2026 John Breaux Symposium: American Media at 250

Hosted by LSU's Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs and held at the Lod Cook Alumni Center on campus on March 20, the 2026 John Breaux Symposium tackled the theme of "American Media at 250" — a nod to the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This year's program featured national voices and innovative scholars who examined how media has informed and influenced civic life over the past two and a half centuries and what that history can teach us about today's media landscape. While celebrating this major national milestone, this event also explored challenges and opportunities facing the country moving forward.

In partnership with the Louisiana America 250 Commission, the 2026 John Breaux Symposium encouraged thoughtful dialogue among its 205 registered attendees about the role of media in American democracy — past, present, and future.

The following transcript has been condensed and lightly edited for flow and clarity.

Welcome & Opening Remarks: The Press & Political Communication Then and Now

- Former U.S. Sen. John Beaux, special appearance via video message
- Michael DiResto, Director of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs

Michael DiResto: Good morning everyone. My name is Michael DiResto. I'm the director of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at the LSU Manship School of Mass Communication.

Ordinarily, at this moment, I would welcome you to this event, but I'm not going to do that. Instead that task will be performed by someone far more appropriate to the occasion. So with that, please turn your attention to the screens for former Senator John Breaux.

John Breaux, via video recording: Everyone, welcome to Baton Rouge and the LSU campus for the John Breaux Symposium on the media. Today's topic I think is very important considering everything that's been happening in our nation's capital and throughout the United States. I want to thank Michael for helping to set all of this up and allowing me to welcome everyone through this recording. I think we all are very familiar with the Thomas Jefferson quotes that were left for him to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government. He would not hesitate to take the ladder immediately.

If you want to bring it up to a more modern point of time, my former colleague in the United States Senate, Senator John McCain from Arizona, who always had an interesting relationship with the media, however, he said, "We need a free press. We must have it. It's vital. If you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free and many times adversarial press. And without it, I am afraid that we would lose so much of our individual liberties over time. And that's how dictatorships get started. They get started by suppressing free press."

I think that what we see today is some challenges that I would hope all of you would address at this conference in one form or another. I note that President Trump met with the FCC chairman, Brendan Carr, and after they met, Brendan Carr came out and said broadcasters must operate in the public interest or lose their license.

We see situations in our own government where Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, says you must sign a pledge now, if you're going to be able to participate in our press conference here at the Department of Defense. A pledge that says you cannot use any material that we don't authorize. He also said in his press conference, that the sooner they also take over CBS, the better off everyone will be. Now we also see the government stopping to fund public broadcasting. We see instances where the government is targeting law firms who represent people that the government does not agree with. You see President Trump saying that we should fire Stephen Colbert. CBS, if they don't fire him, could lose their license.

This cancel culture, these threats, are very serious to a free press which is the backbone of a real democracy in this country. So the question is how do we stop these attacks on the media? I would suggest that it cannot be done by politicians alone. Politicians tend to follow rather than lead. Mahatma Gandhi said, "There goes my people. I must follow them."

Too many politicians in Washington are waiting to hear what the latest poll will tell them they ought to be doing before they take the steps in order to do it. I would suggest that today it is more important than ever that people like yourselves gathered here at this conference–academics, professionals in the media, and people who are in charge of educating

the public. Be strong in your ability to convey how serious this print is and to convey to the general public importance of maintaining a free press. When the general public becomes agitated by what is happening, they will convey that message to the politicians and then the politicians follow the lead of the public and do what is right for society. So this conference has the ability to make an outstanding contribution to ensure a free democracy and a free press, the backbone of a free democracy.

So my best wishes to all of you for a very successful conference and I hope to see what you produce as a result. Thank you very much.

Michael DiResto: Okay – then: wow, Senator Breaux – pretty fired up. And just as passionate as ever. We were so thrilled when he agreed to make a special video for this occasion. I am personally grateful because, years before I came to the Reilly Center, I was Press Secretary for Congressman Richard Baker while both men served in Louisiana's Congressional delegation. It's a time I look back upon fondly, when members from different political parties worked across the aisle, and effectively, to put the people's interest above party.

Finding common purpose while asking tough questions has been key to the John Breaux Symposium since it was established in the year 2001, as an annual gathering that brings students, scholars, journalists, citizens and taxpayers together to conduct timely and impactful conversations.

The Symposium began a year after the formation of LSU's Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs, whose mission statement declared that "Good government, good citizenship, a vibrant economy, and a healthy democracy depend on the quality of our public discourse." In fulfilling this mission, the Reilly Center's approach to research is to be non-partisan, fact-based, and data-driven, and, when it comes to programming, to be thought-provoking and reflecting multiple perspectives.

Similarly, from the very beginning, the purpose of this event was ambitious and clear: to elevate that public discourse around important topics at the intersection of media and public policy. That mission and purpose were worthy goals twenty-five years ago – and they remain even more vital today.

This symposium has always been about serious ideas and serious questions. But it has also always been about the health of our democracy, the quality of our public life, and the responsibility we all share to think carefully about the forces that shape them.

Democracy does not depend only on laws, institutions, and elections. It also depends on how people receive information, and how they use it. It depends on how truth is debated in the public square. It depends on whether citizens are informed, engaged, and able to separate fact from fiction, substance from spectacle, and principle from noise.

In other words, media is not just part of the story of American public life. In many ways, it helps write the story. That understanding is what gave birth to this symposium. And that is why it has endured for twenty-five years as the signature annual event of the Reilly Center.

And so now we kick off this year's symposium: *American Media at 250* – a theme that points to the approaching two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

The scholars and thought leaders gathered with us today will not just lead us in reflection and discussion. What is said here today represents the first fruits of important research, forming the basis for papers, books, and other publications to help future generations understand the connection between media and democracy, and the civic health of both.

Which brings me to the subject of my introductory remarks: *The Press and Political Communication, Then and Now…*. The "then," of course, meaning the Founding era.

At the outset, though, I must confess that, of all today's speakers working for a university, I am the only one without a Ph.D. Now, I came "this close," mind you, here at LSU no less, before being drawn away to a twenty-five-year career on the "other side" of media: campaign strategist, government and political communications, public policy and advocacy. Whether that experience gives me insight to speak knowledgably about this subject, well, you could also say that I stayed at a Holiday Express last night. Or as my wife might say, I went through a long and Quixotic "Founding Father phase" of my obsessive reading, rendering me an "amateur historian" or "unpublished scholar." I know just enough to be dangerous, or at least as much to bore my friends and family. But hopefully not bore you. If nothing else, there is the musical *Hamilton*. I've attended the production twice in person. I've watched the movie more than a dozen times. And I've listened to the soundtrack about a gazillion times. To the point that I could sing for you all the songs by heart *right now*. But I will save that suffering for you, and myself that indignity.

As we stated in our promotions, today's event is not just a reminiscence about what happened 250 years ago. Earlier this year, the constitutional scholar Yuval Levin encouraged his readers to look upon the 250th not as a birthday, not a celebration of a date on which *something came into being* – but rather, with an analogy more akin to a wedding anniversary, when "what we commemorate is a decision to start something together."

He added: "An anniversary, in this respect, is a better analogy than a birthday. It marvels not only at our country's beginning but at the span of time over which it has persisted—through affection, commitment, effort, and no small measure of luck. And a wedding anniversary is not merely retrospective. It suggests that with continuing devotion, the union can deepen and strengthen."

Now, I would add that an anniversary also offers an opportunity to reflect on when we weren't at our best, the times when we stumbled and fell short of our civic vows, so to speak – but then also to look back upon those periods of struggle, to see if there are patterns similar to today, and to learn how they were overcome *before* to inform how they might be overcome *again* in the future.

So let's start with that "measure of luck" – or what is sometimes referred to as the "miracle of the Founding." But let's do it through the lens of American media. And remember, back then, when they referred to "the press," it did not have our more modern connotation of newspapers or journalists – and the protection of "freedom of the press" later included in the First Amendment was not so restrictive – but encompassed everything that came off the printing press. And there was A LOT of stuff flying off the presses, and a LOT of Founders letting it fly. How exactly did all these thinkers and writers converge at the same time?

So when I think about the "miracle of the Founding," yes, I think about examples like John Adams, a patriot and attorney, putting his entire political and legal career at risk, by defending the British soldiers of the Boston Massacre, due to his principled fealty for the rights of due process and trial by jury over his own personal or partisan prospects. And winning the trial! And then going on, eventually, to win the highest office of the land.

Similarly, there's the nineteen-year-old Alexander Hamilton, in the morning distributing leaflets that he wrote rallying his fellow New Yorkers against British rule – and then, like typical New Yorkers, they did indeed get riled up – and so there's Hamilton again in the afternoon standing on the front steps of King's College (where he attended school), pleading with the mob, *successfully*, not to lynch the school's loyalist chancellor, based on the principle that there were more honorable and, in the long run, more productive ways to fight one's political opponents.

I'm trying to imagine contemporary examples of people courageously using their words to restrain those on their side and defend those on the other side, and subsequently to live to fight, politically speaking, another day.

Next, there's Ben Franklin – publisher of the Pennsylvania Gazette newspaper – in which he often deployed cunning but light-hearted satire to advance his political opinions – as well as the Poor Richard's Almanack, an annual booklet of practical advice and witty proverbs to promote small-D democratic ideals like virtue, industry and thrift. It was wildly popular, if you can believe it.

Or Samuel Adams, creating the Committees of Correspondence, so that the people of Massachusetts could transmit news of British depredations in their own colony to encourage solidarity from the other twelve. In a way this was an attempt by the locals to draw together a budding nation – and it's interesting to compare our current climate in which nationalized news can consume us more than what's happening in our own communities. We'll hear more in a panel later about the deleterious impacts of the decline of local news.

Then there's what we might call the "long-form media" – Thomas Paine's pamphlet "Common Sense" – originally running, or meandering, for 67 pages, but powerfully setting the stage for independence from the crown. And later, the Federalist Papers – 85 essays by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, spanning hundreds of pages effectively but maybe not efficiently making the case for the new Constitution. Were these the three-hour podcasts of their time?

By the way, Thomas Paine was a master of the "short form" as well, publishing a series of small pieces, each just a few pages long, called The American Crisis, all very emotional, at the depth of the Colonists' setbacks in the war for Independence, with the first one starting with the famous phrase: "These are the times that try men's souls." It became a rallying cry for numerous regiments and a "shot in the arm to Patriots." Was this a precursor to social media posts and Tik Tok videos?

And then of course there's the Declaration of Independence itself, perhaps the most important piece of political communication in history, not only because it replaced a world of privilege with the promise of unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all people, and a world of hereditary rule upended with governments now "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." But also because it was *written down and distributed*, by a people who determined that "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

In this, courage was also there. They knew what was at stake if they failed. Treason, and the usual punishment for it. And so the signers – identifying themselves willingly – mutually pledged to each other their Lives, their Fortunes and their sacred Honor.

This was the good stuff, even miraculous, historically speaking. But let's not forget the bad, or even the ugly. We know many of these same men, courageous and idealistic in many ways, also were marked by the dark stain and moral blind spot that was slavery.

The Brits, just as exuberant in their speech and not without writers as witty as Franklin, took notice. As Samuel Johnson famously scoffed at the protests from the colonies: "How is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers" of enslaved people?

And the Founders did not always show themselves at their best when it came to the media. After the unity for Independence and establishing the government, once in office, they splintered. They began to employ what our first panel today describes not as a new phenomenon, but a long history of "fake news" and "dark arts."

For instance, Alexander Hamilton, the lead Federalist, yet in his role as Treasury Secretary, gave public notice contracts to John Fenno at the Gazette of the United States, in exchange for coverage critical of Jeffersonian democrats. At the same time, Thomas Jefferson, in his role of Secretary of State, put on the *actual government payroll* Philip Freneau, of the *National* Gazette, who blasted the policies of the Federalists, including Jefferson's own boss, President George Washington. Madison, Jefferson's protégé, who once warned against party and faction, wrote *anonymous* broadsides for Freneau's paper – most memorably stating on its pages: "In every political society, parties are inevitable." And in turn, the people then chose which news and views to read based on presupposed partisan allegiances.

The Jeffersonians, often without evidence, warned that the Hamiltonians, if brought to power, would abandon republican government for a return to monarchy. The Hamiltonians, often without evidence, warned that the Jeffersonians, if brought to power, would subject America to Jacobin anarchy.

As the character Thomas Jefferson raps in the musical *Hamilton*: "We smack each other in the press, and we don't print retractions."

All of which is to say, back then the media environment was as freewheeling, raucous, fractured, polarized, and often uncivil as it feels today, albeit with the emergence of new, independent sources of media blooming up to remind us of mutual, common-sense principles. We're in luck, because all of today's speakers were especially selected because they are leading thinkers on these subjects.

Understand, back then there was perhaps more reasonable fear that the Constitutional system, right at the start of this "noble experiment," would collapse than at any other time in our history. Including now. Washington, toward the end of his first term, really, *really*, wanted to retire. (Another miraculous aside, insofar that heads of state back then did not willingly give up power before death.) But if there was one thing that Hamilton and Jefferson agreed on, it was that the whole thing might fall apart without Washington's steady leadership. They both wrote to him, imploring him to forge on. And in return, Washington wrote them an almost identical letter, saying, Okay, guys, but with one condition – that you cool it with all the attacks in your Gazettes!

Sure, boss, they assured him, but as soon as Washington was re-elected, they went right back to it.

But the crisis was averted. The Constitutional system survived. Not least because of strong protections for free speech and freedom of the press – notoriously abridged, briefly, under President John Adams. But with time, cooler heads prevailed, because of an adherence by all sides to abide by the rules and preserving rights, even as they applied to those they disagreed with.

Today we get to listen to a collection of very smart people, and get to ask them questions, about how American media can similarly help us avoid crisis and to protect our Founding ideals – mind you, with our active help as informed citizens. Just one last observation, which popped into my head listening to Senator Breaux. And I remembered a saying that I heard as a kid – a child of the Reagan eighties – often associated with the civil liberties crowd. And it said: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it," frequently attributed to Voltaire, more probably written by one of his disciples. And I remember thinking, "I like the sound of that … but defending *to the death*?" That sounds extreme. Anyway, I don't hear too many people saying that phrase today.

So -- what *is the* proper level of our responsibility? And should we, like those gathered in a meeting hall in Philadelphia 250 years ago, have to be willing to pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our Sacred Honor? Thank you.

Before we move into the program, just some housekeeping notes. If you haven't already, please silence your cell phone. We encourage you to engage with the conversation on social media throughout the day. If you post about the symposium, please tag the Reilly Center so we can follow along. Each session today will include opportunities for audience questions. You will see on your table there's a handout. We'll put the QR code on the screen as well, so that during each

session if you want to submit questions we'll be able to ask some of those during our panels. You have to aim your phone really closely because it's a different code for each segment.

Panel: Fake News and Other Media "Dark Arts" in American History

- *Jack Hamilton, Ph.D., LSU Boyd Professor; Hopkins P. Breazeale Professor of Journalism at the Manship School of Mass Communication; Columnist for RealClearPolitics*
- *Jordan Taylor, Ph.D., Digital Content Manager for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*
- *Discussion moderated by: Suzanne Marchand, Ph.D., LSU Boyd Professor; Professor of European Intellectual History*

Michael DiResto: We will now take up our first panel. And it's Fake News and Other Media Dark Arts in American History. Fake news may feel like a modern crisis, but misinformation, propaganda, political manipulation are older than the republic itself. To explore these historical roots, we're joined by two distinguished scholars of media history. First, we'll hear from Dr. John Maxwell Hamilton, founding dean of the Manship School of Mass Communication and really a founding father of the Reilly Center. A longtime journalist and public servant, Jack is an LSU Boyd professor, holds the Hopkins P. Breazeale professorship at the Manship School. He's a columnist for real world politics, author of eight books, including the award-winning Manipulating the Mass, Woodro Wilson, and the Birth of American Propaganda. He is currently writing a history of fake news, and he's going to give us a preview. Jack's career spans reporting across more than 50 countries, service in Vietnam as a Marine Corps platoon commander, worked on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and leadership roles in journalism and scholarship. He has received the Sydney Coby Award for Lifetime Achievement in Journalism History and the Donald L. Shaw Senior Scholar Award. Please join me in welcoming Jack Hamilton to the stage.

Jack Hamilton: So, nice to see you all, especially since there's some people here who are old friends of mine who I haven't seen in a long time. So, it's good to be here. I am writing a book on the history of fake news. I'm actually writing a book about maybe the greatest journalism hoaxer of all time. He's the backbone. So, you probably won't know his name. His name was William Francis Mannix. He never told the truth about anything. Which makes it a challenging book to write, I can assure you. When he got married the last time, in one of his various marriages, he used a fake name. His wife didn't actually know what his name was for several years. And then he bounced the check, the $10 check to the minister, so he didn't get paid either.

But I'm not going to talk about Mannix. I'm going to talk about something else because what I'm really interested in and what I think is important here is that Mannix is a way to see the working of fake news. I think the trouble with fake news, there's lots of things wrong with fake

news obviously. But one of the problems is that fake news is a word that's misused and abused. As a result of that, we sometimes use it in ways that don't allow us to really understand what it's about.

So to start with, when a journalist makes a mistake, that's not fake news. That's a mistake. When a journalist sets out to publish a story that they know is untrue and do it purposely–or some purpose that they have, whether it's entertainment or whether it's to just mislead you on an important fact that they want to cheat you on, that's fake news. But somebody saying "that's just fake news," what they're really saying is, "I don't like what you said." That's not fake. In other words, if inconvenient facts are not fake news, inconvenient facts are inconvenient facts.

So, one of the greatest examples of this use of the term is Donald Trump who uses it all the time, but he's not alone. And so, this is not an artisan point of view that I'm making. Donald Trump has also said he invented the term fake news. And this is also untrue.

So the term fake news has been around for a long time and the idea of fake news has been around for a long time. And one way to get a perspective on this is to consider what we often think of as the first modern newspaper. It was published by a guy named Nathaniel Butter. It was called a news book in those days in 1622, in early modern England. It had many names. And it was still trying to figure out what news was. Some days Butter would publish the oldest news first, so you could kind of catch up with what you missed. Something, of course, we would never do today because we only want the newest news. He had many titles for his newspaper: the news of the present week, the last news, more news, brief abstracts on adverse letters of trust related to the present week and so forth. But no sooner did he publish these newspapers than a new term came to be – butter news, or fake news.

And the first best critic, I think you can argue, was Ben Jonson, the playwright and intellectual. There were many critics, believe me, but he was the greatest because of his great talents. He wrote two plays and one was called "The Staple." Those days staple meant an office. The main character in that office was Nathaniel Butter and he had all kinds of uses of the word butter in his play. The character who comes closest to butter… By the way, there are a number of people in the play that look like, sound like butter. But the word butter appears more than 20 times. "Mirth laughs like butter and he wants to be fat like butter. The news is as good yet as butter can make it." The word they just wrote was "beastly butter." Then at the end when the staple goes broke, it said it "melted into butter."

