

Panel 3: Consequences

Valentina Proust

Hello everyone and welcome to the third and final panel of the day and of our symposium. My name is Valentina Proust. I'm a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication and a fellow at the Center for Media at Risk.

We have been listening all day to such interesting and productive discussions about social justice and media. We began the day by listening to some really interesting presentations about how media is created, experienced, and understood within a broad social context. And then we also heard some presentations about how they are often shaped by the political, economic, and legal conditions supporting them. But now it is time to delve into the consequences. We'll hear from four amazing panelists, André Brock, Yoel Roth, Francesca Tripodi, and Lewis Raven Wallace and their work grappling with questions such as, "What are the consequences of putting social justice at risk? How might the media position themselves more productively to embolden social justice initiatives? And if these consequences mainly focus on the individual user's level? And if we can imagine broader and more liberatory structural consequences?"

I'm going to begin by introducing our panelists, then they'll have their time to speak, and we will follow up with a Q&A session. First, we have André Brock, who is an associate professor of Media Studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He writes on Western technoculture and Black cybercultures and his scholarship examines race in social media, video games, blogs, and other media. His book, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, was published by NYU Press in 2020 and theorizes Black everyday life mediated by networked technologies. It was recently named one of the Top Tech Books of All Time by *The Verge*, is also the 2021 winner of the Harry Shaw and Katrina Hazzard-Donald Award for Outstanding Work in African-American Popular Culture Studies, and winner of the 2021 Association of Internet Researchers Nancy Baym Book Award.

Second, we have Yoel Roth, who is a Knight visiting scholar with the Center for Media at Risk at the University of Pennsylvania, a technology policy fellow at UC-Berkeley, and a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research and writing focus on trustworthy governance approaches for social media, AI, and other emerging technologies. Previously, he was the Head of Trust and Safety at Twitter. For more than seven years, he led the teams responsible for Twitter content moderation,

integrity, and platform security efforts, including policy development, threat investigation, product design, research, and operations. Before joining Twitter, Joel received his PhD from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Our next panelist is Francesca Tripodi, who is an assistant professor at the School of Information and Library Science and a principal investigator at the Center for Information Technology and Public Life at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has twice testified before the US Senate Judiciary Committee explaining how relevance is gamed to drive ideologically based queries and spread conspiratorial logic. In addition to her research on these themes, Dr. Tripodi's work has documented how cisgender females who met the threshold for inclusion on Wikipedia are nearly twice as likely to be considered non-notable subjects than their cis-male peers. In 2023, Dr. Tripodi received the award for Impact and Excellence from the Center for an Informed Public at the University of Washington in recognition of her research and fostering an informed society.

And last but not least, we have Lewis Raven Wallace, who is an award-winning independent journalist based in Durham, North Carolina. He's the author of *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of*

Journalistic Objectivity, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2019, and also hosts *The View from Somewhere* podcast. He previously worked in public radio and is a longtime activist engaging prison abolition, racial justice, and queer and trans liberation. Currently a Movement Journalism Fellow with Interrupting Criminalization, he works with abolitionist activists on journalism and narrative strategy. He is also a 2021 Ford Global Fellow, a 2020 Knight Visiting Nieman Fellow, and a co-founder in 2018 of Press On, a Southern movement journalism collective.

André Brock

The last time I shared a stage with Yoel was in New York where we did the #BlackTwitterSummit with Jeff Jarvis and a bunch of luminaries. I ended up in the aftermath of that—because we didn't sufficiently publicize or share the conferences going on—being called a “coon” and all kinds of fun stuff. So, when I was asked to talk about the stuff that I do talk about, that immediately came to mind, because it's not one thing we talk about when we talk about internal discussions within a public sphere. Nevertheless, I'm not going to talk about that at all today. I got something else to say. So, hey and good afternoon.

Audience

Good afternoon.

André Brock

Cool. I need that energy. Many thanks to Sarah Banet-Weiser and to Barbie Zelizer for inviting me here. I still don't know why y'all told me to come, but I'm here. And since Apartheid Clyde (and I will only refer to him by that name for the rest of the day) bought Twitter, I get interviewed frequently and asked, "Where will Black people go?" which isn't really a good question if you ask me. And I say that in part because my friend, Tracy McMillan Cottom, went on the Daily Show—I ain't jealous or nothing—to say that Twitter can't be a public space because it's privately owned, which is true, but there's room for nuance in that discussion. So today I'm going to give you a little bit of that nuance. This is a new project. My wife told me that my problem is I do new work every time I give a talk, which makes these things kind of choppy. So, deal with me.

My current research looks at race and the digital. All my research looks at race and the digital from the perspective of Black life and being. And I do this because I get weary of popular articulations of blackness, particularly in the digital, being conceived as resisting or being oppressed. And this puts me at odds with quite a few folk, but fewer since the book came out. I say that it puts me at odds because "X at risk" is not just a common theme about a platform and really a medium that has never

been understood to be of value to proper Western technoculture. Instead, what we're dealing with is a topos of late modernity itself.

As modern subjects, Anthony Giddens contends that we are reflexive about our continued alienation from the natural world, and each other, thanks to capitalism, technology, and, once again, modernity. Moreover, as ideological subjects, we find pleasure—you knew I was going to do libidinal economy at some point today, right?—we find pleasure in oppositional thinking as opposed to dominant or negotiated, where our deconstruction of dominant meaning, or ideology or pleasure—think about the hate watching you do—is itself a mode of reconstruction, of production, and of pleasure, or as Brian Ott calls it *plaisir*. And from a technocultural perspective, we take great pride in declaring that technologies are over. So, media queries as to whether Twitter is dead should be read as a peculiar kind of technocultural pleasure instigated by Twitter's structural incoherence and lack of perceived rationality, and just a skosh of anti-blackness.

So, today's brief talk is brought to you in part thanks to a conversation with my new colleague, Allegra Smith, who reminded me of Derrida's *pharmakon*— and I'm not about to explain the *pharmakon*, because I've really only got room for one French post-structuralist in my life. I will say that the

pharmakon as a concept symbolizing both remedy and poison could be seen as a warrant for why we are all here today. Few here would argue for social media as an unquestioned good, whether social, civic, political, or even cultural. Even as, *even as*, we all have our mundane pleasures, whether it's a genre of TikTok video (I have friends who love the rug cleaning videos, my personal favorite is the Baltimore Strut videos, or I love videos of Black people dancing, I don't know what that makes me), or favorite podcasters. And so, Twitter has always been a *pharmakon*, but for wildly divergent reasons.

Du Bois once wrote that no one is more critical of the Negro than the Negro himself. But it still seems kind of unfair to point out, 18 years in, that many Black journalists and pundits were not happy when Black Twitter was discussed in that groundbreaking Slate article from 2010. (And I know the math doesn't work. Just work with me. All right?) Like many other Black intelligentsia and professionals, they did not really or initially see the "utility," and I'm using this word specifically, of a site where people gather to spectate on infighting between two up and coming R&B stars. And I talk about this as Black digital respectability politics in *Distributed Blackness*, and while I won't go there today, I believe that there should be a discussion in the public about public spheres where Black elites desire to be seen as modern and their corresponding idealization of what a

Black public sphere should look like, and how that has contributed to some of the problematics of talking about social media as a public sphere.

But the journalists eventually got in on the joke. This is not his first account [referencing an @ira tweet]. He don't even have this account no more. The ones who are perpetually online will know who this is; for those who don't this is Ira Madison III. And notice the signifying levels that are going on here. And so when people say, "Well, why are you still on Twitter?" this is one reason. It's not as easy to find these levels of signification, dark humor, and joy in any particular medium. Well, unless you go looking for them, because I've been told that it happens on TikTok, but I ain't got time.

