

ISOJ 2021: Day 4, Panel

It's not the old op-ed page anymore: The growth of opinion in online journalism

Chair: [Katie Kingsbury](#), *opinion editor*, The New York Times

- [Karen Attiah](#), *global opinions editor*, The Washington Post
 - [Sewell Chan](#), *editorial page editor*, The Los Angeles Times
 - [Matthew Yglesias](#), *writer and editor*, Slow Boring
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Mallory Tenore Hello and welcome, everyone. Thank you so much for being here with us today. We are about to get started with our next panel, which will take a deep dive into opinion journalism. But before we do, I want to share just a quick few notes with you all. First, I want to give a big thanks to the Knight Foundation and Google News Initiative for sponsoring this year's ISOJ. I also want to make sure everyone knows that all ISOJ sessions, including this panel, are being simultaneously interpreted into Spanish thanks to support from Univision Noticias. So if you're tuning in via Zoom, you can click on the interpretation globe in the bottom right hand corner of the screen, select the Spanish channel, and then tune into the Spanish interpretation. If you run into any technical difficulties with Zoom, you can always tune in via YouTube, in English and in Spanish, and we'll post the links to those YouTube pages in the chat so you can easily access them.

So we're now going to turn our attention to our next panel titled, It's Not the Old Op-Ed Page Anymore: The Growth of Opinion in Online Journalism, featuring four journalists who are at the forefront of opinion news and journalism. The conversation will be led by Katie Kingsbury, opinion editor of The New York Times. As some of you may have seen, Katie wrote a piece this week announcing that The New York Times is actually retiring the term "op-ed" because it's a relic of an older age and an older print newspaper design. So I'm mentioning this one, because it's interesting, but also because at times during today's panel, you'll hear the speakers refer to The New York Times as op-eds, and that's because this panel was prerecorded. So just so you know, the speakers will be live after the prerecording, during the Q&A portion. So you're more than welcome to pose your questions to them, and they'll do their best to answer as many as they can. So now, without further ado, I would like to hand the conversation over to Katie. Thank you so much.

Katie Kingsbury Hello, I'm Katie Kingsbury, and I have The New York Times opinion operation. Thank you so much for being here. I was honored to be asked by ISOJ to moderate a conversation between this impressive group of opinion journalism. But first, Sewell, Karen, Matt, and I have prerecorded some thoughts on where we see opinion journalism headed online. Then we'll open up to your questions live. First, we have Sewell, the editorial page editor at the Los Angeles Times.

Sewell Chan Hi, Katie. Hi, everyone. It's really a pleasure to be back at ISOJ, which I haven't attended, I'm afraid, in about a decade, but I'm glad to be back here again. Thanks to the hospitality of Rosental and others at the School of Journalism at UT Austin. I've been reflecting a lot on the title. It's not the old op-ed page anymore. I'd begin by saying that, you know, history has a weird way of moving in cycles and repeating itself. When I think about the origins of the op-ed page in the early 1970s, and as everyone knows, the

modern op-ed page really goes back to the New York Times in 1970, and I had the privilege of working at the New York Times op-ed page for almost five years. It was a time in the early 70s that it's not dissimilar to that today, a time of very, very strong ideologies, a lot of ferment on both the left and the right. The threat of political violence was very, very real, perhaps even more real than it is today, and also really a sense that a broader array of voices need to be heard. So I think there are actually some great similarities between what's going on now, and what went on 50 years ago. That said, there are also profound differences. I think the whole hyperpolarization in America over the last 30, 40 years has in fact gotten profoundly worse. Trust in institutions has really eroded. When The New York Times debuted its op-ed page in 1970, there were still a very wide, broad swath of Americans who trusted The New York Times, regardless of their own political beliefs or views. Unfortunately, we're now at a time when a lot of people appear to be choosing or consuming news sources that confirm or affirm their preexisting ideology or disposition. And I think that's something very, very troubling that gets into the notion of filter bubbles, and it also gets into the notion of what it means to speak to a broad public. And that's a big, big, big difference from the early 70s.

I want to just talk a little bit about four trends that I see in op-ed journalism. The first relates to what I just talked about, the increasing ideological polarization of our times, which I think sometimes might be more reflected in elites than among everyone else. But it's been, of course, exacerbated. In 1970, we didn't have 24 cable news, much less 24-hour commentary on cable. We certainly didn't have the quick takes that Twitter offers, and we didn't have the kind of rapid response opinion journalism that we have today. So I think one of the things that opinion journalism has to do is help in some ways to rebuild trust in the public square. And by that I mean really the ability to focus in everything we publish on good faith arguments. So really taking kind of the traditional precepts around persuasion, rhetoric, use of evidence, use of logic, the ability to anticipate, and kind of prebutt countervailing arguments, and a general tone of civility that we would like to see modeled in our society as a whole. I think our op-ed pages have to do that. It is tempting, and perhaps it would be easy to kind of publish only the most extreme views, because frankly, those are often the ones that the Internet rewards. But I think it's very important that we avoid that. And that doesn't mean a kind of false equivalency. I think we're being called upon as journalists to really document some of the major trends of our time, and not be naive. Not think that the political parties are exactly equal when it comes to how much they care about voting rights, for example, or that the debate over climate change is really a debate over it's reality versus what to do about it. I think that age of false equivalency, of course, has come to an end and not too soon.

The second dimension I mentioned about op-ed pages is an increasing orientation, especially among regional publications like the L.A. Times toward an ethos of community and service. And by that I mean the threat to local news in America has been really profound. And everyone here is aware that something like half of newspaper journalism jobs in America have vanished since the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. And that has meant the emergence of so-called news deserts around the United States, and that has also meant an erosion of trust at the local level. So here at the L.A. Times, I'm really focused on trying to promote and publish the broadest array of California perspectives as possible, knowing that nationally known or federally known politicians and characters and commentators will already be amply reflected, frankly, in the pages of national publications such as The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal. What can we do to try to restore trust and community at the local and state level is an issue that interests me a great deal.

