

25th ISOJ Editors' Perspectives: The struggle of metro newspapers to survive and thrive in the digital era

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David Ryfe [00:00:08] Good morning everyone. It's good seeing you. Summer didn't say that I hold an endowed professorship in news and guts, which is my favorite title ever. And I put it on my business card so that people can see it. I'm the news and guts endowed professor. So I'm very happy to be the facilitator of this panel today. It's hard to overestimate the challenges that Metro newspapers have faced in the digital age, yet they're still here. They're still producing the majority of news that circulates in their communities, and they're still trying to figure out ways of moving forward. I'm very happy to welcome four individuals to this panel who have been on the front lines of this effort. Manny García is the executive editor of the Austin Statesman, and he's held leadership roles as the former executive editor of the Austin Statesman. And he's held leadership roles at several other Metro newspapers. He recently became the editor in chief of the Houston Landing, a digital newspaper, a digital nonprofit newsroom. And do you want to come? Yeah. Emilio Garcia Ruiz is the editor in chief of the San Francisco Chronicle. And before that, he had a long career at the Washington Post, rising to become its digital managing editor. Katrice Hardy is the executive editor of The Dallas Morning News. She's also held many leadership roles across the landscape of Metro journalism. And finally, Nicole MacIntyre is the deputy editor of the Toronto Star. Before that, she held leadership positions at The Globe and Mail and The Hamilton Spectator, among other publications. The format of our panel will be familiar to you. Each of our panelists will have about 10 to 12 minutes to talk about their efforts in their newsrooms. We'll then have an opportunity for them to ask questions of one another, and then we'll finally open it up to questions from the audience. We're going to start with Emilio, who's going to talk about his strategy at the San Francisco Chronicle.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz [00:02:11] All right. I'm going to start with a pretty fast overview of, where we are, in the industry right now. I think all around the world there's an understanding, by news publishers that we're at yet another important inflection point, because of changes that are going on in the industry. And that it's a time again, for us to begin thinking about adjusting our strategies. And so there's a lot of talk about this post search, post social world, that is or is not, coming next. So what is it? What does that mean? And, and so how are we adjusting to that? So, I think we've reached a point, at least in newsrooms that were pretty clear that we are in charge of our own futures, reliance on partners, reliance, even on our own advertising folks. This is really about us and us being able to create relationships with our community, in a way that creates a bond that will make them pay for content, and that, this is liberating to me. It is it means that I am sort of the master of my own future. And if it doesn't work, it is on me. It is on me. So what? What do we mean by that? So you've seen these charts before about how social

referrals are dying. This is a trend that actually started a long time ago. It started with President Trump. Facebook began getting into all kinds of controversies because of the elections and their coverage. And they began ratcheting down, everybody in the news business said, they will come back. They're going to need news. They pretty much have gotten rid of news. And last quarter they had their most profitable and successful quarter ever. So they're not coming back to us. You know, Google has its own existential crisis right now with AI. They've got to figure out their future. No amount of payment to publishers that, you know, all these things that are being negotiated now is ever going to be enough to sustain the type of news coverage that we need. So while that battles itself out and resolves itself, we need to be on our, on our own, sort of concerns. And the concern for us is simply this. Right. It will go from that to that and that, Google will place AI summary as your search result. Frankly, it's a better experience than a bunch of links. I hate to admit that, but it's true. And so they've got their things to, figure it out of of the partners. I stress that Google is has been by far the best one in the news, industry has had. So, what does that mean to us right now? There's been a lot of discussion here already at the conference about the nonprofit model, so I won't go into that much, but for for us, it's still about paywalls. You know, there there is the ginormous success of the New York Times with their subscription product. They have become, I referred to them as the Death Star because they are now the the one of the world's leading, publishers when it comes to when it comes to revenue. The rest of us are struggling a bit. The Post had a bad run. There's hope that the intelligent paywall using AI might help us out. And the, the relationship between scale and conversion that we all thought bring as many people in as you can so that you'll sell more subscriptions seems to be broken. Now, we've had a great, run of subscriptions recently with what I would call mediocre scale, which means the relationship with our consumer is changing. The no paywall world with big, big newsrooms, where you're just trying to do scale programmatic advertising. Those days seem to be behind us. And you've seen some of the rough cuts that some of those companies have had to make. We have a major problem, which is we have no idea what to charge for our product. The world is in this mass discounting phase where we are teaching, our users that, our readers, that what they need to do is sign up for a discount deal. And the minute it ends, cancel and then sign up again, for another discount deal. Everybody's doing it. And it's created a big problem. The second problem for someone like me is, frankly, we have a little bit of Walmart-ization of pricing going on with the New York Times. They are in my market at a very, very low price. They have big penetration in my market. And so I'm having a tough time raising my rates with people who say to me, well, why should I pay more for the, San Francisco Chronicle than The New York Times. So if I'm going to succeed, I need them to pay not only more, but maybe 2 or 3 times more than what the, than what the times is charging. So we have to figure that out. So all this has led to this shift to new models? A lot of the conferences has, has reflected on this. So, about 41% of local or regional news outlets are now non-profits. And so I think we'll see more and more of that, as the metros, dwindle, or and competitors come in, and take little slivers of neighborhoods wanted one at a time. So it's up to us to, to figure out a way to survive in that sort of environment. So the talk is it's, some people call it a post-internet world. Others call it a post link world. What does this look like for us? And it's all of these things, right? We need, the big thing is the better relationship with our, with our users. It just cannot be the old days of getting a subscriber, having no contact with that subscriber, and then hoping they renew somewhere down the road. And this has led to a lot of

