

PANEL: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN FOOD SYSTEMS

Panel Moderator: Meghna Ravishankar

October 14, 2020 – 9:00–9:30 AM

Welcome

Hello from Des Moines, Iowa. We are pleased to welcome you to the 2020 International Borlaug Dialogue, an annual convening of food security experts and champions building collaborative solutions to the most pressing challenges associated with increasing the quantity, quality and availability of food for all. We are so pleased you have joined us from all over the world to address urgently important challenges.

Panel Members

Dr. Alexa Lamm	2020 Borlaug CAST Communications Award Recipient and Associate Professor of Science Communication, University of Georgia
Lazarus Lynch	Writer, Artist, Activist, Son of a Southern Chef
Adam Roberts	Midwest Correspondent, <i>The Economist</i>

Panel Moderator

Meghna Ravishankar

Director of Planning, World Food Prize Foundation

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Day 2 of the International Borlaug Dialogue. My name is Meghna Ravishankar. I am the Director of Planning at the World Food Prize Foundation, and I oversee the planning execution of the Borlaug Dialogue. So we're really glad that you're tuning in, and we hope that you enjoyed all the sessions on Monday focused on climate change, finance and investment. We loved seeing your engagement in the Whova platform, so please continue posting your thoughts, questions, comments in the Community Section and in the chats of each session. You can also engage with us on social media using the hashtag #FoodPrize20.

Today we have a really great lineup of sessions for you to continue the momentum that we have built together. We'll kick things off with a short but hopefully powerful panel on the role of media in shaping public engagement in food systems.

So we know that media has an integral role in making public issues, global issues and challenges accessible to a wider audience. This panel and the panelists that we have today will explore how press, media and communications leaders will shape discourse, influence public opinion, and ultimately inspire action to move the progress on food security issues.

I'm going to briefly introduce our speakers. You can read their bios in full in Whova right below the video feed, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time going into their background. But I'll start off with Dr. Alexa Lamm, who is the 2020 Borlaug CAST Communications Award Winner and the associate professor of the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication at the University of Georgia. Welcome, Alexa, and congratulations on the award.

And next is Lazarus Lynch, who is a writer, activist and artist, also well known for his book, *Son of a Southern Chef*. He is also an alumnus of the World Food Prize Foundation Borlaug Ruan Internship Program. So, welcome, Lazarus.

And, finally, Adam Roberts, who is the Midwest correspondent at *The Economist* with over 20 years of international journalistic experience covering India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and many other countries.

So, as I said, read more about them in Whova and learn all about their backgrounds, because they're all super interesting people, and we're really glad to have them here today.

Discussion

Meghna So I'm going to just dive right into our conversation, given the short time that we have. And, Adam, I'm going to start with you. Given your extensive experience in international journalism, can you comment on how the media landscape has evolved in the past 20 or so years? How has that impacted the way that we consider and address pressing issues and solutions to global challenges overall?

Adam Oh, well, thanks, Meghna, and thanks for having this session. I think it's fantastic that you have a session that looks to the media – and I'm not just saying that because I'm a journalist.

I think that if I look back to my, yeah, 22 years of working at *The Economist*, back to my very first trips when I would leave London and go into Africa and do my first reporting when I didn't even have a mobile phone back in those days, the internet was hardly part of what we used as journalists back then. The landscape is just so fundamentally different today. In my, what I feel is a relatively short time as a journalist, I've just seen fundamental changes to how I work and to how all my colleagues in the rest of journalism work.

When I began, the sort of absolute king of journalism, I thought, were daily newspapers; they were the ones who produced facts, who stirred up the issues, the things that we would talk about day by day. And I think they still do but just a couple of statistics just to remind our listeners as to how much things have changed.

Back in '98 when I began as a journalist, there were 56 million daily readers of newspapers in America alone, and that's fallen by half to about 28 million now. And the value of the newspaper industry has also collapsed by half from 54 billion down to 24 billion. So the whole industry has lost a lot of oomph. It's fragmented. We've broken up into a lot more diverse forms of institutions. And I think that has fundamentally changed something about who we are and the role we play. We as

journalists used to be gatekeepers. We would decide what were the issues that people looked at, what were the facts we talked about, what was unacceptable behavior, for example, by a politician, or what in many ways would public discourse be about. And traditional journalists have to some extent lost that role. And as a sense, as a representative of the old media on your panel, we are losing our strength. And people like Lazarus on the social media, on the digital side, the bloggers, the ones who are much better at telling narratives, stories, hooking people emotionally, they are often much more capable of making things get noticed. So I think that, just at the very basic level, there's been a shift from institutional, maybe more factual-based reporting to more emotional, narrative sort of reporting. So I'll leave you there, because we don't have a lot of time.

