

## ISOJ 2022: Day 2

### Panel: Recreating the local news ecosystem with new models, networking and collaboration

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Chair: [Jim Brady](#), vice president/journalism, **Knights Foundation**

- [Ken Doctor](#), CEO and founder, **Lookout Santa Cruz**
  - [Liz Dwyer](#), managing director, **Word In Black**
  - [Jeff Elgie](#), CEO, **Village Media** (Canada)
  - [Jamie Stockwell](#), executive editor, **Axios Local**
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**Jim Brady** I wanted to start by kind of setting the tone for this. I've been at this digital thing for 26 years now, and as we all know, there have been a thousand different things that were going to save journalism at some point. We could go through the list. It was SEO. It was going to be video. You know, the pivot to video that everybody tried and most didn't succeed at. Social is going to save journalism. Native advertising is going to help save journalism. Podcasts are going to save journalism. Blockchain is going to save journalism. And all of those things will play some role in figuring out what the future is. But my argument for years has been that what's going to save journalism is what the four folks up here are doing and what so many people out in this audience and watching virtually are doing, which is continuing to experiment, continuing to try new things that are using different strategies, different revenue models, different revenue mixes. Because, you know, the silver bullet for journalism theory, I think, has been disproven at this point. There is no one thing that's going to save us from a revenue perspective. There's no silver bullet. It's shrapnel philosophy, which is we're going to put together that silver bullet with lots of different sources of revenue and audience development. And so it's great to have a panel that's doing so many different things up here. I want to get to them and not be the one doing much talking here.

So let's get going. So we're going to start with each giving a little bit of a level set for what their organizations are doing and how things are going to this point. We'll dig in with deeper questions on the second round. So we're going to start with Jamie from Axios. By the way, I didn't do the titles and everybody's bio. Rosental was very clear. When you're at Rosental Fest, you do what Rosental says. And Rosental said, don't read the bios out loud. So you can read the bios in the program, but we're going to start with Jamie Stockwell. We'll talk a little bit about Axios Local.

**Jamie Stockwell** All right. Hi, everybody. Thanks for being here, and thank you, Jim, for putting this panel together and for all of you who put this panel together. I'm a UT grad, so I'm always happy to be back on campus whenever I can be. UT journalism grad, I should add. So I just joined Axios on March 21, so I just finished my second week. So I'm going to tell you a little bit about the company and what excited me so much about the company, and I think that'll get into the model too. But Axios was founded five years ago by a couple of really smart journalists who had also founded Politico. And Politico is, as everybody knows, a hugely successful news organization. And they founded Axios with this sort of mission in mind to declutter the new space. And what really propelled them and what drove them was to bring really smart, authoritative, incisive coverage in a really efficient

way to readers. And they created a format to do that, which is called smart brevity. It is like really tightly written, but it goes deep into why a particular issue matters and what it means. They launched with 50 people five years ago. The core newsroom has grown to about 120 people, and it has been wildly successful. Millions of subscribers, daily email newsletter subscribers, who every day are hearing from Mike Allen, who is just a god in the news business. He's amazing. He also has the stamina of a, I don't know, a two year old. I don't know how he does this, but he is constantly thinking, and constantly running around, and writing and reporting. And that model has evolved now into local news.

And what is really exciting about Axios Local is it started with just three newsrooms just to kind of test this idea that Axios could take the same smart brevity, really authoritative, incisive coverage in local communities using the same reader-first format began in Charlotte, Washington and Atlanta. And then it moved into 11 other cities, so there are 14 cities right now that have daily newsletters. We are going to be launching 11 more cities by July 2. Right now there are about 50, 55 reporters on the local staff, and the goal is to add another probably 11 to 12 cities by the end of the year and then ultimately to get to about 100 cities. So the format is a lean, pragmatic approach in local communities, hiring the top local talent we can get, people who are already deeply sourced, who are very credible, authoritative reporters, and to bring their chops to what it is that we're trying to do. And when you unleash reporters in an environment where they aren't having to deal with any print concerns or any constraints on legacy newsrooms, we've seen that they are able to do really important journalism and are making a huge mark in their market so far. So that's just kind of the overview of Axios and Axios Local. I'm sure there'll be lots of questions, and I'll be really excited to answer them.

**Jim Brady** Jeff, tell us a little bit about Village.

**Jeff Elgie** Hello, my name is Jeff Elgie. I'm the CEO of Village Media. We are a pure play, hyperlocal news publisher located in Ontario, Canada. So our office looks right out across the river, as we call it, to northern Michigan, right in the hub of the Great Lakes. We started Village about nine years ago, but the first site in our network actually dates back now 20 years. So we've had 20 years of experience observing anyways a successful and actually incredibly strong digital-only local news site. Today we are in 16 cities in Ontario, ranging in populations from about 10,000 on the low end to about 175,000 on the high end. We have two more cities we're launching in May. We run two business publications, and we license our platform to about 45 other publishers in the US and Canada.

Some interesting facts for you. In the 16 cities that we are in now, we are larger in newsroom size and larger in digital reach than our daily newspaper or weekly newspaper counterparts. We have a North Star metric in our business where we seek to build maximum reach in the community, and our target is to turn 40% of adults 25-plus into daily readers of the site. Sounds like a lot of people. It's a tremendously large amount of people, but our most successful markets have achieved or surpassed that. We've learned over the years that that reach is achieved by three key things. One of them is the size of our audience, in Facebook in particular, as well as our newsletter subscriber base. The other is the actual size of our newsroom, so not necessarily the quantity of newsroom output, but the actual number of original reporters in the market. And the other is the scope of reporting that we do. Our model starts, kind of the top of the funnel, as a service journalism focus. And then as the newsrooms grow, we get deeper and deeper into the community. We have doubled in size since the start of the pandemic. So we were about 65 staff two years ago and now we're about 135 staff. Our markets are almost all profitable, and we're growing quickly. Thank you.

