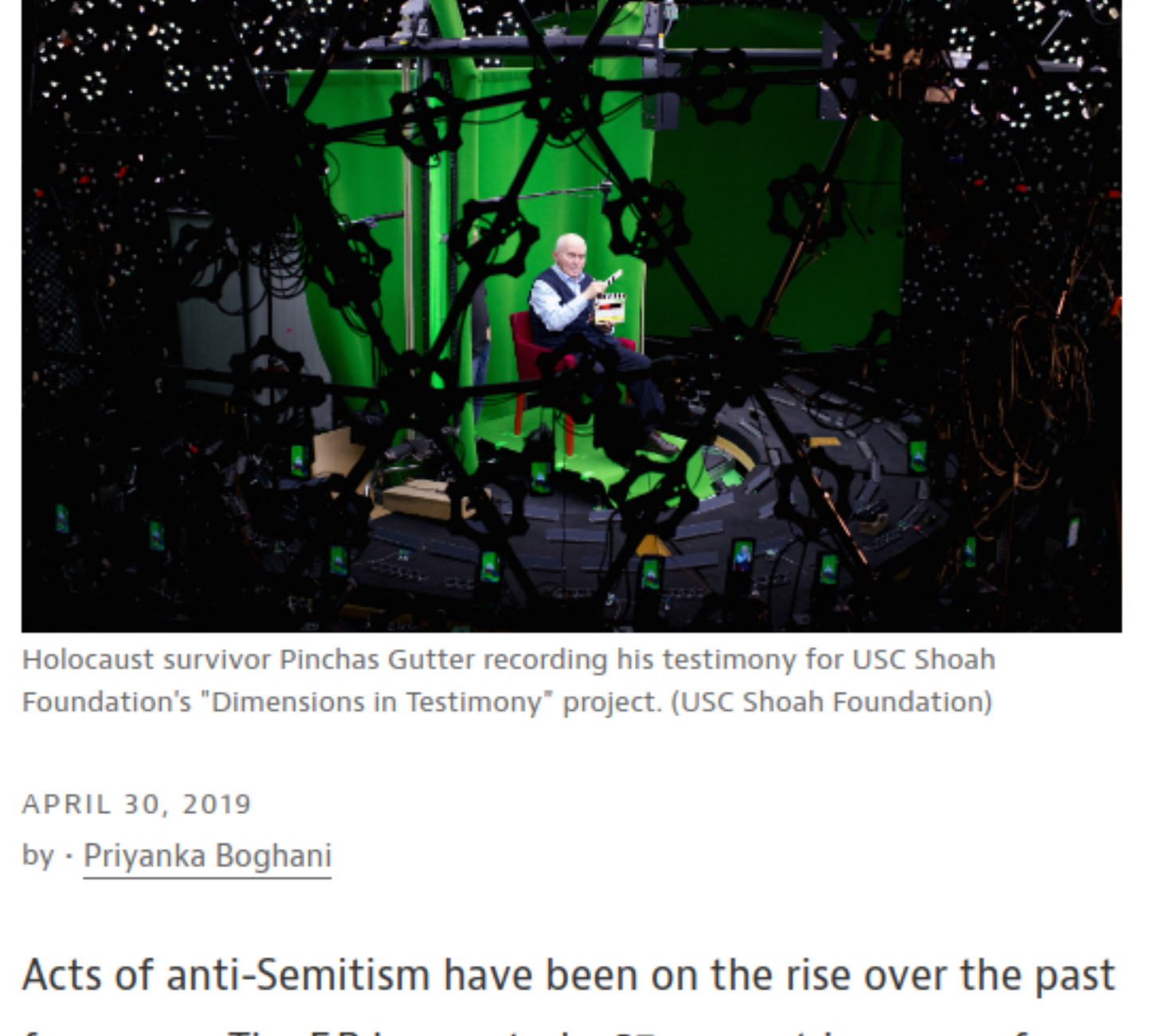


How Technology Helps Preserve the Testimony of Holocaust Survivors

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Holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter recording his testimony for USC Shoah Foundation's "Dimensions in Testimony" project. (USC Shoah Foundation)

APRIL 30, 2019
by [Priyanka Boghani](#)

Acts of anti-Semitism have been on the rise over the past few years. The [F.B.I. reported](#) a 37 percent increase of anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. in 2017; France saw a [staggering 74 percent spike](#) between 2017 and 2018; [violent anti-Semitic attacks](#) in Germany rose by 60 percent in 2018. And on April 27, the last day of Passover, a gunman [attacked](#) a synagogue in a California suburb, killing one and wounding three others, including a rabbi.