talk once again, about newsletters. I call this the third newsletter revolution. Those are the old people like me who were around in the early days of the internet. There was a big push into newsletters that failed spectacularly because the, newsroom product was horrific and people complained a lot. Then the skim came out, in about 2012 or so. Very successful. We all jump back into newsletters. We overdid it and had to trim back. And now we're into a new era, which is the idea of a standalone paid product that will be another driver of revenue. And so this time, story talks about a couple different things that are out there now. You know, these are new publications that are, centered on really sort of niche topics. So Punch Bow, they call themselves a membership based news community that focus on the individuals who power the U.S. legislature. The, folks at Puck. Do it a little bit, different. They do the intersection of Wall Street, Washington, Silicon Valley and Hollywood. Now their model is, a little bit. I'm going to build a little bit on what you all heard in the last session about the growth of the influencer. Agree 100% that we need to learn from the influencer. We need to adopt a lot of their strategies, and we need to hire ourselves some influencers. And I think Puck has done that. They've gone out and they've hired people with big followings, in social media, and brought them and given them a piece of the company. And then they become the, sort of partner, in the, in the product, if you have not read, came out two weeks ago, the the report done by Jeremy Gilbert and

Houghton and a bunch of others at Northwestern called Next Gen News understanding audiences of 2030. It's a great report that talks about a lot of what was discussed in the previous panel about you have an entire generation of people who are used to getting their news from influencers, and that is going to continue. So how do we, as news organizations, adapt to that world? I'm sorry, this clicker is not the best. I have to point someplace else. There we go. All right. Quickly, what what we've done in the Bay area, we actually are quite successful. We are profitable. We're doing well. We have a two brand model, SFGate, and the SF Chronicle. I tell my staff that that SFGate is the relative you don't like, who comes to dinner, who you fight with all the time? We own them, but we are completely separate. Their job is scale programmatic advertising. They've got about 50 people in the newsroom. My job is to sell subscriptions, and try to build upon our 151,000 digital subscribers now. And we have about 170 in the newsroom. So a couple lessons from there. And now we're going to go into more case study stuff. We do have to win all of the fundamentals of breaking news. So you do have to be fast. You do have to get the scoops. We sent a bunch of people to Maui when the fires happened there because a lot of San Francisco people vacation there, and it was a huge audience boon for us. And we went in and we knew we weren't going to compete so much on daily breaking news, but we would be able to do pieces that would be important to our folks. So one thing we did is we went in, we identified all the landmarks that are sacred to, people in San Francisco. And then we updated. We did the same thing after the fires in wine country. We picked specific wineries. We did a list of what their status was, where they gone, were they okay? When were they reopening? And we did a lot of, news off of the breaking news that was specifically catered to our, readers. I bring this up. How many of you believe that, a burrito should have French fries in it? Thank you. Thank you very much. So this is a California burrito. I get to San Francisco, my audience people tell me this is a burrito crazy town. I'm like, what the fuck are you talking about? This is San Francisco, fine dining. Nobody cares about burritos. They said, sir, you are wrong. Shut up. That's just how the audience team treats me. And we did this here, and it was our number one

audience thing. For last year. People will pay you to make their lives easier. Even when it comes to telling them which burrito to eat. The moment for utility news is back. I know a lot of us have been through various stages of this, but if you pick critical coverage areas and you give people the utility news they need in that area, you make their lives easier. It will work. We're going to build on something Richard talked about yesterday. He talked about the importance of doing more than just the news. This is a random list of stories by topic from my newsroom. I'm going to try to use the pointer and not break this thing. There you go. San Francisco. You see that? That's in the middle. That is city hall coverage. Education coverage. All the meat and potatoes of what a regional newspaper does, regional newsroom does. The stuff that leads for us is all utility content. People love weather coverage, real estate, food and restaurants, travel, things like that. We have to do more than just the, the standard coverage that regional newsrooms have done forever. And with that, my time is up. I won't let her raise another thing that says I have no time left. Thank you.

