



# Gateway Journalism REVIEW

Founded 1970 as St. Louis Journalism Review

**Collaboration is more than the new buzzword.  
It could be what saves us.**



# CONTRIBUTORS

## **PUBLISHER** WILLIAM H. FREIVOGEL

William H. Freivogel is a former editorial page deputy editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and contributes to St. Louis Public Radio. He is a member of the Missouri Bar.

## **EDITOR** JACKIE SPINNER

Jacking Spinner is an Associate Professor at Columbia College in Chicago; freelance independent journalists specializing on the Middle East; former Baghdad Bureau Chief Washington Post.

## **ARTIST** STEVE EDWARDS

Steve Edwards is a professional artist at Steve Edwards Studio.

## **GRAPHIC DESIGNER** KATIE GRIFFITH

Katie Griffith is a graphic designer at SIU Printing & Duplicating.

## **GJR FOUNDER** CHARLES L. KLOTZER

Charles Klotzer is the founder of the St. Louis Journalism Review.

## **STUDENT MANAGING EDITOR**

### **EMILY COOPER**

Emily Cooper is a first-year master's student at SIUC from Wisconsin. She is studying Professional Media and Media Management. You can follow her on Twitter @coopscoop.

## **NEWSLETTER AND SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR**

### **NICK KARPINSKI**

Nick Karpinski is a writer and M.A. student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he studies topics surrounding media ecology and expanded media environments.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT**

### **ENOLE DITSHEKO**

Enole Ditsheko is a doctoral student at SIUC, author of "Wrestling Botswana Black from Khama," a 2019 journalistic polemic about the state of democracy in his homeland of Botswana.

## **SUSAN FRELICH APPLETON**

Appleton is the Lemma Barkeloo & Phoebe Couzins Professor of Law at Washington University in St. Louis.

## **TED GEST**

Gest is president of Criminal Justice Journalists and editor of Crime and Justice News. He formerly was a reporter and editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and U.S. News & World Report. He was a founding member of the St. Louis Journalism Review in 1970. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University.

## **ROBIN SLUZAS**

Robin Sluzas is a staff reporter for the Columbia Chronicle at Columbia College Chicago. She recently covered the Collaborative Journalism Summit in Chicago.

## **KAYLI PLOTNER**

Kayli Plotner is a doctoral student at the University of Colorado Boulder where her research focuses on newsroom culture, diversity, innovation and visual journalism. She has previously worked at The Denver Post, Chicago Tribune and Rockford Register Star as well as taught classes at Columbia College Chicago and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. You can follow her on Twitter @kayplot.

## **ROBERT DUFFY**

Robert Duffy is a former editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio.

## **PAUL WAGMAN**

Paul Wagman is a former Post-Dispatch reporter and FleishmanHillard executive who now is an independent writer and communications consultant.

## **OLIVIA COHEN**

Olivia Cohen is a Chicago-based journalist who is currently earning her bachelor's degree in journalism at Columbia College Chicago. Cohen's work includes published reporting in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and the Chicago Sun-Times. She currently is the managing editor for her college's newspaper, the Columbia Chronicle.

## **ROBERT KOENIG**

Robert Koenig worked under Bob Adams in the Washington Bureau for six years. He left the Post-Dispatch in late 1994 to pursue journalism in Europe and, later, Africa.

## **PUBLISHED BY:**

School of Journalism and Advertising – College of College of Arts and Media  
Hong Cheng, Dean  
Jan Thompson, Director

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# Journalism collaborations help produce community impact, policy solutions

By Robin Sluzas

When the Covid-19 pandemic first hit, weekly and smaller newspapers scrambled to provide coverage of the huge global story affecting their readerships even though they had much smaller staff and fewer resources than the city's larger media outlets.

But for publications like the South Side Weekly, Wednesday Journal and Loop North News in and around Chicago, it was not a story they could ignore.

So under the umbrella of a solutions-based journalism collaborative called Solving for Chicago, 20 print, digital and broadcast newsrooms came together to report on how Covid-19 impacted the city. The non-profit Local Media Association manages the collective.

The news outlets first focused on vaccine awareness, which resulted in a \$10

million dollar commitment by the city to enlarge the Protect Chicago Plus program that increased Covid-19 vaccination rates in 15 underserved communities. It then moved on to looking at the ways essential workers were impacted. Reporting over eight months resulted in 87 stories that contributed \$1.4 million directly to communities and helped to drive City of Chicago policy changes.

"I think any news organization that's willing to be less competitive, share resources or knowledge with another news organization is doing a great service," said Penny Riordan, Local Media's director of business and strategy partnerships. "We see value in the industry through shared learning and people coming together to report or tackle another topic. Those are the things I like the most about it."

Solving for Chicago is just one example of the way the collaborative journalism model is bringing together individual newsrooms, from large urban outlets to smaller local papers, to work on big stories they may not have the ability or resources to report on their own.

"Really, in the case of Solving for Chicago it was about getting that idea off the ground," said Riordan, noting that Solving Chicago was the first collaboration for Local Media. "The other piece on how we approach collaboratives in general is wanting to form collaboratives that serve a common good or solve a problem for a newsroom or several newsrooms. That might look differently in Chicago than it does in Oklahoma. We tend to go into that space if people approach us, we're seeing a need in the industry or is funder-identified."





Photo by Raed Mansour via Flickr

## Cross-field collaboration

As Solving for Chicago did in working with Protect Chicago Plus to increase vaccine awareness, pairing media organizations with organizations that provide assistance to communities can influence policy change, said Sarah Stonbely, research director at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University.

"Information producers can no longer rely on common channels for their works received," she said. "You don't have a big mainstream media or a few well read industry outlets. Media spheres are fragmented and are partnering to have broader reach."

More media outlet involvement means bigger audiences and different ways to express content, Stonbely added.

In a report co-authored with Hannah Siemazko, the two looked at the ways journalists and civil society organizations around the world are working together on issues like corruption, environmental or human rights issues.

The organizational workers liked working

with the journalists because they turned technical white paper information into stories with visuals that audiences enjoyed more, the report found.

Other benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration are expanded resources and specialized skills that are brought to projects by journalists, civil society organizations or universities. One of the most important benefits of forming collaborations the report found is the impact that results in solutions.

Cross-field collaboration involves at least one journalism and one non-journalism organization. The report analyzed 155 cross-field collaborations over two years, involving 1,010 organizations in 125 countries.

Corruption in government, environmental issues or human rights were the main topics of the collaborations.

In their report, countries like the United States with collaboration projects based in other countries are called "exporters." Countries like Afghanistan called "subjects" that had no homegrown organizations so investigations by experienced "exporter" collaborations occurred. Other countries like Mexico had cross-field collaboration projects using homegrown organizations; the report calls these places "self-directed collaborators."

These distinctions are important because they identify the reasons for different kinds of collaborations happening around the world.

After analyzing census, gross national income and data from the Transparency International Corruption Perception index, Stonbely and Siemazko also discovered that cross-field collaboration exporter countries with higher national incomes had lower perceived corruption.

The opposite is the case in subject countries such as Afghanistan with lower national incomes. More perceived corruption meant that the poorer country experienced more investigative cross-field collaborations begun by exporter countries like the United States. Lower national incomes also mean the existence of human rights abuses or environmental issues.

There are different kinds of organizations that partner with journalist teams. Fifty-five percent of cross-field collaborative partners were journalism organizations, 21 percent were non-governmental organizations and some of the remaining partners were art-related organizations and universities.

## University/news organization collaboration.

In fact, the partnerships with journalism educators, though smaller in numbers, gives journalism students the structural skills and inspiration to begin collaborations of their own.