Now why is this important? Not only because it's old, not because it's been around, but I think it helps us see something. First of all, there were no rules. The rules were being made up. But there

are other factors that are very important. First of all, literacy rates have begun to go up and the ability to print newspapers. Mass-produced newspapers in a limited sort of way. That was a moment when you had a public that could buy newspapers and you had a public that could read newspapers. And so then you had an economic incentive to produce them. And because Butter wasn't the only one who was buttering the news, in order to compete, you needed to make it interesting. And so they made up all kinds of things in news. One scholar has said that 10% of all of the stories appeared were outrageously false, like a Swiss cow giving birth to a boy and a girl.

The other thing that's important about this, and is one of the most important factors that we're going to come back to in the present, and that is the element of anonymity. In big cities, people become anonymous to each other. They pass each other on the street. In a village, they know each other. In a city, they do not know everybody or most of the other people they see. And so, a newspaper is a way to bring a community together. People want news. They've always wanted news, but they particularly want news in a place where they can talk to, that they can get a common sense of what
their community is about, and learn about things they couldn't have learned if they just met people on the street. They told them everything that happened previously.

There's another element of anonymity, however, and that is the people who are writing for you are anonymous. You don't know them. This is very important.

So, to flash forward to the late 19th century, we still had newspapers in the United States that were publishing fake news all the time. I've made kind of a list, but here's just some headlines that appeared in one week. Malicious. These are headlines: “Malicious fake news,” “Fake news again,” “Bit of fake news,” “Concerting fake news,” “More fake news,” “fake news stories a float,” “fake news pope has died 22 times in five years.”

Now these were written, however, by newspapers about other newspapers to distinguish themselves. It was a way of saying we're better than the other papers, but it also tells us that there was lots of fake news and the barriers of entry in the late 19th century were still very low. You can get a printing press.

The guy I'm writing about, this morning I was lying in bed having my coffee and I thought about it. I'm only halfway done with the book. He's found in seven newspapers. Seven different newspapers. One he found it just for a day because he wanted to con somebody and so he started newspapers. So he had an issue put out and then he got paid to stop publication. So papers were easy to start.

But now to flash forward because we're going to get a lot more when we get to questions. I'm sure you can probe, but something happens in the 20th century that's very very important. The barriers of entry to get into newspapers become very high. And now the goal is to compete based on quality. So we have a moment in history where, relatively, news has never been perfect. Where we relatively had very good news. High quality news. It's true we still had bad newspapers. We had the New York Post. Somebody once said to the owner of the New York Post, the publisher said to a department store owner, he said, "Why don't you advertise in my newspaper?" He said, "Because your readers are my shoplifters." But the fact was we wanted to get good readership and lots of advertising. Quality was the way to get there. So you had high literacy, you had the ability to consume news. Technology had gotten better but much more expensive. And so you had a moment of relative quality.

Where we are today is back to Butter's time. The barriers of entry are very low. Every one of us in here today, go home and decide to start a newspaper. Maybe not any kind of favorite newspaper, but we can start our own newspaper. And when we put out that piece of news. We can do it anonymously. There is no check on us. Nobody knows who did it. And so the result of that is that now we're at a moment where fake news can flourish because you can be irresponsible and you can do it with incredible freedom. You might say the first amendment said we should all, you know, be able to speak our minds, but look what it's got us. I'm not suggesting we roll back the First Amendment, but I do think we're going to see in the coming years lots of steps being taken to figure out how to deal in a world as fraught as the one we're in today.

Fake news is not new. It's old. It's partly technology. Technology has obviously ruined traditional journalism in many ways. Now newspapers don't have the advertising they used to have because you can have your own Craigslist and things like that. And, of course, people can go get the news other places besides getting the newspaper. If they care about sports they can just go get sports all day long from someplace else. The Washington Post just got rid of its sports staff.

So technology has worked against us, which is unfortunate, and what I think we're faced with is how do we manage a world in which we're back in Butter's time. So I'll leave with that. I know we'll have more questions before we do.

Dr. Suzanne Marchand: Thank you very much, Jack. That was fantastically interesting. So many questions to come for sure. Let me introduce myself to all of you. My name is Dr. Suzanne Marchand. I am LSU Boyd Hall professor in European intellectual history. So I am not a journalist but I'm a great admirer of the craft of journalism. A metaphor I would like to

emphasize and something that I have really been exploring thanks to Jack. We taught a course together last semester on fake news and fake history in which we learn from our students, for example, that cash money is not real. So all kinds of revelations as a result of that course. I happen also to this year be the president of the American Historical Association. So I'm very interested in all of your reflections on history and where history goes and the civic value of historical knowledge.

My role today is to facilitate this discussion and I'm very delighted to do that and to introduce our next speaker. Dr. Jordan Taylor. Dr. Taylor is a historian, editor, and digital humanist specializing in early American media and the transmission of news. He serves as digital content manager at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. His book, "Misinformation Nation," examines how the founding generation navigated truth and deception in a representative government. His forthcoming work, "Democracy's Dark Arts," continues this investigation through such figures as Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson, demonstrating that anxieties about post-truth politics are deeply rooted in American history. And I can tell you as a European historian, they're also deeply rooted in European history, back, I would say, to antiquity. But let me now introduce to you Dr. Taylor and ask you to welcome him to the stage. Thank you.

Dr. Jordan Taylor: Thank you. Thank you for having me. This is my first time in Baton Rouge and at LSU, so it's nice to be here. Thank you for making me feel so welcome.

It's officially the semiquincentennial. And you can tell it is because I've had enough time to practice pronouncing that word. We've had 250 years of the American Republic since the Declaration of Independence. And I think it's fair to say that many members of the founding generation did not think we would make it this far. America's founders were in a lot of ways great students of history. They were obsessed with history. You mentioned how some of these things go back to antiquity. This is something that the founders were very interested in. And when they looked to the past, they saw that many experiments in republicanism in the past had gone down a similar kind of dangerous path. As they saw it, what often unfolded was a charismatic demagogue, someone like Caesar or Catiline in the Roman Republic or even Oliver Cromwell, would sort of tell people what they wanted to hear rather than what they believed to be true. A diluted public would then sort of empower that demagogue and as a result the republic would start to fail as the demagogue would pursue narrow, self-interested policies that didn't benefit the entire community in the long term.

In a nutshell this is how the founders saw the problem of truth in a republic. Ordinary people, as they understood it, were easily misled and the birth of political newspapers in the British colonies in the 1760s and the 1770s, made this problem more urgent. So what I'm going to talk

about today is essentially how did the founding generation try to confront this problem? How do they try to address it? I'm going to say share some of the strategies and frankly some of the failures based on research for my new book. Because I only have a few minutes, I'm going to move pretty quickly. So we'll dive right in.

In the 1770s, there was a lot of hope. In this regard, some people thought that newspapers would provide an important foundation for a republic. That they would allow ordinary people to be well informed and that they would help to express the common sense of the public. But after the revolutionary war, things started to get a lot more complicated very quickly. Elite leaders watched as state governments passed laws. The big example was paper currency laws that seemed to reflect the will of an uninformed public, rather than the sound judgment of well-informed leaders. In Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry and others watched as a major rebellion in the western part of the state known as Shay's rebellion broke out. They saw it as a fairly typical, but also tragic case of a credulous people being misled into rebellion by a charismatic demagogue. Gerry and others brought this kind of cynicism into the constitutional convention in 1787.

Connecticut's Roger Sherman, who you may know as the great compromiser, that's sort of the nickname he gets from the constitutional convention. He told them, quote, "The people should have as little as may be about the government, they want or lack information and are constantly liable to be misled." And after he says this, Elbridge Gerry stands up and says that the convention should guard against an excess of democracy because the people were quote, “daily misled into the most painful measures and opinions by the false reports circulated by designing men.”

So they created a constitution that was notably and quite intentionally less democratic than state constitutions at the time. In the federalist essays that Hamilton and Madison and Jay wrote to encourage the ratification of the constitution in New York, they defended these decisions because they argued that in a large complex or in their term “extended republic” only a relatively small number of elites could be sufficiently well-informed about public affairs to make good decisions. So they said that the US system of government should be designed to elevate men with extensive networks of information. They argued that the key structures of the constitution, things like the election of senators by state legislatures, the lifetime appointment of members of the judiciary, the creation of an electoral college to appoint an executive, and even the sizes of districts for the election of members of the House of Representatives. All of these were effectively buffers against the risk of popular misjudgment.

In the late 1780s when the constitution is being written and debated, quite a lot of the founding generation were coalescing around this idea that in order to preserve the republic they had to remove power from the hands of a public that was easily misled through popular media.

In that new republic, as we know, George Washington is elected as the first president and his administration soon ran into this problem. During the revolutionary war, Washington had spent quite a lot of time if you look at his correspondence, combating falsehoods. But one act of deception really particularly got under his skin.

In 1777, a series of forged letters appeared in print that were supposedly written by Washington to members of his family. He had not written them, but they were actually quite good works of forgery. He even admits this. He says that whoever wrote these letters, he never gets to the bottom of it, but he says, "Whoever wrote these letters actually knows quite a bit about my life." He was sort of impressed by him. But they portrayed Washington complaining about the army, about its lack of virtue, its lack of skill, lamenting the hopelessness of the American cause in the war, and calling ultimately for reconciliation with Britain.

So again, these letters aren't true, right? Washington never wrote this. But they circulate widely in newspapers, and when they appear, Washington is understandably appalled by them. But he didn't do anything about it. He didn't try to refute the letters. He didn't try to limit the circulation of these letters in newspapers. He more or less just ignored them and went on with his life. Then 20 years later, after he was elected president for a second time, the letters reappeared in an opposition newspaper. And again, caused a bit of a stir, and again, Washington refused to do anything about them. He didn't publicly acknowledge them. He didn't want to be seen to sort of engage in this little realm of political dispute. So Washington actually left it until the very last day of his second term, his last day in office to write a letter to the Secretary of State correcting the record about these forged letters. He asked his letter to be deposited in the archives of the state department. It was actually one of his final acts as president to dispute the veracity of these letters. He left this denial until so late, really so that no one could accuse him of trying to derive political advantage from his denial.

So Washington's solution to this rampant political falsehood was, in a lot of ways, to ignore it. And expect that if he continued to behave honorably he would earn the people's trust to engage in endless disputes about politics, as he saw it, was to turn himself into a politician rather than a leader.

Washington was arguably the last national political leader in the United States who could get away with this. He was the last person for whom this approach really worked. It certainly didn't

work out that way, and I've already spoiled this by going ahead, but it didn't work out that way for his successor John Adams.

In the late 1790s, under John Adams presidency we've already alluded to this but false news in newspapers and concerns about the corrosive effects of falsehood on the republic had become more widespread than ever before. It had reached a point of crisis and largely in response to this anxiety, the federalist party passed several repressive measures, notably the Sedition Act of 1798. I think many of us are familiar with the Sedition Act. It is often viewed as an effort to clamp down on dissent and derive political advantage from limiting that dissent. But if you look at the congressional debate and the public discourse surrounding the Sedition Act, this piece of legislation is very clearly aiming, also, to tamp down on what its proponents consider false accounts of reality spread by rival newspapers.

Another interesting fact that a lot of people don't realize about the Sedition Act is that it's quite clear that Abigail Adams was one of the driving forces behind it behind the scenes. She had seen newspapers attacking her husband for years even before his presidency, and she ended up becoming a huge booster of the Sedition Act. She wrote of some of these rival newspaper printers, quote, "The wrath of the public ought to fall upon their heads." The only time that Abigail Adams ever goes to Congress and sits in the galleries is in 1801, at the very end of her husband's presidency, to show support for the renewal of the Sedition Act.

The Sedition Act, as many of us know, was a wildly ineffective piece of legislation for limiting dissent in all kinds of ways. One of those is that it really backfires, sparking what becomes known as sort of a libertarian movement for political speech, which has in a lot of ways remained a default for the United States for centuries.

I think it's fair to say that these examples, so far, are not exactly inspiring models for addressing this problem of truth. You know, funneling power to elites, ignoring falsehoods or false news, and implementing government restrictions on speech. But I think it's also worth looking at what the founding generation really didn't manage to do. So I'm going to talk a bit about how a few of these founding figures, some of them a bit more obscure, tried and mostly failed to create new institutions to sustain the republic in the face of rampant falsehood.

So Thomas Jefferson's trajectory in this regard is really interesting. For many years he's a huge booster of the popular press as a tool for ensuring the public is informed. We heard Senator Breaux quote the famous quote from 1787 where he says, "We're left to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government. I shouldn't hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." In other words, he's saying newspapers are more

important than the state. But that is an important quote. It's something that he said. It's something that he felt. But then he took office, right? As Secretary of State and as President, he becomes extremely frustrated with partisan newspapers. Michael alluded to this earlier. He sponsors partisan newspapers of his own. As Secretary of State, he sponsors the National Gazette and as President, he sponsors the National Intelligence who are effectively fighting fire with fire.

Near the end of his presidency, a young man named John Norvell writes him this very polite, very earnest letter basically saying, I'm thinking about taking up a career as a newspaper printer. I wonder if you have any advice for me. This is in a time when you could just write a letter to the president, who might write back. And it's sort of sad because Jefferson writes back probably the most discouraging letter you can imagine. It's this blistering response where he says that because of the press's quote "abandoned prostitution to falsehood, nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper." So quite a turnabout in the space of two decades. He goes on and on about this. So he's become much more pessimistic about newspapers as a tool for informing the republic as a result of two decades of public service.

Over time, as he's losing hope in the media as a tool, Jefferson pushes and pushes for years to expand public education. In 1779, he first proposes a bill for the more general diffusion of knowledge in Virginia. His idea is to create a three-level system with grammar schools, secondary schools and a public university for the state of Virginia. And the legislature says no. They refuse to pay for it. They say it's too expensive. Jefferson pushes. He fights. He tries to get this through. And eventually in his frustration, he writes that quote, "The tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than a thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests, and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance." Eventually after years of advocacy, Jefferson got at least part of what he wanted. The thing that he thought was most important, which was a state public university, the University of Virginia,, in 1819, which Jefferson wrote would aim to quote, "Instruct the mass of our citizens and these their rights, interests, and duties as men and citizens."

Another Thomas, a bit less well known, I think it's fair to say, was a Pennsylvanian named Thomas Mifflin. He was a Revolutionary War officer who suffers a lot like Washington, from all kinds of false accusations during the war. By 1793 he's the governor of Pennsylvania during what's known as the Whiskey Rebellion, when rebels in the western part of the state rise up and challenge taxes on whiskey. It's not unlike, in some ways, Shay's rebellion.

Once the rebels are eventually defeated, Mifflin goes to the Pennsylvania assembly, and he tells them that these rebels were deluded, that they were ignorant. He describes how they refused to

accept the truth when it was presented to them. He takes this opportunity to tell the Pennsylvania legislature that they want to prevent this from happening again. They want to prevent this kind of disorder again, they need to build a public schooling system much like Jefferson is proposing for Virginia. He writes that since ignorance has been the principal cause of the mischief, the solution was to quote "illuminate the minds of our fellow citizens." And he, much like Jefferson, pleads with the assembly repeatedly because, again, they refuse to act. It's the same story. It's too expensive for them. And so public education in Pennsylvania doesn't begin for several more decades.

My last example is a man named William Manning. Who I'm guessing most of you haven't heard of. He is a farmer and a tavern keeper in Billerica, Massachusetts, who almost certainly would have been forgotten today if he had not composed an unpublished pamphlet titled, "The Key of Liberty." I don't necessarily recommend "The Key of Liberty" as light reading. It's almost incomprehensible in a lot of ways. Manning is not a good speller for one thing. He's not educated. I think you can see that the title is misspelled for instance. But if you can look past that and make sense of what he's saying, he's actually leveling a fairly interesting critique, I think, of the politics of the era. He divides the country as he sees it into terms that would probably be familiar to us. The few and the many, the 99%, the 1% is a version of how we might translate that to our present. He thought that the few were monopolizing the access to information and using that monopoly to control the menu. So his solution was to create a national society of laborers that would promote knowledge among ordinary people, and would publish a national cheap magazine that would actually be accessible and available to everyone.

For Manning, it was knowledge. It was information. It was truth that was the key to liberty. And while his specific idea for how to bring this about never came to fruition, his vision of mass media and associationalism became a cornerstone of American democracy in the 19th century as Alexis de Tocquevilleand and many others would soon come to note.

So I'll close by saying a few words about our present. I'm a historian. I'm not a public policy person or anything like that. We'll hear from much more qualified people soon to think about how we can address these problems in our present. I think history can sometimes help us to see those problems more clearly. Looking at the United States in 2026, 250 years after American independence, it seems clear to me that we're dealing with many of the same problems. Jack alluded to this, we're dealing with many of the same problems that republics and civil societies have been dealing with for centuries. Specifically the problems that the founding generation identified, disruptive new media forms full of unchecked falsehoods and a public that often seems to lack the discernment or the interest to separate truth from falsehood.

In some ways, I think that this problem of truth is unavoidable or endemic in a republic. But I also think hopefully, I'm hopeful, that its excesses can be mitigated. I work in a museum. I'm a little bit biased, but I really think that the US Republic is not likely to find a way out of this morass of fake news or false information without embracing education and institutions whose incentives are aligned with producing faithful accounts of reality.

And so I'll stand with Mifflin, Manning and Jefferson here, which is to say that we need to strengthen institutions of truth production whether that's news media, we'll hear about local news soon. Universities, museums, archives, libraries and we also need to get creative about building brand new institutions that don't exist yet that will inform and enlighten the public. While competing in an attention economy. That's tough because it took decades really for Americans to sort of catch up to where the ideas of Jefferson, Mifflin, Manning and others were sort of pointing. And I doubt we have that kind of time today. But if we want another 250 years of this American experiment, I'm not sure we have a choice but to try.

So on that less than hopeful note, I will sit down. We can have a conversation.

Dr. Suzanne Marchand:

Great. Thank you. Thank you for those really stimulating talks. I'll start off with a question or two. I understand we're gathering questions from the audience, also, by way of the QR codes. Michael, is this true?

So let me start off by asking the speakers to say something a bit more about a relationship that Jack in particular alluded to but perhaps we could tease out further and that's the relationship between the free press and the freedom of the market.The market for news has always been quite appealing and perhaps the market in some sense has a role to play in opposing censorship. But then you also alluded, Jack, to the various ways in which this also can go haywire. Perhaps we could discuss that a little bit also in the 18th century context. The new appetite for news and the way in which printers are making money outside the political sphere in ways that also go beyond the ability of the politicians to control the news flow. So I wondered if either of you would like to speak about that.