So, the example that I have, the Ciara and Rihanna brouhaha. And one thing I should say about Ciara and Rihanna going back and forth is the tweet that never gets published is that Rihanna apologizes to Ciara after that exchange to say, "My bad. You hurt my feelings and so I kind of lashed out." I think that's important to understand that negotiation can happen as a way to make things whole. But these examples don't clearly illuminate Twitter's capacity as a public sphere. And I do that on purpose. I believe that a public sphere draws upon mundane libidinal, rather than political or rational, energies.

The French post-structuralist that I do rock with, Jean-François Lyotard, touches upon modernity's penchant to prioritize technical efficiency and productivity, which Lyotard argues inevitably eliminates the aesthetic and emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment, which were never promised to women or minorities in the first place. Similarly, Anna Everett in her book, *Digital Diaspora*, talks about the way television pre-figures the way that the internet broadcasts images of strife, of social protest, to the point where television moved to—somebody mentioned, I think it was my friend Allissa, mentioned that news broadcasts used to be 15 minutes. When they switched to 30 minutes, they started getting hungry for content. And so, the television was America's introduction to privation, to the ghetto, to problematics. So much so that it became a way to remake the public sphere of America to include how badly the Negroes were living and being treated, and as such became deprecated as a medium where a public sphere could happen.

So similarly, the digital, particularly in the form of social media oligarchies, but also within STEM's instrumental rationality, deprecates people, their culture, and their contributions as a standing reserve of content to be extracted and exploited. Not necessarily for spectacle. Sometimes it's just like the new phrase I've heard that data is the new black gold, which is problematic for so many

reasons. But it wasn't always this way. And so, some of you may remember Anil Dash. He's written a couple of articles, about a decade apart, on the web we lost. And with Anil, I've long argued that Twitter's capacity as a Black counterpublic is not based on its affordance to publish and broadcast images of social unrest and protest, but instead it depends upon a preexisting libidinal economy of Black collectivity, care, and fuckery. (I'm sorry. I'm not sorry, but I should say that I'm sorry. Instead of fuckery, I meant an excess of life.) Without these energies, activists would not have been able to marshal thousands of folk in real life for pepper spray parties or beanbag ball target practice. Unless you have the love, nobody's going to go fight for you.

And here I'm citing Couze Venn and Mike Featherstone talking about modernity, and they say that while print is important as a modality for the emergence of non-bourgeois spheres, the “circulation of ideas through networks of dissident groups [...] tends to remain mostly invisible in accounts of modernity.” And I argue that similarly, Black Twitter has often been invisible as a public sphere until it's erratic orbit—I call it that following the OG Catherine Squires, Twitter's a satellite counterpublic—until its erratic orbit powered by dark humor and pungent cultural critique once again intersects with mainstream concerns. Or have you seen that Henry Kissinger meme where Nancy Reagan is preparing to welcome him to hell? Some of

you don't know. Ask your laughing neighbor. They'll tell you.

And so, the other side of the *pharmakon*, because I argue that this stuff actually contributes the life-giving empowering moments of it as a remedy, so here's the poison [slide of Elon Musk/Apartheid Clyde entering Twitter]. I don't know if you can see my darkened image, but someone's carrying a sink into the Twitter headquarters, and he's not even really funny. What he posted with this tweet was, "Let that sink in." Bruh... there were so many other things you could have done to signify, but this is the best you could do. So again, Tracy went on TV to say that Twitter couldn't be the physical manifestation of a public sphere because it wasn't a public space. But when has Twitter ever been public?

Vorris Nunley writes in a book called *Keepin' It Hushed*, talking about Hush Harbors, that many insurrectionist moments were plotted on plantations. Clearly, we didn't own that. Or public spaces, maybe the barber or the beautician, the aesthetician back in the day, owned their little space where they did hair, but many times we conducted those secret meetings and ring shouts, where we celebrated ourselves through religion and joy, in spaces that we didn't own. So, saying that we need to have a private space to build out a public sphere seems to me to be an overstatement and a kind of misunderstanding of what it

means to do this type of work.

So, Apartheid Clyde's hostile privatization of Twitter is commonly cited as the most potent example of what's gone wrong with social media. (I'm sorry, Yoel. Here we go.) I disagree in kind, but not necessarily in principle, because he's a terrible social media CEO. But if you follow tech as closely as I do, you know that there's a Black-owned social media network, Spoutible, and their CEO is terrible at social media. And it's not just his blackness that comes into play. It's his misogyny, his homophobia, and his general dickishness. He just so happens to be Black. So, "actual fiscal ownership is less important [for the public sphere] than a sense of psychic ownership in defining a media source as part of a Black counterpublic" [Melissa Harris-Perry quote on slide]. Because, you see, Twitter was problematic before Musk took over.

Dorsey didn't kick 45 off the platform until January 8th. Prior to that, however, both Facebook and Twitter have been revealed as having secretive content moderation policies highlighting conservatives, racists, and alt-right personalities for engagement, while deprecating liberal and progressive voices, even as they were publicly traded companies. So, despite Black folks not having ownership of the physical (the server and the LAN) or the virtual (code and practice), they still managed

to secure this psychic ownership to develop what I am now claiming Twitter for, a satellite counterpublic.

So, the last piece. And what does Black ownership guarantee exactly? The Bouzy example is interesting, but nobody really even uses Spoutible. The second chapter of *Distributed Blackness* discusses this really ephemeral artifact, the Blackbird web browser, which debuted in 2008 and basically disappeared immediately for various reasons. And while White folk were very dismissive of its features and design, Black power users had a much more nuanced perspective on what entering into a Black designed Black information space online would do. Some of them were excited, and that makes sense to me, about the possibilities of a platform that serves Black information needs from said Black perspective, but others were much less sanguine. They asked, “Who are these devs? What qualifies them to select Black content?” Basically, the version of my favorite phrase of all time when I'm asked to be social, “Who all going to be there?”

And so, this last is a crucial question. As we watch Black Twitter users tentatively engage Twitter alternatives like Mastodon, Spill, Bluesky, Spoutible. Threads has 100 million users, but institutional and ideological hindrances there lead me to argue that all of them have failed to gain sufficient traction

with Black Twitter's digital diaspora. It turns out that Twitter's Black DNA isn't just technical. It's also social and cultural. The blackening of Twitter—I'm going to trademark that now that I think about it—the blackening of Twitter should be understood partially as a network effect. It took time, exigency, and community to happen. Trying to replicate Twitter features is just not enough to add Black folk. As Moten and Harney write, “The black aesthetic is not about technique.” It's not a technique. And so many Black Twitter users like me will continue to inhabit the Apartheid Clyde Memorial Private Housing Authority until the wheels fall off.

So, finally, many issues and circumstances affecting Black folk are not determined or influenced by Black agents or Black participation, no matter how organized the efforts are to the contrary. So, my closing thought is simply that when we start discussing what the role of a social media for minoritized public spheres, is that paying attention to who owns it is not as crucial as to who moderates it. And I was just talking about this with Yoel. The three pillars of any social network are people, technology, content moderation. And then in the article I have coming out soon called “Afrofuturism as Content Moderation,” I make the argument that different communities require different data subjects. So, the typical data subject that we understand to be, that has been promised to us as the ordinary, the normative inhabitant of

space, typically tends to look like White men, cis-het, middle class. And I'm speaking specifically of Western internets. Other non-Western internets will look different. But the one that is dominant ideologically is the West. What happens when you alter those particular content moderation policies to highlight the things that those folks find interesting? So, I'll leave you with that kind of depressing question. And thank you.

Yoel Roth

Thank you. Thank you very much to Barbie, the Center for Media at Risk, and Annenberg for giving me the great privilege to come back to this school. I graduated from Annenberg in 2015 and then went on to work at Twitter for a while until some things you may have heard about happened. But it has been an incredible opportunity to return to the school that taught me everything that I know to do some of the research that I'm going to tell you about today.

