

SDGs CONFERENCE 2026

In the Margins of the UNGA81

TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD

21-23 September 2026

NEW YORK

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION

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JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION

The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) is an international civil society organization dedicated to the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. The JWF promotes diversity and inclusion by creating forums for intellectual and social engagement; generates and shares knowledge with stakeholders, builds partnerships worldwide and develops policy recommendations for positive social change.

* JWF is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization registered in New York State, USA.
* JWF is associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communications.

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PANEL 1: RENEWING MULTILATERAL SYSTEMS FOR A NEW GLOBAL FRAMEWORK

The international landscape is at a pivotal juncture, requiring a comprehensive revitalization of multilateral institutions to confront today's challenges in line with universal human rights and international law. As global power dynamics and financial structures evolve, the UN 2.0 initiative seeks to reform core UN functions through a coordinated framework aimed at enhancing efficiency, transparency, and accountability. This reform comes at a critical moment, as the UN prepares to elect its next Secretary-General, emphasizing greater openness and inclusivity to rebuild trust in multilateral leadership.

Amid pervasive global challenges, such as rising authoritarianism, shrinking civic freedoms, cybersecurity threats, misinformation, and societal polarization—geopolitical shifts are undermining democratic institutions. Reshaping multilateralism in this context demands collective efforts to strengthen governance, uphold shared values, and adapt systems to new technological and geopolitical realities. Enhanced international collaboration and alignment of priorities are essential to reinforcing rules-based global governance, human rights, gender equality, and multilateral cooperation, especially as public confidence in international institutions wanes. Fostering a shared sense of purpose and the principle of "leaving no one behind" has become more vital than ever.

Panel Session 1 explored how reforms can create a more resilient, inclusive, and effective multilateral system capable of responding to today's contested global environment and empowering future generations. The session identified factors contributing to fragmentation and propose inclusive policy actions to shape a renewed multilateral architecture suited for the future.

- The Pillars of the UN 2.0 Initiative: A Coordinated Framework to Renovate the UN Operations with innovative skills and forward-thinking culture
- Reshaping the Future of Multilateralism: Global Challenges testing the Existing International Systems;
- Overarching priorities of the European Union at the UN for rules-based global governance agencies;
- Emerging Trends shrinking Civic Spaces amid Rapid Geopolitical Changes.

PANEL 2: BRIDGING DIVIDES: STRENGTHENING CIVIC TRUST AND REBUILDING SHARED VALUES

Political polarization is no longer simply a domestic challenge; it has become a global obstacle to sustainable development. When societies lose the capacity to engage differences constructively, trust in institutions erodes, social cohesion weakens, and collective action becomes increasingly difficult. In this environment, progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly those related to peace, justice, strong institutions, and inclusive societies—faces significant headwinds.

Yet polarization is not inevitable. Around the world, citizens, civil society organizations, faith communities, and public leaders are developing practical approaches to restoring trust, strengthening civic relationships, and fostering a renewed sense of shared purpose. This panel will explore how societies can bridge deepening divides and cultivate the habits of listening, humility, and collaboration necessary for democratic resilience and sustainable development. Special attention will be given to community-based depolarization efforts that equip ordinary citizens to engage across political, ideological, religious, and cultural differences.

Panel 2 fostered a dialogue among expert speakers on:

- Main drivers of political polarization and social discontent today;
- Impacts of polarization towards the progress on sustainable development and social cohesion;
- The role of shared values in fostering social cohesion and sustainable peace;
- Strategies and initiatives that promote dialogue, empathy, and common purpose across divides;
- Impact of education, media, and technology in either mitigating or exacerbating polarization.

**Panel 2 is co-organized in partnership with Braver Angels which inspires and equip Americans to practice courageous citizenship across political differences through skill-building, convening, and collaborative action*

PANEL 3: PRESS FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM AS A CROSS-CUTTING ENABLER OF PEACE

In today's increasingly interconnected and digital world, press freedom and independent journalism serve as essential pillars that promote positive peace, support sustainable development, and facilitate conflict resolution. However, the rapidly evolving information ecosystem poses significant challenges. Content journalism on social media platforms has expanded faster channels for information dissemination, but has also further facilitated the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, diminishing public trust and the integrity of the information environment. Protecting journalistic integrity in this landscape requires robust safeguards, legal protections, and ethical standards to ensure truthful reporting and the safety of journalists.

At the same time, journalists face mounting threats beyond misinformation. Transnational repression, digital attacks—including cyber harassment, surveillance, and targeted disinformation campaigns—are increasingly used to intimidate or silence media workers, particularly those exposing human rights abuses or challenging authoritarian regimes. These threats weaken press independence and threaten social cohesion and peace. Women journalists have faced particular brutality, with a global surge in violence targeting them, shaped by regional risks and cultural contexts. Gender-based violence, harassment, and threats hinder their participation and ability to report on critical issues, leading to a rise in self-censorship. Addressing these challenges requires gender-responsive strategies that promote safety, equality, and empowerment within the media sector.

Moreover, concerns about artificial intelligence and automated content creation threaten to undermine public trust in media institutions. As AI-driven disinformation and deepfake technology become more sophisticated, combating these issues demands renewed efforts to enhance media literacy, transparency, and accountability.

Journalists and media professionals from different parts of the world unfolded the following topics:

- Protecting Journalistic Integrity and the Information Ecosystem in the era of Content Journalism on Social Media Platforms
- Combatting Transnational Repression and Digital Attacks on Journalists
- Addressing the Global Suge in Violence against Women Journalists: Regional Challenges and Gender-Responsive Solutions
- Strengthening Public Trust in Media against Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation Trends.

SDGs CONFERENCE 2026

IN THE MARGINS OF THE UNGA81st SESSION

23 September 2026, Wednesday | New York

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

www.unga-conference.org

PROGRAM

10:00 AM – 10:30 AM

OPENING SESSION: Welcome Remarks & Keynotes

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM

PANEL 1: RENEWING MULTILATERAL SYSTEMS FOR A NEW GLOBAL FRAMEWORK

- The Pillars of the UN 2.0 Initiative: A Coordinated Framework to Renovate the UN Operations with innovative skills and forward-thinking culture
- Reshaping the Future of Multilateralism: Global Challenges testing the Existing International Systems;
- Overarching priorities of the European Union at the UN for rules-based global governance agencies;
- Emerging Trends shrinking Civic Spaces amid Rapid Geopolitical Changes.

12:15 PM – 1:45 PM

PANEL 2: BRIDGING DIVIDES: STRENGTHENING CIVIC TRUST AND REBUILDING SHARED VALUES

- Main drivers of political polarization and social discontent today;
- Impacts of polarization towards the progress on sustainable development and social cohesion;
- The role of shared values in fostering social cohesion and sustainable peace;
- Strategies and initiatives that promote dialogue, empathy, and common purpose across divides;
- Impact of education, media, and technology in either mitigating or exacerbating polarization.

2:00 PM – 3:30 PM

PANEL 3: PRESS FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM AS A CROSS-CUTTING ENABLER OF PEACE

- Protecting Journalistic Integrity and the Information Ecosystem in the era of Content Journalism on Social Media Platforms
- Combatting Transnational Repression and Digital Attacks on Journalists
- Addressing the Global Suge in Violence against Women Journalists: Regional Challenges and Gender-Responsive Solutions
- Strengthening Public Trust in Media against Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation Trends.

3:30 PM – 4:00 PM **CLOSING REMARKS**



SDGs CONFERENCE 2026: IN THE MARGINS OF THE UNGA81
23 September 2026, Wednesday | 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM EST | New York
www.unga-conference.org

OPENING SESSION

CLICK HERE to Watch the Opening Session

Dr. Mehmet Kilic, President, Journalists and Writers Foundation - USA

Welcome Remarks

Dr. Mehmet Kilic serves as the President of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, an international civil society organization committed to fostering a culture of peace, advancing human rights, and supporting sustainable development. He previously represented the Foundation at the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Dr. Kilic is also one of the co-founders of the Peace Islands Institute in New York, where he held the position of Director of the Center for Global Affairs. He also served as Vice President of the Turkish Cultural Center in New York. Through his leadership in organizing international conferences, panel discussions, diplomatic visits, and youth initiatives focused on sustainable peace and development, he has actively contributed to mobilizing civil society organizations towards greater engagement in promoting peace, diversity, and social inclusion. Mr. Kilic holds a master's degree from Mercy College and a PhD in Education, specializing in Global and Comparative Education, at Walden University.



As the President of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, I want to welcome you all to the 11th SDGs Conference 2026 in the margins of the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. It is truly inspiring to see such a vibrant and a diverse group of change makers, visionaries, and leaders committed to shaping a better future for tomorrow. Today, the Journalists and Writers Foundation is proud to co-organize the 11th Annual SDGs Conference in partnership with 56 NGOs from 30 countries at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a very well-known global institution for peace and justice education.

As the is the main legislative and policy-making body of the United Nations, the UN General Assembly focuses on this core theme this year, which is "Restoring Trust, Managing Transformation: A United Nations that Delivers for All." This year, Dr. Khalilur Rahman, of Bangladesh was elected as the President of the 81st session of the UN General Assembly. Over his one-year term, His Excellency Rahman will preside over all General Assembly session proceedings, set thematic debates, and high-level meetings.

The UNGA 2026 also marks the transition process for selecting the next UN Secretary-General, as Antonio Guterres concludes his final term and we are hoping that we have a woman Secretary-General. The UNGA 2026 also marks the 250th anniversary of the independence of the United States of America. As of September 22, Heads of States have been delivering speeches during the General Debate, a central part of High-Level Week.

On the sidelines of the 81st Session of the UN General Assembly, we as the people, youth delegates, global leaders, women leaders, and interfaith leaders are convening here in New York to raise our voices and concerns about the challenges that we face in this world. Our distinguished speakers will discuss and offer some solutions to these challenges and share some civil society best practices in building peaceful and inclusive societies. I think it is time to reaffirm our shared vision and a hope for the future - a future rooted in peace and justice where no one is left behind.

As the Journalists and Writers Foundation, we believe in civil society and partnerships, which are vital for sustainable peace and development. Without civil society, agreements and declarations signed by governments and presidents would not stick, as Rabbi Schneider said once. Therefore, I want to thank and extend my deepest gratitude to our 56 global partners from 30 countries. These three days of action would not be possible without their support. We are honored to welcome our international guests from Albania, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, New Zealand, Greece, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Kosovo, Lithuania, Moldova, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, South Korea, USA, and Zimbabwe.

Dedication and passion of the JWF Global Partners are crucial to drive social change at the local, national, and global levels. Together, let's continue to build a future where no one is left behind, where peace, justice, and prosperity are within everyone's reach.

Shanelle Franklin, International Speaker, Award-Winning Broadcaster and Author - Australia

Opening Remarks

Shanelle Franklin is an award-winning speaker, author, broadcaster, comedian and international event MC whose career spans radio, television, podcasting, live events and the keynote stage. Known for her ability to connect with audiences through humor, storytelling and honest conversation, Shanelle Franklin explores the intersection of resilience, human connection and the pressures of modern life. She is the author of Because Adulthood Shouldn't Be This Boring, co-host of the award-winning comedy podcast The Beautiful Nightmare, and a keynote speaker and TEDx speaker. Bringing a distinctive blend of insight, humor and authentic storytelling to the stage, Shanelle Franklin creates engaging, energetic and deeply human experiences that challenge audiences to think differently.



We are here at the SDGs Conference 2026 to explore some of humanity's biggest challenges: trust, peace, human rights, global cooperation and I am here to talk about laughter. It is a bit random; but it is often one of the first things to go when it is serious or hard times. Laughter is one of the oldest and most human ways we survive. We do not just need laughter to celebrate joy. We need it to get through pain. If we only use laughter for the good stuff, we miss out on one of its greatest gifts: its ability to help us cope, connect, and carry on. To be clear, laughter is not to mock pain.

It is to help us carry it and heal with it. If you engage in laughter with someone, something special happens in that moment. For a few seconds, it does not matter where you come from, what language you speak, what country you represent, or even what you believe in, because you found something in common. Now, common ground does not require us to be the same. We do not need the same cultural experiences; it is just the moment that sometimes we recognize ourselves in someone else who looks nothing like us.

When I think about that, I think about my grandfather. My grandparents were Scottish; and for as long as I can remember, my grandfather had a very clear plan for my life. Right or wrong, I was apparently going into politics. He used to say to me, "Come on, we need more lasses in politics.

You get in there and give it your best shot." He was so set, and that was the path. Apparently, everything I did became evidence to him that I was destined for this career. I would get a good result in a spelling test and he would say, "Oh, you need to spell in politics. Write your speeches well. Done. Keep going." Or I would get a good result in drama class. He'd say, "Plenty of drama in politics. That is another great. You keep going." He was so motivating. I said, "Grandad, I want to be a marine biologist." He said, "Hey, what were the land sharks? Forget the ones in the sea. They'll eat you."



Bless him. But under the jokes was something my granddad genuinely believed in. He believed we needed more people who could find their way through disagreement without it having to result in an argument. And naturally, he thought, "I can teach her how to do that." So, I said, "Grandad, I do not know what I am doing." He said, "Are you?" Well, you just rang your grandad on the phone, and he will tell you what to do.

I never did go into politics, but somehow, standing here today at a global conference that welcomes people from all over the world, different cultures and different perspectives, all coming together to help solve some of humanity's biggest challenges, I cannot help but think of him. Because maybe Grandad was not completely wrong about my path. I just had my own way of doing it. Not through politics, but through laughter and through connection, and through those tiny moments that, despite everything that makes us different, we recognize the human being standing in front of us. Grandad did not often use words with me like "cultural diplomacy." But he did understand something deeply human: disagreement does not need to mean disconnection.

Humor does not erase our differences, and it should not. Our differences are part of what makes us human. Laughter is that beautiful gift that can give us a tiny doorway through to it. It can interrupt the distance, because now the person standing in front of us is not just a title, a country representative, someone representing an organization or an opinion. They are a person.