Jack Hamilton: Well, as I tried to say in my brief remarks, the real problem when you give my talk is not technology, it's people. And the problem is that people want to be entertained and they want their biases confirmed.

So the market, unfortunately, doesn't necessarily help with that. The impulses are there. I think in the end one of the solutions when we talk about market, is going to have to be regulation of some. Or you're going to have a free-for-all. Right now we live in a world that actually comes as close to being free as possible. We've never had a time in the world where almost anybody could be publishing because even before in Butter's time you had to buy the type.

So I'm not sure that there's a market solution to this. There is a market solution in a narrow sense. Some newspapers,for example, that are legacy newspapers that try to do a really good job based on fact. They will have a niche and they can succeed.

The New York Times has done a very good job of managing the field of digitization and do an exceptionally good job. But then you take a look at the Washington Post. There is a model of a rich person owning a newspaper and subsidizing or making sure to see things through. And people have pointed out in the case of the Washington Post, Bezos could take 1% of his net worth, make it into a 501c3 and a foundation, and the Post would be viable for a long, long time. But the Post, he made bad decisions on who he hired in management. He made bad editorial decisions that led for an exodus of readers. And he's been largely absent as an owner and not really committed to it. You can look at the paper and watch the paper. It gets thinner and thinner every day, looking like a starving child and it's a help. So doesn't mean there aren't big journalists there but just the number of quality news is not what it was.

So I don't think it's a market solution. I think a market solution will preserve some high quality newspapers and that's very important. There is some bench line newspapers and broadcast organizations. But I don't think in the end that's going to be there.

Dr. Jordan Taylor: I'll defer on the questions of markets as a tool in the present. But I can say that a point Jack made earlier about lower barriers to entry from early newspapers is I think really important.

You look at some of the first newspapers in the United States and what you see is it's extremely easy to intervene in the broader world of public discourse and news circulation by setting up a printing press and starting to turn out newspapers. Franklin is extremely gifted at setting up newspapers all around the continent and ultimately helps to build an internal marketplace of news where printers, whether you're in Charleston, Boston or points in between, are all drawing on the same sources of news. They're reprinting things that appear in other newspapers. They're exchanging newspapers with each other so that they can kind of take the parts that they find

appealing. The result of this is that it's very easy to make a newspaper because all you have to do is steal from other newspaper printers.

But there is an absence of a verification that comes from that when you are, you know, let's say you're a newspaper printer in Boston and you're taking news from a copy of the London Gazette that has come on a ship from England. You really have no way of verifying this and so the fragmented and decentralized nature of the early American press creates a lot of opportunity for innovation. It creates a lot of opportunity for very well-intentioned and high-minded individuals to use this market toward an intention that we would probably agree is laudable. You know, spreading truth and helping to frame public debates in a productive way.

The best market in the world is not able to overcome the limits of the technology and the verification curtain that exists in early America. So there's no good way around this in the 18th century. And I think that in some ways, is not the case today, right? The verification burden that we face today is much lower. The question is not whether it's possible to verify news within this marketplace, but rather whether there is the will, the interest. Whether the market will sustain news that's a little bit boring.

The work that I do at the history museum does often feel like trying to get people to eat vegetables when there's a platter of tempting desserts and other foods that is just as accessible. I think Jack's point is a good one, but that we may need to look beyond the market as the basis for our news.

Dr. Suzanne Marchand: Thank you. It strikes me that the opposite of buttered news can't really be dry news, like butter toast and dry toast. But what is the opposite of fake news? And Jack, you use the term "quality news." What would you say? I'll start with you, Jordan. What can we think of as the proper antithesis to fake news? And when do we see it most alive and well in America?

Dr. Jordan Taylor: I think that the moment when the American news media was healthiest in a lot of ways were those moments when the incentive structures were aligned with the production of truth for the reasons that Jack says. Which is that audiences are demanding quality news. In terms of–so the 20th century is often held up as a moment of quality news. I think you also have to balance that with the fact that for a lot of people who lived in the 20th century, including African Americans in the Jim Crow South, they wouldn't necessarily agree that the news sources that were most widespread, that reached the most people were accurately conveying reality.That's just one example.

So, it's hard to pinpoint, I think, a moment when our news media lived up to its promise, in some ways. But moments when these forces sort of came together to allow people to experience news as it was intended, was fleetingly rare and I think in a lot always the norm. You have to understand the norm of American history as being more aligned with what we see today, right? And those moments when people were more positive about the news media as sort of the exception.

Jack Hamilton: So I'm trying to think of how to answer this in a way that is interesting. Yes. So once I was introduced when I gave a talk and they said I was really good at answering questions I didn't know anything about. So maybe this is such a case. But actually I do know something about this and maybe I'm going to make it complicated.

So I've said I think there's a golden period, when barriers to entry were high, there were a small number of media companies. They realized the best way to compete was quality. Wasn't always perfect, but was relatively better than what we had. And they were making lots of lots of money, which meant they could invest a lot of money into the editorial content. Sometimes you make 30% returns. That's credible. And so the news was imperfect, that's still relatively good. I think that's a golden age, and it seems to have passed.

I think the challenge for what is high quality news, is actually being contested right now. There are some people who think that high quality news doesn't have to be what I deeply believe is high quality news, which is fact-based reporting and balanced reporting. At home, I lean left center. As a journalist, I do not. And I believe that very deeply.

There was a very fine journalist who just recently died, John Burns. If you have a chance, you should go look at the obit for him in the New York Times. He was a foreign correspondent. He was an outstanding journalist. At the end of the obit, which is written by a guy Allen Powell, who had himself been a foreign correspondent and a longtime reporter at the New York Times, writes at the end how when Burns was toward the end of his career, how he complained about his fellow young journalists. Who were now writing more about what they thought they should write and what they felt. Really that was being added to the paper by column. I actually talked to my friend Len Apcar, he thinks it's true. It was added because he was sending a message to his fellow journalists at the paper, which is you're not doing it right.

And I believe very deeply in that. I believe the New York Times is actually one of our best newspapers and Wall Street Journal is. They're doing a fabulous job.

What's happened is once you have a free-for-all the way we do now, even the legacy media have to behave differently. That's because, for one thing, they have to cover things they wouldn't have covered before, but now a bunch of people are writing about the planet, you know. The whole child trafficking, pizza parlor, in Washington DC, so they have to start covering it. But also what the technology has done is it's led reporters who think they should be telling you all the time what they think…tweeting. I think they should have their tweeting fingers snipped off because I think in a certain way, their personal views need to be behind a curtain.

You're going to hear soon from a journalist whom I admire enormously, Carl Cannon. He believes that and practices and is fearless in going after whatever story there is and trying to be fair about. I think we're beginning to see that drift away. It's partly because when you have a new media come along, it begins to change the terms of preference for other media. Even the ones that are still what we would call legacy media. So I think we have to fight very hard for fact-based reporting that is written not based on what you think an outcome should be. I will finish with a story because it happens that this journalist really annoys me.

Bob Woodward who has made a living on anonymous sources and a lot of what he's written has been very good. I understand that. But there was something that was very telling to me about journalism today. He wrote a book about Donald Trump and about how Trump told him that he knew what he was saying about COVID wasn't true at a certain point. He said he told Woodward he was lying. Woodward's on the masthead of the Washington Post. He didn't go and take that story to the Washington Post. He waited for his book to come. And when asked about it on a talk show that obviously was very liberal and didn't want to jump all over it, somebody said "well, why didn't you say anything about it?" He said, "well, it wouldn't have made any difference."

There is something deeply wrong with that. Journalists don't decide to write something on whether it makes a difference. They write something because it's news and they don't write to protect their book. They write it because they have a service to pay. So I think that's what we need to focus on.

Michael DiResto: We are going to be taking a short break at the end of this panel so we have time. Luckily I think we can combine about four of these questions into one. For our panelists, one person said a lot of what looks like fake news seems to be, especially with cable news, it's really opinion but it's being presented as facts. Then several people are looking at what's coming with artificial intelligence and whether the inputs going in, being as good as the people who put them in. But it's whether if the market cannot regulate these things, is there other

regulatory things that you know you have to say you're at least trying to aim for the truth? Or it's just going to the wild west.

Dr. Suzanne Marchand: Who would like to start?

Jack Hamilton: Well, so yes, if you look at Fox News and CNN, they call themselves journalists. I think they are moderators for the most part. CNN doesn't have a lot, they have some right now. Only have, you know, a couple of guys in the Middle East that will report what's going on. But they used to do a lot of original reporting where they went out and they found out things. Now, a lot of what happens, they sit there and they talk to each other. They get a subway blown up in London and then they get somebody who's an expert on stuff being blown up and say, "What do you think?" "Well, it could be this and it could be that." Well, that isn't anything. That's not journalism. If you don't have anything to say, then you shouldn't be on the air as far as I'm concerned. So, I actually don't think those people are really journalists. I think journalist are people who want to find out things.

I don't welcome this necessarily, but in the next years I think we're going to see a rethinking of the First Amendment. I think we have members of the Supreme Court right now, conservative members of the Supreme Court, who are open to that. I worry about how they might go about that, but it's not impossible that it'll happen. I think one of the things is that there's a rule that governs Google and all the other internet companies. And that is section 230. Well, section 230 basically said you treat Google like a phone company, which means if I get on there and I say something stupid or lie or whatever, the phone is not responsible.Well, I think the whole model for say Facebook and Google is of course that they don't want to be responsible because if they had it would wreck their whole economic model. But I think we have to find a way to have responsibility and we have to find some way to make people responsible for what they put out. I'm not sure how to do it, but it gets to that question that I raised about anonymity.

You know, maybe you'll find some news because fake news can be funny. A guy named Ellery Sedgwick of Atlantic Monthly once decided years ago that he would publish a story about horses that were raised in places that were really cold or really hot, were small–became little tiny horses like that. And so he runs the story. It's a hilarious story! He runs the story. He even has pictures. This is like in 1900. He has pictures that were obviously just like cut out the horses, like, think of a thoroughbred horse that comes up to the guy's knee – and it was just clearly fake.

I'm good friends, by the way, with his grandson, so I know this story. So anyhow, he published the story. They faked records that they said they got from Rhode Island about the fact they were really authentic horses. If you read it today you think this is hilarious. He didn't get any letters

saying there was anything wrong with it. I found a letter from Alexander Graham Bell to his granddaughter saying this is pretty interesting. This could be true. Tells you how crazy those people can be. The only person, according to Ellery Sedgwick, who didn't like it was a person who actually took a loan out and went to Rhode Island to see if he could find these horses.

Okay, so what's important about that? He knew it was a joke, but people can sometimes think it's not a joke. Or in this case, pretty much everybody seems to have felt that way. But he was held accountable. He had to explain to this guy he shouldn't have taken a loan out. It's obviously a harmless story mostly, alone of taking a loan out. But I think what we need is when people do something wrong, they have to stand up for it. Years later, he published some of the most important fakes ever done. By the way, the guy I'm writing about may have been involved with this. And it was faking Ann Rutledge's love letters and they were all fake. He got them authenticated by people who were wrong. He pushed it out very quickly because he wanted a Christmas promotion, and he then had to stand up and bring experts in and gave them the pages of the magazine to rebut what he had done. He was accountable for and that's what we need. Accountability.

Michael DiResto: I think that's all we had time for. How about a round of applause.

Panel: Media, Civil Discourse & Polarization

- *Johanna Dunaway, Ph.D., Research Director for the Syracuse Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship*
- *Sunshine Hillygus, Ph.D., Co-Director for Duke University's Polarization Lab*
- *Discussion moderated by: Michael Henderson, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Political Communication and Political Science; Political Communication Area Head for the LSU Manship School of Mass Communication*

Michael DiResto: Johanna Dunaway is a professor of political science in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University and research director of the Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship. Her scholarship explores media effects, public opinion and democratic resilience. She is the author of "News and democratic citizens in a mobile era" and co-author of "Mass Media and American Politics." A Carnegie Fellow, her work examines political polarization and the future of journalism. Johanna is also a longtime friend of the Manship School, a member of the Reilly Center's advisory board, and provided invaluable guidance and advice to the Reilly Center in the early stages of the Common Ground Project initiative that we lead with the Public Affairs Research Council. I'm also delighted to announce breaking news right here that Johanna has been named as the Reilly Center's 2026 public policy fellow. In this capacity, she will collaborate with LSU faculty and continue conversations like

the one we're having here today. Ladies and gentlemen, please join in welcoming Dr. Johanna Dunaway.

Johanna Dunaway: Everyone, thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here. I always love to return to Baton Rouge and see my many friends and visit this lovely place. So, I'm going to get right to it since we're a little bit limited on time.

This is a project focusing on how the erosion and decline of local news is affecting many aspects of our politics, but here we're going to be focusing on electoral competition in particular. This project and a series of projects I'm working on that are related to this, I'm co-authoring with one of our PhD students at Syracuse and he's done a ton of work on this so I want to be sure to give him credit.

As most of you know in this room, we've lost more than 3,000 local news outlets since about 2005. Hundreds of counties have no newspaper at all. This is a trend that seems to be worsening. I want to push past that general alarm since most of us know about that problem, and talk about some of the consequences that are arising as a result. Some are intuitive, some less so. Political scientists, mass communication scholars, journalists, and others have identified several of the consequences. So, people know less about their local and state governments when local news declines. Hayes and Lawless have done a bunch of work showing this clearly over a decade of research. Voter turnout drops at these lower levels of office, engagement falls. And here's one that deserves more attention in this room since one of our focuses today is on polarization and the problems associated with it. Our own research showed that when local newspapers close, voters in those communities sort more sharply along partisan lines. Without local news anchoring them to local issues, local candidates and local office holders, it tends to be the case that national partisan identity fills the vacuum. So, it's contributing to the problems associated with nationalizing politics and polarization as well.

Local news in its decline is not just a journalism problem, it's feeding these broader political problems in our environment as well. There's also some downstream effects for political accountability. So some of the electoral consequences, for example, have not been examined as fully yet especially for lower levels of office. So today I want to focus on those election-related consequences in particular, and for really low down ballot contests because as we all know, local governance is really important to our everyday lives. It touches many aspects of our lives and even though a lot of people don't realize that they probably should.

So the political accountability infrastructure at these levels is really important for our politics and whether we're satisfied as democratic citizens, whether we trust our local officials and so forth. So we think this is important.

So we're asking two specific questions today with this project. Does declining local news strengthen the incumbency advantage at these low levels of office, such as prosecutor, sheriff, county legislator, county executive? And does it contribute to the already alarming rate of uncontested elections? So, elections in which an incumbent is running, but there's no person challenging them for that office.

These are important questions because local officials have enormous power over things that affect our lives, as I mentioned: who gets prosecuted, how your tax dollars are spent. If those officials can't be effectively challenged, that's a serious accountability failure. So we already know from research on Congress and the House of Representatives that local news coverage can either really hurt or help incumbents. For House members historically, local news has generally been a benefit to them because it provided them with a platform with which they can claim credit for all their good deeds at the district and so forth. It's a way that they were able to attract cross-party voting and things like that.

Well, in recent decades, we know that cross-party voting has declined. And a lot of people think one reason for that is because a lot of them have lost that local platform where they can try to court voters from the other side. Now it's much harder for them to communicate what they're doing for the district and things like that. So that's one of the consequences.

But at these low levels of office, they're already less in the spotlight of the media, more generally. First of all, for Congress people, as local news declined and that megaphone sort of went away or the platform, they lost some of their incumbency advantage. So, they were less able to court that cross party vote, as I mentioned and as a result, they didn't have as strong of a hold. Challengers were a little bit better able to compete because people were voting more along party lines and so in mixed districts, in particular, people could lose their seat because people were just voting using the party cue and not really based on the performance of the incumbent in office.

At the lower levels of office, we argue that the dynamic runs in the opposite direction because for down ballot contests the information environment is different. We think this is happening through two mechanisms. The first mechanism heuristics at the county and local level, voters have very different levels of information about candidates. Many of these races are nonpartisan. There's no party label to lean on. In that vacuum, name recognition becomes a really dominant

cue. Incumbents have that cue in their pocket, in their favor and challengers just don't. Without that local news to fill in the gap and publicize what this challenger may be about or maybe what was wrong with what the incumbent was doing, this recognition gap widens between a would-be challenger and an incumbent, right? And so declining local news hurts challengers far more than it hurts incumbents at these levels of office because they're just generally less in the spotlight overall and less known among citizens in the local community.

This also connects back to polarization in the sense that as people consume more national news and less local news, they have less information about their local government and they're inundated with information about the national parties and the politics happening at that level. So they fall back on those cues and there's some evidence to suggest that people are starting to evaluate local representatives and incumbents based on whether they fall in line with the party cues at the national level. Rather than performance in terms of how they're serving their community or district. So this sort of feeds that polarization cycle and that nationalization of politics cycle in ways that makes it, one more difficult to dislodge local office holders, but also just reinforces this kind of spiral of division and affective polarization.

The second mechanism through which we think this happens is what we're calling monitoring. I'm open to suggestions about other ways to label it, but this is about political economy. So when local journalists aren't serving as the watchdog, local officials know they can get away with more. And of course they do because they know they can. Research shows that local governments borrow and spend less responsibly when newspapers disappear. State officials become more susceptible to money and politics when capital coverage declines. Members of Congress do less constituency work when local press is not holding them accountable. For local incumbents, this means declining local news doesn't just help them win. It removes their pressure to perform. I often like to say it almost doesn't matter if anyone's reading or watching local news. It's almost as if the presence alone, the shadow, the watching eye, makes people behave differently. I really do believe that's true. And so they can run unopposed or with only token opposition and face minimal scrutiny for how they do the job when there is no local news in the area or not enough, not robust enough of a presence to actually cover things adequately. People basically can't monitor their government as well because their local watchdog is gone.

The problem of uncontested elections is even more stark. In 2023, 85% of down ballot legal races, like for district attorney office judges, sheriffs were uncontested, 85%. In 2022 it was 67% because it's not completely off year so it's got a little bit more. These aren't fringe offices, right? They control the criminal justice system in your community. You might be wondering, okay, but why would local news affect that? Why would local news affect whether people are being

challenged in office or not? Well, there's some new work on this that I want to highlight, more work from Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, that speaks directly to this question.

One way that this happens is through voter awareness. So when local media don't cover local offices or local office holders or local candidates, voters don't really understand what's at stake in those positions, people who can't describe what a county commissioner does, are not very likely to decide all of the sudden they want to run against one, right? The basic informational deficit there, which local news is, by the way, uniquely positioned to fill because national media don't have the bandwidth or capacity to cover a lot of municipal state or county governments. This means the pool of potential challengers amongst people in the community is way less likely to develop.