What happens when a social media platform fails? This isn't a new or a totally novel question or one that is specific to Twitter. We've been talking about platform failure for decades. If you ever want to see a room of undergraduates go completely blank, ask them if they used Friendster, or if they remember MySpace or LiveJournal. These are all platforms that for a variety of reasons have failed. But obviously in this moment, in December 2023, approximately a year and a

month after Elon Musk brought a sink into the office where I used to work every day in San Francisco, it's hard not to look at this question through the lens of what Twitter, now X, has become.

Certainly, we're all familiar with headlines about the increased prevalence of hate speech on the platform. We're familiar, perhaps me more so than most, with the elimination of the company's teams focused on election security. We're familiar with the rewriting of the company's rules to eliminate protections for trans people and other vulnerable groups online. And we've seen, as academics, the exorbitant pricing changes to Twitter data that have all but closed down opportunities for meaningful academic research about Twitter.

We could talk about, and others on this panel have written and spoken about, the personal ambivalence of choosing whether or not to stay on Twitter. The people who have built audiences painstakingly over years now have a choice of whether to continue contributing value to a company owned by Elon Musk on an increasingly hostile platform, or to lose the reach that they have earned through their efforts over years. We also have to worry and think deeply about the communities that found a home on Twitter, despite its long-running shortcomings, who made the platform into the cultural juggernaut that it is and who, completely reasonably, are reluctant to cede

that territory to its new owner, who came out of nowhere with a bunch of capital and bought the company. But this isn't a talk about Twitter. It's about what comes after Twitter and some of the challenges that face us as we look to an increasingly diverse and distributed social media landscape.

And so, in the next 10 or so minutes, I want to offer three perspectives. First, a brief description of federated social media, what it is architecturally, why it is interesting, I think, and novel from a governance perspective, and what it offers us, especially through the lens of activism and social justice. Second, a brief readout of an empirical study of the trust and safety capabilities of federated services and an assessment of their vulnerabilities. Spoiler alert, it's not good. And then third, a call for future activity and investment in this space.

But for those of you who maybe haven't been following the Mastodon, Bluesky, Threads drama as closely as I have, let me sort of lay out a little bit of what the architecture of federated platforms actually is. For the last 15 years, the social media landscape has been dominated by monolithic platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and yes, Twitter. Services of theoretically unlimited size that aspire, as Facebook has put it in their corporate communications, "to connect every person on the planet." Embedded in this is a universalist ideology, a notion that it's possible

and even desirable to have a single piece of software with a single set of features. To have a single piece of software with a single set of features hosting a single community with a single set of operating norms for billions of people. There are advantages to that model to be clear, the ability to achieve unprecedented global reach of ideas and advocacy. But there's a core absurdity to it, especially when it comes to governance, and that absurdity creates major and obvious challenges. While there's a great deal of consensus, perhaps more than we might be led to believe about what people want from content moderation on social media, there are also notable divergences.

Some of the best documented of these divergences relate to the management of adult sexual content, an area where Americans are notably puritanical and prudish, and Europeans less so, and the Saudis very much so. And so, you end up with this disagreement about how platforms should manage this type of content, and companies have to figure out what an acceptable global standard is going to be. So, Facebook bans pornography and adult content, and Twitter doesn't, and each one of them offers an intervention that theirs is the correct solution for that billion, 2 billion, 3-billion-person global community. Last night, Wesley spoke about some of the challenges that we face when we try to balance the primacy of a right to free speech against the more emergent value of universal personhood. That dilemma of non-hierarchical human

rights is really at the core of why platform governance is so hard. Platforms are stuck in the middle of trying to balance these factors whenever they're trying to arbitrate speech for fundamentally heterogeneous communities. And so, herein enters federated social media. What if these communities were radically smaller?

Federated social media, and I'm talking here about platforms like Mastodon, Blue Sky, and potentially Threads, are built on a premise of enabling many smaller communities through social media instead of a single gigantic one. To draw an analogy to cities, if Facebook is a 3-billion-person megacity, something we've never seen in the history of humanity, what if we moved back into smaller towns? But critically we're not talking about a feudal turn of social media. The idea here is smaller towns connected by a highly efficient series of roads and highways that allow the effective and effortless interchange of people. For example, the Annenberg School could choose to host a Mastodon instance, and perhaps that would run on a server in the basement of this building, and it would be running on open-source software that we download, and any students or faculty or staff could sign up to host their account on ASC's Mastodon instance. But critically that instance can interoperate. For example, if next door, Kathleen decides that the public policy center needs its instance, these separate towns can communicate with each other, and that's the

real promise here.

Tech journalist Mike Masnick has called for protocols, not platforms, for standards that enable this type of programmatic interoperability to undermine the totalizing power of big platforms. The benefits here are clear. We have smaller communities with a greater capacity to self-govern and who can set policies that are more closely aligned with one group's values and norms, rather than trying to find a compromise that works for all of humanity. But how does this actually play out in practice? I want to share the results of a year-long study of the moderation and security capabilities of federated platforms. Over the last year, I led a team of researchers at the Carnegie Endowment who studied 10 platforms, 6 centralized and 4 decentralized. We did a textual analysis of everything they've said about their moderation capabilities, we reviewed their code where it's available, their GitHub repositories and issues, and we hosted a series of workshops that included developers, maintainers, and instance administrators to try to get a deep understanding of how this actually works in a new federated internet.

So, I'll briefly walk through some of those results. Bottom line is, in nearly every measurable way, federated platforms are less prepared to meet the safety and security needs of their users than their centralized

counterparts. First, if we look at policy and reporting, we see that while generally federated platforms do have a series of rules and policies, they're even more nebulous than the policies of their centralized counterparts. More than a decade ago, when I was a graduate student here, I wrote articles criticizing the vague, ambiguous, and poorly enforced policies of social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Grindr. The state of affairs at those platforms improved, and it took a lot of time and a lot of work, and that's what I was doing when I worked at Twitter. We're now seeing in a way the clock reset back in time to a decade ago when the rules are unclear and the enforcement even more so.

But let's look here at enforcement. And this is just a small sampling of some of the features that platforms have to build to enforce their rules in practice. Some key capabilities that we take for granted, like the ability to ban accounts, have been built. But other fundamental capabilities, for example, the ability to block spam links from being distributed across the service, don't exist on any of the federated platforms that we studied. Core things like automated scanning for child sexual abuse media don't exist. These are basic things we take for granted when we use centralized social media platforms that—not through malice, but simply through a lack of resourcing and time—haven't been developed on federated platforms. And then finally, turning to governance, for all of our

frustrations over decades with the opacity of centralized platforms, the current state of federation is substantially worse. We know next to nothing about how these platforms are moderating, or why, under their policies, under this global scope of their user base, we know virtually nothing.

And this stands in contrast to certainly limited visibility, but visibility nonetheless into their centralized counterparts. These shortcomings are especially acute when it comes to issues impacting political discourse, like the ability to mitigate government-backed disinformation campaigns. By virtue of the distributed nature of federated platforms, malign activities are dispersed across thousands or even tens of thousands of technically separate instances, resulting in a lack of centralized telemetry that could help to expose what bad actors are doing. And even as decentralization is conceptualized as a return of power to people from platforms, it arguably exacerbates the economic dysfunction of platform capitalism. Whereas centralized platforms spend their own capital on moderation, decentralization turns the practice of dealing with online safety into yet another form of neoliberal care of the self, moving the responsibility for managing offline harm squarely onto the victims of that harm. Volunteer server administrators, often with no training, no legal support, and few resources, have to manage the effectively unbounded domain of potentially harmful shit on the internet on behalf of the users that they

host.