The third issue I want to discuss, something dear to my heart, which is the role of op-ed pages in kind of participating in the historical reckoning that we're going through right now over America's painful past with racism in particular. I had the great privilege of being the lead author last year of an editorial, the lead editorial with a project that we called Our Reckoning with Racism, which attempted through a large editorial that I wrote, and then some personal reflections by journalists, we really attempted to reckon with the Los Angeles Times's very fraught complicity with white supremacy and its history of institutional racism, really going back to the 1880s. And it was a project that we got a lot of internal support for. But more importantly to me, the response from readers was really tremendous. And I think a lot of people really respected that we had the courage and the introspection to be able to really look at our painful past, and apologize for it, and to assert that we're not just expecting people to accept our apology on its face. We will be judged by how well we do in the future in terms of diversity, inclusion, equity, better covering the diverse communities of the nation's most populous state and the nation's most populous county, which, of course, is L.A. County.

The fourth and final thing I'll mention is that I think op-ed pages have become more interesting, in part because at least at our page, we are trying to move away from the traditional reliance on elected officials and policy experts. There's still room for professors and scholars. They are a big part of what we publish still. But we're also increasingly searching for the real voices of people's authentic lived experiences, which is often times as important a form of authority as kind of traditional research scholarship. I'm very proud of the Voices from the Pandemic that we've published periodically over the past year in which we have sought the perspectives of essential workers, health care workers, immigrant advocates, people really kind of on the frontlines of this pandemic. And of course, it sometimes takes help from a seasoned editor in getting these folks to write polished prose. Understandably, they're not professional writers for a living. They are engaged in other vital tasks. But reaching out to folks whose voices might not traditionally be heard is one of the most important things an op-ed page can do today. And with that, I'm ready to close, and I look forward to our question session.

Katie Kingsbury Thank you. So next, we'll have Karen Attiah from The Washington Post.

Karen Attiah Thanks so much for having me. And this is actually my first time as ISOJ, so, again, thank you all for having me here. Sewell brought up so many great points, some of which I'll touch on and some of which I hope to expand a little bit more. So to sort of understand and where I'm coming at the discussion from, I am the global opinions editor and a writer for The Washington Post opinion section. And I have spent my entire career at The Washington Post, which has been almost seven years, in the opinion section, and before that I was a reporter for AP and various other outlets abroad. So with that, my experience has been, I would say, trying to bring very much a global perspective and also trying to cultivate, and court, and appeal to international audiences. And so with global opinions, which I helped to start in 2016, the idea was we wanted to reach English-speaking audiences in countries like India, countries in Europe, Africa. And with that, I think a large part of what we aimed to do and still do was really understanding the power of voice and the power of authenticity. I think to a certain extent, when it came to understanding the world in journalism and in academic circles, I think there was a push on my part to push back in some ways against what I think I would call a little bit of the interpreter class, particularly in Washington, where you have foreign correspondents, you have think tankers tasked very often to explain foreign press. I think in many ways global opinions was an attempt to disrupt that and say, why don't we just let people from the country and from these cultures speak for themselves about what's going on in their

countries, to speak to their audiences, as well as to speak to American audiences as well. So that has been really eye opening in terms of not only just understanding that the digital marketplace is a global marketplace, but also understanding that in many ways how we have tried to cultivate a broad spectrum of voices and opinions and backgrounds, we often find ourselves in the global opinion section saying many of these practices we can adopt for broadening, expanding how we cover America as well.

One thing I would say, as being a part of the Post and being at an American newspaper, trying to be a home for international writers, we often are getting writers who have not had opportunities or voice in their countries. We have had opportunities to basically in some ways be a refuge sometimes for human rights writers, activists who've been barred from being able to speak and write freely in their country. And as many people may know, the most tragic case of that was our work, my work, with Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist who was murdered in Istanbul in 2018. So I think where I've been seeing how we've approached international opinions, global opinions, is really, again, being very proactive about looking for those voices who don't get a voice or a platform in their countries whether it's due to authoritarian government. Whether it's due to, I'm thinking of Rokhaya Diallo, a Black female writer from France, who has written a great and provocative pieces specifically about racism in France. And we've seen how she often faces incredible pushback in France. So I think that that has been really eye opening and just recognizing that the field of the marketplace of ideas is a global marketplace of ideas, and we've seen that both in governments responding to pieces in the Post. And, you know, unfortunately, governments attempting to silence those who would work for the Post.

So I wanted to bring that kind of broader global perspective back to, I guess broadly where I see things going and perhaps what I wish I could see more of in opinion journalism. I think I see op-ed pages, and in general how we're following what's happening broadly in our culture and our world now, which is this reckoning, which is the power of those, again, who have not been given platforms, who frankly have been unheard, unseen or even embraced from the media and from discourse, now through the Internet, through social media, now have avenues to be able to express themselves, to challenge, to critique and to push back. And I think that is a good thing. And I think that this is something that is making a lot of institutions extraordinarily uncomfortable. But it means that change is happening, and those who have not traditionally been a part of mainstream discourse are now finding their way in. And so I think with that is where opinions journalism is finding itself in a bit of a quandary, or difficult questions to have to ask and to answer. As Sewell mentioned before, the genesis of the opinion page was with The New York Times, and I think we have to be honest for a reckoning about the history of even the opinion page, that it is a business product. There is journalism, and then there is journalism as the business product that we are selling to consumers and to readers, consumers. And I think where the discomfort, where the push and pull, where the anger in many ways is coming from is that we so often tell ourselves we are in the business of being in the marketplace of ideas. We are just here to provide a platform for this marketplace. And I think what the reckonings, particularly of the last year have shown us is that increasingly there are demands for understanding that in this marketplace of ideas, particularly in this country, ideas that have caused harm, racist ideas, sexist ideas, anti-LGBT ideas have been a part of that marketplace. That there is an audience for that. And so I think where we struggle is people pushing for journalism to move more towards harm reduction to those who have been marginalized, who haven't been heard, to those who are asking for different language versus the pull to try to appeal to as many people in that marketplace of ideas as possible. I don't know exactly how it's going to shake out. I think we're already seeing in major newspapers, ours as well, where even we are changing how we refer to various groups of