"My interest in this topic is really personal and practical as a journalism educator,"

said Mark Berkey-Gerard. "As someone who's done partnerships in the past, this is something I wanted to look at and learn more about."

Gerard, an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Rowan University plans to submit his research for peer review this summer. He is currently an advisor for the South Jersey Climate News project.

The topic he studied was collaboration between universities and news organizations, another kind of cross-field collaboration, is about student journalists working on news projects with professional journalists as mentors.

"Be prepared to fail and pivot sums up my experience with partnerships with working with my students and news organizations," he said. "I'm all in on collaboration but I'm also someone who realizes the challenges and is realistic about what it entails."

Gerard said the idea of collaborative journalism is not new. In 2005, an investigative project called News 21 partnered students and professional news media and focused on national issues. One of the origins of collaborative journalism is the The Missouri Method. The program, still being practiced by the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, combines classroom work with practical experience.

In April 2022 12 students in the program published award winning works at the school's NPR station, KBIA-FM. Students in the program reported and published stories from their communities while being assisted by professional journalists demonstrating collaborative journalism at work.

In his research, Gerard identified over 100 partnerships. He utilized a survey and interviews to analyze how academic and news partnerships are conducted including the benefits, difficulties and recommendations for student/professional media collaborations.

The benefits of these partnerships are students gaining actual experience by working together with media professionals, the inclusion of student journalists maximizing pro newsroom reach, students taking on local news reporting roles in underserved communities and bringing a youthful perspective to stories.

Challenges are newsroom timelines conflict with academic calendars and the disparity in skill between student productivity and professional media expectations. Newsroom goals and educational teaching methods do not always align. Also, less advisor and faculty contribution time combined with fewer professional news staff can also make it difficult to make collaboration work.

Recommendations Gerard heard in interviews include designating a partnership

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**“There is more collaboration actively going on within media organizations by far than I have ever seen in our 40 years of business.”**

**— Dan Haley, editor and publisher of Wednesday Journal in suburban Chicago**

manager to manage expectations, putting together a memorandum of understanding between collaborators, finding shared beliefs and outlooks that overlap, being clear about reasons for a project and goals that work for both partners to help a collaboration to be successful.

“Student and professional media collaborations range from a couple students to 200 plus students,” Gerard said. “In West Virginia there was a project, named StreamLab where three students, working with a professor, did audio stories for the local NPR affiliate on water quality issues around mining. That was a project that got national attention.”

The project partnered with West Virginia University investigative and environmental reporters including WVU scientists and used low cost affordable do-it-yourself RIFFLE water sensors to log data. RIFFLE sensors are open source devices developed to make gathering water quality information easier and less expensive.

The project focused on the Tygart Watershed in West Virginia. The Save the Tygart Watershed Association was concerned that chemical waste, called slurry, used to process coal from the Leer Mining Complex could pollute the Tygart River. The Leer Mining slurry pond is close to the Three Fork Creek, a tributary of the Tygart River.

Once the data was gathered and reported, the team hoped it would induce community involvement but damaged sensors rendered the data unusable.

While Stream Lab's DIY open source sensors did not work, deployment of the solutions journalism method and the project's level of collaborative scaffolding is an example of an attempt at real world community impact.

## **Solutions Journalism Collaborations**

Collaborative “scaffolding” or a collaboration’s evolution as it grows is the foundation of successful solutions-oriented journalism and its end results that are based on moving away from traditional newsroom reporting methods.

The purpose of “scaffolding” is to imagine, make and share information between the multiple news organizations within the collaborative to increase a decided-upon project’s chance of real community impact.

Key to a successful collaborative’s growth is its ability to keep the values all collaborative members share in place. Trust between all the partners, commitment to the idea of the collaboration as its own organization and joining the divide between reporting theory and real practice to produce shared content that results in an outcome and change in the real world are also important for success.

“We had an opportunity to research the outcomes for six different journalism collaboratives between Fall 2020 and 2021,” said Caroline Porter, media strategist and researcher at the Ralstin Agency.

The six journalism collaboratives studied were Broke in Philly, the Granite State New Collaborative, the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, the Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative, the Wichita Journalism Collaborative and Solving for Chicago.

“While we studied a very specific set of collaboratives, we think the dynamics and insights we generated have applicability to all kinds of journalism collaboratives,” said Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro, Porter’s research partner and senior research fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, and CEO of the National Trust for Local News. “The distinctiveness about these collaboratives that we studied is that they were really trying to bring collaboration and solutions journalism together.”

The collaboratives were also at different developmental stages such as those just beginning versus those in existence, resulting in different success rates. The results of their research suggested that different kinds of projects could apply to different types of collaboratives, said Hansen-Shapiro.

Their research paper detailing study results, “Developing journalism collaborations for local impact” was published this year.

One of the impacts of evolved scaffolding was increased funding and favorable policy outcomes based on solutions to issues reported on by the collaboratives. Successful journalism collaboratives tend to hire a collaboration

manager or a business like the Local Media Association.

LMA’s non-profit foundation section provides non-profit media organizations with another way to supply news coverage to local communities.

“Our company, Growing Community Media, was launched in 1980, beginning with the Oak Park-River Forest Wednesday Journal operating as a for-profit company for 39 years with a small number of owners,” said Dan Haley, editor and publisher. “Over the last 10 years the business model of for-profit newspaper publishers and a lot of media organizations has shifted dramatically.”

GCM’s business model grew to four papers and a magazine but over the last 10 years experienced a decrease in print advertising dollars which resulted in less funding for the company, he said.

Three years ago, the OPRF Wednesday Journal converted its ownership of the Forest Park Review, Austin Weekly News and Riverside-Brookfield Landmark into Growing Community Media, a non-profit organization. Recently, new coverage for Proviso Township called the Village Free Press was added to GCM’s roster.

One GCM news entity, the Austin Weekly News, is a member of the Solving for Chicago collaborative managed by LMA and contributed to its eight-month long Covid-19 project coverage.

GCM continues a strong ongoing collaborative relationship with Block Club Chicago, another Solving for Chicago member, said Haley. The two newsrooms share editorial content on the west side of the city. GCM is also collaborating with another member, Injustice Watch to publish their election guide in multiple GCM papers the week of June 12.

Haley, like Riordan, said the change in journalism business models have brought down competitive walls in the industry. “There is more collaboration actively going on within media organizations by far than I have ever seen in our 40 years of business,” he said. “We are less likely to see another newsroom as a competitor and more likely to see them as an ally.”

Journalism collaborations’ ability to change the perception of anti-media groups is difficult according to Haley. He said people who have no trust in reporters or media will change their minds.

While perceptions about the spread of disinformation and lies tends to be centered around national conservative news media outlets and social media, the reality is it is taking root at a very local level that needs to be challenged, he said. There is value in collaborative journalism, having closer journalistic relationships and understanding issues that newsrooms could be facing like these.





Photo by Phil Roeder via Flickr

# Publishers can only do so much by themselves

By Olivia Cohen

Growing up in rural Iowa, Becky Vonnahme didn't have access to many local news sources. Now, as part-time executive director of the Western Iowa Journalism Foundation, Vonnahme has discovered why. Small publications, like small businesses, have a hard time getting funded. After all, ad sales alone just don't support local journalism anymore.

The foundation works to target specific

counties in Western Iowa to help raise money for publications to fund projects – both big and small.

"In rural areas especially, our mission right now is that you just need to have a valid news source; so many parts of the country in rural areas have lost their newspaper and we really feel, at the foundation, that it is leading to the misinformation and the disinformation,

people's reliance on social media ... because there isn't a valid news source," Vonnahme said. "The gaping news desert is just huge all around the country."