Katrice Hardy [00:14:08] Thank you. I did not know French fries and burritos was a thing, so now I do. So we've been, I'm obviously the editor of the Dallas Morning News. I've been at the paper about two and a half years, and what was really cool for me about, coming to the Dallas Morning News was one main factor. And there are a couple others I could mention, too, because there's no shortage of great news in Texas. Right? But that is the company's history. So the Dallas Morning News is the oldest and the longest and oldest running, continuously running organization in the state of Texas. So we've been around 137 years and we've never shut out our doors, so wonderful legacy. And the family that first started the newspaper. So owns a news organization. So and it's a unique model. So we are considered independent. So the owners, owns 53%. That's his stake in the company. And then we have a board. So we are for profit and the board and shareholders own the rest. But when you've got 53% ownership, guess who wins every time. And so and he's from our region. He loves journalism. He graduated from Harvard was the head of the editor of the Harvard Crimson Tide, and loves nothing more than the work that we do in the community. So what I wanted to talk about a little bit today is, you know, kind of our transformation. And when I arrived, the paper really was struggling, I think, to understand if we wanted to still try to be the paper of record of the state or if we really want it to be something else. And what we ultimately wrestled with is we are in a region of 8 million people. We have 50 fortune 500 companies. We are never at a shortage for news. We started in North Texas, Dallas Morning News, and that's really what our focus needs to be. So I'll start with this. The video didn't work, but we'll just move on. We'll start the video late. So here's what we'll talk about today. We'll talk about our challenges, our transformation, kind of what we're working on every day. And the great work in our newsroom that I think is, we're starting to see some success from. So here's our challenge. And you just heard it. No matter what market you're in, declining audience. People have a lot to do. They don't have much time. They have a lot of places to get news. They also have a lot of places to get the information they need, where they're going to eat. We also, when I arrived, didn't have great metrics. We had a lot of different tools, but they all were telling us different things. So we're uncertain about our audiences needs and wishes. And then we had a hodgepodge approach. We were trying to do everything. We're trying to be on every social media platform. We're trying to serve every audience. And I'm not really certain we were serving all of our audience as well that way. So our

opportunities really was get to know who's in North Texas. Figure out how we can serve them better and return to our mission, which at that point was really just being focused again on North Texas. So we spent a lot of time cleaning up our metrics, and ultimately we wrestled with, you know what page views, conversions, all of those things, but really helping our newsroom understand. And we're still in the process of that. What do the metrics show for their work? What stories are resonating? What stories aren't? The newsroom now has dashboards that everybody can look at and leaf through every day to determine what type of stories are resonating. We do year look back. So we're in the process of doing that. And we also just rolled out something called beat mapping, which a lot of news organizations do. And it's really just dialing deep on which stories resonated. Which ones do we still need to tell for our mission? But maybe there's a different way of telling them, or we just need to keep telling them the same way? Which stories we can give up because we can't do everything. What the audience also told us is a lot of what you just heard from San Francisco. People love food. So we double down in some of these areas. We now have three food reporters and they're all extremely busy. We've added a faith reporter. Our audience showed us that every time we covered a topic, a story in this area, those stories really, really did well. And so now we have a full time faith reporter. We also live in a place where people drive like maniacs, and I'm sure it's the same way in Austin. We needed a transportation reporter. We have so much growth going in. And so we've added that reporter. Of course, we had a World Series, and so we doubled down during the World Series. And before that actually when it looked like they were doing well the Rangers. So again we use metrics determine where we want to add resources. When I arrived we had one real estate reporter. Now we have two because we can't write about that enough. Public safety was an area where when we were talking, we had breaking news reporters, and we definitely need those reporters to do great work in trending work. But we also realized that one of our core missions and what people really resonated with was content that really opened them up to the problems and issues around public safety. So we broke off a public safety team and just a theme and the kind of the switch and just the focus has allowed them to go deep on those types of topics. And we're seeing a lot of success from that. We also have had a watchdog columnist, Dave Lieber. He gets in and talks about anything that someone gives them. He'll talk about somebody maybe getting their house taken from them in the vein of development. He'll write about the utility bill and those charges that we all so often wonder, how is that charge on my bill? What's it for? He does a really great job. And then again, we double down on breaking. We added a couple of trending reporters to the breaking team to really help tell those utility stories. And what was newsy in town. So the way we've been growing and working on growth is by taking a different approach, to just kind of the metrics. So again, doubling down again, seeing what the information tells us and figuring out how to staff that. We've also really picked up and we just talked about newsletter, breaking newsletter. So we have newsletters in a number of different areas. But now we'll push off a breaking newsletter on something that's really resonating or popular. You know, recently if you guys read about the Rashee Rice story, young man in the NFL who was going 119mph, we had a headline about yesterday at 6 p.m. on the interstate on last Saturday and got into it. Obviously, several people were, hit in an accident and he walked away from the scene with some friends. And so again, we pushed out breaking newsletters on that. We saw over a million new page views by taking the strategy last year. And so we're doubling down again. With a solar eclipse, we launched a four week newsletter, sign up that