## Jim Brady Ken?

**Ken Doctor** Thank you. You all are a lot smaller than you are on Zoom, when you look out there. It is amazing. I'm very excited because I started Lookout, local Lookout Santa Cruz. We launched November 2020, so this is the first public talk we've been able to do. It is pretty amazing when you think about it. I'm going to run through just the visuals as I talk about Lookout to show you what it actually looks like. Our idea, the big idea, is we want to replace the flagging dailies in sub metro areas. We started in Santa Cruz County, 276,000 people, hour and a half south of San Francisco. This is our latest launch here. This is puzzles. So we intend to do a lot of what newspapers used to do really well, but of course, better and digital-only and mobile-first. So puzzles is part of it. The bottom part of that, Santa Cruz puzzles. You'll hear a lot of parallels to what Jeff has done. Local, local, local, and actual stuff that people care about is what's key.

So here's a home page. This is a home page from two weeks ago, I think. And you can see kind of the diversity of this. We spent nine months designing. I didn't want it to look like a newspaper. I wanted it to look like it's own thing – this is kind of Santa Cruz colors, we're right on the ocean there – and be very lively and very visual. And we have carried that through in almost a year and a half. The diversity of stories is really important. On this Friday, a week ago, the top eight stories all featured women. Not by design, not Women's History Month, but just because of what we cover. And this one is from yesterday. So you can see heavy emphasis, too, on community stuff. Richard Gingras talked a lot about doing much more than accountability reporting. I am, and have been for 45 years in this business, totally mission-oriented accountability journalism, and mission is why I'm doing it. But to pull in the larger kind of audience that Jeff is talking about, you have to do the kind of things, and it's fun to do the kind of things, that your community wants, including entertainment and including guides.

Accountability stuff. We have done a fair amount of it, and we've done this all under COVID, of course. We had 900 people lose their homes to fire, an incredible number of people in a community that small, in August of 2020. We have stayed on that, and those rebuilding efforts. We've covered sexual assault in the high schools. And we really covered COVID well and have gotten great letters from our readers because of it, saying we had helped save their lives. We are very brand oriented, so that's why you see this shirt. We are Lookout. You'll see the team, and we have 13 people all together. We are big for a community that size. And part of the idea is to be big enough to be able to offer enough of a value proposition to readers and advertisers. And the sub brands are each of the correspondents. We have ten people in the newsroom. They get to know them. Their pictures are on the site, and they will be out in the community. You can see here our Q&A. This is a new format we're doing. It's a quicker format. It gets a lot more people in. And you're finding out about people in your community, and these are nice one-day stories. Everything we do is local and place based. People want to know about that building that they don't know about. We go, and we pursue it. And they are now looking to us for that kind of stuff.

In terms of revenue. This is intended to be an earned revenue model, and diversified revenue is the key. We are a membership site. We are an advertising site. The big surprise is Santa Cruz was an ad desert. We have had 45 marketing partners, all doing promoted content since our inception. Here's an example of it. The local bank was in right at the beginning, not talking about itself or just talking about its great services, but highlighting a PPP recipient that it brought to the table. That's the kind of promoted content

we have really seen work. So job board is another thing. Charlotte Axios was very successful. They were very helpful to us. We launched a job board. Again, diversification of revenue is key. And membership. So membership is absolutely key. We're one of the highest priced sites in the country, \$187 a year or \$17 a month. But from the beginning, since civic betterment is our key, we give 10% to one of six top community organizations, and that has been very successful in showing our community intent. So the student Lookout, another both revenue source and mission, serves high school and college students. We've gotten local donors to pay for access, to pay for student memberships at a highly discounted rate on a New York Times model. We are now doing a newsletter delivered by text only, and we're in the third week of that. So we have a lot of things going. We're still laying our foundation and look forward to talking about it.

**Jim Brady** Great. Liz, tell us about Word In Black.

**Liz Dwyer** Well, I'm so happy to be here with you all. As you see, I repped the stars because I am in Texas, so I figure I got to represent for you all. As has been mentioned so many times so far in this conference, for many of us, this is the first time since the start of COVID 19 that we have been all together in one space. 2020 was such a strange year. We got the COVID pandemic, but we also saw a resurgence of another pandemic, one which, you know, arguably has been present. I guess you could say it's endemic in America, in these shores, since the first enslaved people were brought to this land in 1619. And that pandemic would be racism. So in 2020, you had this convergence of people dying because of COVID, and then you also had the death of Breonna Taylor. You had the hunting down of Ahmaud Arbery. You had the murder of George Floyd. So you put all of that together, and, you know, as Gina said this morning with the example of the bank headline, if you all remember that, it was like, are the Black people being denied the loans or is the bank, you know, refusing to grant them? You know, in journalism, we've had this thing of objectivity, which I always say is a euphemism for white supremacy. Right. And so essentially the Black press did what we have done since 1827, when the first Black paper was founded, stepped into the void and said, we need to come together, collaborate and create something new to tell the true story of what is happening in our communities, what is affecting us at a local level, and elevate and amplify those voices and the solutions that are being generated on a local level.

And so Word In Black was formed. That was the impetus. And it was interesting because this week, I don't know if you all noticed in the news, that finally after 100 and 20 or 30 odd years, the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act. We finally got anti-lynching hate crime legislation. Right. Vice President Kamala Harris said this. I want to quote her accurately. She said that, "The Black press is who tell the story when no one else is willing to tell it." And so for our ten publishers, ten progressive legacy Black publishers, two of them are in Texas. There's The Houston Defender and the Dallas Weekly. They came together, and they partner with the local media association. If you know LMA, collaboration is everything, and they said we have to come up with something new. So we're about to celebrate our first anniversary, June 1, at the site. I started in January. And I tweeted it yesterday, and I mean this so sincerely – I love my job. I wake up every single day just thrilled. We have this mission to be the most trusted news and information source for, about, and by Black people. Right. Black-owned. Our publishers own us. They have their own individual papers, but they own Word In Black. We are theirs. This is not a sort of thing where, you know, it's kind of like an experiment. We'll just see how it works because we needed to do something after George Floyd was murdered. No, our publishers have been in the game since day one. They are the Black community.

And so when we talk about, you know, solutions, inequities, they have the sourcing. In reporting about, you know, Ketanji Brown Jackson, we had Denise Rolark Barnes at the Washington Informer who's able to pull Eleanor Holmes Norton at the drop of a dime and say, would you write an op ed for Word In Black about why DC statehood and the disenfranchisement of Black folks there means that there is no senator from D.C. who can vote for her nomination? We're able to pull Larry Lee, who's the publisher of The Sacramento Observer, because affirmative action is going to come up before the court again. Right. We haven't had affirmative action in California in how long? Since Proposition 209 in the 1990s. So being able to have Larry, who's right there in Sacramento, who knows the history of not just the effects of this on Black students in higher ed, but the ripple effects of this through homeownership, entrepreneurship, the business community, the fact that racism costs our economy trillions of dollars. California is the fifth largest economy in the world. You can't tell me that maybe we could be number one or number two if we didn't have racism.

