



The Virtual SciCon 2.0 Conference Series | Transcript

Nikki Usher | Who gets to know and how: News for the Rich, White, and Blue? (16th January 2023)

Mod.: Prof. Christopher Buschow

Christopher Buschow: So good evening to Germany and good morning to the United States. Welcome, everybody, to the virtual SciCon lecture series. We kick this off today with our first lecture, and it's a pleasure to have you with us. My name is Christopher Buschow and I am your host today. I'm an assistant professor at Bauhaus Universität Weimar in Germany, and my research is mainly focused on questions of organizing and financing digital journalism in networked media environments. So first of all, let me start with some words concerning the background of today's lecture. Today's presentation is the first lecture in the SciCon series, which is science journalism in the digital age, organised by Wissenschaftspressekonferenz. That is the Association of Science Journalists in Germany, together with the Science Media Centre, Germany. And in November, the SciCon conference will take place in Berlin, where we want to discuss what can be done to support science journalism in Germany in these times of turmoil. The resulting recommendations will also be informed by the expert lectures we hear today and in the weeks and months to come. The conference and all the online lectures have been made possible thanks to a grant from Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research. All lectures in this series will be recorded and transcribed to create a knowledge reservoir as input for the discussions in November in Berlin. So everyone, please note, by participating in today's Zoom session, you agree that the lecture, your questions, your voice and video will be recorded. We are actually recording now. So, we will proceed as follows. We will first hear a 30-minute lecture and if you, the audience, have any thoughts or questions, please don't hesitate to write them in our chat here in Zoom. And after the lecture we will come back to your questions in the chat and we will also have around 15 minutes for a further Q&A discussion.

So, but now it's my big, big pleasure to introduce today's guest of the virtual SciCon Conference, our speaker, Professor Nikki Usher. Nikki Usher is since last year, a professor of communication studies at the University of San Diego. Previously, Dr Usher was professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and at the University of Illinois. Nikki Usher's research addresses the intersection of new technology, politics and the news media with a particular focus on how power, inequality and economics impact on our news and the information environment. Nikki Usher is well known for their ethnographic work in newsrooms, for example, their in-depth research on the New York Times Business Desk, which is really a

great book they published as *Making News at the New York Times* with University of Michigan Press in 2014. My job today is to briefly introduce Dr Usher, so I cannot recount the numerous awards and recognitions that Dr Usher has received for their work in recent years. So that would be beyond the scope of my introduction today. But what I can say as a journalism researcher is that we here in Germany very closely looked at the work of Nikki Usher, which in many ways serves as an inspiration and guidance for what we do, especially here in Weimar. So today, Nikki Usher will address issues from their latest book, *News for the Rich White and Blue*, published in 2021. I highly recommend that to everybody who has not yet read it. But they will also focus on local misinformation in times of Corona. So, Nikki Usher, thank you so much for joining us today. We are very delighted to have you here today and couldn't think about a better speaker to kick off this year's SciCon. The floor is yours.

Nikki Usher: Thank you all very much. And just thank you so much for that introduction. And I really wanted to take the brief of what you all gave me about your concerns about science and science communication quite seriously. So, you'll see a little bit about hopefully what I think will help you in your quest to make these recommendations. So, I hope that that will be useful for you. Okay. Let's go to the next slide. So, I do hope you will take a look at the book. This is the core argument that it makes. And it's that in the quest to survive, news organizations are realigning their priorities in ways that favor audiences who are willing to pay, rich, either in terms of cultural or actual capital, faced huge barriers to diversifying and remains stubbornly white institutions and increasingly end up serving liberal blue audiences. So, sort of the question for you all is what happens when the political economy of high-quality journalism in the US or anywhere else means that who makes the news and who consumes this high quality news is increasingly limited to people who have the kind of economic and educational advantages and political views that are most likely to be pro-science and pro fact. Next slide. And so an important takeaway from this book was that non-metro America was growing increasingly distant from the journalism that is most likely to survive the economic maelstrom. Large national news outlets, primarily staffed by the by people from cities, but also people who have run away from rural America for the big city as fast as they can and have rarely looked back.