Meghna That's a really interesting explanation of that trajectory and the change from, like you said, information-based to something that's a bit more narrative-based and perhaps empathy-based to get people to care about issues. So I think, Lazarus, this is a great time to bring you in, given all the work that you do. How has the relationship between storytelling and inspiring action changed since this democratization of communication that Adam had just highlighted. You know, how are younger generations like millennials or Gen Z choosing to engage with issues and care about issues, especially those related to food and food security?

Lazarus Yeah, Meghna. Thanks for the introduction, and just to jump on what Adam said, I look forward to adding to that, but I just want to say I'm so interested in how this panel is sort of unfolding. I mean when I entered the World Food Prize, I was a tenth-grader in high school, and I don't even remember there being a big craze about social media. I think there was probably like Myspace, Facebook. And here we are in 2020 – what a year! – and social media is what we're talking about. So this is a very interesting connection for me personally being part of this panel.

You know, I think that social media obviously has a role. I think it's interesting to Adam's point that the power sort of has shifted from institutions to now people, to celebrities, to influencers. I don't like the word "influencer." I think we are all an influencer in our own way. I think if you're a living, breathing, walking person, alive, being on this planet, you are influencing someone or something.

So I think first of all, we all have to recognize our capacity to create influence. And I think that journalists have been influenced to tell certain stories based on what's happening in the world, and today sort of the roles are shifted. That power belongs to us, to the people. I still hold in high regard journalists. I mean I took journalism courses in college. I didn't pursue it professionally, but I certainly respect the profession of a journalist and of journalism. I think that there's a deeper regard still in the public for it. I just think, though, that we've sort of moved toward a different sense of power, of who can tell certain stories and of what stories are being told. I think the gatekeeping part has shifted as well, where now the people are actually telling the stories, and the people are actually creating the kinds of narratives around the world globally. You know, I can go online right now and see what's happening on livestream in Nigeria. You couldn't do that 20 years ago.

So I think those are positive changes, and I'm interested, you know, and continue to contribute to the conversation in some of the challenges that that presents, too.

Meghna Thank you. Thanks, Lazarus, and that again you're all just feeding right into each other. That opens up a really interesting point here with Alexa as well of just picking up on who tells those stories, how do we choose to consume them. Alexa, given your background in more scientific-based communications, how do advances in science and the dissemination of scientific knowledge play out in these systems, these newer systems that we have now? And as someone who studies public perception and behavior, how have these changes in media communications altered what people want to hear or how they want to consume it?

Alexa Thank you, Meghna, and thank you both Adam and Lazarus for your comments. As someone who has been engaged in science communication and studying science communication for 20+ years, it's exciting to have it on the main stage here at the World Food Prize and to be able to talk about this with two individuals who are very engaged with disseminating food systems information.

I think disseminating science has never been more difficult than it is in the current landscape from the scientific community perspective. As Lazarus mentioned, the public has access to more information than ever before, which is a great thing; but there's a reason the World Health Organization declared this current media state an "infodemic." It's almost like there's too much information out there. And we have to pick and choose what we read, what we listen to, what we interact with. And a lot of what we interact with is based completely on relationships and trust.

Now, historically, as Adam mentioned, the journalists were the ones that guided that conversation. People trusted them. They went to mainstream media for that information and to guide that conversation. And they still do, but there are so many other sources of information. Lazarus, as he mentioned – and I'm not going to say "influencer," I'll say "social media guru" who has been able to translate information in that space and build relationships and build the community and build trust – is really garnering a lot of appreciation from the public. And so therefore when they're seeking information, they look to him and his opinions for that information.

Now, I'm positive that Lazarus uses a lot of science-based information in what he provides to those people that trust him and look to him for some of their solutions in leading healthier lives and choosing good, nutritious food. And he's probably helping them create new systems of thinking about their engagement with the food system, and that's amazing. But how do scientists do that? And how do we play into that relationship? I think that's important, because it's not something the scientific community has done in the past.

I think one of the problems is the rapid pace in technology advancement. There are amazing innovations in technology coming out every day to assist in solving the world's problems. But as technology advances so quickly, the scientific community can move forward in their advancements quickly, but this also means that what we believed was scientific fact not that long ago, becomes outdated faster. And so the public is asking questions like – How can it be fact when it can be replaced and updated so easily? And can I even trust this new information that's just going to be replaced again with more accurate information?

