

USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center

The WALTER CRONKITE for excellence in television political journalism AWARD



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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With Disinformation Everywhere All at Once, Excellent Journalism Matters Even More

2023 Walter Cronkite Award Winners Investigate Untruths and Consequences

*FRONTLINE, Jonathan Karl, Margaret Brennan, Jordan Klepper, Ben Collins,
Getting Better Foundation take prizes.*

“Stolen” election, press freedom, violent extremism among issues tackled.

LOS ANGELES, April 19, 2023 – Despite the Big Lie’s dispiriting tenacity, despite the “disinformation at scale” that AI’s advances may portend, some of the best journalists on TV are imperturbably digging for truth, combating deception and defending democracy.

That is the message sent by the work of the winners of the 12th biennial Walter Cronkite Awards for Excellence in TV Political Journalism, announced today by the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

“At a time when journalists are fighting a tidal wave of disinformation and misinformation,” said Annenberg professor Martin Kaplan, director of the school’s Norman Lear Center, which administers the award, “it’s incredibly heartening to honor these examples of superlative work by indefatigable TV reporters and producers, from the national to the local level.”

Entrants to the 2023 Cronkite competition were limited to one subject: disinformation and the threats it poses to democracy – a fitting topic, given the award’s namesake. Every weeknight for 19 years, up to 30 million Americans watched Walter Cronkite anchor the CBS Evening News. A poll named him “the most trusted man in America.” When he went to Vietnam in 1968 to see if the U.S. government was telling the truth about winning the war, his answer – no – was an inflection point in the war, in politics and in the job of journalism.

Today’s winners are heirs to that legacy. Knotty questions now confront them: How do you debunk disinformation without amplifying and elevating it? How do you push back on lies without enabling the drama that liars crave? How do you show fairness without succumbing to false equivalence and bothsidesism? Promising, instructive answers can be found in the work highlighted here.

USC Annenberg’s Cronkite Awards partners with the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania to present the Brooks Jackson Prize for Fact-Checking. The prize is named for the founding director of FactCheck.org. Its winner is also announced today, below.

Awards will be presented on Friday, June 9, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. For more information, including the winning entry videos, visit cronkiteawards.org

2023 WALTER CRONKITE AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN TELEVISION POLITICAL JOURNALISM

DOCUMENTARY (NETWORK)

FRONTLINE (series)

Raney Aronson-Rath, editor-in-chief and executive producer

"FRONTLINE's consistent commitment to trustworthy journalism sets the standard we wish all news organizations would follow," judges said. The investigative documentary series is produced at WGBH-TV in Boston and distributed by PBS. Together with its four wins this year for individual episodes (below), FRONTLINE has now won the most Cronkite Awards in one year since the awards began in 2001.

A THOUSAND CUTS (FRONTLINE episode)

Produced by Ramona Diaz

Does "an unbelievable job illustrating the nuances, vulnerabilities and disinformation campaigns all at play" in Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's epic battle with the press over facts and truth, told through the story of one of his prime targets, journalist Maria Ressa. Judges said "this film masterfully depicts... a recipe for national disaster that applies to us all globally." "Incredible execution.... Beyond well done."

PUTIN'S WAR AT HOME (FRONTLINE episode)

Directed by Gesbeen Mohammed

Produced by Gesbeen Mohammed and Vasiliy Kolotilov

This film, "made at incredible risk to the journalists and their subjects," "intricately peels back the layers of the Russian war in Ukraine by revealing... how the failure to expose, debunk or prevent disinformation directly impacts (or jeopardizes) people's lives." "Journalism is no more powerful than what is exhibited here."

PLOT TO OVERTURN THE ELECTION (FRONTLINE episode)

Directed and produced by Samuel Black

Correspondent: A.C. Thompson

An investigative partnership with ProPublica. Its "relentless digging," judges said, "uncovers how a small group secretly conspired to spread disinformation about a 'rigged' election." "Until I saw this," a judge said, "I thought I knew the truth behind the Dominion lies." "The time and effort that went into it seemed almost overwhelming." With reporting by ProPublica's Doug Bock Clark, Alexandra Berzon and Kirsten Berg.

LIES, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY (FRONTLINE episode)

Directed by Michael Kirk

Produced by Michael Kirk, Mike Wiser and Vanessa Fica

"Fair, accurate... remarkably clear and definitive," this behind-the-scenes account of Trump and his allies shows "how disinformation can destroy effective communication and turn lies into reality." "A powerful advocate for democratic norms." With reporting by The Atlantic's Tim Alberta and the dean of Columbia Journalism School, Jelani Cobb.

DOCUMENTARY (LOCAL)

AGAINST ALL ENEMIES

NBC 5 Investigates team

KXAS-TV Dallas/Ft. Worth

After a former Oath Keeper infiltrated their official training program, Texas sheriffs were instructed that their power constitutionally exceeds the authority of the FBI and even the president. Judges called the investigation revealing this disinformation "quite alarming.... If they hadn't uncovered it, it wouldn't be known." This "completely captivating" streaming series is "a standout" that "could go up against a network production" and shows the NBC-owned station's "commitment to invest the resources to do a totally professional job."

NATIONAL REPORTING

JONATHAN KARL, ABC News chief Washington correspondent

Judges said this compilation of Karl's reports on how close America came to overturning a free and fair election "debunked the Big Lie" and "fact-checked candidates in real time." Airing on World News Tonight, This Week with George Stephanopoulos and ABC News Special Reports, Karl's "dogged reporting... helped provide truth without further disseminating disinformation." "Jonathan Karl gets at the heart of stories like no other journalist."

