

ISOJ 2021: Day 2, Keynote Session

Katharine Viner, editor-in-chief, The Guardian

Chair: [Emilio Garcia-Ruiz](#), *editor-in-chief*, San Francisco Chronicle
○ [Katharine Viner](#), *editor-in-chief*, The Guardian

Rosental Alves Good morning from Austin, Texas. Good afternoon, or good evening, wherever you may be. It is day two of ISOJ 2021. The world's premier global conference on online journalism is sponsored by Google News Initiative and Knight Foundation. And thanks to Univision, each session is being simultaneously interpreted into Spanish as well. We have almost 7,000 people registered for this conference, so we are very excited. I hope you are excited for the day we have in store, starting with a great keynote session.

A few housekeeping reminders before we go there. You can follow the conversation by using hashtag #ISOJ on Twitter, and you can drop questions and comments in chats both on Zoom and on YouTube, also on Twitter using hashtag #ISOJ2021. Don't forget to click on the link in the chat to tune into our ISOJ 2021 Spotify playlist to hear the finest tunes from Austin locals. Remember that we are in Austin, the world's capital of live music, so the playlist will kind of bring you here to our music scene. And please follow the link to our Pick and Post page on our website. You can find great graphics there, so you can download them and post on social media to let the world know that you are attending and loving ISOJ. I hope you are loving ISOJ. I love ISOJ. Now let's get into our keynote session with Katharine Viner, editor in chief of The Guardian and The Observer. First, let me introduce you to my friend Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, who will chair Katharine's keynote session. Until very recently, Emilio coordinated the successful digital strategy at the Washington Post newsroom. He moved to California recently and became the editor in chief of the San Francisco Chronicle. This will be a fascinating conversation.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Thank you, Rosental. Bienvenidos a todos los periodistas de otros países. Greetings to everyone around the world. I am delighted and honored to be here today with Katharine Viner, the editor of The Guardian, one of the great recent success stories in publishing. Katharine, welcome.

Katharine Viner Thanks, Emilio.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz So we're at this point in our industry with so many publishers struggling, that the first thing I think about when I meet an editor from another newsroom is the financial health of their publication. In your case, you've been called the architect of the biggest turnaround in British media history, having gone from losing \$100-million dollars a year to being profitable. I think everyone here wants to know, how did you do that, Katharine?

Katharine Viner Well, thank you for that generous introduction, Emilio. I wish we were all together in Austin, and I could meet the 7,000 attendees of the ISOJ conference. Perhaps there wouldn't be 7,000 if we weren't online. But yes, I mean, I think we tackled the issue on a few fronts. When David Pemsel, the former chief executive, and I, started in 2015, we took quite a lot of cost out of the business, but we did that in collaboration with our colleagues. So, for example, we switched from publishing in the regular format which was

a sort of bespoke print format into the tabloid format, which saved a lot of money. But then I think the thing that really made the difference was obviously, and shifted the revenue, was our contributions model. And I think this is the strand to our strategy that I think has had the most attention and probably is the most exciting, which was this idea that we do have subscriptions, subscription is a very important part of our reader revenue strategy, subscriptions in digital and in print, but in addition, we brought in the contributions strategy, which is where you voluntarily give us some money. And it might be because you've read so much of The Guardian that week that you're sort of feeling guilty that you've read so much for free. It might be that you want to pay for The Guardian to say free. You can afford to pay for it, and you'd like someone who can't afford to pay for it, to be able to read it. Whatever the motivation, when we started it in 2016, people were very, very suspicious about it, including close colleagues. Like what do you get? And I think that's the whole point. If you want to get something, we have the subscription strategy. But if you just want to support independent journalism in the public interest, if you want to keep Guardian journalism free, and that's an important part, I think, of the Scott Trust agreement, which is that Guardian journalism should be as widely as possible. It doesn't mean we would never do a paywall. But I think we've found an alternative to a paywall, which brings in just as much revenue, but also means that you can be read very, very widely by a very large number of people. They don't need to be able to afford to pay for the subscription, they can read The Guardian for free. Anyway, it was greeted with lots of cynicism. There was a cartoon in a famous satirical British magazine Private Eye, which was a sort of begging bowl, as if we were begging for money. But the readers understood it. The readers understood what we are getting at, and it worked. And it's now a very big part of our revenue. And I think like a lot of big news organizations, readers really stepped up in 2020 and have really given us a considerable amount of support.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz I don't know who came up with the idea of keeping track of how many articles the cheapskates read and then putting it back in their face. Not that I would know anything about that. But the fact that you go on and then you're told you've read 7,500 hundred stories without paying and it's about time you paid, it hasn't worked with me just yet. But we're getting closer, Katharine. We're getting there.

Katharine Viner Well, I'm going to find something else that will work with you.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz We're getting very close, I think. Give us a little bit of the insight on what percentage of people donate. What are the metrics on that sort of thing?