And next slide. So today, I want to talk to you about something kind of core to the message of the book but I don't think that we hear enough about in this context, and it's actually some new research that I'd like to share with you, which is about how social media and misinformation actually play out on the ground in communities that are highly resistant to elites and anti-intellectual and more specifically for today, how this plays out in rural America. With a case study of rural Illinois. So, I want to introduce sort of the why digital platform communication became kind of the critical source of information. And then I want to show you a little bit about how local public health departments were dealing with sort of a toxic and diminished news environment. And then I'm going to tell you a little bit about the rise of mini Trumps and how that all connects together. So next slide. Okay. So, I want to share with you briefly sort of some overall trends that you may already be familiar with. But I think the rationale for why we need to take a closer look. Next slide. So, this trend is mirrored across much of the world. Most of the United States lives in big cities, which are predominantly liberal and the places that are less populated but

still politically important given the US federal system are overwhelmingly Republican. Next slide. And so, I hate the slide, but overwhelmingly Republicans in the United States don't trust the news.

Fifty-six percent that say that news media actually hurts democracy. Next slide. And by public opinion polling from Pew, we also know that 57% of non-urban Americans say that local news covers news that is not local to them. And 70% of non-urban Americans say the news has little influence where they live. Next slide. And so we know as a whole that nearly a third of Americans get their news on Facebook and 66% use the site regularly. Next slide. And we know that this is also not ideal for high quality information. This is from the 2020 election. Misinformation on Facebook got six times more clicks in the United States. Next slide. And this one, I think is really fascinating that Facebook was even worse for information than Fox News, which is really, I think, saying something. Next slide. So, this is, this is my kiddo. But this is a picture of the end of the path of my little sub development in Illinois. Just to kind of give you a sense of really like this is rural America. This is at like literally the end of like the road where I lived. And I really wanted to understand what happened in these places that the media elite often forget to kind of see what was happening to the news and information in these places that we've kind of come to call news deserts with limited access to traditional professional local news and to kind of understand whether there was something maybe more complicated going on.

And as I quickly learned, yes, of course there was. Next slide. So first, we have preexisting literature that establishes that rural communities in the United States actually may rely more on social and digital communications to participate in voluntary organizations, learn about community events, and build social capital and community participation. And in fact, for rural residents, a 2020 nationwide survey found that more so than urban or suburban residents, community oriented social media is actually more important for rural residents and very important to their civic participation. Next slide. So, with my team, we asked this question: What happens when platforms become the front page, homepage and community bulletin board for civic communication in the United States, and in particular, given the preexisting research and the experience of living in one of these communities, what could I really add? And so the focus is actually on Illinois, but everything. That's not a place you've ever visited, not Chicago, but it's actually 85% of the geographic space and only 15% of the population. That's still 1.6 million people, which I looked up, is basically the population of Estonia or Latvia and still larger than the population of 12 states. So we're talking about a lot of people. Next slide. And so, I learned that it was really impossible to see. What many see from the outside is an infodemic of misinformation as anything other than deeply embedded in larger structural concerns and cultural contexts. So, let's look at why digital platform enabled communication became critical to these rural areas in non-urban, Illinois. Next slide.

So non-urban Illinois is a story that is familiar to many other places in the rural United States. The state itself is shrinking rural areas more as people die. People move away for other opportunities. There are these blows to local pride and revenue. Property tax declines, population declines. Farmers are selling out to Monsanto, big box stores, the monopolization of groceries, banks and pharmacies

and the rise of online retail has literally closed down Main Street. And this is just the town right next to mine. And you can see that it's basically, it looks like it's lost in time.

And so we have a crisis in the state I live in or lived in. It was called the most average state in the United States by the Associated Press, based on its demographics, education and economic mix. And so, I think it presents a really important case study of trends we can expect to see in other cases across the US, maybe also in the rural urban divides in Germany. But I think that this growing inequality and the separation between urban fate and rural fate is a really critical part of understanding misinformation. Next slide, please. And so, there are also these growing partisan divides with these rural urban trends. I think this picture really says it all. 2012, not very long ago. Right. And then you zoom to the one on the right, and that's 2020. So, these divides are just getting deeper and deeper. Next slide, please. And the local voluntary civic associations, the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Clubs, which have more of an international presence, these have long raised money to benefit these towns, kind of hosting, hosting events, keeping people together. But as people age, they have been struggling to kind of do this. Next slide. And the political corruption in Illinois is somewhat famous, even internationally. Chicago's ranked number one for federal prosecutions of public corruption. And it's really not just limited to the city. Five Illinois governors in state history have been convicted for corruption.

