they build beautiful structures. Doctor saves lives. And our responsibility is to challenge and to question those who are in power. And in a normal situation, in a democracy, we might not have to take a stand. But sometimes when democracy is challenged, when it comes to dictatorships, when it comes to the violation of human rights, we have to take a stand. And that's a big difference. There's a beautiful world in Spanish, and los traductores le van a encantar esto porque no he encontrado la traducción. But the word in Spanish that defines what I think journalists should do is "contrapoder." Contrapoder. "Contra" is against. And "poder" is power. And that means, and I'm not sure if there's a correct translation in English, but that means that if we want to do our job, we always have to be contrapoder. We always have to be on the other side of power, and if we are always on the other side of power, I think we will be okay. That's our place. That's our role. And that's what I just wanted to say before the conversation start. Borja, to you.

**Borja Echevarría** Thank you. Thank you. Gracias, Jorge. Okay, before starting, let me move just a couple of minutes to a different topic, because this conference historically has been a conference about the future of journalism, the present of journalism, about online journalism. And I want to know because TV is going now through the same turmoil that

newspapers went through a decade ago. Jorge, he always says about himself, that he is a dinosaur. Of course, we all know that's not true. But I want to know, what is he planning right now? What projects does he have in mind now? Univision has announced a new streaming platform. Can you tell us a little bit, Jorge, about what are you involved with right now?

**Jorge Ramos** I think that right now in television with all my colleagues, many of them are in denial. The same way, Borja, that your colleagues were in denial ten years ago, when everybody was saying that newspapers were somehow disappearing, that paper was disappearing, that everything was moving toward digital. Well, we're going exactly through the same process right now in TV. Still, most of the income that we get comes from television, but traditional media somehow is disappearing or becoming very, very small. And then everyone else is just getting their information, their news, somewhere else. When I go to schools and to universities, I tell them, look at me because I am a dinosaur, and I am a dinosaur. If you think about it, one of the things that I do, which is Noticiero Univision, Univision News, which I've been doing for the last 35 years, I'm asking the impossible from the people, because if you watch me one minute before airtime, I'm not there. And if you tried just to tune in 31 minutes later, I'm not there either. So who's getting their news at 6:30 p.m. nowadays? Very few people. So what I'm trying to do nowadays, Borja, is to reinvent myself. As an immigrant, I still have many, many jobs. I'm doing Noticiero Univision, the newscasts every day. I'm doing Al Punto, the political show that we have on Sundays. I write a weekly column for a few newspapers in the continent. And now I'm reinventing myself with a new streaming service that Univision has. It's called Vix. It's a streaming service that is free, that is going not only to the United States, but to all of Latin America. So, in other words, it's opening up many, many countries to what I do. And I'm starting a new show called Algo Personal, which is something that would have been impossible to think of on TV, which is one-hour interviews with people who have transformed our world, starting from Joan Manuel Serrat, the writers Isabel Allende or Mario Vargas Llosa, to groups like Maná, Alejandro Sanz, and many more. So the streaming service is giving me the possibility of staying alive and not being a dinosaur, as we have mentioned.

**Borja Echevarría** Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much, Jorge. And let's move to the point of this conversation. Because, I mean, you're talking about all the plans you have, but some weeks ago, you were reporting from Ukraine. You were reporting very close to Kyiv, and this is a very different story. As we have seen during the first month of invasion, and I want to make it clear, invasion of Ukraine, five journalists have been killed. And at the same time, news organizations have stopped informing from Russia. My own newspaper. Although we have a correspondent in Moscow, we are not informing anymore from the country. Jorge, this is not the first conflict you've been at of this kind. My question is, has your vision changed over the years of what is the role of a journalist and of a news organization in these kind of situations, conflicts? And what can we do when you risk 15 years of jail for doing your job in a country like Russia?

