

## ISOJ 2022: Day 1

### Opening panel: Coming of Age: Nonprofit online journalism attracts big investments and creates sustainable models

---

Chair: [Evan Smith](#), co-founder and CEO, **The Texas Tribune**

- [Mukhtar Ibrahim](#), publisher & CEO, **Sahan Journal**
  - [Imtiaz Patel](#), CEO, **The Venetoulis Institute for Local Journalism/The Baltimore Banner**
  - [Ann Stern](#), president & CEO, **Houston Endowment**
  - [Nykia Wright](#), president & CEO, **Chicago Sun-Times**
- 

**Evan Smith** ISOJ, Rosental, it is so good to be back here with you. Great to see so many of you attending in person. It's nice to be in a room full of people again, isn't it? And, but also, howdy to everybody joining us online. I am indeed Evan Smith, the CEO and co-founder of the Texas Tribune, and the name of this panel is Coming of Age. It's an exploration of how nonprofit online journalism is attracting, as Mallery said, big investments, and creating sustainable business models, and making a positive contribution to the refining, redefining, and reinvigorating of the local news ecosystem. I'm so pleased to be joined today by four very smart people at the center of the action. Each of them is going to talk for a few minutes about his or her precise role in that awesome effort to better serve the public interest. The what, and the why, and the how. And then we're going to all sit together and discuss the big challenges and opportunities that they, and we, all confront each day. In the last part of our time together, we're going to open it up for audience questions. As Mallery said, we're going to take questions on Twitter and in the chat of the Zoom, and I will be asking those questions from my phone if I can make the technology work. Okay.

So let me briefly introduce our distinguished guests. On my left is Mukhtar Ibrahim. He is the founder, editor and executive director of Sahan Journal, a nonprofit news organization that provides deep coverage of Minnesota's immigrant and refugee communities. Both he and it are charms on the charm bracelet right now. A day literally does not pass without someone, a funder, or another journalist, or a devoted reader of this work going on and on about how much they love what was until recently, a best kept secret of sorts in our world. Mukhtar, who previously worked as a staff writer for the Minneapolis Star Tribune and Minnesota Public Radio News, is among the first of his generation's professional journalists of Somali descent in the U.S.. Imtiaz Patel is CEO of the Venetoulis Institute for Local Journalism, a nonprofit organization founded to bring high-quality reporting to the Baltimore metro area. Under Imtiaz's leadership, the institute will soon launch the Baltimore Banner, a multi-platform news organization covering topics ranging from local government, to culture, and the arts. A first-rate newsroom that, in the words of the Banner's extraordinarily generous founder and chairman Stewart Bainum, "tells the stories of the city and its people, strengthens its communities, and holds its leaders to account." Imtiaz was formerly an executive with Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal. Ann Stern is president and CEO of Houston Endowment, an 85-year-old private foundation headquartered in the state's largest and the nation's fourth largest city. The endowment has more than \$2.5 billion in assets and invests approximately \$100 million each year to

advance equity in public education and civic engagement, including grants to support public service journalism. There would not be a Texas Tribune had the endowment not made a gift at the beginning, that catalyzed our great work, and other gifts over time. We owe our founding really in part to, our debt to the endowment. And so it's wonderful to be with Ann, of course. This year, the endowment, along with the American Journalism Project and Arnold Ventures, made a significant seed gift to create a new nonprofit news organization in Houston. Ann won't say this, but I will. She was a key actor in making that very exciting venture happen, and we all await eagerly what's going to happen in Houston any time now. Finally, Nykia Wright, president and CEO of the Chicago Sun-Times, the oldest continuously published newspaper in Illinois. The Sun-Times, as you heard, was recently acquired by Chicago Public Media, the parent of public radio station WBEZ, which will operate it as an editorially independent, not for profit with its own nonprofit board. The combining of these two media titans in Chicago is being watched closely in other markets where legacy newsrooms have been hollowed out to see if, as Nykia puts it, "this unique model raises the bar for preserving and strengthening local journalism." She previously was a strategic advisor for top tier universities and Fortune 500 companies. Please give our panelists a very big hand. Great to have them here. So we're going to get started with short presentations from each of our panelists. We're going to go in alphabetical order. Mukhtar the podium is yours. We'll go down the list of folks here, and then we'll come back and have a conversation.

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Hello, everyone. It's so great to be in Austin for the first time. I'm from Minnesota, which is very cold, so it's good to be in the warm weather for a couple of days. My name is Mukhtar Ibrahim. I'm the publisher and CEO of Sahan Journal. We are a nonprofit news organization that was launched in the summer of 2019. It is the first time meeting in person, so I'm trying to figure out how the technology works and presenting. So we're a nonprofit news organization that was launched in the summer of 2019 with the idea of providing authentic, deep quality coverage for communities of color in the state of Minnesota. As you can see, Minnesota has been changing very fast in the last couple of decades. When I moved to Minnesota from East Africa in 2005, the state was predominantly white. People of color made up around 10 to 14% of the state's population. A decade later, Minnesotans of color now make up about a quarter of the state's population, 24%. So we are trying to be a primary source of news and information for these growing communities who have been underserved by the local media. This is the latest census, and you can see people of color growing very fast, and also we're losing the number of white population, and driving the population growth, bringing vibrancy and richness to the culture, economy, politics. And in 2020, we are about to lose a congressional seat by 89 people, so people of color are saving the state by not losing representation at Congress. And you can see this headline that because of that, because of the people who are growing and making the state very vibrant, they are now saving a House seat. But the problem is there is no professional media outlet that really captures how the state is changing, how these communities are transforming the state. And the result is the stories of this community being misrepresented, written about in a way that truly does not reflect and capture the lived experiences.