So this is what we do. It's a joy to be a part of this, to bring it, to try to come up with the solutions, to understand that those solutions are coming from the community, and that we're centered. Anyone can read a Word In Black, and please do. You don't have to be Black to read us, to subscribe to us. Give us money. We like checks. Okay. We are for profit. But at the same time, this is not centered in the white gaze. This is centered in the Black experience, coming at it with love for Black people. Period.

**Jim Brady** All right.

**Liz Dwyer** I dropped the mike.

**Jim Brady** We are going to leave ample time for questions, so start dropping them in whenever you want to drop them in, by the way. We may drop some in kind of in the middle here. Liz, I want to stay with you. So, collaboration. When people hear about a collaborative, that means so many things to it. There are a lot of collaboratives out there. And people, I think, have this sense that collaboratives are let's share a bunch of stories with each other. I worked on Word In Black a little bit as a consultant for LMA, so I know a fair amount about it. It's very different in the sense that it has like one of its focuses is business sustainability, the publisher is not just sharing content. But what else makes Word In Black unique? Obviously, you answered a lot of it with your statement there. But also, what else makes this unique to you?

**Liz Dwyer** No, I think it's a great point that we are used to collaborations being about content only, but we are also a collaboration around business sustainability. You know, for our publishers, many of their publications are family-owned businesses. The Afro with Dr. Draper, they're about to celebrate their 130th anniversary this August, which is incredible to think about that a Black-owned family paper. And so to have that kind of legacy is invaluable. I would say that for our publishers, with any collaboration you have to have buy in from the top. They wanted to do this. They wanted it, right? This was the priority. This service to the community and amplifying the voice of the community. So we have not had that challenge in terms of like sometimes when you're doing a collaboration, you have to have that buy in and you're like, "Do I have it? Are you on board or not?" They're there. They are with us.

I think it's an interesting space. I work on the editorial side. Andrew Ramsammy, who's our chief content and collaboration officer, there's that word in his title, collaboration. He works primarily on the partnership side, and the reader revenue, and the fundraising, and all

those sorts of things. We're able to bring in partners. Like for example we have Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Funding for our staff at Word in Black is small. We have the content from our publishers that comes in, but we're also ramping up our own staff so that we can create stories that speak to issues from a national standpoint and then give that copy back to the staff of our ten publishers and say, "localize this, even more." Here's like the national framework of something. So, for example, no one is talking about for education, for Black kids, you know, what are they doing? What's the mental health impacts on Black kids of the pandemic? Right. So we went and talked to the Black Psychologists Association. No one's talking about them. But they were thrilled that someone wanted to reach out to them and report them. And then we can send that story back to our publishers, and they can localize that. So that's some of the things that I think that really make us unique.

But I think that journalism and business transformation, they have to go hand in hand. As we know, you can't do one or the other nowadays, and so I think that it's absolutely key with everything that we do. We are looking at how are we ensuring that we are a sustainable, viable brand, and how are we ensuring that our publishers are sustainable, viable brands because they have been doing service to the communities for so long. And we need to keep them there.

**Jim Brady** So, Jeff, you've done two things that are individually hard to do, but you've managed to do both, which is really build out a solid revenue stream that has lots of different pieces to it, and you've managed to engage the audience. And for a long time, there were sites that could generate page views and generate revenue, but they did it in kind of a way that did not engage the audience. What has allowed Village to do something that really for a lot of people who've been chasing this for a long time is a sort of, you know, the magic of being able to do both of those things. And I would assume to some extent they feed each other, but it doesn't mean a lot of people have succeeded at it.

**Jeff Elgie** That's a big question. I think Village has worked in part because we didn't come from a publishing background. So my background was I ran a digital agency for 12 years. We used to build websites, do digital marketing programs, and when I started Village, we were very focused on how do we grow audience. So we've always taken kind of an audience-first approach, and we did that through building the technology that runs our sites. We did that through paid audience acquisition efforts that still continue to this day. And that's all we did. So that's the other part of it, right? We didn't have legacy baggage. We didn't have to worry about printing a newspaper or meeting a press deadline, etc. All our team ever thought about was the digital product. So how do we build digital audience? What do we need to write in digital, etc.?

I think coming from a small community, so my hometown in our head office is about 80,000 people, and so we're also kind of live and breathe it every day. So we are on the ground talking to people who read the content. We're sitting with the mayor and talking to them about what the community feels about it. We're sitting with local advertisers. I sit across the table from the local car dealer or the local furniture store and talk about what works and what doesn't work for them. That has massively shaped our product. The product now is complex. I don't think anyone here is going to tell you that this business is easy. It's not an easy business, and we always say that we have to do a lot of things right for this to work. You have to build audience properly. Obviously your newsroom has to be working properly, and you have to have a very diversified product mix that drives measurable value for local business. And so I think that is something that, again, because we came from a commercial agency background, it's like this is what we think about. We look at analytics all the time. We're embedded in it all day long. We are making sure that

those clients see us in their Google Analytics reports, that we're referring traffic to them, that we're converting for them, etc.. So I think a lot of those things came together to make it work.

**Jim Brady** Jamie, with Axios, you guys have the interesting model here of having had a national site before you had a local site. I assume one of the ways that helps is the advertising that you're selling at the national level, some of it makes its way to the local sites. What other advantages do you think you've gotten out of having this existing organization, launching this new product with some experience and some data in their hands?

**Jamie Stockwell** Yeah, well, one of the really great things about Axios is that it's a new company, but it had an established following and a number of subscribers to the daily newsletters. And one thing that Axios did when choosing the local markets was to look at where a good number of Axios newsletter subscribers lived and what those communities may need. And so leveraging that national brand has been key. It has helped us gain our footing. It's helped us to establish ourselves in individual cities. You know, there were already a group of people who knew and loved us, but it's also allowed us to leverage our local reporters in these really interesting ways. So being able to position ourselves to tell really sweeping sort of national stories at a local level so that it's a bit granular, yes, but also with the really valuable context and distinctive signature style that Axios has.

