

## ISOJ 2021: Day 4, Panel

### Cracking the code for the new local news through networking and collaboration

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**Chair:** [Karen Rundlet](#), *director of journalism program*, Knight Foundation

- [Sarabeth Berman](#), *ceo*, American Journalism Project (AJP)
  - [Sue Cross](#), *executive director and CEO*, Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)
  - [Emilee Gilpin](#), *managing editor*, Indiginews (Canada)
  - [Lisa Heyamoto](#), *GNI Startups Lab Senior Program Manager*, LION Publishers
  - [Kate Moos](#), *managing director*, SAHAN Journal
  - [Mazin Sidahmed](#), *co-executive director*, Documented
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**Rosental Alves** Welcome back. We have had another intense day at ISOJ 2021, and we are rocking and rolling. Almost ready for another great panel. Remember that we have an interpretation to Spanish thanks to Univision Noticias. We are very excited to move along now with our next panel, Cracking the Code for the New Local News Through Networking and Collaboration, chaired by Karen Rundlet, director of journalism program at Knight Foundation. And you know, Knight Foundation is our sponsor of ISOJ 2021, along with Google News Initiative. I'm excited, especially excited, about this conversation. Karen, is bringing six leaders who will be talking from the front lines of the efforts to save local journalism. If you have any questions about this important issue, be thinking about them and save them for the Q&A section at the end of the panel. So let's get started, Karen.

**Karen Rundlet** Hello, thank you so much to everyone who's joining today. We really appreciate it. Again, I'm Karen Rundlet from the Knight Foundation, and I want to tell you a little bit about how we're thinking about this panel and how at Knight Foundation we're thinking about local journalism. At Knight Foundation, we are really committed to supporting the future of local news in the United States, and we believe in the power of networks. And what that means is that leaders learn from their peers. A publisher in New York City can learn from a publisher in Denver, Colorado. They can grow together. One person can say, "I did that, and it didn't work." Another person can say, "I did that, and it delivered even more than I expected." And so today we're joined by network leaders, organizations that work to serve publishers, and we're joined by three publishers. So what's going to happen is we're going to have three different conversations. We'll hear from the American Journalism Project's Sarabeth Berman, and Documented Mazin Sidahmed, LION Publishers's Lisa Heyamoto, and Emilee Gilpin from Indiginews in Canada. But first, we're going to begin with Sue Cross, who is the CEO at the Institute for Nonprofit News. And a last minute edition, Kate Moos. Thank you so much for joining us, Kate. Kate Moos from Sahan Journal.

**Sue Cross** Thank you, Karen. Thanks for the nice intro. I'm delighted to be here with Kate today, and we're going to start off talking a little bit about how Sahan Journal plugs into the INN network, which has about 320 nonprofit newsrooms across North America now, and then how we work with Sahan and try to support their growth. So I think we'll start off with Kate telling us a little bit about the Sahan Journal and kind of laying the scene.

**Kate Moos** You bet. It's really great to be here. And I'm sorry Mukhtar couldn't be, but I'm happy to step in for him. Sahan Journal launched officially in August of 2019, just a little

while ago after being sort of the brainchild of Mukhtar Ibrahim, who is our founder and executive director. Mukhtar is an American journalist who was born in Somalia. He and his family came to this country when he was about 15 years old. He was preparing for a premed college education as his father wished, immigrant parents, of course, and he discovered writing. He discovered journalism, and with the encouragement of a teacher, began to switch his interest to journalism and writing. His father went along with that idea, although he is now a doctor, and Sahan Journal grew as kind of an idea. Mukhtar had it as working out of his back pocket for a few years, building a website. But it wasn't until 2019, when the Minnesota Public Radio and our former boss, Nancy Cassutt, lured Mukhtar back to NPR, having been an intern there and a reporter there, with the promise that if he returned, she would help him build Sahan Journal. And that was by way of financial support, paying for his salary, and allowing him to use his time to start this nonprofit news organization. It was an unusual offer. At that time, I was assigned to work with Mukhtar. I have a kind of executive producer background in journalism. And so we began fundraising. We began giving the project arms and legs. And in August of 2019, we launched with initial investment from Minnesota Philanthropy, and then Knight Foundation and others came on shortly thereafter. In the interim, we have been able to hire reporters through Report for America, which is a great networking organization as well. We had one reporter who was funded by a local health organization, and we launched with the expectation that we would have about 50,000 readers a month, 30 to 50 in our first year.

And then the world changed because in 2020, COVID-19 hit. A global pandemic. And also in 2020, George Floyd was killed on the streets of Minneapolis by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin. That immediately, I think, blew apart many constructs about what constitutes news. Our mission has always been focused on serving immigrants and refugees, emerging communities in Minnesota and in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. And almost immediately, these events created a convergence between the political, and social, and health concerns of immigrants and refugees and the larger BIPOC communities in Minnesota. So as we pursued our coverage, centering the narrative on people in community, providing COVID-19 information in multiple languages, as appropriate and as we could do. It's takes a lot of effort to do that and to do it well. We began to discover that there was a shared interest in broadening our mission to include other communities as well.

**Sue Cross** Thanks, Kate. Sahan's evolution and our work with them from INN has really been wonderful fun for us, as well is a kind of proof of concept that this network can help an individual news outlet grow. When we were preparing for this presentation, we went back, and we added up all the things that Sahan Journal has participated in the course of planning and launching. INN operates as a peer network. We also do an enormous amount of training to help journalists learn how to be successful nonprofit news publishers. And our whole aim is to accelerate the growth of this emerging media field of news media as a public trust. So newsrooms operating as nonprofits committed to their communities and with a variety of business models, but all of them are nonprofit in public service. And we do that through the training and these peer groups, and then also organizations like Sahan are big contributors to that network as well. And so when we went back, I'm not going to go through every point of contact we've had because there are so continual with Mukhtar and others on his team throughout this period. But I'll kind of walk you through the life cycle of how that works between a national network and one local outlet.