Katharine Viner I mean that shifts all the time, so we tend not to sort of share numbers on that. And we tend to call contribute rather than donate as well, because we're not a charity. We're a business. But we're a business that is only in the public interest. I don't know if many people watching know about our ownership model, but we're owned by a trust. There are no shareholders. There's no proprietors. And what that means is that nobody can get rich out of the Guardian, and any money that we make as a business, because we also have a thriving advertising business, has to get plowed back into the journalism. And that's part of the remit. So that's a very, very powerful message as well.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz So, you know, the Financial Times did a piece recently questioning whether these \$30 a month paywall models that some publishers are using, whether they're actually viable, so many other digital subscriptions from Netflix, to Spotify, to Disney+ that we all have. Do you think your way is going to be the way others go eventually, or do you think it's sort of different strokes for different folks?

Katharine Viner Yeah, I wouldn't necessarily say that what works for The Guardian would work for everyone. I think what you need for our model to work is a readership who is very engaged with you and perhaps a sort of distinctive perspective. There aren't many global news organizations of our scale, but we're also progressive and don't have a proprietor and so on. And so I think you need to have something quite distinctive for this model to work, so I wouldn't say necessarily it would work for everyone. But I do worry, I know the piece you're talking about, I do worry that the biggest news organizations might take all of the light away from the smaller news organizations, particularly locally.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz We first met six, seven years ago right after you had been elected to your position, and it was a very different time for The Guardian. The Guardian was on top of the world. Things were going great. You'd gotten this job. You'd won the election. It was going to be smooth. It was going to be easy. And then, bam. You got hit with all of these financial issues. There's a lot of people on this Zoom who are facing the same sort of thing you faced. As a leader of a newsroom and as a journalist, what lessons did you learn that you would impart to other people to get you through what was clearly a very difficult time?

Katharine Viner I mean, again, I wouldn't presume to speak to other people for their organizations, but I can say what we did, The Guardian. It was thinking about what really matters most and who we really are. I do have a real faith in looking back to the history. What about our roots, and what made us who we are? Are there some clues in the past? Because what I've discovered, I'm a real expert now in the histories of The Guardian, it's our 200th birthday next week, so I'm particularly sharp at the moment in these stories, is that nearly everything people have gone through before. Now, it may not be this particular model. I mean, obviously, social media was rather unknown to previous editors, but there were similar things. There was a time when there was a merger with the Times threatened of The Guardian in the 1960s, how we survived that. There was a time when we took a very strong anticolonial position against the Boer War in 1902, at a time when Britain was an incredibly jingoistic fervor, and it was such a controversial move, we lost one seventh of sales. We lost a gigantic amount of advertising, and a rival newspaper even sent a brass band to play a sort of mournful tune outside the office, like a sort of funeral march, as if to say The Manchester Guardian, as then was, is on its way out. But it seems that that positioning, it was the decisive positioning that said The Guardian will now be a paper of the left, and it was the beginning, really, of making it who we are today. So looking at the history, going back to the roots, working at who you are. I know it's easy to say and harder to do, but to really have faith in what you're good at and not be kind of pulled this way and that by whichever pivot is in fashion at the time. People can't mimic reporting, good old fashioned reporting or modern reporting with new techniques, but doing the reporting, finding out what's happening, finding out something that someone doesn't already know that someone wants hidden, just getting back to the basics of who you are and your real identity. And then I think I mean similar on that point about pivot actually is really being meaningful in everything you do. So in our case, you know, one of the ways when I took over that you could show how digital you were was that people were rude about print. If we're going to be rude about print, then let's not have a newspaper. Much better to say no, we're going to produce a really good newspaper. We're a digital news organization, but you're going to produce a really good newspaper as well. Or don't produce it at all. I think high quality matters. And then I think, you know, thinking about who your audience is and what kind of relationship you want with them is really important and increasingly so. You know, can they be part of your future? Can they be part of the solution? Can the readers help you work out what comes next?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz So let's dive into two of the things you mentioned there. The first one I think is really important, which is focus, the newsroom having to focus. My old boss, Marty Baron, who I think is at this conference in a couple of days, he was fond of saying that this notion that publishers need to be comprehensive, no longer works, because there's this thing called the Internet, and that's comprehensive enough. He argued that publishers have to pick their spots and dominate those. So what are the key coverage areas as you look for this identity of The Guardian that you decided to focus on? And why did you pick them? And also importantly, what did you decide not to do anymore?