people can sign up for. Same thing with our projects. We'll just launch a newsletter and then kill it once it's over. We've also really been working on our evergreen strategy. We saw last year that about 30% of the folks who read our content were reading content that we published from previous years. So that tells us it's a lot of seasonal information. And so we're really working to program that information. So like when the bluebonnets are popular we'll bring back stories. The other thing we'll do is if something we'll publish on a Monday does really well, we'll try to bring it back out later in the week, which is something we hadn't done before. When we published it again, we promote it, put it back on the top of the homepage if it has long tail opportunities. And we're seeing some really great success with that. We hired a storytelling editor because real storytelling, phenomenal, impactful work, it resonates. And then last, we actually really start to work on programing, what we're doing. So we have a budgeting tool now we plan ahead and we really look at is this a great a great day to actually publish the ten stories or the 30 stories or the 50 stories that we had talked about? Maybe today is not the day because Rashee Rice is blowing up and people won't pay attention to that. So we're trying to be a little bit more purposeful on when we publish our content. I'll tell you. The biggest thing for us, though, has been going back to quality, impactful journalism. So last year, we published a 30 day series on how fentanyl was impacting North Texas. And it was bold. It was, tough. There was a lot the whole newsroom almost participated in this project. And the stories were told in a number of different ways. We literally had first person pieces, from fentanyl users. We had stories about families losing family members. We had pieces, where we, you know, we shadow the DEA and spent time inside of hospitals. It was a hodgepodge of information as well as utility stories and some investigative work, impact matters. And so we definitely had it was a premium product. We had a lot of conversation around, should some of this information be opened up? We ultimately metered it all and premium, put the hard paywall on some of it. And we saw these results. We also worked really hard now and we published a big series. We don't just think about it in terms of just a newsroom product. We think about it as a company product. So we spent a lot of time with our marketing team helping us figure out how to market it. We actually had a forum that was sponsored, where we gave out information. We also got some more money from a local county so that we could actually publish all the utility content and put it inside of all the middle schools in our region. And so that work, we also thought about it from a business perspective. How can we maximize what we're doing, but also get the business side involved so that we can help underwrite this important work? That was the event. So the next series we did was called Bleeding Out. And this project really again, and a lot of this is health care. If you kind of think about it. But this project was really about trauma and how so many people are dying at from wrecks and other things simply because there's not access to blood immediately on E.M.S. trucks. So many people die quickly because of that. Again, another example of really coordinating around the company and so this these page views were, from maybe six months ago. I probably should have updated this, I'm sorry, from three months ago. I probably should've updated this, but we saw a lot of impact from that. Both of these projects have also just been, we've just found out about a number of awards, including IRE, for this work. Obviously we were lucky with the Rangers when there was a tipsy derby, season. But they are again, we maximize opportunity. We added more resources to it. We decided to do and we went back to print here three posters that we sold for \$25 each. We had multiple fronts and it was a three story package. We had people on social on Twitter saying, you know, I haven't bought a newspaper.

Kind of sad, but also great in years with the Dallas Morning News just made me buy one. I bought three and I paid more for than I paid in my entire year. Again, phenomenal work on digging into serious issues, quality work. This package is about, a young girl, who basically told her school that she thought that was going to be a school shooting and ultimately got suspended for it. And food, it always helps we cover food from a lawsuit perspective. Anything with barbecue in a lawsuit will go gangbusters. Trust me on that. We will look into chefs backgrounds when they kind of fudge their, resumes and say they worked at all these places and didn't, that does well, too. And then we go behind the scenes. This, waiter at a local steakhouse in town is the most popular waiter in the in the community. His, he makes about \$300,000 a year, and he has his own reservation system because people want Benny to wait on them. But it was really special as a story behind who Benny is. And then last, when you've got a bunch of monkeys and other animals being taken from the zoo, go there. So we wrote obituaries on some of the animals that were dead. We did behind the scenes. Look at why the zoo couldn't protect the animals that it was supposed to be protecting. That did really well for us. We swarmed this story from every aspect. I think ultimately what we really found is that our goal is community connection and change. And we do that with our staff and with our work. That's when we see the most success. But utility is also a part of that. So when we do major projects, we think about what are five tips that we can help people with to help navigate this issue or this idea? The clicker woes continue. And that's it. Thank you.