And it actually starts way before a launch. I went back, I was trying to find out how far before we actually launched we first heard from Mukhtar, but it was quite a ways before that August 2019 launch. He started calling, saying, "Who else is out there? What are they

doing?" And we talked through strategic plans, business plans, introduced him to a lot of people doing things that weren't exactly similar but might be related and have learnings. And that started well before launch. Sahan Journal has also followed the mold of other very, very successful news entrepreneurs in that it takes advantage of almost every bit of learning that's out there. It's not time to reinvent anything. It doesn't have to. It just applies it really smartly where it is. So they've come to annual conferences, business deep dive training, and then they've also participated in intense cohorts of leaders in this field who are working on a project basis to either really learn to build sponsorship revenue or learn to build major gifts beyond individual learning. And they've taken advantage of that, and they also take advantage of networking through serving on the selection committees. We had a springboard program for entrepreneurs, particularly those creating new news publications in communities of color and Mukhtar was on the selection team for that. And he also is a member of our emerging leaders councils. These are about 40 people now who are fairly new in running news operations or in mid-level management, but who you can really see are recreating a new future of news. They're just superb leaders who are taking the field in all kinds of exciting directions. So that's how we've interacted on a formal level. And then informally, I talk to Mukhtar every couple of months, and Jonathan Keeling, our chief network officer, who is also in Minneapolis, usually they meet up every six to eight weeks or so. So there's a lot of informal back and forth, too, and we learn from that what's working, what isn't, and can share that out across the network. So that's a quick summary of how it's worked from our perspective. It's just been so much fun to watch you grow.

**Kate Moos** So I remember when Mukhtar came back from his first INN conference, I think it was before launch in 2019, and it really was an exposure to a large community of like-minded people doing similar work. It was a new horizon. And when you're used to working for a large news organization, which both Mukhtar and I have spent most of our careers doing, me for a little longer than him, when you're in a startup environment, you feel a little unhoused. You feel like you don't have a raincoat, even though we had this fostering relationship with Minnesota Public Radio at launch. So having INN there with training from everything from I need to think about legal support, I need to write an employee handbook, I need to figure out some fundraising strategies, or how to do longer-range financial planning, and even having experts keeping the office hours for you that you can actually sign up for in a regular way has really been an amazing resource for Sahan Journal. And I'm aware that we've been involved in a lot of your trainings along with other organizations. We've been in a Facebook sustainability accelerator. We work with the local nonprofit called Propel Nonprofits in Minnesota. And without that, we would simply not be able to proceed with the trajectory that we've been able to have.

**Sue Cross** I want to talk about one other aspect of this network that Sahara Journal has been very active in. But aside from the peer to peer support, being in these networks enables us to act collaboratively and collectively. And one of the biggest ways we do that, with Knight's foundational support in getting it launched, is through News Match. We get a lot of questions about News Match, particularly from international organizations. So I just wanted to take a minute to describe how it works, and then Kate can tell you how that played out for Sahan Journal as an example.

News Match is the largest grassroots fundraising movement really for journalism that is out there, and it does three things. It takes these national matching and from Knight, Democracy Fund, other big journalism funders, and it uses those as leverage, as an incentive to get local supporters to support local journalism. And it also builds the capacity. We do a ton of training to help journalists figure out how to fundraise and how to build that

local community support around them. And then it raises public awareness through this national campaign of news really is an asset like our clean water, like our roads, and it's getting people thinking about donating to news. And it has this enormous leverage and really success across the field. I think the national investment has totaled about \$21 million in matches that has generated more than \$150 million in donations in support of local journalism like Sahan. And it's also generated 2.3 million individual donors. It has lit them up in, and many of those are first time donors to news. They never thought about supporting news in their community. And so that's the other way these networks work is that you can act collectively and make a big push, that everybody then carries out locally as well. How did News Match work for you?

**Kate Moos** Well, it's been pretty amazing. You know, our first News Match occurred three months after launch. Brand new. We didn't really have much of a staff yet. We did have someone who was helping us pro bono on some membership, very seminal membership work. But News Match came along at the end of the year, and we amazingly met our goal and raised a considerable amount of money, including with an additional local match. In 2020, Mukhtar was able to secure additional matches from both foundations, smaller family foundations and corporate funders, to triple the match through News Match, and that was an incredible incentive. We have a population in Minnesota that is familiar with membership ideas and subscription-based access to news because it's a pretty big public media location. But even with that sort of seeding, the addition of News Match and the leverage of News Match has been really, really big financially. It's certainly our our biggest fundraiser of the year.

**Sue Cross** Thanks, Kate. I think we're going to toss back to Karen. And let's hear from some of the other networks. Karen, back to you.

**Karen Rundlet** Wonderful. Thank you, Sue and Kate. Again, Sahan Journal was just founded in 2019, and went to an INN conference, the Institute for Nonprofit News, found others to discuss these issues with, to learn from, learned about a fundraising opportunity, and has changed its strategy and is looking to serve new audiences. So just in a very short time, a little bit less than two years. Now we really want to go to Lisa Heyamoto from LION Publishers, who is a part of the Google News Startup Lab. You're running that. And Emilee Gilpin of Indiginews, which is based in Canada. Thanks for joining us, ladies. It's all yours.

**Lisa Heyamoto** Thank you so much, Karen. It's really wonderful to hear about the history that Sahan Journal and INN have been working together. Emilee and I are at the start of our relationship, and it's been really fabulous to get to know her and her wonderful organization. Just for a little bit of context, so, LION Publishers, we work in this journalism support space where we have really helped to support and connect local independent journalism organizations. And we've long had a very strong community of folks who are talking to each other and learning from each other and really sort of being allies for each other as news founders and as news leaders in this local independent space, which can often be a tough road. People are doing really, really important work, and it can be lonely. And they're pioneering new ways to do journalism and new ways to be sustainable. So LION has a long history of forming that community, but we're really moving deeper into this support space where we're trying to more directly support these organizations.