**Jim Brady** So, Ken, before you launched Lookout, you were on the other end of this, watching a lot of us who played in this space for a long time, writing about it, studying it. What did you learn during all those years of covering this that shaped how you conceived of Lookout?

**Ken Doctor** I can sum it up as I was lucky to be able to talk to people at all levels of the business for 15 years. I looked at especially the models that have worked now and are making that crossover to success, like the Times and the F.T., talking to people like Mark Thompson and John Ridding who ran those. And I remember making presentations to groups like this and saying, "We really have to pay attention in local to what they're doing." And what I was hearing was, "No, they're just another thing now. They're not the same as we are." It always stuck in my mind that the thinking that was at, for instance, New York Times was what we needed. If you listen to what Jeff talked about in terms of the components of the business, borrowing from that model, first of all, revenue diversification. This idea that is too strongly out there in the local news revival business, that advertising is not attainable, is wrong, and it is hugely important to the number one task in front of us, which is paying lots of journalists to do local journalism. So diversification of revenue. The paid post idea from the New York Times turned into our promoted content, which is little more than half of our revenue right now. Memberships and how to do subscriptions and understand how that funnel works, which is very sophisticated and very different than print, of course. But then something as simple as a job board, which is really classifieds. I think lastly, if I picked the fourth, create a mobile-first product that people want to use is very, very important to this and especially to getting all generations to use it. So I applied that and said, "Okay, we don't have whatever it is 200 people in product like the New York Times has. We have 13 people in total. Maybe a lot for an area like Santa Cruz County, but we can apply that kind of thinking." And although it's been difficult, I've been able to find enough of the right people who are excited both about the mission and about creating this model, and so it is basically the New York Times model way, way, way skinned down.

**Jim Brady** Okay. Well, let's take a couple of questions right now, actually. This is for Liz? How does Word in Black include gender and socioeconomic perspectives while you're covering Black and Afro-Latinx communities?

**Liz Dwyer** Yes. So that's a that's a great question. Thank you for that. So one of the things that I think is critical to remember is the concept of intersectionality, that Black people are also women, and also LGBTQIA, are also all sorts of other different identities, that these are not separate things. And this is a reality that I think is something that makes our community so specifically beautiful and special, and that we are able to see this intersectionality and value it and honor it. Not that there aren't challenges sometimes, but that we historically have a level of reporting about this. In terms of gender equity, our publishers, you look at Janis Ware, who's the publisher of the Atlanta Voice, Dr. Draper in Baltimore, Denise in Washington, Elinor Tatum at the New York Amsterdam News, Sonny Messiah Jiles at the Houston Defender. These are all women who are running things. It's funny too because America likes Black women when it's time for election season. But what about the rest of the time? Well, the Word in Black readership, we found, interestingly enough, it skews over 50, Black women. So if you think about that, women are the people who get stuff done in your community. We are the doers. And so when we're talking about solutions, we are reporting consistently about Black women, and what they are doing in our communities.

**Jim Brady** Okay. Second question. I'm curious to know from the local news panel on how they create and sustain buy in and trust from local news consumers? How do you maintain meaningful relationships with the people who need your journalism the most? Jeff, you kind of tackled that a little bit, but do you want to go a little deeper on that?

**Jeff Elgie** Sure. So maybe I'll start with our mission at local level is to strengthen the communities we serve. I hear that more and more lately, very similar missions. I think trust for us means not just publishing stuff online, but being an embedded part of the community. So you will see us participate in almost every single nonprofit charity event or cause in the communities that we can. We give back. I think the combination of doing obviously fair, and accurate, and unbiased reporting consistently coupled with being that real community champion has done that. I would not perceive us to have any issue with trust at local level anymore at all. I think we're well trusted.

**Jim Brady** Ken, do you want to talk about the collaborations you're working on?

**Ken Doctor** Sure and just to piggyback on what Jeff said too. It is that, and even during COVID, speaking at every Rotary. We had a chamber event recently. It is retail, and it is what old successful local newspapers did, and what the chains have dropped is that they dropped all of that community connectedness. And then it's just multiple touchpoints. Online the journalism is where it starts with giving people many ways to be able to touch you, to ask you questions. Have a physical office where, Jeff and I were talking about that, have a physical office that people can come and use your conference room. Some of that stuff's pretty basic.

In terms of collaborations, I think it's really important to find like-minded people in this business, in this revival, that you trust and who have the same models or similar models. So we have put together a group with the Memphian, which is really underreported as a huge success story out of Memphis, Colorado Sun, Long Beach Post, and Block Club Chicago. These are all sites that are fiercely mission oriented in terms of reinventing local news, but also fiercely dedicated to earning their own way forward with a mix of advertising



and circulation money. So we are increasingly sharing ideas of what's working, what's not working, and that's really important to us.

**Jim Brady** So let's keep moving. Let's not all take that question just because we have other questions coming in, and I want to get to as many as possible. But I want to ask, Ken, let's get geeky on your structure. You're a public benefit corporation. Explain what that is, and how it differs from your traditional for-profit model.

**Ken Doctor** So it is a for-profit company that has built into its incorporation and bylaws its mission, very similar again to Jeff's. We say our mission in Santa Cruz, and will be for other Lookout local sites, is to make the community a better place for all who live here. So that community betterment principle is in there. What it means legally and down the road is when we become successful, if we should have people, especially evil doers, who want to buy us out, the board does not need to sell to the highest bid. It has to take into account that public mission, which is the best protection we can get. The reason we did it, and I'm glad we did it, it was one of many decisions at the beginning, but it was a good one. Three good reasons. One, we need to hire journalists. This is, again, the number one thing in front of us. The world's gone to hell. We need a lot more journalists at a local level, on every level. What a for-profit corporation allows you to do is to issue debt or equity to raise capital for expansion, very important. Secondly, we are part of the business community. We're also part of the nonprofit community. And there's a lot of overlap in all these communities. But we're not seen as someone asking for donations but earning our way forward. And thirdly, talent. And we talked about it a little at this conference, and I've talked a lot with friends about it. It is a huge question. And to be able to attract and retain talent and offer stock options is going to be really important for us to get the kinds of people and keep them down the road.