Manny García [00:26:25] Buenos dias. Good morning. So I'm going to give you a a real tactical approach to what we've done at the Statesman. But now jumping into Houston Landing. What I want to talk to you about, as we see here. Okay. Thank you very much. All right, so what I want to talk to you about is really, think about ourselves here as audience directors. All of you are asking the same question, but then I'm the reporter, and I'm not answering your question. I'm answering what I want to talk about. You see how that disconnect is between the audience? This is why what I've worked for in the past three years at the Austin American-Statesman and not going to Houston Landing, is we are data and analytics journalists who do public service journalism, using data and analytics to bring together audience to connect. So the secret sauce for us at the Statesman has really been. And also now going to Houston Landing is audience directors. Putting on my Statesman hat. So who are the top two leaders at the Austin American Statesman? They both came from digital in audience. Robby Farias, hr's audience director. The managing editor for news, Courtney Sebesta. Absolute rock solid journalist. Tremendous background in audience understanding. And the reason I say that, and then going now to Houston Landing. Among the first people I sat down with was our audience director, Forrest Milburn, and for me, that was a strategic leader who understands tactics. So think about in the old days, whether you're in TV, newspapers, we write stories. My gut tells me this is what the audience wants. Now, using Google Trends and all these other ways, you were able to know where is the best place to situate stories. So use those. What we've done is, for example, using Reddit, Instagram newsletters, whichever way, because we have to go with the audiences. If you really want to see a great example of Instagram, go to Houston. Landing. The Instagram page here is absolutely fantastic. One of our reporters, or K through 12 reporters, Asher did a great piece again on the ground with students rather than the academics, the students. What do you want to get out of the school year? How are things happening for you? A walking tour with a

student. Look at that. It's a masterclass in that kind of work. So it's going to where the audience is, the subreddits. The next piece I want to talk about is how analytics can really strengthen coverage. So the headline of my presentation is really: How to Thrive, how to thrive journalistically. So in Austin, you thrive journalistically because the statesman's been around for 153 years. Very strong brand. But we're also in a great ecosystem of great television news. You have nonprofits, public radio, now moving to Houston. Great history of news coverage. I mean, it's great start up with Houston Landing. I'm also in a news town where my wife is the news director of KHOU. So who's right there with me along with and by the way. But the point is that for your coverage, as you're thinking about your analytics coverage, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Think what you've heard from the panel already. What really works? If you have great writers of knowledge of food, context, real estate. So for us in Austin, it was very simple, storms. Storms really drive coverage. People really care. Think about where you're at, if people are moving into your region, if they're moving and they don't understand what it's like to be in a winter here, or worse yet, in a summer of all things, what do we learned? What did analytics tell us in Austin? Among the top search searches every day? Austin Glima. Workers want to know in Spanish. How is my day going to be when I'm out there? Using those analytics. What were we able to do in Austin? We created jobs. The longer if you follow Longhorn football, it's an alternate universe really. So we use that to create on top of our Longhorn writers, a trending Longhorn reporter trending. What are people talking about? What do they want to know? Writing those stories in the moment like you're asking the question in the audience. Tell me about this new recruit. Caleb Young. I'm answering your question right there. You see? Building the relationship. Building the relationship. We've also used that to create extreme climate and a meteorologist position that the Statesman is looking to fill. So the other thing I'll put you here is planning for scenarios and training the staff to win. After what happened in Uvalde, which the statesman played a big role in it, we realized that we had to really own breaking news and we had to have a plan. So when it happens, we're not just calling people saying, can you go over here? Can you do this? People knew immediately how to jump. So plan scenarios, plan coverage scenarios. So we have we created mass casualty coverage events. So we know we have great reporters here. And there was for example we had a shooting. It's called a Shane James shooting which was a gentleman who was in the military, killed his parents in San Antonio, drove to Austin, killed four other people. But it was a story that moved over a 12 hours, constantly changing. We had a dynamic team of journalists updating the story in a moment because the community was paralyzed. Why is that important? If you were able to be there in times of crisis for your community, people will come back to you. Never forget that times of crisis, they're going to need you. Same thing with whether owning whether in 2021 here we had a deadly snowstorm that killed at minimum, 21 people. We think the number is actually higher. And the reason I'm sharing that with you is because one thing we've known is that the audiences is there, is just craving for information in a very competitive ecosystem, but also in a world that we are today where there's a lot of false narratives and a lot of misinformation going on. So what we're doing is building the brands, as Emilio said, building our brands at Houston Landing, where I'm starting, where I've been in for three days and I started full time on Monday, community events. There's think about this term that I've used for years out of sight, out of mind. The reason for doing community events and being out there is that you want to be seen in the communities, not just show up when things are going bad. So it's what I call it's respect your