I am not saying that laughter just solves all conflict, because if it did, this conference would be significantly shorter, and we would have all saved each other a lot of time just by laughing. But connection changes the conditions in which difficult conversations happen, because now it is much harder to reduce someone to a position once you have experienced their humanity. Maybe that is part of human-centered advocacy. Before we persuade, before we negotiate, before we try and solve, we connect. Because every policy is carried by a person. Every negotiation is carried by a nervous system. Every act of leadership is carried by a human being who is navigating the emotional weight of difficult decisions.

Throughout this conference, we are going to have incredibly important conversations about how we build better systems for humanity. But those systems will only ever be as good as the humans who build them. That is the question that is at the heart of my work: How do we sustain the humans responsible for building them? How do we stay compassionate when we are exhausted, curious when we disagree, connected when it is easier to retreat, and human when the work asks more of us? For me, laughter is one of those ways. Not because the work is not serious, but precisely because it is. That is the key, and that is the bit I think we are missing: having those moments of relief.

During the SDGs Conference 2026, we are going to discover things that we disagree with. That is what happens when you put interesting people in a room together. But perhaps what divides us can also remind us to look for what connects us. And maybe, that common ground that we are searching for might be found in something as simple as a laugh—a beautiful exchange between people. Humor does not mean the work is not serious, but sometimes it is what helps us stay human enough to do serious work together. Are you with me?

Hon. Rev. Dr. Lynn Arnold AO, Former Premier of South Australia, UNAA Goodwill Ambassador for SDGs – Australia

Keynote Remarks: Advancing Multilateralism to Revitalize the Sustainable Development Goals

Hon. Rev. Dr. Lynn Arnold AO is the United Nations Association of Australia Goodwill Ambassador for the Sustainable Development Goals, a role he has held since 2016. He has served as the Ambassador for Reconciliation South Australia since 2008 and has been a Patron of the Don Dunstan Foundation since 2020. Hon. Rev. Dr. Lynn Arnold AO was the 40th Premier of South Australia, serving from 1992 to 1993, and he was a Cabinet Minister from 1982 to 1992. He was the Chief Executive Officer of World Vision Australia from 1997 to 2003 and served as Regional Vice-President for the Asia-Pacific region at World Vision International from 2003 to 2007. Formerly, he was the CEO of Anglicare South Australia. In 2014, he was ordained as an Anglican priest.



"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Those famous words were the opening lines of Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities'. But there were more words that followed that almost poetic opening. His opening continued: "It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..."

“It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.” Though the theme of the book was the time of the French Revolution, Charles Dickens wrote those words in 1859, a period of societal uncertainty, of great change, of new ideas being voiced and old ones being challenged. For example, it was the aftermath of the Dred Scott decision which triggered the American Civil War, and the publication of Charles Darwin’s ‘The origin of species’ which would spark a science-faith contention.

Charles Dickens could not have known it, but how those same words speak to us today - the very formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be considered a metaphor for those words. For the SDGs acknowledge aspects of despair in our world yet seek to offer hope. Consider any one of them - for example SDG 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; or SDG 5 - Stop all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere and remove all violence and exploitation against them in public and private life.

Recently, I have been reading a book - Goliath’s Curse: The history and future of societal collapse by Luke Kemp. In an early part in the book Kemp notes that Winston Churchill had written an essay Shall we commit suicide - a work inspired by the catastrophic situations of the First World War and its aftermath. In that essay, Kemp wrote that human society was in the unprecedented situation of being able to ‘unfailingly accomplish its own extinction’. The fact that society did not extinguish itself at the time should, however, not be considered a failure of the perceptive wisdom of Churchill at the time. We should not mock his words as hyperbole in the category of the sentiments of a famous Australian poem by Jack O’Brien - Said Hanrahan.

"It's lookin' crook," said Daniel Croke; Bedad, it's cruke, me lad, for never since the banks went broke. Has seasons been so bad. It's dry, all right," said young O'Neil, with which astute remark. He squatted down upon his heel and chewed a piece of bark. And so around the chorus ran. “It's keepin' dry, no doubt.” "We'll all be rooned," said Hanrahan, "Before the year is out.

For World War I followed by the 1920s and 1930s were the worst of times but they were not immunized against hope. Much was indeed ‘roomed’ but not all was destroyed - though battered, the world did not end. As we face our current challenges, Kemp reminds us that the failure of earlier Hanrahan-type doomsaying doesn’t mean that current concerns are ‘invalid. It means we need a reliable way to put the current threats we face into perspective.’ Kemp goes on to proffer thoughts as to how putting such ‘current threats into perspective’ might be done. He writes: History can help us understand the origins of risk we are facing today that we need to reverse the root causes of global risk, not just build new technologies to cope with the symptoms.’

It is this theme of understanding risk and reversing causes, not just coping with their symptoms that stands as the key challenge for all of us both individually, and collectively - not only as citizens of our respective nations but also as members of vital civil society organizations to which all of us here belong - organizations that exist because they want the worst of times to become the best of times.



At the SDGs Roundtable Discussion 2026, Round 1, the topic was common ground to common good - that session was particularly focused on the role of faith communities working together. However, the title reminded me of an archaic word in English of which I am very fond – commonweal; it is not actually the same as the modern word commonwealth for the 'weal' of commonweal was different from the 'wealth' of commonwealth. The former was rich with the idea of well-being in a broad sense, whereas the latter grew largely to focus on economic and political goals alone.

Time does not permit me to analyze progress or otherwise on each of the 17 SDGs; so, let me tackle the problem in a different way. I want to raise the issue of global population movement and its relevance to the question of individual and community well-being. First, let me identify some issues relevant to this being the worst of times. We live in a world where increasingly walls, both figurative and literal, are getting higher and higher to stem the increasing global movement of peoples. Yesterday, I was struck by Nikos Chrysogelos' statement that: We have to work behind borders, but the solution must be collaboration; therefore, we must build bridges not walls.

Countries have a right to work behind borders, to manage the movement of people into their sovereignties, I do not dispute that right. But here is the real issue, as each national entity faces increasing movement of people seeking entry, they fall back on what seems to be their only solution - build higher walls to stop it.

Yet, a high wall is, in Luke Kemp's words, a type of technological response rather than an understanding of the causes. Let me give some information about current trends in the global movement of peoples. For decades now, technological innovation and environmental impacts such as soil depletion, loss of vital water sources or climate change have separately forced literally billions of people to give up living in rural areas and seek their chances in urban areas. In 2009, UN Habitat estimated that three million people a week were giving up living in the countryside and moving to cities, that is 150 million people a year. Where do they move? Overwhelmingly, they stay within their own country and move to urban slums which are in the increasing number of megalopolises, almost all in countries of the south. One in four city dwellers around the world now lives in slums - 1.2 billion, 300 million more than 20 years ago. Megalopolises are cities with populations of over ten million each. Their number has grown from three in 1950 to thirty-three now with the prediction that there will be a doubling to 67 within the next 24 years.

How promising is all that for the idea of commonweal - common good, or wellbeing - for people either individually or collectively? It seems that the very definition of the worst of times is about to get worse. Considering the SDGs - at least nine of the seventeen seem directly affected - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11 - noting particularly SDG 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

The growing bubble of slum populations in megalopolises, overwhelmingly based in the south, has been leaking badly, as poverty stricken people increasingly refuse to do the wealthy world the courtesy of dying in their own circumstances and so they cross borders, they board boats, they profit people smugglers, they do what is considered not right or proper in order to seek commonweal for themselves and their families.

In response, the walls of national sovereignty just get higher; but there are two outcomes to such a solution. The first, is that they won't ultimately work - the flood of impoverished people seeking escape will not be stemmed; and, secondly, the community psyche of the wall-builders and their communities will be seriously damaged.

The Greek Egyptian Poet C P Cavafy wrote a poem Waiting for the barbarians in which he treated with the effects of othering on the body politic - fomenting the idea of an unacceptable 'them' in efforts to idealize the acceptable 'us' - a poisoning of the true spirit of community. His poem ends: Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution.

So, I have painted a picture of the worst of times - a winter of despair to quote Dickens - but where is the spring of hope? Where could be the best of times? Well, that is why we are here at this conference; that is why we are all players in civil society because we believe there can be the best of times - we believe in the spring of hope.

At the JWF High-Level Reception 2026, Zeynep Selma Guney, Youth Representative of the JWF to the United Nations, talked about the importance of turning values into action. The SDGs are based on core values of decency, but they will be worthless if there were to be no meaningful action to achieve them. In effect what Zeynep was telling us was that there can be no spring of hope, there can be no best of times, if we are not prepared to confront the worst of times by turning values into action.

But to do that, we must reframe our thinking from 'them and us'. We must start thinking about community globally, not just chauvinistically. And we must seek to build the promise of the best of times from the reality of the worst of times. Our poet at the Reception, Ramya Ramana, in her beautiful poem, had this powerful line which reminded us that our futures grow out of our circumstances - she wrote about: Where dreams and confrontation exist in the same hymn.

In the aftermath of World War II, where confrontation had devastated the world, there was a yearning for dreams which might grow constructively from the confrontation which had raged across the world. Immediately after the war, global financial systems were in a perilous state, and this could have led to devastating consequences similar to those which had been seen in the 1920s and 1930s. Not wanting history to repeat itself, major countries of the democratic world realized that only multilateral action could stave off disaster. And so was born the Bretton Woods agreement with the birth of the World Bank and the IMF. From the worst of times, they sought the best of times.

Surely, now is the time for another multilateral collaborative effort, this time to address the issue of the movement of peoples - to understanding the causes rather than, like King Canute, vainly merely trying to stop the ever-increasing flow. If only the commonwealth of the world could be used to improve the commonweal of its peoples - if there could only be agreement on programs for people to find hope where they currently live, rather than be forced to seek it elsewhere, then the rate of flow would become manageable for all. How might that look? Well, if the countries of the North were serious; if those countries who are so focused on building higher walls would look to causes not just symptoms, they might consider investing in sustainable income generation in countries of the South, particularly addressing the creation of new jobs and programs to mitigate the effects of environmental change. Such activities would sit well within SDG 17 - strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development.

What would be especially important to recognize is that the required scale for such programs to have meaningful impact would be beyond any one or small group of nations to finance. I am suggesting a multilateral intervention of the magnitude of a Bretton Woods agreement for population management. Individually, nations would still protect their own borders; while collaboratively, they would enable large numbers of people to be freed from the snares of poverty in the nations where they were born rather than having to flee elsewhere to seek success. SDGs 1, 2 & 3 would be achieved.

I have played with the words commonweal and commonwealth; in finishing let me play with two other similar sounding words - egoism and egotism. Egoism is a sense of self-awareness which includes the idea of self-preservation; egotism, on the other hand, is a concept of an inflated idea of self, of self-aggrandizement with an implicit suggestion that others are less worthy.

If we apply these concepts to national identity, we might say that the world can live with national egoism - situations where countries are self-aware of their national identities; where those entities seek to prosper themselves. What the world does not need is national egotism, where nations seek to achieve self-interest at the expense of others. That would bring the worst of times; the world needs, the world demands, the best of times. The call to action is ours, in civil society, to make it so.

H.E. Dalia Asanavičiūtė-Gružauskienė, Member of Parliament, Seimas of the Lithuanian Republic - Lithuania

Keynote Remarks: Renewing Global Citizens' Trust in Multilateralism for Human Rights

H.E. Dalia Asanavičiūtė-Gružauskienė is a Member of Parliament at the Seimas of the Lithuanian Republic. She is a forward-thinking leader with extensive experience in management and senior sales roles across diverse industries. She has successfully led sales teams, developed strategic sales plans, and driven business growth through both new initiatives and existing client channels. Formerly H.E. Dalia Asanavičiūtė-Gružauskienė served at the Committee on Education and Science, and Committee on European Affairs. She has extensive experience as a project manager, coordinating supply chains and transportation logistics, and representing business companies at international exhibitions. H.E. Dalia Asanavičiūtė-Gružauskienė attained a master's degree in business Value Management from Vilnius Gediminas Technical University.



Dear participants of the SDGs Conference 2026, Members of Parliament, diplomats, community leaders, journalists, and distinguished guests. First and foremost, I would like to say that it is a great honor for me to open this panel of such importance, addressing an issue that matters to all of us. I send my greetings to all of you from the small country of Lithuania, a country in northern Europe on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Walking through our cities and towns today, you will see a modern European state, streets that bear witness to our history, and people who are building their lives in freedom. It might be difficult to imagine that Lithuania borders Russia and Belarus and that, for much of the past two centuries, with only brief periods of independence, my country suffered occupations by an aggressive state. During the Second World War, one man named Petras Malinauskas had to flee the country, avoiding the repression of the occupation army. He met a girl from Hungary in a displaced persons camp. They married and left for Australia, and he was a grandparent of the current Premier of South Australia, Peter Malinauskas.

I was born in Lithuania while it was still occupied by the Soviet Union. I witnessed the struggle of my nation for freedom. One of my relatives was killed beneath a Russian armored tank during our peaceful resistance. But we restored our freedom and independence and now we celebrate 36 years of our independence. If you come to Lithuania, you would not feel any presence of occupation in Lithuania, because we built and continue to build our prosperous and free country and we did it with our own efforts, our citizens, and our will to be free and independent. We know that freedom of the individual and the state cannot be taken for granted. We must defend it every single day.

Today, there are 27-armed conflicts taking place around the world. The world has rarely seemed so far from peace. Political leaders and armed groups exploit conflicts not only to seize territory but also to expand their political influence, both within countries and across the world. Every conflict leaves behind countless violations of human rights and even crimes against humanity. Every conflict brings us, as the international community, a new challenge.