**Jim Brady** So are there downsides to that structure?

**Ken Doctor** The only downsides are at journalism conferences, really. Obviously like American Journalism Project will only fund nonprofits. I've had long debates with my friend John Thornton, and he'd say, "No, no, no, I know you're good, and you're fine, and I believe in you. But we have this principle." And I said like, "Is it religion, you know?" And then other people will say it's tax structure. But the only problem is really journalism conferences. People in the community, they don't care. And I've talked about it and written about it. What they care is about what you do and how you serve your mission.

**Jim Brady** So one way to sum it up is you're Alden proofed?

**Ken Doctor** We're anti Alden in fact. Yes, that is it. As much as we can.

**Jim Brady** As much as anybody can.

So, Jamie, when Jim VandeHei spoke at the Knight Media Forum a couple of weeks ago, I would say the crowd was somewhat riled up by Jim. Some kind of loved the animal capitalism kind of pitch there, and others were a little less charitable, I would say, if you watch the transcript of the chat, which I have. And what people were pushing back on was how can you really change these markets with two people? I know some have more than that, but I think it's two people to start per market. Can you talk a little bit about that, and also kind of the plan to expand those out, which I know exists?

**Jamie Stockwell** Yeah, there is a plan. I mean, we've taken a very lean and pragmatic approach in every market. You start out small, establish ourselves, and we will grow as revenue grows. And the plan is to continue expanding. But I think, as Jim said, I guess that was just in February, I had not started yet at Axios, but I did watch that. And I mean, he made it very clear too that this is, and it's been said on the stage as well, like this is not a hobby or a charity. It is a for-profit model. Axios is looking to make money from this. But I vehemently disagree, wholeheartedly disagree, that you cannot have an impact with one or two reporters in a city. I think even one really excellent reporter can have a huge impact, particularly when unleashed from the constraints of legacy newsrooms and print concerns. One, we're hiring extremely talented reporters who are deeply sourced, who are of the communities that they are writing about. They are sending their children to the same schools as their neighbors. They are driving on the same roads. They are as curious about all of the things that their readers are curious about.

And I'm going to kind of look at my notes here too because I want to make sure I don't forget. But we have like just a single reporter in a number of markets. In D.C., an investigation at a government officials' using WhatsApp led to legislation regulating the apps. Here in Austin, there was a scoop about racist comments made by a Democratic Party official that led to her resignation. In Atlanta, we had a deep dive on water pollution that prompted calls for EPA investigation. In Des Moines, there was a deep dive into a local towing company that caused the Board of Supervisors to back off of a towing contract. In Tampa Bay, we explained how the state fails those with mental illnesses. And in Denver, we looked at how special interest money dominates local elections. So those are just a few of the examples of ways that Axios local reporters are making significant, consequential impacts in their communities.

And I truly believe that that right now, just in 14 markets, soon to be 25, soon to be more, we are so well positioned to tell the stories that truly matter to America, and to do them in like really sweeping but also granular ways, and to be able to spot trends. In Texas, we are in Austin and Dallas, soon to be in Houston. If I get my way, we will also be in San Antonio and possibly elsewhere in the state. And then suddenly, you can tell the story of the great state of Texas, and the things happening here that have real consequence across the country. A lot of what happens in Texas is really impactful elsewhere. Same when you look at our cities of Nashville, Atlanta, Raleigh, Charlotte, Richmond. Now you can tell the story of the new South and the old South. And we can do that in the northeast, and the Pacific Northwest, and the West Coast. So I vehemently disagree with anybody who says that you can't do it with one reporter. But I also agree with my reporters who would love a little bit more help, and don't want just one or two in each market. So we're working on that.

**Jim Brady** I did want to just mention. Ken, your socks are not branded, so you missed an opportunity there.

**Ken Doctor** They're for Austin.

**Jim Brady** They're for Austin, but you know, your T-shirt is not for Austin.

**Jamie Stockwell** I should have worn my Axios socks.

**Jim Brady** You just made a whole thing about branding. I'm just saying. All right, Jeff, obviously the first key to having a successful market is the selection of those markets, so where you decide to launch. I know just from you having talked a bit about it, this is

something you put a lot of effort into to pick the markets. And how do you assess in the Village model, what markets to go into and what are the kind of metrics you look at?

**Jeff Elgie** Well, first we kind of start with the mission, right? So if the mission is to strengthen the community we serve and this didn't used to be the case, but it is now, we will not go into a market that has a healthy newsroom. To us, there is no purpose in doing that. In our markets, as I mentioned earlier, they're ranged in size from 10,000 to 175,000 people, and so we tend to look for markets that have a real strong sense of community identity. In a lot of cases, that means you live here, you work here, so not a commuter community. So we stay away from large cities. We will obviously kind of survey the media landscape in that market. And again, if there's a healthy newsroom, we don't go, but we do look at otherwise the output of radio, TV and print to see what it looks like, to make sure there is an opportunity. We, of course, where we're expanding in Ontario, proximity to our other markets helps a lot. So we share content across markets. We share sales teams across markets. That makes a big difference. And then we'll survey. In advance, we'll use tools to survey the community to see where they're getting their news from now. What are the gaps? And that's how we analyze markets. It all goes in a big spreadsheet, and then we just literally make a decision in a minute.

**Jim Brady** I don't know the answer this, but have you launched any and decided later that it's not the right place, or?

**Jeff Elgie** Yeah, we have a couple markets in Ontario that I would say are not great markets for us. One of them, it's not near any of our other markets. We kind of parachuted in there because we thought the daily was going to be closing in the nearby city, and it didn't. And what we've learned is that this is like a small town of about 15,000 people, but it really gets its news and does its business, its schools, etc., are in the bigger city that it's attached to. And so it's a modest market. I think it's basically a break-even market, but it's not that successful. We also have a market that's fairly close to Toronto. It's a bit of a commuter community. And we used to always say that, you know, well, it's not working because it's too close to the city, until we realized that we just didn't have enough reporting there. So we doubled the number of reporters and that market starting to grow, but it still doesn't behave the same as markets that are a bit more isolated.

**Ken Doctor** To Jeff's point, my friend David Rousseau, who runs the Kaiser Health News, talked about putting together a misery index as a way to decide where to cite new local news sites. So how bad is the local newspaper or newsroom, and how badly is the community need it? It'd be great if somebody did that.