Katharine Viner Yeah, I'd be a little bit cautious about that, though. I mean, I think Marty's Washington Post was pretty comprehensive. So I do think if you're a big news organization, you do have to cover quite a lot. You can't sort of say, "We're going to leave that. You know, we're going to not do that." In my view. I do think you need a kind of base level of something that's quite comprehensive. But then, yes, of course, focusing is a really smart idea. I mean, the environment is a big area for The Guardian. That's an important area for us that has given us a huge number of scoops, a really excellent audience. It used to be, I remember the days when stories about the environment didn't get an audience, but we really, really get an audience to it now, I think, which is partly how we promote those stories and how we report them. But I think also there is a real energy and, as I said, we need there to be around those stories. So I think that's an incredibly important area for us. I liked that science and health reporting, which we've been committed to and has obviously really mattered this year. I think investigations. Again if you're a public interest news organization, you really do need to have an investigative strand. And that doesn't need to be something that's hived off. It could be a small team at the core. We do where people come in and out, according to the story, and I think that gives it a real dynamism and a sort of sense of drive. And then, you know, more broadly sort of public interest journalism. Who has power, and why have they got it? Who is corrupt, and what they're doing about it? Who's trying to hide things? And of course, lots of it flows back to politics. I think when I set up Guardian Australia in 2013 as a digital-only website, it was a lot of fun. This was before I was editor in chief. We were tiny. I think we were about 25 people, if not fewer, when we started, so we were really, really small. And we decided to focus on the environment because we felt that's a huge story in Australia. You see it. You live it, the climate crisis. You live it every day. But it was really not being covered that well, and it's quite a toxic subject in Australia. So on the environment, we wanted to do border policy and refugees. And again, I feel that we really helped put that subject back on the map in Australia. But then the third item was federal politics. Now, there were a lot of people already covering federal politics, but we felt we could cover it in a different way that was less about horse race, more about the policy. We felt that we could do in a really serious way, but it wasn't just that it was distinctive. It's just I think unless you have politics, I think it is quite hard to say that you're a website of that country. And that really was effective, those three prongs really were effective. Trying to be distinctive, but not always in ways and numbers if you see what I mean.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Very interesting. Let's switch topics a little bit. So six years ago, you wrote a piece that turned out to be quite prescient about how social media had helped usher in an era when everyone has their own facts. I'm going to quote a section of the piece. "We're caught in a series of confusing battles between opposing forces, between truth and falsehood, fact and rumor, kindness and cruelty, between the few and the many, the connected and the alienated, between the open platform of the web as its architects envisioned it, and the gated enclosures of Facebook and other social networks, between an informed public and a misguided mob." Since you wrote that piece, it seems to me that things have actually gotten worse and not better. How do we as journalists function in a

world where the truth is under constant assault by people who seem to have no moral issue with bending the truth for their advantage?

Katharine Viner Well, I think obviously that got worse since I wrote that article was Donald Trump got elected. I think that gave so much validity to the idea of you don't need to speak the truth. And I think I really, really struggled with this during Trump's presidency because I clearly remember quite soon after he was elected, he gave some speech. I can't remember what it was. And I woke up, and I saw that the U.S. team had fact checked the speech. And I thought that was a good idea. And then I saw that the BBC had fact checked it, and I saw The New York Times fact-checked it, and Washington Post had, and I thought, "Wow. So almost every news organization in the world was focused on fact checking this speech. And that doesn't seem like the best use of all of those journalists' time." Now, you probably want somebody to fact check it. I was just saying this at the beginning, and I could really get people into this. I wanted one group to fact check it for everybody, and I wanted the rest of us to start thinking about, well, you know, what is he actually doing? Because focusing on what he's saying all the time obscures what he was doing, and obviously, a lot of what he did was incredibly dangerous. And I think some of our best reporting out of Guardian U.S. was looking at what he was actually doing, but also looking at what effect is this having on people, on political discourse? What effect is this having on how people experience politicians and politics? Why do so many people still support him? And trying to sort of square all of that, while accepting that without social media, Trump would not have been able to drive the lies in the way that he did is just true. And I think Trump and perhaps all the misinformation that has been transmitted about health care, obviously there's some overlap in that story, but around COVID, maybe now people are realizing that there does have to be some kind of accountability for these social media platforms, spreading misinformation. Because it can't really carry on. People's lives are at risk.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz I mean you were writing about Brexit, right, at that point, and you were writing about all the all the misinformation and how effective it had been for the people who were peddling the misinformation. And so now it seems that we have this accepted strategy that politicians use now. What's the message to your reporters as we deal with people who we quote, who are telling us things that we know aren't true?

Katharine Viner Yeah, I mean, I've never had any difficulty in sort of saying that people are allowed to call that out. I mean, I think just sort of saying, "You know, this isn't true, and here's why." I think that's always been fine at The Guardian. I mean, but I recognize what you're saying. I mean, our Prime Minister Boris Johnson, at the moment, there have been several sources for something he says he didn't say, saying something like, "Let the bodies pile up in the streets. I don't want another lockdown." And people are saying, "Well, you know, it won't affect how people see Boris Johnson because it's just factored in that he lies." And, you know, you can go, "yeah fine," or you can go, "what a situation that we're in that that could be the way we talk about the prime minister." You know, and I'm very concerned about where this leads, as in, if people don't believe any politicians, then I think, as I sort of wrote in that piece those years ago, I think that is the setting that's ripe for quite dangerous politics.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Switching back to the social media companies. The big topic of the moment is compensation from social media companies to publishers. There are a few people who have started to write that, "Wait a minute. This violates one of our big ethics." Right? Which is we don't take money from anyone, much less companies we cover. So put

you on the spot here at a conference that Google is partially sponsoring, should we be taking this money from social media companies for their use of our content?