**Jorge Ramos** Yeah, I think our role basically remains the same. We have to find the truth, and we have to tell the truth. And in other words, we have to talk about a war. We have to talk about Putin's war. We have to say that it is an invasion, and not a special military operation. That's the most important thing. So people in Russia might not be getting all their information, although I doubt that with all the technology, people who really want to find out what is going on, I find it very difficult that that they might not be able to do that. Because nowadays, censorship doesn't work exactly the same way. But I think our role, Borja, is to report what we're seeing. But what I found in this war, this is my sixth war,

never in conflict, but this is a sixth war that I have covered, is that technology is changing absolutely everything. In other words, we are getting information from people with cell phones. A few decades ago, it would have been impossible to think of. I still remember the Gulf War when CNN was covering that. It was just two figures in front of a TV and with some lights behind that we thought were bombs. Nowadays, we have direct access to the scene simply by getting in touch with people with cell phones. So I think technology has transformed the way we cover a war. But our main mission remains the same, which is to tell it as it is. Just to say over and over again that it is a war. Today, by the way, a sixth journalist, unfortunately, has died in conflict in Ukraine. And not to repeat the lies that Putin is saying, that it is just a special military operation. Because I was there, we saw it. Everybody has seen it. It is an invasion. It is a war.

**Borja Echevarría** Yeah. As you said, technology has transformed how we produce news, and at the same time, it has transformed how news, but not only news, misinformation is spread. And how do we fight against these challenges? Technology has that really amazing side, but also it has that dark side mainly for the audience.

**Jorge Ramos** I don't know about you, Borja, but I already gave up on trying to change people's mind. I don't think that's the way it works, and I don't think that's our responsibility. As you know, I live here in Miami, and whenever there's hurricane season, there are two meteorologists that helped me decide if my family is going to stay home, or if we have to evacuate because of a hurricane. And I think that's exactly the same thing that's happening with everyone in social media. I cannot control what other people are saying. I started on TV way, way too far away, 35 years ago, when there were only a few channels and when people were depending on us to get their information. Not anymore. They can get their information immediately without us through their cell phones and through thousands and thousands of different print sources. But I think that credibility, and that's a word that is important as journalists, is more important than ever because with so many different sources, you are choosing, the same way I choose the meteorologist here telling me when the hurricane is coming and when I have to leave my home, we are choosing sources of information that we truly trust. And that's what I was saying at the beginning of the conversation. The first responsibility that we have is simply to report reality as it is. And I really think we have to tune in and to be very precise on the kind of message and how we communicate that message. But I'm not thinking anymore of trying to change people's minds. That's impossible. Just one number, 53% of Republicans still believe today, 2022, that Joe Biden is not the president and that Donald Trump is president of the United States. So I cannot do anything against that.

**Borja Echevarría** We were speaking about what is going on in Ukraine now, and it's a pretty dramatic thing. But it's only the latest example of how democratic advances are being eradicated in many places of the world. And according to a recent report that you shared with me a couple of days ago about the health of democracy, we are back to levels of 1989. Much closer to the U.S. than Russia, we've got countries like Nicaragua. We have many journalists in this room from Nicaragua who are not living anymore in Nicaragua or reporting from Nicaragua. We have countries like El Salvador, like Cuba, like Venezuela, and you know very well those countries. What can we do as journalists watching from outside these situations? Do you think, for example, and I'm looking to the U.S., do you think there is enough reporting in the U.S. of what is going on in a country like Nicaragua? And I just checked before this conversation in a big media outlet, that I'm not going to mention, if they have reported anything about Cristiana Chamorro here in English, and there was and there was absolutely nothing about Cristiana Chamorro. What can we do?