people. We are changing our language. There are questions, even as we're speaking right now in the police shootings of Black men and the reckonings over that, there are pushes from the outside to change how we even think about, talk about, taking the police version of things. So I think that this "we've got to hear both sides" as a business strategy in many ways is a journalism business strategy, audiences are starting to call for difference. And I think that this push and pull is going to continue happening, particularly as, frankly, our pages in many ways are still facing competition from whether it's right wing media, individual Facebook accounts, social media accounts, some other alternative forms of voices and viewpoints. I think our challenge is to add value. And in many ways, the way that we try to add value to the conversation, I think is to have fact checking, editing. And I think inclusion, and I think we're realizing that inclusion of various voices is not only just a luxury, but it is an imperative. But if we are going to remain relevant and remain adding value, we have to continue to uphold these standards. And with that, I think I'll close. And again, thank you all so much.

Katie Kingsbury Thank you so much, Karen. Just so much we get to talk about in the Q&A. You raised so many interesting points. And next, we have Slow Boring writer Matt Yglesias.

Matthew Yglesias Hi, I'm really glad to be here. Hope to maybe someday come in person to ISOJ. It's a great event. It's really my pleasure to be with this great panel of really distinguished people. You know, something I think about all the time these days is a quote from from Jim Barksdale, who was a businessman for a long time. He was at AT&T Wireless. He was at FedEx. He was one of the founders of Netscape. And he said there's only two ways to make money in business. One is to bundle, and the other is to unbundle. You know, and it's a joke. But I think it's very important to journalism and how things are changing because there's bundling, and there's unbundling. And they happen, and they come together for different kinds of reasons and at different levels in the stack as technology changes. My mother was a journalist of sorts. She worked in magazines. But she worked in the graphic design side of things, and she did it in the analog era. And that always left me with a sort of profound sense of the print journalism product as a kind of physical, manufactured commodity. Right. She had a little box that was full of Exacto knives, and she had all this rubber cement and these T-squares. And, you know, she would make a magazine as a manufactured good, in fact. And so the scale of a traditional periodical was driven by facts about manufacturing and distribution of physical products. Right. Once you had a printing press, and you were going to run it every day. And you had a fleet of trucks, and it was going to drive around to everybody in the metro area, it made a lot of sense to put just a lot of stuff in the bundle. Right. And that is the newspaper. It's like all the stuff you can think of coming in there. And the op-ed page, you know, as Sewell was saying, in its origin, was very much the idea that the newspaper had to become even more expansive, that you would have the opinions of the editorial board, but then you also needed these other opinions. And they had to all be inside your one newspaper because you wanted to encompass all points of view while still giving people a viewpoint on the op-ed page. And that's an idea that even as it's upheld in some ways by modern institutions, doesn't reflect how people consume content on the Internet. Right. You can just read some articles from one place and some from someplace else. You can surf around. You don't need any one website to sort of be your whole life and be everything that there is for you.

And so, what I am doing on Substack, and a lot of other writers there, is essentially unbundling. Right. And what you get as an unbundled self is you get much more brand clarity than you sort of can as a columnist at a bigger institution. You write solely under

your own name for an audience that follows you, and you are not sort of responsible for a larger institutional mission, or institutional brand, or institutional perception. It also means that I have a business that is not built on the kind of algorithmic platform Internet of Facebook and Google. And of course, you know, New York Times, Washington Post, L.A. Times, these are all subscription businesses at this point. But precisely because they are large institutions with lots and lots of other people working at them, there's still a meaningful distinction between which stories get more traffic and which get less. I know when I've written for these other places, they are counting that. They're sort of wanting to see what goes viral. That counts for something. In the one-person subscription marketplace, that's not really true. And you're not finding yourself programing for Google or programing Facebook. You're programing for your own group of readers. What you trade off for that is, of course, a much smaller reach. I mean, I feel very privileged by the number of subscribers that I've had. It's been more successful, frankly, than I anticipated when I started almost six months ago. But it's still not nearly as many people as I can reach if I write an op-ed somewhere or as I used to when I worked at Vox on a typical story. So that's a big sort of downside to solo publications and small kinds of things. To me, it's something that's offset by there's been this huge parallel increase in social media, which I think is very important when we think about opinion journalism. The fact that there are so many people sort of giving their takes all day, every day, on Twitter matters a lot. And some of us who are on there, I think you would consider us opinion journalists, but lots of the people doing that are celebrities. They're athletes. They're academics. They work in think tanks. They work in advocacy organizations. You have politicians out there. But it's an incredible blob of opinion, some of it very well informed, some very interesting, some of it kind of terrible. But it's out there all the time.

And so our question, as people who are trying to be professionals and trying to build businesses that are grounded in opinion, is how do you differentiate yourself from this kind of mall of opinions that are constantly being voiced out there on social? And, I think you hear us all who are on this panel talking about different ways to do that and different ways to rethink what the sort of meaning of the bundle for the modern world is. Sewell's talking about trying to make the L.A. Times a more distinctively California set of voices, because lots of people live in California. They need news. They need media. They need opinion. That's something that the L.A. Times can do that probably nobody else can do. Karen's talking about bringing in voices from around the world, the kinds of voices who are very interesting to Americans, but who I think even very eager, even very curious, Americans might not know who those voices are or where to find them. So that's a kind of service that The Washington Post can provide. I think the kind of writing that I do is in some ways more traditional than either of those ideas. Having columnists who live in Washington, and write about politics, and say senators do this or that, it's actually incredibly old fashioned. And it's so old fashioned that I think in some ways it may not make as much sense in the modern version of what digital newspapers are. And it's why I think the unbundling makes sense for me, makes sense for some other people who are in my kind of of situation. That it's an old fashioned kind of work that needs a new kind of business model. And it's the older institutions that are actually embracing newer visions of what kinds of voices they want and why. And it's sort of a fascinating, exciting time. I mean, I know obviously the intensified competition both for advertisers from sort of digital companies, and also just media organization against media organization has been traumatic, I think, to the businesses of so many journalists and of so much local journalism. It's been a scary time to be someone who cares about journalism. But it's also a very exciting moment. I think, particularly in the world of opinion, we're really realigning and rethinking, you know, what are big institutional opinion forums for? Right? Who are they for? What's out there? Given that people who are more established and sort of maybe people like me who've had a

more traditional access to the public forum can find new spaces for ourselves. Older spaces can be filled with new voices, and I think it's a very sort of intriguing back and forth. I don't know, different metaphors. Tug of war. Yin and yang. But I think it's a very exciting and interesting time for older voices to find new platforms, older platforms to find new voices. And I'm looking forward to hearing what everyone has to say about that.