Can we respond not only with words of regret but with action? Can we stop war crimes and hold those responsible to account? I believe that, as an international community, we are unfortunately failing today. More than ever before, we have an overwhelming amount of information about almost everything, including conflicts and events taking place thousands of kilometers away.

Information is one of our greatest assets. But not all information is created equal. Its accessibility is becoming increasingly complicated by the sheer abundance of sources. In our daily lives, we search for information across countless channels, and we are increasingly expected to process and assess it ourselves. Alongside national media, alternative sources of news and information have emerged. And this is not necessarily a bad thing. In some cases, it is the best thing. However, in a world that moves so quickly, some people have become accustomed to simply reading information rather than verifying it.

According to the PISA 2025 study, reading performance is declining. This means that the ability to understand and interpret what we read is no longer being strengthened as a skill to the extent that it should be. When we were accustomed to receiving verified news from professional journalists, we did not face challenges like this. Today, however, some people live in an entirely post-truth reality where they can no longer distinguish lies from reality. There, radicalization can take hold.

It is therefore hardly surprising that, with so many global conflicts and so much misinformation and distortion of reality, the world is becoming increasingly polarized. This creates yet another challenge for us as an international community. The United Nations, founded on the principle of cooperation, must reform itself and have the courage to fulfill its fundamental purpose: to prevent new conflicts, create international rules, build trust among people around the world, and protect human rights in both large and small countries.

This does not mean accommodating the interests of the big and powerful. The United Nations Security Council cannot include states that act as aggressors while systematically violating the fundamental principles of the UN Charter. The Security Council must proportionally represent all regions of the world and all states that respect a rules-based international order.

We cannot trample on the rights of nations and states and redraw maps by dividing their territories. We cannot trample on the most fundamental human right of all: the right to be free.


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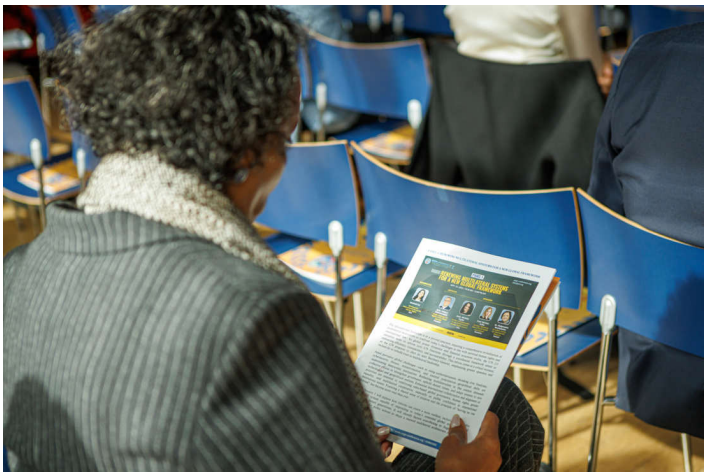



PANEL SESSION 1:
RENEWING MULTILATERAL SYSTEMS FOR A NEW GLOBAL FRAMEWORK

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Maithili Pai, UN Advocate, International Service for Human Rights - USA
Moderator Remarks

Maithili Pai joined the International Service for Human Rights as a Harvard-PSVF fellow in 2020. She currently leads ISHR's work to promote NGO participation at the UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, supports strategic litigation for the protection of human rights defenders and advocacy for environmental defenders. Maithili Pai has worked at the Supreme Court of India, assisted the UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, and NGOs in India, UK and Egypt on women's and LGBTIQ rights, refugee and migrant rights and digital rights. She holds a Bachelor and Master of Laws from the National University of Juridical Sciences and Harvard Law School respectively.

Multilateralism is probably one of the most frequently used terms in our discussions at the United Nations, given that the UN is the principal multilateral forum where countries come together through conferences, summits, and meetings to address pressing global issues. Of course, multilateralism is not relevant only in the corridors and conference rooms where international diplomacy takes place.



The UN exists to serve "We the Peoples" of the UN Charter. Multilateralism affects daily life in simple ways: helping prevent conflict, supporting prosperous economies, and allowing us to travel safely by air and across the seas. Multilateral cooperation is facing one of its greatest crises at a time when it may be most urgently needed.

Powerful governments are retreating from the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, disregarding the rule of law, and cutting funding to multilateral organizations, the lifeblood of multilateralism, and contributing to its slow decline. The foundations of multilateralism are under strain. Rules are applied selectively. Judgments are ignored. Sanctions and accountability mechanisms are contested. In some places, courts and prosecutors face political pressure and open attacks.

Civic space is shrinking. Human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists who invoke the law face surveillance, criminalization, and violence. We do not have to look far: people who engage with the UN can face reprisals when they return home. Institutions working to uphold international human rights standards and norms, established in the hope of overcoming one of history's darkest periods, are being squeezed by tightening budgets and contested mandates.

Yet I will try to find hope in this situation. To describe the present as a failure of multilateralism would, I believe, be misleading. The international system created over the past 80 years, while deeply flawed and not keeping pace with current challenges, has made progress that we should acknowledge. It has promoted interdependence among sovereign nations, fostered treaties and agreements, generated global norms and policies, helped resolve disputes peacefully, and enhanced prosperity and security in many regions. It has organized collaboration among sovereign nations for collective benefit.

Multilateralism remains essential to addressing complex, transnational challenges that require collective solutions, from climate change and global inequality to pandemics and unregulated AI. The UN Charter does not refer to many of these challenges, but when rules become outdated or seem inapplicable, it is time to update and strengthen them, not abandon them. When double standards are practiced, it is time to defend international standards and pursue accountability. When a system is unjust, we should make it just, not walk away. Now is the time to reinforce what works and improve what does not.

I know this sounds hopeful, and I am not naive about how daunting and difficult reform can be. But imagining a world without multilateralism sounds like a catastrophic nightmare. Those are the two options we face as we defend multilateralism.

I want to quote one of my favorite international law scholars, Oona Hathaway. What we are defending is "the quiet architecture that makes modern life as we know it possible." We are defending convictions built on the hardest lessons of the last century: that human dignity does not stop at a border, and that states either build peace together or do not have it at all. We are therefore defending the very possibility of a peaceful, prosperous, interconnected world.

JUDr. Róbert Dobrovodský, PhD., LL.M., Public Defender of Rights of the Slovak Republic – Slovakia

Keynote: Upholding the Rule of Law for Human Rights-Based Global Governance

JUDr. Róbert Dobrovodský, PhD., LL.M., is a prominent legal expert and public servant, elected as the Public Defender of Rights of Slovakia in November 2022. His legislative work includes significant contributions to anti-corruption laws, notably the introduction of mandatory disclosure of public sector contracts, which has been internationally recognized as a model for open government and anti-corruption efforts. JUDr. Róbert Dobrovodský has also worked extensively on human rights issues, particularly domestic violence, victims' rights, and children's rights, both as an NGO activist and as a parliamentary advisor. Recognized for his academic and public service achievements, the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic and the Judicial Revue awarded JUDr. Róbert Dobrovodský the prize "Karol Plank Award for Students in 2005". In 2020, he received "Martin Palkovič Award for Excellent Results in Pedagogical Activities" from Trnava University.



I would like to start by presenting a good example of how checks and balances work in Slovakia. I am the Public Defender of Fundamental Rights. This is my fourth year, and I'm sure you are informed that the current Slovak government tried to restrict the fundamental rights of Slovak inhabitants. But thankfully, we have a strong ombudsman—not strong because of my personality, but strong because of the constitutional concept.

Going back to history, Slovakia is a full member of the European Union. When a future member state would like to join the European Union, it needs to fulfill certain conditions; Copenhagen criteria which indicates that each member is required to guarantee the rule of law, human rights, and protection of minorities. Therefore, the Slovak legislature decided to amend the Constitution in 2002 and established the Public Defender of Fundamental Rights as an independent human rights body of the state. I emphasize on "independent" because it should be independent from the three basic branches of state power: legislative, judicial, and executive.

I was elected by the Slovak Parliament as the ombudsman is appointed. However, the crucial point is that once I am elected, they cannot withdraw me, terminate my position or intervene. I can imagine that after having substantial disputes with the Slovak government, they may have wanted to terminate my post. My colleagues from the European Union and Asia, they say, "Robert, you are lucky to be a strong ombudsman, so you can challenge laws adopted by Parliament." There are only about five ombudsmen like us in the whole world. We are strong because the Constitution protects us from intervention by other branches of state power. The most powerful instrument for maintaining a high level of human rights is that I can challenge each law adopted by Parliament. Many states do not provide such power.

We are an independent body, and we do not operate like the courts. Every human being and every entity on the territory of Slovakia can make a claim free of charge, in an informal manner. The ombudsman operates in two ways. As the Roman lawyers said in Latin, "We protect fundamental rights in concreto", which means we handle concrete cases and complaints. Nowadays, our office is so popular that we receive 2,000 complaints a year because people trust us. They see that we are independent and fight for them.

A very strong instrument for protecting people in abstracto, which means I can challenge laws when they could harm fundamental rights. This is stipulated in Article 151a. I would like to present a few examples of what has been happening in Slovakia over the last three years and how we saved a high level of fundamental rights. Slovakia had the best freedom of information law in the world. I worked at the Ministry of Justice for 13 years in the legislation department, drafting civil law and family law, and I was responsible for freedom of information.



This is a very important civil right that makes it possible for every Slovak citizen to obtain information from a public body within eight working days. No other country in the world has such an effective law that makes it possible for everyone to get full access to public data free of charge. Many countries came to Slovakia to learn the Slovak model. It was the best example and was copied by the United Kingdom and some German-speaking countries. We were a model.

The government prepared an amendment restricting this law. I warned them: "Before I go to the Constitutional Court, I'll try to negotiate with the government. Please don't do it. Do not undertake the second reading of this law. Please amend it; otherwise, we will meet before the Constitutional Court." In many cases, they listen because they know we have had great success. So far, we have won everything. We won all our cases before the Constitutional Court. But in this case, restricting this information was a red flag for them. I challenged it, and we won.

I must say that the Slovak Constitutional Court is very brave, and it decided within three months. In the history of the Constitutional Court of Slovakia, there has never been a ruling decided within three or four months. It used to take one or two years. But in this situation, the Slovak Constitutional Court and our office understood that we are very important for checks and balances. This is what legal thinkers John Locke and Montesquieu in France wanted; independent bodies of the system to oppose and challenge any branch of the state that prevails or restricts others. I am sure that in many of your countries, governments have tried to adopt so-called "foreign agent laws" to control NGOs. The rights of assembly and association are very important.

Our government found inspiration in other countries. It started in Georgia, Hungary, the Russian Federation, and Kyrgyzstan. Governments cooperate very well. However, ombudspersons also coordinate and engage in dialogue. My colleague Levan Ioseliani, the current Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, challenged the Georgian law. I met him in Tbilisi and asked for his petition because these laws are very similar almost like copy and paste. But thankfully, we are cooperating. Levan Ioseliani shared his position and analysis with me, and we challenged the law and won. The law was forcing NGOs to disclose the identities of their members and donors. We would not allow that, because it is the source of European Union law that protects personal data. It also concerns the EU freedoms of movement and movement of capital. These are fundamental rights within the EU. Hungary lost the case half a year before our Constitutional Court ruled on it, so we could draw ideas from the existing rulings.

Then there is the whistleblower protection law. The government prepared the law through a fast-track procedure in December, relying on the Constitutional Court taking the Christmas holidays. I immediately prepared the petition, and just a few hours before the New Year, the Constitutional Court postponed the law's validity, and we saved it; otherwise, it would have been overruled by the government and fully controlled by it. If you are in Bratislava and need a consultation, or if you see that your country's government would like to find inspiration, we are ready to consult on how to protect fundamental rights.

Prof. Marieta Safta, Professor of Constitutional Law, Titu Maiorescu University - Romania

Panelist: Overarching Priorities of the European Union for Rules-Based Global Governance Agencies

Marieta Safta, PhD, Habil., is Professor of Constitutional Law at Titu Maiorescu University in Bucharest and Vice-President of the University Senate. She is a member of the Doctoral School of Law at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and serves as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Bucharest. Professor Safta is a Research Associate at the Institute of Legal Research of the Romanian Academy and an arbitrator at the Court of International Commercial Arbitration in Bucharest. Prof. Safta served at the Constitutional Court of Romania. She also served as Liaison Officer to the Venice Commission and as Secretary of State at the Romanian Ministry of Justice. She has been affiliated with the European Law Institute since 2018, has served as a Member of the ELI Council since 2025, and is Co-Chair of the Romanian Hub of the ELI, established in 2026.



I am glad to offer a few reflections on the European Union's priorities through the lens of my experience. This discussion is particularly relevant amid global fragmentation, because the EU offers concrete examples of how a rules-based multilateral system can work in practice.

In July 2026, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions setting out four overarching priorities that will guide EU action at the UN: effective and inclusive multilateralism rooted in the UN Charter and international law; UN reform through partnerships and coalitions; a peace and security architecture based on prevention; prosperity and sustainable development. Rather than restating these priorities, I would like to focus on the institutional conditions that make them effective in practice: what makes rules and institutions work, within States and at the international level?

The EU examines the gap between legal commitments and institutional reality through its annual Rule of Law Report, which covers all 27 Member States and, since 2024, four enlargement countries. I will take one of its four pillars: the justice system, because justice is closely connected to these priorities, particularly to human rights, international justice and sustainable development. Justice is formally placed in SDG 16 — Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions — but functionally it cuts across the entire Agenda. Economies need enforceable contracts, equality needs remedies, and climate commitments increasingly reach the courts. Courts do not create peace by themselves, but they help turn conflicts of power into disputes settled according to law.

II. Three dimensions of effective justice

The Rule of Law Report examines justice systems through independence, quality and efficiency. I will take these three, but one step further: independence; competence, on which quality rests; and trust, because efficiency is measured inside the institution, while trust is registered outside. The first dimension is independence, effective judicial independence, not merely formal independence.