**Jorge Ramos** Talking about Cristiana Chamorro, I think I had the last interview with Cristiana Chamorro before she was arrested in Nicaragua. The report that you were saying from the institute, I think, is really interesting. And what we're doing right now, this exercising freedom, Borja, is not normal. 70% of the people in the world, 70% of people in the world, live in dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. They don't have the freedom that we have to say whatever we want at this moment. And it's been said before, and we can just repeat it, the U.S. usually pays attention to Latin America only whenever their interest is at stake or whenever there is a huge crisis that might affect the way of living. And that is not the case right now with Cuba, or Nicaragua. Venezuela maybe. As you know, there are conversations between the U.S. government and the dictatorship of Nicolas Maduro because of what's happening with the oil prices in Russia and Ukraine. But I think our responsibility is to make sure, especially if we work in Spanish as El País and Univision and many of the journalists that are participating in this conference, it is our responsibility to make sure that we maintain the intensity and the reporting on these countries. Because if we don't do it, nobody else is going to do it. Again, censorship is not the same as it was a few decades ago. But unless we talk about Nicaragua, and we talk about Cuba, and we talk about Venezuela constantly and invite and give voice to those voices that are silent in those countries, no one is going to be paying attention to that, and to insist over and over again that in the case of Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and Cuba that we are talking about dictatorship. Again, thanks to technology, they are getting their information in different ways. But we have to insist that they are dictatorships and that they don't have the freedoms that we're enjoying.

**Borja Echevarría** And I would add to what you're mentioning, I think part of our responsibility, and I was talking before to Nicaraguan journalists here in the room, I think the people who are at the head of big outlets like El País or like Univision, and I think we have a big platform. I think we have to be generous with them, and let's bring their voices, even if they are right now writing from Costa Rica or writing from Miami. Let's bring their voices to our platforms. I think we need to be generous.

**Jorge Ramos** You're doing that right in El País? You have been inviting journalists from all of these countries to have a voice, something that these dictatorships truly, truly hate.

**Borja Echevarría** Yes, that's the case. And also with Univision. Here we have Wilfredo Miranda. He's in Costa Rica. He's exiled, and he's writing for El País for example. So let's talk, Jorge, a little bit about your other country, Mexico. I said before that five journalists have been killed in Ukraine since the beginning of the war, but eight journalists have been killed in Mexico since the beginning of the year. And in a country that is considered right now, probably the most dangerous country to be a reporter, to be a local reporter. But Mexico is a democratic country where elections are held. We can say many times that holding elections did not suffice for a country to be considered democratic in its whole extension, but if we measure democracy by the safety of journalists, do you think that the country of Mexico is at risk? Who is responsible of this mess?

**Jorge Ramos** Let me just start with a big context. Mexico is a democracy, a young democracy, only 22 years old, but still a democracy. Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador was elected by more than 30 million people, and that's something that we were not able to say before the year 2000, when the PRI, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, stayed in power for 71 years. So, yes, it's a fragile democracy, but still a democracy. Having said that, Mexico is without a doubt probably the most, or one of the most, dangerous countries in the world to be a reporter and to be an independent reporter. As you mentioned, five, probably six journalists have been killed in Ukraine. But in the first three months of this

year, eight journalists were killed in Mexico. Eight journalists. This is important. We are not talking about crimes committed by the government. No son crímenes del estado. But still, the government does not have the capacity or the willingness to protect the journalists. Artículo 19, which is an organization that's done a fantastic job on protecting freedom of expression in Mexico, reported that since the year 2000, 153 journalists have been killed in Mexico, and only since Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador came in power in December 2018, 43 journalists have been killed. Again, the government is not responsible for these killings, but they haven't been able to protect them. And at the same time, Lopez Obrador with his mañaneras. This is something completely unusual, Borja. He's the only president in the world who gives a daily press conference from Monday to Friday. It started being about an hour. Sometimes he goes to two hours every single day. He does it because he can establish the agenda for Mexico with these mañaneras. Las mañaneras, which means the early ones. And unfortunately, Lopez Obrador is very sensitive, very thin skinned when it comes to criticism. And whenever he doesn't like something, he's talking about conspiracies and journalists being part of an effort to attack his government, which is not true. So the problem is that drug traffickers and criminals are killing journalists, that the government is not able to protect journalism, and at the same time Lopez Obrador is creating an atmosphere in which it is very, very difficult to be an independent journalist.