Next slide. And so, I give you this context, because I want to talk to you a little bit about what we're seeing in the local media landscape, because all of this makes journalism particularly important for serving a check against abuses, publicizing who's been caught for wrongdoing, holding rural communities together. And so this is a little bit about the local news environment. I took the list from the State Press Association. Actually, the number of newspapers in the state hasn't really changed that much since the nineties, which I found interesting, but that is a little bit misleading: 89% of those are weekly newspapers. But once you get outside of the Chicago area and you look at the 96 other counties in Illinois and that 85% of the geographic area, that access to local news and information, especially at the daily level, becomes far more limited. So about 22% of these newspapers don't have a website. Only 12% are daily out of 258. So, for the 140,000 kilometer geographic area outside of Chicago, only about 12% of this region really has access to geographic daily specific news. And one fifth of these newspapers don't even have a website, but 40% of them have a Facebook page suggesting in many cases that Facebook has become the stand-in for the website. And these newspapers. Next slide.

These newspapers are struggling for the same reasons that larger ones are. The migration of digital advertising, the platforms that can do it better. A real decline. And this results in a real decline in civic information. This is, again, the local newspaper from the town across from where I lived. The paper that does things which I kind of find deeply. I kind of just love that, but it's closed. And Judd shared with me, it used to be that you could swing an election with an endorsement in the county paper, and now no one knows who is running. There are also these national and local trends that really affect the ability of the local news information environment to provide people with really important news. So just to kind of give

you a sense of national trends, in most major markets, people spend about 9 to 14.8 minutes each month on local news.

And local news receives just 0.5% of all Internet page views, while 80% of visits to news sites go to national news outlets. And usually local television news is the most trafficked local news site. But local television news can cover something like the entirety of a metropolitan area, if not more so. So next slide. So, what this should tell you is that for a fast moving social, political and health crisis like the COVID one, which has highly specific local information and locally specific capacities to craft mitigation responses, legacy local news media in these areas is just not up to the task. It's not focused enough or frequent enough or digitally enabled enough to keep citizens informed about rapidly changing local conditions. So it should be really no surprise that people look for an alternative and find one on Facebook and this is actually from the town I used to live in. Of the 100,000 or so people that weren't students, about almost 50,000 of those people are members of our local news Facebook page and this is all community produced information. So Facebook becomes a stopgap for local information needs and presents of course, its own set of deeply problematic conditions because Facebook wasn't made for quality news and information dissemination. So next slide. So, with this context in mind, I want to talk to you now about some of the qualitative data about what we're seeing public health practitioners in this local news environment struggle with when it comes to trying to reach people on Facebook.

So, in the United States, just for context, public health outreach is at the local level. We don't have kind of government subsidized public health care. So these are actually the instantiation of local government funded health outreach really for people who don't have the means. So, it's like nutrition clinics, dental clinics, prenatal care, things like that. Generally, like a public good that people support, but they have become deeply, deeply, deeply politicized at the local level, kind of across the country, with national misinformation being a huge problem at the local level. So next slide, please. We've all seen oh, sorry, that was, that was the slide before. Okay. So that was that public health becomes the public enemy across the US. Next. Next. Next slide, please. You've seen this one before. So, for this first study, I spoke with 18 public health officials representing 30 public health departments between June and August 2021. These were all people from rural areas across the state of Illinois. And the interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes with most about 50 minutes. So next slide, please. So, oh, local public. Sorry about that. Local public health departments have become deeply politicized as the federal talking points first for Trump and then the Republican Party have turned those trying to keep people safe into the object of people's fear.