audience telling the stories, respect the audience that you're covering. So with that, I'm actually going to talk about the Shane James. The Colony Ridge story is one of the most important stories that Houston Landing has done since its inception. Think about Latinos, everyone we all want. I know my family, when they came from Cuba, they wanted. The American dream is to own a house. Folks go into these homes low interest, virtually no credit check when you can't make your payments. Here comes the foreclosure. Flip the houses again, but it also became very much of a political story. Who were the people who live there? They must be members of cartels. They must be involved in violence, trafficking. By being in the neighborhoods in the community, you're able to knock down those false narratives. But what Houston Landing has done so well was build trust in the community because you're there. How does that happen? Leaving the office. So truly, I want to leave it with you all about. Listen. Yes, we struggle locally. Everybody's struggling. But the point is that there is success and a message I want to leave you with. Here's where needed now more than ever. So be creative. Leave the room here and be creative and support yourselves. And thank you so much. Muchas gracias.

Nicole MacIntyre [00:36:08] Thank you so much for having me here. Last night, my mind was kind of spinning, thinking about all the presentations yesterday and so many things we covered. I debated making my presentation about today because I could talk at length about what happened when Meta pulled out of news in Canada. For our organization, it didn't have a huge impact. I could also talk about government subsidies, which have now flowed in Canada. And the very big impact that that has had in our organization. Or I could talk about when I can't sleep at night, and I think about the future of the paper. I'm not sure if I should be more worried about Google or the New York Times. But instead I decided I'm going to tell you about a story that the Star did that I think really represents the power and the importance of local journalism and also the challenge we face. I'm going to start by showing you a photo that I keep on my desktop, and I really would like to frame for my office, but I'm not sure that it's appropriate, maybe my home office. This is Mayor John Tory reading about his resignation and leaving office on the front page of the Toronto Star, and his resignation came because of a story that the Toronto Star published. We had an exclusive story that revealed that the mayor, who was 68 at the time, had had an inappropriate relationship with a junior staffer in his office. There is about 40 years age difference between the two of them. When we published that story, John Tory resigned to give you a sense of just how explosive that story was. I want to explain to you a little bit about how John Tory came to office and, tell you about who John Tory followed office, which is another Toronto mayor that you may have heard of. This is John Tory resigning, but he came after. Rob Ford. Some good politics in Toronto, I have to say. So the Toronto Star, led reporting, which revealed that Rob Ford, had a drug habit that he had smoked crack while in office, that he associated with known criminals. You guys probably know Rob Ford because he appeared on American talk shows. It was an international story. When it came to be the election time, Rob Ford was diagnosed with cancer. His brother, Doug Ford, stepped forward to run in his place. And John Tory stepped forward to say, you should vote for me because I will bring dignity back to City Hall. I will be the no scandal mayor. And voters went for that. He won. He won again. And he won again again. John Tory was on track to be the longest serving mayor in Toronto's history. And he done it by being very boring. After the Rob Ford years in which there was international media at Toronto City Hall, we went into a period in which there were no scandals,

and the City Hall press gallery had named, Tory "no story Tory." So with all that context, you can probably understand why everyone in Toronto. Paused and went. What went on a Friday night in February we sent out this alert. People have described to me being in restaurants at the time when this went out and literally everyone going, did you just, what? What is happening? Go to the store. And less than an hour later, we sent out this alert announcing that John Tory had stepped down. Everyone was stunned. I don't think I have to tell anyone in this room how big of a moment this was for the Toronto Star. And I have to say, I'm very proud of our newsroom and how we handled this story and that our newsroom understood what the story was and what it wasn't. We knew that this was going to be a controversial story. As I mentioned, John Tory had been elected three times. He was a very popular mayor. He was also very well supported by the establishment of the city. And any time a newspaper goes into the personal life of a politician, it's controversial. And we did get blowback from readers who said the media have no place in the bedroom of politicians, and I would agree with that. But this wasn't about the mayor's bedroom. It was about the mayor's office, and it was about his conduct in his office. And I was so proud of how our newsroom approached that story, and that we never named the woman involved. We didn't even get into the salacious details. We focused very much on his actions as a mayor, whether or not he had violated the code of conduct which an integrity commissioner later ruled he had. And we started an important discussion, which I thought we'd already had. But our conversation, our coverage illustrated, we hadn't about in the post MeToo movement. What is appropriate in a workplace? I also want to highlight this front page and say that why this was a big moment for the Toronto Star. On the top of that page, I want you to look at, you'll remember Rob Ford that I told you about, and his brother Doug Ford, who ran for mayor. Well, he's now our premier in Ontario. And on the same day that the Star broke this scoop, we also had a story revealing that at the at the premier's daughter's wedding, that the biggest developers in Ontario had sat at the head table with our premier. I would say that right around that time is also when the premier announced that protected greenbelt land was being opened up for development, new housing because of the star's reporting, which inspired a lot of other media reporting. The premier pulled back on that decision and protected those lands again. To me, this is an example of the power of local journalism, and it's the best of what we can do, which is holding power to account and showing a community that journalism can have impact. But I also want to say that it also shows the challenge for us. This is the night that the John Tory story broke. That's a screengrab of Parsley, and it was taken by one of our audience editors, who had never really quite seen a line like that on our website. And while I feel proud of this, I would also say to you that a future success is not built on a day like this. Because while the Star has a pretty good track record right now, scoops like this about the mayor are rare. And the reality for us is all those boring years at City Hall in which you need to produce content that people see as valuable, that they want to pay for. So now John Tory resigns and we go into another municipal election less than a year after we've just had one. And now, listen, I used to be a city hall reporter. I love a municipal election. Like I can't get enough. Reader data would suggest that others don't really share that feeling. But here's the thing everyone expects that your city newspaper is going to do a really good job covering election. So to me, that is the challenge that we face right now when we talk so much about data. We're deep into data as well. But what if the data suggest to you that you shouldn't be deeply covering the things that we believe are journalistically really important? I'm proud of how we took on, we had 102 people run