**Borja Echevarría** You are talking about las mañaneras, and you've been personally signaled by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in several occasions. You have the experience of dealing with dictators such as Maduro. At his time, Fidel Castro. But also you have the experience of dealing with politicians that were elected democratically, like Trump. How as a journalist should we deal with these characters that are closer to populism than to autocrats, and people who are backed by millions of voters? How do we deal with these personalities?

**Jorge Ramos** Yeah. You know, we've had this conversation many, many times, Borja. I think that at some point, and this goes against what many people might have heard in journalism school, but at some point, we have to take a stand. As journalists, we have to take a stand. Again, we have to report reality as is, but sometimes when it comes to corruption, when it comes to crime, when it comes to a violation of human rights, when it comes to dictatorships, we have to take a stand because if we don't do that, then who's going to do it? That's precisely our job. And it doesn't mean that we have to be partisan. It doesn't mean that I have to be a Democrat or a Republican. It simply means taking a stand with democracy, taking a stand with human rights, taking a stand with the freedom of expression. That's our responsibility, and that's what we have to do. So when you have a politician like Donald Trump who made racist statements, who has lied thousands and thousands of times, who is a danger to democracy, even today, April 2, 2022, he still says that he won the election, I think we have a responsibility to constantly say that he is lying. That it is not true. And if he's going to run for president again in 2024, we have to constantly remind the audience what he has done in the past.

**Borja Echevarría** And because you have done this, you know perfectly that you have been accused not only by politicians, but by our colleagues about you being an activist. And my feeling is that seeing where the world is heading, and we have looked at the numbers that you were mentioning before about that survey around democracy and populism, an authoritarianism rising, some of those journalists backing objectivity as a rule of law, my feeling is that they're probably making a little bit more flexible their positions, seeing where the world is heading. Are you seeing that evolution in the understanding of journalism for the sake of democracy or for the sake of protecting human rights and minorities? Are you optimistic in that approach?

**Jorge Ramos** I've seen an evolution. I come from an old school in which we were not supposed to give opinions. And when you give an opinion, you have to say it is an opinion. And of course, I've heard the criticism that I am an activist, but my response is very simple. I'm simply a journalist who asks questions. Uno amigo decía este Ramos es un preguntón. I think that's fine. I think that that's precisely our role. And then when I confronted Donald Trump, they would say no, Ramos is a Democrat. He's working for the Democratic Party. And then when I criticized President Obama for not keeping his word on immigration, they say, oh, no, he's Republican. And then after confronting Nicolas Maduro, they were saying, oh, no, he works for Soros. And then when you criticize U.S. politicians, they say no, no, no, he's just too conservative. So, again, let me go back to what I mentioned at the beginning. I think our role is to be contrapoder. So if I'm contrapoder with Trump, with Maduro, with Lopez Obrador, with Biden, with Obama, I think that's fine. That's precisely our goal. But I have seen an evolution. Borja, I think you're absolutely right in which I and some journalists feel more comfortable taking a position and taking a stand when democracy and when the freedom of expression is at stake. It's a role, especially with social media, that we just didn't have in the past. And I do believe that our voices are being heard more than ever before. And it is dangerous sometimes because opinion has to be labeled as opinion. But I do see an evolution in which, again, more journalists are taking a stand.

**Borja Echevarría** If there is a word that defines Jorge as a journalist, I would say that word is trust. We speak a lot about the relation of journalism media outlets with the audience. But personally I was working for four years in Univision. I'm pretty close to Jorge. And I've never seen in my career those kind of bonds, both Jorge, but also Univision, have built with its community. What is your advice to us who run media companies or to other journalists to create or rebuild that trust? Do you believe that it is possible that in this overcrowded digital ecosystem where social media is running the conversation? Do you think it's possible to rebuild the trust that we've lost or to build trust to the media outlets that are new in this space?