Katie Kingsbury Thank you so much, Matt. All right, I think I am up now. Again, I'm Katie Kingsbury, and I run the opinion report at The New York Times. Last year, my team embarked on a process to better understand how our readers find and consume opinion journalism. The good news, they told us loudly and clearly how much they value and appreciate reading intelligent arguments. They told us they very much want to be challenged and discover unexpected viewpoints in our report. And it turns out they still seem to like our bundle, meeting that curiosity was one of the reasons the Times invented the first modern op-ed page 50 years ago, as everyone on this panel has mentioned. J.B. Oakes, one of my predecessors, was the driving force behind its initiation. Here's how he explained the need for it. "Diversity of opinion is the lifeblood of democracy. The minute we begin to insist that everyone think the same way we think, our democratic way of life is in danger." So from the beginning, democracy has been at the heart of what we do at New York Times' Opinion. But as so many of my fellow panelists have noted, that legacy also puts an enormous pressure on us to be constantly reassessing with the modern Opinion report can and should be, and it's really exciting. Today, my team includes about 140, really 150, staff journalists. And we do our work in 18 cities across four continents and in dozens of time zones.

So how do we work? Yes, we still produce our daily print pages and The Sunday Review. Here you can see some recent covers that our editors, our directors and designers have put together. And we are always proud when we can produce signature text pieces. It was an incredible honor back in July that as his life was coming to an end, Congressman John Lewis asked us to publish his final thoughts on the day of his funeral. With the utmost care and respect, we prepared his words for publication. I know I felt that day the full, impressive and validating weight of my job. I do feel like I have one of the greatest jobs there is. It is an absolute honor to publish a civil rights hero like John Lewis, and I am equally honored to produce an enterprise project like the one we undertook on the Amazon last year. That's the rainforest. We spent eight months pulling together this package, featuring more than a dozen experts on and from the Amazon region to tell us what's going on there today and to help imagine a better future. And then we paired those voices with poetry, photography, beautiful design, and this extraordinary graphic that charts the unparalleled environmental devastation and how it affects so many other parts of the world. We then translated the entire package from English into Spanish and Portuguese to make sure we could make it accessible to as many readers as possible. Much of the prowess we've built with big enterprises, pieces like the Amazon package, we then poured back into graphics design and reported investigative commentary and our daily report. Stuart Thompson, our graphics director, leads a significant portion of that work. In December, Stuart produced an easy to use interactive to explain when most Americans could expect to be vaccinated based on the available information then. Over 10 million people typed in their data, and I suspect many of them, many of us, are glad it turned off. He was off by several months. Then in January, Stuart spent weeks listening to QAnon and Trump supporters online and interspersed audio clips and texts to offer a rare glimpse into their world for the Times audience.

Speaking of audio, over the past year, we dramatically increased our investment into being at the cutting edge of what opinion audio can be, including the launch of two major shows,

Sway, with Kara Swisher and the Ezra Klein Show, and a relaunch of our first podcast, The Argument with Jane Coaston as its host. On the Argument every week, people who disagree with one another come together on the podcast to hash it out. Here's a clip of Jane interviewing Kevin Nadal on hate crime legislation following the shootings in Atlanta last month. "Broader acknowledgment, acceptance of hate crimes legislation and acceptance writ large, as you mentioned, by civil society groups and attorneys general, that seems like a net positive. But Kevin, you have a look of skepticism and this very visual medium. What makes you skeptical about hate crimes legislation as a tool for combating biased crimes?"

Our work in audio in many ways, builds on our award winning opinion video operation. This month, for example, we have had our fingers crossed waiting on pins and needles to hear whether our op-doc film A Concerto is a Conversation wins an Oscar. We've also seen some of our biggest impact, though, in the area of women and sports. In 2019, athletes like Alysia Montano and Alison Felix told their stories through opinion video of losing pay, and sponsorship, and health benefits after becoming pregnant. Within days, every major apparel company and the US Olympic Committee responded, changing their policies. Led by senior editor Lindsay Crouse, this important work, its impact and reach, offered us other opportunities, including working with Megan Thee Stallion to produce this video on her experience as a Black woman in the world. "What does it mean to be a woman of color. She's got to be strong because that's just the expectation. Loving herself, but not too much, because then she's conceded. Being his lady in the streets, and a freak in the sheets. Inheriting her grandmother's love, but always loving the wrong one. Talking for her man, but not with her friends. Being constantly told she's too much, or not enough. Constantly having to prove she's a victim because society sides with a man."

