

MOLLY WORTHEN: It's surprisingly unusual for faculty from different disciplines to get to talk in a sustained way about a subject of mutual interest. It doesn't happen enough. And so this is a really neat occasion just for that reason. And my hope for this panel is that we take a very clear-eyed look at some of the difficult, sometimes grim aspects of the political landscape today, but that we also veer at least briefly into some causes for hope, optimism. And if it's all doom and gloom, I promise you, I will force them to say something upbeat before we end.

We are going to have a period of of me firing questions at them and maybe some conversation among the panelists. And then we'll transition to Q&A, taking questions both from the audience. That's with us in person, as well as people who are watching over ZOOM, we're eager for your questions as well.

And afterwards, there will be some opportunity to continue that conversation more informally with the panelists. And this will all be available on our YouTube channel. So be aware of of that. Don't say anything that could have lasting ramifications if it lives forever on the Web.

I'd like to start with a big question. Is public discourse broken? And if so, what is the number one most important reason it's broken? And maybe, Shannon, we can start and go down the line and get us started here.

SHANNON MCGREGOR: Do I think that public discourse is broken? I think it has, you know, a pretty severe sprain that needs to be reset, maybe. And if I could trace it to one thing, I think one of the things, one of the reasons it's broken is that we have this erosion of democratic norms. And the idea that this marketplace of ideas, I don't know that this works anymore in an attention economy where what we're trading on is attention, and that that is what will bubble up to the top of the best ideas. And to go along with that I think, you know, where we can see this is that some ideas that are, I think we can agree, are maybe abhorrent, that make other people feel unsafe, that don't acknowledge the human rights of other people have become more accepted than they even used to be, you know, and in even my lived history - and I am 38 years old. And so I think that we can trace a lot of this, you know, to this priority that we have and in particular in this country, although it's of course central to all democracies, but this idea of freedom of expression. I'm a communications scholar, I used to be a journalist; this is super important, but I think that we have maybe gotten it a bit out of balance with the other freedoms that are necessary to a democracy.

MARC HETHERINGTON: Well, let me just agree with Shannon in pretty much everything that she said. You know, a severe sprain, I think is probably exactly right. One of the things that I'm struck by is how different even the conversation with my family is these days.

So I'm one of those rare people who grew up in a household with parents who have, you know, sort of different political leanings from actually all their kids - poor them. But anyway, you know, dinnertime: my Dad was a long time political operative and, you know, as a result dinnertime conversation was always about politics. And we talk and we talk and we argued and it was fine. These last 10 years or so, we can't even talk, you know, any longer.

And, you know, when I first started teaching - this was back in the mid to late 1990s, a long time ago - and, you know, nobody wanted to take political science courses. And, you know, getting people to talk about politics was really, really difficult.

Now, getting people not to kill each other when they talk about politics is the thing that's difficult. It's really very difficult. And I'm, you know, searching for answers. Now, I do think I have causes, and that's what my work is about, but I think the fundamental thing is: the thing that divides us politically now is just different from what it was when, at least, the panelists here were growing up. You know, politics used to be about social class, it used to be about how big the government ought to be.

Those are all things that we can compromise about. Those issues have departed in many ways, the political agenda, and they've been replaced by issues that are all about identities of various different sorts, whether it's racial, whether it's gender, whether it's sexual orientation.

These are things that are much more difficult to find common ground on. And I'll just give one example of this. You know, 9/11, of course, we just celebrated the 20th anniversary. Celebrated isn't the right word - we just recognized the 20th anniversary. And I remember my dad and I having an argument about whether it was better for the government to provide screening of things going through baggage claim or whether it was better for private enterprise to do that. He of course thought it was his private enterprise.

And, you know, that seemed like a really tough discussion. But both of us agreed that baggage claim ought to be scanned. Nobody thought we ought to just let people walk on the plane

without doing that. Now it's different. You know, the things that we disagree about are things that are the fundamentals of life, and that makes things much harder.

KURT GRAY: I guess I'll separate the kind of public discourse in the university versus public discourse writ large. There's been a lot of discussion about students being unable to have kind of civil discussions about controversial or contentious issues. And my experience teaching at Carolina is that students are capable of having great conversations, and I think the fact that we're doing this will see us through to that.

So, more broadly, things are more challenging than they used to be. Building off of what's been said before, I think what's different as well is that people tend to dehumanize others, right? When we had conversations, we had conversations with others that we knew were equals, right? And we recognized that they had thoughts and feelings like I have thoughts and feelings. But increasingly, we tend to see others on the other side as lacking essential human qualities, and as just - I mean, on the one hand - just being obstacles to our goals, but on the other hand just being enemies, right? People we see as bent on the destruction of ourselves and our way of life. We see them as not rational - working against their self interest. How can we take someone seriously if we think they're not rational. And lacking in emotion and compassion, right? We don't recognize that they probably have families they love, and they probably have hopes and groups. We see them as problems we run into on Twitter.

And I think one reason for this is issues have changed, and I think it's like Marc got at this, things are just moralized in a way that they weren't. And one of the thing spreading us apart is this infusion of morality into politics. And now when we disagree about politics, we disagree about morality, and now it's angels and demons. Not just two people trying to muddle through a complicated thing.

CLAUDE CLEGG: I'm not so sure if we're in a substantially different place now with regards to public discourse than we were I think in the 1990s, or in the 1960s, or in the 1860s. I think that if there are some differences between now and these other periods. The question I think, uh, whether or not our public discourse is broken presumes another questions, that is: was there a point at which it was fixed? Or in good repair? And what does good repair or good health look like in regards to public discourse?

I would argue that in a democratic society in which freedom of speech is something that is valued, is taken seriously, public discourse is going to be sloppy, it's going to have rough edges,

and it's going to be fraught and incivil. I think that's the price that you pay in a democratic society when people from different groups have their voices heard in public sphere.

So I think one of the main differences now is that there are so many different voices that can have access to the public sphere in ways that are not filtered. Social media is one example of that. That is, if you want to use your Twitter - and I've sort of been tinkering with it for the past year,

People who are famous on Twitter are nobodies in real life, but they're famous in that particular sphere. And they have an audience, sometimes an audience of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people who are their followers, but then you've never heard of them outside of Twitter. I think that that's new. I think that that's - whether or not that's helpful or not, I'm not sure. It certainly is an avenue for people who, perhaps their voices wouldn't otherwise be heard by us, to be heard.

But I'm not convinced that what we're seeing now in 2021 is absolutely different than what we saw in the 1990s. Go read some of the back and forth between the Republican Party and Democratic Party over Bill Clinton and the meaning of his presidency in the 1990s, or go read newspaper coverage of, let's say the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, or back to the Civil War period, the 1860s. Some of that stuff was really tough in the same sort of dehumanization, moral judgments of one's opponents and challengers. It reads about the same. I think here is just part of the human experience in 2021.