KYUNG LAH, CNN senior correspondent

ANNA-MAJA RAPPARD, CNN senior producer

The Lies Undermining American Democracy

Lah and Rappard worked the state-level democracy beat for CNN for two years. This sampling demonstrates their "great journalism chops," showing them "confronting power and digging deep" in Arizona, Wisconsin, Nevada, Michigan and Pennsylvania. "They never gave up." "It's strong storytelling" that gives "an intimate, first-hand look into how false election claims affect the local community."

NATIONAL PROGRAM

FACE THE NATION WITH MARGARET BRENNAN (CBS News)

Mary Hager, executive producer

Judges praised "the program's repeated advocacy of small d democratic norms and truth" and Brennan's interviews for her "concerted efforts to combat disinformation." Brennan is "measured, completely consistent, researched and prepared." Citing her interviews of Mike Pence, Kevin McCarthy and Rep. Tom Emmer, they said she also "pushes back – she puts guests in the hot seat in a fair and respectful manner." "Margaret Brennan and the Face the Nation team remind their viewers that an inability to accept electoral defeat is not the norm and puts our democracy at risk."

IMPACT x NIGHTLINE (ABC NEWS STUDIOS)

Threat to Democracy (episode)

Terry Moran, correspondent

Judges called this episode of Nightline's weekly streaming magazine, telecast on Hulu, a "powerful showcase of the harrowing personal consequences of disinformation." It took two months to win the trust Terry Moran and his small producing team needed to interview Atlanta poll workers Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss – the first time they spoke to the press after testifying to the January 6th Committee. They also reported from a Tudor Dixon rally in Michigan and a county clerk's bullet-proofed office in Colorado. "This kind of storytelling is worthwhile journalism."

2023 SPECIAL RECOGNITIONS

BEN COLLINS

Special recognition for incisive reporting from the trenches of the information war

Judges praised the NBC News senior reporter's "brilliant, brave work." "It's inspiring to watch Collins" cover stories like the racist manifesto of the Buffalo shooter or the anti-trans campaigns in the lead-up to the Club Q shooting, "bearing witness to the extremism on the dark web" and "holding it accountable." Judges found his wrestling with the responsibilities of journalists, and with his own work's impact (or lack of it) on violence, "honest and necessary."

JORDAN KLEPPER

Special recognition for using humor to inform and engage audiences

The Daily Show with Trevor Noah presents

Jordan Klepper Fingers the Globe: Hungary for Democracy (Comedy Central special)

Klepper's reports from the CPAC convention in Orlando and the Orbán campaign in Hungary are as probative as they are funny. They locate the U.S. far right in its global context, showing how swiftly authoritarians can undermine freedom and democratic institutions. Judges noted that Klepper's comedy is "rooted in basic journalistic techniques – being on the ground, conducting interviews, making first-hand observations." "There's huge value in what he does: reaching an audience, especially young people, who might not otherwise hear these stories."

MADELEINE MAY, ALEXIS JOHNSON and VICE NEWS

Special recognition for airing death threat voicemails to poll workers -- and calling the perpetrators back

Judges said producer May and reporter Johnson did “a shocking, amazing job exposing hundreds of threats that election workers encountered in a compelling and courageous way,” and “uncovering the ugly and tragic human consequences of disinformation.” Following up with law enforcement, the team found no investigations of those making the calls – “almost zero consequences.” But Johnson called some of them back herself. The callers were remorseless, justifying their behavior as “patriotic.” Judges marveled at Johnson’s unflappable, courteous probing -- “I don’t think I could have done what she did” – and applauded VICE News’ finding and airing the raw, troubling calls.

2023 SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

TRUST ME (documentary)

Special achievement in news literacy

Joe Phelps, executive producer, and Roko Belic, director

Judges praised the filmmakers for embracing the mission of media literacy -- taking on the worldwide effects of disinformation, and spelling out how to spot and debunk it. “It shows how dangerous disinformation is to anyone who scrolls media sites.... This story should cause all of us to rethink media practices by the unscrupulous.” The program aired on PBS/World Channel.



2023 BROOKS JACKSON PRIZE FOR FACT-CHECKING

The Brooks Jackson Prize for Fact-Checking is named for the veteran journalist who covered Washington, D.C., and national politics for news organizations including the Associated Press, *Wall Street Journal* and CNN. At CNN, he pioneered the “ad watch” and “fact check” form of stories debunking false and misleading political statements. In 2003, he co-founded FactCheck.org at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania with Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Jackson Prize entries are reviewed by a separate APPC jury.

CHRIS INGALLS, reporter, and KING 5 NEWS (KING-TV Seattle)

The Fraud Crusade

This year’s Brooks Jackson Prize for Fact-Checking goes to reporter Chris Ingalls and KING 5 News, an NBC affiliate owned by Tegna, for a five-part series that debunked a misinformation campaign that sought to undermine public trust in Washington state’s elections. Ingalls vetted claims of voter registration anomalies in three Washington counties made by the so-called Voter Integrity Project. His reports used public records requests, old-fashioned shoe leather reporting and effective interviews to expose false and misleading claims about voter fraud. Judges called his pieces “important, thoroughly researched, well produced, very informative.”

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