COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

Webinar

Reporting on LGBTQ+ Issues

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REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

Speakers

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Local Journalists Webinars

Neela Ghoshal, senior director of law, policy and research at Outright International, provides an update on U.S. efforts to advance a more inclusive U.S. foreign policy on LGBTQ+ rights. Steve Rothaus, former LGBTQ+ issues reporter for the *Miami Herald*, discusses reporting in a way that promotes tolerance and acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals and

communities and ensures their representation in civic discourse.

TRANSCRIPT

FASKIANOS: Thank you. Welcome to the Council on Foreign Relations Local Journalists Webinar. I'm Irina Faskianos, vice president for the National Program and Outreach here at CFR.

CFR is an independent and nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, publisher, and educational institution focusing on U.S. foreign policy. CFR is also the publisher of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, and, as always, CFR takes no institutional positions on matters of policy.

This webinar is part of CFR's Local Journalists Initiative created to help you draw connections between the local issues you cover and national and international dynamics. Our programming puts you in touch with CFR resources and expertise on international issues and provides a forum for sharing best practices.

Thank you for taking the time to be with us today. This webinar is on the record, and the video and transcript will be posted on our website after the fact at CFR.org/localjournalists.

We are pleased to have Neela Ghoshal, Steve Rothaus, and host Carla Anne Robbins to talk about reporting on LGBTQ+ issues.

Neela Ghoshal is senior director for law, policy, and research at Outright International, an organization working to eradicate the persecution, inequality, and violence faced by LGBTQ+ people around the world. Previously, she served as an associate LGBT rights director and researcher at Human Rights Watch for fourteen years, leading global initiatives on LGBTQ rights and conducting research and advocacy on rights violations in Africa, and she's also worked closely with the network in solidarity with the people of Guatemala, the Bronx Defenders, and the New York City public schools.

Steve Rothaus is a freelance journalist covering LGBTQ issues in south Florida with more than two decades of experience at the *Miami Herald*, where he was LGBTQ issues reporter. During his time at the *Herald*, he was part of a Pulitzer Prize-winning team for breaking news coverage of Hurricane Andrew and co-producer of the Emmy award-winning documentary film *The Day it Snowed in Miami*, a chronology of the LGBT rights movement. He also served for five years as a national board member of National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association where he founded their Newsroom Outreach Project and traveled the country visiting newspapers, TV stations, and universities to discuss LGBTQ news coverage and workplace issues.

And, finally, Carla Anne Robbins, our host. She is a senior fellow at CFR. She's the faculty director of the Master of International Affairs Program and clinical professor of national security studies at Baruch College's Marxe School of Public and International Affairs, and previously she was deputy editorial page editor at the *New York Times* and chief diplomatic correspondent at the *Wall Street Journal*.

So, Carla, with that, I'm going to turn it over to you to take the conversation away.

ROBBINS: Thank you so much, Irina. Thank you much, Steve and Neela, and thank you so much to all the journalists on this webinar. We so much appreciate the work that you guys do, and we know what a challenging time it is to be in the news business. I had it so much easier.

So, we're going to start—Steve, if I might start with you.

ROTHAUS: Sure.

ROBBINS: So I read the profile of you in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. It was a great piece and we will share it with everybody.

And so I was intrigued that twenty-five years ago—and we're dating ourselves here—the *Miami Herald*—and my husband worked there for eleven years—a paper I never considered to be especially forward thinking, created one of the first reporting beats covering what was then, I think, called gay issues.

ROTHAUS: Correct.

ROBBINS: So, can you quickly tell us how that happened?

ROTHAUS: Sure.

I've been at the *Miami Herald* since 1985, and in the summer of 1997 that was the summer that Gianni Versace was murdered in South Beach and it became an international story immediately, and the *Herald* discovered that we really didn't have anybody who could go into the LGBTQ community and, you know, who could cover it with a perspective as not being an outsider.

So they came to me after the story, you know, kind of wound down and they said, Steve, you know, would you be interested in doing something. I was already the chapter president for NLGJA so I was fully out. So they asked me if I would be interested in, basically, covering the community in some way but they really had no idea what or how.

And so, you know, I said yes, with one condition and that was that my stories run the entire run of the *Miami Herald*, which at the time probably was five (hundred thousand), six hundred thousand, you know, circulation.

I didn't want them to zone my stories to where they thought gay people lived, such as putting it into the Miami Beach Neighbors book, and they immediately agreed that anything that I wrote would have to run the full run and, really, that's how it started.

And, you know, I worked with a couple of other people at the time. We were going to rotate a column. But very quickly I ended up being THE columnist and, you know, so within months, I mean, the word got out that we were doing this kind of work and the next year, GLAAD—the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation—they recognized our work by, you know, presenting to us the GLAAD Media Award, and at that time there was only one other person, you know, in the newspaper category who was, you know, running, you know, or nominated for an award, and I happened to win it.

But it was kind of amusing back then. I mean, obviously, things have changed so much. But, you know, I have to say that when I started at the *Herald* I had the very concerns that you spoke about—was this going to be a safe place for me to be an out gay man.

I was already in a relationship with someone who many of the people at the newspaper knew because he had taught journalism at Florida International University. So, you know, he had actually taught many of the people I was going to work with.

And, you know, at the time, one of my professors at FIU—I was a student there, not one of Rick's students but someone else's—and, you know, he was the one who he told me about the job at the *Herald*. He was somebody who you might know from that era because he was the one-time editor of *Tropic* magazine, Kevin Hall (sp). And, you know, he asked if I'd be interested in a job. And just very briefly, you know, when I said, yes, absolutely, and he said, great, because as you know—just so you know that we've already asked, like, three people at FIU and they all said they didn't like the hours of the job.

So, I mean, they didn't like the hours. They didn't want to work nights. But I knew that was my foot in the door, and at that time, not coming from an Ivy League school, I knew that I had to go in and do whatever it is I needed to do.

