KNOWING THY AUDIENCE

Some pose the question "will journalism survive?" Four journalists at nonprofit newsrooms around the country say, "ask your audience."

BY MEG RICHARDS

It's 2016. Donald Trump just won the presidential election. In New York City, veteran journalist Joe Sexton sits across from his coworkers at ProPublica as they ask: What does this mean for journalism? What comes next?

Nearly 63 million people voted for Trump. Journalists from legacy media — Sexton, a former New York Times Metro editor, among them — hadn't anticipated or appreciated the variety of forces at work that produced that result, Sexton recalled.

"For a place like ProPublica, it doesn't have a mission of figuring out the entire national zeitgeist, but it's an investigative organization," he said.

The thought at the time was that there was a substantial portion of the American population who had legitimate concerns about the fairness, equity, and accountability of the government that they live under.

From that "honest, humble reckoning," Sexton said, a revelation:

"We should figure out what those issues and problems and angers and frustrations are, and we should investigate them," he recalled telling his peers. Those in the room agreed. Journalists need to better understand these 62 million people. And he had an idea on how to do so.



Joe Sexton

"What if we took one or two of our reporters every year, and sent them to Trump Country, and helped pay their salary?" he recalled telling his colleagues and bosses at ProPublica. Local newsrooms could write proposals for projects they would do if they had the resources of a multi-million-dollar newsroom. ProPublica could provide them those resources — with money, the manpower of their illustrious data team, high-caliber editors, and prolific photographers.

Two years later, the Local Reporting Network (LRN) emerged to bolster the reporting of 93 newsrooms in 39 states, providing over $10 million in funding to investigative journalism in local news outlets. It has since flourished into a multi-pronged, expanded approach, with the inception of the 50 States Initiative, which has brought the spirit — and resources — of ProPublica to all fifty states and Puerto Rico.

"It has been an enormous success," he said, with confidence and a touch of pride.

Sexton unilaterally credits this with the success of ProPublica: their willingness to meet audiences where they're at. He said this was not just attractive to funders interested in preserving local news, but innate to journalism's ability to survive in a country where 66 million people could vote for a candidate, just to watch her lose, and be left asking themselves, "What happened?"

In 2020, at a newsroom based in Austin, Texas, one queer journalist asked themselves the same thing, though their pursuit of an answer took them to a different neck of Trump Country's woods. For five years, Kate Sosin chronicled the lives of queer Trump supporters for nonprofit newsroom 19th News, reporting on folks from Utah to West Virginia.

Sosin believed exploring conservatism through the lens of queer people seeking community with other Trump voters was how they could best "figure out" why anyone would

vote for him. Especially for voters who are a part of a group that he's trying to "obliterate from the face of the earth," they said.

"It's not just about politics. It's about belonging to them," Sosin said. "I wasn't writing the piece to endorse them, but to say, 'This is how it happens' and, 'This is why' and 'This is how people justify it to themselves.'"

The nonprofit model, Sosin explained, gives journalists more leeway to connect with and tailor their reporting to the needs of their audience, by encouraging them to understand their audience not as something they are disparate from, but as fellow community members. Sosin said they approach journalism as though it's something they're doing with their audience, not for their audience, thereby making their work more adaptable to audience needs.

"I don't see myself as any more capable of doing those things than the people who are reading the articles I'm producing," Sosin said. "They are of the communities I am reporting on."



Kate Sosin

For-profit media has created a binary of consumer/producer out of journalists/audiences, Sosin said. Writing for the sake of clicks, views, and money is "fundamentally dishonest," and a framing architected by traditional legacy media.

In Sosin and the 19th's reframing, successful journalism is produced when journalists connect with their audiences to learn about what they want to see, what's important to them, and what they wish was in the news that isn't. Pursuing journalism stripped of a "sellable angle" and moving away from the 10-second elevator pitch can yield higher-quality reporting and a more civically engaged community.

"I'm not unsympathetic to business needs," they added. "[But] they often overrule the integrity of journalism. I feel like it should not be the job of a reporter to think about the needs of a business."

Over in Kansas, the editor-in-chief of a digital publication called The Kansas Reflector embodies a similar ethos. Sherman Smith recalled interviewing to become a mentor through the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association and being asked what he wanted to do in five years. He wanted to run a digital-only newsroom, he said. And he wanted to fill reporting gaps created by



Sherman Smith

for-profit outlets, to serve audiences previously excluded from important conversations about things like policy.

"We should be focusing just squarely on what news we should produce...Not printing costs," he said.

Smith knew the future of news was online and that he wanted to do journalism. But what took hammering, workshopping, and trial-and-error was finding the Reflector's audience. Without that, he said, newsrooms have no reason to exist.

"What we settled on was trying to amplify voices that are typically left out of public policy debate," Smith said. "I tell [our staff] that we write to the grungy populist."

The state government beat is typically treated like an insiders' club, Smith said, and he wanted to focus on connecting policy to the people it's going to impact.

"I want people to be able to pick up one of these stories... and engage with it without recognizing that it's a political story or a government story,"

Smith said. "It's going to impact them in their personal lives."

Once the Kansas Reflector found its niche, the rest of the story wrote itself. Its readership grew, donations flooded in, and most importantly, the stories had real-world impact, according to Sherman. He credits it all to the journalist's centering of the publication's audience.