Katharine Viner I mean, I think there's no doubt that search and social media companies benefit massively from the use of journalists, our journalism, on their platforms. And particularly, so you mentioned Google. I think Google search would be without trusted source of information and would be quite empty, and so I think it's reasonable. And we've been pushing for quite some time to suggest that platforms pay to license journalism. And it's interesting, I think that the countries that have forced this to the table the most are those such as Australia, where there's been real political pressure. That's where it needs to start, sort of political pressure. But obviously, I mean, the amounts that people are talking about are really the same as a big advertiser, and we cover big advertisers very well, just as we cover the platforms very well. I think the problem comes if people are told to hold back on their reporting because of the amount of money they get from either a platform or an advertiser. And that's where the problem comes. I don't think you'll see that at The Guardian, but I can see that it puts smaller news organizations under a lot of pressure.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Let's talk a little bit about the pandemic, how that has affected everything from your business model to the people in your newsroom. I recently judged a couple of journalism contests, and I can attest to the fact that your product remains very strong.

Katharine Viner Did we win something?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz What are some of the challenges you have overcome to keep the report so strong?

Katharine Viner Thank you. I appreciate that, because it's obviously been a very challenging year for everybody. I mean, at the same time, I sort of think it's kind of incredibly impressive how resilient and resourceful journalists have shown themselves to be. So all along, we've had to have a small team in the office because we can't produce the newspaper otherwise. We can obviously do the website from anywhere, but we can't produce the paper unless we have some people in the office. And, you know, at the beginning, that was very, very scary for people, and I really appreciate them doing that. And then I think what happened is that it's fluctuated a lot. We've had lockdowns in the U.K. and real dramatic waves of deaths. The challenge has been to try and keep people's confidence really going, they can do it, that they can keep themselves together. Because it's very, very challenging, very disturbing. We we actually lost a colleague a few days ago in India. She died aged 51, and it's been very shocking for us all that it could come so close to us. So, yeah, I'm sorry. I'm managing. It was just quite a shocking incident recently.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz I'm very sorry for your loss. So so this stress that people are under, different media companies are doing different things. Extra days off, day here and a day there. But of course, an extra day off when you can't leave your house is just another day in the cage, if you would, it feels like sometimes. Are there any things you all have done that's unique or any ways that you've come up with people to help relieve some of the stress?

Katharine Viner Yes, I think there's some things that have really worked well and actually we might keep even if or when we're all back in the office. So you might know, but one of

the things we have done is we have an open morning conference, which used to be every day. It would be in a room in the office. Anybody could come. You didn't have to be a journalist. You could be any Guardian employee. And we would talk about the previous day, we would talk about the day upcoming, and we might take a couple of big themes. So it's very sort of open and visible. And we transferred that to being online Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And as a result, so the room in the office could fit probably 60 or 70 people, and one day we have 550 people dialing in. And I hear the foreign correspondents absolutely love it. They feel really connected to head office in a way they weren't able to. The Australian team, they can be awake. I mean, it takes a lot to get the New Yorkers awake, but sometimes we get them to come in because it's at 10:00 a.m. London time. So that has been a really positive way to bring people together, and people really like it. And we also did this thing that I love called random lunches, where on a Friday they sent their name in, my PA picked a number of names out of a hat, and you were put together to have a Zoom lunch together. And people loved it. They met colleagues that they never met before. It's this thing that we just still miss each other. I think we just miss seeing each other. We've shown that we can do the work. I mean, by the way, I don't think the work is as good as if you can be in the office throwing ideas around, particularly when the news agenda is quieter as it's becoming, as it is in fits and starts, at the moment. I think you definitely need to have groups throwing ideas around. But I think we can do the work. But the bonds, the kind of teamwork, the creativity, I think we're really missing that. So, yeah, the random lunches were really positive as well. I recommend those.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz I can tell you what not to recommend. I hold an open office door every Friday where I just announced on Slack that I'm available. No one comes. No one in my Slack. It's very lonely when you're in a pandemic and in a Slack room where no one comes.

Katharine Viner But it must be partly because you must have met very few of your colleagues in person.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Katharine, you would think that would be a strength. You think they'd want to come meet the new person. But no, clearly word about me has gotten out, and they're like, "I'm not going there!" The only one to come are the interns. The interns are there, but otherwise no one comes. But you're touching on something here that I think is going to be an issue for all of us. So we've done surveys of our newsroom. Other publishers have done the same. And it's pretty overwhelming when you ask people about whether they want to come back after the pandemic to the office every day, they say no. Most of them are willing to come back once or twice a week. Some don't want to come back at all. They don't want to deal with the commute, and the cost, and the time that they've lost. Their argument is that they've proven that we can function fine remote. Why would we be together? So editors are going to have this tough decision to make about whether you make people come back to the newsroom. Have you thought about your re-opening strategy, and how you're going to handle that?