When you talk to them, these moderators commonly report burnout as a primary concern. If or when they do burn out, or run out of money, or just get bored and move on, they put at risk the content that their users have created. Users then have quite little recourse for what to do when the server they've hosted their activity on suddenly goes kaput. So where do we go next? There aren't obviously right directions here. There's mostly just a series of uncomfortable trade-offs, but I'll suggest a couple of potential areas for how we move forward in the face of these dynamics.

First, we need to take seriously the work of finding sustainable financial models for social media. Broadly I expect the folks in this room are—I'll be polite—ad-skeptical, but the ad-supported internet has nevertheless led to platforms spending hundreds of millions of dollars on safety and security and I think that's a good thing. You can argue that what they've spent isn't enough, and I would agree wholeheartedly with that, but it's more than the basically \$0 being spent on it in a decentralized context. The failure here is an accounting problem. It begins with insufficiently computing the true cost of social media. We think sometimes about the costs of storage and computing power and bandwidth, or the cost of employing engineers to write

software, but less so about the costs of employing human content moderators. Costs that can be especially significant if we want to employ moderators in conditions that are not abjectly miserable. And once we have that accounting of the cost of giving each person the ability to tweet whatever they want, we have to wrestle with the fact that these sums are wildly out of reach for many of the people who we represent as being part of the liberatory project of social media in the first place. And so perhaps in this context, ad support isn't the worst possible funding option, but I digress.

Second, we need to avoid a dogmatic pursuit of decentralization as a solution to the ills of today's massive scale platforms.

Decentralization has significant benefits. It empowers communities to better govern themselves, but it can also make those communities less resilient to collective security threats that operate at a network level. There's an analogy here to email. The reason that most of us use a tiny handful of email providers—despite the fact that email is an interoperable protocol—is spam. Fighting email spam well requires expensive, complicated, data-intensive infrastructure, and Google and Microsoft are the company's best positioned to provide that. And so, we use Gmail and Outlook. Email is an inherently decentralized protocol that became centralized in practice because of the challenges of collective security. So, as we look ahead to the

future of social media, we can't stick our head in the sand and demand decentralization at all costs. Creating institutions that can solve collective security problems, institutions that are well-governed, accountable, sustainably funded and so on, trades a small amount of centralization for the long-term success of a less centralized project.

Finally, I'll just note, we have to stop reinventing the wheel of online trust and safety. The capabilities that platforms like my former employer have built are significant and can solve the challenges that emergent platforms face. But those developments are locked behind corporate walls. They're patented, proprietary intellectual property, and we need an alternative model here. Whether that model is academic or philanthropic, we need to start thinking of part of the project of social justice and social media as being the development of trust and safety capabilities as a free and open-source commons, rather than just as the work of specific companies. Thank you all so much.

Francesca Tripodi

Hi, everyone. As everyone's mentioned already today, I just want to say a quick thank you for having me here. I'm continuously amazed that I get invited to come talk to amazing people. I recognize this as part of my own imposter syndrome that I'm working through, but it really has been a treat to learn

from everyone here today. And so, thank you everybody who has invited us, especially the students who clearly did so much work in making this happen. I really appreciate that.

Today I'm going to present a little bit on a new paper that I had come out just recently with my fabulous Ph.D. candidate, Aashka Dave, who helped me do the research for this project and is also a co-author on the paper, which talks about abortion access. And I'm different than almost everybody else here today, and most scholars in my field, because I like to think about the importance of search and search engines. I really center search as a huge, huge factor in pretty much everything we have going on today.

Obviously social media is extremely important, but for the last eight years I have been focused on the sociology of search, paying really close attention to how the way people see the world shapes the kind of queries that they put into their search bars, and then how those queries are impacted by political and corporate interests. I'm going to give a quick shout out to my book that came out last year [*The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy*]. I think about how this impacts the political process, and unfortunately, I would argue this book is now more timely than ever, considering the horrible, horrible space we're going to be in

this next upcoming year.

The other thing I really want to bring our attention to is that the search landscape, and I would argue the media landscape, is just shifting extremely rapidly before our eyes. I mean, everything that we're talking about is just changing so dramatically while we, many of us in this room, still think of Googling it as this synonymous verb for search. Even that model is becoming quickly antiquated. TikTok is really one of the primary ways that young people find information about not just trivial events. This is how many of the people who are marching and organizing for ceasefire agreements are finding out about what's happening in Palestine. And also obviously chatGPT and OpenAI, large language models are revolutionizing the search landscape. But I would argue that this emphasis on keywords, this really important way of understanding how starting points shape our endpoints is now more critical than ever. And how people are manipulating that process and trying to intersect with that process is extremely important. Also, obviously, we have a lot more of our talk devices. We're speaking a lot more as we search, and that is really changing the information landscape as well.

So, the central research questions that basically align all of my work is, how do opinions shape our starting points? And to what extent are these returns complicated by

corporate and political interests? And I'm effectively taken the great work of Safiya Noble, and all of her incredible theory, and then I just put this into experiment after experiment. So obviously it starts with the greats.

Today I'm talking a lot about abortion and abortion access. I want to recognize the United States is clearly not the majority of the world. So, to provide a bit of context to the situation in which I'm presenting, I want to just quickly give a little background on the state of abortion within the United States. In 1973, you have the landmark case, *Roe v. Wade*, that legalized whether or not women had the right to have an abortion. And I use "women" because, in that case specifically, that phrase is used. In 1992's *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* *Roe* is upheld. And, as I'm still reeling about and I'm sure many in this room are as well, in 2022 you have *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned both decisions, leading to changes in abortion policies in numerous states and heightened tensions surrounding abortion access within the United States. It was actually during our research study that this got overturned. So, I'll talk a little bit about that today.

I also want to provide context for what I refer to a lot in this work as CPCs, this stands for Crisis Pregnancy Centers. These are

organizations that are typically religiously affiliated that provide services and advice for pregnant people. There's a lot of work that talks about how these organizations rely on search engine optimization, what I'll sometimes refer to as SEO, and professional-looking websites, what Jesse Daniels refers to as cloak websites, to make people think that they're giving people information about abortions, but their actual goal is to deter people from having abortions. They are primarily staffed by volunteers. They do not adhere to medical guidelines. They lead to delays in access and abortion care. This study conducted just two years ago found that persons looking for an abortion were still seeking an abortion up to three to four weeks after visiting a crisis pregnancy center. CPCs in the United States also vastly outnumber abortion clinics. There's about three to every one. And again, this study is in 2020, so I would imagine that number is actually much larger now.

So how did we do this study? This study is actually a sliver of a much larger research project that is continuing, but we interviewed 42 participants using a "Think Aloud" protocol, which was effectively me with a loaner laptop where we were controlling for personalization. We went to public libraries, used public internet access, cleared cookies before and after every search, and we talked to 42 participants throughout the state of North Carolina so that we could get a pretty wide

swath of the American public on their opinions on four very politically divisive topics. We talked about abortion access, we talked about gun control, we talked about voter ID laws, and we talked about January 6th, which we refer to as "events." So, ultimately what I'm talking about in this paper is the first prompt where we said, "A close friend of yours recently found out that they are unexpectedly pregnant and are considering terminating the pregnancy." We use this language very specifically so that we weren't using the phrase abortion. "Do you have an opinion on what they should do?"

So, what did we find? By and large, Google still dominates search, at least within this context. A vast number of people used Chrome as their browser, although all of them were available on the desktop. Then once opening Chrome, they all went to Google. And also, this is important, we did a test prompt where we asked them to buy pencils and they all went to Amazon. So, it was clear that the dominant model is definitely working. We had one lone Bing user and then we had people who used combination of both. I pick on Google often, but that's because they are very clearly still dominating this market. The other thing we found was search terms. So very much backing the work of Safiya Noble and the theoretical work of myself, the way people see the world dramatically shifts what you are going to put into the browser. This is also something that Eszter Hargittai was working

on in the early 2000s, when people were still dialing into the internet.