**Jeff Elgie** And in those markets, our target is to have one reporter for every 15,000 people in the community. So we're looking at a couple markets now that are around 200,000 people, and the newspaper there has one and a half full-time reporters total. So those to us are opportunities to move into.

**Jim Brady** That's great. Liz, again, having worked on Word in Black, one of the things that really distinguishes it from other collaboratives I've worked on, because I have worked with a bunch of them, is the participation in almost every meeting of the CEOs and owners of that organization rather than the editor or, you know, someone who's maybe selling advertising. This is the top. It's Sonny, and it's Elinor, and it's Larry on pretty much every call that I was ever on. How important, when you're running a collaborative, is that kind of buy in from the top? Because I think where they fail sometimes is people are excited to be in it, but they can't get their bosses excited about it.

**Liz Dwyer** Yeah, and I will say that they also call me on the phone too, and we like chat about all sorts of thing. And they're always like, "Girl, how are you doing?" You know, like, I love that. And again, it's that piece of like these are family businesses, and it really does come through. But I think that that buy in is absolutely crucial. We've all been in newsrooms or had roles where we are not the decision maker, and we have a great conversation, great idea, yes, we're going to do this package of content about this particular issue, blah, blah, blah. Let's collaborate together, and then you got to run it up the chain. And it stalls, or then somebody is like, "Is that really a story? I don't know." And then it sort of gets killed. Right? And it's that piece again of who gets to decide what is normal, who gets to decide what is news. But all of these publishers are committed to amplifying the voices of this community. They are committed to solutions. They are committed to talking about the disparities, and not through the lens of like Black folks are the problem. Like Black children and families are not the problem. The school system is operating as it was designed. That is the lens. So when they are on the phone with us, they are coming at this with having been in this space, having that trust in the community. They are known in their communities. Let's face it. Like newspapers, mainstream newspapers, have done a ton of harm to Black communities, Latino community, the Asian community, native communities. Tons of harm to these communities in the way that they're reporting. Even the uprisings after George Floyd. What, they are looters. No. Come on now. Everyone wants to give Ida B. Wells her props now. But listen. Did they love her back in the day? Nope. So these publishers see the value of being able to take a local story reported by Black reporters on the ground who know the folks there and then being able to amplify it to a national audience. They are fully invested in it. Because again, this is not just about the survival of Black folks. As we have seen, the destiny of this country is inextricably tied to what happens to Black Americans. If we don't make it, then none of the rest of y'all are either. Racism has a two-way street here. You know, one of the questions that I have is like, so there's ten Black publishers in our collaborative right? We're made up of ten publishers, but there's 200-something Black publishers nationwide. For your local newsrooms, do you all partner with them? Not just on content, but on resources, funding opportunities, all those sorts of things. You know, like that is, I think, the challenge for this industry to not just be like, okay, it's Black History Month, we need a one-off sort of thing. Or, oh, I heard, you know, this church over here is doing something cool, let's give the newbie that to report on. But to center these voices, I think not just for Black folks, but for everybody in that reporting, and that's what our publishers are committed to.

**Jim Brady** This will sound like a plug, which I suppose it is, but Knight just funded in January, the Knight x LMA BloomLab, which is providing funding for 26 Black publishers to do some of the same business transformation work, technology stack, and so I totally agree that.

**Liz Dwyer** Can I say one other thing? Just the other thing, too, is that I grew up with the Chicago, I'm a Chicago area girl, and I grew up with the Chicago Defender. You know, in Los Angeles, I've been in L.A. since 1998, everyone black there has the Sentinel on their coffee table. Right. I think there is a place in our industry where we dislike traditional legacy media. I think it's a yes and piece. You know, like if we really want to reach this community where they are, there is nothing like having that Black paper passed around the barbershop educating the people about what's actually happening. So I think that we can absolutely, NFT, blockchain, whatever the heck we want to do in the future. All right. I know Black folks there still don't even have a cell phone, let alone a smartphone. So I always like think about that too as well. Our publishers recognize that. That there's a place for all of it.

**Jim Brady** The Center for Community Media did a really great study, I think, last year that showed how much more Black newspapers cover issues that matter to Black communities. And it was not a little bit more. It was a ton more. This is for Jamie. How is Axios Local different than Patch?

**Jamie Stockwell** Well, I mean, Axios Local is being funneled from the main Axios brand and newsroom. And, you know, to be completely honest, I don't know a whole lot about Patch today. I remember when Patch first started. And then somebody here can please correct me if I'm wrong, but it was then purchased by AOL, or it was part of AOL? Right? So apologies. And then sold again, and a few other times. It is very different from that model. This is an opportunity for Axios to like really leverage the national brand in local communities and to help fuel the local ecosystem in what I see as a very different and a very targeted way. We have an emailed newsletter, so we have a number of subscribers. Right now it's something like 770,000 subscribers across the markets. These are people who are saying every day, email me, tell me what's happening in my city, and who want that relationship with us. And so the advertising model around that is very different from what Patch was doing, too. We have national advertisers who are looking at all of our markets and then choosing which markets to be in. Sometimes all of the markets, if anybody who is based here in Austin and subscribes to Axios Austin, you may have noticed a really interesting ad all week from northwest Arkansas trying to get people to move to northwest Arkansas, where the cost of living is better, but the food is supposed to be just as great, according to those ads. And so it's different in that regard, too. I mean, we are hiring local talent to really report deeply on their communities and in sort of an elevated journalistic way. We aren't chasing clicks. We don't have to chase page views. We're just trying to build a sustainable daily habit with our readers.

**Jim Brady** Ken, you look poised to say something. Were you planning?

**Ken Doctor** Yeah, I mean, I think there are parallels and very much I think Axios is a much smarter company, and this is a product of 2022. Patch is essentially a company of maybe 2012 or something.

**Jamie Stockwell** 07 it feels like.

**Ken Doctor** I mean in terms of local. In terms of local. But it is dependent on national advertising. I was thinking from the earlier discussion about what the success of it is, so it's the definition of it. Clearly the kind of reporters that you're hiring will make an impact. The stories I've seen written about Axios Local say like this is the next solution in local. No matter how good of work they do and how additive it is, and I acknowledge it probably will be, it is not the level of original reporting that is needed in the kind of markets that Jeff and I are doing. You need more people to tell those stories.