If you look at this headline, what comes to your mind? "Rochester murder victim had recent violent history." Just take a moment to read that headline. Someone being killed, and then his history of violence being brought to light. Or this headline where a former U.S. senator from Minnesota writes this kind of headline, "in the land of 10,000 terrorists." Minnesota is famously known as the land of 10,000 lakes. We have a lot of lakes in Minnesota. Not 10,000 terrorists. But these kind of headlines, they have consequences. They harm people. If you are a Muslim and traveling through Minneapolis-Saint Paul

International Airport and you are trying to visit your family in Kenya, or Somalia, or Ethiopia, this has consequences. They harm people. This narrative is very dangerous. Or this kind of a story where a congresswoman is trying to advocate for immigrants who are facing deportation, and the local TV brings images of people fighting in Liberia or in Palestine, or protesting in front of the federal court, something that has nothing to do with what the congresswoman was trying to do. The need to have high-quality journalism, that's community centered, that truly captures the stories of communities of color in Minnesota is extremely urgent. That's why Sahan Journal is needed. That's why we exist.

So what have we done in the last couple of months that we have existed, which was in the middle of pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, extremely traumatic events. We have emerged as a leading innovator in the digital space for journalism with stories that truly reflect the experiences of communities of color and bringing community-centered journalism to the forefront. We have received people who are very hungry to create stories about communities of color. Young, diverse people in the state of Minnesota want to read stories that clearly shed light on the lives and experiences of communities who have been so harmed by the local media. We just don't produce journalism. We also try to really engage the community in the journalism process in which we are doing. When the pandemic started, we translated our stories in multiple languages: Somali, Hmong, and Spanish. We also produced a multimedia video series that explains the COVID 19 vaccine, the misinformation that we have been hearing from the community, the rumors. Imagine putting together a series of videos in multiple languages, what that takes. It's time consuming. It's expensive. It requires a lot of resources, but we have to do it because it saves people's lives. When you hear from some people saying does the vaccine include pork? Because the Muslims, you know, they don't eat pork, or they want to comply with the religious beliefs. And there's a lot of misinformation saying, you know, the vaccine was not halal and all that. We have to go in the community, connect with imams and religious leaders so that we can provide accurate information to the communities who have been impacted the most by the pandemic.

Our journalism has received the highest awards in the journalism industry. Lion Publishers gave us a Community Engagement and Service Award in 2021 because of our deep engagement with the community and making sure we are truly servicing the stories that are relevant to Minnesotans of color. Our stories also have been captured by Institute for Nonprofit News and NewsMatch, showing how the community is actually supporting when they see their stories covered everyday and put on the front page. They support it. And I can confidently say almost 15% of our budget comes from readers. Members, since we launched, we had over 3,000 members who donated through our website. 1,000 of those are recurring monthly donors. I'm not just producing the stories too for our website. We are also trying to establish connections and partnerships with some of the largest media outlets in the state. We have a partnership with the Star Tribune, the leading newspaper in the state of Minnesota. We also have a partnership with Minnesota Public Radio, which is the largest radio station in the state and in the country. We don't want just people of color to read our stories. We also want the white community who read the Star Tribune or listen to NPR News to come across stories from their neighbors, from their colleagues so that they can understand. They can get a good understanding about their neighbors, and they can read the stories that truly reflect the lived experiences of people that they see every day. Thank you so much.

**Evan Smith** Thank you. Imtiaz?

**Imtiaz Patel** Morning, everyone. So I was thinking about how could I start this with a joke? And then I realized, I don't have any jokes. So I'll be serious and talk about the Banner. So, you know, there's been a lot of press about the Venetoulis Institute and the Baltimore Banner, so there's not a lot really I can add to it. We're kind of pretty transparent, but I can probably add a little context to what we're trying to do. Really, no conversation about us really starts without talking about the history that got us here. I met Stewart about 22 months ago, and it seems like it was literally a few months ago. And really it started with Stewart thinking about, his whole family is very philanthropically inclined, and really thinking about is he really having an impact with the money he's contributing to a lot of different causes. So it's a little bit here, and a little bit there. And the thought he had is like, "What if I actually concentrated the money that I'm giving away? Could I have more of an impact, and should it go to causes that aren't necessarily supported as much?" So that was one thing that happened. And he's sitting at home during the early days of pandemic and starting to read about what's going on with news deserts. And he's looking at the Baltimore Sun, and it's getting thinner and thinner. And he's like, "How can we have a properly functioning democracy if we don't have good, solid local news?" So those two ideas came together and he's like, "Oh, let me go find someone who knows something about news." And somehow you got stuck with me.