We were at about a 60/40 split. So about 40% of people that we interviewed did not support their friend's decision to access an abortion. And these people in this category here, the second category, the 40%, their keywords were all over the place. A couple, like two, had put in "adoption" or "adoption services." Three people were saying "pregnancy counseling," but then there was just a whole lot of stuff. "Why the Bible doesn't agree with abortion," was one. "Why abortion is a sin." Not a lot of continuity. For those who supported their friend's decision however, there was a lot of continuity. So, an overwhelming majority of people who supported their friend's right to an abortion typed in the phrase, "planned parenthood." The other ones were "abortion + location" or "abortion more information." And when people typed in "planned parenthood," it was extremely consistent in what they received. So, this is just snapshot of one of them, but they all look the same. The knowledge graph was a Planned Parenthood explainer. The location was where they were located. The ad was for Planned Parenthood. But when people put "abortion near me," things became a lot more complicated. Alarmingly, a large number of places returned were crisis pregnancy centers, CPCs. In this example, someone's looking within the Raleigh-Durham area and CPC is one of the top choices.

Now, while the study was happening, this model shifted, and while the study was happening, they started putting labels on the content. But we argue in our paper that these labels, while well-intentioned, don't actually help at all. They in fact confuse the process sometimes even more. Here's an example where you have North Durham Women's Health. This is actually a place where people can receive an abortion and it's labeled as Women's Health Clinic in Durham. And then over here you have Gateway Women's Health, which is a CPC, and it's also labeled Women's Health. They modified it again during this study to say, "Does not provide abortion" or "Does provide abortion." But I would argue, again, that is not necessarily helpful if the people who are not providing abortion are actually actively dissuading someone for an abortion. That is different and so these intents are not being met by the search provider.

Since I'm here, I always like to do a local one. So last night when I got in, I wanted to know what's "abortion near me," logged into the hotel, and all of these are CPCs are in the ads, in the sponsored content, and then you have Planned Parenthood, which falls well below it.

Okay, so why does this matter? I mean, clearly this matters, but someone who is looking for an abortion is in a crisis moment. They are going to search giants like Google for help

and they are not getting the health services that they need. Ultimately, these discrepancies in user intent have long-lasting consequences. We are in a place right now in the United States where states are increasingly restricting abortion access as well as gestational limits. If we know from the research that persons trying to seek an abortion are unable to get access to that care and still seeking that care three to four weeks later, that puts that person as no longer eligible for an abortion in that state. I think it's also really critical for us to understand, and I think Yoel's point is extremely important, what role does advertising play? Yes, it's important. It allows us to create this structure. But Google's decision to monetize CPCs made them *billions of dollars* last year. I want to know where those billions of dollars are going.

Thank you so much for your time.

Lewis Raven Wallace

Thanks so much to the folks at Annenberg for having me. My name is Lewis Raven Wallace and I'm the author of a book called *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* and a podcast by the same name, *The View from Somewhere*. We are so lucky to have right now in the room, the editor of the podcast, Carla Murphy, who's one of my most important teachers and a really amazing thinker. Just had to shout that out. Really, really grateful to be here.

I'm going to talk less about users and less about platform, and more actually about creators. My work is focused on journalists themselves. I came to journalism from activism and then kind of got spat out by journalism back into activism. And now I organize journalists and agitate within the field of journalism as my main role.

A lot of my research and writing is about the myth of objectivity. So, I won't spend too long on breaking down why I think it's a myth, but I will say the tradition of objectivity to me has these three aspects to it that are different and separate. There's the methodological tradition, the approach to journalism as a science, which I think we could break down as its own ideological mythology, but there are also elements of that that are practices.

Meticulousness, fact-checking, certain kinds of rigor, the use of interviews and multiple sources. Objectivity is also ideological. It represents and reflects a dominant ideological frame in most instances, and that's racialized, that's gendered. There are a lot of unspoken ideological assumptions that go into the production of objectivity in newsrooms and by individual journalists. And then finally, objectivity appears as performative. I heard Masha Gessen refer to it as a style. So even beyond the underlying ideology of, "What is controversial?" "What is political?" "What is important?", all of these are ideological questions, there's also the performance. How

are we being perceived as objective and unbiased as we give this performance of news media production?

I'm going to focus on that last performative bit a little bit, arguing that "both sidesism" is actually a major problem that we're dealing with in the performances that news media are giving. I think we see this obviously pretty constantly right now around the siege in Gaza, around the depictions of Israeli militarism, around the discussion of the war that's happening right now. And I'll argue that grassroots media is and always has been an antidote, actually its own tradition, in opposition to the objective tradition of both sidesism.

So, problems with this performance. One is that performing objectivity gives a platform to bigotry and disinformation, or can. I'm bringing in this kind of famous example in my communities [referencing slide]. I come from a background of trans activism and a tradition of trans people telling our own stories. There's a lot of reporting right now about us. And a lot of it carries out, I think, really, really bad faith debate about whether or not we should have access to our basic healthcare needs as trans people. One side of that debate is trans people and almost all experts on trans healthcare. The other side of that debate is ill-informed bigots who have created a network of information and rhetoric, that is often cited as the other

side of this debate. This is kind of a famously terrible example by the reporter Jesse Singal, who is a very antagonistic person actually toward his trans critics. So, in a way he's sort of a straw man for this, but you see this same type of both sidesism appear, most notoriously, in the *New York Times* and lots of other outlets.

Another problem with both sidesism is that it sidesteps a power analysis and can reinforce polarization. So, I wanted to bring up this example of a headline following an Israeli military attack on the funeral of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. She was a Al Jazeera journalist, as most of you I think know, whom the Israeli military killed in cold blood just last year. And during her funeral, there was an attack in the West Bank. There was an attack by the Israeli military on the pallbearers. It was depicted in a lot of news outlets as a riot or a clash, which is a sort of both sides approach that we see a lot of, sidestepping a power analysis. We are rarely led to understand in the U.S. news media, in particular, that Israeli military in that context are an occupying force, that they're attacking people who are unarmed, who in fact don't effectively have government representation or their own access to similar means of power. That sidestepping is repeated over and over again until we become very confused, as many people are, about what's actually happening when we hear about a so-called clash in the West Bank.

Another aspect of this is that it can actually reinforce polarization to reflexively report a two sides story because of a form of human bias called binary bias. We want to think in terms of this side or that side. And when we're presented with, "You're either for this or you're for that, and here's the two sides," we tend to root in. So, complexity, pulling things apart, not reflexively going to that both sides kind of practice, can actually decrease polarization, which I think is really something that we need to be looking at more in scholarship about polarization. That simply presenting two sides can actually further send people toward those sides.

Then finally, and I think this one should be pretty obvious as an example of a problem of both sidesism, is that there's often a deferential aspect. Deferring to assumed credibility that's often toward the police and toward military, toward official sources. I brought up the example of this demonstration because I was physically present there. And it appeared in the news the next day in a lot of outlets, especially the initial news reporting as an instance of, again, a clash. A clash, or in some cases, as this says, "U.S. Capitol Police said 150 people were illegally and violently protesting outside the Democratic National Committee headquarters." So, the police said people were violently protesting. The people said they weren't. I was there and the people were not violently protesting. So, this is not

good news reporting, but it's also one of the major problems, again, of the style of both sidesism as a required performance. "We have to say what it is that the police said, even if we know that it's probably not true."

What's the antidote? I wish I had a silver bullet for this one, but I want to talk about practices. We're actually not starting from nothing. We're starting from a long tradition of different kinds of grassroots media that we can learn from, traditions that have been crafted and created by people whose information needs have never been well-reflected by mainstream news media. When we look at, "Oh, this reporting isn't good for communities," or "People don't trust this news reporting," there have always been folks who have been creating stories and telling them outside of those platforms and spaces, and therefore creating traditions that allow for that.