I think, because there's so much of it, perhaps it feels more onerous and burdensome, because there's so much speech and so many ways to access speech. Whether it's cable news, whether it's social media and so forth. So I think there's so much noise out there that perhaps it feels like we're in a different place. But I think the nature of it, the nature of the divisions have been there for a long time.

MOLLY WORTHEN: So it sounds to me like there are there are a few questions on the table that are actually highly debatable.

You know, one is the place of free speech in all of this. And whether free our cultural commitment to free speech has become hypercharged in a way that's actually poisonous and

counterproductive. Or whether free speech has become somewhat of an illusion, and too many Americans exist in the bubbles in which they really only exchange ideas with people who basically agree with them already. And we don't really have much of a free exchange of ideas at all.

It sounds too like there's some room for debate about the place of social media and the novelty of it, and whether the advent of social media represents kind of an ultimate advance in democratization and providing wider access to the public square, or whether it has kind of an anti-democratic outcome that kind of encourages even authoritarian tendencies in humans.

And then, I think this question of how new is all of this, and maybe that question in particular, but all of these, revolve in part around the question of who we are talking about when we say "American society is polarized." So are we talking about the mainstream media? The very partisan YouTube media? Are we talking about the average person on the street, whatever that means, however, we measure that?

University campuses - Kurt mentioned that maybe we should kind of think of them separately. Are we talking about political elites? What do you think about this, this question of who we are describing when we talk about the breakdown of discourse and polarization, and do we need to make some distinctions?

And now it's a free for all, by the way. So anyone who has an idea, feel free to leap in.

MARC HETHERINGTON: I'd be happy to speak to that. You know, if there's one thing that we know about public opinion, it is that it's deeply affected by leaders opinions.

This is a top down process. You know, having grown up on one side of polarization - that is, say, before 2004 or 2008 - and now experiencing this, I can tell you for certain, I did not wake up one day and say, man, I'm polarized today, whereas I wasn't before. Instead, I have gotten cues from elites that, you know, my team feels a certain way about certain things. And the other team is, you know, full of a bunch of, you know, reckless malcontents. And as a result, I reflect those things.

You know, all of this, you know, ordinary people are always just ordinary people. And this has been true - and Claude's point was really well made - we've been here. We've been here lots of different times, not just in American history, but in all history. And as Kurt is sort of getting at too, it's not like moralization of issues is new in the world, right? You know, I think we've had some battles over religious differences over the course of history.

So, you know, with that in mind, it wasn't that ordinary people woke up one day and said, "man, I just want to strangle my political opponents," it's that the leaders who represent them, you know, have provided a sense that these people who we disagree with are bad people with bad ideas, dangerous ideas, you know, in that respect.

So, you know, I think it's really important for us to start from right there. You know, people can be people; it's what leaders bring out in them that can make things either awful or manageable.

SHANNON MCGREGOR: Yeah, I'll jump in after that, and I was going to print it off to make sure that I got it right. But it's true that this is where we get our cues from. And so, you know, one of the things that we're concerned about when we're concerned about polarization is not necessarily - you imagine the polls, right? Not necessarily where we are on substantive issues, right? Of like who should be screening the baggage claim. But what callers are increasingly concerned with is what we call affective polarization and the particular animus towards people that you see differently than you, right? And feeling along those ways.

And if you ask partisans in particular, so people who identify as either Republicans or Democrats how they feel about the other party. Well, it's quite a bad, right? But there's a recent study that when you ask folks "Well who do you think of when you think of that?," it's the prototypical partisan, right? It's their leader. It's the person on cable news, you know, it's the person with tens of thousands of Twitter followers. But when you remind people that most partisans are not really that extreme, then it changes the extent to which they have this sort of outgroup animus. And so that's good, right? We can see how we can sort of get around some of these differences. Um, but I but I will also like I want to come around to this idea that: Is polarization even the thing that we should be most concerned about, right?

Of course we can't be too polarized in democracy. We have to be able to see the other side as legitimate, right? See that we can have debates, right? And if we become too polarized that might not happen. But I really think that any consideration of polarization in our U.S. democracy has to really start with an analysis of what polarization is, why is it occurring right

now at this point in our country, and what are the consequences for our democracy? So are we polarized around issues of racial and social justice, and of human rights? And have these movements for racial and social, social justice, which are pro democratic, does that polarize people? Of course it does. But in that moment, is the polarization the bad thing or is it the anti-democratic movement against that that is the opinion we should be concerned about? Right? So where do we place that sort of locus of concern when we are talking about things from a scholarly perspective and when we're talking about things just in the public sphere, whether it's on Twitter or it's on cable news. You know, I worry sometimes that our discussion about polarization, it paints this idea that there are the two poles are equal.

And if we're thinking about supporting democracy, that's not happening right now, right? There are anti-democratic movements in this country and there are movements that are moving further towards democracy. And I think that's important to think about when we think about the polarization.

KURT GRAY: I mean, I can add a little bit to that. It seems funny, I might have talked about - it seems we kind of switched roles a little bit when we talk about systems and institutions. But um, uh, you know, I'm a social psychologist - we think about "What are the forces that are influencing people?" And people of course have individual agency, but they're also really influenced by social norms and the systems. I focus on all those little ways. And social media. I mean, I think that incentives for institutions are not consistent with promoting civil discourse. I think part of that is what promotes polarization.

So a report came out last year, a little while ago now on "The Exhausted Majority" by an organization called More in Common. And what it found is that the average person doesn't really care that much about politics. They'd rather just now talk about it, right? They'd like to stay away from all this contentious stuff. But that person is probably the same person who goes onto Fox News or MSNBC, who looks at Twitter, right? And the Twitter algorithm pops up the most contentious post. So it's not that they don't care - they're not really polarized. But in another sense it's that the currents are taking them towards polarization.

I think people find themselves ultimately polarized, and affectively polarized and hating the other side, because of these cues in their environment. So they don't start out hating someone. And if you really ask them if they really hate someone they: "Well no, I guess I don't, upon reflection." But people don't [...] they just repeat back what they've heard, most typically. And so that can create an environment where people are just fed this terrible information, and they speak it back.

CLAUDE CLEGG: I agree with everything my colleagues have just said. I can't think of a word that they just said that's disagreeable to me. I think leadership matters, as was said before. What we hear from people whom we choose to lead us matters to us. And people look up to leaders, good ones and bad ones - and indifferent as well.

I also think that - and this is something that Shannon said - she mentioned an attention economy. I think there's an economics to our attention span, who gets our attention and how much of it they get and how they get and so forth. I think there are industries, cable news comes to mind, but certain other industries, that have mastered that art of getting the attention of American people. And manipulating and shaping it and so forth. But those journalists, journalism students among us, you'll probably be familiar with the term: "If it bleeds, it leads." That is, if there is some catastrophe that happens, something terrible happens, some war, some famine, so far, put it on the front page. That's what people want to see, or at least that's what we want them to see.