Vonnahme said if a publication cannot support itself financially, the platform cannot invest in investigative or watchdog reporting, as they have to focus on basic news first.

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Vonnahme added that when publications cannot fund bigger projects, they often turn to grant funding or philanthropic donations.

Many of these collaborative efforts, like what Western Iowa does to connect smaller news outlets with funding, are relatively new, starting in just the last five to seven years, said Leah Todd Lin, a collaborative manager with the Solutions Journalism Network.

One of the many ways news publications finance their projects is through applying for grants through non-profits, paid partnerships and through journalism-driven organizations such as the Pulitzer Center.

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is a news organization which sponsors independent reporting and reporters that other news media outlets are less willing or unable to take on and fund on their own.

In 2021, the Pulitzer Center financially supported over 200 reporting projects, 332 working journalists in 84 different countries.

Some of these projects included reporting on toxic chemicals in Texas' air quality, the cost of labor in post-coup Thailand and menstrual health of Kashmiri women.

(Editor's note: GJR partnered with the Pulitzer Center on two recent special issues, one focused on police accountability and the other on race in St. Louis).

Andrew Ramsammy is the chief Content and Collaboration Officer for Local Media, an association that focuses on the business side of local media in over 3,000 newspapers around the country.

Ramsammy said many of the public service reporting projects that he oversees are through newsroom grants, including many projects highlighting caregivers of color through AARP, which would not have been possible without external contributions.

Ramsammy said one of the collaborative campaigns he worked on funded by a grant found the minimal diagnoses of Alzheimer's given to the Black community. Ramsammy added that each campaign costs more than \$100,000.

"This would not be able to happen if these collaborations didn't come together," Ramsammy said. "Publishers can only do so much by themselves but with a collaboration of 10 on a nationwide scale, we are talking big dollars and big opportunities to partner with brands that align with our mission."

Ramsammy's publication also works in tandem with philanthropic initiatives to fund journalism projects, specifically the sustainability of publishers of color. Ramsammy said the Local Media Association strives to help local media companies not only with their journalism endeavors but also in developing "cutting edge" programs, conferences, webinars, research, and training within the realm of journalism.

The topic of fundraising and fiscal health in newsrooms was discussed during the 2022 Collaborative Journalism Summit in Chicago last May.

Cassie Haynes is co-founder and co-executive director at Resolve Philadelphia, a journalism organization that seeks to build collaborative relationships between journalists to forge strong research.

Haynes said learning to extend collaborations outside the newsrooms is ever-evolving and a skill that even she is still practicing, noting that creating Resolve Philly's initiative projects was like "building a plane while flying it."

"In our experience, we are experts in what we have gone through as a team, as an organization over the past several years and we are absolutely still learning every single day to make [collaboration] a part of our process."

Resolve Philly's main initiative projects include "Broke In Philly," a reporting project with over 20 newsrooms working to expand economic mobility; "Reframe," which reports on both under- and misrepresented communities in Philadelphia; "Equally Informed," Resolve Philly's direct response to COVID-19; and "Shake the Table," a reporting innovative that works to hold Philadelphia's elected officials accountable.

Haynes added that for external collaborations to be successful, an organization must work to integrate both existing and new practices around community engagement.

"Whatever your investment is in building structures, workflow and process is, just double-down on it," Haynes said when asked how journalists could avoid hurdles when entering the collaborative space. "The process: How we think about building trust and how we think about engaging with communities, that shifts, but how you work together as a team and the steps of that process, the pieces of that puzzle... that doesn't change."

**“ In rural areas especially, our mission right now is that you just need to have a valid news source; so many parts of the country in rural areas have lost their newspaper and we really feel, at the foundation, that it is leading to the misinformation and the disinformation, people’s reliance on social media ... because there isn’t a valid news source. The gaping news desert is just huge all around the country.”**

**— Becky Vonnahme**



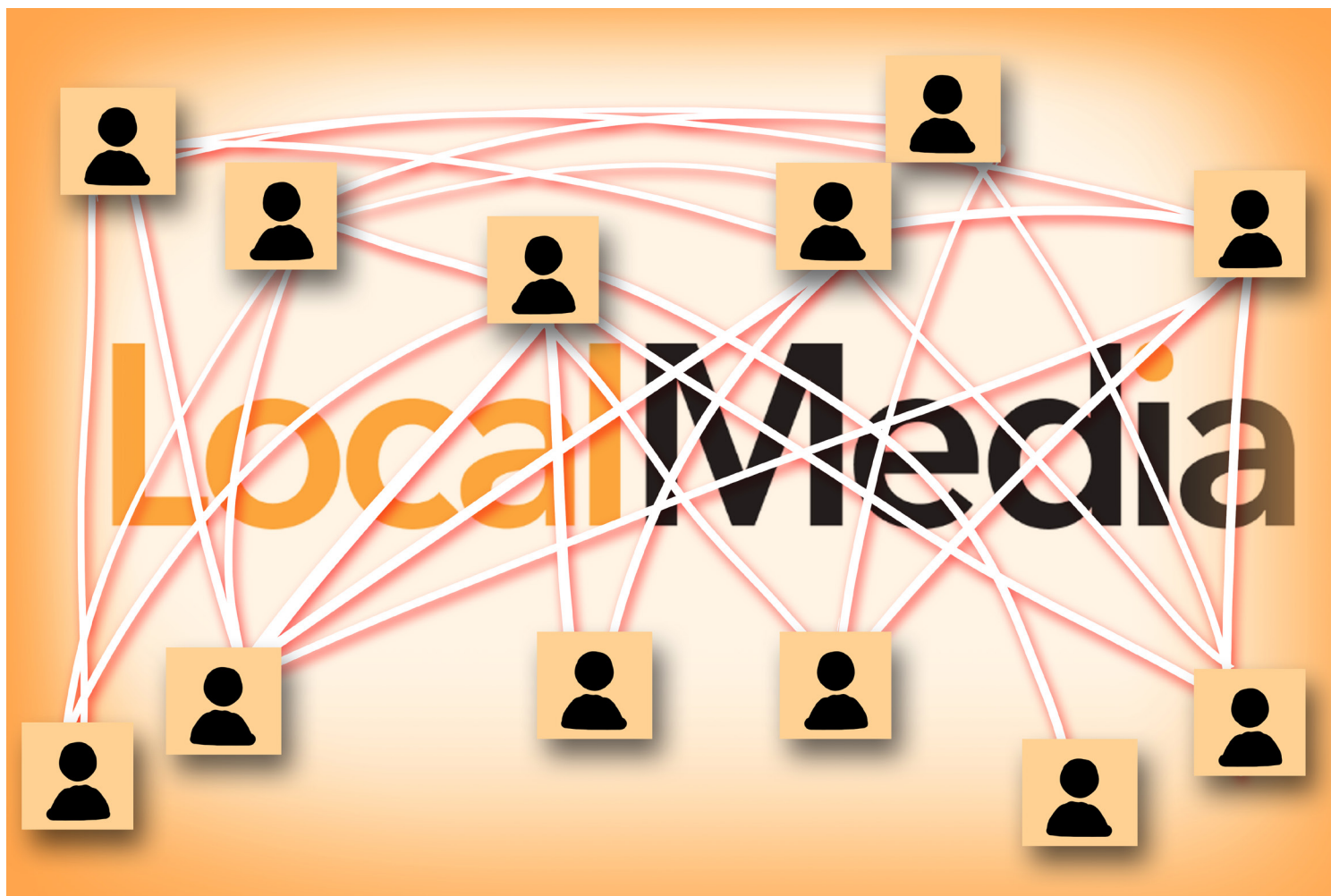


Illustration by Steve Edwards

# From competition to collaboration: How an evolving media landscape influences teamwork in the newsroom, classroom

## Collaborative journalism for communities

By Kayli Plotner

Five local reporters crowd into a large tent to listen to the Rockford mayor announce the city's newest low-income housing development; three work for TV stations, one for the local daily newspaper and one for the alt-weekly across town. We each return to our respective newsrooms and file daily stories, including this one I wrote for the Register Star. But what about the more impactful, long-term news regarding this housing complex? What if we could answer questions like, what happens to surrounding property values? Does the crime rate increase? Do these residents have access to public transit, or a grocery store? Do they have to find new jobs?