A Constitution or law may look impeccable on paper while pressure operates through disciplinary proceedings, case allocation, budgets or public campaigns against judges. Appointment is a key safeguard, especially for constitutional courts, which may later review power exercised by those involved in appointing them. The tension cannot be eliminated, but institutional design can strengthen resistance to pressure. The same question arises internationally. The way international judges and heads of multilateral bodies are selected shapes the capacity of those institutions to act independently.

The second dimension is competence. Judges work across increasingly complex national, regional and international legal frameworks, and digitalization adds another layer:

digital files, complex digital evidence, technology-driven cases. At EU level, DigitalJustice@2030 provides the framework for the digital transformation of justice, while the Judicial Training Strategy for 2025–2030 focuses on the skills needed to make that transformation work. At UN level, UN 2.0 reflects the same concern with institutional capacity, particularly through data, digital tools and innovation. The main idea is that institutions need mandates and rules, but also the capacity to apply them. A mandate unsupported by expertise produces documents rather than results, and a legal guarantee may stop before reaching the citizen.

The third dimension is trust. The EU Justice Scoreboard identifies pressure from government and politicians as the main reason for perceived lack of judicial independence. Trust therefore begins with the State. But perception is only part of the issue. The Rule of Law Report also looks at the implementation of judgments. Trust is tested precisely there especially when the outcome is inconvenient. A rules-based system does not require agreement with every institutional decision. What matters is the capacity to disagree without turning disagreement into a reason to disregard binding obligations or to delegitimize institutions themselves. Every act of compliance strengthens trust; every unenforced judgment erodes it, within States and between them, at the international level.

III. What sustains these dimensions: dialogue and rule-of-law culture

Independence, competence and trust do not stand on their own. They rest on dialogue and on a culture of the rule of law. First, dialogue: Europe itself shows why these matters: national and constitutional courts, the Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights operate within an increasingly interconnected legal space.

From my experience of cooperation among constitutional jurisdictions, one conclusion is clear: independence does not mean isolation. Through dialogue, courts support and inspire one another, strengthen the protection of fundamental rights and contribute to the resilience of a rules-based order. But no court today holds all the expertise it needs. Universities, experts and professional networks bring comparative knowledge and broader perspectives into this shared space.

This is the concrete connection I see between SDG 16 and SDG 17. Partnerships are not only cooperation between governments. They are also networks through which knowledge and legal standards circulate — and they make institutions more resilient.

Second, a culture of the rule of law, which EU documents expressly identify as an objective.

IV. Three suggestions

Against this background, I would close with three ideas. First, safeguards should be judged by how they work under pressure. Transparent appointments, long non-renewable terms and sound procedures all matter, but institutions also need to assess periodically whether these safeguards remain effective.



Weaknesses often arise not from the absence of rules, but from failures in their application, while forms of pressure evolve over time. Second, courts, judicial networks, universities and professional communities need to be better connected through stable institutional frameworks, not occasional goodwill. Constitutional jurisdictions have already built important networks, the Venice Commission, the World Conference on Constitutional Justice and regional associations of constitutional courts. Connecting these more closely with universities, experts and professional networks can strengthen both competence and institutional resilience.

Third, rule-of-law culture must be built both within institutions and across society. Within institutions, judicial training is only part of the picture. Implementation also depends on ministries, parliaments and administrations understanding both what a judgment requires and why compliance matters.

Across society, it depends on citizens. This spring, the European Commission ran a campaign in all Member States, “Protect what matters: democracy”, addressed to young Europeans and built around free press, free speech and academic freedom. The same logic underlies the European Democracy Shield, protecting elections, independent media and civil society against information manipulation now amplified by artificial intelligence. What we need, in my view, is more systematic legal education in schools. Young people should understand from an early age how law, rights and institutions work in everyday life.

In Romania, I coordinated such a program on behalf of the Ministry of Justice, together with representatives of the judiciary, the prosecution service and the Ministry of Education. Judges, prosecutors and lawyers volunteered in schools, speaking with students about law in practical terms. The program was later consolidated, and legal education gained a more formal place in the school curriculum, including as an optional subject. And this matters because a rule-of-law culture cannot simply be decreed — it is built through institutional behavior and through what we teach.

A minister's reaction to an inconvenient judgment may teach more constitutional culture in one evening than a semester of my lectures. A rule not applied, a right without a remedy and an unenforced judgment reveal the same problem: the distance between the legal order as declared and as it operates.

This is where the EU's experience is especially relevant to its priorities at the UN for rules-based global governance: multilateralism, reform, peace and sustainable development ultimately depend on strong institutions capable of turning commitments into results, and on citizens who understand and support the values on which those institutions rest.

Dr. Małgorzata Bonikowska, President, Centre for International Relations - Poland

Panelist: Emerging Trends Shrinking Civic Spaces in a Rapidly Changing Geopolitical Landscape

Dr. Małgorzata Bonikowska is a Polish scholar, think tanker, expert in international relations and European studies, university professor and media commentator. She is the President of the Centre for International Relations since 2013, a leading independent think tank in Poland, and is also the Co-Founder and President of the THINKTANK Leaders Hub, a network for managers and leaders in business and public administration. Dr. Bonikowska is a Member of the Advisory Council to the Polish Parliament's European Affairs Committee, the Council of the National School for Public Administration, and the Supervisory Board of Bank Millennium. An Associate Professor at Warsaw University's Centre for Europe and Vistula University, she specializes in EU foreign policy, neighborhood policies, and South Asia.



Foreign Minister of Poland, Radosław Sikorski, who is now at the UN General Assembly, was also in the '80s working in the UK, as all Poles and Romanians were doing. Sikorski always says, "I would never have thought that one day the UK would leave the European Union and Poland would join." It happened in just three decades. My generation remembers very well that the world was bipolar. Then we suddenly ended up in a world that became, unexpectedly, completely unipolar, with the US leading. My country, Poland, Romania, all the Eastern Bloc was enthusiastic about US leadership.

Poland is still the most pro-American country in Europe. It is 250 years of friendship, our joint efforts to build free countries. Poland lost its independence in the 19th century, so this friendship is much longer than any presidential term, and it's very solid. But in the '90s, our feelings were not necessarily shared by the whole world. Europeans fell into a mental trap: "This is great. This is how the world should look.", especially our colleagues in Western Europe. We also had this division of duties. Europe was very content that Americans were all over the world, so we Europeans could concentrate on values, soft power, regulations, and telling the world what to do. Democracy was the leading, and perhaps the only, system for us, but not for the world.

That is why the year 2001 is so important. I remember New York just after September 11, it was not the same city. This was really a signal in history. As historians and political scientists, we always like years. There should always be one year that is a milestone in history. I think 2001 could be that year, because what happened was not only a shock for the US; it was a shock to the whole world. But there is one more thing that happened in 2001. China joined the World Trade Organization.

It is very symbolic, because China started to become the factory of the world. We were enthusiastic about globalization, and the whole world changed economically because the Americans and Europeans moved production to China. That was good for those countries and perhaps partly good for our businesses.

But over the years, we started to see that there was a huge problem with this, and we discovered it very soon even during the pandemic, when it began in 2019–2020. We realized that 90%- 95% of our supply of medical substances and equipment came from Asia, mainly China, but also India and elsewhere. Europe started to feel very dependent. The US was also very uncomfortable with all this.

We liked this unipolar world, but it was questioned from the very beginning. China was seen as a simple country, not dangerous. But with President of China, Xi Jinping coming in 2013, it started to change its rhetoric and play the game of power. Economic power started to become political power and technological power, and China offered an alternative to what we thought in the West. The West started to feel completely lost. How can there be a global order without Western leadership, or at least one in which Western values and models are questioned? There could be another model. China offers another model to many countries.

I think this caused a reaction: this unipolar world is no longer valid. The Trump effect is more a consequence than a reason for that even Americans have accepted the fact that they cannot handle everything themselves. We, political scientists, are talking about global disorder, and looking for ways to describe it. We do not even really have the words to describe it. We talk about maybe returning to a bipolar world, right? Many people say, "It is a new Cold War or Cold War Zero, with China replacing the Soviet Union." I'm not so sure. But our mental maps always take us back to what we remember. We have to find a concept that is compatible with the 21st century.

In politics, we do not have innovation; politics is frozen. We still have the system made after the Second World War, based on the experience of two big world wars, which does not work anymore. We also have mental maps, especially in the West—or, as we like to call it, the Global West. Then we have the countries of the so-called Global South, earlier called developing countries. We talk about the Global South, which is also problematic, because Mexico is in the Global South, but it is not in the south. I think this is the key problem today: most decisionmakers are using old mental maps, and this leads them to decisions or visions that do not fit reality. Young people may feel the new era, but they do not have experience, and access to the table to influence the world.

If mainstream politicians do not deliver, they will be voted out. In democracies, at least, we can change the leaders. Bad times produce good leaders. That is what we had after the Second World War and the First World War. That's why we were able to design the global order in a way that worked. Who now has an idea of what to do? Global citizens indicate that democracy must connect with the people, even the European Union, which began as a very bureaucratic and technocratic project in the 1950s because of trade and regulation, has turned into a project that is very open to the people.

Otherwise, it will not continue. People will vote the EU out as well, which is a strategy. But it is also a very good moment—a wake-up call for the current elites—because opinion polls show that all this is very much combined with an anti-elitist trend. People in democratic societies do not trust the elites. They do not believe what current politicians are saying. If they don't get good answers to their real frustrations, populism can be a kind of wake-up call if leaders wake up too. It shows us where the problem is.

If you look at opinion polls in Europe, and I think it would be very similar in the US, what matters to people? First of all, everyday life: the economy, wages, what they can buy with the same amount of money, housing, and the situation of every family. That's what people care about. The second aspect is that they want to feel secure. In Europe, that is a very important issue, because people do not feel secure after the war in Ukraine.

Some aspects are going wrong with the fundamentals of our system, capitalism and democracy. Capitalism no longer builds a middle class. It is shrinking. The middle class is increasing in the Global South, in countries like India and even China. People who were rich are now poorer, and those who are super-rich become even richer. But capital does not go to many people. This is a mainstream problem with our system. We can surely talk about corrections to the existing model, but I think we are in a transition period, as a historian might call it. It is a very difficult time for all of us, to live through a transition period, because you do not know what to do.

In conclusion, I think it is not enough to correct or repair the system. We should think about radical reform that is more adapted to the 21st century, with the use of AI and new technologies. Participatory democracy is very possible. Representative democracy is outdated. Why do we need parliamentarians in Parliament when all the debate is on social media? We use institutions invented in the 17th century. We need fresh thinking. I do not have all the answers, but I know those answers will not come from within the system. Do not expect current bureaucrats at the UN or the EU to repair the system. The resolutions must come from outside, from the third sector, from gatherings like this one, from dialogue and brainstorming, but only if the third sector connects with the second sector, which is the business world. Private sector is really worried because it does not want to lose stability and prefers to continue with globalization.

I would like to end with a quote from a writer from Poland, Sławomir Mrożek, who once said, "The future is today. It's just only in the future." So, the future we build is built today.


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PANEL SESSION 2:
BRIDGING DIVIDES: STRENGTHENING CIVIC TRUST AND REBUILDING SHARED VALUES

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Maury Giles, Chief Executive Officer, Braver Angels - USA

Moderator Remarks

Maury Giles is the Chief Executive Officer of Braver Angels, the nation's largest grassroots movement dedicated to renewing America's civic culture. Maury leads a growing national effort to inspire and equip Americans to practice courageous citizenship, learning to contend without contempt, rebuild trust, and solve problems across differences. Maury Giles brings more than three decades of experience from the commercial and civic sectors, spanning journalism, market research, and experience design. As a former executive and entrepreneur, he specialized in decoding human motivation and building high-trust engagement strategies for complex organizations. Maury views the private sector as a vital laboratory for innovation and results-oriented leadership, applying those same rigorous disciplines to the work of national depolarization. His focus remains on shifting civic culture by turning deep human insights into scalable, collective action.



How many of you have a personal relationship within your family, friend network, or among colleagues that has stopped, or is seriously strained, because of different points of view on a political issue? About 38% of Americans these days report this. I think it is higher than that, because it is a challenge I have in my own family. I am in a blended family with 10 children, and five are more conservative and five more progressive. They are divided, and some of our children just are not talking to each other because of this. That is where I think this becomes most hyper personal: the reality of these relationships.

The challenge we face, and the reason this is so critical, is that being in community with each other requires the ability to see and engage with one another as human beings, with the inherent dignity we all have, while recognizing the great strength in our different life experiences and points of view.

Here in the United States of America, one thing we talk about a lot right now is the idea that the simple solution is to just not talk about politics and religion. That is not the solution. That is called dictatorship. If we choose not to talk about these things, it gets in the way of our ability to know how to engage. Engaging with one another is required for self-government, and self-government is not possible if the self is not governed. If we are waiting for people or some institution to come in and resolve this, we are missing the point. We are the people we are waiting for. The only thing we can control is our own ability to act instead of react.

At Braver Angels, that is what we are trying to do with tens of thousands of people in the US. We also have people in Europe and Canada involved in practicing that. I also want you to think about this: if the only thing we can control is our ability to act instead of react, to what extent is the challenge we are facing an actual dynamic of hyper individualism and a self-centered approach to issues driven by fear and anxiety?

Hon. Mike Lake, Member of Parliament for Leduc-Wetaskiwin, House of Commons - Canada

Panelist: Main Drivers of Political Polarization and Social Discontent Today

Hon. Mike Lake is the Member of Parliament for Leduc-Wetaskiwin and was first elected in 2006. After his re-election in October 2008, he was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, a position he held for seven years. On September 13, 2012, he was sworn into the Queen's Privy Council, after being asked by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to serve on a Cabinet Committee tasked with efforts to balance the federal budget. Hon. Mike Lake has been elected seven straight times and, in both 2019 and 2021, received the highest vote total out of all candidates, from all parties, across the country. In opposition, he has held three Shadow Minister positions: Youth, Sport and Accessibility; International Development; and Mental Health,

Addictions and Suicide Prevention. Prior to entering federal politics, Hon. Mike Lake worked for 10 years with the Edmonton Oilers Hockey Club where he served as National Accounts Manager, Director of Ticket Sales and Group Sales Manager. He holds a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Alberta.