And I think that is the... I think it's the nature of news media and how news gets reported and what makes the news. I think that it's an open question about whether or not all of us want to hear the most sensationalist, extreme thing that is happening in the world every time we turn on the television or look on Twitter or Facebook and so forth. I would guess that there is certainly an appetite out there. And certainly if it was not an appetite out there for people for hearing the most sensationalist things, we would not have media and cable and others that would be feeding it to us.

I think the categories of elites, leaders, ordinary people, average people, those are some what soft categories and they're very porous. That is, I think university professors are generally unique. Whether or not we like to think of ourselves as such, I think that we're very privileged people. But at the same time, I think that many of us kind of think of ourselves as average people or somewhere in the middle state where we're not the extreme people in a society. But we also operate in the media market and attention economy and so forth. And we're kind of participants. That is, you have to write some book or articles to get the attention of people that are gonna write those letters that get you tenure and then so forth.

So we are also participants in a sort of attention getting economy as well. So, again, I would just reiterate that: 1) leadership matters. I also think that what was said by my colleague in terms of systems, in terms of larger chatter that are bigger than the than the individual, those sorts of

things -they're -those sorts of things I think are less visible to us. For example, the rise of cable media whether it's left or right. That's, something that takes place over 30 years. And I think it has more power than it ever has, but it wasn't something that fell from the sky overnight. Or that regardless of what people might say about cable news and so forth, it doesn't have a ready made audience that it has mastered and has mastered various narratives that we're talking about.

MARC HETHERINGTON: I wonder if I could add one thing along the lines of what Shannon mentioned. And, you know, I want to put a plug in for polarization, you know, on one level or another. And I know that's an unpopular thing, but it's really important because, you know, the roots of the polarization that we're experiencing now are to be found in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s and the gender rights movement, the gender equality movement in the 60s and 70s.

And the LGBT rights movement in the 90s. Now, that's caused a lot of polarization, a lot of strong feelings and stuff like that. But it's, it's a demonstrably better world as a result of those battles. And those battles having been won for democracy. You know, in the way that you put it. So I wanted to, you know, sort of put a plug in, you know, that. yeah, we're experiencing a lot of discomfort and stuff like that, but it's not for no reason.

SHANNON MCGREGOR: I'll just say briefly say too, in, I think it was, like, 1956, the Association of Political Scientists in the US said, you know, we're really worried there's not enough polarization. Everyone seems to agree on too much. And this is maybe not good for democracy.

So you're right. You're right. Polarization in and of itself is not inherently a bad thing. It's when it gets too far that we can't engage in democracy together that we worry about it.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I want to be sure we're not giving elites too much credit. I think about the, what I've learned in my time studying religious communities, and I've been struck by the very American phenomenon of church shopping. So it's not that the average American who seeks supernatural, moral guidance goes arbitrarily into the religious institution that's nearest them and immediately accepts the teaching, right?

It's much more common for a person to have their own presuppositions already about certain things: What's important, the nature of the divine, what a community should look like, what worship should feel like, and they choose according to that. And I see the same thing transpire in how people build their podcast playlists.

So it seems to me that Americans, and perhaps humans generally, do an awful lot of quite proactive choosing their own leadership. And once they choose that leader, that leader has very limited power to necessarily change their mind as they try to move beyond simply affirming what their flock already came in with.

One of the patterns in American religious history, if you look at the relationship between churches and the civil rights movement, for example, is that the clergy are time and again out ahead of their congregations and cannot bring their congregations with them to save their lives. And people leave the church rather than change their mind, to go along with what their leader is now telling them they should think. So I want to plumb this question of influence and how we develop the ideas we do. Because it seems to me that that's crucial to also pushing on this question of: is polarization good or bad? It matters not just, sort of, what the sides look like in a polarized environment, but also how we became polarized. As you arrive at your supposedly polarized position, you know, through a kind of rational empirical evaluation of the evidence or in some other way.

And, Kurt, you mentioned kind of systems and institutions and this broader environment of influence. And I know that this is something you spend a lot of time thinking about. Could you explain to us how humans change our minds?

About something important, you know, not about like a favorite ice cream flavor.

KURT GRAY: I mean, I like the religious analogy a lot, and maybe I'll push back a little bit on that. So, I think that people do choose a church.[..] choose a denomination that's fairly close to their parents' church. Or friends, or perhaps they got approached randomly on the first day of college by an organization and it seemed like they had nice people. I think there is a choice, but I think there's often a lot of invisible things that go along with that. And I think that the community you find yourself in reinforces some of your truths, but I think they come a lot from something internal.

So one thing I'm interested in - I'm sure we both are - is sermons, right? When people hear a voice in our head, and is that voice the voice of God or that voice their own voice? It's hard to tell. Enough where if I see a vision of a burning bush I and even ask "right, that's a hallucination, that's not like the truth of anything." And so what you do is you hear the quiet, still voice and then you bring it to your community and then they help you figure out if that has divine authority or not, right?

So I guess you could imagine that each of us has inside of us some kind of impulse. Whether it's good or evil - that may be too vague - or prosocial and antisocial, right? I'm going to bridge divides with someone who is different from me or I'm gonna call them an outsider. [...] maybe I haven an impulse, and then I go to my community to figure out which of those competing impulses should I embody, should I act upon. And so there I think it's a lot of what your environment is, your social environment, right? You maybe pick it initially, but I think you're shaped by it in ways that's hard to escape. If you look at when people are in cults for instance. It's really hard to escape the gravity, that social gravity of belonging.

So so, you know, so people do have choice and people do leave cults and then they do change churches, but I think that we want to belong so much that perhaps the gravity of other people keeps us in our ruts and the way we change our mind is perhaps when we decide we don't want to belong with a particular group of people and then we change our minds.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Haven't you recently been doing some research on the impact that personal experience and hearing the personal testimony of someone maybe you thought you disagreed with - as compared to hearing a very logical line of syllogisms - that actually experience makes more of an impact on people?

KURT GRAY: Yes. Molly's like "aren't you going to talk about your research?" But I really appreciate that prompt. So basically, when people talk to each other across divides, we think that the best way to do so is to marshal facts, right? We're in the land of data, in a country of, like, "I'm going to come at you with as many facts as I can and fire them as fast as I can, and eventually I'm going to fact you into submission, right? You're just going to bow under the power of my statistics." It never works, obviously.

We're all people who have had this conversation. It never changes someone's view on abortion based on some solid statistics. But it turns out that if you have a personal experiences about your beliefs, especially those grounded invulnerability, in your own suffering, those are the kind

of things that make others see you as rational. Because you're basing your beliefs now on your own personal history and experience and those are the kinds of things that they'll listen to.

SHANNON MCGREGOR: Really interesting. If I can just jump in here, because in communication - in the news media research - we talk about these two different ways of telling stories, right? In like a journalistic perspective, something is framed episodically. Right? So that's like it's about this one event or someone's personal experience. And in general, when we think about that as it relates to social problems, that that's like bad, right? It's not about the cops killing this one black man. It's about this happening over and over and over again. It's an institutional problem. So when we tell the story individually, it doesn't relay at all. But it's hard to square that then with the idea that, like interpersonally, this might work better.