It would be hard to cover those topics in depth, with few resources, especially on a deadline. But what if we could? What if our newsrooms teamed up to provide

community members with the information that came after the press conference, or city council meeting, or protest in the downtown street. What if instead of competing, we collaborated?

This is just one example of a moment I recall as a local news reporter when there were several different news outlets covering a story; the same went for city council meetings, holiday celebrations, municipal elections or major crimes. In the end, we all produced the same news content, and sent our community members down an internet search hole in order to find it.

Journalism has no doubt adopted its share of catchy phrases over the years in order to explain various ways of practicing the craft, many of which have turned into full blown departments or even college majors, be it watchdog, engaged,

participatory, social, solutions, community, Within each of those can live another umbrella term: collaborative.

To get a better understanding of how collaborative journalism works, and furthermore, how we can teach it to current journalism students, GJR spoke to three former journalists whose roles are now all journalism-adjacent. They are: Stefanie Murray, director for the Center for Cooperative Media, housed at Montclair State University; Amy Maestas, region collaborative manager and local media project director for the Solutions Journalism Network; and Patrick Ferrucci, associate professor and interim chair of the Journalism Department at University of Colorado Boulder. Their insights follow.

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**Q: How do we define collaborative journalism, or how should we?**

**Murray:** So at its core, collaborative journalism can be defined as two journalism entities working together to produce a piece of journalistic content. It is organizations that are not related to each other i.e. not owned by the same companies that are working together in pursuit of something of journalistic value. But more and more we are running across those that have more partners than just news organizations and those often are the ones that can be the most impactful, when you have a few news orgs, a library, a university, etc. That can go a lot further.

**Q: What are the benefits of collaboration and why is it important in today's media landscape?**

**Ferrucci:** It's a matter of resources. Newsrooms, even in just 20 years have shrunk considerably. So the amount of time that people can work on real investigative, not necessarily watchdog, but real resource-heavy journalism is not as easy and so therefore, when places can collaborate, it not only helps fray the cost of not just money, but time, and people. It also helps, I would argue, with a diversity of viewpoint. A lot of non-legacy newsrooms collaborate a ton. What that collaboration means is different in different places. Digitally-native news entities are more likely to collaborate because their model isn't as entrenched in an old model like a legacy newsroom, whose whole model is for profit, and advertising driven. We can say "Oh, well why don't you change things up a bit?" but it's not that easy because everything they do is essentially built around those structures from the 1930s.

**Maestas:** As communities and funders look for ways to rebuild and strengthen local news, helping [journalists] understand that collaboration helps with diversity and equitable coverage, it helps them be more inclusive in their coverage of a specific topic. They're able to deepen their relationships with people in the local media, but they're also deepening their relationships with their audiences in the community and helping with change in their communities. That's not to say that collaborations need to be advocacy. It's not advocacy journalism. But when it comes to solutions journalism, working on collaborative solutions journalism is telling the whole story. So when you have those shared values of wanting to strengthen your journalism by being collaborative, that increases trust with the communities in the media organizations. And it helps do journalism that might not be done because of lack of resources. So if you pull your resources you can do more honestly.

**Q: In the college journalism classroom where we also teach breaking news and scoops and being first, is collaboration more important than competition?**

**Murray:** I don't think competition is something I would ever teach. I just think it's not the way that the information ecosystem works today. It's just not how people consume information. What we see is that many journalists in the United States still have this mindset that their competition is other professional journalists. And that's just patently false. It's just not the way the world works. And so that's an outdated mindset. On a national level, is competition important to motivate journalists to want to get something first or get something better, sure. I would give you that. Competition can be a healthy motivating factor for some journalists, but the vast majority of journalists in this country are not national reporters. They're local reporters. I'd be hard pressed to be convinced that journalists must be motivated by fear of missing out, to want to serve their communities' information needs. There are many other motivators for it to produce good work.

The way the information ecosystem works today, is that consumers have so many choices, and so many platforms to get information. Your motivation should be, who is your audience? What are you trying to provide to them? What are the information needs in the community you're trying to serve? And serving those needs as best as you can, should be the ultimate motivating factor for every journalist in this country. Often what you're competing against is for attention and also against misinformation. And so I envision courses where you're taught breaking news, and how to cover something that's breaking from the perspective of community information needs, and best serving and best getting information out on whatever platforms that you need to but also, there's elements of collaboration that can be pulled through all sorts of different courses.

**Maestas:** I think competition is good and needs to exist where there are multiple news outlets, to an extent. Our theory is not that the whole industry needs to collaborate on everything all the time, but that where there are opportunities about an issue that's really affecting the community. Our belief is that there's strength in numbers, which is cliché, but it's true because you are able to have collective work, that's not duplicated. In a time when almost every newsroom is struggling with resources, from finances to person power, to the staffing issues. Is it in the best interest

of the practices of these newsrooms to have five people doing the same story? When resources are shrinking, and by working together, you're able to do deeper work, you're able to reach audiences that no single entity can reach across all audiences.

It's really as basic as we believe that it strengthens the local media ecosystem when you do deeper work that's not about the horse race every day. And that's not to say that competition can't exist in some form or fashion. But when it comes to collaborations which generally work best when there is a more narrow scope, we're saying it helps for challenges, and for solutions journalism, responses to social problems. There's the strength in numbers to do deeper, more meaningful, more engaging work when you're able to put all of your resources together, maximize your time and resources and move beyond status quo journalism.

**Q: It sounds like it's not so much a matter of how to teach collaborative journalism, as much as it is, how do we teach students to be collaborative regardless of the style of journalism they practice. So what can journalism schools do to incorporate collaboration into their classrooms or even their curriculum?**

**Murray:** A lot of the academic literature has focused on case studies and looking at different models and dissecting how projects are done. And that's probably what I would teach, is showing some examples to students about how news organizations can pair up and work together to produce impact and talking about some of the skills that are needed to work collaboratively with other professionals. Things like trust, shared decision making, talking about working on stories together, how you might divide up work, editing procedures, ethical concerns, thinking about ownership of work, project management. We need to get them to think through that because that's usually where that's where the rubber meets the road.

I've seen many examples of journalists who have an idea of a project they want to tackle together, and it could produce some really amazing journalism, but then they don't know how to work together and don't trust each other. They have always been taught to do things like, not share sources. And, and that's where collaborations often fall apart. And so if you have people who are trained from the beginning, that "No, this is a normal part of your work, and here are some things that you should keep in mind and consider as you go out to the professional world you're going to run into these issues" that can make a big difference.



**Ferrucci:** Every university makes departments go through, like an accreditation sort of every six or seven years, so you're intentionally thinking about your curriculum, or forced to reevaluate it. Almost every department of journalism that I've ever heard of including our own college, has their own advisory boards that are mixed with alums and people in the industry and things of that sort. So you're always in constant conversation with them to try to make the classroom better reflect what a newsroom looks like.