For many Holocaust survivors, who experienced the brutal consequences of anti-Semitism at its height, the greatest antidote to the current swell of hate is sharing their stories.

"Many of them will speak about their concerns of what they see happening in the world today, with the tearing apart of the fabric of society and knowing what happens when groups are targeted," said Diane Saltzman, director of survivor affairs at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. "It's so important to them that they and their experiences serve as a cautionary tale that people need to be paying attention to."

Time, however, is running out — the youngest are now in their mid-70s.

"Time is marching on, and it will not be long before there will be no firsthand survivors alive," 89-year-old Manfred Goldberg said in the recent FRONTLINE film [The Last Survivors](#), which documented the stories of 10 Holocaust survivors. "And it is important to record this testimony as evidence for future generations."

Those who have spoken publicly about their suffering under the brutal Nazi regime feel an urgency to share their stories with as many people as possible. With the help of technology, Holocaust memorial museums around the U.S. are helping survivors preserve their legacies.

Holocaust museums have collected survivor testimonies for years, but digital tools have helped them account for outdated and fragile mediums. Since it opened its doors 23 years ago, [Holocaust Museum Houston](#) has collected 298 testimonies from survivors in the area. Kelly Zúñiga, the museum's chief executive officer, said that many of the testimonies recorded toward the end of the 1990s and early 2000s lived on VHS tapes that would degrade over time. Now, those recordings have been digitized, and the museum is currently focused on making them available on their website.

"It's protecting that history, but also utilizing that history," Zúñiga said.

Other museums have also beefed up their digital archives with the aim of expanding accessibility to survivors' stories. [USHMM](#) currently has 20,000 testimonies in different formats — audio, video, written — and more than 85 percent of them are available online. Saltzman said there are ongoing efforts to digitize the stories "so that anybody, anywhere can have access to Holocaust documentation."

"It's not just about collecting for the sake of collecting, but it's collecting for the sake of making it accessible to people all over the world," Saltzman said.

Zúñiga said protecting Holocaust Museum Houston's testimonies is all the more pressing because many survivors have passed away, or are no longer able to speak in public. But when they do make appearances, "there's nothing like it. We equate it to them being a rock star, because after they've finished speaking, many people want to go up and touch them, hug them, tell them how much they appreciated hearing their story."

There will be a day when that experience will be out of reach, but the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center has the greatest chance of recreating it long after survivors are gone. In 2017, it debuted "Dimensions in Testimony," an interactive project developed by the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation in association with the museum. Though it has found a [permanent home](#) in Illinois, the project has also appeared at other Holocaust museums, including USHMM and the Holocaust Museum Houston.

Audiences watch a short film about a person, and then a 3-D image of the survivor prompts them to ask questions. The exhibit uses voice-recognition technology to select answers from between 16 to 20 hours of pre-recorded testimony, given over five days of filming. Survivors are asked around 1,000 questions for the project, and are recorded by 50-plus cameras.

"You can have world-class exhibitions, which we most certainly do, or you could watch award-winning films, which we have access to... and you can read an award-winning book too, but really in terms of developing empathy, the most powerful comes from human interaction," said Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center CEO Susan Abrams. "These interactive holograms are able to provide that in a very special way."



Eva Schloss, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, is part of the "Dimensions in Testimony" project. (USC Shoah Foundation)

The project began with a proof of concept in 2012, and the first survivors were recorded in 2015, according to Stephen Smith, executive director of USC Shoah Foundation.

"We want to make sure we have enough Holocaust survivors recorded so they can represent a variety of experiences — men and women, religious and not religious, Western European, Eastern European," Smith said. "Some of them were in concentration camps, some of them were in hiding, some of them were children."

Smith said 21 survivors of the Holocaust have been filmed so far, and they are recording survivors in more languages — Russian, German, Spanish and Hebrew — to capture cultural and linguistic nuances in their responses. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who survived Auschwitz and features in [The Last Survivors](#), was also interviewed for the project, once in [2015 in English](#), and once again this March in German.