The second effect is on political ambition and this is where Hayes and Lawless's recent work comes in. They conducted a comprehensive study using six surveys including national samples, and then statewide samples in Michigan, Montana and New Hampshire. A very large sample of potential candidates and they have really interesting and striking findings. They find that people who consume local news are significantly more likely to express interest in running for local office. National news consumption, on the contrary, does not have this effect. Watching CNN or reading the New York Times doesn't make you think about running for city council. It just doesn't. Local news consumption does. The effect is strongest for more substantive forms of local news. So, listening to the local NPR station or something like that. When there's more coverage of public affairs, in other words, people were much more likely to express interest in running for office. Something like five or six percent more likely, which is significant at that level.

Basically, the mechanism that they propose is intuitive. Local news helps people identify problems in the community, understand how government may or may not be addressing them well and allows them to see if there's an opening for themselves or maybe a friend that they might try to talk into running for office or something like that. But without that information, these would-be challengers never really develop the motivation to run. So to summarize what we expect here, as local news access declines, we predict incumbents will win more often and that more races will go uncontested or more candidates will run unopposed, in other words. So let's see if the data support that.

So to test this, we merged three data sources. Local newspaper circulation data from the editor and publisher yearbooks, and we have a year span between 2008 and 2021, giving us an approximate measure of county level newspaper access over time. Local election data outcomes from the American government elections database which covers roughly 18,000 election

contests for county prosecutors, sheriff, county executive and county legislature. And US census data to allow us to incorporate into our model the demographic and economic informations about the context of each county.

Our main dependent variable, and I'm going to show you two results in just a second, and the main thing that we're expecting to make the difference is this measure of access to local news. It is not a perfect measure, which is something I'm happy to talk about in Q&A and I'll expand on in just a second. So our main dependent variable is whether in the first model the incumbent runs and wins or wins basically and then in the second model it's just whether the candidate runs unopposed or not. So, you know, are they unopposed in the election? We use logistic regression with saving your fixed effects to make sure that we're comparing counties in the way that we should and not ways that confound our models in multiples. That's weeds that we don't have to talk about unless you want to in Q&A.

So, let me say a really quick word about the independent variable.Obviously, we know that local newspapers are not the only way people consume local news. There are digital forms of local news. There's television local news. Some places have radio local news. You can encounter sources of local information on Tik Tok and all these different social media platforms. First of all, those last two or three categories are very difficult to measure. It's a fieldwide problem as we try to figure out how to capture that kind of population and demand and consumption at local levels. Second of all, it's still the case that newspapers provide the reporting infrastructure wherever they're served. Like they are the most robust reporting infrastructure. They have more people. They typically have more expertise. They're more embedded locally in the community and know more about the institutions and so forth. So, at least for now, it's a pretty good proxy measure of what we think of as the reporting infrastructure available in that area. We can talk about it more during Q&A.

We also have a bunch of control variables, both about the candidate and the local area to make sure that we're not accidentally assuming these changes are happening because of things happening in the area or due to characteristics associated with the candidate. They include all the things that you might expect. This finding is about the incumbent win rate. So figure one here shows the predicted probability of incumbent victory across the range of newspaper access in a place from near complete news deserts to strong local news. The bottom line is that if you go from a place with basically no local news to robust local news, newspaper access reduces the probability of an incumbent winning from about 84 to about 75%. About a 9% drop for every hundred elections. That's about nine additional incumbents who lose if local news is more present rather than more absent.

This is our finding about uncontested elections or about candidates running unopposed. Moving from, again, a place with basically a news desert to a place with high circulation reduces the probability of an uncontested race by about 2.5 percentage points. That sounds modest, but consider the baseline. A quarter of these races are already uncontested. And small changes in challenge or entry really can change the dynamics of a political contest significantly by raising different issues and creating some competition and discussion over what's going well or badly. When a candidate emerges, it really does change the nature of political accountability in a place and in those elections. These findings hold up across multiple different robustness checks which again I could talk about more in detail.

Let me just close what I think the main sort of important takeaways and stakes are here. Local government is where most Americans encounter their government most directly. It's the decisions of these local office holders that really affect their daily lives, their criminal justice, public spending, land use, and more. Perhaps, or arguably more importantly, we know from lots of years of research and empirical data that these offices are also the training ground for higher levels of office. Most people start at low levels and progress up through the political chain of different offices. They end up in the state legislature, then Congress, and so forth. So it really does matter who these pools of candidates are, and these pools of office holders. When we see less local news and accountability at those levels, local news declines, we see more incumbent wins, not because they're doing a better job, but because challengers aren't known and their bad behavior goes unreported. Fewer races have opponents. So voters lose that meaningful choice between candidates at the ballot box, which is pretty much the foundation of the way democracy and elections work here. The polarization of politics then also starts to seep into local choice at the ballot box because people don't know anything about who to choose. They just go with whoever they think is the Republican or whoever they think is the Democrat, whether there's a label there or not.

Breaking that cycle is going to require us taking local news seriously as a democratic infrastructure, not just as some other form of information. I won't talk about next steps because I'm out of time, but I'm happy to talk about those in Q&A. Thank you so much.

Dr. Michael Henderson: Thank you, Johanna. That was wonderful. I'm going to briefly introduce myself. I'm Dr. Mike Henderson. I am the area head for political communication in the Manship School of Mass Comm here at LSU. I have the distinct privilege of introducing our next speaker, Dr. Sunshine Hillygus, a distinguished scholar and on a personal note, a mentor and a very dear friend. Dr. Hillygus is a professor in the department of political science at Duke University where she is also appointed to the Sanford School of Public Policy. At Duke she also serves as a director for the Duke Initiative on survey methodology and co-director of the

polarization lab. She's also currently co-leading the American national election study, the most prestigious, longest running ongoing study of the American electorate dating back to the mid 20th century. She served as an adviser to the US census. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation multiple times and numerous foundations. Her research focuses on campaigns, voter behavior, public opinion survey methodology. She's the author of "The Persuadable Voter, Wedge Issues and Presidential Campaigns," a book that won the Robert E. Lane award for the best book in political psychology when it was published. She's also authored another book "Making Young Voters," converting civic attitudes into civic action. She's a leading authority on how campaigns, media, information technology shape electoral engagement. Now, as brilliant as all that sounds, I do have to point out that she's also a fan of the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, which only goes to show, even the smartest people, you know, do make some mistakes. So, please join me in welcoming Dr. Sunshine Hillygus.

Dr. Sunshine Hillygus: Thanks, Mike. It is really great to be here, except for all of the tiger stuff in the hotel room. I mean, the lamps even and the shades really, it's a lot. But anyway, if anyone does want to talk SEC sports, I'm happy to do that in Q&A as well.

So thank you so much for having me here. I'm going to bring into the conversation a discussion about social media, which we haven't really talked about that much.I'm going to be getting into some weeds about the role of social media and political polarization, but happy to kind of step back, big picture at any point in the Q&A.

So I'm co-director of the polarization lab at Duke. Our mission is to try and understand the role of social media in political polarization and reflecting back on the 250 years of America. It's not this straight path to say we went from pamphlets to newspapers to radio to TV and now the digital age, right. We are in a fundamentally different time. The supply and demand of information in today's ecosystem is fundamentally different. And what we are trying to do with the polarization lab is understand how and if social media has an impact on the ability of the American public to hold politicians accountable in today's media environment.

Certainly you are probably aware of all of the headlines that point to social media as the cause of all political ills today, right? That it exacerbates polarization, leads to instability, and spreads misinformation. Our goal at the polarization lab is to try to really remove hyperbole from empirical evidence. So what I wanted to talk about today is the challenge that academic researchers face in trying to untangle what is the role of social media in the political dysfunction that we see today. So that we can then say "What can we do about it?" I want to run through some of the challenges that we face. Just to give you a better sense of how the polarization lab is going about this and why we're doing what we're doing.

Okay, so yes, you know the headlines, you know, the pointing of fingers. The question is how do we actually study and look at the causal effects of social media? It's useful to remember that social media was not developed for the purpose of democratic dialogue, and information gathering. Yet that is one of the primary ways, particularly younger people, are now getting their information. Facebook was created to rank the hotness of co-eds in Harvard. Instagram was created to schedule keg parties. So the fact that they might not be optimized for democratic accountability should not come as a huge surprise, but we do want to unpack what is it about social media that could be problematic if we're actually going to come up with some common solutions.

So one of the key challenges in trying to understand the role of social media is that it turns out these private companies aren't great about sharing their data. Some of the companies will not provide that to academic researchers at all. Others, most recently Twitter, have started charging $42,000 a month to academic researchers when they used to, pre-Musk, provide it for free. So, getting access to even what is currently happening is not as easy as just going on to your Twitter account and looking because you're seeing just such a small snapshot, and the person next to you is seeing a very different snapshot on social media. So, getting data is really hard. It is the case there are some industry academic partnerships. I've been involved in some of these. I've also spent months and months and months working on developing a project collaboratively with a platform only to have their lawyers back out of it at the last minute. So it is an incredibly fraught approach to try and establish a partnership approach.

Also, there have been some issues with our ability to trust the results. Most recently, Facebook participated in a set of studies in 2020. A lot of that research came out. A lot of it was quite favorable towards Facebook. Now some of those academic researchers are feeling a little bit duped because it turns out that there had been some changes, for instance to their algorithms, before they agreed to do this project with academic researchers. There is a degree of control that the platforms are putting into place in what gets studied, and what gets released. So some industry academic partnerships have started and have ultimately not beared the fruit that academic researchers needed.

So, even if we could scrape the data, maybe violating terms of service of some of these companies. Just us simply looking at what's happening in social media is not representative of what people think, and how they are engaging with various platforms. It turns out, for instance, if we want to understand how Democrats and Republicans are talking to each other, that going on a Truth Social and seeing which Democrats are on that platform is not necessarily representative of how Democrats and Republicans are normally going to interact. Likewise the

Republicans who are on Bluesky are probably different from other Republicans. So simply observing is not enough because the majority of the people, when they go on social media, are not the ones who are saying inflammatory things in the comments or posting a lot. Most people are going on and they're just looking. And so we have this perhaps skewed view of what the public thinks or the extent of polarization based on this small number of creators who are pumping content into our feeds who don't necessarily reflect our own views or the views of the American public.

So this selection bias, the fact that people are opting into both particular platforms as well as the choice to post or comment means that simply observing is not enough. For academic empirical research, what we would like to do is experiment. We'd like to randomize, if we put somebody into a given platform. We'd like to randomize if they had a particular composition to their newsfeed to be able to untangle what the impacts are.

So the way that researchers have typically done this, is they have used survey-based experiments where they show people an image of a tweet, or an image of somebody's profile. And they say, "if this was in your feed, what would you do?" Very hypothetical and not really the type of reality, kind of inferential situation, that would be ideal for really unpacking how people will engage. To be fair, some of these things are from my own studies. I do this too, so just because I'm criticizing it does not mean that I don't also do this. But this is what led us at the polarization lab to develop what we call the Social Media Accelerator (SMA). This is an app that can be downloaded on the Google store or the Apple store. You can only use it if you have a code, so you know, don't bother to download it. But we recruit people to download and test this new social media platform. Unbeknownst to them, we are able to manipulate what that experience is going to be like. So we can put "do you have a like button or a like and a dislike button? Is it anonymous or do people have their name shown?" To try and unpack this question of what it is about social media that might impact attitudes and behavior. Importantly the other users on this platform are powered by AI. So the vast majority of people don't realize that they are primarily interacting with LLM, as well as researchers, because they're told that they're just testing out a platform. We're able to collect both their responses to survey questions asking things about their attitudes, as well as what they actually do on the platform. So it gives us a chance to actually see both that expressed behavior as well as what they're thinking in their heads. If you go to our website, you can see a demo.

In the last few minutes, I'd like to show you some of the lessons that we've learned in conducting studies from the lab. Just briefly the framework for the type of studies that we're doing. We start with an intake survey in which we tell people, you're going to have to download an app. Are you really willing to do this? We are paying them. They create a profile. They take a

pre-treatment survey. So before they've engaged on the news feed, they go into a news feed, then that we have manipulated. This particular one, we had one news feed in which it was civil, and a different news feed in which there were a lot of uncivil people that they were interacting with. Then after they spend 10 to 12 minutes in that news feed in which they are engaging like they like, whether it's just lurking or posting or commenting, we then ask them a post treatment survey.

In this particular study where we were looking at the causal impact of being in an uncivil environment, it turns out that incivility drives incivility. Now, maybe this isn't a huge shock, but when people go in, and see incivility on social media, they like the other side less. They also start commenting. Even though they say they're less comfortable sharing their views, they actually comment more. So they're pained when they're doing it, and they're also fired up and being hostile when they do it. So they are more likely to be toxic themselves when they see other people being toxic. Importantly, outside of this news feed, it makes them like Democrats or Republicans, whichever is the opposing side, even less. Out in the real world. It makes them like them less, having seen this type of uncivil behavior online.

Let me give you some better news. We can also change the affordances of social media. For instance, the standard kind of Facebook prompt asking about a post is what's on your mind? It's asking you to profess your opinion, express your opinion. So we said, okay, what do we do if we instead have a prompt be, "what are you curious about?" Turns out it encourages people to ask questions, including of the other side. It actually makes them say things that are more intellectually humble. So there are ways that social media can be redesigned to promote pro-social interactions.

We can also incentivize better dialogue. Most platforms right now are rewarding popularity. Things that are trending, things that are going, and so when we instead give badges that are not about popularity, but instead give a badge for being open-minded, it incentivizes better dialogue in that new scheme. However, the thing that we kept running across is that time after time, when people were engaging in social media, in contrast to what a lot of research says that when you put a Democrat in a room with a Republican and you have a conversation face to face that this is actually a very positive thing for democracy and they like each other more. That's a pretty unrealistic thing because where people tend to be engaging with the other side, is on social media. And in that group dynamic where there's an audience that sees how you are engaging, when it's a group, people end up self-censoring. There's a lot of self-censorship. People don't want to stick their neck out and have a conversation that's going to offend others. So we see that in study after study and particularly among young people.

So we did a study in which we were looking at young Trump voters and how they shared their views and what they were willing to share when they were around a majority of young Harris supporters. Which mimics many college campuses these days, right? What we found is that there was a lot of discomfort in sharing their views and what they shared was quite different.

I know I'm over time but let me conclude by saying evaluating the role of social media is very difficult. So we have to be very careful to remember that what we observe on social media is not a reflection of reality. It's not a reflection of the American public. It is a reflection of a lot of different processes in which people have selected in and only some people are willing to say things. So we think the SMA is a great tool. Unfortunately, we had a Department of Defense grant terminated. Turns out polarization is a bad word. And so we are scrambling now to find new funding for new studies. We have just secured a much smaller grant than the Department of Defense grant. But I again invite suggestions for the type of topics around social media that we can study next. Thank you.

Dr. Michael Henderson: Thank you both. That was great, great stuff. I'm going to kick off our Q&A portion kind of borrowing and modifying a question that came up in the previous panel. We can now apply to y'alls research and broad contemporary information environment. So it strikes me that both of these projects really reveal a lot about the supply of information. Whether it's incivility on social media or the availability of local news. So they're about the diet of information consumption and we're looking at how the supply of that information can shape and contribute to foster organization, nationalization, instability or what have you. So what I'm curious about is, what does your research, or the discipline more broadly, suggest about not just the supply side but also the demand side. Are there limits to the kinds of tweaks we could do on the supply side that would help address some of these issues if we have serious demand side issues. That the audience wants to see uncivil posts, misinformation, national news or something other than local news. Can you speak to that?

Johanna Dunaway: Thanks. So one of my main areas of research is basically the economics of news. So I often think about news production and consumption in terms of the supply or demand issues. And the one thing that's really hard to communicate to public audiences and audiences of punditry, even politicians or even organizations trying to solve these problems, like well-meaning organizations, is that the demand is always the problem. I mean that's part of the issue with our economically based media system, is that as long as eyeballs, clicks and attention drives revenue, demand is always the problem. I do think sometimes it's overstated to say that hardly anyone ever wants any serious news content. I don't think that's true. I think people want especially useful news content that's relevant. But it is true that there's a reason outrage generates more revenue and more time on pages and more clicks and more returning

pages. Just like back in the broadcast era, news was sensational and if it bled, it led. That was the same problem in a different format. So yeah, there's a civic set of issues here. It's not easy to figure out what the solution is. I think a lot of people are trying to think about interventions in the earlier ages of education cycles to try to instill the importance of civic attention and democratic health especially since the attention economy is so problematic in this way. But yeah, the demand is always a problem or a huge part of the problem.

Dr. Sunshine Hillygus: We have a student who is studying this topic who shows that people really do want to hold the government accountable. They want information that allows them to do that. They want both to be entertained, and they don't like all of the incivility and the polarization. We see that news avoidance has been increasing. So, the issue is they both want things to be easy. Why not, right? We all have day jobs. And they want to be able to get the information that they need. The dilemma is that the incentives are simply not there to do both because there's fewer people who are subscribing to pay for news. Those who do are the kind of weird people like you guys, right? Who actually want to understand and dive deep, right? And have a taste, a hobby for politics and news. So the economic driven media are catering to us. That means that they are not necessarily packaging things in an easy way for other citizens that just want to know what they need to know and know it, when they need to know it.

So the question is, is that solvable, right? It is not solvable in the current market of media. I think we can't just say we need to educate in schools. That's not a solution. I think we need to recognize what the incentives are, what human psychology provides constraints and go from there in terms of thinking about solutions.

Dr. Michael Henderson: Great. Thank you. Looks like we have some questions from the audience.

Michael DiResto: We do. These two questions on the screen I'm going to combine because they come right after what you just said, Sunshine. The first one, I think we all understand this, but I think people want to see if you all have some quantification. Which is, to what extent do social media algorithms intensify polarization by prioritizing content that aligns with users existing beliefs? And I'm going to combine it with this one. In Louisiana, we have a public service commission that regulates utilities. Given society's exposure and dependence on social media platforms, should those platforms be regulated as public utilities?

Dr. Sunshine Hillygus: So sure that's a pretty different question. So don't let me forget as I answer one or the other. In terms of regulation, I think this was raised in the previous panel that it is fundamentally different. Section 230 means that the platforms are not held responsible for

the content that is shared and that is different from a lot of places around the world right. It is something that, there is no question in my mind, why social media executives are now doing all they can to make sure that doesn't change. So that means that all of the regulation is really left to the platforms themselves and they are thinking about their bottom line. Now that is not to say that they don't have any interest in pro-social outcomes. They are worried about things getting so bad that then they will get regulated. I have worked with Meta. I have worked with Google. I have worked with these companies and there are people in these companies that do recognize there are bad outcomes, and would like to think about things that can improve.

However, this is where algorithms are set up for the sake of getting content, right? And so some of the solutions that you know have been put out there, would impact the bottom line of social media companies. So right now the incentives are misaligned for the type of pro-social outcomes that we would like to see.