I think when we romanticize journalism, we think of the dogged reporter going out there and you know, going through obstacles to get a big story, which is obviously what happens a lot, but when it comes to what we do in terms of classrooms, often we would just, here's the story assignment, go get us a story then come back. But journalism doesn't work that way. Classrooms could teach [collaboration] just in general, because the classroom itself can be a kind of collaborative laboratory. If you're making them just do stuff, pass it in and giving them feedback, well that's great, but you could actually take those things and take stories that people do and actually critique them together and make it something where everybody is kind of involved in pitches together. You can make it so it's an actual, collaborative environment, even if they're working on their own work.

Collaborative journalism is less about competing and more about serving your audience. Yes, breaking news still happens and being first can be beneficial, but in a world of shrinking resources, where news consumers are inundated with information at all hours of the day, multiple different news outlets delivering the same surface level information does not effectively serve their community in the long run. And serving our communities with factual, well sourced information, is what we need to teach our students, the journalists of tomorrow, how to do.

If you're interested in learning more about how to help students collaborate, or see what sorts of collaboratives are currently in progress, check out <https://collaborativejournalism.org/> which features best practices as well as tools to help facilitate collaboration in the classroom and newsroom. You can also visit the <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/storytracker> and filter for "Cultivating Collaborations" as a critical success factor.

# David Bowes - P-D correspondent who circled the globe with LBJ - dies

By Ted Gest

The first assignment that David Bowes got when he joined the St. Louis Post-Dispatch 61 years ago was to cover a coroner's inquest for Maye Trainor, the city's premier madam and hostess to Babe Ruth when Ruth's New York Yankees were in town.

In the years that followed he interviewed Dr. William Masters, the sex researcher, reported from a Florida nudist colony as part of cross-country examination of cultural change, traveled around the globe with President Lyndon B. Johnson and was tear-gassed at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Bowes died May 13 at 88. After his years with the Post-Dispatch, he was a vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers, an associate editor of the Cincinnati Post, and a contributor to Mid-Atlantic regional magazines.

Bowes, a St. Louis native, earned degrees from the University of Virginia and University of Michigan journalism program. After working in a postgraduate internship administered by Michigan and the Post-Dispatch, he joined the newspaper as a reporter in 1961, moving to writing editorials in 1967 and serving as a Washington correspondent from 1967 to 1970.

He didn't always find that his editors wanted to run more risque stories.

Bowes arranged for a rare conversation with Dr. Masters, the acclaimed sex researcher who had been working under cover in the conservative city. When the doctor's first book was published, the Post-Dispatch declined to acknowledge or review it on grounds that "some readers might be offended," according to an obituary prepared by his family.

On another occasion, Bowes filed a story from a Florida nudist colony. Bowes had been sent coast to coast to measure cultural change; the headline he chose, given Oh! Calcutta's acclaimed run on Broadway, was "Nudism vs. Nudity." The story was spiked despite its scholarly context.

Bowes won the Con Lee Kelliher award for news reporting from the St. Louis chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, a professional journalism society. By then he was the youngest member of the paper's editorial board, where he wrote about topics including arms control and disarmament, the seasons of weather, continental Africa, science and medicine, literature, merchant shipping, the Mississippi River lock system and Southern Illinois politics.

From Washington, Bowes covered President Lyndon B. Johnson's five-day circumnavigation of the world. He was tear gassed at the Democratic National Convention where he reported to Marquis Childs, syndicated Washington correspondent for the paper.

Bowes was a specialist in urban affairs journalism, he was cited by the Scripps Howard Foundation for "outstanding editorials that produced results" by saving an historic Cincinnati hillside neighborhood from demolition for an interstate highway.

The American Political Science Association recognized him in 1970 for 60 essays written while roving nationally; their insights informed his commentary on city planning, urban design and historic preservation.

He is survived by his wife, psychologist Rosemary Tofalo Bowes, of Washington, D.C.; three children from his first marriage, to Judith Gregory, and two grandsons.



Photo courtesy of family

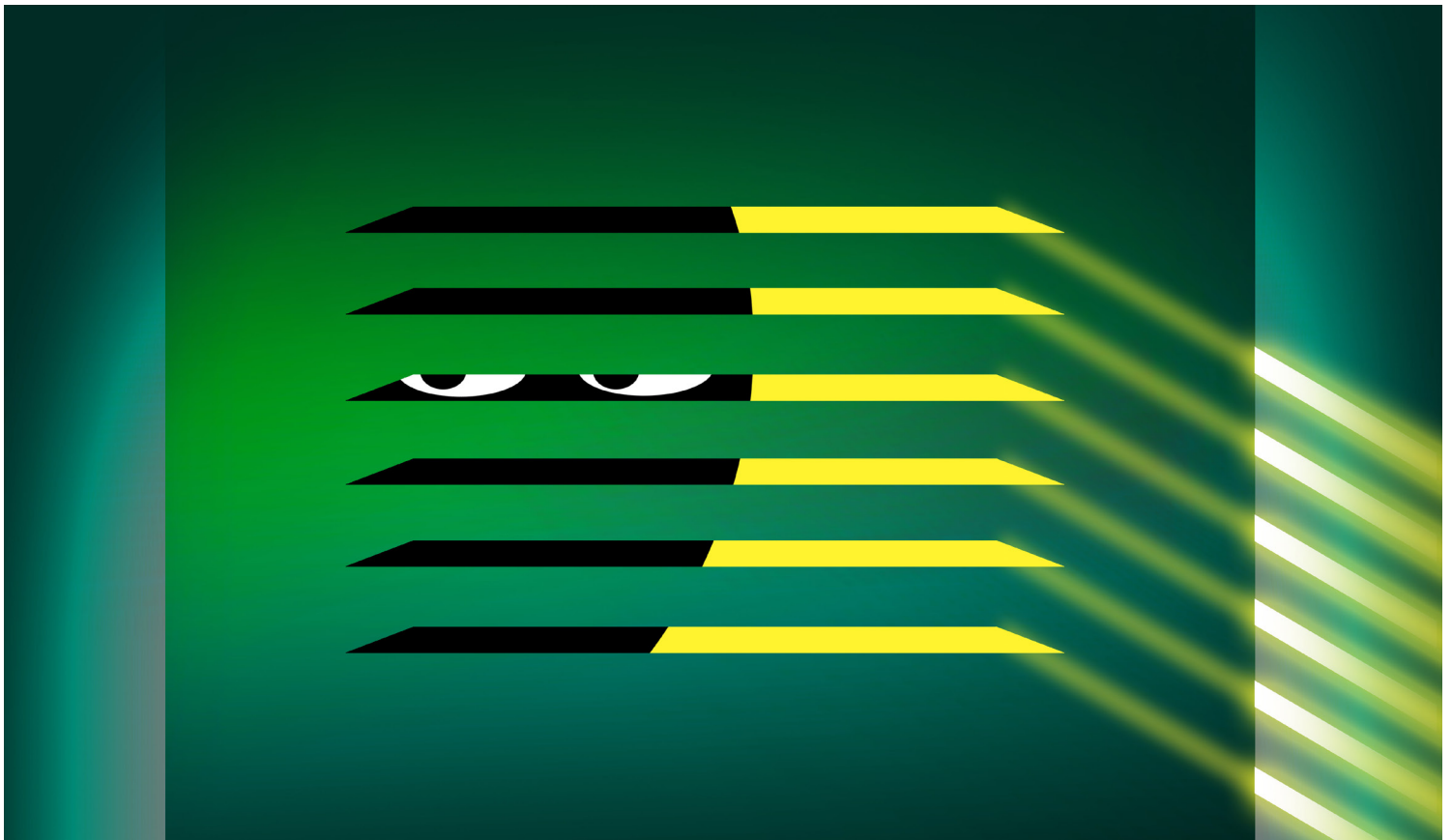


Illustration by Steve Edwards

# St. Louis start-up that funds news sites is financing and profiting from the alt-right

by Paul Wagman

A much-heralded Washington Avenue startup led by some of the top names in St. Louis tech and venture capital is far more extensively tied to the alt-right than previously reported..