The project team gave special consideration to the impact of dredging up deeply personal and potentially traumatizing experiences. Survivors had a member of their family with them at all times for comfort. But Smith said that, for the most part, survivors faced the interviews head on.

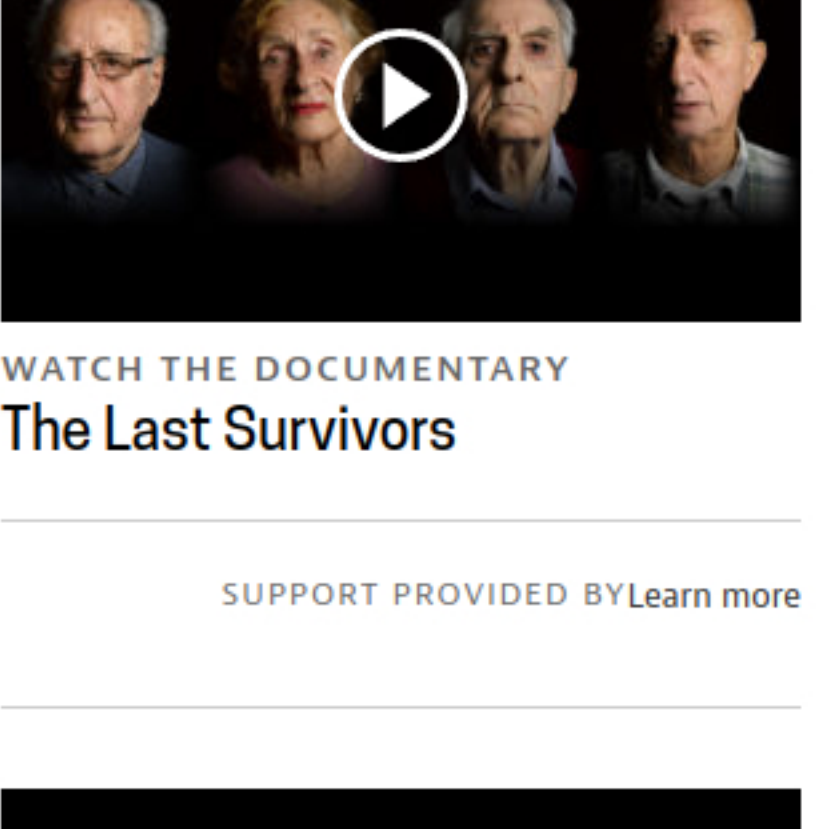
"That commitment is really remarkable, because I sat in the studio week after week with these Holocaust survivors and they passed on very few questions," Smith said.

One of the survivors who recorded his testimony for the project, Aaron Elster, passed away last April.

"We survivors feel that when we are gone, our story is gone," he told [The Chicago Tribune](#) in October 2017, after he gave his testimony for the project.

"I'm hoping that many, many years from now, I will still be able to speak with me," he added. "That I will be able to answer questions for them, that I'll make the Holocaust more than just a story."