I am a conservative member of Parliament in Canada. So, when you see me sitting here and hear me say that you probably have a set of assumptions. I have been a conservative for 20 years in one of the most conservative parts of the country: rural Alberta. I will tell you a little about who I am, because it may challenge your assumptions. I grew up below the poverty line in a town just outside Edmonton. When I was 16, my parents became foster parents.

My father struggled with alcoholism. Sadly, in 2003, he died from a lethal dose of OxyContin. He was an incredible father, nonetheless. He had been sober for 15 years and then died from a prescribed dose of OxyContin.

I have a 30-year-old son with autism; Jaden is incredible. He is non-speaking and one of the most authentic human beings you will ever meet. I also have a 27-year-old daughter who is a lawyer. She was six when I was elected, and now she's married and two years into her law career. Time moves quickly.

There's an interesting story about Jana, my very shy daughter. We did an interview when she was 13 and Jaden was 16. The interviewer asked her, "Do you ever wish your brother was 'normal,' like every other kid?" Jaden and I were sitting right beside her. She looked at her brother, then at me, and answered without hesitation. She hadn't known the question was coming. She said, "Honestly, since Jaden was diagnosed with autism before I was born, I don't know what a normal brother is like." Jaden is what is normal to her. The interviewer asked, "You like him just the way he is?" She said, "If he didn't have autism, or was cured or something, he wouldn't be the same Jaden he is now."

That is an amazing perspective, and it gives me a lot to think about. When I think about Jaden, I think about our life experiences and our differences. Our perspectives differ because of our life experiences, but even people with similar experiences can see them differently. I've learned more about human interaction from Jaden than from probably anyone else in the world. When Jaden was about one and a half or two, we knew something was going on but did not know what. As we were getting the diagnosis, we tried to bring him into our world. That is the natural instinct—to bring him into our world.

A turning point in my relationship with Jaden came when I realized we were better off if I got down beside him, looked at what he was looking at, and played with things the way he played with them.

Usually, he would stack things up, line up cars instead of driving them around, knock down a tower of cups, and build it again. I might play with it a little, knock down the tower, and see how he responded. Getting down to his level, seeing the world as he saw it, and trying to understand his perspective taught me more about human interaction than any other experience in my life. That is a human skill.

I voted for our socialist party, the NDP, in Canada when I was 19. When I talk to students, I tell them that what changed was not what I cared about; it was how I thought we could get there. Many of us can find common ground on the things we care about, even if we debate how to achieve them.
I work a lot on mental health. I am the shadow minister and my party's lead on mental health and wellness. I also work on intellectual and developmental disabilities, and with Special Olympics, Right to Play, and World Vision. Over the past six years, I have done more and more work on polarization, using my platform to bring people together for conversations.

We need passionate debates about important issues. Our democracy depends on smart conversations. As John Wooden said, surround yourself with smart people who will argue with you. We need to do that respectfully, though. We are moving away from respectful debate, and it is not serving any of us well. This is happening everywhere, not just in the US, North America, or the Western world. I think people everywhere agree that it is something we need to take seriously. We have to protect our ability to have conversations.

I love the word "dignity." At the event I attended last night, with Special Olympics and Right to Play, the words they used included "flourishing," "joy," "connection," "belonging," "hope," and "play." We need to have those conversations—a world where our kids can play like we used to.
When I think of my work as a Member of Parliament, I think about my children. I long for a world where every girl has the same opportunities my daughter has had, and where every person with an intellectual or developmental disability, wherever they live, has the same opportunities my son has had. If we can agree on things like that, I think there are many other things we can agree on too.

Algorithms amplify differences in the language we use. In some of the fields I work in, such as international development, people use a certain kind of jargon. If I used that language in my constituency, my constituents would not understand what I was saying. That is not how ordinary people talk. My conservative friends also use different language from my more liberal friends. I think we need to recognize that algorithms are manipulating us a little. The transparency around algorithms is really important. We need to understand why we see what we see on social media.

Dr. Donna Hicks, Associate, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University - USA

Panelist: Impacts of Polarization Towards the Progress on Sustainable Development and Social Cohesion

Dr. Donna Hicks is an Associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University and the former Deputy Director of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution. She facilitated dialogues in numerous unofficial diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Colombia, Cuba, Libya and Syria. She was a consultant to the BBC in Northern Ireland, where she co-facilitated a television series, Facing the Truth, with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. She has taught courses in conflict resolution at Harvard and Columbia Universities and conducts seminars in the US and abroad on dignity leadership training and on the role dignity plays in resolving conflict. She consults to corporations, governments, schools, churches, and non-governmental organizations. Her book, Dignity: It's Essential Role in Resolving Conflict, was published by Yale University Press in 2011. Her second book, Leading with Dignity: How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People, was published by Yale University Press in August 2018.



I spent most of my career doing international conflict resolution. I have been bridging divides and working on polarization my whole life as a facilitator of dialogue in international conflicts. We would often discuss political issues at the table as we tried to create opportunities for dialogue. I started my work in the Middle East, then I went to Sri Lanka for 10 years, worked on another project in Colombia, and later went to Northern Ireland. These conflicts are all intractable.

We would sit together, trying to create opportunities for people to have dialogue, bridge their differences, and find a way to peace, because people around the world had suffered so much. The human cost and suffering were right there in front of us.

Working in Libya and Syria, the most recent conflicts I have been involved in, I realized there was a psychological dimension to these conflicts. My postdoctoral training at Harvard was with a social psychologist who believed we had to look at the social and psychological dimensions of conflict, not just power relations, politics, or where borders should be drawn, but all the political issues that divide people. We would bring the parties together, and inevitably, wherever we were, someone would explode with rage, anger, or resentment. I remember saying, "Oh my gosh, what happened? We need to explore your reaction. It is too important. That was such a deep emotional reaction."

I remember being in the Middle East when one man said, "Emotional? This is not emotional. This is about justice. This is about identity." I said, "Okay, I promise I will never use that word again." The next month, I went to Sri Lanka. I thought, "I can't use the word 'emotional' if something happens. But I will use the word 'trauma.'" I would studied trauma and realized that people on both sides had been through incredible trauma. I thought they might be more willing to talk about the traumatic experiences these wars had brought.

The same thing happened. We were having a dialogue, and somebody exploded. I said, "Oh my gosh, that was such a big reaction. I have a feeling this may be about the trauma you and your community have endured." He said, "Trauma? This is not about trauma. This is about justice, recognition, and identity." I said, "Okay, I promise I'll never use that word again." Two strikes and I was ready to give up.

Then one day, walking through Harvard Square, I passed the Harvard Book Store. I saw a book in the window about dignity and thought, "That is the word. This is about their dignity. It is about not even being treated like a human being."

The next time it happened, I was in Colombia. The same thing happened, with the same reaction. I said, "Could we stop for a minute? I have a feeling your reaction is a response to all the indignities you have suffered, all the violations of your dignity. If we could discuss how both parties feel their dignity has been assaulted, then we can move on to the rest of the training. Would everybody be willing to do that?" Some Generals in the room were looking at their phones while I spoke. I made eye contact with one of them, and he said, "Yes, we can do that. We can talk about the indignities we have suffered as individuals and bring forward the stories of the indignities our ancestors suffered."

The point is that I have spent the rest of my career writing about this topic. I wrote a book called Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict. I thought I would be sharing this insight with my international colleagues in mediation and facilitation. But then I started getting calls from the corporate world, healthcare, education, NGOs, faith communities. People said, "Donna, I think you have named our problem. It's the unaddressed violations of dignity that are making people seethe. Please come help us." That is what I have spent my time doing, I've created something called the Ten Elements of Dignity.

I have been working with teachers at independent schools across the country to help them develop a dignity curriculum for their students. I say "kids" because children as young as third grade are becoming dignity leaders. Teachers are teaching them how to lead with dignity. We want to see our leaders model the behavior we are looking for, but they need education too.

The dignity work I have done for years is not common knowledge. We do not learn it anywhere. I am involved with business and management scholars who are teaching dignity in business schools. There is growing agreement that leaders need to learn how to lead with dignity and teach their students to do the same.

Research shows that when a leader admits a mistake and takes responsibility for the harm, they have caused others in their group, people are moved. They think, "I cannot believe my leader just admitted that." It opens their hearts to that person. They say, "If my leader can do this, maybe I can too." We need to create safety around admitting mistakes. A fundamental job of leadership is to model that behavior sincerely.

Dr. Melissa Derby, Race Relations Commissioner, Human Rights Commission – New Zealand

Panelist: Strategies and Initiatives that Promote Dialogue, Empathy, and Common Purpose across Divides

Dr. Melissa Derby is serving as the Race Relations Commissioner for Te Kāhui Tika Tangata at New Zealand Human Rights Commission. Dr. Derby brings over a decade of experience in human rights advocacy. Her previous role was in the School of Education at the University of Waikato, where her teaching and research focused on children's early learning and development, and literacy as a human right. Her scholarship has been recognized through a range of awards including a Fulbright Graduate award, a Royal Commonwealth award, and two awards from the Royal Society of New Zealand. Dr. Melissa Derby`s published books include a children's book in the Māori language and a co-edited book on a bicultural research framework. In her current role as Race Relations Commissioner, Dr. Derby is committed to ensuring the rights of all groups in New Zealand are upheld, and to promoting harmonious relations through open dialogue, common connections, and shared values.



I offer my warmest greetings to you all. In the first language of my country, New Zealand, "kia ora" means hello. My work focuses on bridging divides and strengthening social cohesion. I want to make a crucial point: when I say, "social cohesion," I don't mean that we must all be the same or agree on everything. That is not a sign of a healthy society. Rather, we can disagree peacefully and respectfully. We can be our unique selves while still sharing a strong sense of trust, belonging, and unity.

At the core of my work, is the fundamental human rights principle that every person is born with inherent dignity, and everything else flows from that.

I am from Aotearoa, New Zealand, a nation of around five million people in the South Pacific. We are known as a clean, green, peaceful nation. We have a stable democracy, and trust in our public institutions is comparatively high. Māori are our Indigenous people, and the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori tribes, is foundational to our national story. Like many countries, our nation is full of migration stories. Each one has shaped, and continues to shape, the country we enjoy today.

New Zealand has areas of strength, pressure, and opportunity. Eighty-four percent of New Zealanders feel a sense of belonging in our country. On the other hand, 14% believe that using violence is sometimes acceptable to achieve a political goal. We are very diverse, and different ethnic and faith communities work well together to achieve shared goals and purposes. At the same time, opposition to immigration is rising. These mixed findings tell us that we cannot leave social cohesion to chance. We must seize opportunities like this one to converse and connect, find common ground, and foster a strong sense of belonging for everyone.

When I started my work as Race Relations Commissioner, I wanted to take a different approach to addressing racism and discrimination and promoting harmonious relations, which is my legislative mandate. I'll share three projects, each of which aims to foster connection and strengthen social cohesion. The first project is called Constructive Conversations. It came about after I observed increasingly divisive rhetoric on a range of topics, including immigration. On one hand, I saw communities concerned for their safety as anti-migrant protests took place internationally and domestically. On the other hand, I saw genuine questions about immigration often being framed as racist. I want to make a point here: when words like "racist" are used carelessly, they stop functioning as a warning and instead become a weapon that can entrench division, defensiveness, and disconnection. It also means we lose the word's impact when we need to call out racism.

Much of the conversation about immigration was happening online, where algorithms simplify complex issues and reward outrage. I wanted to provide a space for people to listen, talk, disagree safely, and find common ground. Using immigration as a case study, the wider goal was to create practical, evidence-informed tools that demonstrate how to have constructive conversations about polarizing issues. The aim wasn't to manufacture consensus or persuade participants to adopt a particular position on immigration. It was to test whether a carefully designed conversation, using specific techniques, could help people with different views engage more constructively, understand one another better, and find common ground without requiring complete agreement.

The theme of common ground also informed another project: the fourth edition of the Statement on Religious Diversity. The statement uses a human-rights based framework to bring diverse religious and faith groups together around a shared purpose.

I engaged with communities across the country. A range of groups endorsed the statement, and our current prime minister wrote its foreword. To ensure the statement is backed by action, I am now working with schools, workplaces, and communities to put the rights it describes into practice.

What I would like to highlight is what I observed while developing the statement, because it tells a story as compelling as the statement itself. Everybody wanted others to have what they wanted for themselves: the right to live freely and safely in our country as a person of faith. They all valued treating others well, aspiring to be good person, and sharing values of love, service, peace, and hope. That is an important story to tell, especially when these groups are often pitted against one another—sometimes in the media, no offense to the journalists in the room. It offers a foundation for unity beyond this project and reminds us to think carefully about the stories we tell and their impact.

I came to this role with a background in storytelling and a firm belief that stories can divide us or unite us. I am committed to the latter. The Where We Belong project is a series of videos that promote empathy and connection by sharing different stories of migration and belonging. The stories are filmed on people's doorsteps to evoke a sense of home. I have mentioned how social media can fuel division and give contempt more coverage than compassion. The Where We Belong project also has three "pre-bunking" videos that help people recognize divisive tactics used in scapegoating, fearmongering, and false dichotomies. Ultimately, all this work reflects a different approach in New Zealand to addressing racism, discrimination, division, and polarization.

As Race Relations Commissioner, I do not want to turn warnings into weapons or deepen division, defensiveness, and an "us versus them" mentality. Rather, I want to create spaces that invite people to participate and work together—spaces where disagreement is not a dealbreaker and where we seek common ground while allowing differences to exist. In other words, spaces where pluralism truly flourishes. Crucially, these spaces are grounded in the fundamental human-rights principle that recognizes the inherent dignity of every person, including our own. Our dignity depends not only on how we are treated, but also on how we treat others.