Katharine Viner Yeah, we've been thinking about it a lot. I think it's really interesting because in that first phase, the bit I told you about when we needed a few people in the office to produce the paper, and it was a very scary time, absolutely nobody wants to come into the office. We did well to get that team together. And then as time went on, we found that people really wanted to come back to the office because they were just finding it a bit boring. And I think people just have a really different views. I think there are a whole range of views on this, depending on people's home circumstances. If you're in a shared apartment where you working means having a laptop on your bed, I just don't think that's a

good environment to work in. Obviously, I was going to say rich journalists, but there aren't many of those. If you've got a rich partner, and it means you've got a whole load of outside space, and a beautiful office, and so on, then I think it's easier. So I also think different desks are different. I think it may be that certain teams work better remotely. You know, I think there's no doubt if you want to dig into a document or spend a lot of time with one thing, say, doing a huge edit, it's better at home. There are fewer interruptions as long as you've got quiet at home and not, you know, children and pets running in and so on. Whereas if it's kind of idea is brainstorms and stuff, it's better in the office. So I think the thing we'll be doing is working with colleagues to work out the best way. I imagine it will be some kind of hybrid model that we end up with. But there's some very interesting research going on about this, and I think it's a very live thing. I think it's changing all the time. So I want to be sure that we don't make changes, that we then sort of regret. That we make good changes that will last.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And I don't think it's something that's going to be unique to journalists. It's going to be every office everywhere. And out here, there's been a real split. Twitter told people they never have to come back. They can they can live wherever they want. Google told people they've got to be within 100 miles of the office. Some places let go of their office real estate. Other companies like Google have been snapping it up. So I don't think anybody knows what is exactly going to happen. It's really interesting.

Katharine Viner Absolutely. And that's why I think, personally, not making too big decisions that you can't real back because I think things might change again. Who knows how they're going to change. I mean, if there's one thing the last five years have taught us is that you just don't know what's coming. And so, yeah, I think we need to be careful in how we make such decisions.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Well, there's one question that above all that I wanted to make sure I posed to you, because it is the single most important issue that we deal with. And I would start by saying I'd be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to thank you and all the British people for saving the world from one of the greatest threats to humanity in the history of mankind. The Super League. My people, the Spanish, folded like a cheap face mask and actually are still part of the rebel camp by themselves on an island somewhere. The British came through for the world in a way that we will always, always remember. Where do you stand on the Super League? Where were you when this thing happened? Were you on the street protesting? How did you handle it?

Katharine Viner I'd say it was such a weird subject in the U.K. because it united the nation. One of my jokes to the team was, "Can you find me someone who is in favor of this bloody thing?" You know, because I think it's so rare to find something that everyone is opposed to. But yes, I'm a Leeds United fan, and we managed to play in Europe several times over the past few decades and done very well. And we're completely left out of any Super League negotiations. I do think there's something kind of interesting. I mean, just to be serious for a moment. I do think the Super League is a very anti-Guardian idea. You know, we're about fair play. We're about underdogs having a chance. We're about fairness. You get promoted fairly or demoted fairly. This is the opposite of that. And I think the fact that the world united against these plans, most of the world, shows that most of the world really are natural Guardian readers, and our traffic should be much higher.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz All our traffic. And Madrid is still on that hill saying, "Oh yeah, we're just going to tweak. We're just going to tweak. We'll be back. We're just going to tweak." It is the most American of things, I have to say, to have rich people own leagues and then

never have to worry about being relegated and just take the TV money every year. It's quite an appealing thing. But yeah, that was absolutely wild. One of the craziest sports stories and over in a nanosecond, how quickly they folded.

Katharine Viner I hope you read the Guardian coverage of that because we had some absolutely brilliant coverage. Brilliant columns. It was great.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz That was story 7,112, 7,113, and 7,114 that I have not yet contributed to.

Katharine Viner It's a good example of the intersection of sport with politics. Just like the intersection of anything with politics, ends up being very revealing about a country and its priorities and what's going on. And everything is interesting, isn't it?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Yeah, well, and it's also, I think goes back to the audience. Right. If you can find topics that people are passionate about, and people will actually live and die for, that's how you start to see revenue increase. And frankly, I tell people this, and they get very angry. But that is the lesson of Donald Trump for all of us. Right. The lesson for Trump is if you find a topic that is unifying either on one side or the other, the eyeballs will come, the revenue will come, and it becomes a dominant sort of a storyline. Which takes me to my next question, which is a lot of publishers in the United States are seeing a very big drop in audience in the past few months. Some people are saying it's just the end of the news heavy period, and it's natural. Others are saying, no, no, no, it's all about Trump. What are you seeing in your numbers, both in the U.S. and in England? And do you think it's natural? Do you think we're going to bounce out of it or what?

Katharine Viner It's interesting, isn't it? Because Trump, I mean, so many theses have been and will be written about this, but Trump put journalists' lives in danger while making their business models soar. I mean, it's a really strange paradox. Yeah, I mean, our numbers are down on last year, but I'll give you an example, March that we've just been through, if you put 2020 out of it, would have been our biggest month ever. Yeah, but it's just that 2020 was so exceptional. So for us it was more the coronavirus crisis. I mean in March 2020, we had 350-million uniques, two-billion pages. I mean it's absolutely off the map. And so Trump was important to our traffic numbers, but I would say the global coronavirus pandemic plus Trump was more the story for us. But yeah, our figures are still strong. But it's just obviously year on year, they're not as strong.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And then how are you looking at this period? There's some news organizations that are hiring into the pandemic and actually growing. And then, of course, there are the struggling organizations that are cutting. Strategically, what do you see you all doing?