So that pursuit then led us to kind of thinking about the Baltimore Sun and saying, well, we came up with a model. His question to me is, "Do you think there's a sustainable business model for local news?" I'm like, "Of course there is. It's just going to take a lot of money, and investment, and so on." And so we decided, let's go get the Baltimore Sun and try the ideas and invest in it, build up the newsroom again, and go for it. We came really close. There's plenty of history here. I broke off negotiations with all of them because I couldn't accept what they were giving. So we're like, "Okay, let's just buy all of Tribune." Here's what I would say. We came so close to all of Tribune that it is literally ridiculous how close we were. We probably were days away until one of our funders pulled out, and we saw nothing in the due diligence that scared us. Actually, we found upside and opportunity in the Tribune acquisition, but the way Tribune was structured, we couldn't move forward unless we had someone who wanted to buy the Chicago Tribune as part of the deal on the front end. Otherwise, we'd end up with like an \$80 million tax liability, which made the numbers just unworkable. So we're like, okay, so we didn't get that. So the problem that we set about to solve for really was around kind of news deserts and what will happen to local news. And the worry was under Alden's ownership, it's going to accelerate in Baltimore. So let's just go start our own thing, and maybe, we'll see how this goes. And at least there'll be more journalism in Baltimore. So that's what we decided to do about a year ago. We decided to make that move probably around May.

So where are we? I was looking at the numbers yesterday. We've been aggressively trying to hire. It took us a long time to find Kimi, our editor in chief. But since then, we've kind of really accelerated hiring in the newsroom. We're up to about, as of yesterday, a total staff of 40 people. About 21 of them are in the newsroom. We're about to make another seven offers this coming week. So we're growing quickly, slower than I want it, but growing quickly. And slower because we're trying to be really, really deliberate about the kind of newsroom we've built, a diverse newsroom in a lot of different ways. So we're taking our time. We're figuring this out, and so we're making progress. So one of the things we really thought about, because we spend a lot of time on this, right, this is our mission. Even kind of talked about it. But really, at the end of the day, our mission is about serving our communities. That's it. We choose to use journalism as a way to serve our communities. Journalism is not the end, right? It's a means to the end, which is serving our communities. And that's what we're really focused on. And then the other part of this is we want to do it

in a way that people are willing to support, because the sustainability side of this is really, really important. We talk about what we're building today is not for today, not for three years from today, but really we want to be around in 100 years from now. It'll look very different, but we want to be around in 100 years. So that's what we're building.

I tried to think of this in very simple terms, right? I don't want to overcomplicate what we're doing. At the end of the day, we will have the largest newsroom in the state. I think we will be there by the end of the year if Kimi just hires quicker, so our budget this year is to have roughly 60ish people in the newsroom by the end of the year. We will only be local. There will be no national, no international news in the Banner, unless it is about Baltimore or Maryland. Right? So we're going to really, really double down on local. And we're going to be broad. We're going to be, you know, tough news, but also the fun news, the arts and culture, because I think we need balance. And there's a narrative in Baltimore. Everyone sees Baltimore a certain way. But there's so much more to Baltimore, and we want to tell those stories at the end of the day. Multi-platform. This is really important, right? We are in the business of creating content, news content. We should not care about the format of that content. So we are not a website. We are not a newspaper for sure. We are not a website. We will be across every format that we need to be across in any way that the user wants to get our content. Five years from now, we may not have a website if no one wants to go to our website, right? So we've got to continue to innovate from that perspective. Scalable. And last one is true, so if anyone's looking for a job, please call me. Fantastic place to work. It's really, really important that people feel like we're taking care of them. We're nurturing them. They're getting to grow and do the best work they can, and they really enjoy being there. We spend a ton of time thinking about this.

Yeah, this is like me trying to be fancy, but really a lot of channels. We're going to start in the city and county. We're going to move to the surrounding counties, and then it's going to be state wide. I think in a rough idea in my head to go statewide is probably 24 to 36 months, so we're going to kind of deliberately build out beats and build out geography once we launch. And then the content, you know, is broad. So Stewart talked about he is committed to giving and raising \$50-million-plus. Our business model has us at about 100 to 120 in the newsroom at scale. You know I see when we hit steady state at least two thirds of our organization being in the newsroom. Any money we make beyond break even really will just go into the newsroom. The goal is to get to 100,000 subscribers and 5 million monthly uniques by 2025, and the monthly uniques is important. But I'll talk about that in a second. Really, what we're trying to do is monetize that audience. I think we need multiple ways to make money to be sustainable. It's not one way or another. We're really focused on diversity of income at the end of the day: subscriptions, advertising, contributions, and other ways to monetize that audience. That is why we need 5 million monthly uniques, right? We can start creating events. We can start creating other solutions, eventually nonpublishing solutions, to monetize that audience so we can feed the newsroom and continue that cycle going. That's what we're trying to do.

So this is kind of a break down. Subscriptions will be about a half our income. Let me talk about that for a second. We're going to have a hybrid paywall. Some content will be free. Some content will be behind a paywall. Marginalized communities will be given access for free. Right. We will either just do it, but we're getting a lot of interest from corporations and companies who want to fund free access for certain communities. So that will be given. Advertising 25%, you know, 20 or 25%. But it's going to be much more about kind of custom solutions. I want an ad like model. There will be zero pop ups on our site. We're just going to focus on the experience. Philanthropy 10 to 15, and then audience monetization, another 10 to 15. That's it. That's me.

**Evan Smith** I love when the next slide says "thank you." That's good. And it means we move on to Ann Stern. Imtiaz, thanks very much. Ann Stern of Houston Endowment.