This work does not stop with these projects. As a practical person, I will develop actions from each initiative for schools, workplaces, and communities. At the government level, I want to build cross-party support for social-cohesion initiatives. I will conclude with this point about the Sustainable Development Goals: from a development perspective, human rights, social cohesion, and peaceful pluralism are not peripheral to sustainable development. They are among the conditions that make it possible.

Dr. Scott C. Alexandar, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, Catholic Theological Union - USA
Panelist: The Role of Shared Values in Fostering Social Cohesion and Sustainable Peace

Dr. Scott C. Alexander is Professor of Islamic Studies and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Catholic Theological Union. For nearly 40 years, he has studied and taught Islam and Muslim-Christian relations, focusing his ministry on reconciliation, mutual understanding, and solidarity for justice. A scholar-activist, he challenges Islamophobia and other forms of systemic bigotry and marginalization. Dr. Alexander is the Founding Director of CTU's Catholic-Muslim Studies Program and a consultant on Catholic-Muslim relations for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is also a member of the National Catholic-Muslim Dialogue, co-sponsored by the USCCB, the Islamic Circle of North America, and the Islamic Society of North America. Since 2015, he has served as co-editor of the Journal of Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society. He also serves on the Scholars Advisory Council of Georgetown University's Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and the Board of Directors of the Alliance for Shared Values.



I would like to start by thanking all the organizers and I especially want to recognize Braver Angels as a global partner. For many years, I have deeply respected them for a variety of reasons, but mostly because they focus on skills and process. They give people the tools to have difficult conversations. Often, we dive into difficult conversations without knowing what to expect—not only from others, but from ourselves.

I tell my students in a class I teach called "Us Versus Them: Neuroscience and Theologies of Conflict" that I am not a neuroscientist, but I play one here at Catholic Theological Union. That is because, for about the past six years, I have been reading more neuroscience and social psychology than theology. Not because I think theology is not critically important, but theology uninformed by science is increasingly irrelevant and less committed to truth and the pursuit of truth. My vocation as a theologian has been enriched by research into what I call "the biology of difference".

Let's start with a platitude often heard in intercultural and interfaith settings: "We are all more alike than we are different." It is well-intentioned, but it can have negative consequences. A more positive way to put it might be that we are as alike as we are different. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz said that what most distinguishes human beings is our capacity to be different from one another. That is because culture is part of our evolution and our biology.

We can invent and reinvent ourselves in many ways that other species on Earth cannot. Saying we are more alike than different can imply that difference is a problem, rather than something exciting and transformative to encounter.

I want to acknowledge two intellectual debts. I am not a neuroscientist, but I am indebted to at least two neuroscientists: Robert Sapolsky, author of Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst, and Lisa Feldman Barrett, author of Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain. I highly recommend both books.

When we talk about encountering difference, many of my students are uncomfortable with the idea that they divide people into in-groups and out-groups, because their theology commits them to the solidarity of the human family. But hundreds of thousands of years of evolution have shaped us, as social creatures, to form in-groups and out-groups. Some in-groups are life-affirming. The nuclear family is an in-group; not everyone belongs to your family. The nation-state can also be prosocial and moral if it lives up to its highest values and supports its citizens without doing so at others' expense. But the "us versus them" dynamic can also have very negative consequences. We have all experienced it in our personal lives, workplaces, and politics.

One aspect that makes this dynamic difficult to control is that, like most of what we do, about 80% of our behavior happens subconsciously. The brain is like an iceberg: only about 20% of what we do involves conscious thought and the prefrontal cortex. Almost everything else happens automatically. That applies to "us versus them," too. If a tiger walked into the room, our blood pressure would rise, and stress hormones would be released before we consciously registered the tiger's presence. We would be preparing to fight or flee before we even realized it was there.

Unfortunately, this also applies to other people and to the markers that may identify them as belonging to a group we see as hostile. In the United States, each visual for example, a MAGA hat and a Pride hat, may trigger different reactions, and those reactions begin subconsciously. If things happen automatically, can we control them? The answer is a qualified yes. Neuroscientists suggest that individuation is crucial to encouraging prosocial "us" dynamics and minimizing antisocial ones. We need to see the person wearing a MAGA hat or a Pride hat as an individual. None of us is fully defined by the groups we belong to, and our dignity does not depend on those groups. We have inviolable dignity as human beings. As a Christian, I would say we are beloved children of God, and we need to recognize that belovedness in one another. Doing so can help create neural pathways that support this way of seeing people.

Dr. Esther Solano, Professor of International Relations, Federal University of São Paulo - Brazil

Panelist: Impact of Education, Media, and Technology in Either Mitigating or Exacerbating Polarization

Dr. Esther Solano is Professor of International Relations at Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Complutense University of Madrid in Spain and is a specialist on public opinion, changes of subjectivities in the contemporary world and the increase of the far right. She conducts research in different Latin-American countries. Dr. Esther Solano has a focus in studying youth, influencers and politics, dispute of gender agenda and female vote; new workers, platformization and new subjectivities; masculinism and gender ideology gap. Dr. Solano participates in different political campaigns in Latin America and is a member of several organization and networks such as Extreme Right Observatory (Brazil), International Network of Experts in the Far Right (Germany), Cross-Regional Democracy Collective (USA) or Real Instituto Elcano (Spain) naro paradox and The rights in the Americas.



I would like to share some ideas about what we call the digitalization—or platformization—of life among children and young people. Did you know that 20% of young Americans under 30 years old say they are friends with ChatGPT? They have some kind of friendship or interaction with artificial intelligence. Let me summarize eight risks of this platformization of life.

First, let's return to neuroscience. We have a great deal of data showing how harmful long-term screen and social media use can be for children's brains, especially at a young age.

We see sleep disorders, memory problems, difficulty concentrating and focusing, anxiety, depression, and more. We only have to look at suicide rates among young people. We are facing a serious and growing mental-health crisis. The first question I would like to ask is: How can we have a healthy democracy if we have an unhealthy generation?

The second risk is new trends in relationships. One that concerns me is a very narcissistic form of self-improvement: coach culture, where I need to be the best and become my best self, but focus only on myself and not on the people around me. I always tell my students: fewer selfies, more photographs. The third risk is what I call the tyranny of the algorithm. Social media is the new political arena, but we do not know the rules governing it because we do not know how the algorithms work. Society needs to demand transparency about algorithms.

A few days ago, the European Union introduced its "Kids Act," regulating minors' presence online. I want to focus on one important point: accountability for big platforms. We need to demand responsibility and accountability from them. The EU called for safer algorithms for children and restrictions on highly addictive features and tools. Neuroscience tells us that endless scrolling creates a cycle of dopamine that harms children's brains.

The fourth risk is what I call "TikTok politics." It is not just the ridiculous sight of politicians dancing on TikTok. More and more political communication, campaigning, and marketing are being adapted to fit short, shallow videos. What we end up with is shallow, theatrical debate with no substance. This opens the door to radicalization, polarization, and hate speech. The fifth risk is something very worrying to me: the "meme-ification" of hate. It is the idea that hate can be cool and fun online.

In 2018, I interviewed young Black people from low-income neighborhoods and peripheral communities in São Paulo. It was the first Bolsonaro election. I showed them racist digital content presented as joke memes. They all started laughing: "This is so cool. This is so funny. I want to share it with my friends." I was shocked. I said, "But this is hate speech. This is racist content, and you are Black. What's going on?" They told me, "You are taking it too seriously. It is hilarious. It is fine. You can't be so serious." In my interviews with young people across Latin America, I am seeing that it is becoming harder for them to recognize hate and authoritarianism because they are presented as cool. This "cool authoritarianism," or "cool hate," and the meme-ification of politics are very concerning. The sixth risk is the influence of online personalities. We know very little about many digital influencers, but our children know them well. These influencers shape children's views, not only about politics, but about everything. We need to study their work. Increasingly, influencers are becoming politicians and candidates. They are turning followers into voters.

One especially concerning trend in the digital ecosystem is the manosphere. We are learning about new models of toxic masculinity that are popular with teenagers—and even preteens. When children as young as nine, ten, or eleven consume propaganda about toxic masculinity, incels, and the manosphere, it is dangerous. In my interviews with children, I have seen how this can open the door to radicalization, including political radicalization. Radicalization often does not start with politics; it starts somewhere else. These misogynistic models of masculinity can be a gateway. The seventh danger is very important. I want to present you what political debate on Twitter—now X—looks like in Argentina and Brazil today. The current political debate on X in Argentina and Brazil is completely hyperpolarized: left, right, left, right. How can we build a healthy, democratic debate when we have this level of online polarization? It is almost impossible. We need to focus on what lies between the extremes, even though there is very little there right now.

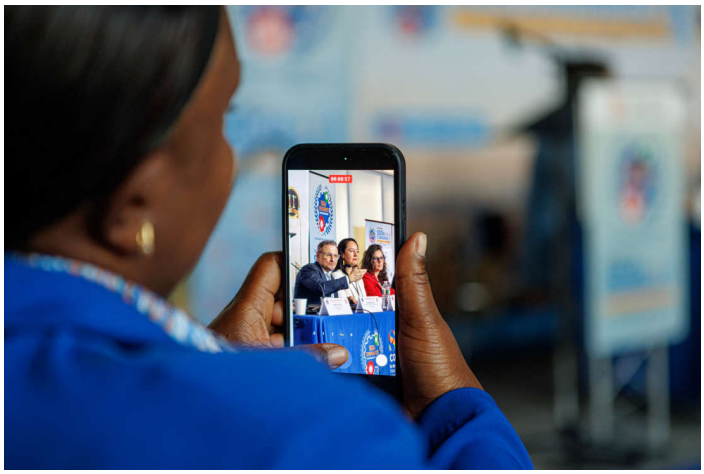
First, we need common topics and a shared, depolarized agenda. We could talk about housing prices, public health, or childcare, issues we share. Second, we need common ways to talk.
We need to understand one another's language, words, and vocabulary.

And third, we need common speakers. If we continue as we are, democracy will be impossible.

The final aspect that I would like to share is very concerning. The latest PISA results, an exam taken by 15-year-olds around the world, in about 93 countries, are dramatic—catastrophic, in fact. For example, in Spain, where I am originally from, the results are the worst in the country's history. Reading comprehension has dropped dramatically. We are facing what I call a non-reading society. Our children cannot focus or concentrate, and they struggle to understand a text. How can students understand the world if they cannot understand a text or a book?

I would like to conclude with an emphasis on the fact that novels matter. Imagination, creativity, novels, and books are essential. They're a privilege because they allow us to enter other people's lives. They have everything to do with diversity, pluralism, and interfaith understanding. So, here's my final question: How can we build a healthy democracy if we are a non-reading society?









PANEL SESSION 3:
PRESS FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM AS A CROSS-CUTTING ENABLER OF PEACE

CLICK HERE to Watch Panel Session 3

Hon. Tino Machakaire, Minister of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training, The Republic of Zimbabwe

Keynote: The Role of Media Literacy and Digital Skills for Young Human Rights Advocates

Hon. Tino Machakaire serves as the Minister of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training and is entrusted with the responsibility of serving as Secretary for Youth Affairs in the Youth League of ZANU PF. He is a businessman in his own right with interests in logistics and real estate across Zimbabwe, South Africa and the African region. Since 2018 he has served as the Member of Parliament for Hwedza South and previously as Deputy Minister of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation. Beyond the offices he holds, Hon. Tino Machakaire has a deep love for the arts and has been promoting musicians and supporting creatives long before he entered the political arena. Through the TINMAC Foundation and the Hwedza Arts Festival he has nurtured talent and provided platforms for young artists.



Issues of press freedom, independent and responsible journalism, digital literacy, and human rights are increasingly interlinked, and it is important that we have a multistakeholder conversation on how they can contribute to sustainable peace. We live in an extraordinary age. Today, a young person in Zimbabwe can access the same information, participate in the same global conversation, and engage on the same ideas as a young person in Geneva, New York or anywhere else in the world, in real time. That is the power of technology. But with greater access comes greater responsibility.

The same digital platforms that democratize access to information can amplify misinformation and disinformation. The same technology that gives a young person a voice can expose them to manipulation, online abuse, fraud, hate speech and harmful content. Digital access alone, therefore, is not empowerment. Digital empowerment means giving young people not only the technology to connect, but the knowledge to question, the skills to verify, the confidence to participate and the wisdom to use technology responsibly. That is the generation we must build.

Zimbabwe is a youthful nation, and we view our young people as a national strategic asset, a demographic dividend to be harnessed, and partners in building our future. This philosophy is at the heart of the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training, which I have the honor to lead. Our vision is clear: an empowered youth actively participating in national development by 2030. Our responsibility goes far beyond preparing young people for employment. We are preparing them for enterprise, innovation, leadership and responsibility.

Through our Vocational Training Centres, the Zimbabwe Youth Council, EmpowerBank and other youth empowerment programs, we are working to connect skills with enterprise, innovation and sustainable livelihoods. The digital revolution is transforming virtually every aspect of our lives. A young farmer needs digital knowledge. A young entrepreneur needs digital and financial literacy. A journalist needs digital verification skills. A human rights advocate needs digital security.

And every young citizen needs the ability to distinguish credible information from manipulation. That is why technology and digital transformation are strategic priorities under Zimbabwe's National Youth Empowerment Strategy 2026–2030. Our objective to close the connectivity, knowledge, skills gaps, and ensure that our young people also possess the tools utilize technology intelligently, safely and productively. In today's environment where information is readily accessible with just a click, our young people need to be empowered with skills to undertake the following actions:

- Establish evidence to support the information;
- Verify authenticity and credibility of information including news articles, opinion pieces, images, audios as well as video messages; and
- Distinguish between responsible journalism, satire, propaganda, misinformation and disinformation.