Solidarity journalism, movement journalism, community journalism, and abolitionist journalism are four of the examples that I want to uplift. Again, not as silver bullets or solutions, but as already existing antidotes that we can support, we can fund, we can shift resources to, and we can uplift, especially in times like this when there's an onslaught of bad information coming our way.

Solidarity journalism, and this comes from the

Solidarity Journalism Initiative, which is now at the University of Texas at Austin, Anita Varma's work. That means that journalists stand for basic human dignity and against suffering. It's practiced through newsworthiness judgments, through sourcing, through framing that centers the lived experiences of people subjected to unjust conditions. And solidarity techniques, journalists do what the most celebrated journalism has always done, insisting on representing truthful narratives that accurately convey lived experience, amplifying sources who have the most insight into an issue, which is often those who are on the ground or directly affected, and conveying outrage at people's dignity being disrespected.

Movement journalism, another tradition that hasn't always necessarily gone by that name, but that's deeply rooted in communities of color, Black and Brown, queer and trans communities in this country. And these [Ruben Salazar, Marvee Cooke, and Marlon Riggs] are a couple of the movement journalists whose work I love to uplift. Movement journalism is journalism that's explicitly in service to liberation. We want liberation and we're looking for ways to tell stories that lift that up. That doesn't mean we're turning journalists into soapboxes for organizations or specific activists, but fostering deep collaborations between journalists and grassroots movements, supporting journalism created by oppressed

and marginalized people, and seeing journalism as actually a way of building movements for social change. And I think that there are a lot of really amazing examples actually on the ground in Palestine of that, which is part of why my heart is so broken right now seeing the journalists who are doing that just being murdered and taken out of this world. It's hard for me to be talking about almost anything else.

This is an example of movement journalism, again from my community, from Tina Vásquez and an incarcerated journalist named Derek Trumbo. Certainly, the intent and the vision of this kind of journalism is to change the enslavement conditions that incarcerated workers are under. I don't know if workers is really the right word for that, but that incarcerated people are under, laborers. Tina worked in really close collaboration with Derek to put out this article that's both based on his lived experience and based on both of their ties to movement building.

And then finally, you all are surely familiar with some of these wonderful examples of community and community-driven journalism like City Bureau's Civic Reporting Programs and Documenters Network, teaching people to document and report stories from the South Side of Chicago. And Outlier Media in Detroit has created these incredible, text message-based services for low-income people in

Detroit. Really driving what kind of information is put out into the world, based on what questions low-income people are asking, and meeting them where they are in terms of technology and platform as well.

Abolition journalism has always been a thing, although again, it's not necessarily always been called that. Abolitionists during the era of slavery created their own papers, created their own media, and told these stories. Abolitionists now are doing the same thing. And this is just one example of that, the Kansas City Defender, which is a new, youth-run, Black-run, abolitionist organization covering the Black community in Kansas City. Definitely encourage everyone to check that out.

My job is to support people who are bringing an abolitionist frame to journalism, so I have office hours. You can come to them and talk to me about that if you're interested in it from pretty much any angle. Thank you all so much.

Valentina Proust

Thank you so much to all our panelists for such insightful presentations that I'm sure will develop very interesting comments and questions. I'll start by asking the first one so that you can gather your thoughts and prepare your questions. Your presentations delve into

media transformation and power dynamics. So, what do you see as the most urgent obstacle to creating safer and more just media information infrastructures? And also, what approach would you recommend for overcoming all these obstacles?

Lewis Raven Wallace

I would recommend community organizing.

André Brock

I want to chime in on that just a little bit because one of the things that I think is under-discussed about Twitter is the involvement of the TXTMob devs. The TXTMob was a group of activist developers who came up with a way for activists to communicate during the 2004 Democratic Convention using text messaging. It was a way to circumvent then working police networks of surveillance. And a lot of those devs, more than you would think, I'm specifically thinking of Evan Henshaw-Plath, who goes by... Was it, not Rabbit, but something?

Audience member

Rabble.

André Brock

It is, right, Rabble. And others heavily contributed to the original Twitter database.

And so if you think about Twitter as a space for a social action, you should necessarily be thinking about the ways that activists incorporated some of the ways that Twitter allows people to communicate person-to-person without necessarily having to go through—it still goes through a central server—but they do have the capacity to communicate with one another in ways that actually kind of mimic what text messaging does. And so, I think having activist-developers on the ground as these things are developed goes a long way towards already beginning to address some of the problematics.

I will say this question is *interesting*. It reminds me of when I defended my dissertation on Hurricane Katrina, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and looking at Black bloggers, and one of my well-meaning cohort members was like, “So how will this dissertation solve racism?” The question is a good one, I think, in introducing that there are problematics to be addressed, but I think it also locks us into talking through instrumental approaches to where the problematics are actually originating from as opposed to ideological, which is the work that everybody else that's sitting next to me, or even cultural.

So, my half answer to that question is, what do you do, building on the examples I used, if the public sphere is run by somebody like Michael

Baisden or Tariq Nasheed? Or what's the other guy, the one who passed? I can't remember his name. Kevin Samuels. What if you are, and this is a thing for a federation too, what if the domain is run by somebody who's not a good person? No technical fix will fix that. And so, I think it's incumbent upon all of us to start thinking through what are the other ways that we can encourage a governmentality, not just a technical means to address the problematics that we're talking about here.

Francesca Tripodi

I'm going to jump in here really quickly also to kind of connect these two things together. We've been talking a lot about information as public good and that information should be a public good. I just want to throw out that information is public at libraries, and these are also being attacked at a very high rate right now. So, there are a clear number of pundits and politicians that recognize and understand the power of public knowledge and public information. As we are social organizing, I encourage local involvement, whether that be at a school board level, even if you don't have children in school, at a community level, and also thinking about really explicitly the attack on public information that's happening right now.

Yoel Roth

I'll just briefly note that for all that I think

there's tremendous power and opportunity in having everybody participate in this project of constructing a more just and equitable and effective media, and certainly federation creates opportunities for that, I would also just say folks should give themselves permission and the space to not feel like they need to be at the leading edge of putting in the work to do all of this.

I have seen and have spoken with people who feel a responsibility to stand up a Mastodon instance because somebody needs to do it to host journalists who are trying to leave Twitter, and they feel that that's a politically and socially important project. And then they've come across their first instance of child sexual abuse media and are traumatized by it. You don't have to do that. You can certainly choose to, and I think it is an admirable contribution if you want to be a part of this, but also there is not a requirement to do it.

The same thing applies to leaving Twitter. If you want to leave Twitter, I did. Great. And if you don't want to sacrifice the value of your audience on Twitter, also great. These are deeply personal decisions. And I think, especially when we view this with a mindset of activism, we can sometimes prioritize that long-term project over the short-term investment in self and well-being that is just as important to center.

Valentina Proust

Thank you so much for such insightful answers. I believe we have a question over here.

Emily Edwards

Thank you all for such insightful presentations. My name is Emily Edwards. I'm coming in from St. Francis College. And so, thinking through this concept of risk and consequence, I think we've all seen, and you were all discussing the way in which users and communities invested in social justice have been pushed out of certain spaces or chose to leave certain spaces. I think X is a great example of that. But moving towards a more fragmented media ecosystem, whether that's Bluesky, Mastodon, having one's own Substack or moving over to Discord, but I think we've also seen media institutions and platforms disinterested in social justice. Jezebel was an example I'm thinking of, where platforms, companies, institutions are deciding they're not interested in the risk of social justice from a brand or a financial perspective. And so, I'm just wondering, where do you think we're going to go from here, from this context of disinterest, but also fragmentation? Maybe not what we can do, I'm a bit pessimistic myself sometimes, but where do you think we're heading in this context of disinterest and also fragmentation? Thank you.