"The point is to get journalism out in front of people," Smith said. "To get news stories out in front of people."

He leans on his background in audience development, having been the Director of Digital Audience for Topeka Capital-Journal, a for-profit shop, which taught him to analyze audience metrics and engagement, and the application of that data — all without prioritizing clicks over the needs and desires of real-life humans. Smith said they do this by monitoring social media discussions about certain stories, what tags attract the most people, and measuring the time people spend on a story — not how many people click on it.

"We don't tell you how many page views a particular reporter has, which means we don't hold a reporter to a page view metric...That's not valuable," he said, adding that the Reflector puts "virtually no emphasis" on page views.

And if a story doesn't perform well, the Reflector correlates it to how the story was written and reported on as opposed to the story's topic.

The Reflector also hosts monthly town halls across Kansas to strengthen relationships with its audience. Smith said reporters and editors travel to small towns around the state to hear from people about the work they want to see from the Reflector, while a nonpartisan



Nora Smith

host facilitates the conversation. Usually, he said, at least 40 or 50 people show up.

"It really gives us a better understanding of what people around the state want from us, what they care about, and what they want from legislators," he said.

Smith's newsroom, like many nonprofits that center their audience, implores readers to keep reading by engaging with them in a way that instills a sense of civic duty in their readers.

Pull quote about community engagement: "The point is to get journalism out in front of people," Smith said. "To get news stories out in front of people."

Last year, an Appalachian State University graduate student wrote their thesis paper on audience-centered journalism. They found that readers are invited to see themselves as drivers of morally good journalism when audience input holds weight in editorial decision making. When audiences feel gratified by the journalism they engage with, they engage more, concluded Nora Smith in their thesis paper, Who, What, When, Where, And Why? A New Story Of Journalism, As Told By Nonprofit News Organizations.

Nonprofit newsrooms do this the most, said Smith in an interview. By mobilizing their audience in this way, nonprofit newsrooms position themselves as active participants in democracy, centering themselves as citizens and a part of the community, which may energize people into engaging more.

"Clearly, the for-profit structure is not working in its current form to maintain that audience," Nora said. "This is something that's only become clearer through watching things fall apart. The key is redefining what success means."

When nonprofit newsrooms ask their audience what they want to see, like the Reflector, they're inviting them to participate in their community, the journalism they consume, and

democracy at large. The result, Nora said, is an enthusiastically informed citizenry and a blossoming newsroom, well-positioned to adapt to the evolving media landscape and in harmony with their audience.

"Creating and demonstrating social impact is a core role of any nonprofit organization and tied to the question of sustainability," the Knight Foundation wrote in Getting Local: How Nonprofit News Ventures Seek Sustainability. "The general shift away from simply delivering news to an effort to engage readers or users is a challenge for both traditional and emergent news organizations. Engagement is particularly valuable to nonprofit news sites."

News organizations need to engage in a "genuine rethinking" of their mission informed by the communities news organizations purport to serve if they want to survive, Nora said.

"I'm not the kind of person who thinks that journalists need to be completely objective and detached observers of society," Nora said. "Simply by having a lived experience, we all bring a subjective perspective to the work we do."

Nora, who has done copy editing for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette before working in communications for the University of Pittsburgh, said this is what they find most encouraging about the nonprofit model — the forging of a new path, one made by serving a community.

"Not necessarily change-making or policy-making, but truly what does your community want and need from you? And how are you, as public-interest journalists, meeting those needs to the best of your ability?" they said. "That is the only way you're going to see growth in funding and monetary support, because we have reached a stage of capitalism where people are only going to pay for a service if they absolutely have to or if they can't see a path forward without it."

Sexton, of ProPublica, concurred with this, saying he suspects nonprofits are the future of journalism, evidenced by the "impressive variety" of them that have found their niche, like the Reflector. He said people are willing to pay for something if they can't imagine life without it, and a news organization's awareness of this behavior could make their newsroom successful tenfold.

"I would suspect that the heart of Amazon's success is that it knows exactly what its customers want and what they need and at what speed they want to obtain it," Sexton said.

To apply this to journalism, journalists must ask "what do people consider most vital to learn about, and how do they like to engage with it or receive it?" Sexton said.

A comprehensive inquiry into a newsroom's prospective audience is essential to any kind of promising effort in the nonprofit world, he said. So is having faith that there are people who actually care about the challenges of American life today, enough to pay or donate to read about it.

"Meet them at their need, and with their wallet in hand," he said.

For all the reasons there are to be pessimistic about the future of journalism, Sexton said, it's par for the course. In his opinion, American journalism has a, "mean, cynical, manipulative, and cutthroat" history. But he doesn't lament about the waning trust in journalism, the declining health of democracy, or the consolidation of media empires. He remains an optimist.

"For people who feel like we're in some particularly darkened moment, darkness has a long history. It's part of the business," he said. "You can get a lot done in the darkness that matters."

From Kansas to Texas to New York to Pennsylvania, journalists will keep doing journalism. To know the "who," the "where" and the "why," journalism is what people need. But it's not the "what" being questioned. It's the "how."

So, how will journalism survive?

Let's ask the audience.