Johanna Dunaway: The only other thing I would add to that is I agree with everything Sunshine just said. But also she mentioned places all around the world. It's true that there are more rigorous or stricter regulation attempts happening. Different models for it around Europe and other places where we may be able to look to those to see, almost like experiments, to see how those pan out. I do think there is an appetite among lawmakers in certain places too. Here in the US various lawmakers are interested in trying to solve at least some of the aspects. I think some of them are less interested because it might not serve political purposes as well. But in other cases I think there are areas where they do want to figure out a way to do more without overstepping. I mean we in America are less regulation friendly as a rule, so it's different than the European context. But we still might be able to learn something from what's happening with different efforts to control or regulate some of this.

Dr. Sunshine Hillygus: And I would just add in terms of regulation that it's more complicated than just thinking about, okay the FCC, right? Like because you know when we're heading into an election season, right? You think about the differences in what television advertising, political advertising has to do and how it has to be public record. You contrast that with political advertising in social media–fundamentally different. And even to the extent that some platforms put regulations in place. So Tik Tok doesn't allow paid political ads at all. But that doesn't prohibit influencers from being paid by political campaigns. So that organic content is not regulated. That's coming through and people tend to trust it more than a paid political ad. So when you start looking at that intersection of not just political content but candidate, elections and campaigns, it gets even scarier.

Michael DiResto: Okay, I'm going to keep going, this one is for both. So Johanna, you talked about a decline in local news, and particularly how it impacts contested or uncontested elections and accountability. While at the same time, Sunshine, the rise of social media and all of the exacerbation with polarization. Question is, in those dynamics when it comes to local communities, are you studying or do you know of anybody else studying, or what do you think the impacts of both of those dynamics are at the community level when it comes to economic conditions, social conditions, even race relations? Is anybody gauging what's happening to the community fabric, I guess, is the question.

Johanna Dunaway: Yeah, I think there's a lot of people who are interested in this sort of broader set of problems associated with declining local news, and whether they measure it in all of its different forms or whether they're looking at news deserts or what have you. That there are people studying the economic impact. It's another difficult thing to pin down. Especially given that you need data over time, that are getting easier to get a hold of, but it's been difficult historically for us. But yeah I think some of the things people are interested in, looking at things like community relations, community engagement. Not even political, but how many organizations or how much democratic satisfaction are people feeling in a given community? How much trust do they have in their leaders? Things like that. And there's a lot of variation across all the communities across the US. So for one thing, studying those things at those levels allow for comparison across to see what's happening where, and how things might be different. But local leaders often report and community groups often report that there is an important role for local news and helping them facilitate the things that they're trying to do. So there's kind of some anecdotal evidence to suggest that that's important culturally, civically at those levels. So I expect only for these areas to branch out, and definitely beyond politics and to see about how basically quality of life, perceptions of safety and satisfaction are impacted in communities with less access to local news.

Dr. Sunshine Hillygus: You're (Johanna Dunaway) the expert on this topic. So I would just both defer to the research that Johanna has done, but also just add that when we think about social media that it is this double-edged sword. Where on the one hand it changes our geographic connections, right? It allows us to stay connected with family across the world. But it also changes our geographic focus. And so it means that that local community can be overlooked and so there is lots of evidence about the nationalization of our conversations. A part of that is the way that we are engaging with the information ecosystem through social media.

Dr. Michael Henderson: I'd like to follow up on one final question. It relates to what you both just talking about. So Sunshine in particular, it seems like part of your work is suggesting, we know from these other studies we get these face to face encounters and maybe that makes

people a little more cival to each other but we're not necessarily emphasizing that online. And as you said, online is not necessarily the real world. Although, we know it has political effects. So if we think about this in the context of what we know and the debates about the extent of the forms of polarization, is the results of the research and discipline really all bad? Could it also be the case that well, the real world is still the real world and we could say yeah go out and touch grass and everyone will be great. Maybe that's not feasible for improving online interactions, but are we getting more animus, more affective polarization online and carrying that liberty into our day-to-day lives? Or are our day-to-day lives relatively independent from the not real world that is social media?

Dr. Sunshine Hillygus: I think it's a great point. One of the main things I would say as a takeaway is just to remember that what you see on social media is not in fact necessarily even reflective of the people who are saying it. And it's a useful thing for us to remember that. That said, there are these spillover implications in terms of partisan animosity and it is still a problem. Even if we remember that crazy thing our uncle said is not in fact – you know, he's still a lovely man. It is useful to just remember that people's online persona is not necessarily reality.

I also think that there is a lot that we can still do, that platforms can still do, as society in terms of regulation that we could potentially do, that would help. Because it turns out we don't disagree with each other nearly as much as social media tells us, particularly on policy issues. So although as a political scientist, you know this. That you know, ideological polarization is not–we agree on a lot of things. We just don't like each other, right? And that's the fundamental problem. If we can solve that piece. So a lot of the focus is on polarization, although what we call the polarization lab, I often times come to these conferences and say, "Polarization is not really, like we don't want to fix polarization. We don't want to change people's attitudes. People can believe what they want to believe. What we need is to have more productive dialogue. We need to have more respect for the other side. We need to have more understanding." And in that vein, I would say I'm gonna point fingers at traditional media too, right? So let's not focus all attention on social media when there's a lot of other things that might be closer and in grasp.

Michael DiResto: Thank you so much, Mike, Johanna, Sunshine. How about a round of applause?

Panel: Navigating the Minefield of a Fragmented Media Environment

- *Carl Cannon, Executive Editor and Washington Bureau Chief of RealClearPolitics*

- *Discussion moderated by: Jack Hamilton, Ph.D., LSU Boyd Professor; Hopkins P. Breazeale Professor of Journalism at the Manship School of Mass Communication; Columnist for RealClearPolitics*

Dorene Hantzis: My name is Dorene Hantzis, and I'm a soon to be graduating senior here at LSU. I'm majoring in political communication and I'm minoring in applied statistics and leadership development. I'm also an intern here at the Reilly Center, so I'm really happy and honored to be here to be able to introduce our next guest. Our next segment shifts towards our contemporary journalism landscape and the realities of navigating a fractured media environment, both for producers and consumers like ourselves. Today we are honored to welcome Carl Cannon. Carl is executive editor of RealClear Media Group and Washington Bureau Chief of RealClearPolitics. He has covered every presidential campaign since 1984 and is a recipient of both the Gerald R. Ford Prize, and the Aldo Beckman Award for Excellence in Presidential Reporting. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, and a former president of the White House Correspondents Association. He is the author of multiple books on the presidency and American history. Please join me in welcoming Carl Cannon.

To explore these issues more deeply, we'll also welcome Jack Hamilton back to the stage for a fireside chat with Carl about the realities impacting today's media environment.

Jack Hamilton: He's also my boss at RealClearPolitics. So, I want to say something first. And I want to single out one person here, who happens to be the best person I've ever worked with in my life, and that's Adrienne Moore. There would be no Reilly Center, there would be no Breaux Symposium, if it weren't for Adrienne. And furthermore, Carl's father, who some of you may know, Lou Cannon, the famous correspondent, political correspondent with the Washington Post, his book is shortly to be published under a book series at LSU Press, that also wouldn't exist if it weren't for Adrienne.

So, one thing about Carl is he never says anything that's not interesting, and often provocative. And that makes him a lot of fun. He also is representing an organization that's working very hard to be balanced. Some people who are on the left consider it too conservative. One of the reasons I wanted to work for Carl is because I wanted to show that you could write for an organization that looked like it was more conservative, but that you could not just write for an organization that was repeating political views. So I enjoy enormously working with Carl. And I admire enormously what he's done with his organization. I want to explore with him a little bit about what he does and why he does it. And his concerns about what journalism needs to be and how we can get there. So Carl, let's start talking about the mission statement for RealClearPolitics which you wrote. Tell us a little bit about what that is and what's behind it.

Carl Cannon: Well, the mission statement for RealClearPolitics is that we don't–you can look it up on our site. But it's that we don't believe agenda driven journalism is really journalism. Now, I don't mean you don't write stories that you hope will have an impact. The Pulitzer Board when it awards a prize, by the way, there's a Pulitzer Prize winner in the audience. Did you know that? Jeffrey Marks. Jeff, raise your hand, please.

I knew a reporter named Mike York many years ago, who wrote a series about abuses in University of Kentucky basketball and Kentucky had to straighten up its ways. Now we've legalized paying players. Kind of dated that series. In the news business I grew up in, the idea that you would write something with a partisan agenda in mind or broadcast it–it was unethical. Conservatives have said to me since at least Barry Goldwater went for president, that the legacy media tended to be democratic. "Tended to be," this was their great complaint. There was some truth to it, but people didn't brag about it. They denied it. They tried to check their prejudices at the door and their partisanship. That was the ethos that lasted.

These academics say, "oh, that really started after World War II." But that's not true. Adolph Ochs in 1896. That long ago. He wrote, "I'm going to start this newspaper, the New York Times, without fear or favor. We're going to cover the news without fear of favor or partisan design."

So when I wrote this mission statement it had some of that language in it. It was the way I was raised. It was the way all journalists of my generation would have just said, "yeah that's what we do." Now there's a movement to say, that's not our role. Some people see Donald Trump as an existential threat to democracy and they say you have to resist him. Jim Rutenberg of the New York Times wrote a very influential piece early in Trump's administration. He said, "if you find that you believe this about Trump, you find yourself in an oppositional stance." And Rutenberg's piece was very nuanced and very thoughtful, but people took it as a license to just attack Trump in straight news stories and not even pretend to be objective.

Our mission statement, I still think that's the highest value. I think trying to be objective is what you have to do. Otherwise you don't really have a news organization. I'm going to read you something, it's very short. This is Jen Psaki who works for an organization that used to be called MSNBC. They changed it to MS Now. She was introducing James Talarico who had just won a primary in Texas. Here's what she told her audience.

"Now, one of the biggest contests this election season is going to be in the state of Texas. Texas is the state of, well, the highest number of veterans in the country." I don't know if that's true, but she said it. "The people who actually fight our wars. Texas is also the state with the most farms in the country where farmers will now have to pay higher prices for fertilizer thanks to

Trump's law. And though Texas is known as a state that produces a lot of oil and gas, it also consumes more petroleum and natural gas than any other state in the country meaning that 60 cents is really going to hurt. Everything is bigger in Texas, including the cost of Trump's war." This is her introducing a guest on the show. "Texas, of course, is also the state where Democrats have just nominated a charismatic, faith-driven candidate who has already charmed some formerly Trump friendly influencers like Joe Rogan. He's already making sure that Texans understand what Trump's war will cost them."

Well, Jack, that's not journalism. I know that you agree with me. You said so earlier. Jen Psaki is a Democratic party hack who was a very able press secretary, the way we now define that job. And she was hired as a network producer, a network host.

So that's not what I think of journalism. I don't know what you call that. I think of journalism as trying to get it right and being fact-based. I'll give you a personal example that just happened a few minutes ago. So this very poised young woman introduced me as a Pulitzer Prize winner. That's on my bio. The publishers of my books keep putting it there. I keep trying to take it off. I have the Pulitzer Prize on the wall of my office. It was for coverage of the Loma Prieta earthquake in California. I worked hard on that story. I was out in the Washington Bureau, but I was out in California for the World Series and I earned it. We worked on it. I'm proud to have it on the wall. But the award was actually awarded to the staff of the paper. That's a slight distinction. Doesn't matter. You know, I wish I had won a Pulitzer by my name, like Jeff.

So to point out facts that don't always just make you look good or your political party look good, should be what any decent human being ought to be able to do. Somehow now we've gotten to this Manichean world where people think if they say anything, the Democrats say anything positive about Donald Trump or conversely on the other side, anything critical you somehow betrayed your own side. Now it may be effective politics but it's not journalism.

Jack Hamilton: So talk a little bit about RealClearPolitics and the kicker of this question is, tell us how financially it does with the model of trying to play it straight down the middle. But first talk a little bit about how it's funded, where the revenue comes from, and then a little bit about how viable it is.

Carl Cannon: Okay well, RealClearPolitics. We have large traffic. Millions of people, especially in election year, go to it. Most of them are drawn to the poll average. Averaging of political polls is done now in four or five places, but these two guys who started RCP kind of invented it. After 1988 there was a proliferation of polls. Some of them are good and some are bad. If you just average you get a more accurate snapshot. So people come for the polls and then while we're

there we try to keep them. And we keep them with original content, which is what I do, or the aggregation of stories from other outlets, which we try to balance. You would think there would be an enormous model, enormous audience for this. There kind of is, but it's hard to monetize it. It's hard to make money. In 2017, I had a larger staff than I have now. We've had to downsize like everyone else. The Washington Post is owned by the world's richest man or I guess Elon Musk is now the world's richest man. The second richest man, I don't know. There's probably oligarchs in Singapore I've never heard of, but a very rich man.

He's just laid off a third of the staff. It's hard to make money in the news business. The traditional legacy media, new media, it's just hard. Our revenues come from ads you get on the site, which are much less than they were, and from sponsorship people. Then we have a foundation side where people who believe in our mission send checks, and we have to apportion those correctly. So, we're right with the IRS. But we would qualify for an SBA loan. We're not a large company. Fewer than 50 employees.

Jack Hamilton: Michael, we're going to take questions from the audience. But first, Carl, we've been talking about solutions. Talking about 230 and how that can be changed. What do you think about solutions to deal with the level of polarizing movements that we have today?

Carl Cannon: Well, the solutions that we've been trying and I grew up in the legacy media, so I'm talking about legacy media and new media. The solutions we've been trying have all backfired. Financially they're problematic, but they also make some of these problems that Sunshine talked about and these other speakers, worse than polarization.

So what are some of the models? Well, the old model was advertising. And some of you in the audience are my generation, or old enough to remember this. I wrote a column for several years for the Orange County Register. Anybody heard of that paper? Yeah. It was a huge circulating newspaper in its heyday in the 60s and 70s. It was always called a conservative newspaper. That wasn't quite right. It was more libertarian. The publisher Hoiles was his name, was I think the only major newspaper publisher in the whole state of California to come out against the incarceration of the Japanese Americans during World War II. And he was also a guy advertisers would come in, because he was progrowth like all Californian publishers in those days. He had some reporters investigating something when the chamber of commerce types came into office and said, "well you know we're advertising in your newspaper, but these stories you're doing, they don't make us look good," and Hoiles said, "if you don't like what's in my newspaper, don't advertise in it". Kicked them out. Well today, I mean, you'd be hard pressed to kick an advertiser out. That's unusual Jack. You'd be happy they were there. And so that was the old advertising model.

One time I went there. There was a young guy who hired me to write columns for them. He wanted columns down the middle, which is kind of what I do. And he's like classic California. He's a gay, vegetarian, Republican. It's California. A really smart and nice guy.

Anyway, he's giving me a tour of the plant, and there's all these rooms that aren't even being used. There's one as big as this room we're in–bigger than this room. And he said, "oh, this used to be the sports department." They had 150 sports reporters. They covered high school football, college football, they covered everything. It was the heyday. You could be a real idiot if you owned a newspaper in the 50s, 60s and 70s. It was like only a printing press of money. We went into this one place, it was a lobby like a bank and there were marble teller booths and he said, "I can't figure out what this is." I said, "you don't know what this is?" He says, "no." I said, "this is where," and they were all girls or women, "would sit behind a desk and people would come in person because they didn't trust the new technology, the telephone, to place a classified ad."

In every newspaper in America. If you wanted to advertise for a job, sell a car, sell a bicycle, sell your house, they would take these little ads and they cost, you know, 16 or 20 bucks. But there were thousands of them in the paper every day, every day of the year.

My friend Steve Proctor who was the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle. One time we were walking in San Francisco and he points up the hill. That was my hometown, San Francisco, and he said, "that's where Craig Newmark lives." I said, "Who's Craig Newmark?" He said, "oh he's the guy who's taken $50 million in revenue out of my newspaper every year for the past five years." It's Craigslist. And he said, "And he doesn't even charge for it."

So, the business model collapsed as we knew it, but you still have to have some ads. So that old model doesn't work. So, what's going to be the new model? Well, an oligarch can buy your newspaper. That sounded good. Turns out oligarchs have opinions. Jeff Bezos certainly does. Worse, they have other businesses. And you have a president who's willing to threaten, directly threaten, the owners of news organizations with their other businesses. Trump's been very close to that, saying it openly.

Then you think, okay, we'll have a subscription model? Well, that sounds like the most egalitarian model, except that people who subscribe to your newspaper now think that they have a say. They'll not just write comments. They'll organize boycotts of people to stop subscribing if you don't do what they want. The New York Times found this out. In his first term, Donald Trump gave a speech that would have been anodyne in any presidency against racial prejudice. He gave a speech against racial hatred. It was a speech you'd want a president to give and he

gave it. And the New York Times had the straight news headline, “Trump denounces racism, extremism.” People went crazy. They said, "You can't, you're normalizing Trump. You … he is a racist. You can't write this." It was just a straight headline on a straight news story. And the really bad news, Jack, and I don't want to make you defensive because, you know, I love you, but the guy who organized the boycott was a journalism professor.

So, the subscription model has problems. So everything we've tried not only hasn't really solved the business model problem. It's actually increased our problems with engaging in an audience and open way. When I say an open way, I mean just presenting news, saying we're just going to be an old-fashioned newspaper or magazine or TV station. We're just going to tell you what happened today and maybe have some editorials with it on both sides. But there's no magic bullet that I've come across.

Jack Hamilton: Just a word of my opinion. I think there are some examples of models where people have owned publications, or there have been foundations that own publications and made them pretty good. The Christian Science Monitor was for many years very good. It was run by the St. Peters Times. And the Washington Post, when it was purchased by Eugene Meyer. He had been a governor of the Fed and while he owned the papers, he was the president of the World Bank. But the difference between him, I think, and what we can say is the difference between him and Bezos, is he cared about how he'd be remembered as the publisher of the paper and that makes a difference. If you identify with the paper and care about the contents, that's a very important connection. If it's just a thing where you say, “hey you guys better figure out some algorithms so we can use technology to sell more papers.” That's not very much the strategy.

I want to turn this subject slightly to something you and I have talked about before. We've talked a lot about how journalists do their job. That is– are they being fair in reporting? Are they being fact based? Things like that. One of the things that's happened that's also changed, and it's also a huge problem, is that access to news has changed and the institutional structures around news access has changed.