Last spring the Gateway Journalism Review reported that LockerDome, now known as Decide Technologies, had maintained a long business relationship with the Gateway Pundit, a notorious, St. Louis-based purveyor of lies and conspiracy theories. At the time, the GJR also noted that Decide was working with other hard-right sites, and identified five of them.

But an in-depth review shows that the connections run much deeper. Through its business partnerships, Decide is helping to finance dozens of alt-right sites, while at the same time making money off of them. Among these sites are several that, like the Gateway Pundit, are among the most notorious in the alt-right ecosphere. One online advertising expert has found Decide advertising on more than 100 alt-right sites.

The sites cover the spectrum of right-wing passions and fantasies, ranging from election fraud to Covid-denial, from alleged Pelosi-family depravity to Donald Trump-

reverence, from climate change-denial to passion for guns. Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, and St. Louis's own Jim Hoft (aka the Gateway Pundit) — all have been given a platform by sites working with Decide.

"LockerDome's partnerships with disinformation outlets mean that the company helps fund and at the same time profit from organizations that are undermining American democracy," said Nandini Jammi, a co-founder of the Check My Ads Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog over the digital advertising industry.

The examination this summer also showed:

- LockerDome, by its own account, has benefited from a close, multi-faceted relationship with Washington University in St. Louis. About one-fifth of its employees have degrees from Wash U and Cliff Holekamp, until recently the head of the entrepreneurship program at Washington University's Olin School of Business, is an investor and board member.
- Missouri taxpayers provided modest subsidies to LockerDome's operations

in 2019 and 2020, as the company benefited from the state's Missouri Works program.

- Some of the nation's wealthiest individuals and families — including some whose politics could not be more opposed to that of the alt-right — have a sliver of an ownership stake in the company. There is little likelihood that these individuals and families are aware of the stake, however, because of its small size.

Officers and board members of LockerDome did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

## Specific Websites

The GJR examined a wide range of alt-right websites in search of digital ads that could be traced to Decide. Here is a sampling of sites where such ads were seen, often in abundance:

**Rumble.com**, which hosts Bannon's War Room, the daily podcast by Donald Trump's strategist and adviser Steve Bannon. Bannon was recently found guilty of contempt of Congress for refusing to respond to a subpoena by the House



Committee investigating the January 6 Attack on the Capitol.

**American Thinker.com**, which on June 6 ran a story called "How the COVID Vaccines Kill," and which Website IQ ranks as the 10th most popular fake news and conspiracy site in the United States and the United Kingdom.

**The Federalist.com**, which the Center for Countering Digital Hate reported in 2021 was one of the "toxic ten" publishers" responsible for nearly 70 percent of Facebook-user interactions with content that denied climate change. (There is no connection between this site and the Federalist Society.) LockerDome ads were also seen on another of the "toxic ten" sites and LockerDome claims to have a partnership with two more — four in all.

**Bigleaguempolitics.com**, which in October 2020 warned: "It doesn't appear that the swamp can be drained at the ballot box... patriots [must] rise up and defend justice quickly."

**LifeZette.com**, which in 2016 suggested that voting machines might be rigged because of links to a company owned by George Soros, the all-purpose bogeyman of the right. On July 25 it reported "Soros Bought Los Angeles DA Thinks Gun Control Stops Crime."

**Rightwing.org**, which recently ran a defense of the theory that white Americans are being replaced by immigrants of darker skin.

**Gunpowder Magazine.com**, which in 2020 reported: While "the mainstream media would have you believe that America has a problem with rifles" and "an epidemic of gun violence," the reality is "Twice as Many People (are) Killed with Hands, Fists, Hammers, Clubs than Rifles."

**Patriot Party Press.com**, which recently reported "Religious Leaders Assure Us that Jesus Christ Lives Through Donald Trump," below ads from Decide about blood pressure treatments.

**Patriotalerts.com**, which on August 5 reported (next to a raft of ads from Decide) that church and state were not meant to be separated in America. Rather, "The separation of church and state was to keep the state out of the church, not the church out of the state."

**Political Cowboy.com**, the website of Chad Prather, whose tweets advocate "Texas secede from the socialism that's coming."

**And World Net Daily**, or WND.com, which gained notoriety for promoting the theory that Barack Obama was not born in America, and which the Southern Poverty Law Center has accused of "peddling white nationalism." Above ads from Decide, WND reported this past June 27, "Elites finally reveal their #1 enemy: Christians."

This list, however, just scratches the surface.

A report posted by Decide itself lists dozens of disinformation sites with which it works. The report — at <https://decide.co/sellers.json> — is a list of the publishers and intermediaries with whom Decide has approved an account. In other words, these publishers and intermediaries have been cleared by Decide to receive its advertising bids — and when those bids succeed, advertising — on their domains.

The report's list is not complete, however. Decide ads can be found on numerous disinformation sites — including some that are listed above — that are not found on the "sellers.json" list. Jonathan Allen, publisher and editor of Entrepreneur Quarterly, which covers the St. Louis tech scene and which has also reported on LockerDome's alt-right connections, said he had personally found Decide advertising on 110 alt-right sites before he simply stopped counting.

## The Gateway Pundit and Mainstream Media

Until recently, another site where LockerDome ads were readily visible was [thegatewaypundit.com](http://thegatewaypundit.com), owned by St. Louisan Jim Hoft.

Hoft, who was the subject of a GJR profile in 2021, currently faces a defamation suit in the Circuit Court in St. Louis from Wandrea "Shaye" Moss and her mother Ruby Freeman, two Georgia poll workers who served as witnesses in the Hearings by the House Select Committee Investigating the January 6 attack on the Capitol. In a story under his byline on Dec. 8, 2021, Hoft accused the two women of being "crooked" operatives who counted "illegal ballots from a suitcase stashed under a table!" Fifteen days later, he wrote that his site had been "the first to identify the women in the late-night ballot-counting video." A state investigation refuted the allegations, but the women nevertheless faced months of harassment, including death threats, and Freeman went into hiding.

Meanwhile, Hoft faces another defamation suit in the U.S. District Court in Denver, where Eric Coomer, the former security chief for Dominion Voting Systems, sued him for alleging he was, among other things, "an unhinged Trump hater and Antifa supporter" who would ensure that Trump would lose the election. Coomer also said he had endured death threats and had had to go into hiding. In a deposition for this case, taken Sept. 17, 2021, Hoft acknowledged that he had no evidence for his accusations and did not seek comment from Coomer or his employer before making them.

LockerDome appears to have done business with the Gateway Pundit since at least 2017, and to have continued at least through earlier this year. Decide ads, which were all over [thegatewaypundit.com](http://thegatewaypundit.com) last winter, vanished from the site late in the first

quarter of this year, and Webtechsurvey, which monitors technology use by websites, recently began listing Gateway Pundit as no longer using LockerDome.

Whether this change is related to the fact that questions about LockerDome's relationship with Gateway Pundit were being raised by two news organizations — first Reuters and then the Gateway Journalism Review — is unknown, because LockerDome wouldn't comment.

In any case, Decide may still be working with the Gateway Pundit through an intermediary, Jammi said. The arrangement would enable LockerDome to obscure its role by simply serving its ads through the intermediary, she said.