Human rights advocacy must be anchored in facts. Even when intentions are well meaning, misinformation and disinformation can damage reputations, deepen mistrust, inflame tensions and undermine social cohesion. Media literacy must, therefore, also be understood as a peacebuilding skill. It teaches us to pause before we share. To verify before we accuse. To choose evidence over emotion. And to create space for dialogue rather than division. This responsibility has become even more urgent with the rapid development of new and emerging technologies, in particular, artificial intelligence and synthetic media. We are entering an age in which seeing is no longer necessarily believing.

A photograph can be manipulated. A voice can be replicated. A video can be generated. A statement can be altered from its original context. And with one click, an ordinary citizen can unknowingly become a distributor of misinformation. Whilst we must encourage our young people to create content, they must also learn to verify, contextualize and responsibly communicate this content. Credible journalism remains indispensable to nation building. Rather than diminishing the importance of professional journalism, technology has highlighted the importance of credible journalism. Journalists carry the responsibility to verify information, protect sources, provide context and give citizens reliable information on matters of public interest.

At the same time, technology has transformed millions of young people into content creators. A young person with a smartphone can document an event, tell a story, and in the process, reach millions of people across the world particularly, through social media platforms. This offers an extraordinary opportunity to access information on the go. It, nonetheless, places responsibility on the creators of the content. Digital citizenship must respect human rights, human dignity, privacy, and accuracy. Young people need to have the confidence to speak—and the discipline to verify. Journalists must be able to discharge their duties without hindrance while upholding professional ethics. Institutions must implement transparency as this strengthens public trust. Citizens must engage critically and constructively with the information they receive.

Zimbabwe believes in practical youth empowerment which translates training and skills development into opportunities, enterprise, and sustainable livelihoods. Through a Heritage-based 5.0 Education policy as well as various empowerment initiatives, my Government is implementing initiatives that ensure that our young people become producers of knowledge, creators of solutions, and responsible participants in public life. This conversation carries particular significance for Zimbabwe as our country prepares to serve as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2027–2028 term. For Zimbabwe, this is an opportunity to contribute constructively to global conversations on peace and security, multilateralism, and the priorities of the Global South.

And there is a direct connection between that responsibility and our discussion today. Beyond the diplomatic corridors, peace is increasingly being shaped on online platforms. When technology is used for ill intensions, it can deepen tensions, divide communities and provide fertile ground for violence. Used constructively, the same technology can educate communities, counter misinformation and disinformation, promote dialogue, connect young peacebuilders and amplify voices that might otherwise never be heard.

Zimbabwe views young people as key actors in building and maintaining peace. This is why, working with other stakeholders, my Government is investing in media literacy, digital skills and cybersecurity awareness, supporting credible and responsible journalism, and creating spaces where young people can engage constructively with institutions, communities and one another.

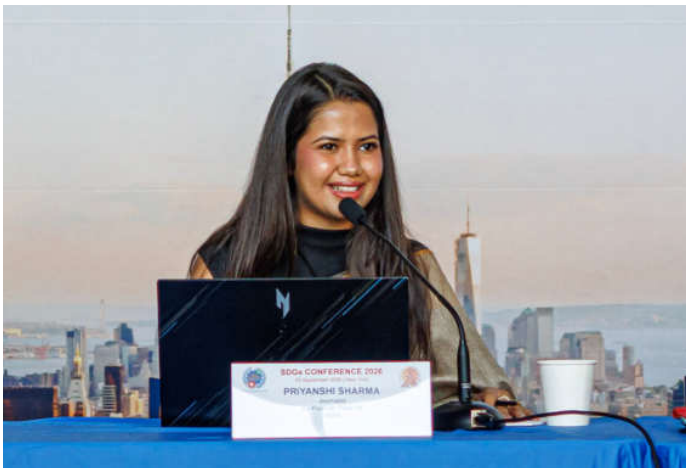
As I conclude, let us use this opportunity to move from talking about young people to investing in young people. Let us move from giving them access to information to empowering them with the know-how to understand and interrogate information. Let us move beyond teaching young people how to use technology to teach them how to use it responsibly, ethically and productively. And let us move from seeing young people merely as audiences and beneficiaries to recognizing them as partners and leaders.

The future of journalism is increasingly digital. The future of human rights advocacy is increasingly digital. The digital space will increasingly influence the success of peacebuilding initiatives. Our shared future will depend, to a significant extent, on whether young people possess the skills, values and confidence to navigate this environment responsibly. Let us, therefore, equip them with the tools to shape the digital world, and to contribute to a more peaceful, inclusive world.

Priyanshi Sharma Journalist, Co-Founder, Peek TV - India

Panelist: Protecting Journalistic Integrity and the Information Ecosystem in the Era of Content Journalism on Social Media Platforms

Priyanshi Sharma is a media entrepreneur, award-winning journalist, and an ISB alumna working to redefine India's news landscape. A former anchor and reporter at NDTV, Priyanshi Sharma is the recipient of the ENBA "40 Under 40" award and the National Television 'Young Journalist of the Year'. In 2025, she co-founded Peek TV, India's first short-form video news platform aimed at delivering unbiased news to the young generation to make them informed voters. The platform has a monthly audience of more than 300 million and an active follower base of more than a million across social media platforms. A Torchbearer Awardee from the Indian School of Business, Priyanshi combines traditional journalistic integrity with modern, digital-first innovation.



We keep talking about the power of independent journalism and how much trust it can rebuild among people, viewers, and consumers of news today. But what I was specifically asked to talk about today is the blurring line between influencers, activists, and journalists on social media.

I happen to be a journalist on social media, so I am often confused with an influencer. Those labels are frequently used interchangeably.

I want to talk about the risks of interchanging those tags and how, in the interest of media literacy, we can differentiate journalists and influencers apart—and why that distinction matters.

First, I want to talk about how independent journalism has changed the industry from a state of hopelessness to one of greater hope than we have possibly seen in recent years. Why was there hopelessness? In India, social media takedowns are becoming more frequent. More channels are taking the government's side and acting as government mouthpieces. People increasingly do not trust channels enough. There are increasing cases of arrests against journalists. All of this is happening while we are sitting in the US, just two days after CNN and several other channels were banned from the White House. These are enough instances to tell you about the hopelessness. But let me turn to the hopeful part.

A couple of months ago, an interesting protest took place in India's national capital. More than 100,000 people showed up, demanding the education minister's resignation. This government is known for refusing to resign; it has said plainly, "We don't do resignations." So, it seemed nearly impossible that such a demand would be met—especially since mainstream and legacy media, including TV channels, completely blocking out the protest.

If you watched TV in India, you wouldn't have seen any sign of the protest happening in the heart of the national capital. So, who was covering it? People like me: independent journalists, content creators, influencers, and activists. They made possible what mainstream media thought could not happen. The minister resigned after a month of protests—an outcome nobody thought possible in our country. Even veteran journalists and politicians could not have predicted that outcome.

That was a hopeful moment for independent journalism and the power it holds. Another hopeful moment is that I am an independent journalist from India, sitting here in New York and talking to you about independent journalism. These stories are refreshing for someone like me, who came very close to quitting journalism a couple of years ago because of the hopelessness. I would like to cover the risks we are exposed to as independent journalists and as consumers of independent journalism. Here are some statistics: 54% of people across 48 markets worldwide access news through social media and video networks. At least 77% of people globally watch online video news every week.

What does that tell us? We're increasingly moving away from television and newspapers and turning to social media for news. News is in our hands, wherever we go. But who are the people we trust on social media? Twenty-seven percent of people get their news from individual creators and influencers who focus on news. They are not journalists, but they are influencers who focus news. Forty-six percent get their news from creators of any kind.

Why is this risky? Let's look at the usual process of news delivery. I previously worked at NDTV, one of India's biggest news channels. In a traditional news channel, a story comes from a reporter, goes to an editor who checks it and makes changes, and is then broadcast by the channel. That is when it reaches the audience.

What happens on social media when influencers and others give you the news? It may come from a citizen reporter or citizen journalist—or it may simply come from an influencer or commentator. They post a video on a platform, and the algorithm decides who sees it. That is where the process ends. This is a clear distinction, and it explains why fact-checking and journalistic safeguards are often missing on many of these platforms. That is a major risk.

There are several green flags to look for when distinguishing journalists from influencers. If you look at certain social media videos, these are often missing: words like "allegedly," "reportedly," "officials said," "experts said," and "eyewitnesses quoted," or phrases such as "this person claimed" and "this politician claimed." Do you hear these words often on social media? You do not. You hear stories and conclusions, because that is what people like to hear and what the algorithm promotes. These are some journalistic green flags we should all look for when distinguishing journalists from influencers. It is more important than ever to be able to make that distinction.

Why is this distinction needed? Social media, digital journalism, and citizen journalism were supposed to be a cure for everything going wrong in mainstream media and television news. It was supposed to be the medicine for hate, sensationalism, bias, and agendas that we see on television news. But as we democratize news, we also democratize misinformation. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report, 47% of people think they get misinformation from online influencers. Another 47% think they get it from politicians and political parties. The report identifies online influencers as the biggest source of misinformation for people.

I want to give you some specific examples of how virtual misinformation has caused real-world damages. It has led to lynchings in my country and riots in several countries, including the UK. Those claims were made on our television channels late at night during Operation Sindoor last year, when India was involved in a very sensitive conflict with Pakistan. At a time when you would expect the greatest sensitivity, TV channels and social media were spreading sensational stories that kept people watching all night, sometimes until 4 a.m. These are real-world examples of why we need to care about this distinction.



Where does the problem come from? Social media was supposed to be a remedy for television and legacy media. But it has become a carrier of many of the same problems because we are once again selling extremism and outrage—that is what the algorithms reward. We are racing to be first and to be fast, at the cost of accuracy. If you post something first on social media, it is likely to be shared widely in WhatsApp and family groups. We serve conclusions and confirmation bias to the echo chambers supported by the algorithm. The social media engagement metrics have simply replaced the television ratings we criticized for so long.

Ultimately, we are trading credibility and journalism for activism and emotion. Blurring the line between journalists and activists is dangerous for both journalists and viewers. If I report on a protest as an activist or protester rather than as a journalist, you may give my report less credibility because you know I am part of the protest. But if I show you both sides—the violent incidents and the genuine ones—you may give the protest and its cause more credibility. So, in my view, when a journalist becomes an activist, it does a disservice to the story itself.

As I wrap up, I want to end on a hopeful note. We have talked about the issues and problems, but I think there's a promising way forward. This is something I'm trying to do with an organization I co-founded last year with a friend of mine, Vedant.

We're bringing the old-school journalism training we learned at NDTV into digital media: slick editing, 90- and 120-second videos, vertical Instagram formats, and language our generation understands. That does not mean simply copying Gen Z slang, because when you do that, young people do not feel seen. Combining digital-native writing and polished video production with old-school journalism is the sweet spot we need to nurture in independent journalism.

We might think that extremism and outrage sell, while objective, old-school journalism is boring and cannot make an independent news organization successful. But I am proud to show you my organization, Peak TV, which I co-founded last year with my friend Vedant. It is now one of India's fastest-growing independent digital news platforms, followed by more than one million people.

India has more than 1.4 billion people, so one million may not seem like a lot. But it is enough to show us there's room in the industry, that journalism can be aspirational again, and that people still see value in it and trust it. Bringing together the old-school journalism training we were fortunate to receive with our own strengths sets us—and other independent media platforms—apart. These platforms are becoming the replacement, and the new mainstream, I would say.

Femi Adesina, Journalist, Former Special Adviser to the President on Media and Publicity - Nigeria

Panelist: Strengthening public trust in media institutions against Artificial Intelligence and escalating disinformation trends

Femi Adesina is a journalist with over 40 years into the profession, post-graduation, a career trajectory spanning radio, television and newspaper. Adesina was Current Affairs Officer, Lagos Television, Radio Lagos, Features Writer Vanguard Newspaper, and he joined Concord Press in 1991 as Senior Writer. Femi Adesina spent the next 10 years at Concord Press, where he held different positions like Chief Correspondent, Deputy Features Editor, Features Editor, Deputy Editor, and ultimately Editor of the daily newspaper, National Concord. Adesina was pioneer editor of The Sun Newspaper in 2003, holding positions of Executive Director, Deputy Managing Director, and Managing Director/ Editor-in-Chief, respectively. Adesina is into media consultancy and holds the Notional Honors of Officer of the Order of the Niger. He is also a Fellow of the Nigerian Guild of Editors.



How do we strengthen public trust in media institutions against artificial intelligence and escalating disinformation trends? What can erode public trust in media? Falsehoods, unbalanced stories, and stories that are downright fabricated. We know that most of these are created by artificial intelligence.

Artificial intelligence is good; it has its uses and its positives. It also has its negatives, and one of them is that it escalates disinformation. When the media begins to peddle disinformation, it erodes trust. Those who get actionable information from the media then begin to lose confidence. That is why it is very important that we strengthen public trust in media institutions against artificial intelligence and escalating disinformation trends. It is a global trend. No country is immune from it. Every country in the world suffers from disinformation, particularly from AI.
So, how can the media strengthen public trust in itself? First, we must raise our standards as professionals. We know what the ethics are. When in doubt, leave it out. That is what journalism teaches us. Anything you are not sure of, don't publish. It is better not to publish than to suffer the resulting loss of trust.

Journalists and the media need to raise their standards so that, in the process of competing for news and exclusives, we don not end up damaging our own reputations. When you damage your reputation, there is no media left, because the public will not trust you. We also need to check and check again. Anything we publish must be checked repeatedly. In my career, spanning the last 40 years, I have had several instances of people giving me information they swore on their mothers' graves was true. But I checked and checked again. In the end, the information was not true. That is how an entire media house can fall into the trap of disinformation. So, now more than ever, the media must check and check again to avoid falling into the pit of disinformation.