So we can look at Donald Trump who changed who was coming to the White House to be in the White House press corp. They kick out the Associated Press because the Associated Press refuses to call the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America. So they get thrown out. Now they've changed access into the Pentagon. You have to sign a pledge if you want to be there. So of course, journalists can't do that. So they're not in the press room. But this is a bipartisan problem because when Obama became president, he created a social media office that was way bigger than the press office. He found ways to not go to the press at all, but to bypass the press,

which was much more effective for him because he controlled the media. President Biden, as we know, stayed as far away from the press as he possibly could. Unless he got somebody who would give him a canned interview that would be positive. So he was hidden. They use other mechanisms as a way to effectively block inquisitive pressing journalists. And so I think that's an issue.

So you want to talk about that?

Carl Cannon: Well, if you follow the news, and I don't think you'd be here if you didn't, you know that Donald Trump has a unique way of dealing with questions he doesn't like asked. He attacks the reporter by name, in front of you. It'll be a question he doesn't want to answer. "How do you see Iran? Is there a way out for this?" "Who are you with, CNN? Well, of course, fake news. CNN, that's why your ratings are low. You suck." It's really weird. He seems especially annoyed by female reporters. "Quiet piggy." Can you imagine the president saying that? It happens. We still have trouble getting our mind around it. And Donald Trump has also done other things that seem to me almost destabilizing. He's sued news organizations and collected big settlements because they don't want to go to court. Then said he was going to use that money for his library.

A fiction writer writing about a president who had a talk show, a reality TV show 15 years ago writing this, a publisher would say, you know, that can't happen. He poses a unique challenge to cover. This didn't start with him. The antipathy among the intelligencia of the left for Republican candidates, I would submit to you that it helped create Trump. All this stuff, you know, Reagan's a racist warmonger. George Bush is stupid, doesn't read books. George Bush actually read more books than I do, he's very well read. Mitt Romney killed people when he was at Bain. John McCain is psycho because of the time he spent in Vietnam. This was stuff said about Republican presidential nominees in New York Times, the Washington Post, ABC, NBC– silly, easily disprovable claims.

So, here comes Trump. And just for the sake of argument, I submit to you Trump may be all those things that they said. But by then, all the Republicans and half the independents had tuned us out. This was something we did. We created an environment where a guy like that could be elected. Now it's not that simple, but I want you to keep that in mind as a possibility because I talk a lot about bias in my organization and outside. People in academics will tell you everybody's biased so don't even try. Well, the first part of it is right. Second part, to me, is risible. So what notable human endeavor? Love thy neighbor, love thy enemy. Taking care of your parents when they're feeble, taking care of your children. What are the things that we do that we're proud of, that are easy? They're not easy. They're hard.

Jimmy Dugan said in "A League of Their Own," remember the star player wants to quit. It got too hard. He said it's supposed to be hard. The hard is what makes it great. That's what I think about doing journalism the right way.

Jack Hamilton: You got a question from the audience?

Michael DiResto: Yeah, we're going to try to combine them. Carl you talked about a new business model with the example of the Times where they've got to almost tailor the news to their core readership and whatever their beliefs are. Earlier we heard about how the algorithms on social media are going to keep feeding us the type of news that we already want to hear. We've got another question kind of back to how RealClearPolitics tries to do a balance in what you put on the page. And then back to the question of our responsibility as news consumers and citizens: are we contributing to that problem because we are just going to what we already want to hear?

Carl Cannon: Right. Well, look, it's human nature to want to have your views validated. I get that. And it's human nature, at least in a capitalist society, to want to make money. So, I understand why, you know, Facebook does what they do. Yes, consumers do have a role, but we've made it too easy, I think on our side, Michael, to encourage that kind of behavior. So, the comment sections. Why do we have comment sections? I don't think we should have them. I tell my reporters not to read them. Oh by the way, if you ever even talk about doing this, people will actually write you and say, "You're abrogating my first amendment rights, which displays our elastic view of the first amendment."

I was reading, Washington Post had a piece the other day. A woman named Emily Heil who writes kind of popular features. They tested 10 microwave popcorns. Ten people on the staff. An entertaining little story, and the worst microwave popcorn tastes like cardboard and the best is pretty good. Because I was coming here, I was just curious, "will someone bring Trump into this conversation?" It took four comments and then somebody else said, "you know, the orange man," you know. I guess that's shorthand for the president of the United States. And most of the people commenting just attacked The Post for doing the story. They said, you shouldn't eat microwave popcorn. It's bad for the environment. It's bad for you. It was all this crap. And I thought, would the Washington Post be less if they just shut that stuff off? I think it'd be better. You read these comments and it actually has a series. You read comments and you think, well, this is my community. I didn't realize that. I was just reading an interesting story, but my community is health nuts and Trump haters. I thought I was just reading a piece about popcorn.

And so, you know, this national open mic night that we've implemented, I don't think it works very well. And the people commenting are the most maladjusted people in the country.

Michael DiResto: So quick quick follow up. Someone now wants to know how is it that y'all go about choosing the morning lineup on RealClearPolitics. How do you go about picking what articles you're posting there? And I'll make a note myself when I visit in the morning. It almost seems likely the top three headlines are going to be about the same event or same topic but from three different sources.

Carl Cannon: Yeah, I don't do the aggregation. We have editors who do that including one of the co-founders, Tom Bevan, who still gets up at 4 in the morning six days a week. They go to, on any given day, 200 news sites. They have about 800 sites total that they look at and they try to match stories. So, we'll have a column by Jonah Goldberg that says, you know, Donald Trump is a functional idiot, and then one below it saying, Trump's the most brilliant statesman since Disraeli.

It's meant to get people thinking and we ask people on our podcast, we say this almost every day. Go to our site, read someone with whom you disagree. We believe in that ethos. I'll volunteer this, Michael. You didn't ask, but for the question you asked. There's a weakness to our system, which has been pointed out to me by Bill Galston. Which is that you're going for the more provocative writers and the more provocative headlines and what's missing sometimes is the thoughtful, boring stuff in the middle. I think that's a fair criticism, but we try to put a page that reflects what's going on that day both in news and in public opinion. It's not a perfect system, but on any given day if you're on our front page, you'll find something that you agree with and probably something you don't agree with, but hopefully that makes you think. If you don't know the arguments of the other side, well, first of all, you'll be less effective in making your arguments, but secondly, you might learn something you didn't know. You might think, okay, there's something there. And so, that's what we try to do.

Jack Hamilton: So, say a little bit about what you think about news rooms. Historically there have been many efforts to find newspapers that could be viable economically, and also overcome what had been the shortcomings of the press. Especially during the yellow press period in the late 19th century. One of those models was, of course, staff owned newspapers.

Carl Cannon: Milwaukee Journal.

Jack Hamilton: Well, yeah, actually I worked for the Milwaukee Journal. That's true. Okay, I'll give you an anecdote. So, the owner of the Milwaukee Journal didn't want unionization. So, we

decided to have employee owners. And the paper made so much money that some guy who'd been the copy desk for 30 years, when he had to sell the shares, he'd be a multi-millionaire. So they made a lot of money, but the thing was that the owners, being the staff, behaved like owners. They didn't want foreign bureaus. They didn't want a bureau in New York because they wanted to make more money every year. So maybe that could be an argument against staff ownership. But what are some alternatives?

Carl Cannon: Well, the alternatives right now are just streamlining, are cutting as bare bones operations. It's very depressing. I told you about the Orange County Register. I worked in the San Jose News. It was a great little paper. It punched above its weight. It was like Sugar Ray Robinson. We had bureaus in Tokyo and Mexico. We had two people in Washington. I was one of them. We ran major investigative pieces. One of them got Ferdinand Marcos to resign as president of the Philippines. It was a great newspaper. Now the building's gone. It's been sold. The office, and a half a dozen reporters. What's the harm of that? Well, we heard some of that. The harm, I'll give you a specific example. You said bad behavior maybe isn't punished as much as it should be. That was a very sweet way of saying it. I'll give you an example.

When I went to Washington, I was hired by a network to go to the Old Night River Bureau. I drove cross country with a guy named George Condon, who was a good friend of mine and he was going, at the same time, to be the bureau chief of copy newspapers. Which the San Diego Union Tribune was their flagship paper. I worked there as well. We got there and we did our thing and went ahead with business. George became chief and several years later George and a reporter who worked for him named Mark Stern, found out about a guy named Duke Cunningham, who was a Vietnam ace, the first ace in Vietnam, fighter pilot who shot down enemy planes. He was a conservative, Republican member of Congress from the California delegation. He was one of the most spectacular thieves in American public life. Well, never mind. In Congress.

What Trump and his sons are doing, I don't have words for. Duke Cunningham had a list and he would go to contractors and they had to bribe him if they wanted appropriations, and he had a list. A ship would cost you this much, a base cost you this much. He was pernicious. He spent the money on prostitutes and a yacht and booze. He was a real bad apple. Here's the thing. That bureau went out of business the next year. That guy had hung on another 18 months. The US attorney prosecuted him. He went to prison, but the investigation started because the newspaper went after him. There's nobody now. Newspapers, bureau folded. There's nobody there. Most senators and congressmen, overwhelming majority of members of Congress. I'd say 400 or so, don't have a single report or assigned to them.

David Simon, who was my colleague at the Baltimore Sun. You know him in this town better as the guy who wrote “Treme” and “The Wire.” He said at another seminar, “This is the greatest, this is the golden age of thievery in American politics. There's never been a better time to be a crooked politician than right now.” That's because newspapers have cut their staffs. So, I don't think it's not an equilibrium position in a democracy to not have the people who are elected representatives covered by newspapers. Something's going to replace it. You keep trying to get me to say what it is, but I don't know yet, Jack.

Jack Hamilton: I have one final question. You've told me, you tell my students this. The story about the story you did on wolves. I love this story because it shows for those of you who maybe haven't been a journalist or want to understand how this should work. It's a good story about how a journalist should go about a job with humility and perspective. Go ahead, tell the story.

Carl Cannon: All right. When I got up to Washington (state) for the San Jose Mercury News, a friend of mine called me and he said, "Hey, you know, I noticed it's like 20 degrees where you are, but we're going golfing today before work." He's kind of rubbing it in. He said, "What's it like?" And I said, "All right, well, the weather's not great, but I got to tell you, I love Washington." He goes, "Why?" I said, "The stories are lying in the street. All you have to do is bend over and pick them up. It's just wonderful." And he said, "What are you hearing?" “Anything you care about.” Shortly after, one of the things I cared about was wolves. I don't know why. Defenders of Wildlife have a building, and it’s still there. And there's like a wolf or a bear or something outside. I just walked in one day. I said, "What do you do here? Put the guy on the spot." "Oh yeah, we'll tell you." And I said, "What are you working on?" “We're working on restoring wolves to Yellowstone National Park.” I said, "That's crazy." Anyway, so I got to learn about it. I bought every book written about wolves in American English, like 30 of them. I don't know if anybody in journalism knew remotely what I knew about wolves and I got interested in it.

Then Bill Clinton won the election in 1992. I covered that campaign and I called and the rumor was going out that Bruce Babbitt was going to be interior secretary. The first rumor was he was going to be on the Supreme Court interior secretary title rights. So I called him, I know him. I covered his presidential campaign in ‘88. He was governor of Arizona. I said, "Bruce, are you going to reintroduce wolves into Yellowstone?" And the National Park Service had a whole plan. It was on a
shelf. It was ready to go. And the Reagan administration, Bush, nobody wanted to do it because the ranchers in the west were against it. Consequently, the Republican senators from the West were against it and it never got anywhere. But it needed an interior secretary. And he says, "How do you even know about this?" And I said, “Oh I know about it.” He goes, "Well, okay." He says,

“Can we be off the record?” I said, "Well, sure." He said, "I'm going to do it. You can come watch. You can come read all this stuff."

So, I wrote a story after the campaign, a long piece about wolves and how they had been killed and it was a bad ecological decision. It was bad for the elk. It was bad for the beaver. It was bad for the parks. People love wolves. They'd come to watch them. This very, this ode to wolves. And I turned it in. And I don't know if you've ever had this experience, but if I make a mistake in a story, even like a middle initial, I have this like tinnitus and I don't always recognize it even after 50 years of business. It's a mistake you made. But this wasn't like that. This was a feeling of foreclosure. And I thought, what's that about? I researched that story very carefully.

In the middle of the night, it came to me. It was the most one-sided story I'd ever written by a factor of a hundred. It was completely pro-wolves. I said, “well, who's anti-wolves?” Well, most people. Cause most people are afraid of wolves.

So, I called – there's a friend of LSU named Ray Strother. I've gone on on fishing days at his place, now owned by his son Dane, on the big Old River. Which is one of the great dreams in America. But there's a bar there called the Wise River Club, and the politics of that bar are such that there was a dart board in the men's room of Hillary Clinton when she was first lady. So, all right. So, I called up the guy, Chester was his name who's the owner. I said, “Chester, do you know anybody who thinks introducing wolves in Yellowstone is a bad idea?” Well, first I went up to the desk for the story and I said to the woman, hey, I need that story back. I need to put something else in it. Which is fine. I haven't started on it. So, I went back to my phone and I called him. He says, “No, I don't know much about that, but my brother, he owns a bar at the great hall. Call him." That would be more likely where they're running cow in the west, in the eastern part of the state. So, I called this guy. He gets on the phone. He says, “anybody in here want to talk to a reporter from the east about wolves?” I hear some guy gets on the phone. He's not some right-wing redneck. He went back east the way they used to say. Went to Dartmouth, you know, third generation rancher in Montana. And he said, “yeah, I'll talk to you about that.” Said, “well, Defenders of Wildlife says they'll repay for any wolves. I know they say that, but I'm still not good with it.” I said, “why? He said, “Carl, do you happen to know how many acres you'd have to run in.. where do you live?” I said, “Virginia.” “How many acres would you have to have to run 100 cattle?” “Well, probably just like 150. It rains a lot here.” He says, “Yeah. Well, I have 300 head of cattle I run and I have 10,000 acres and at least another 20,000 acres from the Bureau of Land Management. I can't fence it. It costs tens of millions of dollars. The government would let me do it anyway, and those cheaper out there cattle, they're out there. And if cows – I could show you my tax return. I made $60,000 last year. It's a big operation, but

after expenses, that's what I made. If the wolves get 10 of my calves, my family doesn't eat. The wolves eat. We don't eat."

I'm paraphrasing this from memory, but "so yeah, I'm not just not in favor of it." So I typed up like three paragraphs of what he said, stuck kind of, you know, in the middle of the story, just what he said. And then I was happy with the story. And when it came out, both sides, Defenders of Wildlife and this rancher thought that I was secretly on their side, but I wasn't. I was on the wolves' side. It didn't cost me anything to make that story fair and to make people understand why somebody would be worried about this. That's journalism.

Panel: The Emergence of Independent Media, Today and Tomorrow

- *Jonah Goldberg, Editor-in-Chief and Co-founder of The Dispatch*
- *Discussion moderated by: Michael DiResto, Director of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs*

AnnMarie Bedard: Hello everyone. My name is AnnMarie Bedard. I'm a senior at the Manship School, and I'm graduating in the Spring. I'm honored to be here today to welcome the next speaker, who will conclude today's program with a conversation surrounding the rise of independent media, its impact today and its prospects moving forward. A topic that feels especially appropriate as we observe the anniversary of American independence. It is my pleasure to introduce Jonah Goldberg. Jonah is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, the editor-inchief and co-founder of The Dispatch, and a nationally praised columnist, formerly of the National Review. He's the host of the Remnant podcast, a CNN commentator, and the author of three New York Times bestsellers. Please join me in welcoming Jonah Goldberg.

Jonah Goldberg: I sat here listening to a lot of things today, and disagreeing with some things, and violently agreeing with others. Not sure I can get to everything. I know we want to get to Q&A. You guys want to get on the road and get out of here. So, as Henry VIII said to each of his wives, I won't keep you long. I don't have a PowerPoint thing for you because Lord Acton told us power corrupts and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely. But sort of reminds there's this great story about Boris Yeltsin, when he was still president of Russia and things weren't going great. The economy was in rough shape and some reporters asked him, in the gaggle kind of thing, can you describe in one word the state of the Russian economy? And Yeltsin grimaces, thinks for a second and says, "good." So the reporters all chuckle and whatever and the one reporter says, all right, can you give us two words? "Not good."

I normally tell that joke, it's a true story apparently, but like I always use it to talk about the state of American politics in general, but it also occurs to hear that it's also a good point about dogged, determined questioning reporters. So speaking of reporters, I'll get to some of the independence for stuff in a second, but one thing I kind of want to push back on a little bit that I heard today. Again, there's a lot of stuff I really agree with, I also can't get past the name the Manship School. It sounds like something Pete Hegseth wants to send people to. "You're eating tofu? Send you to the Manship School."

I get why we're talking about journalism the way we're talking about it here and I agree with many of the broad generalities about what was said, but I want to fly flags a little bit for something. Jack Hamilton said several times, some variation of "journalists go and find out what the facts are." And in the context in which he meant it, I think that's absolutely true. And we need more fact-driven reporters. It's one of the reasons why we launched The Dispatch is to put fact-driven reporters first. At the same time, maybe it's just because I've been an opinion journalist for 30 years. I'd like to make a little bit of a brief for opinion journalism. I am not a reporter. I've done some reporting. It's mostly like let's send Jonah someplace weird and have him write funny stuff about it. But, I certainly got my share of sort of reporting things, but at the end of the day, I'm an opinion journalist. And I've long believed that opinion journalism in many ways is the highest form of journalism. It's also often the lowest form of journalism, but it can be the highest form of journalism. And what I mean by that is good opinion journal, a long-form essay in a magazine–in the New Yorker or the New Republic, in National Review, wherever, in The Dispatch. It's about making arguments. And the whole point of having a convincing, persuasive argument is dealing with the facts, but also dealing with the other side's best arguments, not their worst arguments. And that kind of journalism, I think, proves enormously vital for democracy itself in part because democracy is about disagreement. It is not about agreement. I cannot stand when we hear from every single president, almost every single politician and lots of sort of thumb-sucking dogoody kind of journalists who talk about how what this country needs is more unity. Unity is fine when you're unified around the things that you should be unified about. Unity is also the greatest source of group think. Unity is amoral. It's like fire. You can use fire to cook food or you can use fire to burn down an orphanage. It depends what you do with it. Unity is merely a tool, an instrument. And democracy, elections are about disagreements. That was the genius of the Madisonian system, is to have regular arguments about what the best policy is, who's doing a good job, who's doing a bad job, who should be fired, who should be rehired. And that requires arguments. And that's what opinion journalism is largely about.

And I should also say, Carl's point about Arthur Ochs, whatever his name, who founded the New York Times in 1890 whatever. Point taken. But the simple fact is that up until the 1950s,

essentially, a lot of newspapers were partisan. That was okay as long as they also dealt with the facts, as long as they told the truth. But people are going to come from different perspectives on different issues in different ways. For regional interests. Why did all those newspapers have the Democratic Gazette or whatever? It's because they were Democratic Party newspapers.