So how can we come up with a communication system and think about where in our media environments that we can have both, right? That we can have both the personal experiences, which may cause people - I imagine part of this process must be seeing the other person as more than just what I perceive their identity to be, but to see them as human, right? And that means no one is a Republican or a Democrat anymore, or a man or a woman. I'm seeing them as a human who has this story that I can empathize with, right? In some way.

So how can we figure out places in our media systems where we can have these stories? But we can also hold the institutions and social systems that put people in those situations over and over and over again accountable, right? I don't have an answer.

MARC HETHERINGTON: Just to piggyback on that: You know, the Covid data collection that we've done over the course of the last 18 months shows really powerfully how personal experiences and personal fears affect people's positions on things. You know, if politics were entirely top down, you know, Republicans would not be afraid of Covid. They would not support mask mandates, they would not support business closures and things along those lines.

But in our data collection, over 50 percent of Republicans supported all of those things over the entire course of the pandemic. Now, Democrats did it 80 and 90 percent, so there's a big difference between them, but what we found was that it's Republicans who either had a personal experience with someone affected by Covid or themselves were just scared.

You know, it's amazing what, you know, personal experience can do to politics. But I am going to say this: boy, the the pull of partisanship is something else. You know, especially in this day and age. I think about this all the time, you know, that the sort of exemplar of conservatism from my era is Ronald Reagan, you know. And Ronald Reagan dubbed the Soviet Union the evil empire. And people who were Republicans then are Republicans now, you know, for the most part. And yet those same Republicans, they like Vladimir Putin better than they like even Michelle Obama.

And that's unpredictable. Except for, you know, if we have sort of top down understanding of things. Before Donald Trump ran for president, most Republicans were in favor of free trade. Now they're in favor of trade barriers, you know, tariffs. So, you know, especially about things that we don't know very much about, you know, leaders can have a big impact. Now, on the things we have personal experience with, though, or, you know, something as intimate as a church, the leaders, I think, have less of an impact.

MOLLY WORTHEN: While we're on the topic of rationality, Claude, I'm wondering how your research on Obama has shaped your view of the place of reason and rational argument in politics. I think of Obama as just a paragon of making rational cases. So tell us what we can learn from that period.

CLAUDE CLEGG: One thing that I think all of us have learned, or is, at least, a lesson that's out there for us to interrogate is that the notion of facts is an unstable thing. What are facts, who's the custodian of facts, what is evidence, how you can deploy evidence and so forth. I think that one of the things that the 21st century world has certainly demonstrated to me is that 1) there's a good amount of our country, women and men and people around the world, who are suspicious of expertise. They're suspicious of elites, they're suspicious of science and so forth. And not only that, there's a belief out there that anyone can go and get the facts and that their facts are as good as anyone else's. That is, if I spend two hours on YouTube looking at the right kind of videos, then I've become an expert, you know?

Or if I read enough of those Wikipedia articles - and nothing against Wikipedia for a first pass at something - but if I go and do "the research" on the Internet or online or so forth, then I too can make a judgment about whether or not people should be wearing masks. I too can make a judgment about the value of this ideology or that ideology, and I should be suspicious of those who claim to be the experts, the the the scientists, the professors and so forth.

On one hand, that sort of leveling of expertise or democratization of it is probably not a bad thing, at least on the surface of it. But at the same time, it's a bad thing in regard to people putting that sort of unfettered belief in what they find on the Internet and online and so forth, and believing that exposure and exposure to a series of YouTube videos and so forth makes them an expert or makes their opinion more valid than, let's say, people who've been studying something for 30 or 40 years.

In terms of the Obama presidency, that's a through line, I think, that goes beyond his presidency and certainly goes in to the successive presidency. That is, this sort of erosion of our common understanding of what "the facts" are or what science is and so forth. I think that started before Obama, but I think it sort of accelerates during this time period, in so far as the opposition arrayed against him is such that his partisan opponents, the Republican Party, are willing to sort of go back on things that they previously thought were good ideas. Where it's cap and trade or whether it's a mandate to get people to buy health insurance or whether it's free trade and so forth. To go back on things that were sort of orthodoxy in opposition to that particular individual in the White House at that time, because he believes or he's reaching out with an open hand, all these things that previously were not contentious, things, you know, paying your bills or raising the debt ceiling and so forth just to pay your bills, it was nothing. Nominating somebody to be a Supreme Court justice and having that nominee, even if they're going to get voted out by the other party, at least they get a hearing.

So just the sort of rules of the road, I think, have been sort of thrown aside in the name of power. In the name of the partisan gain and so forth. But I also think there's a larger problem in regard to where folks, and you can almost chart this along partisan lines - I think that's been said already - where they stand on basic facts, historical fact, scientific facts and so forth. And you can almost guess where they stand just based on their partisan identification. And I think that's new. I think that, you know - the politicization of mask wearing. You know, you can almost determine which party is more pro mask or which party is more anti-mask or vaccinations and so forth. These vaccinations have always been contentious.

I don't think you've been able to trace them in a sort of partisan lanes in the same sort of way. And it gets back to the question of who are the custodians of facts? Who is a specialist? What do you think about specialists? Skepticism about expertise and so forth. And you can also chart that along partisan lines as well.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I appreciate you bringing our focus to this question of expertise and the alienation between experts and the public. You can go back and look at a book by a historian

named Richard Hofstadter, who wrote this book in 1963 called "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life," and his argument is that this is one of the great through lines of American history from the very beginning. And it ebbs and flows, but there there is in kind of the DNA of the country, this hostility toward, you know, a self-declared elite who claims to know something you don't, and it's worse sometimes than others.

But so if it is this longstanding pattern, it seems especially germane to our situation at a university, right? I mean, the alienation between UNC and much of the rest of the state is also an old theme. The nickname "Red Hill" goes back more than a century. But we are in a trough there. And I think that's a national pattern that is of concern to all of us. And we wouldn't be part of this UNC community if we didn't have some regard for experts and their role in making complicated situations clear.

So my question is, what do you think experts can do? People who are in that role of having, you know, a hard won body of knowledge at their disposal that they think has some public good? What can they do to rebuild that trust, or what needs to happen? You know, if it's not that the expert that has the agency, what needs to happen to rebuild that bridge of trust between the people who have the expertise and people who might benefit from it?

CLAUDE CLEGG: I think it's been a fairly rickety bridge the whole time between elites and the experts and so forth and the rest, that is, the common people. I think that there's always been a suspicion, whether it's class based, socioeconomic, whether it's education and so forth. But I just think that's probably been there for a long time. And I think that certainly there's enough blame to go around.