Decide also serves ads to other kinds of sites, including many that are apolitical and deal with subjects such as investing and health. And on its sellers.json list it claims to have relationships with several — the GJR found at least five — that are overtly hostile to right-wing politics. The latter include, for example, [dailysoundandfury.com](http://dailysoundandfury.com), where Decide ads were visible August 25, and [The Proud Liberal.com](http://TheProudLiberal.com), where no Decides were seen. The company has relationships as well with several respected news organizations, including [ncronline.com](http://ncronline.com), the website of the liberal National Catholic Reporter; Euclid Media Group, owner of the Riverfront Times; Lee Enterprises, the owner of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; and CNN.com. It is names like these that Decide streams across the bottom of its website as examples of its publisher relationships. The mere fact, however, that Decide has been approved by these organizations as an ad vendor doesn't mean that Decide actually serves ads, and none were spotted on Lee's or CNN's digital sites.

Regardless, politically oriented websites appear to be one of the largest single area of concentration for the company's business. And among these politics-oriented customers, right-wing disinformation sites are overwhelmingly dominant.

## Decide's Business

Decide is based at 1314 Washington Avenue. The company now has nearly 90 employees, according to its LinkedIn page, of whom 44 live in the St. Louis area. Many employees work remotely, and the company earlier this year opened a satellite office in Austin. That was shortly after it changed its name from LockerDome in a rebranding that it said better reflects its technology's ability to use machine learning and data to help advertisers and publishers determine when to place advertisements.

Decide operates an advertising platform for "brands" — the advertisers — and digital publications — known as publishers. Google and Facebook dominate this business, but

Continued on next page

its participants number in the thousands. Webtechsurvey places Decide 116th in market position. That share was enough to enable Decide to report 2021 revenues of more than \$32 million.

The basic role Decide plays is that of middleman, or market maker. It provides advertisements – “serves” them, in the industry jargon – to publishers from its network of advertisers. Money flows from the advertisers to the publishers with Decide getting a cut – a commission, essentially. That is true whether Decide serves the ad directly itself or indirectly through an intermediary in what is often a highly complex supply chain. How much money flows depends in part on how many “impressions” the ad receives – i.e. the number of times the publisher’s page is loaded and therefore displays the ad – or how many times visitors actually click on the ad – or both.

All of this is much more complex than it sounds. Most of the work is done by computers, not human beings, so ad selection and pricing are done automatically and in the blink of an eye.

Decide also places ads on sites through another channel. Instead of acting as a middleman, it places ads on some sites directly by embedding a small piece of its software – called a “widget” or “iframe” – in the site’s code. Decide pays the owner of the site for this widget, likely according to a formula that reflects the number of total visitors, said Zach Edwards, a digital advertising expert who is also on the board of Check My Ads. Sites that Decide serves through this “back-door” channel do not have to be publicly disclosed on the sellers. json file, he said.

No matter which channel is used, the upshot is that advertising networks like Decide are the parties that bring the publishers their revenue. They “monetize” the business. The pledge Decide makes on its LinkedIn page is: “Better returns for advertisers and better monetization for publishers.”

Christo Wilson is an associate professor of computer science at Northeastern University in Boston who has studied the advertising network industry. “Without advertising networks,” he said in an interview, “many or most of the disinformation sites they serve would wither and die.”

But with them, they can gush riches. “The misinformation industry generates about \$2.6 billion in estimated advertising revenue that is automatically served to websites by programmatic advertising platforms,” according to an August 2021 report by the media measurement company Comscore and NewsGuard, a journalistic watchdog. Most of that – \$1.6 billion – was spent in the United States. And while \$1.6 billion is not a lot in the context of all advertising

spending, its significance is magnified, industry observers say, by the fact that alt-right websites, unlike most legitimate news operations, have only minimal staff and equipment.

Consider Hoft. He wholly owns the Gateway Pundit and operates it out of his house here. He writes a substantial portion of it himself, with help from a handful of people who contribute their own brief articles. Yet Similar Web, a provider of web analytics, estimates his revenues at \$10-\$15 million a year. Hoft, who says he used to be a human resources consultant before his website started generating more money than his day-job, now lives at a prominent St. Louis address.

## A Dream List of Investors

Decide, then called LockerDome, was founded in 2008 by Gabe Lozano, a St. Louis native whose initial ambition was to build a social media site focused on children’s sports teams and leagues. By Lozano’s own account, however, the company got off to a slow start, and after repeated failures, the 30-year-old founder reportedly had to move back into his parents’ home.

In early 2012 his luck changed. The company announced an early-stage “angel” investment by a group that included Jim McKelvey, a St. Louisan who is the co-founder of Square, the mobile payment processing company, and of Cultivation Capital, a St. Louis-based venture capital company. McKelvey, who has been called “the face of St. Louis Tech” by the St. Louis Business Journal, is also the founder of LaunchCode, a widely praised initiative which provides free tech training and places its graduates in jobs. Joining McKelvey in the investment was Brian Matthews, also a co-founder of Cultivation Capital. McKelvey and Brian Matthews promptly joined LockerDome’s board.

In an email exchange, McKelvey told the GJR he still has his investment in the company, but that it is small, and that he had dropped off the board “several years ago,” His departure, he said, had nothing to do with the company’s embrace of alt-right sites; that, he indicated, came later. “This was all pre-Trump,” he wrote.

McKelvey added that he had been told once earlier, even before the GJR contacted him, that LockerDome had been working with alt-right sites. But “I don’t comment on politics as I’m on the Fed,” he wrote. He is a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Matthews, however, continues to serve on the Decide board. In addition, his wife, Carol Matthews, joined Decide as an employee in 2011, according to her LinkedIn page, and since 2016, has served as the company’s senior vice president operations.

Significant investments finally began

coming in 2013, when Cultivation Capital led a \$6 million round of “Series A” funding – early-stage venture capital. Joining Brian Matthews in leading that investment was Cliff Holekamp, another co-founder of Cultivation Capital who is also that firm’s managing director and general partner. Holekamp recently retired from his position as leader of the entrepreneurship program at Washington University in St. Louis, and now works out of Cultivation Capital’s office in Greenville, S.C., according to his LinkedIn page.

The Series A round was also notable for the visibility of some of its other participants. With its focus then on the sports world, Decide was able to attract funds from St. Louis Cardinals President Bill DeWitt III and other members of the Cardinals ownership group invested, along with some out-of-town sports figures.

In December 2014 came the company’s largest single investment – a \$10 million Series B round led by Cultivation Capital but that also apparently included Holekamp personally. This round also included an investment by the Washington, D.C.-based Revolution venture capital firm which was small in size – less than \$275,000, according to a Revolution spokesperson – but enormous in prestige.

The chairman and CEO of Revolution is Stephen Case, the co-founder and former CEO and chair of America Online. Revolution has three funds, one of which was created in 2017 and is called the Rise of the Rest Seed Fund. The LockerDome investment is now a portfolio holding of this fund. Among the investors in Rise of the Rest Seed Fund, according to this Revolution press release, are some of the top names in all of American business: Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon and owner of the Washington Post; members of the family of Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker; members of the Koch family; members of the Walton family of Wal-Mart fame; Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks; and more.

The Revolution spokesperson noted that at the time it made its investment, LockerDome was focused on sports. Asked to comment on LockerDome’s current operations, the spokesperson did not respond.

Regardless, by the end of 2014 LockerDome’s investors represented both the “A” team of St. Louis venture capitalists and a high-profile national fund that later attracted some of the richest people in the United States.

Whether the Cardinals’ ownership is still invested could not be learned; DeWitt’s office did not return a reporter’s phone calls. Revolution remains invested and indications are that the investments by Cultivation Capital, Mathews, and Holekamp are as well. Efforts to reach all of them failed; they did not respond to emails or, in the case of Matthews, to a detailed phone message.