So I worked on the police desk for a year and a half and, you know, one thing led to another. By 1988, I was the Key West —Keys reporter. So I was promoted pretty quickly and did well, and down in the Keys I covered, you know, the gay community.

But it wasn't my beat. It was something that was part of my beat, and at that time in 1988 Key West had the highest AIDS rate in the entire United States per capita. So it was a huge story and a huge part of my job. And I was out.

In the end, they didn't even like my coverage because I was writing about things like gay bashings and HIV/AIDS—things that were never actually covered even in Key West by the *Miami Herald*. And, you know, so it was a learning experience for everyone because, you know, you should be careful what you ask for.

They wanted coverage until I began to cover things that made them uncomfortable. And, you know, my job was to cover Key West for the *Miami Herald* and that meant writing about people who were victimized because they were gay and it wasn't—I wasn't presenting the image that they wanted for Key West.

When I wrote the first front-page stories about HIV and AIDS in Key West, the immediate response was, oh, my God, no one's going to want to swim in our pools. I was, like, that's not my problem. I'm a reporter. And that's how I, basically, maintained myself for the rest of my career at the *Herald* as I covered LGBT, to the point where I was interviewing and had access to people on who—the other side—you know, the people who were, you know, leading initiatives to ban anti-discrimination ordinances or to ban gay marriage—I mean, all of these things, and I had access because they felt more comfortable talking to me than they did with many of my non-LGBTQ colleagues. It was something I really worked very hard to be fair.

ROBBINS: So, I'm going to ask—go to Neela and then come back to you because I want to talk more about this, you know, question of having gay people cover gay issues. And, I mean, do women have to cover women issues? Do Black people have to cover Black issues?

I mean, this is sort of a basic—a basic question. I mean, there's an empathy. On the other hand, there's also the ghettoization potential there for reporters, and so this is an interesting question.

So, Neela, first, and I want to talk about what you actually do. But I want to talk to you, first, as a smart person who consumes news. As a consumer of news, how do you think we're doing, generally, these days?

We're not—it's not 1987. It's not 1997. You know, I would think that we've come a ways here. I mean, even Republicans voted for love is love suddenly for the Republican Party.

So, how do you think we're doing covering issues of gender identity, issues of—all of the issues that now cover—it's no longer just gay issues.

GHOSHAL: Yeah. Thank you for the question.

So, I've been working on global LGBTIQ human rights issues for the last ten years and for much of that time I was based outside of the United States. I worked in east Africa for Human Rights Watch, initially working on other issues and then working on LGBTIQ issues, but from East Africa for many years, and so I often consumed U.S. news as someone who was seeing things from a not quite American perspective.

So, I would say a couple things. On the one hand, it's clear that coverage has improved dramatically in the last several decades and I can say a little bit more about that. But I also would say that one pitfall that I saw occasionally from my base in Nairobi for most of that time was that sometimes there was a bit of a kind of condescending or White savior

angle when the issues of LGBTIQ people around the world were discussed.

And so I would see headlines like top ten most horrible places for gay people around the world, which is not a helpful story for anybody working in the movement, for anybody living in those countries. I would see stories about kind of White or Global North-based folks who were doing things to save LGBTIQ people in places like Uganda and often the perspective of Ugandans was missing.

So this is, again, something that I would say has gotten better in the last few years but where there's still work to be done. One of the interesting things that we've discovered at Outright International, where I work now, is that we've been able to identify LGBTIQ organizations in every country in the world except about twenty-two, and it's possible that they exist in those twenty-two countries and that we just haven't been able to access them as an international organization.

And I think a lot of American readers would be astonished to realize that in Zimbabwe, in Cameroon, in Malaysia, there are thriving LGBTIQ movements that are capable of speaking in their own voices. So the more that can be done to elevate those voices the better.

The other issue that I think has really improved a lot in the U.S., I would say, I'd say that there's some other parts of the world, and I will name the U.K. as one, where sensitivity around this issue is somewhat lacking is the issue of transgender people.

I think that a lot of stories about trans people continue to sensationalize them and give airtime to arguments that are completely not evidence based like arguments around trans women being a threat to cisgender women or the idea that if we allow people to self-identify, if we allow people access to what we call legal gender recognition on the basis of their own identity, that this somehow poses a threat and will lead to swarms of men in women's restrooms, et cetera.

And so the U.S. media has typically dealt with that more sensitively than the U.K. media, for instance, but there's still work to be done in terms of getting trans people, again, to speak in their own voices and not to amplify or give a microphone to kind of voices of hate that are not basing their arguments on any evidence.

ROBBINS: Thanks for that, and I want to come back to, you know, some of those issues that you raised.

But, Steve, to get back to you, you described a *Miami Herald* that I remember and one that makes me very sad because, certainly, the circulation of *Miami Herald* is no longer six hundred thousand, nor for most local newspapers around the country.

I mean, the *Herald* could afford to take an experienced reporter and devote you to one community.

ROTHAUS: Correct.

ROBBINS: And but, today, very few newspapers have the resources to devote an experienced reporter or any reporter to a single community.

So, given that, beyond the question that I asked before, whether you got to be gay to cover gay people, how does any person prepare themselves to cover this community and what would you tell them to prepare them to cover it because you can't—I mean, most newspapers are not going to create this single beat because they can't afford it.

ROTHAUS: You know, unfortunately, towards the end of my time at the *Herald* they were giving me more and more work to do that was not on the beat. They gave me more editing responsibilities so that by the time I retired, very—a very small part of my job was covering LGBT. And, you know, I said to some of my peers, I said, I've—you know, it's unfortunate, but I know that when I leave they will not be replacing me on this beat, and they didn't.

So, I mean, and this is not something that's—you know, particularly, the fact that it was an LGBTQ beat—but it was any beat. They're not filling jobs. And, you know, we were—this was a time before the company actually, you know, went through a bankruptcy.

So it's a very unfortunate time for the people who remain in the industry but worse than that, I think, is it's an unfortunate time for the consumers of news. And, you know, so there are limitations.