I think that in regard to the elites - and I think that many of us are on that side of the ledger - I think that well, there's a saying that the people who rule the world are the people who tell the best stories. And I believe that's right. I think that many of those of us in academia, and corporate elites and so forth, we tell stories to ourselves, we tell stories to help replicate and clone ourselves and the next generation of us, which are not the stories of everybody else. And that's not - and I think we can simply presume that our stories are the stories of what everyone aspires to be. And that's not necessarily the case. That people want to be university professors, they want to be elites, or they want to be politicians and so forth.

I think for public universities, universities like this - I was looking at something that was recently circulated by maybe the Chancellor's office. And he was saying for the nth year a row, twenty-

first year in a row of something, UNC is in the top five public universities. Which is wonderful. You want to be a, you know, a student at the university, that you want to be a professor. What does that mean outside of the university? What does it mean to the man or woman in Carrboro, or, you know, a woman in Greensboro at UNC? What does that mean to them? What is that to celebrate? You know, that was great. We have a great university. But what does that mean outside of Chapel Hill, outside of the university campus?

One of the departments I'm in is the history department. It's a wonderful department. I suggest everyone take history classes. Everything has a history worth knowing about. It usually rates in some high slot and so forth. I think many of us think - whether it's the history, the political science department, neuroscience and so forth - that having a great top 20 history department is a great thing in and of itself.

I think that, and thus we don't have to tell a different kind of story about why history is important. Well, we have a great department and so forth. People in Raleigh, however, don't ask that question. That is they don't proceed from the premise that having a great history department in of itself is a cure or is a benefit. The question they would ask is how does having a great history department matter to my constituents, matter to people looking for job and so forth. Which makes us elites - having not told the story of why a great history department is a great thing to have - we have to tell a more convincing story about why we should give raises around here, why the university should be invested in and so forth.

So I think especially on the sort of elite side of the equation you were talking about, Molly, those who are comfortable or uncomfortable with the term of being an elite. I think those of us who are tagged in that way have done a very poor story of telling why 1) we matter, and why the things we tell you that should matter matter to others. Why have a world class history department?

Why does that matter? What's a world class history department? Again, those are elites talking to elites talk. Others don't proceed from the same premises that that elites are proceeding from. And we've done a bad, those who are privileged in this society have done a bad job, I think, or a not so good job of trying to convince people why we matter.

SHANNON MCGREGOR: I think that some of the anti-elite or anti-intellectual or anti-fact or whatever, whatever the lines of differentiation that we would like to lay them along, is also about representation.

You know, I think for the vast majority of our history, at least in this country, I don't think we're alone in this. And even in my lifetime, which is not enough, we have not seen people in positions of power that look like most of us. And I don't mean just our skin color. I mean they don't sound like us; our background. And I think representation is a really important part of it. But we have to communicate that, right? And so then it's about how do we tell that story, right?

I feel pretty strongly that I'm not going to change my vocal fry of saying like because I'm a youngish woman. That is just part of who I am. And I don't need to sound like someone else to be authoritative, to to claim the knowledge that I have worked, you know, quite hard to build. And so I think that's also what I mean when I think about representation, right? And being our authentic selves, when we do get to those positions of power.

Because I think one of the things that happens - becoming an elite in whatever way - we draw those lines, those are lines of differentiation, right? Now I'm a doctor, right? Or now I'm this. And like I'm pretty stoked that I'm a doctor, right? Like, my PhD was really hard! But I'm not going to let all those other things go. And in the classroom, I try to work very hard to communicate that like, yes, that's part of me and where I get my knowledge from.

But so are the other things that are me, right? And that that's also part of it. And so I think, you know, I don't think that's going to fix everything. But I think like when I think about being in the classroom, trying to communicate that authority doesn't look one way, I think can help combat some of that anti intellectualism and anti elitism because it doesn't look one way, right? But I think it has, especially in the public mind or in the public imagination for quite some time.

So I think that you're asking what can we do, you know, and individual agency, I think that's one thing we can do is to try and communicate that it takes all shapes and forms and vocal fries to make us an intellectual elite.

MARC HETHERINGTON: I wonder, Molly, if I could go back to your reference to Hofstetter, because it's such a good one. And, you know, I'm a huge fan of his work. And what he points out, what I really think is important about this is we've had this anti intellectual strain since the beginning, you know, since the founding and it's not just here, you know, it's in all countries.

The question is, does it become politicized? And sometimes it does. But most of the time it just sits latent, you know. One party is not the anti intellectual party, you know?

But that's what we're living through right now. Like, you know, it's not inevitable in the world that that that right-wing parties are against or don't believe in climate change. You know, in France, even the National Front, you know, thinks that climate change is happening and, you know, it's something that needs to be combated. In the rest of the world, it's not a given that right-wing parties are going to be against mask wearing or vaccination or things along those lines. It's true here because, you know, the the people who seem to have a tendency, a worldview that might predispose them towards this anti- elitism are clustered in the same party. That's not inevitably the case, but that's what's developed over the course of the last 40 years.

And that's what makes this moment, you know, kind of a difficult one to deal with. Because, you know, you think about, you know, if you were to say before, say, the 2020 election, what percentage of Republicans would say the election was stolen? You know, you might say, well, you know, there's probably, you know, some 20 percent, you know, who would think that. And that would be like the 20 percent of Americans who are really kind of conspiracy, you know, sort of related.

But you know what? 70 percent of Americans believe that. And that's sort of - republicans, right. You know, and in that sense, you know, you mix partisanship with this sort of tendency toward anti eliteism. You tell people that, you know, scientists or whatever, that's playing to an audience that already exists, and that's the base. But it also infects people well beyond that group of people. So the, you know, that latent 20 percent say that's always out there, not a problem we've always had it, right? But when it gets mixed together, you know, in some sort of political way, then that that top-down part of public opinion that I was talking about earlier really becomes an issue.

KURT GRAY: You mentioned, conspiracy theory. And I wonder if that's something that, there's always been conspiracy theories, obviously. But I wonder if the distrust of elites is not just that - you can imagine a continuum, right? So, like, holding elites up high or just thinking that they're useless egg heads.

But the rise of the system of conspiracy beliefs that puts elites like academics not just as useless but as totally deluded, in some sense, correct? So I think there are elites even for people who

say they don't like elites, like "Q" is an elite, right? Like, here's this secret person who has infiltrated the government and knows so much about so many things that people don't have answers to. People go, Qanon folks go to Q, and Q gives them prophecies and they think that's true, right? They look up to people who are elite. It just so happens that that whole worldview casts the rest of us as, like, trapped in a matrix of our own delusion, right? And so I think it's different now because everyone does love elites but they are elites that are in radically different worldviews, that attack each other as totally deluded.

And so I don't know how we get - part of our mission should be like: "Hey, let's everyone go back to the elites that we used to love," or we should just ignore that's us, right? Like, we were, were the leaders now instead of Q. But, I think, you know, you study religion, and I don't know [...] but there's a worldview that's catholic and there's a worldview that's protestant and there have fundamentally different perspectives on some things. So I don't know if that's where we are now with our views of elites or if we just have different elites that are fundamentally different.