André Brock

A conversation that happens among Black academics recently is the damn near complete disappearance of DEI initiatives following 2020. I bring that up to say that it's a Western phenomenon, these withdrawals of performative initiatives of care and support, because at the time they were approaching it as an engagement thing. If they did the DEI, then they would get a claim for it, and users would flock to their platform. And what they found is that it's a lot of work. And just from an academic perspective, it's one thing to hire a Black academic. It's another thing to retain, support, and promote them.

And I think the same thing is happening with DEI. So Yoel's point about once you get started doing the work, it requires a heavy investment, not just technical again, but emotional. I'm going to say libidinal, because that's my thing, but also cultural, to be able to take on the kind of work that happens. And most corporations, the FANG, Facebook, Apple, Amazon... I'm saying this like y'all don't know, but maybe some don't. But they have no incentive to do so. It doesn't make them money.

So, Sarah Roberts's fantastic work on content moderators who are doing the dirty work of looking at these terrible images without any

sort of compensation. And I'm not just talking about financial compensation. They don't get mental health benefits. It's something that is going to continue. This is why I've become a recent convert to Heidegger. The idea of humanity as a standing reserve for technology has never become more apparent to me than it has in these last few years of social media, and to be fair, media consolidation. There's a reason why Warner Bros. Discovery has taken off movies. It's not because they don't have the storage capacity. They somehow deem that having that content is not serving their instrumental economic purposes.

So, you ask another problematic question. I mean, not problematic in that it's a bad question, but a question about a problematic, and I think there are many ways that we can talk about it. But the first thing is trying to figure out how to inject, and I hate this word but I'm going to use it, an ethical perspective into the things that we're really concerned about here today. And I hate ethics, because to me, ethics is the mediation of risk, where risk is a modern condition, where it has supplanted pre-modern networks of trust and safety. So how do we get back to those moments? I think that's the question that journalists definitely need to consider, but academics have to as well.

Yoel Roth

How do you follow that? I'll just briefly note,

the fragmentation of the Internet has always been the peril, and we've thought about what solutions to it look like in different contexts over the years. For a long time, the barrier to connectivity was literally access. It was like, maybe if we have Facebook's Project Zero with the Internet being beamed in from balloons in wherever, then we can solve the connectivity problem and reduce fragmentation. Now we treat access as more or less ubiquitous, although that's not an unproblematic statement. Instead, we're seeing fragmentation emerge as the demise of these giant platforms, the emergence of alternatives, and increasing fragmentation through regulation where nation-states are intervening in the management of the Internet in ways that drive it in different directions in different countries.

That's not really reconcilable. I agree the peril there is this loss of a shared space, but there are so many different factors: regulatory, economic, community-driven, that are pushing us towards a more fragmented Internet. There are a number of people, especially contributors to some of the open-source projects around federated media, who say that's a good thing. They say, "Maybe we actually need to be more fragmented. Maybe we need a community that's 100 or 200 people and not 100 or 200 million." I disagree with that, and I think there's political reasons to disagree with that, but that's a tension. That's an unresolvable tension in the media moment

we're in right now.

Natalie Fenton

Yeah. Thank you to everyone. I've got a question that cuts across a bit of the panel, but particularly to Lewis. I'm so pleased that you're doing this work. It's really fantastic. I want to start with a comment about the BBC, because they're often held up as being paragon of good journalism, and they do objective and impartial stuff. They've recently got themselves into major fixes around all of that notion. They have a phrase, "due partiality," that they allow some impartiality if they think that that's acceptable and that the balance of evidence lends itself to one side. But who gets to decide what that balance is of course, absolutely key. And they've now had a recent example of a fellow media activist, who is also an activist with a group called The Landworkers' Alliance, a climate change organization in the UK, who was working under contract at the BBC for three days a week. They found out she was doing her other two days a week at the LWA and then terminated her contract because she no longer had the possibility of being impartial or objective because she worked for this other organization.

The next comment connects to the rest of the panel. There's another Black activist, Marcus Ryder in the UK, who is the director of the Lenny Henry Center for Media Diversity in

the UK. He was applying for a job; he's been employed by the BBC for years and years and years. He was applying for a job there, they did a search on his Twitter and decided that he was unsuitable because of the stuff he'd said. We're now in a situation in the UK, but if you go and talk to anyone in Parliament, they do a search on your Twitter and if they think you have done something that they would count as risky, then you are disinvited.

So, all these things connect in some way as to the power behind the myth of objectivity. And my question really was, how do we mainstream that? I get that we've got solidarity journalism, movement journalism, and abolitionist journalism, but how do we shift the ideology of objectivity away within that bigger kind of power dimension?

Lewis Raven Wallace

Probably community organizing. [He and audience laugh.] I am only kind of kidding. I mean, but I do feel like this is what you were getting at as well, André, around how we can't just address these issues through sort of tweaking practices or shifting platforms. We are, to echo what he said, talking about ideological and cultural change, which to me requires community organizing and it requires a kind of interpersonally networked, what Adrienne Maree Brown calls emergent strategy approach, to making change. That we're not just changing policies from the top

down or how we access information, we're changing how we relate to one another.

I think that radical subjectivity actually really lends itself to those practices. It's not that hard for any of us to be in an accountable relationship to another person, where we're running into problems around accountability or ethics, so to speak, is in our dealings between people and corporations. So, I see community organizing, as well as a kind of return of the assets of information and media to community ownership and community control as really, really key aspects of that.

André Brock

Okay. Lewis, I got to push you. Moms For Liberty is a community organization.

Lewis Raven Wallace

Yeah, let's go. Well, one thing I would argue is that Moms for Liberty is not a grassroots community organization per se. They're performing that very, very well. And part of their success is the platforming that they're receiving by presenting or representing that and having that replicated through large media outlets.

But that said, there are people I'm sure in this room, including me, that have a Moms for

Liberty in their community. And there are people having those conversations and recruiting people into that world. So, we have to be on the ground countering that. We have to. There's no other way. But I think the fact that they're organizing actually just tells us how important organizing is. We can't just be right. We have to organize people. They're super wrong, but they're organizing people. Alicia Bell's a good speaker on this topic too, on community organizing and journalism.

Valentina Proust

I just want to thank our four panelists, André, Yoel, Francesca, and Louis for such insightful remarks and also our audience for the comments and questions. I'll now give the floor to our Dean, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and our Director, Barbie Zelizer, who will close the symposium with some final remarks.

Barbie Zelizer

First of all, I want to say that these three panels were absolutely awesome. I feel so grateful to be able to walk out of this day and feel that there are really critical issues that if you spin them enough times, they begin to look different. And I think that that's really what we have been doing. So, I want to thank all of you for preparing such great remarks. I want to thank everybody in the audience. I want to thank all of the organizing committee for this symposium, and of course all of our

staff. And now I want to share some comments with you.

I tend to go through emergent topics by constructing a straw person argument and then arguing against myself. I do this in class a lot. People call me out on it all the time, but because I've now admitted it you can't call me out on it. But I want to start by saying that since we started yesterday with Wesley, I've been wondering about where social justice has been historically. Why has it traveled such a precarious and uneven journey toward recognition and a kind of ongoing centrality? I think that most of us would agree that the media have been agents in that journey. So, my question is really, why? And I think maybe it's because we recognize social justice not in its presence, but in its absence or in its violation. So, poverty, food insecurity, climate crisis, and the media don't work well with absences, right? Although their mandate is to make things visible, that's usually moving from this point to this point. It's never moving from this point to that.