But I believe that, you know, it's across the board. I don't think that the LGBT community is, you know, any less covered than—you know, than the Christian far right, you know, outside of places like Fox News or MSNBC where they really focus on those kinds of issues.

But, otherwise, I mean, they're just fortunate, they feel, to be able to cover the school board and, you know, so this is—it's a problem, and they take people who don't have beats and they put them on stories that they really know very little about and they have to learn along the way, and this is the reality of the modern newsroom—

GHOSHAL: And I think that—

ROTHAUS: —that—if you're on a breaking news desk. Yeah.

ROBBINS: But that's why I'm asking the question here—

ROTHAUS: Sure.

ROBBINS: —because I suspect that's why we have so many people who logged on today, which is, you're going to probably take a reporter who's got three or four topics that they have to cover.

Maybe, you know, an editor will say, OK, you cover social justice issues and—of which this is part of it. Or maybe you're just a general assignment reporter and if you're interested in this you can add this to your portfolio.

But if you were going to run a boot camp, for example, to prepare someone to cover this community in an insightful way—and I'm not talking about walking on eggshells here, I'm talking about it in an insightful way—that treats the community fairly but also, you know, does it, you know, with the same—you know, without fear or favor, the way we cover everything else, what would that boot camp cover?

And I'm going to ask you both that question.

ROTHAUS: Sure.

Well, I mean, I think that the way I covered it I had to juggle that, you know, there were activists in the community, many of whom saw me as, you know, a friend or a peer and didn't quite relate to the fact that I was a reporter—that my job was not to, you know, be their friend but to show up at their events and to talk to them and get to know them well but that, you know, there were times I was going to be writing things that displeased them, and that's exactly what we're seeing today.

There are stories out there that people will be pressured not to write because it will make a particular community, they feel, not look good. And I think that it's the basic tenets of journalism, and you go in like anything else, no matter the beat. You may not know it but you're going to learn it really quickly if you go to the right places and look for the right things.

I mean, it's much easier today to get information than it was when I started, that's for sure. I mean, you know, people—they live on Google. They do searches. They go through Facebook and Twitter, and there are plenty of ways of finding sources and that's the key is to find reliable people that you can turn to and that you trust and who will help make you look good. I mean, it's all sourcing.

ROBBINS: I think—I mean, you shared before, and we will share it with the group—you shared before two style books that seemed really important, and I was doing my homework because I actually do my homework before these things and looking—I was looking at the AP and the *New York Times* to see what—you know, how they are using different language—initialism, my new word. I told you guys that. And that style book seems really important.

I mean, language is really important for making the community feel comfortable to trust you. But the terminology is also changing and it changes, you know, pretty quickly.

So, Neela—

ROTHAUS: And that's like—

ROBBINS: Yes?

ROTHAUS: I just want to say that, you know, part of the problem in the industry is that we are a group of people, generally, who don't do well with change—(laughter)—and when I talk about change I mean talking about style changes that—you know, I mean, look, the *New York Times* still puts, you know, periods in between LGBTQ and they're the only news company that still does that.

But you ask why and, you know, it's because this is what the *New York Times* has decided is the way it wants to present, you know, an acronym, and, you know—

ROBBINS: Back off. (Laughs.)

ROTHAUS: —every time a letter—every—

ROBBINS: I'm a former *New York Times* editor. (Laughs.)

ROTHAUS: I know that. That's why I can say it.

But the fact that every time a letter gets added. You know, when I started, as you said, it was gay. I was the gay issues reporter, and then suddenly it was gay and lesbian. And, you know, you had mentioned LGB and LGBT and LGBTQ, and then the Q was, you know, offensive to some people but embraced by others.

Years ago, 1999, 2000, there was a TV show called *Queer as Folk*, which had started in England and then Showtime, you know, did an American version and it's still running. But we did a cover story on our weekend section for the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which, of course, isn't called that anymore.

But we did a cover story and we called the cover "Queer as Film," and that cover was produced by, you know, myself. I did it. A gay graphic artist, gay copy editors—we were all gay. And do you know that because we used the word queer in the headline we all got these horrible phone calls from people how homophobic we were—how dare we.

You know, and—you know, that still hasn't changed dramatically among certain people. So there is no right way to say it or not because you're going to hear controversy even within the community.

ROBBINS: So that's—I mean, that's—but this is, I think, a potentially very intimidating thing if you are a nongay reporter—

ROTHAUS: Right.

ROBBINS: —and you are sent into a community and told to go and cover, you know, without fear or favor, which goes back to my boot camp thing.

So, Neela, tell me what's the best way to be a good reporter, which doesn't mean you necessarily have to be all that sensitive—just to be a good reporter. I'm not sensitive when I cover the Pentagon.

Why should I be sensitive covering anybody? I just want to be a good reporter, which means I want to get people comfortable enough that they actually talk to me so I can do the right reporting.

So, tell me—you know, tell me what it is I need to know to do a good job of covering this community.

GHOSHAL: Yeah. Thank you for that question, and it's funny that Steve said that the media is very slow in adjusting to new terms and acronyms, and I think that our communities are some of the fastest in the world in changing the terminology and acronyms that we use to refer to ourselves and nobody can keep up with it, including ourselves.

And so that's just—(inaudible). I think that if you come into this with good intentions and you are willing to adjust to the circumstances on the ground people will recognize those good intentions, and you will always find people who just have a bone to pick with everything.

And so I'm sure, you know, whatever acronym you include in your news story you will get comments in the horrible comments sections from people saying, why didn't you include A for asexual, right, or why didn't you include queer—you just said gay and lesbian. And for—

ROBBINS: Wait. Wait. I thought A was allies.

GHOSHAL: A can be asexual in many—(laughs)—

ROBBINS: I'm just kidding.

GHOSHAL: —in many versions of the acronym. I mean, the craziest version of the acronym that I've seen actually comes from the Ghanaian parliamentary opposition that has introduced a bill that would criminalize LGBTTIQQAAP people.