All of this work in different mediums and on different platforms is in pursuit of meeting our audiences where they are and hopefully building new relationships in the meantime. We're also constantly refining our strategies around social media, newsletters, comments, and on-site programming. One of the most popular features we started since the pandemic are regular chats and interviews with our columnists and writers on Twitter and Instagram. But we know that journalism doesn't travel the world in the clean packages, like the editorial and op-ed page of your. Remember those readers we've been speaking with this past year? Another thing they told us is they crave more differentiation, clarity and context. In particular, they want to understand when and why we're publishing outside writers. People who don't work for the Times, but bring direct expertise, personal experience and authority to an issue. To this end, we recently launched two design efforts to help. We now add longer bios to pieces to give readers more context around the authors of any given piece, illustrate their expertise on the subject they are writing about. And we've worked on what we internally call "story line modules" that show up on the page while you're reading and directing more clearly to the curated assortment of pieces we published on any given topic. After talking to readers, we knew we could provide more clarity through more intentional design, and there's more to come. In the mid 20th century, J.B. Oakes saw the future of opinion journalism, and The New York Times set its path for the next 50 years. I'm so excited to have my team be at the forefront of where its headed next. Although somehow I doubt Oakes would have ever predicted Weird Al Yankovic would be part of that legacy. So to finish, here's Weird Al, for The New York Times opinion section. (Plays video.)

I can't help but laugh every time I see that video. I hope you did too. And as I said at the top, now we'll have a live moderated discussion. Please feel free to ask questions in the chat.

Hi, everybody. We are now here to have a discussion with Sewell, and Karen, and Matt. Hey, guys, thank you again for taking this time today to talk to me a little bit more about opinion journalism. And I actually wanted to start with a question from one of our viewers today, just because I thought it was a pretty smart one. He was addressing this question to Matt, but actually would love to hear everybody's opinion on it, in a world where everyone has an opinion, what is the difference in the quality of opinion articles from the media versus opinions from social networks? Is there disorder and chaos? And maybe, Matt, you want to kick us off for how you see that?

Matthew Yglesias Yeah, I mean, you know, on one level, I think social networks have been great for bringing a wide range of opinions to the fore. We hear from more people in all walks of life. It's just been a great opportunity for people in academia, places like that, to sort of share their expertise in a way that's a little bit lower lift, I think, than doing formal writing. So there's incredible value to that kind of thing. At the same time, I mean, if you work with editors and do something as your full time job, there is an opportunity to both do reporting that focuses specifically on the question you're trying to answer and also to work on, frankly, just the quality of your expression to create something that is good to read. It's really clearly written, things like that. I mean, I think that's what editors are doing all the time. I think is what professional writers are doing. Right. We're trying to create not just like quote unquote, good opinions or even have some kind of factual knowledge, but actual written works that are valuable, and useful to people, and clear, and fun, and engaging, and things like that. And some people are great at doing that on an amateur business, but like it's hard. And I think that's the real value of professionalism.

Katie Kingsbury Karen and Sewell, do you guys have anything to add there?

Karen Attiah I think it's understanding that it is about opinion, but writing itself is a craft. And I think what institutions who have staffs of editors try to do is to try to, I think in general, we like to think we're trying to elevate the craft so that we can elevate the quality of the national and international discussions that we're having about issues. And so I think that's where the craft of the journalism is attached to that. Because, yes, everyone has opinions, but it's also about expressing it in a way, bolstering it in a way, challenging it in a way for it to be expressed in the best way possible to as many people as possible. I agree with, Matt, and another plus one for editors. We all need editors.

Sewell Chan I definitely see the opinion pages as the digital extension of what used to be the public sphere, which I think is very, very much under threat. I mean, let's face it, our discourse is pretty coarse, pretty degraded, pretty degrading sometimes. And if you just want to hear noise, cable news and Twitter are really good at producing noise. I think ideas journalism at its best can really be about synthesizing and really kind of presenting ideas. My favorite experiences as an op-ed editor has been when a reader tells me, "You know, I didn't think about it that way before. You're making me see things in a new way." Because it's not even so much that the facts are revelatory. That's nice to have, but our job isn't the news pages. Right. By and large, we don't conduct original investigations. Rather, we're trying to take the complexity of the world and kind of putting an interpretive frame on it. And the best columnists give a very consistent interpretive frame and are really, really fun to read. I used to say when I was at the New York Times working with the columnists, the columnists are like your old friends, you know. Well, they may not say something that shocks you, but you really want their take on it because you're familiar with them. And you always think they're a thoughtful person whom you want to hear from. And the challenge right now, of course, as the questioner gets at, is what's the role of the institution? What's the role of the editors? Well, I hope we'll have more time to talk about this. But I think the

Substack model and the idea of the talent, or the creators, the thinkers, the columnists going straight to the readers without any intermediation, you know, no one like Katie, or Karen, or me is a very, very interesting notion, and we'll see how scalable that is.

Katie Kingsbury Yeah, I mean, all of you in your talk touched upon this idea of whether or not a news organization should present readers with a wide range of ideas and viewpoints, including those that they may or may not disagree with. That is core of what we do in times opinion every day. And I'd argue it's pretty core to the democratic discourse in the United States and far afield from there. Karen, I was especially interested in your mention of this concept of harm reduction, and I'd love to hear from all of you a little bit more about how you see that mission evolving and how the news cycles that we've all lived through over the past few years has changed your thinking on it?

Karen Attiah Yeah, I've thought about this a bit more and thought about the reckoning, if you want to call it, with past and present harm, that the media has done to particular communities. We are having these discussions about language, about language that is more inclusive, about language that is more specific to communities that have been harmed in some ways by being lumped in together as a monolith. So I think that the op-ed pages, just as our language in general in society is changing about harm reduction, about identity, this is where there's opportunities for, as the L.A. Times has done, to take a look at the past and to rectify that. But, yeah, I think this is a question that we have to really grapple with. What do you do when, again, there are harmful ideas out there to groups of people? What is our responsibility when it comes to harm? I'm not sure. We're always quite there yet on the right answer.