for mayor. The ballot. You had to unfold the thing. So listen, an incredibly important election and we need to do a good job of informing the community. How do you do that in a way, though, that people are going to read, that people are going to pay for? We have through multiple elections, provincial elections, federal elections, learned people don't want podium journalism. They don't want us just to regurgitate what politicians have said. So we've said we're not doing that. They also don't want long features about issues. They also don't want a long list of here's where every candidate stands. Here's all their platforms. But they do need all that information in order to make an informed choice. We took a different approach with our election coverage. These are profiles, which is a pretty standard thing in election coverage. But what we decided to do is after two mayors in which their, ethical decisions had raised questions about their leadership, we decided to focus on the top candidates purely as people. And we did 360 leadership reviews. If you're a manager and you've had a 360 review, you know they can be humbling. This was our way to say to readers, let's just focus purely on who these people are, to tell us what kind of leaders they would be. But also, people still needed to know their platforms. So we partnered with a company called Vox Pop, which creates a vote compass, in which you go in and you fill out a survey in which it asks you things like, would you support taxes being higher if it meant more social programs for people who can't afford to pay taxes? How do you feel about, the libraries and whether or not, we're giving people enough service at the same time? We sent that same survey to all the top candidates, and they got to fill out their answers. And then what it does is it offers readers, here's how you align with the different candidates. So here we are, giving people the same kind of content that we would have given them years ago, but probably in a big chart of here's everyone's platform and you go through. Instead, we've made it an interactive experience, and also we've removed this sense of bias. We're not in between helping say, this platform, this. It's like, how do you feel? How do the candidates feel? Let's say it over. The biggest thing that was taken out of this is that people are often surprised who they align with. This is our new mayor, Olivia Chow. She's also been a bit of a nose story. And I would, I guess I would say like that is what I would say is the challenge. Our jobs would be easy. If every day it was crazy scoops. That's not the reality of what we do. We do have to use data to help us decide how are we going to cover our community, and how are we going to resource our newsrooms? How many people are you going to have on an I-Team digging into stories that are going to have a huge impact? But how many people are you also going to have on an express desk that needs to chase breaking news? How many people are you going to cover have cover food? Does that mean you're taking someone out of City Hall? And I think that is what we're all struggling with as newsrooms right now. How do we fill that mandate of journalism that we also believe in? But I'll also be guided by reader data. I think it has been humbling to be guided by data, but it also opens up so many of the opportunities to show that actually people do care about these stories, but they're asking us to tell them in different ways. So thank you so much.

David Ryfe [00:48:03] That was all very interesting. Okay, good. That was all very interesting. We do have some time for questions. I've been given an iPad with questions from the audience. I thought I'd just go off that list. The first question actually relates to what Nicole was just saying. And it has to do with news avoidance. We know that there are some people in the audience who actively avoid news and actively avoid news about certain subjects. You're collecting so much data now on what kinds of news your audiences are attracted to. What happens when you learn

that the audiences simply don't want, or trying to avoid certain kinds of topics that perhaps people in your newsroom think are important? How do you manage that tension?

Nicole MacIntyre [00:48:48] I am happy to speak that it's always. We have an advice columnist, and she's consistently the top thing read on our website every day, which shows to me people do want that kind of content. I think what we have tried to say to our newsroom is we're not saying that people don't care about these issues. We're saying we have to be different in how we tell these stories. And, you know, when we used to publish stories in print, we just trusted that we were doing our job and people read it and had an impact. Now, actually, when you can see analytics, you know, you can say to a reporter, I know you believe this story is worth 10,000 words. Our data shows us that people are there for about 300 words. So, how are we going to tell the story in a different way? And if we believe that a topic is important, then we have to tell it in a way that it has impact. A story can only have impact if people read it. So how are we going to tell the story in a different way?