And one of those ways is through the GNI startup lab, which Indiginews is participating in. So we just a few weeks ago started our inaugural program with the GNI startup lab, a partnership with GNI, and we are just starting to dig into all of the wonderful ways that we can help these organizations. And we're doing it, sort of our philosophy of this is this notion

of holistic sustainability. All of these organizations are doing absolutely amazing journalism, which is, of course, why they got into this and how they're serving their communities. But we're also working with all of these organizations to help build out other parts of sustainability. Of course, financial health. Right. All organizations need financial health to keep doing the good journalism that is serving their communities. We're also focused on what we call operational resilience, which is kind of that third leg of what we define as sustainability. And of course, it's the strategic planning, and the workflows, and the systems, and the hiring, and the retention that all organizations are focused on.

We're also really focused on the human side of that. So, you know, the pace of work, the workload, and the burnout, that is a very real aspect of running a local independent news organization. And so we're working with Emilee and Indiginews in these spaces because we really believe that there's not necessarily a one-size-fits-all way forward for local independent news businesses. And so we've designed this sort of bespoke program to meet folks where they are because we really believe in local independent news, because folks are able to serve their communities with all of the nuance, and all of the context, and all of the knowledge that comes with being of a community and understanding that. And I think that's something Indiginews is really just doing so well. Emilee, maybe you want to talk a little bit about what Indiginews does and how it's really thinking hard about how to serve a particular community in a way that meets them where they are.

**Emilee Gilpin** Great, Lisa. Thank you and thanks to everyone for inviting Indiginews to be a part of this panel today. We got started last year in May 2020 when we really launched, which, as everybody knows, was an interesting year to launch an independent media right in the middle of this whole pandemic. But at the same time, it was perhaps more important than ever, independent community based media. So we hired three journalists in one region in the BC province. This is the west coast of Canada called the Okanagan Valley. And then we hired journalists a couple of months later across Vancouver Island. So we have a team of majority, all indigenous or allies that are committed to upholding stories of the communities, indigenous communities, that we're covering. A couple of our reporters are from the communities themselves. Others are visitors in the territories that they're living or working in. But it's really important to us to have a cultural understanding. I've given workshops for the last few years around indigenizing and decolonizing media, so upholding values like accountability and respect and holding them on par with objectivity and other values that are the pillars of journalism. And so we've really wanted to put some of those values into practice at Indiginews and rebuild that trust, because with many marginalized communities across so-called North America and many different regions, there is a history of mistrust with the media because newspapers were used at a time to be an arm for the state. Right our colonial government. So we're really clear about our intentions as a media organization. We have 10 intentions that are listed on our website, and we stick really close to those. We really claim to be a media organization that hears, and values, and respects your stories and tries to do that in a good way. So it was really awesome when GNI wanted to work with us, and uplift us, and help support the work that we're doing.

Lisa was speaking a little bit about the culture of a newsroom, which is something that I'm really invested in as well, is making sure that we're avoiding burnout, making sure that people are happy and healthy, and in our workspace as well, and so that our work is coming from that place of care and accuracy. So it's been really cool to work with GNI and be a part of these training sessions and work with our individual mentor to talk about different revenue streams and experiments, and see what's worked for others and what hasn't, and to not feel, kind of like you mentioned, so alone in the whole thing.

**Lisa Heyamoto** Yes. Oh, that's wonderful to hear. Yes, like I mentioned, we've just started down this journey on the GNI startups lab, and what we kind of do is we've designed this program that addresses holistic sustainability. And we're just moving into a portion of the program where folks are doing one-on-one coaching with these wonderful folks that we're working with. And what they're doing is they're designing a revenue generating experiment where they're going to try some things that will hopefully add up to something that's working really well in the organization that can help that financial health aspect and can help folks be sustainable, so that they can keep working on that journalistic impact and that operational health that will help them keep going. And I guess, Emilee, maybe do you want to talk a little bit about how you're thinking about sustainability for your organization and what sorts of things you're thinking you might try or that are on your mind?

**Emilee Gilpin** Yeah, I mean, I'm not sure how things work in the U.S. for you guys there, but in Canada in 2018, our federal government made an announcement that they were going to commit \$600 million dollars to media, kind of like a media bail out, over a number of years. And so that funding gets dispersed in different ways. So that's kind of like the majority of the funding that we applied for to be able to fund our reporter positions. But there's a lot of job insecurity involved in that. There's some criticisms and questions around how much independence you can really have while also meeting the criteria that is expected in some of these applications and that sort of thing. Indiginews is a part of Discourse Media. We're also not a media group that wants to be advertisement generated. So we want to find ways that we can be sustainable, economically sustainable, that also aligns with our values. So this has been really cool to kind of have this support that you GNI has provided and use it to experiment a couple of different models. So we're right now, in the beginning, conversations around what are those experiments going to be? Of course, we have a newsletter. We have supporters and subscribers that can sign on for monthly donations or a one-time donation and that sort of thing. But we're really talking about things like apps, right? We're talking about things like private Facebook groups. Many different models that we want to maybe think about or talk about so that we can meet people where they are. That we can meet readers where they are and be as accessible as possible because I think these are stories people don't want to miss. I mean Indiginews we really get stories, and cover stories, and amplify stories that otherwise are either misunderstood because folks don't have any cultural connections, or relationships, or connections to communities, or they're just completely ignored altogether. So these stories are important stories to hear, and they're stories that can be a part of this effort in Canada that we have towards reconciliation and towards having a more equitable, and fair, and just society. So these stories are really important to us, and we're excited to experiment and see what kind of revenue models are working, and what's going to work for us.

**Lisa Heyamoto** Oh, that's wonderful. The possibilities. There are so many. I mean, one of the reasons why I enjoy so much being in this journalism support space is it gives me a chance to sort of live my values every day at work. And I feel so strongly about supporting local independent journalism organizations and really helping to support local news that is for, by and with communities. And that's something Indiginews does so well. I guess, why do you do this work? What are you passionate about when you go to work every day?