**Jamie Stockwell** I disagree.

**Ken Doctor** It's really important.

**Jamie Stockwell** I disagree. We can agree to disagree on that.

**Ken Doctor** You can cover all of Denver with one person or two people?

**Jamie Stockwell** We have two people, and we're going to be growing. And we can cover the stories that are truly consequential and that really matter. Yes. Yes, we can.

**Jim Brady** Might I propose a bridge between these two positions?

**Ken Doctor** Sure.

**Jim Brady** Which is that in the older days, the Denver Post, for example, viewed itself as the only. It didn't count itself as part of a larger community of journalists covering a city. Right. I would say that in the cities you're in, Jamie, the expectation is you're not going to cover everything. There's going to be other publications.

**Jamie Stockwell** Absolutely. And one thing that Axios Local does do every day, too, is round up some of the most important news that you ought to be reading from The Denver Post, from The Colorado Sun, from other news organizations that are doing really great work. We are not trying to be everything to everybody. We are still sort of sorting our lanes, too. And we're only, in some markets, only six months old, in Austin only six months old. We're really trying to like focus on what are the stories that are going to really elevate residents' understanding of their community, help make them smarter, but also steer them toward the really great journalism being done by other news organizations because there's a lot of it being done.

**Ken Doctor** And we have heard, I mean, but it is aggregation.

**Jamie Stockwell** No.

**Ken Doctor** And as an aggregation play we've all been through.

**Jamie Stockwell** No, we're doing a lot of original journalism. It's not just aggregation. There is a roundup in every newsletter that is aggregating some of what is being written by the really powerful here by the Statesmen, doing really great work by the Texas Tribune, by other Texas outlets. But we are also doing very original and important journalism.

**Ken Doctor** Yeah, it's a question of value, and where the value.

**Jamie Stockwell** Well, I think there's great value in it.

**Jim Brady** Keep going.

**Liz Dwyer** We promise you the slap is not going to happen up here.

**Ken Doctor** We don't want anybody rushing the stage here.

**Jamie Stockwell** I'm going to say a couple of things. I have spent more than half of my career in local journalism. I started my career at The Washington Post as a metro reporter. I returned to Texas for one very big and important reason, and that is that I wanted to be back in my home state doing journalism in my community. I went to the San Antonio Express-News, where I was a crime editor. I became the managing editor. As the managing editor, I oversaw the daily operations. I had to cut 3 to 5% every year. It was mandated year after year after year. I was cutting news. I was cutting freelancers. I was cutting stringers. I was cutting, cutting, cutting. But I was also, knowing I had to cut, I was trying to conceive of ways to grow revenue in different pieces across the community,

through events, through sponsored newsletters, through podcasts, etc.. I'm very committed to local journalism. I left local journalism for an opportunity at the New York Times. I had a fantastic time there. Unfortunately, I wasn't even there for quite four years. Half of it was pandemic, so I was working from home. And the only reason I left The New York Times was because of this opportunity to be in a really innovative and exciting space back in local journalism, one of many solutions. But I think a solution that is truly exciting because I don't have to worry about cutting. I'm only focused on growing and being able to hire journalists across the country in key markets and build a model that I believe is a smart model. And then we will see where it goes. Our greatest ambitions are also to get into communities where there are no news organizations and to really dive deep into some news deserts. I don't know exactly what that's going to look like right now, but it is very much on our radar. And it is part of our growth plan. And, you know, when you hear Jim VandeHei and others talk about growing Axios Local to 100 cities, or 150 cities, 200 cities, that's a lot. And I think, you know, we have an opportunity, even with one or two reporters, to do significant, distinctive journalism. I am never going to sit here and crap on any other news organization because I think great work is being done across the board and across the country. And I think all of us, together, with the single mission of putting the reader first, putting the audience first, telling the stories that really matter to communities, it's a win for the reader. No matter how you look at it.

**Jim Brady** Yeah, and I think there's a beachhead model there, which is you get as many troops on as you can afford to have on shore, and it's not hire beyond what you can afford.

**Jamie Stockwell** We're not going to hire 25 people in a market and then have to lay off 15 of them. We're just not going to do that. We're going to grow at a pace that is sustainable and that makes sense for the revenue. And then we're going to continue to grow as the money comes in, and we're already hiring additional reporters in several key markets and will continue to.

**Jim Brady** All right. One more round of questions here. This is for Liz. So, as mentioned yesterday, how headlines can be dangerous. How does Word in Black present information not only accurately, but ensure that a stigma or stereotype is not thrown into the court of public opinion? For example, when reporting about hate crimes in the media, is there a bigger space for discussing possible reasons why a victim might have had some fault, rather than looking at it purely as an uncalled crime toward another human? It's not a light question.

**Liz Dwyer** Gosh, that's an interesting question. I mean, my mind immediately goes to, you know, the space of as a team, like when you're workshoping headlines, and you're talking through it, and all that sort of thing. Every team does that. And I think that there is obviously, when you have a team that is 99.9% all Black, when you are workshoping headlines or going through those things, there's also recognizing that we're not a monolith. And we are going to bring our own, as I was saying, that intersectionality to the fore. I do think that we over index in media on blaming the victim. And, you know, I'll never forget after Tamir Rice was killed, and some of the photos of him. Same thing that happened with Trayvon Martin. Some of the photos that go out about this. Breonna Taylor. You know, "Well should she have really been dating that guy?" You know, like that sort of insinuation in there. And that is not something that you see in general in the Black press. There is a recognition that you're going to see that in all the other media spaces. Again, it's that piece of we normalize white supremacy. We don't even see it, you know? And it's something as Black folks, we grow up in the United States too. Like we absorb this, so we have to check ourselves as well in this sort of thing. It's not just like a magic wand appears and then we

don't have any biases even in our own community. But there's a recognition that the inequities, the systems that exist, they're operating as they're intended to. Our new health reporter Alexa Spencer, she lives here in Austin. I was trying to get her to come over, but she's doing something with her granny today. So it's granny's birthday, so I hope that's going well. Thanks for dissing me, Alexa. But, you know, she reported out a piece of what the impact of Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation to the Supreme Court could mean in terms of environmental cases and the health of Black folks. And, you know, the layers of why Black people live where they live, why factories were deliberately built where they were, you know. A million Black folks living within proximity of oil refineries and gas things, all that sort of stuff, that's by design. Redlining, all that sort of stuff, which is still happening, by design. And so I think that we don't have that luxury of wanting to be like, "Well, you know what? You were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

I was telling somebody the other day. So my sister is a detective. She's a polygraph examiner. She was in the military. She and I have gone back and forth about all sorts of fun things. And she's my big sister, and she can whoop me. She's five foot two. But, you know, I have to be careful with what I say with her. But, you know, after Mike Brown. I was saying after Mike Brown was killed, my sister said, you know, "All he had to do was get back on the sidewalk." And how many times did we see that in the reporting that was out there? You know. And from another perspective, you know, like if he was white, would that have been even an issue? So I think that there's a piece of recognizing that and keeping that in mind, and then also seeing that not everyone in our community is going to see things the same way. Does that answer it? I don't know. I'm a former teacher, so I'm always looking for understanding.