**Ann Stern** Hi, everyone. Good morning. I'm the non-journalist on the stage, so I am really deeply grateful to be here with you and just sort of soaking up all the vibes from smart journalists that I can this morning. We are starting a local news initiative in Houston, Texas, because we believe that high quality, independent, nonpartisan journalism is absolutely essential for our democracy to work, and it's absolutely essential for the future of our region. Greater Houston is big, diverse and complex. It's over 7 million people in the Houston region. By some measures, the most diverse metro region in the country, and we are so complicated from a governance standpoint. We have a huge city within a complicated county, surrounded by other counties, surrounded by municipal utility districts and unincorporated areas, and about 15 public school systems. And there is no way today that our journalism resources locally can even begin to cover the institutions and the issues that people care about, so we have a huge void. I would step back and similar to what you've heard from some of the prior speakers. Houston Endowment is not funding this just because we want more journalism or because we love journalism, although we do. We're funding it because it's essential to really serve the people of our region. Our two biggest, and I should say we have always funded the Tribune. And the reason we fund the Tribune is because the Tribune sort of undergirds all of the other work that we do, informs us, helps us understand the public policy issues, and sort of what's going on in our state, and helps inform our work in education, affordable housing, health care, criminal justice, whatever it may be.

But our two largest priorities right now are pre K-12 public education and civic engagement. And as we began to really dig deep into trying to increase electoral participation as part of our civic engagement work and try to integrate the amazing immigrant communities that we have in Houston, which has really fueled our growth and our prosperity for decades, we began to realize that there was really a missing piece. And that missing piece was good information. People simply couldn't engage in a meaningful way, couldn't participate in a meaningful way in community, because they just didn't have good information about the things they cared about, and there were lots of voices that weren't being heard. I would also say that our other work was suffering from the lack of information. People didn't understand what was going on in education, for example. And so we have lots of insights and perspectives, but we knew that we needed someone to provide us with a more complete picture of what was going on. So about two years ago, we reached out to the American Journalism Project and said, "Help us understand the state of local journalism in greater Houston." So the details are on the slide. But what they did was they not only figured out what resources were out there from a journalism and a media perspective, but also they talked to real people and they said, "What do you think about the information that's available in greater Houston? What do you need to know that you don't have access to? How are you accessing what you're getting today? What would you like to see?" And conducted it in multiple languages, and the findings will surprise no one in this room. What we learned was that, yes, local journalism resources have been hollowed out. People don't trust the information they're getting, and in many cases, they shouldn't. They don't feel represented. And in fact, they feel misrepresented by the local news about their communities. And while there are lots of community organizations and sort of niche and ethnic media outlets that are doing a great job transmitting information, there's not enough original reporting. We even had a local public official, very senior, who said to me, "I know you're going to be surprised to hear me say this, but we would be

better if we knew that someone was looking over our shoulder. And no one is looking over our shoulder."

So it became pretty clear, pretty quickly what Houston needs. And I would put it into two buckets, and this is entirely consistent with what you've heard from others this morning. We needed more high quality, independent, nonpartisan journalism. We just needed more. We needed more resources, and we needed it to be in service of community. So that meant several things to us. Information needed to be free, and it needed to be accessible. We needed to understand how people were accessing information, and we needed to meet them where they were. And that meant languages and formats that were very different from what was going on. So our commitment. When we saw this information and conferred with our fellow Houston-based funders, the Kinder Foundation and Arnold Ventures, we were all compelled to come together and do something about it. We realized that philanthropy could play a role here, that it could support not only the future of our region, but a lot of the individual issues, unique issues, that we were working on in addition to this. And we knew that given the scale and the scope of Houston, that it was going to take a lot of resources. And so we were thrilled to be joined with funding from the American Journalism Project and the Knight Foundation, and together, we have over \$20 million to get this organization up and running.

I just want to point out three things that I think are really important for us, and I think you all will appreciate. One is that it has to be independent. We are three funders who understand that we will have no say in the editorial coverage of this organization. We won't decide which stories are covered. We won't decide how they're covered. And we are very clear that there will be days that we think, "Ugh, I wish they hadn't covered that story in that way." But that's part of the deal, and that is necessary to build trust. We believe that it has to be nonprofit, and that also is really important because we don't want this organization to go out and explicitly try to compete with other resources. That would be counter to our mission, which is to create more, not to replace, not to push out, but to create more. And finally, we wanted it to be new because there is so much going on in this space, as you well know, and we wanted to be able to start with a blank slate and innovate as best we can. So you've seen our mission. We are just getting started. We are way behind the others on the stage, and we are just getting started hiring an outstanding team. And I'll make a pitch for Houston. We need strong leadership in Houston to develop the mission, the vision, and help us achieve the mission for this really, really important organization. Thank you, all.

**Evan Smith** Ann, thank you. Finally, Nykia.

**Nykia Wright** I'll try to make this brief. I know I stand between you and the Q&A session.

**Evan Smith** No, no, no. You go as long as you need to.

**Nykia Wright** Good morning. I'm Nykia Wright. I'm the CEO of the Chicago Sun-Times. I stand before you today, two months into this new vision for local journalism. You heard Alberto mention a few minutes ago that the Chicago Sun-Times was acquired by Chicago Public Media, and the date was January 31. So happy second month anniversary to me and my colleagues on this amazing feat. I also just wanted to give a huge shout out to the Knight Foundation. When we were going to many organizations, MacArthur Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Knight Foundation, and many others who came to the table, it was the Knight Foundation and Alberto on that Zoom who really challenged us and said, "Hey, this sounds great. We'd like a front row seat, but you must get the culture piece right." And so

that's something that we are sort of burning the midnight oil on to make sure that that happens. The graveyard is littered with organizations around the country who have merged. And if you don't understand mergers and acquisitions, if you're not able to bring the culture along between the first 18 to 24 months, you're really setting yourself up for failure. So that's something that is at the forefront of our minds, and I'm sort of happy to say that we are marching very boldly in that direction.