**Emilee Gilpin** I mean, like I've mentioned before, I've given a few presentations and workshops around decolonizing the media. Like, what does that mean? And it's really recognizing the history of newspapers, in our country anyways, and seeing what their function was, and seeing where they were a service to society, and where they may have

caused harm and been a part of this divide between many different peoples and communities, and then seeing which ways that independent media or that the media at large can address some of those issues and change some of those issues. So what I'm excited about is that at Indiginews we've really taken that full on. People talk about diversifying newsrooms all the time. And then we hired seven reporters. All of them are women, or non-gender binary conforming, majority mixed Métis and indigenous peoples. So we really upped to the number of indigenous journalists in the country just overnight. And of course, there's been a process of training. We've been engaged in training sessions ever since we kind of got going. But at the same time, these are people, like you said, that are connected to communities. They're sharing stories about cultures, and traditions, and language, and education. We're addressing difficult topics like child welfare, missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, and we're doing this in a way that we're connected to. We're connected to these stories. Our families are connected to these stories. So we're not doing it in a way that's causing more harm, which has been done quite often because things get reduced to a statistic, or there's a lack of cultural awareness and that sort of thing. So I'm just passionate about the fact that I'm working with people who care about the stories, and they put in a lot of work so that others care about them, too. And I love a good story. I'm a journalist, you know. I love a good story, so I love to wake up and read other stories, and help get them out there in a good way, and engage with younger audiences, and just to keep growing.

**Lisa Heyamoto** That's wonderful. Well, because we're in this journalism support space, I feel like we should sort of help support others. So as we think about what from journalism's past we should bring into its future, and what the future needs to be, what's something that's working that you really think is so important that we bring into the future, that we share, that we help others to do?

**Emilee Gilpin** You know, I talk about this quite often, but we kind of uphold objectivity in the journalism world as like one of the most important values. And I think that that's true, although we have to remember that objectivity comes from a Western scientific notion that a view from nowhere is possible. And yet we've all been influenced and educated by our different societies and education systems, and influences, families, cultures. So in a way, it's a goal to aim towards. But does it actually exist, and who can be objective? That's a different conversation. But I really think that we should, as journalists, bring into our newsrooms, especially when we're working with marginalized communities, accountability. And what does that mean? Really looking at what is the intention of our work, of our story, and look at the difference of a story when the intention is to win a Pulitzer Prize, or to get more likes, or more headlines, or more followers, than the intention is to tell the truth. Right? And to amplify somebody's story. So we take that really seriously in our newsroom. What is our intention? What's the impact going to be? How can we do this in a good way? We do culture checking as much as we do fact checking. And I think that's where you're going to see some newsrooms really accelerate or really stand out to others because they're taking that time to not only do it differently, but to get it right.

**Lisa Heyamoto** Well, that's wonderful. Well, we're so excited to hear from Documented and AJP, so, Karen, we'll kick it back to you.

**Karen Rundlet** Thank you so much. I really appreciate the conversation. And of course, I just want to invite everyone to please ask questions in the chat. We'd love to take your questions. We've reserved some time for that as well. Interesting to hear about the \$600 million dollars in Canada. I'd love to hear from other people about what's going on in other parts of the world. The focus on journalism for an equitable, fair and just society. The

questions around what journalism has done, what service it's provided, and where it has done harm. And interestingly, of course, to hear about the one-to-one coaching, the mentoring, that goes along with the Google News Initiative Startup Lab that Lisa is leading. Yes. Now we're going to go to Sarabeth Berman, CEO of the American Journalism Project, and Mazin Sidahmed, from Documented. Please take it away.

**Sarabeth Berman** Thanks so much, Karen. This is really a delight to be here, and it was really fun to hear from LION, and INN, and our colleagues in the field, and from these incredible newsrooms Sahan Journal and Indiginews. And I'm excited to be here with you, Mazin, because I'm such an admirer and really thrilled to be partnering with you on your work at Documented. Let me just quickly frame up a little bit about what the American Journalism Project is, and then I want to really hear from you, Mazin, about what it is that you've created. We are a venture philanthropy organization, which means that we are pairing philanthropic capital with really hands-on business planning, capacity building, and support for organizations so that they can build the sustainable revenue models that can deliver local news for communities. And so, Mazin, I want to hear from you about what you're doing at Documented because you are living this every day. Why don't you introduce to us why you started Documented, what is Documented? This is one of the most exciting news organizations in the country right now, so I'm excited for everyone to hear from what you all are doing.

**Mazin Sidahmed** Thank you so much, Sarabeth. But like you said, I'm super excited to be here and just honored to be with all these great newsrooms and organizations talking about this. You know, everyone here is really leading in the field, so it's really great to be here. So I can give you a bit of background on Documented and how we got started. My co-founder Max Siegelbaum and I were both reporters in the Middle East some years ago. I was based in Beirut, covering the Syrian refugee crisis there, and he was based in Cairo, covering the rise of Sisi and a number of issues around migration, Sudanese immigrants, as well as Syrian migrants as well. And we both met digitally there, but actually connected when we were in the U.S. and spent some time in New York, but went our separate ways. Max went to Pittsburgh and Colorado, where he was covering immigration from a number of different angles. He did stories on immigration, detention in prisons and immigration courts and in the federal prison systems. And I covered a lot of issues around Muslim Americans and the national security state for the Guardian. In 2017, we were both talking about doing a project together because there was an intense focus at that time on what was happening at the border and what was happening in D.C. around immigration. So there was a lot of focus around all the policy issues that were happening and the really horrible things that were happening at the border, when at the beginning of the Trump administration. But there were these huge shifts happening in U.S. cities across the country that we felt one being reported on as closely as they could be, and these were the places really where everything that was happening in D.C. was being felt the most. So we were talking about doing this project together, and then we got an opportunity to actually pitch an idea for a newsroom to this now defunct company called Civil. I'm sure some of you have heard of Civil. It was around in 2017 and 2018, and trying to create new business models for news. So we thought, why don't we take this project and create a sustained news organization that's providing sort of sustained coverage of immigration issues at the local level. What would that look like, and how could we actually execute on that?