So, since you can't really see that, I'm going to give you the takeaways and then we'll go through one by one. So, number one, national misinformation becomes local public health misinformation. Local public health officials have limited tools to deal with the swirling misinformation on this platform, too. These public health officials cannot depend or rely on local news media because of declines in media trust and the lack of reach and attention of local news to these communities. Three, that there are real material consequences to these divisions that have actually impacted and torn apart small communities. And this isn't just stuff that happens online and where local public leaders have taken national talking points to further

their own causes and rally supporters to undermine public health efforts. And I'll give you the example of one. So next slide, please. So, this is not unique to public health officials in Illinois, but they're feeling the brunt of a larger social and political climate that has politicized their work. And the spillover impacts on getting their messages across is deeply problematic as they try to reach out to audiences that have become deeply polarized. So, the first big theme is the struggle to deal with national misinformation at the local level. As one public health leader told me, a lot of this went hand in hand with the election cycle and the federal election made for an absolutely perfect, horrid storm for county health departments, especially in areas that tend to be red.

And so that was interesting because partisanship is never a good thing. And politics infiltrate public health and our work. And, you know, a partisan news organization was infiltrating. I think they're referring to Fox and putting forth an agenda that was diametrically opposed to what the CDC and World Health and local health department was saying. Next slide. Another told me this: There were the people that thought you were incompetent or that you were lying on purpose, that this was a conspiracy or a scam. You have all these people bashing all the health care personnel, including ours, saying that we were scamming everyone and doing this for our benefit. There were ones that were aggressively negative and people that did not believe in COVID, that people were making up for this. Making this up for their personal benefit. And that these good people of the county are actually agents of Q or something like that. That would actually be a good thing if they were seen as agents of Q. But you kind of get the sense of desperation, like, you know, people being caught up in a conspiracy that, you know, they have nothing to do with, even because they're local health providers. Next slide. And another one told me they've taken a health issue and turned it into a political issue. And it's very hard to get people's attention about the health side of it.

People who are trusted and respected voices in health care are mixed up in politics, so people don't know what's true and what's not anymore. Next slide, please. So national misinformation becomes public health misinformation at the local level, and it's something that can be seen quite plainly. So, I just want you to imagine this, the local health department page, which people would normally turn to for information, maybe about sort of like foodbanks or pediatrician clinic, has become a battleground. So imagine trying to have a Facebook page where you're trying to give really quick up to date information for a community because you can't use the local news because it's not, it doesn't really exist and you're just trying to inform them about how to save, stay safe. And so, you need to post information on Facebook and you need people to take it seriously. So, this is a screenshot from a local public health department, the county next to mine. And you can see this conversation. It might be a little hard, but there's comments about the vaccine killing somebody. My cousin died from this shot. Of course, it tells you something about education levels that they spell vacation instead of vaccination. But these are people who are sort of really, you know, on the place where they're getting information about COVID count, saying don't get the vaccine, it will kill you.

Right. And this is where the public health department is trying to get out health messaging. Next page, next slide, please. Sorry. And one of the things that's difficult in the United States is that we have a Freedom of Information Act, both at the

federal and local level, such that anything that is government communication is public record. So, this and larger political discourse about free speech online has made these officials feel like they don't have any ability to just go in and delete these comments, like, why wouldn't you just delete this stuff? And it's because they don't feel like they can. And this is kind of from their words, again, featuring from another rural health department. This is a comment on a page attacking the public health official saying no one gives a anymore, accusing somebody in the public health department of not wearing a mask on St Patrick's Day and saying that nobody cares. So this is what's happening on the primary source of information for these communities. And so this is what you know, why they feel like they can't just take this stuff down. So one told me there are rules that we can't delete comments because that's altering a record. And so if they say really harmful things about our staff, that's altering a public record and we can't delete that. So they just got left there. And when another told me at one point in time we took Facebook down, but that was interpreted by some in the community as censorship, that we were preventing them or taking away their freedom to express their opinion about COVID and the pandemic.

So, we put it back up. So this is sort of what's going on in this communication outreach, but this was the one that really hurt. Next slide. I'm just going to check that we're aligned. Next slide, please. Yeah. So, sort of making the situation worse is that public health officials must conduct this outreach at a time when local news media is on the decline and there's diminished trust and news. And what this means is that public health officials can't actually depend on local news media, both because of declines of trust in media generally, but also the lack of reach and attention to communities in these areas. So, the local media really isn't an efficient source for this information. So next slide, please. So public health officials notice this loss and COVID has simply moved too fast. And the information particularly changes so quickly that newspapers aren't the best way to reach people. And there are also concerns about this difficulty of public health officials facing television and these news deserts that are coming from multiple states that are not local in any way, leaving them to have to navigate a very messy environment. And so Facebook becomes the default.