So in summary, what are we? We were acquired by Chicago Public Media, and this should be creating the largest newsroom in the region, reaching more than 2 million people per week. And we're trying to build a sustainable source of funding for local journalism for over 200,000, what we are calling, subscribers/members. We're still trying to figure that piece of the model out, but this is sort of our true north. The combined newsroom will have 165-plus journalists. This is something that I'm also excited about. Most times when you hear about mergers and acquisitions, you hear that people lost their jobs. Not one person has lost their job. It is our mission to ensure that we can balance both making the right business decision for the sustainable business model, but also ensuring people like you are comfortable so that you can go out and do your best work. The audience will represent the diversity of Chicago. We're super excited about that. Everyone hears all the time that now journalism must reflect the community that it serves, and so that's something that we think about every single day in terms of hiring, getting people in the pipeline, trying to find the right talent. So I encourage you to continue to raise your hand so that people can find you where you are and bring you into these bold new initiatives.

Love this one, because this is our mission. We aspire to become the most essential and most trusted, underscore "trusted," news source that Chicago turns to each day for understanding the people, events and ideas that shape our community. It's so interesting to stand before you today, because understanding what could have happened with the Chicago Tribune and how that could have absolutely changed the landscape in Chicago is chilling, to be quite frank. But right now, this is for Chicago Public Media and the Chicago Sun-Times, and so this is what we want to be. We want to help shape the conversations of our community. This is just a what we call a flywheel to show how things come together. Content, audience funding, people and culture. A total 350-plus people employed, 165 of those being journalists. So we try to overindex on making sure that we're not heavy on the business side of the house, but we're really putting all of those investments where we can on the journalistic side. Audience, 2 million. Chicago, as you all know, is the third largest city in the United States, reaching 2 million people is something that we are proud to do. And then I mentioned a minute ago about the 200,000 members, so paying news subscribers for content.

When we were trying to understand, at least at a very base case, why should these two news organizations come together, omnichannel, of course, is something that comes up first. But what we saw is the strength of both organizations. Both of them had loyal audiences. Ours was in loyal print because we launched digital subscriptions in 2018. We were well behind the eight ball, but we're trying to get caught up now. And then WBEZ had that really loyal broadcast audience. They had strong email and podcast portfolio. We had strong website traffic. You mentioned about 5 million unique visitors per month, so we have over 6 million unique visitors per month. But because of the significant disinvestment, we were not able to overcome that and monetize that in ways that you all are doing, and so we're trying to do that now. I just put "tens of thousands" here just from a competitive position and perspective, not give it all away. But we've got lots of members and subscribers and buyers that we are going after that are not part of the current system of payers, so we're excited about that. And then WBEZ naturally can punch above its weight



class because it has that NPR syndication and public radio, and we're certainly known for strong breaking news in sports. And so those are sort of the top line, why should you even think about coming together before you even get any deeper? And so because the business case at the top line started to make sense, then we started digging deeper. And like I said, we're two months into that deal.

This is just something that I mentioned a minute ago. So public mindset, leading investigative journalists, expanded coverage, arts and culture. I want to speak about that for a minute. Because arts and culture, I think sometimes people look at that as sort of a side dish and not part of the main entree. In Chicago, arts and culture is significant. It's huge. It's a corridor that brings people from the suburbs to downtown. It helps explain what's happening next with respect to society. And so we're looking at arts and culture in a very big way, and that's something that we want to double down on. When the pandemic hit, people were not coming to that specific corridor in the city, and so there was disinvestment there. And so we're trying to get that back in there. So when we think about arts and culture, it's not necessarily a side thing. It's part of sort of the main dish of things that we're trying to present. And then data journalism and visual journalism. Lots of people have talked about this. This is super important as we are moving much more quickly and forcefully into what we call that "explainer journalism," understanding how different people consume different types of information, whether they want to see a quick picture to understand what's going on, or they want to read it, or they want to listen to it. We're thinking about all of that to put that together in a unique space.

These are just examples of some of the things that we have come together on. But I think the next slide is really the most compelling. This is it, right? So 53% of Sun-Times readers are people of color. 45% of WBEZ listeners are people of color. That's a strength that we have as we go into the combined entity. 79% of Sun-Times readers trust WBEZ. 76% of WBEZ listeners trust the Sun-Times. Another sort of strong piece for why we should come together. 9% of Sun-Times readers listen to WBEZ, and 26% of WBEZ listeners read the Sun-Times. That's the money piece, right? Okay. There's not a lot of significant overlap. That's the case for why no journalists will be losing their jobs. We actually are stronger together, and we can go out and get those 2 million-plus people. 75% want investigative reporting. I think this is across the country where people understand the strength of investigative reporting, that longer form, slow sort of burn, helping people understand as more information comes out. It's helping them understand how to navigate their community. And then Sun-Times has 63% aided brand awareness and WBEZ has 17%. So WBEZ had the pockets. They had the balance sheet. Sun-Times had the readers. We had the 6-million-plus unique visitors each month. And so when you bring those together, we have the greater awareness. So it's not that we came to the party with nothing. Both of these entities had their own separate strengths, and coming together made us even stronger. And then lastly here, 59% of Sun-Times readers ranked local news as top importance. We are truly a local news organization, and while we're not going so far as to not have national news because we're not quite ready to make that leap yet, what we are doing is starting specifically with the advertisers. We're a local paper, third largest city in the United States. No one industry has more than 14% of the industry that is in Chicago, and so we're able to try to go back and say, "Okay, well, if this is a local newspaper, then why don't we go and double down on local advertising from local companies?" And so I think that's it. I don't have a "thank you" slide, but I think that's it.