So we came up with this idea for Documented, and we really wanted to use this as a vehicle to try and break some of the extractive cycles that we had witnessed in immigration reporting. You know, when I was in Beirut, I would often go to a Syrian refugee camp and



speak to people. People would share really, really personal stories with me. Then I go back to my office and write it for an audience that wasn't them. They were the center of these stories, but we weren't writing for them. So we wanted to break that cycle, and we wanted to actually report on stories where the protagonists of the stories were also the audience. So we pitched this idea to Civil, and we were able to get Documented off of the ground. And that nugget of, making sure that people who are at the center of our stories are also the people reading our stories really set us on a trajectory that has completely changed my approach to news. And it has kind of made us a leader in the industry as opposed to how you can actually reach marginalized communities who people often write about but don't often write for. We've done that mainly through launching a WhatsApp news service, and the majority of the people that subscribe to it are undocumented Spanish speakers in the city. And it's started a real, real deep conversation with that community in New York City, where they're basically like the editors of our newsroom, and they really drive our coverage. And we sense them in everything that we do.

**Sarabeth Berman** Thank you. So I think it's been good to talk a little bit about this partnership that we now have. You got started, and a couple of years into it, we, American Journalism Project, started partnering with Documented. From your perspective, how would you describe this partnership? What are we doing here?

**Mazin Sidahmed** This is unique. AJP is unlike any funder that we have. AJP is unique because they fund the things that other funders don't want to fund. So for the first two years, we were getting a lot more attention in the foundation space. But everybody wanted to fund a cool project that they could put their name to, you know, an investigation, which is amazing and incredible. But we needed operational support if we were ever actually going to reach the level that we wanted to reach. So we started this conversation with AJP and really, really got in the weeds on like where we want to take Documented, and what we would need operationally to actually make that a reality. And that has resulted in us getting the support that we need to bring in a development director, which is something that we've been wanting to do for a really long time, at a healthy salary level that's competitive and actually makes us competitive with a lot of the big nonprofits here in New York City. And we can bring in an accounting and finance team that can actually help us create policies around that, do our budgeting process in a more sophisticated way. And also, I have a success partner that I work with at AJP called Anna, who is really just like my partner in crime. We meet like once a week, and we just nut out about operations. And one of the things that I've really come to realize as a founder of an organization, that if you really believe in equity and you actually want to build an organization that's equitable, where people who work there feel valued, and they want to be at the organization for a long time, you really, really, really have to study and think about operations because that's really where those things happen. And Anna has just taught me so much. You know, we work together really closely, and she thinks through all of these different things. And she's always sending me ideas on Slack, and, yeah, empowering me in different ways. So it's been really powerful. And just being part of the network with other newsrooms has been really incredible.

**Sarabeth Berman** So awesome. I love to hear that. Maybe I'll pull out for a second and just frame how we think about these partnerships. But I think the way Mazin describes it is how it plays out, which is what we've done is made investments in news organizations on the business operations, and then we come alongside them in building those business operations. So we do that both through, what Mazin you just described, this partnership with success, partners, where you're working Anna, and we have several other success partners on our team. Really like that should be their job descriptions, "partners in crime."

They help get the work done. And then we are beginning to really develop this portfolio and cohort among grantees to pull them together to be able to learn from each other. I know Sue talked a lot about the power of network. There is no doubt about it. Just the power of sharing across each other and learning from each other. And then over time, we're beginning to really get a sense of what's working, like what job descriptions are working, how do you recruit effectively. And so beginning to really capture those tools. And then over time, we're really tracking and measuring the impact that these investments are having on organizations' long-term sustainability and working to use that to inform our support and our investments. So I love hearing how it's playing out in the day to day from your perspective, Mazin. Let's talk a little bit more about Documented. How do you know you're having an impact?

**Mazin Sidahmed** So we're obsessed with surveys. We are constantly surveying our audience and talking to them and trying to figure out whether what we're doing is actually having the intended purpose of helping them make better decisions in their lives. So via WhatsApp, we constantly receive questions. Our audience editor Nico, who runs the WhatsApp news service, he'll constantly receive questions about how to access this government service, or you know what does this new policy that just came out mean for me? So we'll do our best to create resources. We publish articles to explain these things. We send it to the person who initially asked the question and then make sure we send it to the entire list, and it lives on our site. People find it via search and we ask people, you know, have any of our resources helped you? And we constantly get people responding to those types of questions saying, "You know, I was able to receive funding because of a resource that I read on your site. I was able to get food for me and my family because I read about a list of resources on your website." You know, people just send us unsolicited thank you notes as well, which really makes this job worthwhile, like when you hear somebody saying, "Your work is really important, and this is how it helped me." That's been really impactful. And we've had impact in the kind of traditional journalism sense as well. In our first year, my co-founder Max published a series of stories about public pension funds investing in immigration detention that led to huge divestments in New Jersey and the Canadian state pension fund actually divested from immigration detention because of our reporting. You know, there's been a change of legislation locally around courthouse arrests also because of our reporting. But, yeah, the most meaningful to us has been that one-to-one relationship that we've built with a number of people in the city.

**Sarabeth Berman** It's interesting. I was on a call earlier today with Marty Baron, the former editor at The Washington Post, and he was reflecting on the fact that when he worked for local papers in Boston, Miami, he heard from the community a lot. But once you got up to national news, you didn't hear from people as much. And he was reflecting on the really deep two-way relationship that you can have when you're in communities reporting with communities. And so it sounds like you're really experiencing that.

**Mazin Sidahmed** Absolutely. Yeah, and it's it's been really beautiful for me also coming from The Guardian, where I was prior to this, to really feel grounded in a place where people know us. And I really wanted to make sure that people in communities really felt like they had a connection to Documented, that it wasn't this kind of just like lofty idea, where you didn't know who was running it, or where it was based, or where it was coming from. That you felt like you have a connection to it. And I think via WhatsApp, we've been able to build that, and going forward, we want to kind of replicate that work in other languages.

**Sarabeth Berman** So, yeah, great. I mean, when I think about why it is that we made this investment in you all, I mean, some of it's obvious, like we find outstanding leaders, and you and your co-founder, Max, are just really remarkable leaders. But also you're really being so intentional about what local news for the future needs to look like. How do you really intentionally build two-way relationships with your audience? How do you really serve audiences that have never been effectively served by local news? The potential audience in New York of immigrants is enormous, and so I think we felt like we needed to make an investment in you all so that you could scale because what you're doing is working. And if it reached many more and evolved into reaching more audiences, that would be really powerful. And the way to do that is by building the revenue that can enable you to do that. So maybe before we turn back to Q&A, it would be helpful, I think, to hear about your plans, like now as you're building more revenue capacity and you build more revenue for this organization, where do you want to take this?