So, this one official really explained it pretty well. I thought it makes it difficult based on our geographic market, we have media from three different states to get our message to the same county region. So he's talking about television. The dissemination of information is very fractured. And so when you start to lump in there the small community newspaper, do they subscribe to the local county newspaper? It might only be printed once per week to get information out there. It's usually very dated by the time people get it in their mailbox. We've pressed hard on Facebook as being most up to date. Next slide, please. And perhaps I think more alarming is the way that public Health Department officials actually talked about their relationship to local and national news as unreliable and too contentious to even post it. Given perceptions among county residents that news media can't be trusted. So as one told me, we tried to avoid news sources altogether just because of the polarization we were dealing with, especially coming out of the election cycle. We felt news sources were a hot button issue we didn't want to push. So, looking at the demographic and makeup of these counties, news sources aren't always trusted in this region. So just to kind of make this a little bit more profound, they didn't feel

like they could post local news on their Facebook pages because people didn't trust it.

Next slide. Oh, sorry. Yeah, next slide. I want to next slide. Another told me, though, before we move on to this, that we try to stay away from news stories because they can be controversial. There are also, like real material consequences to these divisions and to the lack of information that's actually torn apart small communities where there's so much happening on an interpersonal level, where people know each other and the consequences move from digital life to real life. Next slide, please. So, this is what one told me. Everything changed for me. There's people that simply because of where I work and what I do, they won't make eye contact with me or they'll make very aggressive eye contact or will drive by and yell something out the window. I didn't have any one person solid prior to COVID that didn't like me or had an issue with me. I'm pretty easy to get along with. A lot of threats told me to stop talking in the newspaper if I like the way my face looks. Next slide. Another official just kind of tried to ring home. These aren't outsiders. These are people who have lived and worked in these communities for a long time, which I find very scary. So, everyone knows each other. I often laugh because I'm either related to them or know their family, and that's just not me. And that's not just me.

It's true for anyone native from here. And the pandemic has wreaked havoc on family and so-called social circles. And then next slide, please. And again, I don't know what's more material than disinformation is a fact than actually seeing what the real implications mean. This is from The Wall Street Journal, noting that the surge in COVID in Illinois was inflamed by our rural counties. So, kind of the last sort of big point I want to share with you in our time, given the time that we have. What really worries me is these local public leaders have taken national talking points to further their own causes and rallied supporters to undermine public health efforts. And so these little local political leaders, particularly right wing local officials, are using this moment to take national issues local and then using COVID 19 as a platform to spearhead their own political gain, as well as undermine and harass local public health officials. And it is terrifying to see those anti-democratic tendencies. Sorry, can you move to the next slide? Sorry. And it's really scary to see these anti-democratic tendencies, because if this is happening in places where everybody knows each other and, you know, shares in community life, it only stands to get worse as people grow more distant from people's immediate connections. Next slide.

So, this is what someone told me. At the height of the pandemic, it got really ugly. People were downright brutal. And I had a lot of haters in the community. My name was thrown out there quite a lot, and it was pretty stressful at the time. The issue was that restaurants were closed and there was a local attorney who was representing people very inexpensively and saying that Illinois Public Health Department didn't have the authority to do what it was doing, nor did local health departments. He really helped stir up the dissension. He would do Facebook live periodically, and all his followers would get on there and I'd watch the comments streaming. So basically you had a local lawyer who is supposed to be following the law, circumventing it for his own gain and using his platform to create potentially threatening and dangerous situations for the local public health official. Next slide. In some cases, it was interference from state attorneys or sheriffs not enforcing mask mandates. And in some cases, it sort of started to see the rise of sort of these

mini Trumps with populist demagogic demagoguery at the local level. So just to kind of give you a sense of this, we got pushback from local businesses as they tend to mimic what they saw on Fox News and on other more conservative websites from Facebook postings. We had local businessmen that were mad with masking, and you maybe could call them local social media influencers, and they would go to their minions and their followers to threaten us.