**Jorge Ramos** I think at the end, Borja, I think that's the only thing we have. La credibilidad es lo único que tenemos como periodistas. Credibility is the only thing that we have as journalists. And if you write and if I talk and people don't trust what we say or what you write, then our job doesn't work. No sirve para nada. So I'm very proud of the relationship that we have with the audience. I mean, I started doing Noticiero Univision, Univision News, in November 1986. And I checked the ratings yesterday, and still hundreds of thousands of people, millions of people are still watching. So in other words, I've made many mistakes. And whenever we make a mistake, we try to recognize that mistake and to rectify it. But when I go on the air, when I write a column, and when I'm on social media, I do my homework. I try to make sure that whatever I am saying is the truth. And that trust only happens with time after time, with repetition, and going back to the idea of reporting reality. Not as I would wish it would be, but reporting reality as I see it. That's one thing. And then the other element that we haven't talked about, it's for another conference, is that I think we represent a community, an immigrant community, an underrepresented community that lacks leadership, political leadership. And when you are almost 20% of the population and you only have six senators, that lack of representation, that vacuum, is being filled sometimes by journalists. And that's maybe the role that we have had in the last couple of decades, and that's why people I think, I hope, will keep on trusting us.

**Borja Echevarría** Let me go, and I'm sorry, let me go for a couple of minutes back to Trump. I was reading yesterday in The New York Times a piece and also listening to a

podcast under the headline "Is the News Media Setting Trump for Another Win?" What is the answer to this? Do you think that the press can prevent or should prevent Trump restoration?

**Jorge Ramos** Yeah. I think our responsibility is to make sure that whenever Trump speaks that we say he made racist remarks. He's a liar. And he's a danger to democracy. Over and over again. We didn't do that when he first ran for president. And we won every one. I still remember confronting Donald Trump in Dubuque, Iowa, and the people say, no, Ramos, you don't understand. Nothing's going to happen. We were saying, hey, look, he has insulted Latinos by saying that Mexican immigrants are criminals and rapists. I'm a Mexican immigrant, and I can tell you that that is not true. He ejected me with a bodyguard from a press conference the same way that Fidel Castro did once. And we were saying, look, this is a danger to democracy. This person is a danger to freedom of expression. This is a person who's a danger to freedom of the press. They said, no, Ramos, you don't understand. Well, yes, we did understand. We knew exactly what was happening. So this is not normal. We cannot normalize a behavior that is not normal in a democracy. January 6 is not normal. It was not just another day in the park. No, it was not. It was one of the most serious dangers of democracy in two centuries. So, if Donald Trump wants to run for president, we have to keep on saying again, this person made racist remarks. We have to say this person is a liar. He has lied tens of thousands of times, according to The Washington Post. We have to say that he's a danger to democracy. It's on us to confront him over and over again and not to normalize this kind of behavior. I think many, many people in the news media made a mistake the first time he ran for president. We simply cannot afford to do the same thing again.

**Borja Echevarría** And aren't you afraid, or maybe you don't care at all, that this has just the opposite effect in a world that is more and more polarized? Do you think that doing this is going to change anyone's mind?