Sewell Chan Yeah, I would add to that with the idea of a neutral sphere with everyone having equal access to platforms to offer their ideas is kind of idealistic and mythical at best, right? We all know from working with op-ed sections that the people who think their ideas are worthy enough of being published, tend to be male, tend to be white, tend to be older. All of us at the legacy publications have had to make a lot of effort to make sure that a younger generation of scholars, and thinkers, and activists, much more diversity along gender, race, sexual orientation, et cetera, that there's a greater diversity of voices in our pages. That's something we really have to work at. I do want to tackle a couple of the issues head on. I think over the past couple of years, a couple of prominent op-ed incidents really across different publications, have really foregrounded the notion of are there some ideas that are too extreme or unacceptable? I think, yeah, there are. I mean, there are some. We're not going to publish someone who believes in Hitler's ideas. But I think that's really an extreme that's actually not very helpful in thinking about the day to day. Instead of thinking about are some ideas acceptable or not acceptable, and that is a question, but that's rarely the one that we're encountered with, what I think we're more likely to be encountered with are ideas that are provocative, or challenging, or difficult, or controversial. And our job as editors is to help the writer, whether we personally agree or not is not relevant. Our job is to help the writer adduce evidence to make the strongest possible, logical and persuasive case. But it ultimately has to be a case that is grounded in logic, persuasion and evidence. And if we do that, I actually think a lot of ideas that are provocative or difficult can enter the discourse. And yeah, they'll provoke people or upset people. But we've done our duty as opinion editors because we've at least exposed our readers to the broad range of views that are out there.

Matthew Yglesias Something that I think is interesting as we develop that, is there's always a census of like what's in the bounds and what's out of the bounds, right. Nobody tries to put together an opinion section that's like a totalitarian perspective, and also

nothing is a total free for. And I think we traditionally had a media structure in which the views of nonwhite people were very sort of decentered and marginal, even when they were occasionally sort of allowed in. And there's been a big amount of progress on that, an incredible amount of emphasis, on trying to do diversity that way. At the same time, we've had a change in politics so that voting behavior and ideology has become much more correlated with educational attainment. Right. It wasn't true in the 1990s that people with college degrees differed systematically in their political opinions from people without. So we've come to have a situation where the question of like what is the relevant community, has, I think, become relevant. Right. And a lot of ideas that are common sense among the social strata of people who work in journalism are actually quite a bit off center of American politics. And a lot of ideas that are very mainstream in American public opinion seem quite right wing to people who are working in media and working in journalism, and it then becomes a dilemma for the people who are sort of the stewards of this. Do you proclaim an idea that you have good reason to believe 45% of the public agrees with, but it strikes your team as incredibly outré? And I don't know. I never worked at a big newspaper like you guys did. I mean, I got my start at a small circulation ideological magazine. And we would sit around the table at the American Prospect and literally say, "No, we're not going to print that." And, you know, the bounds were actually quite narrow. You couldn't say it's good that people are allowed to buy Japanese cars in the American Prospect, but it was very narrowly focused and deliberately so. But I think the rise of educational polarization has created a sort of harder task for the general public sphere enterprise.

Sewell Chan Matt, I completely agree. But I would add it's not just educational polarization. It's regional. There's an urban rural divide, and all of us are associated with cities. Right. By its nature, big publications are associated with big cities. A wide swath of America, we know that one of the biggest predictors of whether someone supported Trump or not is whether they come from a rural or less populated area. So there are many, many axes of of division now that I agree mean that we're not reaching necessarily the broad public that we used to. Some of that you could say is the mass media's fault, but there's also many ways in which our society has been stratified, and kind of fragmented, and diced and sliced demographically in ways that are not fully under our control.

Katie Kingsbury Although I would also add though, Sewell, that I think that we as journalists tend to look at the world in binary way of the left right political spectrum. And that often, I'm sure this happens in your newsroom as well, but we're often saying to ourselves, "Do we have a conservative viewpoint?" Most people don't operate their lives that way. Their views are much more heterodox. They're much more situational and circumstantial than feeling that ideological pull that we sometimes can get very obsessed with.

Sewell Chan I completely agree with that. I'll just say one thing brief. I find that most often, for example, with fierce debates in California over land use and affordable housing. It's not really left right. It's really about how much do people value kind of density, which often comes with affordability, but also comes with growth, and letting developers build. Versus kind of an emphasis on privacy or California way of life, less density. And each side actually, says they have very good values, and I think they do. But ultimately, those values clash when it comes to the question of how should cities build, or how do we try to lower rents? Just one also very quick story. Probably the thing I've been most burned for was running a page after the election was called was letters from Californians who supported Donald Trump. Now we carefully fact-checked, verified, edited the heck out of every letter. There was nothing unreasonable being said. There was no one openly espousing racism. Several of the writers were people of color. But nonetheless, we got an intense blowback

from our readers, basically saying, "How dare you platform, legitimize, or even show that it's acceptable to have done this." And I was like, "Jeez, 75 million people voted for Trump, folks, including 6million in California." I may disagree with their voting decision, but I can't pretend they don't exist.

Katie Kingsbury We did that in 2018, you may recall, after Trump's first year, and we got some similar feedback. Karen, I feel like you want to jump in. I'm sorry for cutting off.

Matthew Yglesias Look at the same time that all of this has been happening, we're still in a business. Journalism is still a business, and we're operating in an attention economy. And our op-eds are competing not only with each other's pages, but we're competing with that. We're competing with podcasts. We're competing with people who have viral threads on on Twitter. And so I think a lot about this idea that do we reach into some of these segments and fragments of these siloed places that cater to, again, you know, conspiracy theories, and what I would argue is a phobia based on...I think a lot of the rationale might need to change. Because I would hear we talk a lot about we want to expose our readers to what people are saying and people are thinking out there. Because if they don't get it here, I mean, they're already going somewhere else to be affirmed, seen and heard. I just think that these questions, especially as as the field becomes much more crowded, much more segmented, that basically that pressure in some ways... Maybe it will be less because Trump is out of office, we tend to blow with the wind sometimes politically. But I'd be very curious to see how we're going to react to, especially as more and more individual creators and writers can strike out on their own and develop audiences that way, and we see value in their numbers, how we'll grapple with that.

Katie Kingsbury I want to turn to audience questions, but I think you actually anticipated one more question I had for this group, which is how do you think political and more generally opinion discourse is going to change in the post-Trump era? What is the big thing you see changing about our jobs and how we do them over the next three years?