And I truly believe this was stoked by the person in the presidency, stoked by Fox News. But we had a local element that played on it and they took it out on public servants. So, I want to be mindful of the time, so I don't want to get into this too much so people have a chance to ask questions, But I really want to move to the next slide, please. But I do want to point out that kind of the rise of these mini Trumps are not just a Facebook phenomenon, but indicative of actually local and national media coming together to boost the profiles of local people who have taken these national talking points and kind of are starting to make their career off of it. So, I mean, and there's more there, but I think I'll stop here. But so and maybe we can flash ahead to like my contact info or you could do that later. It doesn't really matter. But so I have the case of like one of these officials who actually ended up being, one of these local public officials actually became famous for resisting a mask mandate, and then within a week was on Fox News. So, he went from a local television station to Fox News in one week. So, I hope today I've given you a sense of the things that I'm thinking that come out of the arguments of *News for the Rich, White and Blue*, but really go beyond to help you think about what's happening with science communication. And the big takeaway for me is that we really need to remember the context. We need to think about the local experience and we need to know that this is not without implications for real people who are fighting to bring good information to their communities. And it's not easy and that it is an additional digital misinformation epidemic. It's a physical one. So, with that, I'll end there and feel free to get in touch and I can depress you even more.

Christopher Buschow: Thank you so much, Nikki. Very enlightening talk. Very interesting case study. Thanks for sharing the fresh data with us. And I think this really shows one thing that sort of Franco from WPK always highlights. If there is no journalism anymore, then there is not no communication. To the contrary, there is a lot of communication happening and you have shown us what happens in such an essential health crisis and how public health authorities are really undermined, undermined by these local social media influencers as you showed. Very interesting. Thank you. Thank you so much. Everybody is now invited to ask questions. We already have a question in the chat. I will read them that question. So, it is recorded, but everybody who has a question is invited to raise your hand here via Zoom. So, you can also unmute yourself and ask a question here live or write them in the chat as we have no other question yet. I will, I will take the question of Franco Zotta, who asked What is the reason for the changes in the public sphere you illustrated? Just the crisis of the media system caused the social crisis, or is it rather the other way around? In other words, would it help the media system if societies were not so divided economically and socially? Or does the crisis of the media system primarily have its own causes?

Nikki Usher: That's not an easy question.

Speaker2: Not a softball question.

Nikki Usher: I think that they're all intertwined and intermixed. I think that's why I tried to show you that the crises of our communities are also media crisis, because the ability of a community to support its own economy in a commercial media system is also directly related to the ability of a community to support its media. Right. So, I think there are other forces that have made the local media environment even more challenging. You know, Google and Facebook and the disruption of the digital advertising model, I think is something extraneous to kind of the decline of local communities in rural America. So, and I think that the partisan polarization that we see in the United States is the end product of a strategy that was set in place by Republicans in the 1970s. So, we're seeing kind of an almost an end point of a very deliberate strategy to decrease trust and expertise, particularly the media. So, I don't know if anything is really causal, but I do think that the media and the newspapers in particular have a set of challenges that are not made easier by some of these tech giants and kind of the attention economy more generally. So hopefully that's helpful. Sorry, I'm going to.

Christopher Buschow: And we have another question by Anja Noster. I invite everybody to post to the chat or raise your hand. Before I take Anja's question, I would just briefly ask you if there have also been actors that tried to make business out of that, because I think there's a very interesting paper by Philip Napoli just recently released on these pink slime media outlets like Metric Media that have really made a business out of distributing automatically generated fake news and misinformation and all these kind of very invaluable information. And my question is, do you also see that in your data? It's also like people making a really business out of that misinformation?

Nikki Usher: You know, I think that it's definitely happening. I think what's happening is that they're taking advantage of a media vacuum. And so, like there isn't if you want to know, I was embedded with some local Republican officials for a while. You know, field research that doesn't really lead you anywhere. It's always great. But what they would tell me was that the only way you could really get people to know who was running was to put in, like, mail. Like literally, that was it, because there was no newspaper. If they didn't see it online, they weren't going to know who was running for local office. And so really what has happened is bad actors from the Republican Party have stepped in to fill a critical information need. They're doing it in a way that is really terrible for our information environment, but they have stepped in to fill an information need. And I would caution to say that this is all made up. Like some of it is generated kind of from a content farm, but there's just enough of local coverage for you to kind of think that this is real, right? Like, because they might cover a high school game and then 'there'll be political coverage. So, it's much more complicated than just like these, you know, low budget things kind of appearing in somebody's mailbox or on their front step like these are filling an information gap.