David Ryfe [00:49:42] I have a different kind of question. I wonder if in your data you're learning that your news products are reaching certain segments of the community, but not other segments of the community? That, for instance, wealthier people may be reading the news much more than, other kinds of people from your news organization. Are you seeing that kind of data or are you still reaching a broad, mass audience?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz [00:50:09] I think it's really hard to get that data. It's hard to be able to get. We know, for instance, that, for you, my predecessor in San Francisco, Audrey Cooper, the one gave me a lot of advice. But one of the things she said was, you need an AAPI reporter who speaks Cantonese and Mandarin, because that community's growing so big, it's very hard to find. Took us a long time, but we have somewhat in that community now trying to reestablish or to establish a relationship that's been broken. Another problem all of us have, I think, is that if you go back in our archives and look how, immigrant communities were covered, there's some pretty horrific stuff. We have dug ourselves a really big hole with a lot of really important communities in our area. So it's really important to us establish those relationships, without the concerns so much about audience goals. And we're trying to do something different with those reporters. And so it's going to have to accept that it's going to take a while.

Katrice Hardy [00:51:10] Yeah. And I think, you know, it is like I agree, it's very hard to dig in that deep. But will you ultimately know is how much more diversity is coming into our communities or is dominant in our communities, especially in our region. And so you just have to take different approaches. I can tell you, for example, with the solar eclipse content, we found that the stories we translated into Spanish, there were like six of them were in the top 12 stories that we produced about the solar eclipse with the same thing we have. We've had conversations about which story should we actually translate from Spanish to English. And so, you know, having more utility buttons on our content so that we're doing it in both. But that's, that's just a surface. We have a group of reporters, and an editor who are really focused on the Asian American community now, and they've been doing tabling there. So we're just trying to take a lot of different approaches to trying to reach those communities.

Manny García [00:52:01] David, I was going to just address the news avoidance thing. It's I think it's the way you present stories. In Houston Landing. We've got a big election package that we're going to work on. It's clear that it needs it should be told visually. So to explain the issues in visual way rather than the traditional big written stories. And I'm on the point of of audiences. It's what I call many of us in newsrooms today. We're addressing what I call the sins of the past, the way we've failed to cover news. This goes way back. This goes ten years ago. Plus when I was the editor of the local Herald making up for mistakes in South Florida. But but you do it. I mean, you have to invest. And this is whether it's in Houston Landing, going out into the community, spending time there. It's building respect and trust because you're visible. You're seeing yourself. Same thing in Austin a healthy share of the leadership team at the Statesman. They're fully about they can write and speak Spanish. So there's something to be said about that. Having that kind of firepower and expertise.

David Ryfe [00:53:06] We have time for one more question. Many of you referenced newsletters as part of your the successful part of your business strategy, and they're asking why newsletters, why are newsletters successful? What do you think is gone into their success?

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz [00:53:20] I do think that a one on one relationship between, that go back to that, what we talked about an influencer. Right? I think people who subscribe to your new newsletter have an affinity for your brand. They're inviting you into their mail, their, your, your box. Right. And so that already establishes a relationship for you. You have to guard that relationship very carefully, though. You can't over, a lot of places over send newsletters, but at certain specific key moments, a newsletter at, you know, as, as, you know, an alert is very similar right at the right moment on alert can do a great job of serving your readers the information they need at a given moment. It serves to talk a lot about utility coverage, right. News you can use, a newsletter is exactly that. It's news that I've asked for because I think you can make my life easier.

Katrice Hardy [00:54:16] And I will say, I couldn't say enough about overusing it. So we used to have like 45 newsletters, about three years ago. It was insanity. And so again, going back to the metrics, what do the metrics tell you about which newsletters are resonating and which aren't? And then when you have a pop up newsletter, it makes sense because you don't have to manage a lot of them that don't work. And so we've cut that down significantly and then really tried to improve the newsletters that we know reaches our audience.

Manny García [00:54:45] I find them to be, there's an intimacy. There's a relationship to them. There's a trust. There's a conversational nature to the newsletters of those who ask for it, and you're presenting it in a much more tighter fashion. That's that respects the reader's time.

Nicole MacIntyre [00:55:05] And I would just say habit is. The other thing is that it builds that habit of every day you're getting that connection with us. It used to be that we had a habit of reading the newspaper every day. Or we know now that often people don't even go to our home pages to browse that way. So it's a different way of making that daily habit.

David Ryfe [00:55:23] Oh, that's really interesting. Thank you so much. So we're at time. It's now 1215. Thank you so much, panelists, for coming today and telling us about your work. Can we give them a round of applause?