**Evan Smith** Nykia, thank you. Let me just check with our organizers because we started late. I want to understand what is our hard out? We've got about 15 minutes? Okay. I'm going to dispense really with the portion of this that was going to be me and all of you, and

go to audience questions. But let me just say, as a point of personal privilege, 13 years after we launched the Texas Tribune, it is incredibly moving to hear all of you talk about this. And it is an indication of how the world has changed. It has moved in a direction that I think is very hopeful and positive. And I could have watched these presentations for another three hours and not had enough of them, and I'm just so elated about all of them. Please give them a big hand. This is so great. In ways big and small, it just means an enormous amount. I just want to ask about the competitive landscape first. So, Ann, you announced your plans in January and immediately the Houston Chronicle responded in a way that made me think, they're not welcoming your arrival. Imtiaz, I know that you want an ecosystem to be created in Baltimore, but the reality is, how will the Baltimore Sun see what you're doing as anything other than competition? Can you each talk about that first? Ann, how are you regarding the Chronicle? Imtiaz, how are you regarding the Sun? As collaborators, competitors, or what?

**Ann Stern** There was a very visible piece written in the Chronicle that was less than welcoming. However, I've had a number of conversations with other folks at the Houston Chronicle, and those have been very productive conversations. And I think the hard thing is that until we have leadership in place that reaches out to the leadership of these other organizations and starts to really build those partnerships, there's just going to be a lot of anxiety. And so the most we can do right now is say, "We want more journalism resources, not less. Let's figure out how we leverage the strengths of every organization in Houston to get more." But until we have leadership in place, those are just words. But that is truly the intent behind this.

**Evan Smith** But you come in peace?

**Ann Stern** We come in peace.

**Evan Smith** Right, and also you will hire people away from the Chronicle. Honor among thieves. Period, paragraph, right? As much as you may not be a competitor.

**Ann Stern** I think that's the greater risk to them, quite frankly. But as some of their leadership has said, competition at some point causes us to sharpen our pencils and makes us all better.

**Evan Smith** Imtiaz, you've talked a lot about the Baltimore Sun's decline. From what I can tell, you are the decline because you've hired away a ton of people from the Baltimore Sun, have you not?

**Imtiaz Patel** Yes, we've hired a number of people, and the reality is that that was always going to happen. They wanted to come to us. We wanted to hire a lot of the reporters, but not all of them, because what we are trying to do is build something different. We are not trying to build a facsimile of the Baltimore Sun. I think what we can do is create a different solution in the marketplace, and then the readers will decide which one better suits their needs. Some may decide to stay with the Sun. Some may decide to come to us. I hope more come to us.

**Evan Smith** And a lot will read both.

**Imtiaz Patel** And a lot read both. And so, yes, I think at the end of the day, it is better if there are more journalists in town. Right? We do keep an eye to kind of their pricing and things like that, but I'm trying not to really be driven by what they're doing. Really we

should be thinking about what does the consumer want and really create a solution for the consumer at the end of the day, and then things will fall where they do. Now talk to me in three years, where I am in a price war, and I might be very different. But right now, that's how we want to be.

**Evan Smith** Are you giving your content away to the Sun? If the Sun wants to run something that you've run, will you allow them to republish it at no cost?

**Imtiaz Patel** No.

**Evan Smith** Okay. Why not? If the goal here is to accomplish a public service mission, why not accept the fact that whether it's accomplished through their door or your door, everybody, and particularly Baltimore, wins.

**Imtiaz Patel** So the challenge here, and I've been thinking a lot about this. It's not so much about the Sun, but it comes back to Alden. Look, we'll all be better off if Alden decides to exit this business, and lets the papers go to better ownership at the end of the day. And if I can help some way to do that, I'm going to do that. I'm not going to enable Alden.

**Evan Smith** Right. But you said journalism is a means. Isn't the end making Baltimore better, not making Alden poorer?

**Imtiaz Patel** That is true. But I think Baltimore becomes better if Alden's poorer.

**Evan Smith** Right, we'll come back to that. Ann, you're giving your content away to anybody who wants to run it? Yeah. Nykia, now that the Sun-Times is a nonprofit, do you feel particularly handsy about your content? If the Tribune wanted to run something created by this combined nonprofit, a WBEZ story or a Sun-Times story, could the Tribune run it?

**Nykia Wright** So we have important collaborations throughout the city of Chicago, right? The Tribune specifically has not asked us for that. And honestly, because we don't really know who's behind the Alden curtain, I cannot speak to their strategies, their desires, and there's no one that I can point to to negotiate with across the table.

**Evan Smith** Okay, let's role play. I'm the Chicago Tribune. You're you. Can I run one of your stories, yes or no?

**Nykia Wright** There are agreements in place. Yes, there are agreements in place. Now the mechanics of those agreements, we have to discuss. But let's be very clear. We partner with ProPublica. We partner with WBEZ. We partner with BGA. We partner with many organizations in the city, and we actually put those sometimes on the front page of the paper.

**Evan Smith** Right. But it sounds like the relationship with the Tribune is just different in the sense of maybe it would be more complicated?