**Mazin Sidahmed** So we really want to take the work that we've been doing with Spanish-speaking immigrants and try and replicate it with other immigrant communities in the city. So we have a partnership right now with an amazing organization called The Listening Post Collective, where we're doing an information needs assessment for the Chinese community in New York City, the Caribbean community in New York City, and thinking about A. is there a space for us in that community? We don't want to just come in if there's already effective organizations, doing good work. And then, B, if there is a space, what do people want? What do people need? And where people congregating digitally? Where is a place that makes sense for us to actually speak with the community? Is that WeChat? Is that Facebook or other other platforms? So that's the main work that we're doing now. And I think that's the kind of work that we'll continue to do, just trying to do it in a measured and thoughtful way, and always trying to make sure that we're responding to a genuine need as opposed to just coming up with an idea and pulling the trigger without asking people if they want it.

**Sarabeth Berman** Excellent. I love that approach, and I can't wait to hear what you learn and watch as this increased revenue enables you to reach more audiences. So that's great. I'm going to call back Karen. I think we're moving over to Q&A.

**Karen Rundlet** Thank, Sarabeth, and thanks, Mazin. I just want to kind of lift up a few points. What you said about where people are congregating digitally, whether that be WeChat or WhatsApp, I think that's very important and informed your work in the beginning. The relationship that you've had with American Journalism Project, they were funding the things that were not so interesting. But as you said, you like to nerd out with your coach on operations. And I did ask on text, how does one say nerd out in Spanish? And I told "estoy nerding." So because I had no idea, and I wondered if anyone would understand that. So I will work that in. And then this was a financial investment. This is dollars that go along with coaching and discussion around building out a business, building out a sound organization. So thank you. I do want to get to a couple of the questions and invite others too. I do have one one to begin, and it's for Emilee. And I think all three leaders of newsrooms could answer this, if we were talking again in three years time, what would count as success for Indiginews? And I think we could ask our other panelists as well. So, Emilee, first.

**Emilee Gilpin** Thanks, Karen, and thanks for the question. I think at the moment we're operating in two regions, the Okanogan and across Vancouver Island. So we're trying to establish this model that works, having people report from their communities about stories that communities say that they want shared and amplified, raising the bar, like I

mentioned, in ethically doing the job in a different way. So I think success would look like taking that model and replicating it in other communities. So now we're doing the same thing outside, across BC, in different communities and really training and uplifting people to be reporting on their own stories from their own communities. And then why not take that across the country? So I think that's what success would be like in three years. You know, just really having this media in Canada where we have communities representing themselves, and we have, kind of like Lisa was saying, by the community, for the community.

**Kate Moos** Wonderful, Kate, do you want to take a crack at that one? That's a big question. And, you know, I was listening carefully to Mazin because right now, after a couple of years of rather rapid growth and development, I think for us it's about infrastructure. It's about building capacity and then managing that capacity. When you're a startup and new and so young as we are, the question of who you want to be as a nonprofit organization in the context of journalism is very important. And you do have to make decisions operationally that reflect your values. I think that is something new, honestly, as someone who's spent a lifetime in public media. I'm not sure that when people set out to do news organizations 50 or 100 years ago, they said, how can we make this a place that welcomes a variety of people, diverse people. People have different needs. People have different ways into journalism. How do we create a place that really works for them? And if the principle of our journalism is going to hold, as Mazin was saying, that we want to be responsive, that we don't want to do stories because we're clever and smart, we want to do stories because we have data, and evidence, and relationships that tell us these stories matter, then you really have to operationally rethink your organization. Much more engagement, resources, budgets. We hired our first full-time innovation and engagement editor, a brilliant young woman, and it has had an immediate impact on all of our coverage. It certainly had an impact on our Instagram feed, where she's been working. So I think that for us, we really need to have some discipline and some strong thinking about what kind of organization we are building and how to be smart about where to put our resources, so that we have wise management, so that we have really good organizational infrastructure. That might have been more than you wanted, but that's what came to mind.

**Karen Rundlet** No, that's a really sophisticated answer. Mazin, I would love to hear from you as well.

**Mazin Sidahmed** Great. I would just echo everything that Kate said. I think infrastructure is really the key to what we're thinking about over this next year or two. Really building serious operations out and thinking 30 years in the future. Like, we don't want to have a situation 30 years from now where it's like, "Oh, why don't we build these infrastructures in place? Now we're kind of going back and trying to think about all these different things." So really trying to think through all of these different potential scenarios. The long-term goal for Documented, is that it really reflects New York. You know, anyone from any immigrant background can land on our website and see stories that speak to them and their community, that they, their auntie, their cousin, can read them and feel like, "Yeah, this is me. This is my experience of the city. I feel seen in this website." And we're just building that, and it's going to take time to get there. But I think as we continue to listen to different communities and think about how we can incorporate their needs, and the things that they want to see from a news product, and then knit it together in a cohesive way, that's really the dream for Documented moving forward.

**Kate Moos** I would just jump in and add one more thing about Sahan, which is this, you know, the reality of journalism of the future is that if it doesn't do this very basic work of recruiting, and soliciting, and engaging with the people we are serving, it's not going to happen. And I think that it's tremendously important at Sahan that we understand that our ambition is to serve these communities, who, by the way, in 20 years are going to compose majority culture in Minnesota. Right. They're already very nearly that. And so if we want an informed public, if we want informed policymakers, business people, we have to have newsreaders. We have to have people who are engaged with the events in the world around them, and local news is how you do that. So I think the stakes are high, and we certainly hope to be there in 10 or 20 years and be serving that majority audience.

**Karen Rundlet** Thank you, Kate. I actually want to just ask Sue, and Sarabeth, and Lisa. Your three organizations, you all know about each other. I would like to talk a little bit about maybe the relationship and the journey. Does one become a member of LION Publishers, or the Institute for Nonprofit News, and then turn to AJP? Sue, why don't you start with that?