If you read Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, he talks about newspapers as essentially the lynchpin of building community at the ground level. It is the way in which communities largely defined themselves and hashed out important things that they needed to work out and there's nothing wrong with that. And one of the things that drives me crazy in all the debates about like Jeff Bezos and the Washington Post, and there are good criticisms of Jeff Bezos and there are bad criticisms of Jeff Bezos, but there is a certain crowd of journalists in Washington who get all worked up about how, "well the New York Times can only afford to do that because they have Wordle. And we're too good for Wordle." And I'm laughing at him, like, garbage.

First of all, my dad was in the newspaper business for 40 years and he always said every year he was managing the whine. But one of the things that newspapers used to do, people bought newspapers for different reasons. Some people bought newspapers for the funnies, some bought them for the news, even the movie listings, some bought them only for the sports. Entertaining the diverse group of readers of newspaper buyers is perfectly acceptable. I would love it for The Dispatch to have Wordle. But one of the things that got the Washington Post in trouble was a lot of the reporters thought, well, we are Woodward and Bernstein and we're too good to actually put out an interesting newspaper that does things like cover local news. You know, newspapers are going to be different things to different people and that's fine. The trick is, you have to be honest in how you're doing it. Doesn't mean you can't have a perspective. Jack referred to the golden age of newspapers or of journalism and in some ways I agree it was a golden age. It also had problems. It fostered a lot of consensus, but it also fostered a lot of group think. I completely buy into the idea to the arguments that the mainstream media had had liberal bias. I don't see there's anything wrong with conceding that fact. It seems incandescently obvious to me. It also meant that the New York Times was a great newspaper. You could be both things. One of the interesting things about the United States is that when we split off with one understanding of what journalism was supposed to be, we got … because we're Americans, we love technology. We got caught up in the cult of objectivity. You just put a camera on it, it'll tell you all the truth. You don't need a journalist as an intermediary and you interpret anything.

And it took us a long time to realize that cameras don't tell you the whole truth. There's all sorts of context about what came right before you were shooting, what came after, what someone was thinking, what someone wasn't thinking, what someone was doing. Say what you will about the

Rodney King tape. People came to different conclusions the more they saw of it. And, there was a certain arrogance that came to American media during that golden age. You know, Walter Cronkite, I think, was a great journalist, but he also, you know, he ended every evening news broadcast by saying, "And that's the way it is." Not "that's how we think it is." That's not the stuff "we thought was important." But "that's the way it is." As if this was some sort of ontological, epistemological declaration of final truth. And journalism has never been about final truth. It's the truth as best we see it in the moment.

The New York Times has "all the news that's fit to print." Screw you. There's news maybe that you didn't cover that you didn't think was news that you didn't want to be news. But again doesn't mean the New York Times isn't a good newspaper. Where I think we all agree is on the importance of truth. I don't know how many of you know this but I was a Fox News contributor for 11 years and the final straw for me, where I quit with still 13 months left on my contract, was when Tucker Carlson, guy I've known for 30 years, came out with this absolutely outrageous and disgusting documentary exposé explaining how January 6 was a false flag operation by the FBI and it was an attempt to turn the war on terror on Americans and put Republicans in Gitmo and all of this nonsense. I was like, "All right, I can't stomach this anymore. I'm done. But I stuck it out at Fox for a long time. I'm a conservative. I'm a proud conservative. But what the problem that happened at Fox News, which gets us more to the topic of today, is that Fox News, like a lot of other media outlets, has been subject to audience capture, where you start telling your audiences what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. And I get it. That's the business model. In a balkanized digitized economy where you're not trying to get a broad swath of the market, you're trying to narrow past for a sticky 2, 3, 4% of the market. You kind of have to cater to it.

And I watched in real time as someone who's always cared more about conservatism than journalism per se. I watched in real time as conservatism got corrupted by the same sort of dynamic. If you watch in the early days of Trump's rise in the primaries, it was basically the places that went Trumpy the fastest were once dependent on a broad market. Talk radio, the Heritage Foundation, which has like 800,000 donors, small donors that it relies on. Rush Limbaugh and you could see it in real time as their audiences said we love this guy. These people changed their positions, much like a lot of Republican politicians, to fit what their audiences wanted. There's this famous line from a French intellectual whose name is too difficult to pronounce from the revolutions of 1870 in France where he said, "there go the people, I must go with them for I am their leader." And that spirit suffused big swaths of the right. And so one of the things that was really remarkable for me, where I started to feel like I was in a body snatcher movie, was I thought that people in my line of work, broadly defined, right? I write books, I'm a think tank guy, columnist that does public speaking, I do TV

commentary, all that kind of stuff. Wear a lot of different hats. But I thought like the one thing, whether you want to call me an intellectual or a journalist or a writer or whatever, I thought … I always lose patience with a lot of the journalism school stuff about ethics. Trying to turn it into a massive discipline. Some of it's fine and I agree with. But the one thing I think that you can boil down a vast swath of journalistic ethics and also just ethics to is "don't lie." Don't say or write things you do not believe to be true.

I watched in real time, hanging out in the Fox News green room, which is a little bit like that Star Wars cantina some days. As one person or another, who I thought basically had the same job as me, broadly defined fellow columnists, talk radio hosts, TV pundits, magazine writers, who one by one started like would tell me things in the green room about Donald Trump or about this policy or that policy and say, "Oh god, this guy's an idiot. He doesn't know what he's talking about. That's unconstitutional." And then they go, "Oh, it's time for your hit." And they go in and get in front of a camera and they would say there is no greater lover of the Constitution than Donald Trump or under Comrade Trump we will have the greatest wheat harvests we've ever seen east of the Euros or whatever it is. That stuff offends me because it's contrary to the fundamental core understanding of what the job is about. And I think a lot of these problems, there are a lot of problems that have to do with the economics of journalism. We can talk about that a little bit. But part of it also has to do with the fact that elite institutions are becoming partisan.

We saw during the George Floyd riots and all sorts of CEOs having to sort of take a position on all sorts of political issues. They have to get out in front and align with constituencies on a political issue that have nothing to do with their business. More acutely, and I'm much more comfortable talking about the structural problems of American politics than I am about the nitty-gritty of American journalism. Part of the problem is we have such strong partisanship in this country because we have such weak parties.We are the only advanced industrialized democracy in the world for the most part, whose parties had voluntarily given up the ability to pick their own candidates. We'd outsource it to primaries. Primaries have been hijacked about 80% of the time by hyperartisans on one side or the other side. So they determine who the final candidates are in the general election and then all the normies are like "why do I have to choose between these crazies?"

If the parties actually controlled who their candidates were they would have a much better incentive of protecting the brand. But what happens is when you have weak parties, the partisanship that is supposed to be soaked up by the parties and also by Congress, which is completely broken,

spills out into society and gets internalized by everybody else. And so you start getting partisanship mapping, like a religion or like a form of identity politics like an ethnicity. And there's all sorts of fascinating studies about how there's more discrimination in certain institutions by certain people against people in the other party than there is about race or gender or religion or sex. We are treating having a D or an R after your name as if it is an ethnicity that we don't like. And this spills into the sociology of a lot of mainstream media and people pick it up and they don't trust these institutions because they feel like they're water-carrying. Sometimes they are water-carrying and sometimes news consumers have been so pandered to that the second they hear something inconvenient to their worldview they assume it's bias rather than just unpleasant facts.

Which brings me to The Dispatch. One of the reasons why Steve Hayes and I founded The Dispatch is we wanted to model. Steve was the former editor for the Weekly Standard. I was the founder of National Review Online. It was at National Review for 20 years. We wanted to model behavior that we thought was lacking in American journalism and also on the right. Part of our theory was that there are a lot of great media organizations that we think are center left in their assumptions about things and it's not that they're all damned hippies with open-toed shoes and closed minds who are doing the reporting, but just in terms of the way stories are framed, the way stories are selected. There was a serious bias from the New York Times and the Washington Post, ABC, NBC, CBS, all that kind of stuff. That was part of the secret of Fox News's success. As my late friend Charles Kraurhammer used to say, Roger Ailes had this brilliant discovery that you could actually get quite successful in a marketplace if you target the other 50% of America.

And so they had free reign for a long time at Fox. I will defend a lot of the reporting and journalism from Fox 15 years ago, 10 years ago. Don't get me started on Fox now. But the point is, other than the 800 pound gorilla that is Fox and basically the editorial side of the Wall Street Journal, there was a huge market gap because as you move left-center and left, there were lots of institutions that really valued reporting. Again, I think the New York Times has some liberal bias problems, but it's a fantastic newspaper with deep resources and a long tradition of actually doing really great reporting. It also leans left on some cultural issues and political issues. That's fine. Doesn't mean they're a bad newspaper. Doesn't mean they're right. NPR, I'm like the houseboy at Morning Edition. I'm on there all the time, right? And it's amazing the complaints that they get from, particularly during Trump's first term, they would get from listeners because I would say things critical of Trump and they couldn't process the cognitive dissonance that resulted from a conservative saying negative things about Trump. But say what you will about NPR. It's got its issues. It also is a great journalistic organization.

And for years, for decades, little magazines, that's the term of art form, you know, like the New Republic, Washington Monthly were feeders. They were minor league teams for the New York Times and the Washington Post. But basically there was nobody that fed the mainstream media from the right. Very hard to get from National Review to the New York Times in the old days. And so when we would tell people, when we were raising money for The Dispatch, we're going to be center right. We're not anti-Trump. We want to be post-Trump. But we also want to be strictly and profoundly nonpartisan. We don't want to carry water for anybody. But we also want to be clear about what our priors are and what our ideological commitments are and where we're coming from. What has two thumbs and loves the free market? This guy. And we're not going to pretend otherwise. And it is amazing how many mainstream journalists were like, well, that's not possible. You can't have an openly center-right organization and do good journalism.

And I was like, "well, what would you call the New Republic or the New Yorker or the Atlantic or any of?" "Oh, I think they're centrist." Or if you push them and you point out some things, "oh, you think they do good journalism?" "I guess so." So, you're just saying that once you're right of center, you're a tribal guy and you can't do what you got to do. And I don't believe that to be true. And so one of the things that we do, and I think this gets a little bit to the solutions part is you actually can get a lot of latitude from your readers, if you educate your readers about what you're doing, if you tell them, "Here's where we're coming from. Here's why we're doing it. Here are what our biases are." So you're not going to love everything you read. You're not going to agree with every opinion piece we write, and you're not going to like the stories we select when we're doing news stuff necessarily every day. We have an in-house rule at The Dispatch that if we don't piss off about 30% of our readers on any given day, we're doing something wrong. And so we get a lot of slack from our readers. We have, you know, I'd say about a third to 40% maybe of readers who describe themselves as center left, but a lot of people are actually really curious about what a principled conservative argument about something is, that they don't suspect is just water-carrying for Trump.

And I have quite a reputation for not being a huge Trump fan. I don't call myself part of the resistance or any of that kind of stuff. My old joke always used to be, look, Trump isn't Hitler. Hitler could have repealed Obamacare. But I don't change my positions just because of what Trump says or does. And you know, and to be fair, Donald Trump has tried to get me fired from every other place I ever worked. Trying to get me fired from Fox publicly and privately, trying to get me fired from the National Review publicly and privately. And because of that reputation, a lot of readers understand that if I'm defending something Trump is doing, it's not because I'm carrying water for the guy, right? It's because I actually believe the underlying policy is defensible. Now, I probably did more Trump bashing here already than I should have, so I won't

get into my problems with even when Trump is directionally right, he's implementationally wrong. But let me just sort of leave it at that.

But I think going back to the previous point, one of the things that is part of our model, and we basically don't have advertising. Sometimes we have what we would call tasteful sponsorships, but they are so far not for paid subscribers. We have ads on the podcast. We think that's sort of a different thing. My colleague, Steve Hayes, thinks that in the clickbait environment and the internet environment that online programmatic advertising is inherently corrupting because you try to do the thing that gets the most eyeballs, the most Drudge links. That was his experience when a different company took over the Weekly Standard. They just get more sort of trolling stuff in here to get more eyeballs and he resisted that.

I agree with him, but for me it's like a five on my list. The reason why I don't like most internet advertising is because I think it ruins the user experience. I'll pick on the Washington Examiner. I have friends there. I've said this in public to them. Lots of them have nodded in agreement, but they have a lot of really good people over there. But I will never go to the Washington Examiner site because I don't want to spend 20 minutes trying to close video-playing boxes and weird ads for toe fungus or penal augmentation pills or whatever. It just makes it impossible to read anything seriously.

And so we sort of have a Substack model when it comes to the reading experience. And in fact we launched on Substack. We were the highest viewed product on Substack the entire time we were there. Now we're doing pretty well with the subscriber model. Subscriber model is hard and we are not opposed necessarily to again tasteful sponsorships. We don't want to violate anything that we promised to our readers. And what we'll never do, because we promised our readers, is we'll never have the embedded video stuff and like "where can I, how do I close this thing?" and "oh, that's not a close box, that's something else, and now I'm going down this crazy rabbit hole." Because it ruins the user experience, and one of the things that you have to remember in journalism is if it's a pain in the ass to read something, people aren't going to read, and if it's not written well they're not going to read it, and if they don't trust you they're not going to read it. And so we take this kind of stuff very very seriously.

I want to sort of close on this before we do the little conversation thing. I think one way to think about our problems particularly in journalism but also in the broader society is… well, first of all let me put it this way. Every mass communication and technology since the printing press, has created populist upheavals. The Protestant Reformation doesn't happen but for the printing press. The wars of religion don't happen but for the printing press. The populism of the 1930s doesn't happen but for radio. I don't think you'd get Hitler if you didn't have a radio. You know,

you certainly don't have people like Father Coughlin without radio. The mass protests of the 1960s, wherever you've come down on the substance of what they were protesting about, do not happen in scores of cities around the world but for TV, and people chanting with the whole world watching. And the thing about it is, in the past we've had time to adapt to these technological innovations, to adjust our institutions and our cultures to deal with these new forms of information. The problem now is the flow is so fast, the change is so fast, the information and misinformation, fake news and all of these things is so dis-intermediated through social media outlets that it's impossible.

Social media was designed to fuel populism, where you dump things down and you try to enrage people. We talk about social media as essentially monetizing dopamine hits. It is designed according to their own internal literature to make you angry, to make you scared, to make you anxious, and most of all to stay on it. And that is fuel for populism. Populism is not great. I've been writing against populism for 30 years. It used to make me a traditional conservative and now it makes me a rhino squish cuck who needs to go to the Manship School. My problem with populism, I have a lot of problems with populism. I've read a couple books about it, but my main problem with populism is it is inherently anti-intellectual and inherently contentious of facts and arguments.

One of my favorite lines is from the legendary populist William Jennings Bryan who said, "The people of Nebraska are for free silver, therefore I am for free silver. I will look up the arguments later." And that is the spirit of populism. The reason I bring that up is we talk here a lot about reporters, journalists and local journalism and all these things. It's all valuable and important. One of the things that kind of got short shrift, even more short shrift than opinion journalism, is editing.

The edit function is essential to a functioning liberal society. What I mean by the edit function, we understand it in terms of journalism. Some young reporter brings in something, it's too good to check, it's too one-sided, it's wildly pro-wolf, right? And the editor is like, you know, why don't you go talk to someone anti-wolf? I mean, fortunately, Carl caught himself, but like your editor, if he had gotten to it, or she had gotten to it, should have said, you know, this is written like it's someone from Big Wolf, right? And so what an editor does is go back, check your facts, figure out what the argument is from the other side, right? That kind of slows things down. But it's not just in journalism. It's the essence of science, you know, you get raw data in, it seems too good to be true. Go check your numbers. Go check your math. Are you sure those calculations are right? Did the samples get spoiled somehow? Whatever it is. And then you have other institutions that competitively check that institution's results. Because science is about disagreement, too. It's about trying to falsify other people's truth claims. It's what journalism is

about. In terms of politicians, I assume you know the saying from Chicago: “if your mother tells you she loves you, check it out.” That sort of spirit is the editing spirit, is to say your gut emotions, your raw instincts, your anger, is an unreliable way of getting to the truth. And in institution after institution, we are laying waste to the edit function. We are laying waste to the people who say, "I don't care that you're angry. Go figure out, you know, what you missed."

And you know, when I talk to people in politics about my problems with populism, one of the most common responses I'll get back is, "Oh, but you don't understand how angry people are." Like, "No, I get it. You should read my email." I mean, I was um … the Anti-Defamation League came out with a report in 2016 about the biggest targets of anti-semitic attacks on social media. I came in sixth in the entire country. Which is kind of weird because like I know I have the Jewiest name short of Schlommoitz, but like, I'm not a famous Jewish guy and it didn't matter. All they saw was my name and there were all these anti-semitic jabronies out there and they went after me. And anyway, my point is I understand that people are angry.

But then I asked people, okay, great. So you're really angry. Really angry. Really, really angry. Okay, so you're really, really angry. When was the last time you made a really good decision when you were really, really angry? And they would look at me the way my old basset hound would look at me when I try to feed it a grape. You know, just total unblinking incomprehension. There's like, being really really angry is no way to go through life and it's no way to do journalism and it's no way to do politics.

Slow it down. Think for a second. One of our rules at The Dispatch is we don't want to waste people's time and we don't ever want to win the race to be wrong first. Which is an obsession with a lot of people who are driven by the Twitter model who want to be out there with something before everybody else, even if it's not true because they'll still get the engagement. They'll still get the eyeballs. We'd rather wait a day. We'd rather wait two days and that's why we target our ideal. This is a little complicated because we tell people, we tell ourselves internally and we tell our staff that our model reader is like an ER doctor in Baton Rouge. Somebody who's smart, educated, wants to do their due diligence about what's going on in the world, but has other things to do. And that's who we try to write for. We spell out what acronyms, you know, stand for and we lean heavily into explanatorial stuff. At the same time, the reality is is that a lot of our readers are actually inside the beltway, Capitol Hill types in part because The Dispatch's brand is trusted and there are a lot of I call them “closet normies” on Capitol Hill who don't believe all the garbage that they hear on Newsmax or all that kind of stuff. And they think that if we're writing it and it helps Trump, they suspect that we don't want that to be true, but they trust us if we write it. And if we write something that doesn't help Trump, they also believe it's probably true. And I cannot tell you, I'm sorry to talk so much about Trump because I really do

want to live in that Shangri-La of the post-Trump universe. And we're going to get there either for constitutional or actuarial reasons eventually. But the distorting effect on conservatism and right-centered journalism has been profound.

It's also been profound for the reasons Carl's getting at on mainstream journalists. A lot of people think you need to be resistance but part of it also that when again the parties are so weak, other institutions pick up party functions in the process. So I think of the NRA or Planned Parenthood, whatever you think of the institutions. They do more party work than the parties in terms of voter mobilization, issue framing, call lists, all of that kind of stuff. And because they're not part of the Democratic party or the Republican party, they don't have to moderate. They don't have to participate in the Madisonian process of compromising between different coalition members. They take 100% positions and they get politicians to buy onto it. And I think what a lot of the stuff we see from mainstream media outlets is that they get roped into the partisan sociology as well and it just turns off a lot of customers.