MOLLY WORTHEN: And the old elites, the good elites, have they not figured out the attention economy the way that some of the newer elites have?

I think now is a good time to go to questions from the audience. We've got a traveling microphone for those who are here with us in the space. So, if you have a question for all or any of our panelists, please raise your hand, and the mic will come to you. And we'll also take some questions over Zoom too.

Audience Question: *How do you – and who gets to – define what constitutes democratization or a good democracy?*

SHANNON MCGREGOR: Um, I think that, you know, I guess I don't believe that we are either in or not in a democracy. I think we're always - it's not like a state that we exist in. We're moving closer to it as defined by, you know, not just us. I think we can probably all debate the meaning of democracy and what are the definitions of democracy.

I think some of them are fundamental human rights. And so we're either moving closer to that or moving further from that. And sometimes moving closer to that is a huge rupture, right? It's war. It's, you know, people being killed on the streets.

I'm not saying that's good, but those are parts of the hard movements to or from different things. And I think what I'm trying to say is what we should not necessarily be concerned about is just that we are moving in opposite directions, like the polarization, but which directions are - how do those line up with directions to democracy or away from democracy? That's not always going to be the same, right? But I think that it's not just the polls in and of themselves and do we disagree, but where do we can we also add in the axis of democracy there?

And are any of these things moving us closer towards a more ideal, fundamental human rights for everybody? Or are they moving us further away from that? And so that's sort of where I see some of the distinctions.

MARC HETHERINGTON: Yeah. I don't shy away from the idea that there are good guys and bad guys, you know, in these struggles. You know, when the founders wrote "We the People," they weren't talking about that many of the people, you know, at the very beginning.

And you know, what it seems to me is that in the arc of the last 200 and some odd years has been in large measure filling out the roster of who the people actually are, you know. You know, Abraham Lincoln is one of the good guys. Jefferson Davis is one of the bad guys. You know, I don't I don't shy, you know, from that. I'm sure that there is some, you know, in the moment moral sort of justification for, you know, Jefferson Davis' side, but I don't think, you know, history has treated it especially well. So, you know. Yeah, you know, in in that sense, you know, especially as it relates to, you know, issues of fundamental rights, you know, fundamental civil rights, I think that's I'm pretty comfortable there.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I'll just add that one of the scariest things that you read among commentators who do worry about civil war, I mean, it's not it's not a totally fringe idea, is the incredible geographical concentration and self segregation of people who have such different worldviews.

Especially the rural-urban divide, which is certainly not just American pattern, but the fact that we are physically surrounded by people that we view as an "us versus them" makes these kinds of historical analogies not totally far fetched.

SARAH TREUL: Yeah, just one quick comment on that as someone who teaches the American founding, I'm thinking back to this elite question and how much of our disdain for elites is sort of baked in to the initial creation of our country. The whole set up was "Elites are gonna rule and that's because we're the enlightened ones, because we know more." And there's truth in that, right? Um, [...] I want to go back to free speech and expression, that came out of the very beginning, and I think that's a really interesting question, right?

Obviously, it's an important liberty to express yourself. It's deferred in the constitution. Super important. Now, that being said, I think what you brought to our attention is that our thoughts about freedom of speech have become convoluted with just because you can say something doesn't mean you should.

And so thinking about how we can do a better job of explaining that component, right? You might have the freedom to say something, but how do we explain that that's not in your best interest? That's certainly not society's best interest, right? What are the institutional structures that we can set up around speech [...]. And then alongside that is - what was I saying? Maybe I'll just leave it there. I don't want to take up any more time. [...]

SHANNON MCGREGOR: I think it's a really important question, I'll kick it over to the social norms in a second because I think that's a huge part of it. When I'm thinking about this I try to talk with my international colleagues about this. You know, we're not the only democracy out here, so I think it's important to get an international perspective about these things.

But, for example, in Germany, which is a well-functioning democracy, you cannot deny the Holocaust. That speech is prohibited, right? I don't know that we should that. I'm just saying that there even in functioning democracies, there are limits that look different than ours in this country.

I think another thing, though, is like, it's about social norms. We get a lot of these cues from elites about what is acceptable, what is good. I think a lot of stuff, especially when we talk

about the Internet and how things have changed, you know, social media, how it's changed our communication, you know, in the early days of the Internet, the idea of trolling was like to just see how far you could push it. And that was a particular type of individual that had the privilege to sit around and say, let me just see how far I can push it, right? The type of individual that has the freedom of speech to see how far they can push an idea in the marketplace of ideas because there are not going to be personal consequences for them. That's a real privilege, and I don't think we contend with that when we think about freedom of speech a lot.

And I think that, you know, as the Internet has developed its own culture and different platforms have their own cultures and norms, you know, I think that that the freedom of speech has gotten pushed to "just to do it," not necessarily because of a belief in in some fundamental thing that I'm saying.

And I'll quote my colleague, Dr. Deen Freelon, who's also in the School of Journalism and media with me. We had an event with our Center for Information, Technology and Public Life not long after the insurrection on January 6th - trying to make sense of anything. And he said: "you know, we were talking about freedom of speech and how far can we push ideas and he said, you know, like, I want to make racists feel bad again, like I want to make when people say racist things, like that should be bad again."

And so I think a lot of it ties into our social norms, you know, and how do we set social rules around acceptable speech? They don't have to necessarily be laws. We get elite cues, we get group norms, but like where did those social boundaries have gotten pushed and how might we rethink them as groups within a multiethnic and multi-functioning democracy?

KURT GRAY: I really like the point about just because we can say something doesn't mean we should, and I think there is a huge focus on rights, like the Bill of Rights!, but, you know, it takes rights and responsibilities, and I feel like people don't feel particularly responsible for any creation of discourse norms or an environment where you can have a constructive dialogue.

And I think one reason for that is that everyone feels like a victim oftentimes in conversations, right? So I think we can agree that there are people who are more objectively victimized in American society, but, ultimately, whether you're a victim exists in your own mind, right? So you can, you can feel, you can be someone who's disrespected by a retail worker and feel like more of a victim than someone who survived the Holocaust, for instance, right? Like it really exists in your mind. So when everyone goes around thinking that they are the victim of

someone, you know, trying to suppress their rights somehow, I think that's not the best basis to create fundamentally civil dialogue. We have to be willing to take responsibility for saying like "maybe I won't say that thing that's incendiary because my goal is really to have a constructive conversation. It's to learn and not incite."

So I think this is why universities are amazing, right? Because our goal is to learn. And I feel like students typically do take responsibility in having those civil discussions, but I'm not sure that's all we share.

CLAUDE CLEGG: I think underneath your question and what's been said is, I think the fundamental notions in regard to the individual and individual rights and individual civil liberties and the notion of community and where those two things interface and sometimes are in friction. And I think it's one of the underlying themes or thematic strains in American history. That is, the notion that the individual has certain rights as articulated in the founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence in the Constitution and so forth.