**Sue Cross** Sure. You know, there were kind of networks of networks, too. And so every startup that comes to us, we also tell them, "Do you know about LION? You should go join LION." It's a slightly different kind of network, and so they get a double strength from it. And we work closely with AJP since before it was started, like, what are the strategies that are going to grow this field? And their deep investment will create new models that we then try to share out across the entire field and to some extent globally. And then often our members that are starting up and building, they get to a point where AJP can invest in them. So I see all of these. I mean, when you look at the extent of the issue we are tackling to reinvent journalism, we do need all hands on deck, and it's not going to be any one organization. So I know that may sound pollyannaish, but it's really true. I mean, the scale of what we are up against is really important. The other thing that these speakers in these organizations said that I think is so inspiring and informs, I won't speak for the others, but I sense it in their spirit as well, is that this isn't just about saving journalism, as in filling the gaps or replacing commercial models falling away. This really is reinventing something that's really powerful in transforming communities and bringing people back together. And that comes through all of these. It's not like a "choose one of these four models." People are finding it and inventing it as they go, and each one of the networks helps do that.

**Karen Rundlet** And, Lisa, would you speak a little bit more about the application process to become part of the Startup Labs?

**Lisa Heyamoto** Yeah, well, I really want to echo what Sue said. There is no shortage of work to be done in journalism, and we are allies in this grand step forward. And it's really exciting to be working together. We've got a lot of overlaps, and we each kind of also do sort of different things. And we're very much in this together. And for the application process for the GNI Startups lab, we are really excited. We've been working on something that we call a sustainability audit. So folks who are the finalists for the program, even those who did not ultimately become part of the cohort, received this sustainability audit where we've got these wonderful experts who come in and really take a holistic look at their news business, and look at sort of what's going well, where is there room for progress. And we'll have these conversations with folks as we're moving forward in the application process, that's really not so much for us to sort of evaluate, but for them to have this really great sort of perspective on their news business, regardless of whether they're in the process or

whether they're in the program or not. And we're developing that, and we're really excited about that. So that's been a huge part of that pre work on both sides.

**Karen Rundlet** So, Sarabeth, many of the organizations that you work with and that American Journalism Project has funded are either members of the Institute for Nonprofit News, or LION Publishers, or both. So when you receive them, if you will, there's a bit of a journey here. There's obviously the collaboration between the three organizations, but also by the time they get to you, how are you evaluating them?

**Sarabeth Berman** Yeah, well, I thought Sue just really framed very clearly the interaction between these organizations. This is an enormous problem. We all have different focuses of our work. Ours in particular is focused on local journalism, and also we overlap with Sue in our belief that the nonprofit model is a hugely promising model for financing and sustaining local journalism for the future. So we are focused on identifying local news organizations that have already demonstrated that they really are having an impact in their community and also have the ambition and the leadership to be able to scale. Like we believe right now nonprofit news really has to rise to the moment. As commercial news is declining, we really need to see new models serving communities. And so we've been identifying organizations that have the ambition to grow and grow significantly, and we're enabling them to do that. And then we've also been doing some startup work, specifically in partnership with place-based philanthropists. So helping to enable place-based philanthropists to see that their communities are really lacking local news but don't know what to do about it. And we partner with them to figure out a new solution for those communities. So that's how we've been building out our portfolio of grantees. As you said, there is a lot of really great intersection between what LION, and INN, and AJP is doing. There's not enough resources to go around, so we're all very intentional about making sure we're not reinventing the wheel here. If LION has a great tool on it, go to LION. If INN has figured this out, go to INN. And we're really trying to direct traffic on that.

**Karen Rundlet** Excellent. I do have a question, and I'm going to put this back to you, Sarabeth. It's just how can funders like AJP convince their philanthropic colleagues to support general ops?

**Sarabeth Berman** I love this question. OK, so I actually think that the crisis in the sustainability of local news is really a value proposition that you have to go to them and say. Every funder cares about sustainability. Every funder wants the project that they're funding to sustain. Make the case to them that in the context of local news declining, a portion of these funds have to go to the long-term sustainability. If you're funding an education reporter, a portion of that should go to the general ops. We're also going to do our part to be evangelizing out there, doing our best to help. But this is really important. I think appealing to funders' real belief that things should be sustainable in the long term is something you should be relying on, but we'll do our part to evangelize this.

**Karen Rundlet** OK, now the questions are really, really coming in. So this is going to be a little bit of a lightning round. So, Mazin, why WhatsApp? Why did you choose that?

**Mazin Sidahmed** We did a research survey with a graduate course at NYU on where undocumented Spanish speakers were getting news, and overwhelmingly people were getting their news on WhatsApp. I'm fully aware of the issues and the concerns around utilizing WhatsApp, but it was kind of a question of going where people are, or trying to push them to somewhere else. And we decided to go where people were, and it's proved successful. But, yeah, if an opportunity arises to go to another platform, we'll jump on it.

**Karen Rundlet** Back to that theme of where people are digitally congregating. I will pick on maybe Kate for this next question. What kind of insurance do you have to protect yourself against a lawsuit, legal action?

**Kate Moos** Funny you should ask. We had to get liability insurance. We did that early on, but we were threatened with the lawsuit by Project Veritas over some reporting we did the summer of 2020. So the other benefit of these sorts of peer support and networking organizations like INN and others is that they can connect you with legal help and legal advice. We also found a woman who is an attorney in the Twin Cities who represents most of the major media there, who also had heard from Project Veritas, and she worked for us pro bono for a while. But we have insurance, and it can be had for not a huge amount of money a year. And we haven't had to test it yet, so that's the good news.

**Karen Rundlet** OK, I have two similar questions. This is to Emilee. Someone is looking for advice on working with different tribes and their stories. And then another is asking do you know if there will be a lot of development around projects to cover native communities in Latin America? Are you able to address those?