So they've included—and this is an opposition bill, right, hostile to our interests—they've included transgender, transsexual, pansexual, ally, asexual, queer, questioning, in addition to all the other things that we're a little bit more used to, which just goes to show kind of how far those who are opposed to our communities will go to cover all of us in any kind of hostile law that they're promoting.

So that's the issue, right. So if someone writes a story and says gays and lesbians in Ghana are under attack, the point is the story, right. The point is not that they excluded pansexual people or some other group of people in the story.

So, I would say that there will be people who will be very sensitive about it. But the most important thing is getting the stories out and not being intimidated to take on these stories.

We also work in places around the world that use completely different terminology, right. We work with hijras in India. We work with communities in the Pacific that have a whole range of precolonial terminology and would not identify themselves as LGBTQ or anything else in that Ghanaian acronym.

And so it's important to try to get it right but not to let that hold you back, and just be earnest and ready to learn in your approach, which I know it's hard to find time to do as a journalist.

But I wanted to say a little bit about kind of what would be in my boot camp as well for reporters and the fact that people don't have time to just work on this issue as their beat.

One of the things that we're always trying to emphasize in our advocacy at Outright International is that it's hard to think of an issue that's not an LGBTIQ issue, and so whatever issue you're covering there's usually an LGBTIQ angle and I would challenge anybody who's reporting on any number of issues to find that angle, and if that angle is not there and if that LGBTIQ voice is not there to know that probably a part of the story is missing.

And so I think of issues that we've been working on in the last year, right. We've been working on the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and how that's impacted queer people. We've been working on the war in Ukraine and how the policy that prevented men from crossing the border was also preventing trans women from crossing the border. Now we're also looking in Ukraine at Russian war crimes and how those are impacting LGBTIQ people.

When we look at things like immigration, asylum, these are, clearly, LGBTIQ issues. People who were stuck in Mexico, who continue to be stuck in Mexico, under Title 42 and other Trump administration policies who are queer are affected disproportionately by those policies.

Obviously, if we look at education it's an LGBTIQ issue. We have people like Kevin McCarthy, who are threatening to undo so-called woke ideology—this is his term—and the first thing he wants to do is go after any teaching about sexuality and gender in the schools.

Climate change, right—the last climate conference was held in Egypt. This was a real issue for queer civil society activists, who would have wanted to participate in that conference, because Egypt is not a safe space—is one of the countries that's most hostile to and most routinely arrests and prosecutes LGBTIQ people.

And so in almost anything that's happening in the world there is that angle and that would be kind of my boot camp. Find that angle and get it out there to readers.

ROBBINS: So I want to turn it—

ROTHAUS: So, Neela—

ROBBINS: Yes, please. Steve?

ROTHAUS: —I just want to say that, you know, things you're talking about, you know, to me, it's very heartening to me to know that there are people who now are coming on board, younger people, where, generationally, they don't understand any of the reasons why we wouldn't be included.

When I started covering LGBT they—you know, just having a gay mother or a gay father on Mother's Day or Father's Day was considered to be groundbreaking, and the idea of finding, you know, a gay LGBTQ person for any story, to me, it's very gratifying that we're at that point.

But it's the truth. I mean, when I first started writing about this the features editor, you know, was bringing me on board for this project and she said to me, is there enough to sustain a twice a month column in Miami.

ROBBINS: You mean are there enough gay people out there?

ROTHAUS: Are there enough gay stories. I mean, are there enough stories that they could commit to running this column twice a month. And, you know, my reaction was—I would have liked to have done what you just did, to laugh.

But I had to, you know, basically, you know, with a straight face, you know, very calmly say, look, for every gay person there's a story. There's a story, just as there is for anybody, and we just need to look for them and find them and write them. And she understood that then, but her immediate reaction was, like, how can we sustain this beat.

You know, we've come a long way in the twenty-five years since, and the fact that the people who are, you know, listening to this conversation or watching this, you know, they don't come in with the same baggage that so many reporters had twenty-five and thirty years ago when I was in the business starting.

And, you know, I didn't—what's taken for granted today and that's why I feel very comfortable that, you know, this coverage will continue just in a matter of fact way and that there may not be a beat but that you can find ways of writing about people in any story.

ROBBINS: So, writing about people is one thing. Writing about policy is another, and policy is really important, not just because I'm a policy nerd, because policies, you know, affect people's lives in a pretty fundamental way.

ROTHAUS: But that's the key. You know—

ROBBINS: And as Neela raised, you know, what Kevin McCarthy is talking about and there's a major shift in Washington coming, and a lot of this action is taking place in the states.

So can we talk briefly—and I'm going to turn it over to the group for questions so, guys, can you please get ready to raise your hands and I'm going to call on you. Please—you're reporters. I'm sure you've got lots of questions.

Can you just talk—tee up a little bit, you know, what policy stories do you think are out there right now, what things we should be keeping an eye on that are going to really have a major effect on this community in—you know, in coming months? Because there's major political shifts going on in Washington—some for good, some are bad—and a lot of this

stuff that's playing out on the state level.

Neela, you want to pick that up first, and then Steve?

GHOSHAL: Yeah. I can say a little bit about that.

I mean, I actually work in a global organization and our version of global doesn't really include what's happening in the U.S., let alone in the states. But we look a little bit into U.S. foreign policy and how it impacts the rest of the world and we also look a little bit at how what's happening in the rest of the world is impacting developments in the U.S.

And so when I look at developments at the state level—and I hope that Steve can bring more expertise to this question—we're seeing a lot of kind of tag team around the world from different actors in what we describe as the anti-gender movement. We also sometimes call this movement the anti-rights movement because its critique of gender is fundamentally related to a critique of human rights and democracy.

And the anti-gender movement includes people like Viktor Orbán of Hungary, who Ron DeSantis, when he brought forward the "don't say gay" policy, said that he was inspired by Viktor Orbán, who had passed a bill the year before in 2021 that, basically, prohibited people from bringing up issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity around children, right.