To defend speech is one of those rights and freedom of expression and religion and worship and so forth. But then the question of whether, what're an individual's rights within the larger understanding of a national community or responsibilities of citizenship. And throughout the history, it's sort of in a back and forth.

And I think if you could, if you look at world history, you can see extremes on both sides. You can see fascist societies in which the individual has really had no rights or totalitarian communist authorities in which the notion of community trumps all. And then the situation in which, you know, purely sort of libertarian societies - I'm more hard pressed to point to those, in which those individual and individual rights and so forth, trumps whatever the larger interests of the community might be.

I think we're in a moment like that now of the mask debate. The pandemic and vaccination and the question of whether an individual right to go out and take his mask off and breathe there and so forth, or do I have some responsibility to the larger community and the health of the community and so forth. And I think that's bound up in all our conversation about tax policy and infrastructure. And how are you going to pay for this and how are you going to pay for that? That is this conflict, this interfacing of the individual and what are due to the individual in regard to rights and privileges and so forth, including the right to free speech and then the

larger notion of community that is what does the individual owe to a larger community and and the responsibility that individual, an individual, has beyond him or herself.

So, yeah, I think that's the more fundamental tension under any debate about free speech. That is this notion of, sort of corporate - and not in a sort of economic sense - but a sort of a unitary, you know, America versus the sort of rugged individualism that some people take very seriously as a thing that should privilege all actions above any sort of consideration of what's best for larger imagined communities.

MARC HETHERINGTON: Another thing I'd add too Sarah, I think that the premise is so smart and I don't have anything much to add except for that it's not just like in the political realm where I think that this is really important.

I mean, you know, I've been you know, I follow sports, you know, really closely. And the types the kind of abuse that, you know, women, professional tennis players receive and, you know, this poor fella and, you know, who tore his cartilage yesterday and a game for the forty-niners after the second play. People are calling him "glass". And and, you know, "wimp," you know, all of these things. I mean, where where's the décor? I mean, where's the filtering, you know, of people just using good judgment. I mean, it's horrible. And it's not just in politics. It's across the room.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Can I follow up, though, because the question of decorum reminds me of a word that has become somewhat controversial, especially on the left, and that is "civility." So I hear from all of you a call for more civility, more restraint, not saying the thing that you might be thinking or the thing that you want to say to provoke. But there's also an argument that you encounter around many progressives, that say that this is call for stability is a call to silence voices that haven't been heard and need to be heard. How do you balance that critique against what you've just been saying?

SHANNON MCGREGOR: I don't think that I am in favor of what we might have very traditionally called civility. You know, I think that we need to see each other as members of a community, but as a diverse community.

And the idea of civility has you know, I'm not saying that that's how we might define as academics, but within our sort of public conversation, has most often been like being like a pretty polite white dude, has for a long time been what civility meant and like that's sort of what you would aim to talk like if you were going to be civil with someone else. And we wouldn't bring up personal facts and you wouldn't insult someone. But when your human rights and your ability to have any power within a society is being threatened, sometimes, how can we come back with civility to someone who doesn't respect you fundamentally as an individual because of some aspect of your identity?

And so I'm not necessarily in favor of civility in the way that we have, like, I think thought about it in the public imagination. But I think what we need to do is be aware of those that might prompt us to think or act uncivilly or to speak out without thinking, right?

So a lot of people talk about, you know, I'm sure some of y'all have seen *The Social Dilemma*, right. Like there's somebody pulling the strings behind Facebook, making you angry and making you sad. And I think that's a bit simplified. But I do think that our emotions are really powerful. And so when your first instinct is to be angry and if you respond in that, that can be uncivil. It can also be the thing that can rupture the community, right?

That can break that bond within the social tie. So it's like, can we take a breath sometimes? I think that's good. I don't think that our media ecosystems are necessarily built for that. And not just social media. You watch a cable news show. People aren't taking a breath, you know, either necessarily. So, yeah, I don't know. I feel very torn about the idea of civility.

KURT GRAY: I think I can distinguish between authenticity and malice. I think you should be able to express your views authentically and not to have to tone police or masking what you actually feel or what you've experienced. But I don't think you should say something just to twist the knife. So like using a slur. I don't think that, you know, like it's protected by free speech, of course, but does that, is that your [...].

MARC HETHERINGTON: One thing I'd add, I mean, I'm no expert on this at all, but, one of the questions I think you asked had to do with persuasion early on and, you know, how do you persuade people. And, you know, being uncivil generally doesn't work to do that. You know, I'm not suggesting that people shouldn't have the right to be uncivil, but if you're trying to persuade somebody, it's probably important to not start with, you know, calling names, you

know, because you're not going to get very far under those circumstances. So, you know, that's probably just a consideration to keep in mind.

Audience Question: *How much is the lack of trust in experts the fault of experts themselves, particularly regarding issues of replicating results from social science experiments and the CDC and Dr. Fauci changing mask mandates towards the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

SHANNON MCGREGOR: I'll take a tiny crack at that and then pass it on. I think a lot of it has less to do with how experts necessarily answer, but also people's ability to deal with ambiguity and changing minds. You know what I mean?

Like, I don't know that we're very good at that, you know, updating our beliefs. I don't mean our fundamental beliefs, but like, oh, I used to think this was OK. And now actually, I'm not sure that's OK, right? And that that idea of changing your mind or updating your beliefs is seen as like a character flaw now. And so I don't know, that's not necessarily about how an elite is acting or communicating, but more about our culture and society, about changing minds is a problem.

MOLLY WORTHEN: And I see this in the debates between creationists and defenders of the theory of evolution. You often hear from critics of evolution that "it's just a theory," "it's just a hypothesis," and it has all types of holes.

But that critique is premised on a very faulty understanding of what the word theory means in modern science and that's constant across the division. But that's not to say there isn't a certain hubris. In one way you can see the crisis of the social sciences as discipline correcting itself and the process working, but you can also see it as a real sign of hubris. That that would decimate the authority of those experts.

What does the social scientist think about that question in particular?

KURT GRAY: Yeah. I mean, one) it's not particularly unique to the social scientists, right? Most medical studies don't replicate either, right? But I mean, if I say if I say, look, most medical studies don't replicate, so if your doctor says don't take your hand in a blender. I feel like, you

probably shouldn't stick your hand in a blender, even though we still have doubts about some empirical studies published by the medical community.

So I think most of social science's do replicate, but the kind of, the most interesting kind of skim on the top of it that makes its way into articles from the New York Times bestseller, I feel like those things often don't replicate. But the principles underlying it are sound, as what Molly was saying.

And so I think, I think we have done ourselves a disservice, though, because we like to point fingers like "Your research is wrong, I should get your grant dollars and you shouldn't." We don't do a good job of saying like, "look, we're a 99 percent agreement here about everything and we're just disagreeing about the margins," because people see that as like we're disagreeing about the whole edifice, so I think we do bear some responsibility. But I think when we come out and say that we're making ourselves better, right, that's what we do, that's the scientific principle, people don't say, well, some science is wrong, and then they reinforce their existing beliefs or partisan identities. So we're maybe a little bit to blame.