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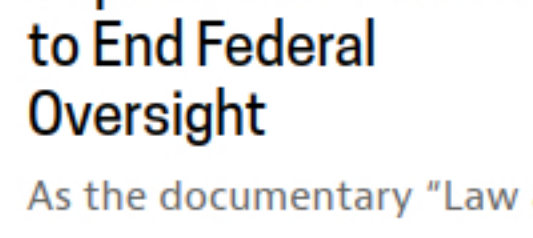
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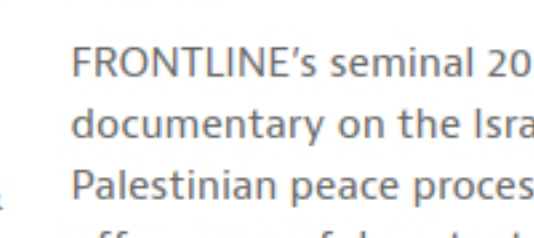
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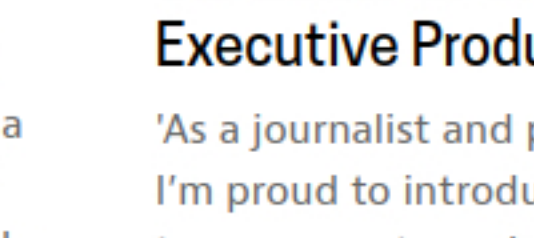
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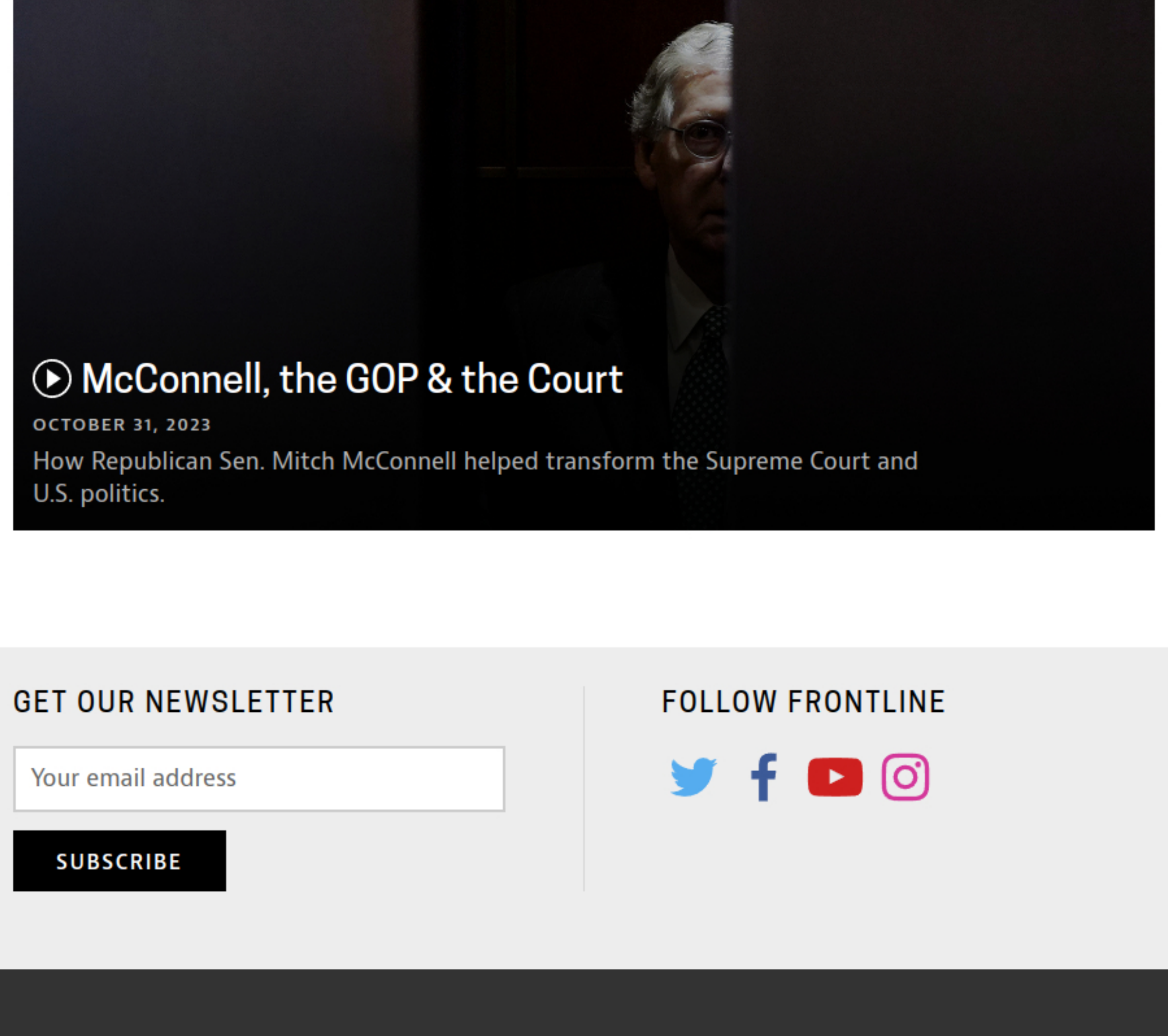


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