**Nykia Wright** Yes, and it's always been that way. So Chicago Tribune, in fairness to their legacy, they've always been the belle of the ball. Right now, with everything that's going on and the uncertainty there, we have an opportunity to come in and fill a space that they might not be focused on. And I'm being very judicious here.

**Evan Smith** Boy, you sure are.

**Nykia Wright** If you haven't picked that up. Because like everyone else here, I do believe in the strength of the ecosystem. I will not indict the journalists that work there because of the perceived reputation of the owners. Does that make sense?

**Evan Smith** Have you had interest from the Tribune reporters to come over to the light side?

**Nykia Wright** We already do. I mean, yes. Chicago has a lot of bouncing around, and so I expect that to continue.

**Evan Smith** Your content that has run, Mukhtar, in the Star Tribune is being provided to them at no cost.

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Yes.

**Evan Smith** Have you thought about charging them?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Yes.

**Evan Smith** And why aren't you charging them then? If you thought about it, why aren't you doing it?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** We are experimenting the partnership for now, and we're going to see how it goes. Maybe after a couple of months we can figure out what that would look like.

**Evan Smith** Do you view them as competitors or collaborators?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Collaborators.

**Evan Smith** Okay. Each of you down the line, and then we'll go to questions from the audience. Nykia, first, and then all the way down to Mukhtar. What is the one bit of complexity here that you need to solve for that you haven't solved for yet? What is the thing on your mind that you think, "I don't have the answer to this yet in order to figure out how to best make this work"?

**Nykia Wright** Community engagement. Without a community, there are no readers or subscribers, so going back into the community and reminding them of why journalism is important.

**Evan Smith** Yeah. You're confident that you can get there? You're just not there yet?

**Nykia Wright** Yes. Booked and busy trying to figure that out. But once we figure that out, I mean, then people will come, the traffic will come, the readers will come, the listeners will come.

**Evan Smith** Right, and different for someone who is doing an established entity like the Sun-Times, then something that is right now a theory of the case, not yet proven?

**Nykia Wright** Yes. And we have to understand the strength of the establishment. The establishment brings the brand to the table. So I don't have to tell people, "This is who we are, this is what we do. Now will you listen to us?" So that brand is important.

**Evan Smith** Yeah. Ann, you're just at the very first inning of this game in terms of persuading people in the community. What is the biggest thing that you're solving for?

**Ann Stern** I would say very similarly, and we want to make sure that that community engagement focus is sort of hardwired into the organization, and not just a well, "Let's go out and talk to people every now and then." It needs to be part and parcel of the model.

**Evan Smith** In fact, the phrase that I've heard associated with this Houston project, and I have been listening, is "community journalism." You're baking community into it from the very beginning. Imtiaz, what is it that you're trying to solve for? You are so advantaged. I mean, to say it again, we had \$3.5 million in the bank when we started. You have a commitment of \$50 million. I'm reminded of that old story from decades ago of Elizabeth Taylor spending \$5,000 one night in room service at the Plaza. No one could figure out how she did it. You guys are like Elizabeth Taylor at the Plaza. How are you going to spend \$50 million? I can't figure it out.

**Imtiaz Patel** We don't stay at the Plaza. We like to stay at choice hotels.

**Evan Smith** I don't believe that for one second.

**Imtiaz Patel** So here's the thing we grapple with all the time. At the end of the day, I don't want to create a news organization that's yesterday. Right? We have to think about what is the newsroom of the future, what is the content of the future, so those things are really important. But also, more importantly, how does the content resonate and serve the different communities, not just the communities that are buying subscriptions, but different communities? And how do we reconcile all of that?

**Evan Smith** So you're not just simply trying to turn Baltimore Sun readers into Baltimore Banner readers. You're hitting them where they eat in this case. You're going after other communities?

**Imtiaz Patel** Exactly, because if you think about our mission, it's serving the communities. And there are communities who don't necessarily buy subscriptions or get the news the way we're going to provide necessarily. They need it, and that's the people we want to impact. So how do we get our content in front of them and have an impact, a positive impact?

**Evan Smith** That's what you haven't solved for yet?

**Imtiaz Patel** That's right.

**Evan Smith** So, Mukhtar, I'm looking at the people up on this panel. He's got \$50 million at least. She's got a mere \$20 million. The commitment I understood from your piece was \$61 million?

**Nykia Wright** Coming in at \$61 million.

**Evan Smith** \$61 million is a nice number. What do you have? Like five bucks? Like by comparison. I mean, is that a problem for you, tike with resources? I mean, obviously, we put you on a stage with people who have significantly more money available deployed to solve this problem. What is your big challenge? Is that it? Resources?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Resources. Yeah, definitely. We brought in around \$250,000 of advertisement and sponsorships. But we don't have the inventory if a new company or a new client comes to us to place an ad or a sponsorship on the website. We have to comply with the inventory. So I need to hire more reporters.

**Evan Smith** It's not as simple as a check showing up.

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** I know the business model, right? Ads, sponsorships, memberships, foundations, all that. But the more I can produce more journalism, the more I can hire more reporters, the better for my business. And, you know, I just want probably \$10 million.

**Evan Smith** Just \$10 million?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Just \$10 million. Not \$50, not \$60. Just that.

**Evan Smith** You have set a relatively low bar, a curb you can step over. \$10 million. I'm sure there's \$10 million in this room. All right. I'm going to take a couple of questions here. Okay, here's a question. As some news organizations begin and build or as they restructure, is there room to consider journalists' mental health and well-being publicly through mission statements and actionably through acknowledgment and resources? Nykia, I'll ask you that since you're running a very large organization that has endured through the pandemic. You understand the challenges of running a news organization today as it relates to the well-being of employees. We're all prioritizing the well-being of our employees alongside the importance of our work. What do you do about that? Is there a way to ensure that that continues?