They're not like slimy, right? They look like news and in some cases actually have news. It's just not clear that they have a political agenda. So, I actually differ from a lot of folks because I think if you want to counteract that, that local news organizations and maybe even the Democratic Party and I make this argument in

the book, need to get in the business of counter tactics. If you want to fight people at the ground game, you need to have a ground game. And so, something I've been really interested in is talking to local media. I was talking to a journalist in Wyoming, which has a population of 70,000 people, but tons of power and like, how can we get his work to be like instead of being pink slime to be like, I don't know what a positive metaphor is, but use the tactics of outreach that the Republican Party is using because currently, like, we're just like, oh my gosh, it's an evil, but there's no action being taken. And it's actually brilliant outreach. They recognize in some communities that there's an information gap and they can fill it. Where is the response? Does that make sense?

Christopher Buschow: We have a question from caller clients who I invite to unmute yourself and go ahead.

Cordula Kleidt: Yeah. Thank you very much. Thank you, Nikki, for the kick off of our second series. That was truly interesting. I lived in Oklahoma for a year and also in Wisconsin, so I can truly picture the main street that you showed and what an effect it has if there's no local news on that level. And coming from the Federal Ministry of Science and Education here in Germany and being the division that is funding this series, I'm very interested on hearing a little bit about whether you see any action on the state levels in the United States. Probably not the federal level, I'm sure, but maybe there's some action on the state level being taken or maybe there's some good practice in some local areas. And also Franco Zotta's question fits in there as well. I'd be very interested in that. And I have to say that I have to leave in about 10 minutes. And I wanted to say thank you very much for this great input. Yeah.

Nikki Usher: Super. No, I'll tell you a little story. I am technically a government appointee to the Illinois State Commission for Local News, a panel created to discuss local news. And when it was launched, there were some good news stories about like, oh, look, Illinois is doing something, and the panel has never met. In a year and a half there has been other than to be appointed to a position in the United States, even if it's free, right, you need to have a background check. And so, I went through all of that. I got my certified seal from a governor and nothing ever happened. So, I think that's just profoundly disappointing. In a few days here at the University of San Diego I will be hosting, I'll be hosting the Social Science Research Council with Phil Napoli and Joshua Darr and Mike Miller, where we're looking at the information needs of communities. And one of the things we have looked at is what is happening at the state level. And really the only state in the United States that has done anything has been the state of New Jersey, which created a \$5 million fund for local news media.

So, it's really unclear, I think, that some strategies are being put in place to shift the state's advertising budget to support local newspapers. I think this happens much more, I know, like in Austria, I don't know about Germany, but like a lot of the Austrian papers get a lot of government support through government advertising, right? That's a major subsidy. So, redirecting some of that. But I'm not sure that that gets to the problem because if this is a weekly newspaper, that's somebody coming in somebody's mail once a week that they may not get anymore. I don't know how that counteracts the digital Facebook, Fox, rapid moving information environment. So, it's certainly something that needs immediate action. And I'd like

to see more. I'm sorry. I'm depressing you all, but I just want to kind of, I mean, I just think it's shocking. Like, I was so excited. I'm like, I'm a government appointee, and nothing.

Christopher Buschow: And so we think we have still time for one question So, Franco, your question. Okay. We have somebody raising a hand. So, Elli, please, please go ahead.

Karin E. Lason: Hi. Thank you very much, Niki and everyone from the press conference to do that great talk. I have a question. I'm from Medwatch, Germany. I'm an author for Medwatch Germany, which is an online magazine taking care of fake news and medicine. And I would I wonder if you and the States have any, have seen any like even creative media project that could sort of change the local idea on COVID or the science and get the scientific point out? And was it measured scientifically by you? Maybe.