So there's a lot of kind of cross-pollination here. In Brazil, there have been efforts for the last eight years or so at the state and municipal level to prohibit discussions of sexuality and also of gender in schools. Even the idea of gender as a social construct there have been attempts to legislatively ban that, which so far the supreme court in Brazil has pushed back against.

And so these issues are not new to the United States. In some cases, they're coming into the United States after having been kind of spawned elsewhere, and then in other cases they are coming up in the United States and, unfortunately, the influence that the U.S. has abroad and kind of the mouthpiece that the U.S. has abroad means that these things are picked up by other people, like the politicians in Ghana, who I don't think came up with that acronym that I mentioned before on their own.

So we're concerned about state developments, even though that's not our expertise, because we know that those will reverberate internationally. And we're also looking at, you know, as we see things happen—like Indonesia passing a bill that prohibits all extramarital sex, right? This is something that just happened the other day. Or Russia passing a harsh anti-LGBTIQ propaganda bill, that builds on a bill that already was there that prohibited talking to children about sexuality, and now basically says you can't produce anything about sexuality for anybody—about queer sexualities. We're looking at this back and forth, and how these negative actors are influencing each other. So it's definitely a matter for concern.

I just wanted to mention as well that in terms of the change that's coming in Washington, we're really concerned. I mean, this administration has shown itself to be really probably the most progressive issues on global LGBTIQ issues ever. Of course, we also had an ally in the Obama administration, but this administration has been able to do quite a bit more. And one of the things that it's been able to do is increase funding through Congress for global LGBTIQ human rights programming.

Now, Republicans in Congress get very agitated, in some cases, around, you know, oh, the U.S. is funding a drag show in country X. No. The U.S. is funding transgender communities' human rights organizing, which can include culture and celebration. And this is really important when we have transgender people being killed at astonishing rates around the world, and the importance of being visible and speaking up for yourself is a fundamental human rights issue. So I think we need to watch closely what the next Congress does with regard to global LGBTIQ funding and programing.

ROBBINS: And that can very much be a local story, because if your local representative is a key sponsor of some of this legislation or is making a big noise on some of this legislation, this, you know, opens the way for an explainer. Not necessarily an editorial, but it opens the way for an explainer. So if somebody wanted to do an explainer on legislation that's—or, at least somebody's standing up there and talking about, you know, we're financing drag shows, where would they go to get information on what—you know, what the administration's actually doing that's not just going to the administration?

GHOSHAL: So my organization, Outright International, is part of a network called the Council for Global Equality, which is a group of—a network of organizations that work on ensuring that U.S. foreign policy is LGBTIQ inclusive. And I will pop the link into the chat. The Council for Global Equality puts out a quarterly newsletter on both executive level and legislative developments. And that's a really good source of information in terms of what's happening in Congress, as well as what's happening at the—at the various different departments of the executive branch with regard to global LGBTIQ rights.

You'll recall that there was a Biden administration memo—one of the first things the Biden administration did in February 2021, was a memorandum on the human rights of LBGTQI people around the world. And although sometimes not—there's always a little bit of a critique, right, because I'm a human rights advocate. Sometimes not with the same urgency that we would desire but, you know, bit by bit the administration has been advancing the objectives that were set forth in that memo. And so the Council for Global Equality tracks that and reports on what's happening and where we're still seeing lags.

ROBBINS: Is there an organization that puts out, like, a calendar or, you know, alerts, or something like that about here's legislation, or a committee hearing, or a debate, or something that could flag people to things that are happening? Not that if you're a local reporter you're necessarily going to be covering what's happening in Washington, but if your representative is on that committee, or, you know, a ranking member, or something of the sort, you know, that would be—you know, that could be very much a good hook for a local—for a local story. But most people don't have the resources to monitor what's happening on the Hill every day, certainly not if you're a local reporter. So is there—are there good links for that?

GOSHAL: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think Council for Global Equality does some of that. I would also look into the Equality Caucus in Congress, which is advancing pro-LGBTIQ legislation, and might have some reporting on what's happening on the anti- side as well. And if I think of anything else—Human Rights Campaign, which mostly does domestic work, also does some following of foreign policy and might also be a good resource.

ROBBINS: Great. Steve, you were going to answer that? And I would think that you are on the front lines because your state invented "don't say gay."

ROTHAUS: Correct. I mean, you know, the whole conversation earlier with Kevin McCarthy and—you know, it was really Ron DeSantis and, I think, Neela, you know, mentioned his name before. But this is how he came in with 70 percent of the vote. Not talking about issues outside of, you know, these kinds of social issues. And there's really nothing new or unique about any of this kind of politics. I lived here in 1977, during the Anita Bryant campaign, during that era in which, you know, they named their group, Save Our Children. That was in 1977. Save our Children from these people—these gay people.

And then they would show TV commercials of men dancing in dresses and, you know, scenes from San Francisco Pride Parades, things that they knew would really get people excited and motivated to come out and vote and raise money for them. That hasn't changed at all. And that's exactly how they've pursed recently these anti-gay laws. And, you know, you talk about how to cover this, I mean, it's obviously different today because you have politicians who don't call you back. They don't want to talk to reporters, and mainstream newspapers, and TV stations, certainly, or websites. You know,

they'll just put out a Twitter feed. And, you know, yeah, it happened to be the governor's spokeswoman who put out a—you know, a tweet talking about grooming. And it's, like, grooming, where did that come from? And then suddenly, that becomes the word. That's what we keep hearing about.

And so, you know, how do you get information? I mean, I read a lot. And I'm not reading novels. I'm reading news from all over the country, all over the world. But news that, you know, pertains to what it is that I'm interested in, but what I cover. And I put myself on every possible mailing list. Everyone's putting out press releases today. Everybody's giving statements. When legislation passes, such as the Respect for Marriage Act, you know, suddenly we're deluged with email from both sides of the equation. You know, people saying how wonderful it is, and people saying how awful it is. So, you know, the resources are there. And it's pretty easy. I mean, so much reporting today is done by going to somebody's Facebook feed and just grabbing quotes. So, I mean, it is easy.