Audience Question: *How should we think about the relationship between religion and philosophy to politics, and will we ever stop moralizing political issues?*

MARC HETHERINGTON: Well, the one thing that I toss in, I don't know if this is super helpful, but, you know, these moral issues become politicized when it's advantageous to one side to do it. And then after that ceases to be advantageous any longer, then it disappears. And, you know, you made reference to gay and lesbian rights in particular, when it when when I was a young professor, you know, this was an issue that became politicized, you know, both through the courts and then, you know, through the party system.

But although, you know, I don't mean to downplay that the issue has been resolved. It's not as political as it used to be. It's not raised in political discourse because the country has embraced the rights of gays and lesbians, at least. Transgender, you know, well behind, you know, you know, that curve. But the point being that there's a politics to these issues and they they become valuable when they can be used for political purposes. And once they serve that purpose, they they tend to disappear.

CLAUDE CLEGG: I detect in your question the assumption that a lot of people make about history is that the notion of it is repeating itself, the cyclical notion of history, that is, things sort of keep happening in the same way and so forth. Someone wiser than I once said, that "History has repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes." And I think that's exactly right. Sometimes it does rhyme. That is one period looks like another period looks like another period. It looks like people are doing the same thing in this period and so forth.

Different periods of history have different actors and different circumstances making decisions on their unique factors and variables and so forth. So while in the sort of grand sweep of history, it looks like, oh, World War One kind of looks like World War Two or Vietnam looks like the American failure in Afghanistan and so forth. There are so many different things that are going on in a particular historical environment that make it unique, even if it looks like some of the outcomes are very similar. So I think that you're very astute to be able to compare over time, like human behavior that looks similar in one era to another era.

But if you look under the hood, you will see again different people making all kinds of different decisions, often with different imperfect information, and with different and unpredictable outcome. That tends to be the case, even though if you zoom your lens back, it looked like it looked like people were doing the same sort of thing in the same sort of way and so forth. That usually is not the case, it's usually the case that perhaps they're coming to some of the same sort of conclusions and some events appear to be unfolding in similar ways, but it is always different, you know.

So our current moment in which we're living in perhaps is suggestive of other periods, but it is unique in of itself. In so far as we live in this age, we didn't live a hundred years ago, we didn't live with the technology, the assumptions and so forth, that people live in those contexts..

And we should to be careful about projecting backwards onto folks the kinds of things that motivate us and the sort of knowledge, and we have, the benefit of hindsight, in which ways, in ways that they didn't have the benefit of hindsight when it comes to their actions. So we can sort of read, the historian uses the present to read the past. So we have that benefit. We don't have that benefit, or people in the moment don't have that benefit. So here in twenty twenty one, the world looks crazy, and a hundred years from now, people will be able to read our circumstances in ways we are not able to read it. And they'll say, "Well 2021 kind of looks like A, B and C and so forth."

Audience Question: *What role should technology companies have in censoring what they deem to be disinformation and/or hate speech, and what are the potential consequences?*

SHANNON MCGREGOR: Um, yeah, this is an easy question. I think it's really hard to think about who should be in charge of speech, right? We were talking about we have laws to protect our freedom of speech, but how do we decide what is our right versus what is our responsibility, right?

That being said, Facebook and what WhatsApp and Instagram and Twitter are private companies, and they have no obligation to free speech. If tomorrow they wanted to turn off the hose and say, "sorry, we're not going to talk about politics" in whatever way they might define it, they could do that, and that's completely within their purview. I'm not saying that they should, but that's within their purview.

I certainly think that could be a better process than having Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey be the ones who are deciding what is political and what should stay up on their sites and what should not be. I certainly think that there is room for a lot more accountability and transparency in those decisions, because they're not easy decisions. But I think the way that we're doing them now is not good. That that's not the way we should be doing it.

You know, there's a role for the public in it and there's a role for people who are publicly accountable, like those people that we elect to office that might be in a at least more responsive situation than the CEOs of companies to be making these really difficult decisions.

CLAUDE CLEGG: That's such a great question. And I think my colleague really put her hand on, her finger on the problem here. That is private corporations, mega corporations controlling the speech of millions of people who go on Facebook and Twitter every day to see speech of other people.

I think the sort of one of quintessential case that comes to mind for me as a historian is our former president, Mr. Trump, and Twitter, which is a case in which you have this massive company, the likes of which we've never seen in regard to the number of users and just a number of, the amount of information that passes through Twitter. And this president, who's chosen this company as his megaphone of choice to more or less narrate his presidency and

reach out to his followers without any sort of filter. He just tweets it and it goes instantly to tens of millions of followers.

Earlier this year, Facebook shut down, or, Twitter, Facebook too, I think shut down his account. And the question for me as a historian is, ok, Twitter his his archive. He doesn't have papers, or he'll have papers, but, if you want to study the Trump presidency, you have to have access to all the tweets. Regardless of what you think about the tweets, if you're going to write about the Trump presidency, you have to have access to Twitter. And Twitter is saying, no, that's enough for this guy, we're going to lock this down.

So the question becomes, how do you, how does not only a historian, but those who want to understand the Trump presidency or this time which we live, how do we access that when a private corporation can turn off the spigot and say, "That's enough from this particular voice, and we're just gonna lock it down." I don't know how long they're going to lock it down. Apparently at some point Twitter will have to give the historians and whoever access.

SHANNON MCGREGOR: I have the, I have the archive if you want the data.

CLADE CLEGG: Well at some point, you know, this is going to have to be shaken loose, because it gets to that very question of the power of a corporation to, in this case, control the speech of the most powerful person on planet Earth and to lock it down.

And again, I think we've had a conversation about that particular case, which I think extrapolates into other cases about, if you can do that to the president of the United States, or a former president, then whatever speech that any of us have articulated through these various media is also susceptible to that sort of power.

MOLLY WORTHEN: We're right at seven o'clock. So I'll summarize what I heard over the past hour and a half. I think it's easy to feel right now like you are drowning in lots of terrible stuff you can't control. And at some, all that is the human condition, right? That is what it is to be a member of our species.

There are reasons why it maybe feels extreme right now. And there are false ways of reasserting a feeling of agency.

You can adhere to a conspiracy theory. You can list to a leader who can tell you a nice story that makes you the hero. You can shout and express your anger, maybe in a nice echo chamber that reinforces how you feel and feel validated.

There's all that, and it's not real.

And then there's the one hope of genuine exploration of how we might reassert some order over the chaos, and that is what we try to do at this university. That is thoughtful reflection from these different angles of different disciplines, what you're doing in your classes and in your dorm conversations, that compels us to be a little bit more self reflective about how we came to our own conclusions and how we might make those arguments to other people.