**Emilee Gilpin** That first question, I would say really do your research. Understand the governing system of the nation or tribe that you're working with. Understand who the experts are in the community, if you should be speaking with elders, matriarchs, culture carriers, chiefs, elected or hereditary. Understanding, like I said, kind of how different tribes differ from one another to make sure you're speaking to the right people. And then also take your time. And I did mention how important a culture check is, not just fact checking, but culture checking. And so that doesn't mean sending your whole draft of the story, but it might mean going over important things, important quotes, sections, to really make sure that you heard correctly because there are so many cultural nuances. And even if we are indigenous or mixed people, we can get it wrong, reporting on a different community. So just make sure to take your time and really hold the bar high for your accuracy. And then I'm not sure. I was in Peru in 2019 in the fall, and I did attend an indigenous media conference. And there were folks there from all across Central and South America, so I know there's a lot of people that are on the front lines of independent, especially radio and community media across the so-called Global South. But I can't name anything right off the top of my head, but I know there are exciting things happening. And also I lived in Brazil for the last year, up until September, and I was also very inspired by Brazilian independent media and especially indigenous led. So just seeing what was taking place on Instagram and how quickly people were organizing to get their messages out and continue to do so as the pandemic affects the indigenous communities the most. So anyways, there's a lot of inspiring things happening.

**Karen Rundlet** Thank you, and I just wanted to mention, too, there is an organization in the United States, the National Association of Native American Journalists. So I just want to mention that as well, because there are quite a few questions here with interest in native communities and indigenous communities. There's a question here for Sarabeth about American Journalism Project. Can the American Journalism Project finance foreign projects, as in Mexico? I think that's a yes or no, probably. But then I'd love for you to talk about who you fund and why?

**Sarabeth Berman** Sure. Well, so currently we are focused on the United States of America and the problem here, and I know the problem is severe all over. But the problem here is a big one, so we're staying targeted here. I will say that before I worked at the

American Journalism Project, I worked at a global education organization. When I told my colleagues from around the world that I was shifting to this role, they were like, "OK, you need to make sure that it becomes global very soon because this is an issue that matters around the world." I will say that there's an organization called the International Fund for Public Interest Journalism, I think it's called. But if you go to Illuminate's website, they're launching a new fund. It's very similar to the American Journalism Project, but global. It's our model, but doing it globally. I also have this secret dream that out of this conference, people from different countries are going to contact me and say, "I want to start the Argentinean Journalism Project or the Mexican Journalism Project." And if you are that person, get in touch with me. I'd love to tell you about what we've learned so you can apply it there. Because I really do think this is a model that rallying national philanthropy to support local journalism is a really smart one as we see the economic failures of local news across the world. So that really is my answer to that question.

**Karen Rundlet** So, I mean, potentially there could be a Mexican Journalism Project. This is a North American panel, if you will, again, we have a non U.S. audience, certainly, and philanthropy may not exist or be translated in some other way in other countries. Would you sort of explain that a little bit, Sarabeth?

**Sarabeth Berman** I mean, there are growing philanthropic movements in a lot of countries around the world. The U.S. has a particularly robust philanthropic culture, but there is philanthropy in countries around the world. I know this from the education sector, where education organizations around the world are fundraising from local philanthropists. So what we've been doing is recognizing that there really is not a strong model now for local news in the country, and yet it is so vital to a strong democracy and healthy communities. And so we are going to philanthropists nationally and locally and really trying to make the case for why strong local journalism really undergirds your other priorities. Like if you care about education, you need to worry about whether or not the school boards are covered, or if you care about climate, you need to worry about how communities are encountering climate change. If you care about immigration. And I mean, Mazin, I think has done an amazing job of this, appealing to funders who both care about journalism, some of his funders, and some of his funders care about immigration issues, and they want to make sure immigration issues are covered more effectively. And so I think equipping news organizations to really make the case for support, we need to be out there. There is a lot of inequity in this country, and one of the implications of inequity is that there are a lot of people with a lot of philanthropic dollars. That money is out there, and we need to appeal to it.

**Karen Rundlet** Excellent. A couple of comments here asking about engagement, asking about collaborative journalism with small teams. And then a question, how can universities and professors encourage local reporting with students? I'm going to ask Lisa to answer that.

**Lisa Heyamoto** Sure, happy to. I've been a university professor for the past 12 years, so I know well the mind set of our new generation of journalists. And I'm here to tell you, they are already interested in it. This is a generation of persons who have spent their entire lives incredibly steeped in the very real, very big problems of this world, and they see it with clear eyes. And they want to be part of the solution. And they understand that solutions start locally, and they want to be a part of that. It's very interesting to talk to folks who are just getting into journalism and starting to think about it as students. And they're kind of interested, and they're kind of thinking about it. But they're not sure there's a place for them. And then once you start talking to them about local journalism, about solutions



journalism, about community-first relationship-based engaged journalism, then you can see that light bulb go on. And they're like, "Oh, my gosh, there's a place for me. I didn't know. I want to be here now." And I think it's our responsibility as journalists, as journalism educators, as anyone who touches the journalism industry, to talk as glowingly about the local journalism community service path as we do about some other more traditional paths. Because folks, they just need to know that it's a thing, and that it's wonderful. And it is a really great way to be ambitious about your life and how you live it. And it's really, really exciting. That path is there. We just need to show.

**Karen Rundlet** Thank you, Lisa. Thank you, Mazin, Sarabeth, Emilee, Kate, and Sue. I'm glad that we ended with university professors and their students. I will turn it back to a wonderful university professor Rosental. Thank you.

**Rosental Alves** Thank you so much to all of you. This was great. It was very insightful. I learned a lot. And I think this combination of the network and the people who are building it is amazing. And thank you so much. Now we have to end our fourth day. This was a great way of ending the fourth day. A big thank you to all of the speakers for joining us today and for everyone at home keeping up with the conversation. And thank you also to Google News Initiative and the Knight Foundation for the sponsorship. The party doesn't have to stop yet, though. If you don't want to stop, the conversation can continue at the Wonder room that we have, and you can see the link in the chat for the Wonder room, where we try to replicate that environment of meet and greet that happens in the in-person conferences. We will see you back here tomorrow for the very last day of the ISOJ 2021. Tomorrow, we're going to open the day with Marty Baron, who has just retired from The Washington Post after a celebrated tenure there, so I can't wait to listen to Marty tomorrow. So thank you very much, and I'll see you tomorrow.