But, you know, the thing is that in today's world—you know, first of all, I find it difficult to separate policy from people. And that was something I just wanted to talk about a little bit, because when I covered LGBTQ people, but I did it—you know, I wrote about the policies. I didn't just write about—but I wanted people to know—readers to know that these were real people that were being affected, whether it was children who were, you know, unable to be adopted by their gay parents or, you know, couples who wanted to build lives together and just have the same ability that everyone else—but they were real people.

And, you know, I think that what ended up happening was, you know, you had these groups that, in Florida, for instance, that they petitioned to ban same-sex marriage in the state. And yet, when they went to court, they were told they had no standing. And they had no standing because they were not really affected parties. You know, yes, the voted. And, yes, they had petitions signed. But their lives were not affected one way or the other. And, you know, so we tried to show how real people were affected by the decisions on how people vote, or the decisions how Congress votes, or the Senate, or what happens when somebody gets appointed to the Supreme Court, what it really means to people. And then, you know, readers start to understand it differently. I mean, you know, you have to be able to tell the rest, but, still, you have to make it accessible to readers.

ROBBINS: Completely agree with you. I think you can be a policy nerd and still make the story come alive. So what are the next set of policy issues that we should be watching for? I mean, certainly there was marriage equality. We've got the states which have their own versions of "don't say gay." We have very much the question of transgender sex-assignment surgery, questions including, you know, hospitals stopping surgeries as they review policies. You know, fearful of how the politics of that are going to play out. I mean, those are the things that immediately come to my mind from just reading the newspaper. What else should we be watching? And can you flag particular places that are going to be hotbeds for this in the near future? Anything else that?

ROTHAUS: Yeah, no, I think that, you know, the trans story really—you're very right that that is the story. It's just beginning. It has not—it hasn't reached a crescendo. You know, the Respect for Marriage Act I think was very convenient for people to be able to vote for that, and to be able to then say, well, you see, we are supportive of this LGBTQ community, but we're not supportive of—then they refer to the child abuse. The child abuse being parents who are

helping get medical care for their children. But they framed it as child abuse. That's what Ron DeSantis called it during his debate with Charlie Crist. That he felt that—and it strikes a tone that suddenly it's not based in anything other than fear. And that's where it's all still headed. And, you know, will there be collateral damage? There might be. I think that they're trying to play both sides.

ROBBINS: Neela, are there any other topics that we should be particularly looking out for?

GHOSHAL: I just wanted to briefly highlight a couple of the positive developments around the world. So yesterday, Barbados became the fourth country this year to decriminalize same-sex intimacy. So this is a really incredible thing. When I started working in this movement about ten years ago, at the global level there were close to eighty countries that criminalized same-sex relations. In some cases, just between men, in some cases between women as well, in some cases with very vague language that could catch anybody up in it who the state decided to persecute.

We've now gone down to about sixty-five countries in the last ten to fifteen years. And so that's really remarkable. So this year we've had Barbados. We've Antigua and Barbuda. We've had St. Kitts and Nevis. And we've had Singapore. These cases in the Caribbean have all been led by a civil society organization called ECADE, the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality, which has just been charging through the Caribbean and making change in the most wonderful way. And so I think it's important to keep to mind the dynamics in the U.S., I think, at this moment are very concerning. And there are concerning global dynamics as well. But there's also globally a somewhat positive trajectory that I think is important to report on. And it's important to report on the role of domestic civil society in these countries as actors who are changing things on the ground for themselves and their communities.

So that's—you know, that's really incredible to see. I do think at the global level, the anti-trans developments are some of the most concerning things that I'm seeing as well. And I just also want to make a mention of intersex people's human rights. We talk a lot about LGBTIQ. We were discussing acronyms earlier. But often when folks including the I, they don't actually include the I, in terms of they don't address the issues that intersex people experience. One of the issues that we work on at Outright is trying to end what we refer to as medical violence. Some communities also use the term intersex genital mutilation. Forcing surgeries on babies and children in order to normalize their genitals. And these are not medically necessary surgeries.

And so there's a movement around the world that's pushing back against these surgeries. And Greece recently became the most recent country—there's only about five or six—became the most recent country to ban these surgeries on infants and children who are not able to consent. And so that's a kind of under-looked issue that I think is worth following.

ROBBINS: So for these countries that are changing their laws, part of it is good organizing by civil society. But I have to assume that a good part of it is shifts in norms. You know, that people think differently. I mean, that's certainly what happened with, you know, the Defense of Marriage Act, what happened with, you know, the change in the rules for the military. You know, just things happen. Institutions tend to trail shifts in society. But it was—you know, on marriage equality, it was really extraordinary how fast that happened. I mean, both legislatively, you know, with the courts, and ultimately the federal government caught up.

But if you looked at the polling data, I mean, that was a shift that happened like that. I mean, it may not have felt that way—(laughs)—but it certainly felt that way for those of us who weren't in the struggle. You know, that wasn't our lives. It was really fast for a norm shift, for a cultural shift. I mean, when you look at the way—how hard it was for Obama to embrace. I mean, he had to have Biden, you know, shove him to it, drag him to it. So I'm just wondering, you know, a couple of things. One is, you know, is there really interesting polling data in the United States on transgender issues that you guys are paying attention to? Who does good polling on this? I mean, I'm always intrigued in how norms shift, how quickly they shift, and how out of step politicians are with their constituents. And I always think those make really good stories. So does anybody poll on this who you trust?

ROTHAUS: I mean, Pew will put out research but, I mean, I'm very wary of all polling today. I mean, I'm just very uncomfortable with relying on polling, because I just don't think that the pollsters have access the way they used to, and that you can particularly trust the people who they're reaching to give them honest answers. I think that when we see what happened just in general elections, and how wrong they can be. So then you have the added, you know, layer that with many LGBTQ people, that they don't want to identify that way publicly, particularly with a stranger who's reaching out to them. So I just don't know how easily that can be—that data can be, you know, obtained.