So maybe it makes sense that there's a disparity in terms of what we expect or hope for, and what we get. Because the media by definition operate on an either/or, totally there/totally not, kind of spectrum. The problem I think is clear. I very much appreciated Alicia's call for a launch of institutional care. But I wonder, how do we

move there from media irrelevance? If media can't recognize social justice when it is there, how is it going to be repaired by recognizing social justice when it's more there? And I wonder how much we need to agree on in order to act or enact a plan of action. As Assil rightly noted, the title of this symposium could be generatively flipped. I think that that's a lesson to us that maybe we haven't exactly got the frame as generative as we want it to be.

I want to point to three different negations on this journey, if you will, whose resolution I fear continue to escape media attention. The first one, it's actually two and one kind of a response. The first is a question of which agentic activity is implied by watching. The first panel today, I was, as a visual scholar, I was in a high degree of excitement. Court drawing, cop watching. But the forced absences or negation that was also implicit in much of this discussion. The unbanked, the lending platforms for the poor who aren't seen, the experience with Black witnessing. Implicitly suggesting that watching in many cases becomes the end rather than a means to an end. And I worry about how we get beyond that. This is not a worry that I came up with this morning. This is a worry that has accompanied my books for a very long time, and I don't think we have it right, yet. I don't think that by calling the watching impulse an accomplishment, I don't think we're getting as far as the media should be pushed.

A second question is what kind of autonomy is implied by structural delusions? The idea that Natalie framed, that democracy can't function without media even when we know that the media are tools giving cover to the exploitative nature of capitalism. And so again, the resolution of this cognitive dissonance may again depend on absence, on a gap, on a negation. Wazhmah talks about the aestheticization and visibilization of violence in funded news that skips over the real violence being experienced by Afghan citizens. In her case, Assil reminded us of the Middle East. Gholam speaks about the structural conditions that sustain the fiction of network autonomy and the hierarchy of invisibility as a mode of engaging with the problematics on the ground. And Natalie talks of understanding powerlessness rather than holding power to account, in that twist on Erich Fromm with the difference between power to rather than power from.

But again, I ask how will media learn to recognize negations like invisibilization, disempowerment, or powerlessness, given that all works against the rhythms by which the media sustain themselves? I see these cases as pretty much the same thing. I think that they raise the same obstruction to getting the media and social justice to work more in tandem with each other. And it suggests that these gaps or negations or absences can be understood, maybe more fruitfully, if we could

all see them as a failure to recognize and privileged nuance. So that we're not going to one side of the polarity, but maybe it's there in the small questions that we need to begin. And this is not to say that the panels today don't already do that. They did. I told you I was going to do a straw man argument. But our third panel I think was particularly productive in getting there, on the question of whose subject, whose topic are we talking about when we talk about consequences?

We heard lots of different answers to this, and all of them derived from nuance and granularity. The interconnected and unstable wholes created by modernity, technology, and democracy as articulated by André. Or in y'all's discussion of platform failure and the collective insecurity it generates. The idea of federated social media. The idea of treating sustainability and decentralization as goals that are spotted, but with many options. Francesca, on the spectrum of options that present themselves quite vividly as search queries if we only thought to look. And Lewis on the performative nuances that journalists use to hide beyond objectivity, and the solutions that arise from journalisms that already privilege solidarity, that privilege movement, that privilege community, and that privilege abolitionism. And the grassroots nature of all of these. So, I think we make a start here, even if we walk out of with lots and lots of questions in hand. But I think that those questions are a sign that we're moving in the

right direction. And at this point, I will turn it over to our Dean and then to the reception.

Sarah Banet-Weiser

I'm acutely aware that I am the thing that is holding all of you back from wine and food, so I am going to be very quick with my remarks. I have a slightly different take—it was interesting to hear Barbie's remarks—on the day. I first want to just say that I am so incredibly energized by all of the panelists. I feel like it's been a very, very rough time. To think about how to be generative in our work, in our scholarship, to think about having a space where we can talk about discomfort, and we can talk about tragedy, and we can talk about trauma and grief, I think is so important.

And so, I'm grateful to all of the panelists for providing painful stories, personal stories, stories that I think really, really kind of cut to the heart of some of the kind of trauma that the world is undergoing right now, in all different directions. So, I'm first just bolstered by the day, and I want to thank everyone for their work on that. And those of you who know me also know that I try to be optimistic, because I write about misogyny and racism, so I need to think about how to be optimistic. So, I want to frame my remarks—it's interesting, Barbie said something similar—I want to frame my remarks around Alicia's call for media reparations.

I was struck by the brilliance in our student organizing committee, first of all, for putting together these panels that worked so beautifully together. I was struck by the very first paper, the very first talk that we heard was about media reparations, about things like acknowledgement and accountability and redress. And then from different points of entry, every single paper during the day addressed that in some way. I thought every single paper during the day at least said, this is what we need. We need to have this kind of reparations. So, I was really struck by that and I kind of want to frame my remarks around that. So, thank you for giving us that analytic.

I also was struck, like you said Barbie, by the nuanced analysis of the papers and of the work that was presented here. I don't think that we should look for a resolution for cognitive dissonance. I think that what has been presented today is ambivalence and contradiction. And I will say my students in the room, you'll know this, some who had to listen to me long ago, some have to listen to me now. I'm always saying, if we talk about ambivalence, what does it mean to live in ambivalence? What does it mean to use ambivalence as an analytic? What does it mean to parse through the contradictions? I must have said that a thousand times in my career. I know it's very annoying, but it means something. We need to sit with this discomfort, sit with the contradiction, sit with

the ambivalence. And that I think is where we get to some of the other themes in all of the papers.

Trust, hope, love of an archive, joy in a media platform, solidarity, care. I really thought that all the papers, all the work talked about care in a different way. I did tell Natalie that I wanted to work on the last two of her seven principles, which were hope and trust. And to think about what it means to, as you said Yoel, create an open-source trust and safety platform. What does it mean to think about media in its capaciousness and not, as Lewis said, in its binarism and its one-sidedness. I think that we can point to this work in the different papers that were here. Alison Hearn, I thought her paper was, I'm not going to lie, fairly devastating about fintech. It is no joke. And the way in which it continues to colonize the Global South I think is something that we all need to attend to. But you began and you ended with care: an informal economy, mutual aid, kinship services, then you ended with that as well. Gholam, again, absolutely important. I just need to figure out how to distill that for my students in a lecture that is titled something like, "It's Not About Intellectuals, It's About Influencers," which is what you said. The idea to let go of liberal individualism, let go of a definition of autonomy that means nothing when we're talking about fintechs, or we're talking about platforms, or digital diaspora. To let go of that, to let go of some of these very sedimented

ideologies and epistemologies that we have organized social justice around.

Natalie asked us to think not just about communication or media, and how important it is for democracy, but to think about what we mean by democracy in the first place. One of the things that I come away from listening to everyone here is that there are some really problematic definitions in the idea of democracy that so many of us hold onto. I think it's time to let go of that. Not let go of democracy. Just to be clear. I like democratic things, okay? But let go of some of the things that we think are so necessary for this kind of democracy, because it is just an empirical fact that it relies on capitalism, and capitalism relies on racism, and relies on misogyny, and relies on homophobia, and relies on division.

So, if we think about democracy from a different point of view, if we start to reimagine what democracy might mean, I think that that is an important starting point. I think everyone today has done that. Everyone today has given us arguments, words, and thoughts to think about how we might reimagine media, how we might reimagine social justice. So, with that, wine is waiting for all of you.

I want to thank you so much. Thank all of our amazing panelists. All of the staff who have stayed with us all day and provided food, who

provided tech. Thank you, Edwin. Thank you to Barbie and the Center for Media at Risk for letting me share the stage and to co-sponsor with my center. And again, have a wonderful night. Go enjoy some wine. Thank you all. See you next time.