Karen Percy, Journalist, Director, Karen Percy Ink - Australia

Panelist: Global wave of violence against women journalists: Regional challenges and gender-responsive solutions

Karen Percy is an Australian journalist and a vocal advocate for media freedom with decades of experience around the world. She promotes ethical, public interest journalism and diverse voices in the media. A former foreign correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting corporation and a legal reporter, she's been in the room with Russian Presidents, Thai Princesses, a Filipina First Lady and a notorious Australian criminal or two. Her long career has taken her from Australia to Canada to Thailand to Russia. For more than 7 years Karen Percy was an elected official with Australia's union for journalists, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, where she assisted in lobbying governments to take on the social media giants over misinformation and disinformation as well as Artificial Intelligence. She now has her own freelance business, Karen Percy Ink. Karen Percy's currently undertaking an academic research project looking at workplace practices to monitor, measure, and mitigate exposure to traumatic events and material.



I am humbled by this opportunity to speak today, to be in this room with incredible, committed leaders who want peace, prosperity and who strive for a free, equitable and united world. However, I take little joy in the topic I will be discussing because the rise in violence against women journalists around the globe is a persistent problem. Violent language, violent threats are now seen to be just part of the job.

The good news is that there are more women journalists than ever before.

They are doing great work holding power to account, reflecting their communities giving voice to issues and people. The bad news is they are given a hard time doing it. Sometimes they are killed - as ten women journalists were last year according to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists Among the 129 journalists and media workers killed in Ukraine, Sudan and of course Palestine, Yemen and of course Iran to that list of war zones. But outside of military conflicts, it is increasingly dangerous to be a journalist. They have died in Bangladesh, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Nepal, Peru, Tanzania, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

More often women will be threatened, undermined, belittled. Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, once said "What is not recorded is not remembered." This has a personal touch for me. I was sent to Islamabad after her assassination in late 2007. It was a momentous time, and I often reflect on the life she had, the sacrifices she made, but also that her failings are judged by many much more harshly than the failings of her male colleagues. Sadly, what we are recording, and remembering as Benazir notes is an increase in abuse of women journalists.

The brave editor of Rappler, Maria Ressa, in the Philippines, whose reporting on the violent actions of then president Duterte led to a number of criminal cases against her. The murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruna Galizia is still unresolved after her accused killer was recently acquitted. In recent days, journalists from three major media organizations in this country have been barred from the White House. It is no accident they are women. The International Women's Media Foundation has called it "A tactic to silence those asking difficult questions and ultimately to undermine press freedom". I absolutely agree. We are witnessing a blatant silencing of journalists, when leaders of political parties or leaders of nations think they can pick and choose which news organizations and which journalists cover them. When it is lawyers at ten paces to uphold basic media freedom. These are extreme cases and they are alarming.

But you do not have to be a high-profile anti-corruption reporter, or in the cross hairs of the us president to be targeted.In so many small and constant ways, women journalists are under attack.
It is even worse for diverse women journalists, indigenous journalists, women of color, members of the LGBTIQA+ community, those living with disability

In recent weeks I have been speaking to colleagues across the globe to get an understanding of what's going on where they are. It is a grim picture. In the Pacific, women journalists are poorly paid and overlooked for their important work in elevating women's voices and issues. And challenging the violence and inflexibility of governments and patriarchal systems. They are subjected to constant sexual harassment, where online trolls use modern day manosphere misogyny to reinforce rigid gender definitions and roles.

Women journalists across Asia and the Pacific are exposing wrongdoing and double standards every day, just like their male colleagues – yet they are subjected to sexist and very often racist attitudes. They are routinely prevented from covering risky and dangerous stories, or high-profile stories, because of deeply entrenched views of what women can do and where they can go. In countries like Australia the online information atmosphere is toxic and dangerous for women. It is a problem that has escalated in recent years.

In a 2020 global survey published by UNESCO, 20 per cent of women journalists associated the offline attacks or abuse they experienced with online violence. In the new 2025 survey –that share of journalists and media workers has more than doubled to 42 per cent. In the past five years, three quarters of women journalists reported online violence; that has not changed at all between the 2020 and 2025 studies despite activism and advocacy. What has changed is that now one in five women journalists are experiencing violence enabled by artificial intelligence. Yet another problem with artificial intelligence.

This is fundamentally a media freedom issue. When 51% of the population cannot do their jobs without fear it is a threat to media freedom. Many women journalists I know simply refuse to post their stories on social media; they just won't subject themselves to the hate. Because of violence and threats, women are being silenced. Again.

Gloria Steinem wrote a book published in 2019 and please excuse my language, but it is important to get it right. It was entitled "The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off."

Her death reminds us of the huge gains made by women, but also that there is so much work still to do. I fully appreciate that not everyone agreed with her tactics, her motives or her actions. But hers was a voice that was heard. Her actions made a difference. Yet there is so much more to do. The gender pay gap still exists for women journalists and that gap is 20-percent according to the latest report from the International Federation of Journalists. Women are promoted less. They are assigned lesser stories. The motherhood penalty is alive and well for journalists, who are overlooked again once they have a family. Their careers too often go backwards. Workplaces, made for the needs of men, become intractable and inflexible.

Women journalists in so many jurisdictions are penalized when they cover politics or sports, because the main players and news makers are men and so often don't want to answer questions or be accountable, especially to a woman. As a result of the persistent challenges to our existence, many women journalists ultimately bow out. We are in danger of losing some of those talented, motivated women who do not see a future in an industry that still refuses to fully accept them, and to fully utilize their skills, experience and knowledge. It is another way of writing us out of history. Again.

As brave education advocate, Malala Yousafzai, said "There is a moment where you have to choose whether to be silent or to stand up." It is not a time for silence. It is absolutely the time to standup. To support ethical, public interest journalism, and the people and the organizations still fighting that good fight. So I would like to wrap up with a call to action - you can do something to improve things for women journalists. Find a journalist whose work you like in your community or your country. Elevate their work, subscribe to their outlet, send letters to the editor commenting on their work, leave comments on their stories.

If you see a woman journalist being attacked or abused, call it out in some way in person if you can, via an online post or comment. Seek out media freedom groups or women's media advocacy groups, donate, volunteer, share their work.And more broadly, if you have an issue with news media reporting, you are concerned about accuracy or if there is an error or other concern - say something. Use the complaints mechanisms available to you, not just complaining online, because the quality of the news media depends on each and every one of you.

Keep it calm, keep it kind, but keep the journalists and media organizations accountable. Despite the chaos around us, indeed because of the chaos around us we must continue to utilize the mechanisms and tools for the checks and balances our society needs. As Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi once said, "Whenever you take a step forward, you are bound to disturb something." That is exactly what we need to do to build a better world for all. Things will be disturbed but progress is needed. Australia's first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, once said "In politics there's never a magic wand".

There are no easy fixes in anything. But there has to be the will to change and that is what is really lacking in my view. Politicians, governments, businesses, NGOs, ordinary citizens; we all have a role to play in upholding gender equity, freedom of the media, and ultimately democracy. It is as simple as looking around the room and asking yourselves: "Who is missing? Where are the voices we need to hear?" and then making sure those voices are included, fully and completely.

Abdulhamit Bilici, Journalist, Media Executive, Host of The Timeline - USA

Panelist: Turkey Case - Rising forms of transnational repression and digital attacks on journalists

Abdulhamit Bilici is a veteran journalist, editor, commentator, and media executive with more than 30 years of experience. He is the former Editor-in-Chief of Zaman, once Turkey's largest daily newspaper, which was seized and later shut down by the Erdoğan government. He currently contributes to Turkish Minute, TR724, MC TV, and Bold Medya, and hosts The Timeline and Kum Saati, programs exploring the ideas, events, and figures shaping global affairs. He studied Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University and holds master's and MBA degrees. Following the closure of the Zaman media group in 2016, Bilici was forced into exile in the United States, where he continues his work as a journalist and advocate for press freedom and democratic values. He recently testified before the U.S. Congress about media repression and democratic erosion in Turkey. The Virginia House of Delegates also honored him for his contributions to democracy, human rights, and press freedom. Bilici has spoken at institutions including the Middle East Institute, the Center for American Progress, the IRF Summit, and the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, as well as several U.S. universities. His opinion articles have appeared in The Miami Herald, Le Monde, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and other international publications. He has also appeared as a commentator and analyst on CBS News, BBC, NPR, Al Jazeera, and Sky News.



I would like to start by asking why media freedom and independent journalism are not part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. I was thinking about which goal they might fit into, perhaps SDG 16, which covers peace, justice, and strong institutions. But there is no explicit reference to the importance of press freedom, and that is missing for me.

Because my life, my story, and the story of the country I come from, Turkey, prove how important it is. I did a little research with the help of AI. AI is not always bad; sometimes it helps.

I asked which ten countries in the world were doing best in terms of press freedom, and it came up with a list: Norway, the Netherlands, Estonia, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, and Switzerland.

Then I asked it to compare those countries with the United Nations Human Development Index; which measures countries by health, education, income, and other important statistics. I found that most of the countries ranked in the top ten for press freedom were also in the top ten on that list.

So, there is a strong correlation. Countries with press freedom are more prosperous. To check my reasoning, I also asked about the ten countries performing worst in press freedom. The results did not surprise me: Russia, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, China, and North Korea. In terms of the UN Human Development Index, these countries are not all at the bottom, but they do not perform well. North Korea is unranked. Syria is ranked 162nd, Afghanistan 181st, and Nicaragua 113th. That tells us something important: there is a relationship between press freedom and quality of life. I always challenge the idea that press freedom is an elitist issue. It is not. It's an issue for ordinary people. Without press freedom, it becomes easier for people to steal from your pockets. It is that simple. We need to understand this, and as journalists, we should be able to explain it to our audiences, political parties, NGOs, the United Nations: press freedom is not just the freedom of journalists.

Yes, I lost my freedom in 2016. I lost my newspaper, which was the largest in Turkey. It was a huge media group: we had an English-language daily, a Turkish-language daily, and a news agency. Ours was one of 200 media outlets that were silenced. I later drove for Uber for four years to survive in Washington as an exiled journalist. But did people back in Turkey get better off? No. I will share some statistics that show they are not in good shape either. I lost my career and the good life I had. But the consequences were not limited to what I lost. Let me tell you what happened in my country. When Turkey was relatively free and democratic, around 2013–2014, one US dollar was worth almost two Turkish liras. I checked the exchange rate before coming to this panel today. Do you know what one dollar is worth now? Forty-nine Turkish lira. Can you imagine?

That is why I am calling for press freedom and independent journalism to be taken more seriously at every level—not just by the United Nations, but by governments, society, individuals, and NGOs. This is not a luxury topic. This applies to female and male journalists. Of course, I appreciate that we need to do more to increase the number of women journalists. But independent journalism in general should be part of our struggle for quality of life and democracy.

I would also indicate that when you leave the defense of press freedom and independent journalism to journalists, they cannot do it. Journalists cannot defend press freedom alone. I could not. We (Zaman Media Group) fought for three years, from 2013 to 2016. We kept our newspaper in print, kept our news agency running, and our reporters kept covering the news. We put up a good fight. But you cannot fight a government that has the courts, police, gendarmerie, intelligence services, and everything else. In the end, I felt hopeless. When the police came to raid our headquarters in Istanbul—which I am sure many of you saw, that magnificent building, now used by the government—I felt at my most hopeless. As a journalist and editor-in-chief of a huge organization, I had a lot of power. But against a state or government, you cannot do anything.

Journalists cannot defend a society or community against genocide, just as they cannot defend media freedom against their own state or another state. Do you know how many people and colleagues lost their lives in Gaza? The last time I checked, it was 256. They were trying to tell the story, to report that there was a genocide. They gave their lives. But were they able to stop it? No. Independent journalism can sometimes be a kind of prophetic work. It requires real bravery. People in power, from corporations to governments, from the military to the mafia, don not like being challenged. Once you do that and cross that line, you are crossed. I am standing in front of you as an example. I am not speaking as an academic; I am speaking from experience.

That is another reason why this issue must be taken seriously. It is vital for you, for me, and for everyone. I see climate change and many other issues included in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and I can connect all of them to press freedom. Most of them are related to corruption. Before going to sleep, I sometimes ask myself why I had to go through this persecution. The reason was corruption. The government became corrupt, we tried to expose it, and then we were punished.

I do not think it is fair to blame social media for so many of the media's problems and ethical failures. I come from conventional media, and conventional media was not always ethical or independent either. For example, in 1995, two journalists from one of the mainstream newspapers, Hürriyet, one of our rivals, almost started a war between Greece and Turkey. A Turkish-flagged ship ran aground on a small, uninhabited island. This was in 1995. Turks call it Kardak; Greeks call it Imia. It is in the Aegean Sea, part of the Mediterranean. Greek authorities said they would come to help the Turkish-flagged ship. The captain said no: it was Turkish territory, and he would not accept Greek help. There was already significant tension between the two neighbors, as there often is between neighboring countries.

The dispute turned into a question of sovereignty: which country did the small island belong to? Two reporters from that newspaper went to the island. They took down the Greek flag and put up a Turkish flag. Turkish army ships arrived to protect it, and we came close to war. If Bill Clinton had not intervened, if Washington had not intervened, we would have been at war. This was before social media.

The problems of ethics and independence in journalism have always existed. Digitalization has made them more widespread and created a bigger challenge. Media literacy is becoming essential because of the flood of information. Which sources are truthful and which are false? You can still be misled, but critical thinking can reduce the risk of getting the wrong information. The challenge is not just social media or influencers. You need to be critical of all sources of information. That could include a religious leader, a political leader, politicians, or anyone who might deceive you. We need to teach our children to think critically.

I also want to underline that the press is not an elitist or luxury issue. We should take seriously the role of independent journalism. Not all journalism is good, of course, but independent journalism is an important function of democracy. That needs to be understood. You cannot have democracy without independent journalism.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