But I just want to say something that, you know, on what Neela was talking about before, the positives. And if you look at what happened in Qatar in the last few weeks and, you know, the crackdown on not being able to present rainbow and the other signs that they didn't want anyone to show, yet look at how many people said, you know, we're going to show it anyway, and until they were made to take it off. They were not afraid. And that's generational too. You know, the idea that an entire team would wear rainbow T-shirts until they were ordered that they had to take them off.

But it also, you know, shines a light on what it's like elsewhere. I mean you know, you wouldn't see that happen here. At least, you wouldn't see it at an organized—you know, an organized, you know, game like we saw in Qatar. I mean, yeah, it might happen on the field, you know, in some small county some place, if somebody was wearing a rainbow T-shirt that they might be, you know, bullied or harassed for that, but not in an organized way. And one of the other things that I think, you know, helped facilitate the change with marriage, certainly, but, you know, throughout the LGBTQ movement of the last twenty years was how business, you know, adapted, and how business really became, you know, the surrogate for the government. They were offering insurances, and they were doing things for people, and making people feel comfortable, long before the government told them they had to.

And I think that that helped shift perspectives also for the people who work in these companies, and the people who shop. But, I mean, I know even Publix, which is a very conservative, you know, shopping chain here in the Southeast, even before they were told they had to insure their gay couples they were doing it. They had domestic partner benefits. That's something we don't hear much about today, but that's what helped bridge the gap between having no coverage and having, you know, full marriage quality. People were allowed these domestic partnerships.

ROBBINS: And we certainly saw that in states that were doing bathroom bills and things like that, and the reaction they —you know, the boycotts for conventions, and people just saying we're going to pick—as well as sports teams. There were sports teams who weren't going to play. So I'm not sure that your assessment on sports in the United States is accurate. I mean, there were sports teams that were going to refused to play in the states who were doing their bathroom bills. So.

ROTHAUS: Right.

ROBBINS: So there is a question from Meg Wingerter. I'm sorry if I pronounced your name incorrectly. Meg, do you want to ask your question? Or should I read it for you? I think I'll ask it. Oh, here we go. Meg, can you tell us who you work with and ask your question?

Q: Sorry. Can you hear me?

ROBBINS: Absolutely.

Q: OK. Well, my question was about—you know, there's this kind of debate over objectivity and what that means, and whether we should even aspire to that. And I just wanted to get your take on—because you had talked about, you know, having relationships with people on both sides—to what extent we should be covering those—both sides the same way, taking a position of, you know, certain things are fundamental rights, and those are not things that are up for debate.

ROBBINS: And Meg is the education reporter at the *Denver Post*.

ROTHAUS: Meg, thanks for your question, because, you know, when I was in the early days of covering LGBTQ, there was a referendum in Miami-Dade County, where I live and where the *Herald* is based, to repeal the second gay rights ordinance that had been passed. The first one had been repealed in the Anita Bryant campaign in '77. And twenty years

later, the county commission passed a new—you know, a new ordinance that would protect people on the basis of LGBTQ. And then there was another referendum. And at the time—so this was about 1999-2000—there were reporters and editors who objected to my participating in the coverage. Because they said, well, he's gay. How can he do that?

And, you know, that became a talking point for me later because, you know, I would say to them, gee, you know, you have Cubans who covering Cuba. You have Jews who are covering Israel. Why is this any different? You have, you know, people of color covering, you know, the urban affairs beats. Why is this considered different? And they couldn't give me an answer. And so, yeah, I just began participating in the coverage. So, you know, that—it evolved. Today I mean there's absolutely no reason to think that a mainstream, you know, news organization, such as yours, should, you know, disqualify somebody because they identify as part of a group of people that they might be asked to cover.

It might happen, but I think that that's the response. Like, do you trust me as a reporter? Do you trust me as a journalist? And, you know, if you do, why wouldn't you trust me to do my job as fairly and as accurately as I would if you were asking me to cover the school board. And it puts them on the spot.

ROBBINS: But I think the question Meg—I think the question also that Meg was asking is that are there certain basic rights at this point that it's, like, reporters no longer give equal time to climate change deniers.

ROTHAUS: Right. I agree. I agree.

ROBBINS: And so are you suggesting that—I think the question that Meg is asking is, you know, how much, you know, equal time does one give to people—sorry, my camera just fell off. Thank you. How much equal time—I got so excited there—how much equal time does one give to people on the other side on—

ROTHAUS: No, absolutely. I mean, I think that that's something that has also changed dramatically. I mean, I think that, you know, when I first started covering LGBT, I mean, it depends on the story. If I was writing about a campaign, you know, to ban marriage between, you know, same-sex couples, I mean, that requires a different level of coverage in terms of, you know, having equal sides, and fairness. And I used to say, you know, that's fine. But if I'm doing a Mother's Day story and I'm writing about a gay mother, I am not going to find somebody who would go on the record and say, oh, I think it's a terrible thing that this lesbian is raising children. That's not the appropriate time to have, you know, the other side represented. It all depends on the story.

And the other thing is, today, you know, you talk about, you know, relying upon the science. I mean, when somebody says it's child abuse to do something, it's child abuse to give your children surgery when they're still teenagers, or it's child abuse to put them on, you know, hormones that will, you know, stop them from entering puberty, things that have been done. These are techniques that have been done to help basically safe some kids' lives because they were able to, you know, prevent these children from developing the physical characteristics of the gender that they don't identify with. OK, so that's one thing.

But then on the other hand—and this is something that I've seen great debate recently, that there shouldn't be another "on the other hand," but when you have doctors—and I'm talking about legitimate doctors—who say, well, there are risks to giving these hormones to young people, that they might develop osteoporosis, they might develop other kinds of, you know, health problems as a result of being on hormones that, you know, are not intended for a twelve or thirteen year old, I think that that needs to be reported also.