Karen Attiah I think already I feel like we're kind out of the scramble to cover whatever Trump has done or said on Twitter. I mean, I think we can't underestimate the difference in atmosphere now that the former president does not have access to Twitter. I think speaking as someone who we did build the infrastructure with Global Opinion during the Trump years, and we did have writers that weren't just writing about politics, but developing their voices on other things, I think we're going to see whether or not businesses or op-ed pages really made those investments while our traffic numbers were up, while the ratings were up, while people were subscribing. How are we converting that into efforts to, again, I think getting back into, I would like to see and I hope to see a lot more efforts into, just in general, we should be doing this all the time, but into really developing writers, but developing audiences. I think there's a lot more understanding of the importance of, frankly, understanding digital communities, and audiences, and what those conversations are like, and how our journalism fits into that some more. In some ways, like more of an audience first type of ethos. Almost rather than writer first if that kind of makes sense. I think now legacy is sort of like, "Oh gosh. Audience editors matter. Social media really matters." And we're catching up very well, I hope. Now what are people interested in that doesn't have to do with traditional left right politics?

Sewell Chan I think we have to try to empower a whole bunch of people who haven't traditionally thought of themselves as writers, and I think that's actually one of the most healing things we can do for society. People who are incarcerated, people who are in poverty. In a way, like ours is a very narrative era. Right. When the power of storytelling is

driving everything that we're seeing in media, regardless of the medium, whether it's the podcast boom, newsletters, video. The voice and the opinionated voice, I think are more powerful than ever before. I think an organization like The New York Times is the leader in kind of really taking that idea of a powerful voice, expressing it through so many different kinds of medias other than just text. And that's to really be commended. I think that's the wave of the future. I do think that there's a lot of left right things that do need sorting out. And it could be I'm saying that because I'm a political junkie, but I think a big part of the future is really what principled conservatism will look like. I'll get to liberalism in a moment, but I think there's a real sense right now that the center hasn't held in terms of conservative thought. I personally find that very destabilizing for our democracy. I don't know of an advanced democracy that doesn't have a stable center right party at the core of its politics. I don't think that ours is stable right now. I think it's very factionalized. And there's so much uncertainty going into the midterm elections, much less even thinking about four years from now. The Democrats have a different challenge. The Democrats are trying to bring a big tent back, much like the New Deal coalition. That trend too will have a lot of contradictions, and fissures, and tensions, and fractures, particularly around the relative emphasis on class versus race and other aspects of our identity. So that's going to heat up. But I will agree with Karen. I think, look, my view is pretty clear on this. I thought Trump had a negative influence on American intellectual and spiritual life. And by that I mean that even when he had interesting ideas, which was not infrequent, the way in which he set about uttering or expressing them didn't really allow for the kind of helpful, for the kind of civic, civil reasoned discourse, talking about principle and about values that we need to actually work through our hardest stuff. Because ultimately, even though all of our opinion pages are fact checked and the facts are crucial to the foundation, but ultimately what makes opinions so interesting is when they are competing or clashing values. And that we're trying to have a discussion as a society about which values we will share, we wish to give greater priority to.

Matthew Yglesias You know, I think one of the big things that opinion journalists do in opinion sections do is they help people organize the landscape of political debate, to understand which issues go with which. Sewell was talking about housing debates in coastal cities, where some of what people contest is what should the land use policy be? But some of what they contest is like, how should we think about this? Right. Is it right wing? Because you're saying, well, there should be less regulation. Or are you saying this is progressive? We're embracing change, or embracing urbanism, we're embracing diversity. Right. And you could do it either way. Like, you can make the argument either way. But something that columnists do and that opinion sections do is sort of paint the landscape in particular ways for people. Trump was the least ideasy, I think, major political leader that we've had. But he scrambled the chessboard a lot. He's provoked a significant realignment among the mass population, caused people to question is free trade really something that goes with low taxes? Right. How do we want to think about these kinds of things? And there's an effort I mean, on the right, I think in particular, to try to sort of backfill that. Like, can we make up a Trumpism that makes sense, that appeals to the same voters, but like works as policy and legislation. And that's really interesting to watch. And then there's an effort by progressives to sort of incorporate a wider range of viewpoints to incorporate diversity in a real way, but then to say what does that mean as a governing agenda as opposed to just a sort of a set of ticks or rhetorical modes? And, you know, Joe Biden is really old. It's almost like a placeholder figure, where a great way for Democrats to agree to disagree is to be like we're going to bring back the vice president from the last administration and try to work out what happens next. But that's what I think we're doing in opinion spaces, is trying to organize what's going to be the next big debates in American politics.

Katie Kingsbury Yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. So let's turn to some questions from the audience. Karen, the first one here is for you, who asks in each country, do you look for only one person who gives an opinion on all issues or more than one columnist who does so on many different issues?

Karen Attiah That's a great question. I mean, I think in general, you always want to avoid the one person to speak for all people. I want to avoid tokenization, basically. But I think it speaks to what Sewell, and Matt, and what we've all said is that, you're looking for people who consistently and professionally are able to express themselves in a way that has granted them an audience. I mean, I think for my work with Global Opinions, it did start off, just part of it, is just an infrastructure issue on our end. I think people underestimate how much time it can take to really be able to develop a relationship, develop a beat, develop expertise, to work with someone to help them find their voice. It can take years, honestly. So I and the team we really took time to really invest in, say a writer from India for almost for four years now. And of course, she has her viewpoints. We often have people who write in and say, "Hey, I'm from India. I disagree with what she has said." And we ran those too. So it's not that we're looking for one representative who can speak for the whole country, but often it is from places where we just often don't have at all anyone from that place or that region who can speak to from a very ground level, how they see things. So, again, right now, I mean, looking at COVID in India, there's room for so many viewpoints on how India got to this place. So we just do as much as we can. But we are always open. Our inboxes are open for people and for pitches. So I think we're always like scouting for who could work. But again, it is about people who, and I agree with Sewell, that not everyone is a writer, but they have a story to share. They have a narrative to share. And so there are those who are consistently great with writers, and they meet our needs for deadlines, and for all of that. But we do our best to try to find as many people as we can.