**Jorge Ramos** Maybe. Maybe not, Borja. But that's what we do. That's our responsibility. I think we have to say things the way they are. Let me put it this way. How can we normalize this kind of behavior? If someone made racist statements in a country like this in which in the Declaration of Independence clearly says that all men were created equal? And you're having an interview with Donald Trump, are you going to avoid racism? Are you going to avoid the fact that he has lied thousands of times? Are you going to avoid the fact that he's a danger to democracy and that he inspired the assault on Congress? I don't think we can afford that. I mean, I don't want to be the journalist who avoids those issues when talking to a candidate. And if he's responsible for that, we have to ask him over and over again. Because it is not normal in a democracy that someone wants to stay. Whenever we were talking golpes de estado, Borja, we were always talking about Latin America. But what we saw on January 6, and in the minds of many of the people who attacked Congress, fue un golpe de estado. Fue un golpe de estado. Un intento de golpe de estado. So either we say what we see and we report reality as it is, or we're simply not doing our job. It isn't. Look, I understand that it's not easy. This is not a profession for people who want to be silent. There is a lot of stress and a lot of pressure. But that's what we do. If we cannot handle this, then we shouldn't be doing reporting in the time of Trump. We shouldn't be doing reporting during the time of the war in Ukraine. We shouldn't be doing reporting in a time when everything is so polarized. Because if we don't do that, then people aren't going to trust us. And we're going to continue this conversation of why people don't trust us. Well, they don't trust us because we're not telling them the truth.

**Borja Echevarría** Thank you, Jorge. We have, I think, three minutes. And we have a couple of questions from the audience, so I'm going to move there. How can we tell that the reality of our lives are in danger when we touch on very sensitive issues? I guess she's referring to the situations of journalists who are reporting in complicated situations.

**Jorge Ramos** Yeah. I mean, all my respect to my colleagues in Mexico for instance. I go in and out of Mexico, but those who are reporting in small towns in Mexico, they're really risking their lives. I mean, again, eight journalists have been killed this year in Mexico, so they represent the soul of journalists. And I wish we could do more to protect their lives. But, when you are confronting drug traffickers, and criminals, or when a politician comes and says, "I know where your daughter goes to school. And I saw your wife walking to the store the other day, and she was dressed this way," and they make \$10 a day or \$20 a day, what kind of protection can they have? Unfortunately, again, Mexico continues to be the most dangerous country in the world to be a reporter. And I don't see, unfortunately, any positive news in the near future.

**Borja Echevarría** Okay. How are journalistic ethics affected by the current dangers of the profession? And what would be the pillars to recover the credibility of their profession, which in many cases has been affected?

**Jorge Ramos** Yes, I think ethics and journalism, they are together because this profession is based on morals and ethics. So if you see something that is red and you don't report it as red, then you are not telling the truth, and you're breaking your ethics. So I know it sounds so simple, but it comes with repetition. If you see someone that you trust and over and over again that person tells you something that eventually you can see that is the truth, that's how we build trust. So it is simply a matter of repetition, and a matter of doing your homework, and a matter of recognizing whenever you make a mistake. But it is simply a matter of repetition. I grew up watching Tom Brokaw, and Dan Rather, and especially Peter Jennings. And over and over again, they reported about things that eventually I knew were the truth. So that's how you build the trust with people, and especially with so many people speaking in social media who have no idea. I go with just a few people that I truly trust.

**Borja Echevarría** So third and last question before we finish. We are out of time. ¿Cree que con el periodismo que hace crear una opinión? Do you believe that with the kind of journalism you do, you're building an opinion?

**Jorge Ramos** Yeah, I do. I mean, this is not a profession for people who want to be silent. If you report, I don't want just to be in a vacuum, I mean, I'm reporting because I want people to hear it. I want people to see it. Let me finish with this anecdote. Once I had the chance to be seated side by side with Barbara Walter. She was about to retire. And probably in the last few days before her retirement, she was still promoting a special program that she was going to present that night or the night after. And I was telling here, Barbara, why are you doing that? You've done everything in the world. Why do you need this kind of promotion? She said, because we do this so people can come watch it. It is so simple, but actually we do it so that you can watch it. We don't do it, we don't write, just to keep it in our closet. No. We are doing it because this is not a profession for people who want to be silent. We want to make sure that whatever we do is being seen. Otherwise, we would have chosen a different profession.

**Borja Echevarría** Okay. We're done. Thank you, Jorge, so much.



**Jorge Ramos** Gracias. Gracias a todos.