So I think this kind of leads to this general lack of trust in science that we're seeing among the public. We're seeing that play out right now in the validity of a vaccine

that we're all awaiting as a potential solution to COVID – right? People are questioning – should I take the first vaccine? How can I trust this scientific advancement? Will it get better because we're learning more each and every day? And so the narrative, the community, the relationships, building trust is something that the scientific community really lacks, that individuals like Lazarus, like Adam, *The Economist* built that relationship over time – right? Lazarus is busy building relationships, building community, caring about those people. And I think the scientific community could learn a lot from both of them.

Lazarus Can I jump in on this point?

Meghna Absolutely, absolutely.

Adam I love the fact that Alexa talked so much about trust, because I think that's absolutely core. And rather than my focusing on trust in scientists – because I think polls suggest that a lot of people still do hold scientists in very high regard, whereas journalists and politicians and secondhand car salesmen are pretty much lower down the line.

There is some trust in journalism still, as Lazarus said. You look at Pew surveys – around half the population, basically, thinks that journalists are ethical and do a reliable job. But when you break down those figures and look at trust in journalism, it's often very polarized in the same way that politics is very polarized. So, for example, a Pew survey this summer found that, whereas 73% of Democratic-leaning people thought journalists were basically doing a good job through the COVID pandemic. Only 44% of Republicans did. And you see other splits between where people politically lean.

And that suggests to me, going back to your community point, that people are saying, "Well, who do I belong to in the first place? What's my tribe? What's my grouping?" And once I've decided that, only then will I decide, what are the facts that I'll agree with or whether I respect or disrespect someone. And I think that it's the fragmentation of the media landscape that has helped drive this polarization, this fragmentation more generally of whether or not we trust institutions, trust facts, trust science.

And so this leads me to think that in the media space we have to think much harder about how we encourage those on social media to have some of the same restrictions that those of us in the old media had. So if you publish an utter falsehood, if you publish something libelous, if you accuse someone of something that is completely untrue, that you have to pay a price for it. And only very recently are we beginning to see Facebook, Twitter, Google, the rest of them beginning to take seriously the idea they have to take down the QAnon nutcases, the anti-vaxxer-lunatics, the most vicious calls to violence and civil war that is just sprouting up all over social media. And this, I think, is the beginning of regulating the digital space a little bit in the way that we used to regulate the old media space. And I think that's essential. I think we have to follow down that path, but it doesn't need to stop any of the wonderful stuff that, say, Lazarus is doing. It's just that we have to get back to somehow agreeing that facts are different from opinions.

Meghna Lazarus, did you want to come in here to talk about the community building and perhaps that accountability building that comes in with individuals using new or media contemporary methods?

Lazarus Yeah, I mean this is getting very juicy, everyone. I'm excited. This is exciting. Well, one of the things that I was thinking about as both Alexa and Adam were speaking, is sort of this idea that information - you know, we believe that information will be accessible forever in this generation that we live in. We don't often talk about the importance of documentation, of archival, of survival, so Alexa's point, the constant changing of information over time. But I think that sort of the opposite end of trust – and I said earlier in a pre-call with the three of us, the four of us – is that I don't think trust comes up in my generation as sort of a big issue of who do we trust. And then I thought about it and I reflected on it, and I think that it *does* come up. And I think the trust is that in whatever we say and whatever we tweet, whatever news article we share, that that information is going to somehow live on forever. It's the same idea as being on this Zoom call, that our connection is going to endure and that we're going to be able to survive on this call.

So I think that we have to start to think about the archival piece of information, of storytelling. As somebody who tells stories every day and is part of the media, I think a lot about legacy around storytelling. You know, I'm able to see farmers around the world grow food and feed their communities through social media every day in a very immediate way. I'm also able to, through Instagram, for example, donate money to a local farm, just through the app. I mean, and immediately I can send \$10, \$20 or whatever the amount I desire. And so I think those are beautiful aspects.

But I do think, and I get weary of when we start to democratize information, when we start to say who has a voice and who doesn't have a voice, the problem or sort of the tendency is to start to suppress certain voices that otherwise don't have platforms to speak. And so I'm always very careful about whose voices are being suppressed, whose voices are being heard. I'm sure we all know about this "A" word called algorithms. And so algorithms are very interesting, and what happens is that your information is being marketed to you in real time, based on what you search, based on what your interests are. You know, someone, Alexa – not you down there, Alexa – but Alexa is listening. You know, someone's listening somewhere, and so information is getting to us all the time. Talk about infodemic – right?