Nikki Usher: So, something I'm really interested in our community outreaches by news organizations that don't look anything like news. So, a couple of news organizations have started using WhatsApp. These are usually nonprofit news outlets. City Bureau is one, Outlier Media is another. And what they are doing is they're using another is, oh, my gosh, I'm forgetting the name of it. It's in a suburb of Chicago. But they're using text messaging and WhatsApp to communicate directly and answer questions. And that is kind of just, you know, go to people where they are. And I think that I feel like I just, maybe a paper for the conference I'm hosting, I just read some initial data about how that's being done. But I don't like what's really hard is, is are people, especially in urban areas, those the outreach has tended to focus in cities and the people most kind of at risk for misinformation in big cities are usually immigrant communities or people who are black or Latino, historically marginalized by white people in big cities. And so, tracking the efficacy of those messages, you've got a tiny news organization getting a population that's already underserved. So, I don't think we have a good sense of metrics. Anecdotally, I think that.

It's a really creative way to build trust and to get to people where they are. So that could be something. But again, it doesn't really speak to the place that I lived in, right? I don't even know if anybody there would know what WhatsApp is, because we're Americans. But also these are like rural Americans, right? So, I don't know.

Christopher Buschow: We have another question. Harald Franzen. I'm also with the Federal Ministry of Science and Education. I actually used to live in Illinois, ironically. But that being said, I was wondering two things that I was thinking about. Just based on what you were saying earlier, would it not make sense? As you mentioned, there's sort of a digital divide with having these traditional local media that are not necessarily don't have an online platform to actually deliver the information to support, in a sense, the setup of that infrastructure in a sense where obviously there are still journalists out there on the local level but may not have the right platform. The other question for me was media literacy on that end, like we have a nonprofit here in Europe called Lie Detector, which sends journalists into schools to sort of teach people how to

interpret news and to understand to sort of understand fake news versus real news sources and all that stuff.

Nikki Usher: So first, the answer to your first question. So actually at the state level, where there is some action, as there have been some media literacy bills and K through 12 education. Illinois actually has that going on. And one of our colleagues, Stephanie Kraft, who some of you may know has actually been working on those media literacy efforts, but they are very much targeted. You can kind of make interventions at the kind of K through 12 educational level, but anything else, I mean, and I think you have to imagine there's a deep culture of distrust when the local public health official who went to the biggest state university closest to these little counties and knows everybody and, you know, their neighbor across the street no longer talks to them because they suggested they wear a mask. I just don't understand how you, like send a journalist into this territory, because I think that's the thing I didn't really appreciate that, that and I've sat on this data because I haven't known how to theoretically interpret it. That's why you haven't seen it come out, because it's not it's not asymmetrical polarization. It's not out party in party conflict. It's like these are people who know each other and because of the polarization, no longer trust each other. And that's, that's really what upsets me.

Dana Young who's at University of Delaware, we've been trying to theorize this because her theory was that if you just get to know people, they'll all agree, contact hypothesis, know that's where you start to work on information literacy. Unfortunately, this data seems to disprove some of her thinking on this. So, I forgot the second first question. Sorry, I don't remember the first question.

Christopher Buschow: And it was whether it would make sense to support sort of the technical infrastructure for local news.

Nikki Usher: Yeah. You know, it's an interesting question. A lot of what you're talking about are these newspapers owned by one person that maybe they hire two or three people. They're not interested or are too tired to think about this. But there are definitely people working to create like public stacks for ad technology and even like basic WordPress sites to get these sites more digital. But there's really a capacity issue, I think like these are people who ... And they don't make any money from hosting things online. So, there's like a disincentive to put things online because then nobody will buy their tiny little newspaper either. So, I think it's really difficult, you know, something that we don't talk enough about ... And I wasn't able to do a systematic study of the role of radio. I mean, we look at this and like, you know, the Global South, right? Is like, look, there's radio. But like actually in rural America and in immigrant communities, radio is extremely powerful. And so often there is something local. There's like a local religious talk show, local DJ, and that person would sometimes read like the Corona virus cases, for instance. And I think that that's like a like old media missed intervention possibility, I think.

Christopher Buschow: Okay. So last chance or last question. I didn't see any hand raised. So, we say, thank you so much for joining us today, for being with us, for being here this early and yeah, for giving us insights in your research and very enlightening findings from your research. So, we couldn't think about a better start for this lecture series, I would say. So thanks again and I recommend everybody to

observe science minus journalism dot EU because there the next guests of the virtual second conference will be announced in the next days and the next session will be at the beginning of February. So, thanks everybody and have a great evening. Great day, Nikki.

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