Katharine Viner Do you mean around science and health reporting?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz I mean in terms of growing your newsroom or shrinking your newsroom, or how are you preparing for the period ahead?

Katharine Viner I mean, I think our plan is to grow a bit next year. So I don't believe this is a moment for a dramatic shift, so we're increasing our American newsroom and our Australian newsrooms. We're increasing at a couple of strategic areas in London, such as audio and newsletters.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And it's really interesting that some are growing it great with great guns, which is fascinating and good for the industry. Speaking of growing, I'm going to dip into the questions real quick. Before the pandemic, there was news about the Guardian operating in Mexico and Spanish. Those of us who've tried foreign language publishing know the danger there. What is the latest on that project?

Katharine Viner We're not going to be doing it in Spanish, I'm afraid. We do have a partnership in Spain with a very good online website called El Diario.es. But we don't have a Mexican project live at the moment. I mean, I agree with you. There are lots of risks in translation, so we're very cautious around that.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz For those in the audience who've never tried it, No. 1, it's expensive to translate everything. No. 2, you're essentially starting from scratch because Google and the social media companies don't know who you are in a foreign language. So it's very hard to build audience. And then there's the whole building of a brand and trying to get the audience for your news that way. Many have tried. Some have succeeded, but many have failed. And I think most are trying small bore experiments as they try to find a way in, largely because for some publishers, they feel they sort of maxed out in their language. They feel they have all the English speakers they're likely to get, and they feel like.

Katharine Viner Really in the whole world?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Well, I think if you look at those CNN numbers, where they come in at 150 million a month sometimes, and there's 400 million Americans overall. And they're getting 150 over the age of 18. You do the math. They got to be thinking there's not a lot left. And so it's tempting to go there. But as I said, many have tried, and many have failed. To follow up to something you touched on earlier, but I think it's really important to a lot of the people on this call. Many of them are wrestling still with, or are beginning to wrestle with, the notion of how do you keep print vibrant? It still brings in the majority of revenues, but everybody knows they have to improve their digital report. We actually went to The Guardian when we met to actually learn from you all and what you were doing because you were considered ahead of the curve when it came to this. So what have you learned about how do you manage that transition and keep them both vibrant? And I know you don't like to give advice to other people about what they should do, but dammit, Katharine, give advice to people about what they should do.

Katharine Viner I do think it's working pretty well, I have to say. So what we do, we have a small print team who are really excellent. But the digital team sits with the desks, with the national desk, the international desk. And when I say "sits with," obviously, nobody really sits with anybody else at the moment. But that's the idea. So it's not really a conversation about digital first anymore. It's not really like that. What we want the desk to do, is to deliver fantastic digital journalism all day, and then make sure that they can make a good paper out of that at the end of the day. I mean, having run digital-only newsrooms in Australia and America, the simplicity of just having digital, just having one platform actually, I remember the days of just having print as well, just having one platform, there is a simplicity about it. Your days are much more relaxed, but I think we are the generation that's going to do both. And so we have to find ways to do both. I'm not one of these people who sort of wants to talk down print and so on. I think it's just another platform for Guardian journalism. We've got a fantastic weekly magazine. That's another platform.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz The the best I heard of this about print was actually the owner of the Post, Jeff Bezos, who was asked, and gets asked a lot, when is print going to die? And his

answer was always, well, you know, years and years ago, everybody rode horses, and horses were the key form of transportation. And then eventually it was replaced by something else, but people still ride horses. And so he views it as never going away and becoming a niche product at a very high subscription rate or cost that will be for whatever number of people who still wants to read print. And it's an interesting way of looking at it, because I was one who famously in 2003, predicted that all of print would be dead by 2011. So you really don't want to take any gambling advice from me or really any advice at all for me, because I got that completely wrong. So thinking of it as something that is never going away makes it actually a little easier as you try to plan things out.

Katharine Viner In the U.K., it's sort of distribution model. That's the stuff that might be the biggest challenge in the U.K. rather than just the desire for it.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Yeah. And in the U.S., which is a very home delivered product where publishers now work together to deliver each other's products. But what we're seeing is a publisher will drop Saturday as print and then everybody else has to drop Saturday because of it. And so we've created a little bit of a dependent delivery system that could come back and force strategic decisions, so it's quite complicated. So before we go to reader questions, I'm going to ask you to look ahead a little bit. The pandemic, good God, it has to end soon, hopefully, or we're all going to lose our minds. You know, Brexit did not destroy Europe. Things have calmed down there a bit. Can you tell the journalists here that maybe we're in for a period of calm, back to the days when you don't have to wake up in the morning and look at your phone and, oh, my God, the world is on fire again? Or will these daily eruptions, these hurricanes just continue but in other areas? What do you think's going to happen?