So I think we live in a time where not only should we think about how we preserve information over time and where all this information is going to be stored and who's storing it, who's in charge of that, who's the gatekeepers of that, but also – how do we begin to empower ourselves, right?- to think more dynamically about the role we play in social media, in the media landscape.

And the last point I'll say here is that we have to think about social media as its own food system. You know, the way that we think about eating food and consuming food is the same. It's the same process, it's the same cycle in the internet landscape of social media.

Meghna Yeah, that's a really great point. There's so much that you've all brought up, and there's so much interconnectivity here between what you said, Lazarus, of which voices are being heard, and how do we make sure that the ecosystem of

communications and media, old and new, are able to encompass and lean into the new methods and the new forms and move into something that maybe is a little bit more participatory. I think generally in the food system and the international development world, which is my background, that is the trajectory of moving to something more participatory, something that you said, Lazarus, so you're able to turn on a livestream and see what someone is doing on a farm in Nigeria, for example. You're able to have that very direct access and hear directly from that farmer. And in the same way, the world of food systems transformation now is moving to that of having those direct voices represented or at the table as opposed to filtered through different institutions or systems and then brought to a stage or brought to a conversation.

So I think that's really fascinating, and all of your points there are so interesting, and I wish we could keep going. But I do want to pose a closing question to each of you. Given all these conversations, this is such a complex issue and topic, the burning question, I guess, is what now? What do we do as individuals in this system of media and communications to be ethical citizens or to be ethical communicators in this space, especially with food systems transformation? So what action items would each of you perhaps set? And, Alexa, I can start with you.

Alexa Yeah sure, absolutely, and thank you for asking. I think there are several things that we need to think about in this space. First, we need to be more outcomes-oriented than output-oriented. Are we interested in just putting information out there or what the people are going to do with it? And if people are engaged in storytelling and being in community and hearing from diverse voices and that's going to promote action, then the community needs to move in that direction and be thinking about that. So if scientific fact is not always at the forefront but the story behind it, then we need to emphasize that as we try to communicate science within this new media platform, especially around the food systems.

Meghna Thank you. Adam, if I can go to you next?

Adam Sure. I liked Lazarus' phrase that we must think dynamically about the role that we play. And I think we are all consumers of information, consumers of media. And I think one thing we have to do more and more is train ourselves to distinguish reliable sources of information from the unreliable sort. And that's an education for all of us every day with whether it's Russian bots on the internet or fake news that really sometimes is out there.

And the second thing I'd say is, as a journalist, be ready to pay for some of that. You know, gathering information, the investigations that *The New York Times* and others do, that takes resources, and they can't all be funded by sort of benefactors like Jeff Bezos or paid for by the state. It takes the consumers of the information to pay for it. So subscribe to a form of journalism and pay for it. That makes a much more robust media ecology in which other things can flourish. So I'd say those two things—be true consumers, and be ready to pay for some of it.

Meghna Lazarus, if I can end with you with your closing comment.

Lazarus Yeah, I'd say, number one—Try to surround yourself by diverse places and both in sort of real life and on the social media landscape. Have diverse voices that you can

trust. And I would say the second thing is to really understand that our voice is our tool of power. And so our voices can be used as a tool for social justice. And so to not sort of remove ourselves from the media and who we are, to understand that we're part of it, that we're in it together, and that there is an interconnection.

And the last thing I'll say, which is, I think, probably the most profound thing I can say today is – beware of fake news. Thank you.

Meghna Thank you, all, to our speakers for the wonderful insights today and the actions that you've set forth for us. Thank you to our audience for joining us, and do take forward these fascinating points that our speakers have shared with us today.

Engage with us in the Whova chat, and engage with us in the Whova community space. We have more sessions coming up today for you, a couple of interactive workshops that you can tune into. The IGNITE diagnostic tool workshop still has a few open spaces for breakout sessions, so do sign up if you're not signed up already. You can do that through the Whova agenda page. And then coming up in just a few minutes is a roundtable focused on nutrition, so you can go to the Whova agenda page and see that session there and click the View session button to tune in. So we'll see you there at 9:30 A.M. Central Time.

And thank you again to our speakers. We're so glad that you are here and able to share this time with us and very much appreciate it. So see everyone soon in the upcoming roundtable, and thank you for joining us.