**Jim Brady** Whoever asked, I'm sure would be happy to talk out.

**Liz Dwyer** Yeah.

**Jim Brady** I want to ask the other three panelists a quick answer on this one. How do you decide how many people you need to cover an entire city? How do you decide what to cover knowing you can't cover everything with, say, three to five people? Should the motivation and focus be just on news that will drive revenue? How do you all make those decisions about what to cover in a city where there are other people covering things as well?

**Jamie Stockwell** I can go first. So again, I'm two weeks into my job here, but one thing that I've been talking to reporters about at Axios Local is either the stories that we want to be telling in every city and every community are the distinctive stories, something that is not what the other news organizations have already covered. We don't need to come back in and do exactly what they have done in a slightly different way. I mean, I'm really looking for like key coverage of key areas that maybe some of the local newsrooms don't have the time to cover, maybe they haven't had a chance to cover, or maybe they don't have as many people, you know, covering politics, as an example. So just looking for distinctive signature journalism in a way that doesn't feel, you know, like a commodity.

**Jim Brady** And, Jeff, when you go into a market where there's one and a half, like if you go in with 40, do you do the same things that one and a half does? Do you look to go around them?

**Jeff Elgie** Well, it depends on what that one and a half is doing. So, you know, we wouldn't enter a large market that small now. If we entered a market that size, we'd



probably enter with six or seven reporters. We start at, again, top of the funnel for us is service journalism. So they're talking about the information needs of the community. What's going on? It's transportation, it's crime, it's housing, it's events. It's all of those things. And then we have a model that basically spells out what gets covered in more and more depth. So City Hall, for example, municipal politics would be the next in line, and that gets deeper and deeper. So we're pretty clear what to roll out with the resources we have, but we don't start fully formed. So we start roughly around 50% target.

**Jim Brady** Ken, a quick answer on that?

**Ken Doctor** Yeah, we don't have a metric yet because clearly we're just starting out. I think it's two things. Its mission, and its model. So we want to make sure we have enough impact. We have tried to devise the product so that we can concentrate the reporting in areas like government accountability, health, education, and arts and food that have formats where we can be a primary news source but deliver short bits of news while doing connect-the-dots reporting. And that, of course, is something that's difficult to do. We're getting better at it over time. And I think the other part of it, having 13 people. There are three on the business side, which we call community and commerce. Having those people out in the community have as much impact as the reporters, especially as we get past COVID.

**Jim Brady** So on panels like this, we all get to talk about successes. We all get to talk about the things that have gone well, and we get to kind of sell a little bit about what we're doing. But having lived the lives that all of you have lived, my own, it's hard. It's a really hard business to be in, and you run into a lot of pain points. What's one lesson, preferably from the operation you're in now that you would pass on to this particular group of a hard lesson learned? It may not be a fair question for Jamie, who just started yesterday, basically, but.

**Jamie Stockwell** But well, you're right. Yes. I can't really say hard lesson learned at Axios, but I can't say hard lesson learned just in more than 20 years in this business is the consequences that come from not putting audience first and from not putting the reader first. And for me, that's key. It is my daily mission to always be sort of anticipating a readers needs thinking about what the audience wants and then driving in that direction.

**Jim Brady** Jeff? We'll go Jeff, Liz, and then Ken.

**Jeff Elgie** I would say video. We years ago invested in building a studio, virtual sets, hiring news anchors, doing daily newscasts. And we still do video, but not like that. We've learned at local level and small markets, it's very hard to draw enough audience to monetize the production costs of video. So it's lots of learnings in video for us.

**Jim Brady** Pivot away from video?

**Jeff Elgie** Yeah.

**Liz Dwyer** So, Word in Black is going to celebrate our first anniversary on June 1, which is really exciting. And I've been there for three months, and I think sometimes I suffer from "now disease" because I'm like, I want it all now. I want everything to be amazing now. So I think that the thing that I'm learning more and more and more about is just that everybody says collaboration is hard, but not collaborating is worse. And, you know, if we don't do it, we lose so much just in terms of everything. We have all those meetings with the

publishers just because having that buy in and that trust. You know, I don't know if you all have ever seen this experience, but like for Black folks and Black culture, the concept of respect is really important. And sometimes, you know, as a former teacher, I taught in Compton, you would see kids and they'd be like, you know, "Why did you get in a fight?" And he'd be like, "Because he was looking at me weird. You know, he disrespected me." Because the root word of respect is to see, right? And so if we're not seeing each other, if we don't spend that time, and I think in traditional news, it's like this, this, this, just keep it going, keep it going, don't reflect. But seeing each other, recognizing that our publishers have been there since day one. Investors pull up. They're not going anywhere. They are the investors in the product. So, you know, I think that it's just that piece of pacing ourselves and recognizing that we're just getting started. We've got a lot of room to grow, and so subscribe to our newsletter. Read us. Share us. We love you.

**Jim Brady** Ken, bring us home.

**Ken Doctor** I'll be brief. I would say beware who you put in your tech stack. This is, no matter our noble missions, this is a technology business. And if you're going to be small, you're not going to create your own technology. You shouldn't. But those fundamental decisions about who you pick to power your business are hugely important. And we made about, I'd say, eight or nine really good decisions, and one that we are extracting ourselves from now. And that delays what your ability to succeed is.

**Jim Brady** And the one extraction can take up as much time as the eight successes.

**Ken Doctor** And it's painful. Yeah, it's a very painful extraction.

**Jim Brady** All right. All right. Well, I think we finished right about on time. So thank you very much for your questions and attention.