Katie Kingsbury Thank you. The next one is for Matt. She says, "You note that your work is now unbundled, but your work is hosted on and you are paid by a platform Substack, that some are leaving because they allege it is benefiting from and encouraging a culture of anti-trans bigotry. Can you speak to that?"

Matthew Yglesias Yeah. I mean, for starters, I'm not paid by Substack. Substack is a payment processing method. So I think that this larger question of do people want to associate other writers with the platforms that they've jointly used. This is something that, you know, requires a little bit of harder thought. Right. Because we are all using a lot of the shared elements of the Internet infrastructure to communicate with our audiences, whether that's Amazon Web services or stripe to process payments. It's Verizon and Comcast to deliver the broadband out there. No institution is like genuinely an island from the kind of underlying set of plumbing. I think that normally the idea right, when the L.A. Times, or The Washington Post, or The New York Times comes out there, they are trying to create a cohesive editorial brand. And so it's completely fair to look at the pieces of content there and say, "OK, this influences my assessment of the brand." And the brand could be more or less expansive. It can define itself in various ways. But that's what the brand is doing deliberately. Right. And it is trying to create a bundle that is more than the sum of its parts. The New York Times is not just a collection of writers and the particular editors that they work with. It's a thing, right? It's too big to be like the brainchild of any one person, but it is a team. And that's the idea of the product. I don't think that Substack is like that. I wouldn't suggest that anybody browse Substack. It's like a lot of people out there up and writing and doing whatever. But I do think that there is a specific activist movement to try to say that certain viewpoints are really, really bad. And we want to marginalize the people who

have that viewpoint by any means necessary. And that means sort of trying to hound every conceivable platform into kicking them off. I just don't think that that works. I mean, I don't think it works as politics. I think that you are going to end up sort of pushing the audience into weird directions if you try to impose those kinds of restrictions on people. So, yeah, I mean, that's basically what I think about it. I mean, it's fine if writers want to go someplace else, like Substack is not the be all and end all of authoring tools. I might be someplace else in the future. So, you know, good for everybody there. But I don't think it makes sense to say that we can't share tools with people whose views we think are really bad.

Katie Kingsbury Thank you. We have so many questions and so little time. So does opinion journalism include more original reporting than it once did in your experience? What are the pros and cons for this? Do you think this makes it harder for readers to tell the difference between news and opinion? I'll speak for myself for just a moment, which is we absolutely do have probably more reporting in some of our opinion pieces. One of the major parts that I always tell people, though, is that perhaps because we're being more transparent about our reporting. There was always reporting in opinion pieces. In fact, the best reported commentary has had reporting at the heart of it. Think of someone like Nick Kristof who works with me still today. That is why he is a multi Pulitzer Prize winning columnist, is it's largely to do with his reporting. But I do think we owe our readers more transparency about where we're getting our facts from, where we're getting our opinions from, how we're coming up with opinions. And I think that's particularly true for editorials, which when I arrived at the Times, very, very rarely quoted people in them. And I think that's because we have to gain trust with readers at every turn. And so that is something that we emphasize actually is showing our work and trying to be more transparent. It also goes back to some of the things I talked about in my presentation about labeling and making sure that differentiation between news and opinion was crystal clear. But we have just one minute if others want to jump in. No. OK, well, let's take one last question. We've touched upon this a little bit. There are kind of two questions here. One is how many op-ed submissions do you vet daily? As Mallary mentioned, we at the New York Times don't have op-ed anymore, and we have new submission process. And then the other is how do you deal with opinions that are based on misinformation or disinformation and only serve to spread it?

Karen Attiah I'll take this second one. That's easy. We don't run it. Although I think to a certain extent, and to answer the first question, we actually had a meeting about this, so please don't quote me, you probably see as a section and then it's different from every individual editor because I know I'm writing more. I still get probably 10 to 20 pitches a day. So, let's just say ballpark from what kind of come across my desk, I could probably have access to about like 60 or 70 just pitches a day or so. And then meaning if we only can choose maybe one to maybe as a guest to one run that week, I think basically when everything calculates out we have like a 2% acceptance rate of outside op-eds. So it's very tough. That's also part of the reason why we do have to have curatorial standards because so much is coming across our desks. So I say that in defense of the editor tribe also. We don't always have a chance to get to get back. We are flooded with pitches and with drafts.

Katie Kingsbury I think being flooded with pitches, and drafts, and opinions is the place to end on. I'm getting the signal to wrap up. Thank you so much, Karen, and Sewell, and Matt. I really appreciate you joining us today. And I'll hand things back over to Mallary.

Mallary Tenore Wow, thank you so, so much. This was a fascinating panel with such incredible insights. I know I personally learned a lot from it, and I particularly liked what you were saying about how opinion news is changing, and how it's elevating a diversity of

voices, and how it can really create meaningful awareness and change, particularly at this moment in time. So thank you so much. I'm sure this will be a great ongoing resource for journalists, and students, and journalism educators. So for those of you who want to access it after the fact and share it on social media, you'll be able to find a recording of this session in English and in Spanish on our ISOJ YouTube page. So thank you again.

We have a break now before our next session, and we hope you'll take this time to unwind and join us and other ISOJ'ers and speakers in our Wonder room, where you can really network and just chat with other people who are attending this year's conference. So we'll post a link to that Wonder room in the chat. And I also want to mention that we have a pick and post page on our website ISOJ.org. And on this page, which we'll link to in the chat, you can download really fun ISOJ geographics and post them on social media with our #ISOJ2021 hashtag. So we hope you'll keep the conversation going on social media and in the Wonder room, and that you'll join us back here at 4:00 p.m. Central Standard Time for our next panel titled Cracking the Code for Local News Through Networking and Collaboration. So this is going to be a really strong panel made up of six journalists, and it will be led by Karen, Rundlet of the Knight Foundation. So you won't want to miss it. We'll see you then.