Katharine Viner I don't see calm coming at all, I'm afraid, Emilio. I mean, I think you used the word hurricanes. It's literal hurricanes. I think the climate crisis is the backdrop to all of these things you talk about. And unless that is tackled in a very, very serious way, I don't see any calm, and I think we know what that drives. It doesn't just drive destruction of the natural world, which is bad enough. It also drives sort of terrible consequences in a social and political way as well. So I think you could argue that the technological revolution and the climate crisis are what underpins all of these big shifts we've seen in recent years, but maybe that might be a bit of a stretch.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz No, out here we have fires because of global warming and living in it. Yeah. And the fire season, we saw what happened in Australia. It's terrible out here. Yeah. No, unfortunately, I think you're right. I used to tell people, "Remember when Obama was president and in his second term, and no one was reading anything, and everyone was bored? That's never coming again." So we should have been content during that period as opposed to being cranky. But yes, it does seem that the world will continue to be a series of hurricanes. All right. We're going to jump to the reader questions. And so here's one. What do you think is the role of freelance journalism in big companies in the future? Is this model gaining space or losing? And how does this work in The Guardian?

Katharine Viner Yeah, I mean, I think it's a tough world, isn't it, to be a freelance journalist at the moment. I think lots of people have been hunkering down. But we do use a lot of freelance journalists at The Guardian, and we have some really great people. Some of them are on sort of contracts and some of them just complete freelancers. And what I'd always say is think about the thing that only you know about, that only you can discover, or uncover. And, you know, build relationships with editors so that they trust your work when

you approach them. But I think it's tough, but you can definitely make an impact. Lots of big stories have come from freelancers.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Another question from the Philippines. I heard you mentioned advertising a while ago. How do you handle the separation of advertising partners, the company's advertising partners and the newswriters, in terms of influence in news writing?

Katharine Viner Yeah, I mean, they just have nothing to do with each other. We wouldn't allow them to have anything to do with each other. A few years ago, we had a big exclusive on a very, very big advertiser. And what happened then is that the advertiser pulled their advertising. It's not that we pull our story. So it's very, very important that that principle is maintained if you want to be in the public interest. The reporters, they might say, "Oh, you might want to know about this." But then we would never pull a story on that basis. It's very important that that's a rule.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz I think that it's an issue around the world that is very different by country and traditions, but I think that's one where England and the United States are quite fully aligned. Another question. For The Guardian, what was the biggest difficulty in reporting on COVID-19 and its effects? The fake news? The matrix created by the government to bring security? The immediacy of releasing information on social networks? How do you move among those pressures?

Katharine Viner Yeah, it's all of those things. I think the misinformation and how quickly some of those stories took hold, I think was pretty challenging. For me, it was how to get people to understand the scale of the deaths. So I remember at the end of March thinking all of these people were dying, and yet they were just numbers. And so we started several projects lost to the virus where we've profiled, four-thousand word profiles, of some of the victims lost on the front line in the U.S., where we track every single health worker has died of COVID-19. And that's a really brilliant resource as well. To try and humanize it. It's a strangely invisible pandemic. Even people say, "Well, that's a brilliant set of photographs from that hospital." But everyone's got masks on and PPE, and you can't really connect with them. So it's really hidden. and hidden because we're all locked away as well. So I think the challenge I've had is to communicate the humanity of it. And I think with the misinformation, it is to try and ensure that we've got brilliant science experts and to make sure that they bring that rigor to the reporting. So everyone might be getting excited about some new cure, or preventative, or whatever, and we'll make sure that it has that scientific lens on it. And we won't cover even if lots of other people are. Yeah, I'd say those were the big issues.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Yeah, I agree on photography. I think one of the great struggles of the early part of the pandemic was that most photographers in the U.S. were shut out of hospitals, and so no one saw the suffering. And those who doubted the importance of photography that shows the human condition, it was a great example of how we need to maintain the vibrancy and aggressiveness in our photography. Because people weren't seeing it, and I think it was easy to say it doesn't really exist.

Katharine Viner The trouble is even when you get in there, though, Emilio, it's hard to visualize. I mean, the other aspect actually, I think, was at the beginning, we were doing a lot of really hard reporting. A lot of reporting on who gets the contracts. What was called in Britain, chumocracy, but might be called in some countries corruption. But, you know, when contracts are awarded to friends of ministers and so on. We were doing a lot of hard reporting at the beginning, and to start with, we were the only ones doing that. And that felt

quite lonely. It felt like everyone else was trying to sort of say, "Don't worry. We'll all have some summer holidays and so on." I think the other papers hardened up as the pandemic went on. But at the beginning, it did just feel like that holding power to account bit had been sort of dropped elsewhere.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And the other big frustration, of course, is we have no idea how many people actually died from it or how many people actually had it right? We know the count is low. We know people weren't diagnosed. We know public officials all over the world are hiding numbers. It will be years before we actually know how many people truly were affected by this, so it's a little frustrating. All right. Let's do a staple of all conferences. What is your advice to an early career journalist trying to break into the industry?