So just to close, I know I'm supposed to talk about the rise of independent media. Part of the problem is that independent media is kind of like Unity. It can be really good and it can suck, right? Right. I mean, like Nick Fuentes, the neo-Nazi Jabroni, he says he's part of independent media, but so does ProPublica, which does great stuff. I mean, I disagree with some of their priors, but like they're a serious news organization. The point about it is the reason for hopefulness is that people are seeing that the public is being poorly served and a whole bunch of different institutions are rising up. The Dispatch is just one of many that are trying to solve the problem that we have with the current media landscape and it's going to be really really hard. One of the things I would say to you is if there's a media outlet – I'd love for it to be The Dispatch, doesn't have to be – that you think is doing it right, subscribe to them. Even if you don't always read it. It helps them. It's part of their model. And you're paying for stuff that the country needs, even if you don't need it.Think of it like you're some media organization's world. You're helping pay for the stuff that it needs to get done.

I'll just close by saying I need it. I live in Washington DC. It's not a fun place to be these days. During commercial breaks on CNN, I spent a lot of time cutting myself. But, at the end of the day Herb Stein was Nixon's former chief head of the council of economic advisers. He coined Stein's law. "That which cannot go on forever must eventually stop." And this current trajectory is unsustainable. And what it's going to require is people to start…. I hope it doesn't take a financial crisis or something like that to do it. But it's going to require Americans, and this country is still a very good and decent country with deep reservoirs of civic-mindedness, to understand that they need to be part of solutions rather than part of problems. And we need to get back into this idea of grown-ups being in charge of institutions and taking the edit function

seriously. And I think we will but it's going to be hard and it's going to take hard work and it's going to take hard work from not just the people at these media outlets but for the people who consume. I hope you'll be part of that. Thank you all for having me.

Michael DiResto: Thank you, Jonah. We did get some feedback during lunch that not everybody had the ability to use the QR code. So, we're going to do Q&A the old fashioned way, which is Maria DeRoche, our program coordinator, will take questions and bring the microphone. So, I have some questions. I don't need to ask any of them. If y'all want to raise your hand, Maria will come to you. If I don't see a hand up, then I'll ask a question. So, I'll give you a second. If you've got a question, put up your hand and Maria will come see you.

Jonah Goldberg: If you can just make your statements in the form of a question, that would be great.

Audience Member: I'll just read what I had written as an earlier question. I think it applied to what you were talking about. Did the elimination of the fairness doctrine requiring balanced political coverage in the 1980s open the door to a Pandora's box? And if so, can we contain it or put it back in the bottle or is that just gone?

Jonah Goldberg: One, I think it's gone and good riddance. I'm a libertarian leaning guy on a lot of things and for years I've been telling people, you know, what happens if you get an FCC commissioner who's ill motivated and vindictive, and now we have the answer. If anybody has done more work to validate the legitimacy of the FCC than the current FCC commissioner, I'd like to know who it is. Even so, I get the spirit of the fairness doctrine. Part of my problem is that it still boils down into this binary that there's a Republican point of view and a Democratic point of view and I think we need less of that not more of it. But also in an era, take the equal time thing is still a thing, that's why Colbert allegedly couldn't have James Talerico on his late night show. So, he in order to avoid punitive measures allegedly, they took the interview and put it on YouTube. Where the YouTube interview got something like four times the viewership of his show.

So, this idea that you're going to either you're going to have to start regulating everything according to some notion of the fairness doctrine, even if it was a bad idea to get rid of it at the time, the technologies moved so far ahead that I don't know how you could possibly reimpose it. And given the punitive nature of how Donald Trump sees the government in all these agencies, I don't think you're going to see a lot of appetite to give that power to anybody else. So, maybe it was a mistake at the time, but I think it'd be more a mistake to bring it back.

Michael DiResto: I'm going to jump in with a quick one. Y'all did something with The Dispatch when you launched. You wrote a manifesto. It has lots of strong ideals. It's got some down to earth. This is what we are. This is what we're not. “We launched The Dispatch to do right as we see it by providing engaged citizens with fact-based reporting. …. And to become a forum for thoughtful discussion and civil disagreement.” It also added, I find it intriguing, “we do not believe such a mission requires the sort of eat your spinach humorlessness or finger wagging that often accompanies such endeavors.” My question is a little bit of a curveball. At the beginning I talked a little bit about how effective Ben Franklin was with some of his satire in his political writeups for his gazette. For those of you who have not historically read Jonah's G-File, you will often find pop culture references. You will find irrelevant and irreverent aides. He has also been known to have imaginary conversations with his couch. And my question is: why humor? Why do you use humor in so much that you write?

Jonah Goldberg: So I just want to be very clear. I am not a humorist. People started to sort of pigeon hole me as a humorist and I flatly rejected it. Part of my life, my philosophy of my career is that the second your audience starts to think they pigeon you, is when you need to disappoint or shock or surprise your audience. And so I used to just do endless Simpsons quotes and then I became known as the Simpsons quoting guy. I stopped doing that. PJ O’Rourke was a friend of mine. One of the smartest, most insightful journalists I've ever known. If you read him when he was trying to write seriously, it was impossible. The expectation of the reader was, you know, sort of like when Homer Simpson is watching Garrison Keeler and he starts smacking the TV saying, "Stupid TV be more funny." You're like, "Wait a second. I thought this guy..” It just doesn't work and so I think humor is important but I'm not a humorist. Look I think humor, first of all, part of it is I think I take ideas really really seriously. I don't take myself really really seriously and I think that comes across. I also think entertaining your readers is nothing to apologize for. Yeah, it's inappropriate if you're doing some heavy piece in the New York Times or something on famine in Africa. You probably shouldn't work in some pull my finger jokes or anything like that, right? But I'm an opinion guy. And I think opinion is helped with humor. It humanizes the author. It makes a connection with the reader that gives you a little bit of license to indulge yourself. My dad, who was an editor for half a century, always told me the goal is every sentence should either be good or important. If it's important it has to be there and if it's good the reader will forgive you for it being there. And I feel a similar way about joke stuff. I don't do it all the time, but it's also my comparative advantage. I grew up in a conservatism when there were like seven funny conservatives and I learned on the dinner speaking circuit. It's funny, it really started with, in terms of public speaking, is I would get very paranoid that I've lost the attention of the audience and the only way I could tell if they weren't listening is to tell a joke. And then all of a sudden word got out that like oh Jonah can give funny speeches and so I started doing well.

And so it's not some grand philosophical thing. It's just that I think entertaining your readers is important. I like telling jokes. I like making fun of myself. The talking to my couch thing I haven't done in a while, but that was when I was living alone and early days of National Review Online and I was losing my mind. And so I would just sort of have like my couch hated me because I was on it all the time. AndI can't breathe. And so whenever I would make some grandiose statement, they would cut me down in size and readers like it. So we kept it.

Audience Member: Hi, we've talked a lot today about the decline of newspapers and either captive audience or just the business model itself was no longer profitable. Can we talk about the disconnect between the civic value of journalism versus the commodity of journalism which doesn't have the same sort of, like, market value, pure market value? What about public funding? What about things that would stabilize and create a staff but with certain caveats and guarantees, but just involved less profit pressures on the product.

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah, I think NPR invited some of the problems that they had with the war on NPR funding. I think part of the problem at the same time was that a lot of people who wanted to defund NPR didn't actually listen to it. And often what they listened to were on local stations which had Pacifica radio which is not NPR and is ultra-left as far as I can tell, right? And so managing the brand where you get people thinking, "wait, my tax dollars are paying for this?" It can just buy you some political problems.

There's also just a sort of high democratic hygiene thing about state funded media that I think you can be seriously concerned about, but also work around like PBS does not, you know, the news hour. I'm sure I have my disagreements with it, but like it's not a threat to monitoring. I think the Wikipedia model, some foundations can set up an organization. You need a really good corporate governance for that kind of thing. Or you end up getting what's happened to a lot of foundations if they've just sort of slid into really weird niches and start taking on stuff that they shouldn't take on. The market provides a kind of feedback that can keep you on the street now. That was one of the good things about that golden age we talked about before. When you had 30% of the audience being Republican and 30% of the audience being Democrat and 30% somewhere in the middle watching the CBS nightly news or reading the Washington Post. And you had advertisers who didn't want to piss anybody off. It had a small C conservatizing sort of effect on these institutions. I'm totally open. I'm not a zealot about it. I'm totally open to entrepreneurial and creative ways of doing that. I think as a political matter proposing it right now, not going to go for it. It would collapse. Any such project right now with federal funding would collapse like a cardboard submarine, you know, just really quickly. I think smart people should think about it. I would love it if Jeff Bezos set up some Bezos Foundation and just said,

"Here, Washington Post. Here you go." But you know, we launched The Dispatch as a for-profit company for a reason. It wasn't to get filthy rich. It was to prove that you could actually do the kind of journalism we wanted to do without being dependent on philanthropy. We could have raised a lot more money a lot faster if we just did it as a 501c3 thing. But we thought it was sort of important to at least try to do it as a business proposition.

Michael DiResto: One more question.

Audience Member: Should different methods of persuasion be used when you're dealing with a debate in which the facts aren't agreed upon versus a debate in which the facts are agreed upon with different weight assigned to those facts?

Jonah Goldberg: This sounds like someone from the school of political communication. My short answer, if I understand the question, is yes in so far as… it depends what you mean. Is it a formal debate, or is it an argument in the public sphere?

Audience Member: So as a law student you kind of talk about the difference between the admissibility of evidence versus the weight that's assigned to evidence. So I was curious if there's any room for that model in public discourse. How do you deal with situations in which people don't agree to the facts, like how do you persuade those people?

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah, so I'll start with both just on the legal point. I didn't say it up there, but part of my longer argument about how adversarial journalism can be a great tool for truth seeking is the single institution that we all understand is adversarial in American life is the courtroom. The prosecutor is biased for conviction. The defense attorney better be biased towards acquittal, right? And they argue and if they don't deal with the other side's best arguments and most damning facts, they're probably going to lose. They might even get sanctioned, right? I don't know. But there are rules. You can't lie. You can't mislead the court, which some of Trump's lawyers are starting to do, which is really bad. Yeah, you can pound the table on all of that and maybe try to convince the jury that way but pounding the table will only take you so far if all the facts are against you. And I think that that's a good way of thinking about a lot of opinion journalism and just broader intellectual discourse is you want to take one very useful way because again, there no hard and fast rules like the way they are and the procedures in court. But if you cite the other side's preferred sources for your facts, you're leveraging the credibility of that institution for your own argument.

So, it's very helpful for me if I'm making a right-wing argument, which I'm known to do from time to time, to say, well, look, even the New York Times says this. Often people on the left will

say, well, look, even National Review admits that. That is a way to buy into the tribal allegiances of the other side for your own purposes. The other thing is just trying to raise, this is an issue with rhetoric more than anything else, right? But it's, you try to, if you're trying to argue for a principle, it helps a lot. It's very persuasive to people if you can see that your own principle will lead to some results you don't like and don't favor. So it becomes an argument against interest at the periphery that helps you persuade at the core. And then, you know, tell a joke or two.

Michael DiResto: Oh when I said that was the last question, I lied, because we're going to do something, basically inviting you to bring us home on a high note. In January, The Dispatch wrote what it called the rare editorial called "The Cost of Silence." The main thrust of it was a failure of Congress to do its constitutional duties. It had some not happy things to say about some of our problems being the result of a kind of digital culture and clickbaits and conspiracy theories. It also toward the end included this. "Now 250 years into this great experiment in self-government, we firmly believe that there is still a much greater appetite for sanity, civility, and decency in this country than social media and cable news would indicate." You mentioned earlier some of the tone of your emails. How do you or maybe this is the editorial stance of The Dispatch. How do you keep that belief in decency alive?

Jonah Goldberg: So the first thing to keep in mind is a lot of stuff on social media, a lot of stuff from Washington in general, is kind of like those animatronic pirates at Disney World. You know, the Pirates of the Caribbean. They can launch out. They can frighten you. They can startle you, but for the most part, they can't do anything. It's all St. Elmo's fire. It's all a show. Doesn't mean it can't lead to some terrible things. I'm not trying to minimize all of it, but a lot of it is performative nonsense. And it's worth keeping in mind that I don't have the exact numbers off the top of my head, but I am very confident I'm directional right. It's something like four out of five Americans aren't on Twitter and something like 10% of Twitter users are responsible for close to 90% of Twitter content. So you're really talking about a very small number of people who think they command beaches. Once you sort of take that to heart, it helps you…Lets put it this way. Sean Hannity, I think he's still the highest rated guy on Fox News. That means on a really great night, he's got about 4 million viewers. That means on any given night 329 million people aren't watching it.

So a lot of our problems aren't because everybody agrees, or tens of millions of people agree with Rachel Maddow or Sean Hannity or Tucker Carlson or you know, pick your own personal gargoyle that's fine. It's that our system right now is very very very sensitive to a very small group of people who are very turned on about politics.

This is something that I'm loath to bring up at the end here, but one of the things that's really done enormous damage to our system are small donors. What I was saying earlier about how all those institutions that went Trump did it because they were riding a mass market. Two of the biggest, at least as of a year or so ago, the biggest outside of leadership, two biggest fundraisers in the House were Marjorie Taylor Green and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They didn't do any legislation. I think AOC named some post offices but was very good at social media. Very good at you know riling up people sending in 10-20 bucks a month. Marjorie Taylor Green, with the Jewish space laser, which I don't get a royalty from. Same thing. And I know a senator who literally tells people, "If you give me the 9:30 block on Hannity and let me cite my website, I can raise $3 million." And the thing about that is it used to be when parties were stronger, they controlled first strings and they could incentivize people to not be jackasses. Parties now are so weak and it's so easy to raise money independent of the formal institutions that you rely on that 10% that is on Twitter, that 2% that does watch Fox or MSNBC or whatever. And because of the primary system and the way it's written, those people control the primaries. And so what's happening is a vast swath of normal people from the center left to the center right are not only turned off by politics. They're not engaging because the people they meet are such freaks. You know, the stuff they see on TV is so ridiculous.

You know, Carl said this thing about comment sections. He's absolutely right. We police our comment section really, really hard and we've educated our readers about the rules and we kick people off all the time because there's a Gresham's law to comment sections. The really, it's a technical term from social science, the really dickish people, turn off the normies and so eventually only the people who want to be jerks and say you're literally Hitler are left in the comments section. And that's what's happened at scale to a large chunk of our politics. And so the uplifting hopeful thing is that this is really a very fixable problem. If you actually had a Congress that wanted to do its job. If you had a few party leaders that actually cared about just doing a few simple structural reforms to how parties pick candidates and the rest, you can get around a lot of these problems and there is work being done on this front. I mean that's one reason I'm not a huge fan of rank choice voting. I think it's better than the status quo. Lots of states are moving that way. One of the things about rank choice voting is that in theory, it doesn't always work this way because the other party can game it in ways that are not good. But in theory, what it's supposed to do is steer people to the least objectionable candidate rather than the most objectionable candidate. And you know there's a reason why vanilla ice cream is the most popular ice cream in America. It's not because it's many people's favorite flavor. It's because no one is really turned off by vanilla ice cream. Like that's why you serve it at a wedding. No one's like, "Oh crap, vanilla again." You put Rum Raisin out there, right?

Sarah Palin, she ran a general primary in Alaska. She lost because Sarah Palin is nobody's second choice, right? They want their whack job or they're going home. And so there were reforms like that that could actually fix the system pretty quickly. What we want to do is get back to the politics of an era where when you won the primary and got the nomination, you ran to the center to win an election and cared about the median voter. Now, because of polarization and the big sort and all these things, the only threat to your reelection, your incumbency in a lot of districts and states is the primary. And if you get the nomination in a very red state, you're going to win. If you get the nomination in a very blue state, you're going to win. And so, the threat to your incumbency is earlier upstream. And that encourages you to be really extreme, really radical. If you go, I mean I've talked to a couple congressmen about this. If you go to a very red district or a very blue district and you say "hey, if you make me the nominee in this election when I get to Washington I will work with anybody regardless of whether R or D, or on both sides of the aisle to do the important things that we need done in this district and in this country." If you say that you will lose. If you say, "If you send me to Washington, I will tear off the heads of members of the other party and use their skulls as a victory goblet," you will win. And then people are shocked when these people are the nominees from one party or the other party that they have to choose the lesser of two evils. Fix the system so you don't have to choose from the lesser of two evils. And that's very fixable. If we could do that, you can unleash all sorts of goodwill and civic engagement that I think is being pent up on the sidelines from people who just don't want to hang out with really scary people or be associated with them. Which is why the number of people who describe themselves as independents is at an all-time high and keeps getting bigger. The people who want to call themselves Ds and Rs are increasingly extremely partisan people. Particularly in various parts of the country. And you want to fix that, and the good news is it's fixable, so let's get busy fixing it.

Michael DiResto: How around a round of applause.

Just a few closing remarks. A lot of thank yous to go around especially to you for being here today. We asked a lot of questions today. The discussion did not settle those questions. But it models the kind of good faith engagement that makes democratic life possible. I want to extend a sincere thanks to all of our speakers who traveled to Baton Rouge to participate in this year's John Breaux Symposium. We're grateful for Senator Breaux's participation, to Lod Cook for hosting us in their beautiful space. Very importantly I want to recognize the extraordinary team of the Reilly Center and the Manship School. Special thanks to MAria DeReoche, who makes everything possible. Team members from Manship School and Reilly Center, please stand up so we can all recognize you.

If you enjoyed today's programming, we hope you'll stay in touch with the Reilly Center. Sign up for our newsletter, follow on social media. Our next event coming up, Civic Sips. If you haven't heard of it, you need to be there. It'll take place on April 9th at the Executive Center on Government Street. We hope you'll join us. You can check it out at lsu.edu/reillycenter and to register. Next Wednesday on March 25th is LSU Giving Day. Jonah said small donations are bad. We'll take small donations at the Reilly Center. No gift is too big, no gift is too small. Again, lsu.edu/reillycenter. You'll find instructions on how to give us money so we can do more things like we've done today. A recording of today's symposium will be available on the Manship School's YouTube as soon as we can get it together. And we'll also publish a transcription of today's event.

There are to-go boxes out there. If you thought the étouffée was good and you want to have it again tonight, we invite you to take some food. So on behalf of the Reilly Center and the Manship School, thank you for spending your time with us. We're honored to host this conversation. We look forward to continuing it with you in the days ahead. We hope to see you soon. Thank you very much.

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