**Nykia Wright** Yes. First of all, mental health is not just a challenge of managing and monitoring in journalism. It's throughout the nation and throughout the world, and so I don't think that the two should be separate. What do you do for the mental health of journalists versus other people? It's something that we continue to evolve on. I think we are sort of lean in some areas in HR. I've not heard a lot of challenges as it relates to that. I think we're talking to the senior leaders to help monitor that, but I don't think that it's any different from any other human resource talent allocation challenge that we have to deal with. It's important to be clear. It's super important.

**Evan Smith** Imtiaz, you're hiring at a really interesting moment for this industry. Right. There's a lot of churn, and there's a lot of discussion about how organizations can best serve the people who work for them. You are building from an empty lot. You're not refurbishing an existing structure. Right? You're building from the ground up. How are you thinking about that particular piece of the build of this organization?

**Imtiaz Patel** Yeah, so there's a couple of pieces to this. One is the kind of organization we want to build. So if you even just look at us, does this organization look like a diverse organization? Does it represent the different voices in the city as well? So we're very consciously thinking about that. There's no quotas on diversity hires or anything like that. But we know when it looks right, it'll feel right, and we know we've got the right number of people. But everyone still has to be a great reporter at the end of the day, or in business

functions, to be really good at that. So that's one piece of it. The other piece of it is we're really consciously thinking about the benefit structure that we have and the programs that we have in place. So like our health care benefits, right? We cover 75% of all health care costs for our staff. We have tuition reimbursement. We're about to put a new program in shortly. So there's a lot of things we're doing kind of from a benefits and structure perspective to really support the staff.

**Evan Smith** Steve Waldman, who runs Report for America, and is generally a good dude, is here someplace. I think he may even be on the program over this week. He just texted me a question and asked about the balance of accountability reporting versus culture and arts. I think everybody here is essentially doing a full-service news organization. Right? You know, we at the Tribune just do politics and public policy. We've decided that that's the lane. We've stayed in that lane for 13 years. It sounds like you all are doing more. I mean, you've talked, Nykia, about the importance of culture and the arts, particularly in Chicago. What would you say the balance in the combined organizations will be of what we think of as accountability reporting versus culture and the arts?

**Nykia Wright** Yes, and I just want to be clear. Just because we're doing it does not mean that we have the right number of staff to do it well. So, yes, we do cover all of that, but I do think that we are anemic in certain areas of the business. And so to answer your question, how do you do it well? One of the things as it relates to this merger is, of course, we said that no one will lose their job. Everyone currently has the beat that they came into the merger with. But the uniqueness of this is we get to start, in some cases, in ground zero to say, "where are we anemic?", and then grow those areas.

**Evan Smith** So you intend to be not only maintaining the current positions you have, but adding positions?

**Nykia Wright** Yes. Now, of course, that's subject to change six months from now. Will some people maybe be in different beats? That's possible. And we've sort of thrown that out to say, "Okay, that's possible." But we've worked very closely, certainly with our union, where they've actually surveyed themselves to see what percentage of them would be interested in doing that, so it's not going to be forcing something down someone's throat. But in anemic areas, because of the merger, we get to start to say, "Who is strongest in this?"

**Evan Smith** But accountability journalism will continue to be a big part of everything that you're doing?

**Nykia Wright** No question.

**Evan Smith** Right. Ann, you're looking to balance the two as well in Houston?

**Ann Stern** It's too early.

**Evan Smith** You're at the very beginning of this discussion?

**Ann Stern** It will be balanced.

**Evan Smith** And, Mukhtar, same, right? Where you are currently, what's the balance between accountability, and what you might think of as culture, arts and all that?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** So we only have four reporters.

**Evan Smith** Four reporters?

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** Four reporters covering, you know, the state education, politics, economy, arts, food, business, so they're doing a lot with just four reporters.

**Evan Smith** There aren't more than four reporters at a lot of big city papers these days, it feels like, so you're actually not that far off.

**Mukhtar Ibrahim** And three of those are actually Report for America members.

**Evan Smith** Second Steve Waldman shout out. That's exactly right. Imtiaz, how do you think about that? I mean, I see you saying you're going to go from city, to counties, to statewide. So how much of that will be accountability? How much of that will be kind of full-service newspaper stuff, culture, arts, and alike?

**Imtiaz Patel** I think there's going to be balance. I don't know exactly the percentages, but when we started thinking about the beats and the coverage areas, one of the first editors we hired was a culture and arts editor, Lawrence Burney. And now he is building out his team. I think we're thinking about initially at least three people on that beat, but right we're supplementing with our creatives in residence program as well, which allows us to bring a lot of other people to contribute, and different voices.

**Evan Smith** All right. I'm getting the cut off sign here. Basically, we have a minute left. Again, let's acknowledge the optimism on display on this stage. The fact that we have a lot of people willing to spend a lot of money to try to solve this problem that all of us have been working very hard to solve for a long time. Let's hope this is only the beginning of a revival of a commitment to local news and communities around the country. It's wonderful to get to be with Mukhtar Ibrahim, Imtiaz Patel, Ann Stern, Nykia Wright. Rosental, thank you very much for having us. Thanks, everybody.