Katharine Viner Well, first of all, good luck. It's really tough, but there's plenty of opportunities. And the main bit of advice I have is something I've already mentioned, actually, which is to find the bit that you know about. So, you know, it may be your hometown that news organization doesn't have reporter in, but something's going on there. Especially a subject from your academic life or from your hobbies. It may be only something that you know about, or it may just be a personal story. And so when you pitch that, they say, "Well, only this person knows about this." And then they get to know about you. I mean, the other thing is, I know it sounds really banal, but really, if you can manage to get sort of work experience or internships, whatever, really, really work hard and take on the lowest jobs. Don't be afraid to make the tea. People really like if you make them a cup of tea. I'm speaking for Britain and probably India, but people like it if you make them a cup of tea in the afternoon. Right. So then they start to say, "Well, who's this person making a cup of tea. Maybe we can give them a bit of research to do?" And you never know where it might lead. So don't be afraid of doing the lowly stuff, and become an expert in something that only you know about.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Another question along that theme. Does the Guardian accept interns who have work experience but didn't have the opportunity to pursue an undergraduate degree yet?

Katharine Viner The rules are quite tough on internships at The Guardian, and obviously we're not doing them so much at the moment during the pandemic. But really, it's an age. It's just you have to be 18. That's the main rule. But it's worth applying. But we don't have the elaborate schemes that you have in the U.S., and maybe we should.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Some business model questions. How much in terms of profile and pay do you value columnists and commentary, op-ed contributors?

Katharine Viner It's really interesting. I mentioned earlier that I've been doing lots of research on the history of the Guardian, and columnists are a pretty new invention. It was sort of in the 80s that they started to become dominant. And I would still always, always say that the most important role of a news organization is reporting. And I think the best kinds of columnists are those who don't just say, "This is bad." They say, "This is bad, and here is how you could do it better." You know, "Here are some ideas I've been reading about or I've heard about, or how things could be improved." So those who bring ideas, not just critiques, those who can give creative thought, not just an attack. I'm slightly over the sort of ranting kind of column. I think the hot take or even the cold take. Just the take. I think you can get that just about everywhere, and I'm much more interested in learning something new, getting new information or a new idea.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And one of the phenomenons, and now that I'm in the local news business, is how difficult it is for a general interest local columnists to get digital audience because they're constantly jumping from topic to topic, and the search engines really don't recognize them. So building up a digital audience for a local columnists in digital sometimes can be a really, really hard. Couple of questions about growth. One is in what areas is the Guardian growing in the U.S., and how is The Guardian looking to grow in international markets?

Katharine Viner Good questions. I mean, it's going great in the U.S. I think we've got a small newsroom well, several small newsrooms in New York, Washington, and Oakland, and I think they've really made an impact by focusing on climate, on public lands, on access to clean air, and water, and social justice movements. So I think they've really been making an impact, and we are expanding, as I mentioned, in a small way this year in the U.S. And I think it's going really well. Australia is also thriving. It's got a different kind of approach because it very much is a local news site in Australia. It really competes with, and in fact, beats a lot of local news sites there. But internationally, we have more than 70% of the Guardian's audience is outside of the U.K. The New York Times and Washington Post figures are much lower than that for outside of the U.S. So we already have a big international voice, and that is something I'm interested in looking at more. We have a very, very big audience in Europe. I think they really trusted us for our reporting on Brexit. There's obviously a lot of people who speak English as a second language in Europe. So Europe will be the most obvious place for us, but we have big audiences everywhere. Canada, New Zealand, obviously, but also India as well.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Second to last question, and it's a good one. What are your thoughts about two sideisms, which is the notion of giving the opinions of two people on an issue, even though the facts they're using on one side might not be factually true? What is your guidance for your reporters in that area?

Katharine Viner Yeah, we never do that. We've never done that. I think, again, it's not really part of the British journalistic tradition to do that, although the BBC did get into a bit of trouble about that over the environment. But certainly on the environment, we stopped quoting denialists a long time ago. And as I said, I think what we need to do is report what's true, rather than have one on the one side and one on the other.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And final question. Are you a Harry Meghan person or a William Kate person?

Katharine Viner You saved the most controversial question to last?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz Exactly, the hardest one at the end.

Katharine Viner And, you know, The Guardian is not a royalist newspaper. In fact, we are a Republican paper who has many times in our history campaigned for the end of the monarchy. So on that basis, who's most likely to bring the monarchy to an end? It would be Harry and Meghan, wouldn't it? But I've got to be careful what I say, Emilio. I don't want to end up in the tower, have my head chopped off.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz And with that, with head chopping, we will call it a day. Katharine, thank you so much for your candid answers to the questions. And with that, I will end this. I don't know how to end it. I assume someone will end it for me. Thank you all so much. Thank you. Bye bye.

Rosental Alves Yeah. Thank you so much. This was brilliant. I am fascinated. All right. Thank you. Bye bye. Well, like I said, I was delighted with the session. Thank you, Katharine, and thank you, Emilio, for this incredible insight. I told you all that this would be a fascinating session, and it was a fascinating session indeed. We all learned a lot. We are grateful to hear from both of you.

OK, so join us back here in a quick 30 minute break for our first workshop. Our workshop of today is how to develop secure communication with sources and a drop box for whistle blowers. This is a very, very important issue that newsrooms all over the world have been struggling with, so I think you should make sure your newsroom gets someone learning in the session that is about to start in 30 minutes, 11:30 Central Time of the U.S. Thank you very much, and see you soon.