I think people need to have all the information that's available, and then be able to work it out with their professionals, with their doctors, the people they trust to make the right decision. But I don't think it's appropriate to ignore those kinds of, you know, ideas if they're rooted in real science, if these are trustworthy people who are saying this.

I mean, there's a story that broke this week that Fox News has covered extensively. And I know that there are many activists who wish it would just go away. And that is the Kristen Beck story. Kristen Beck was the Navy SEAL who transitioned about ten years ago, and wrote a book called *Lady Valor*, and, I mean, she was—she was just totally adopted by the LGBTQ community as someone who was a Navy SEAL who had come out as trans—as, you know, somebody that the community should know about and who should be honored. She was given awards.

Well, unfortunately for the community that honored her many years ago, this week she repudiated that. She went on television, and she said it was, you know, the biggest mistake, it ruined her life. She's now identifying again as Chris, and she has de-transitioned. And that is a very uncomfortable story for people to have to cover, and to share, because there's pressure not to. Because, well, we shouldn't—she's only one person. Or he's only one person now, if you, you know, use the current pronouns. Well, you know, unfortunately, I don't think you can have it both ways as a journalist.

If ten years ago I was asked to do a story because this was an important story within the community and I was covering an award that was being given, a national award to this person, how can I ten years later just say, oh, well, he's only one person. We shouldn't be paying attention. Well, it was the same one person ten years ago that everybody wanted to know. So—

ROBBINS: Steve, I'm going to interrupt you because we're about to run out of time and I want to give Neela the last word here. We could go on so much longer. This has been a fabulous conversation. Neela, could you sum up, you know, just in, sadly, only a minute. But this has been fabulous. But we're going to share all sorts of links to your organization and everything else. What's, you know, another big takeaway you want our group to take?

GHOSHAL: Well, I just wanted to respond a little bit to that question, which is keeping in mind that I work in regions where there are politicians who will go on the record saying things like, "LGBTIQ should be killed," right? And that's a story too, right? And so the important thing is not to report on these kinds of opinions uncritically. And I mention again the issue of kind of trans people and the language around trans people being a so-called threat. I have seen some very unfortunate reporting that has quoted, you know, people like J.K. Rowling in the U.K., I mentioned the U.K. before as being kind of a bastion of a lot of anti-trans sentiment right now. That has quoted a number of cis women making unscientific, non-evidence-based opinions or generalizations about trans people. And responsible reporting requires not taking that as face value.

So it is a news story that J.K. Rowling, because she's famous and wrote a lot of books, says these things. That doesn't make it a fact that should be, you know, not critically reported on. And if, you know, anyone's going to report on, oh, some feminists are saying that transwomen are a threat, then it's your obligation to say there is no evidence that shows that Argentina, that has had a gender identity law for the last ten-plus laws, has had any kind of increase in gender-based violence against cis women. So we know what the facts are. And someone's opinions do not discount those.

So I think, you know, we're in for an interesting number of years ahead, where these issues will continue to be highly politicized. And I really think it's important for the media in the U.S. and around the world to s think about hat the facts are, and to make sure that marginalized voices and voices aren't being heard, are being heard and being—and being centered, and not that media is amplifying the voices of the powerful who would seek to undo or hide the realities of the powerless.

And I just want to mention one more thing, which is why this is why freedom of expression is so important, right? And this is why countries like Hungary, Russia, Nigeria, Ghana, are trying to legislate against freedom of expression on LGBTIQ issues. Because where there is freedom of expression and people are able to tell their own stories, and where—I mean, we have a problem with—you know, when the media space is owned by people who don't give a voice to everyone who needs to have that space, then you still have certain voices that are heard, and others that are not.

But as long as there is access for marginalized voices to be heard, that's when that opinion change happens that you were speaking about earlier, around marriage and other issues in the U.S. When you know someone who's trans, when you know someone who's queer, and you hear their story, you are more likely to support policy change that will allow

that person to live a safe and dignified life. But if you shut down the discussion and you don't allow people to even talk about sexual orientation or gender identity, then you're never going to get to that place of positive change. And that's what a lot of politicians are trying to do right now around the world and in the United States. And I think the media has a really important obligation to push back.

ROBBINS: Well, thank you. That sums it up perfectly. You guys have helped an enormous amount. We have put in the chat links to the work that you guys do, as well as to these stylebooks. But we'll send things out as well. And I'm going to turn this back to Irina. And thank you, Neela, so much. And thank you, Steve, so much.

ROTHAUS: Thank you. It was very interesting.

FASKIANOS: Yes, I second that. And as Carla said, we will send you the link to this webinar and the transcript, along with the links. You can follow Neela Ghosal on Twitter at @adi. Steve Rothaus at—

GHOSHAL: Actually, sorry, my Twitter account has been hacked. (Laughs.) And, unfortunately, nobody at Twitter will respond to my efforts to get it back. So do not follow me on Twitter. That hasn't been me for the last three months.

FASKIANOS: OK then. (Laughter.)

GHOSHAL: And sometimes I feel that—(inaudible)—I'm giving up on Twitter right now.

ROTHAUS: And I'll say something. So am I. I mean, I want to say that too, because I've not been posting. I've been lurking/looking, but I'm really uncomfortable with what's happening at Twitter. And so I'd prefer not to give my Twitter address, only because I don't know that I'll be using it.

ROBBINS: (Laughs.) Take that, Elon Musk. OK. (Laughs.)

FASKIANOS: OK. And you are all—both right, that this is—we need to be following what's happening on Twitter and watching that space, for sure. (Laughs.) So delete from—erase from your memories what I just said about Twitter. And please do follow us on CFR.org, ForeignAffairs.com and ThinkGlobalHealth.org. You can go to those websites for the latest developments and analysis on international trends and how they are affecting the United States. Please, of course, email us your suggestions for future webinars. You can email localjournalists@CFR.org. And, again, thank you all for today. We really appreciate it. It was extremely informative and a worthwhile conversation.

GHOSHAL: Thank you very much.

ROBBINS: Thanks, guys.

ROTHAUS: Thank you.

(END)