## Fame, Pivots, and "Changing the World"

As LockerDome's fortunes rose, Lozano became a go-to man for local media seeking insight into St. Louis tech. As early as 2013, he was able to pack the hall as a guest speaker to students at Washington University's Olin School of Business. According to a story in the Olin Blog, he described himself and his company during that appearance in terms that seemed both down-to-earth and romantic.

"You must have an insane passion for what you're doing and a 'don't die' attitude," the story quoted him as saying ... 'You get no sleep, no social life, and most days you feel like you were hit by a Mack Truck.' But, he added, 'I would do it all over again. It's been the most rewarding experience of my life.'"

The excitement around LockerDome built even more when Forbes, a national publication, published two major pieces in late 2013 and the first half of 2014 that described the "pivots," or strategic changes, it had made since its inception. In the first pivot, Forbes noted, the company had broadened its focus beyond children's sports to professional ones. In the second, dubbed "LockerDome 3.0," the company had expanded beyond sports. LockerDome's users, the second story reported, were now encouraged to "engage around both sports and non-sports topics, including entertainment, music, business, politics, fitness, men's style, gaming, and technology." The story then added:

"LockerDome is also gaining attention from top political publishers. The Daily Caller and National Review Online, for example, both use LockerDome's poll widget to ask questions about hot-button topics such as Edward Snowden and the turmoil surrounding the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

"If there's one audience that trumps sports fans in terms of passion, it's probably the political audience," Lozano says. 'The passion and engagement around political content stands up against any vertical we've experimented with in the digital media space.'"

Forbes didn't say so, but The Daily Caller is an online news and opinion site co-founded in 2010 by Tucker Carlson, who since then has become an uber popular host on Fox News. By the time Lozano was citing the passion of its readers, the publication had already been accused of multiple breaches of journalistic ethics and standards.

These facts seemed to escape comment, however. The buzz around Decide instead echoed the idealism that had characterized the tech industry nationally in its early years. "I'm not motivated by sports," Lozano said in a video interview published on the

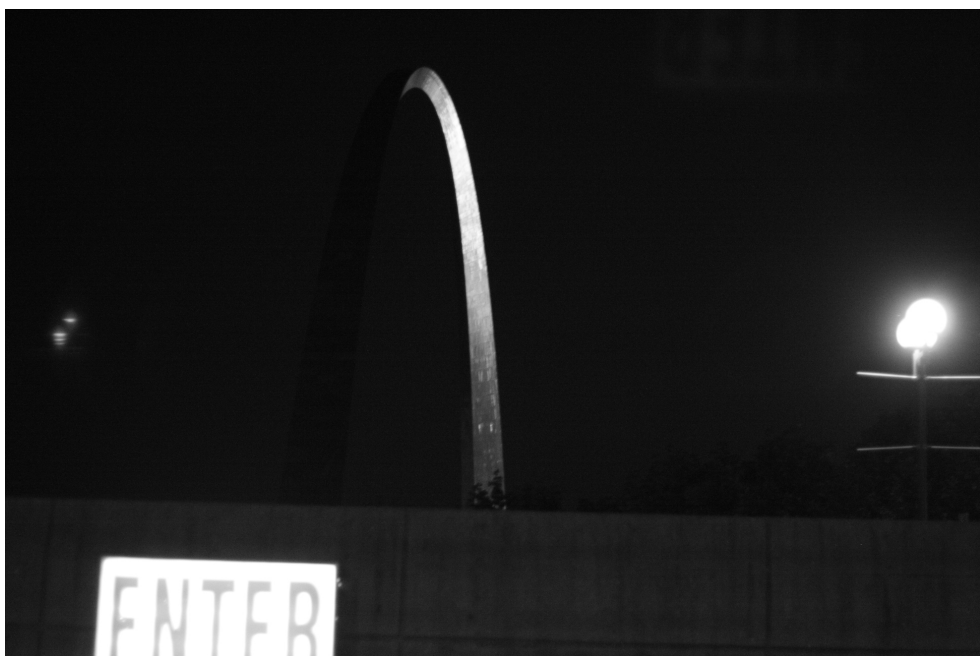


Photo by Matthew Black via Flickr

company's YouTube channel in August, 2015. "I'm motivated by changing the world."

In a separate interview, Lozano noted that when LockerDome was building its 3.0 incarnation, he and some employees worked 81 straight days without leaving the building. They slept in what the company called "LockerDorms."

"People want to positively impact the world and people around them and that to me is what drives us to sleep in the office for 81 days straight," Lozano said in the interview, which is posted on YouTube.

### State Aid

By the end of 2015, LockerDome was being described by St. Louis Magazine as "one of the fastest growing sports sites in the world" and the company was announcing plans for a multi-million dollar expansion and the hiring of up to 300 more people over the next five years. Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon scheduled a personal visit to LockerDome's offices to join Lozano in announcing the planned expansion and to tout St. Louis and Missouri as the home for such a success.

"... it's exciting to see companies like LockerDome continuing to grow here in the Show-Me State," Nixon said in a Dec. 23, 2015 press release from the Missouri Department of Economic Development. "This significant expansion by a homegrown startup is proof positive that the investments we've made through the Missouri Technology Corporation are creating jobs and accelerating growth all across our state."

Nixon's reference was to a \$200,000 investment the Missouri Technology Corporation (MTC) had made in LockerDome in 2012, an investment that facilitated the company's receipt of \$1 million from private

investors. The MTC sold its stake in 2013 for twice what it had invested, the press release said, but it noted that added that more financial might be in the offing.

"Missouri has offered (LockerDome) a strategic economic incentive package that the company can receive if it meets certain job creation criteria," the release said. "The City of St. Louis as well as the St. Louis Development Corporation also assisted the company with its expansion."

LockerDome was in line to get \$3.7 million in state tax breaks from the Missouri Works Program if it carried through on its plans, the DED said. In fact, however, the 200 to 300 new jobs never materialized. The company therefore received just \$40,115 in assistance, a DED spokesperson said in an email, and is no longer enrolled in the program.

Nonetheless, the taxpayers of Missouri subsidized the company by \$40,115 while the company helped monetize disinformation.

A spokeswoman for the St. Louis Development Corporation said that neither the SLDC nor the city had ever provided Decide with financial assistance. She could not account for why the press release suggested otherwise. It's possible the state, which issued the release announcing the city's and SLDC's assistance, was just trying to be gracious to the host city, one observer speculated.

### Where the Money Is

In any case, it is in some respects not surprising that Decide has found a niche in the alt-right. It's where the money is.

In 2017 a study by the Campaign for Accountability looked at a sample of 1,255 partisan news sites that partner with Google on advertising. It found that right-wing content publishers — many of them outright disinformation sites — accounted



for a disproportionately high 68 percent of Google's revenue from the sample, while left-wing sites accounted for only an estimated 4 percent. And the very top revenue-generators for Google were the hyper-partisan ones, the report said. One of those top generators was WND, with which Decide partners still today.

The reason the right-wing disinformation sites spew money for their ad networks, the Campaign for Accountability said, is simple: they draw the most traffic – and therefore the most impressions and clicks. The Gateway Pundit, for example, drew 26.6 million visits on desktop and mobile in May, 2022, according to Similarweb, a New York-based provider of digital intelligence. In the same time period, stltoday.com, the site of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, drew 4.8 million. Chicagotribune.com drew 11.9 million.

Google routinely severs disinformation sites – including, last year, the Gateway Pundit – from its ad network. But its efforts are seen as half-hearted by its critics, who say it is reluctant to kill the golden goose. “Google is the biggest funder of disinformation in the world,” Jammi said.

And the whole digital advertising industry is marked by a lack of transparency that makes it difficult even for advertisers to know where their ads are getting published, let alone for anyone to identify all the links in the supply chain between an advertiser and a publisher, observers say.

“Advertising on misinformation is an industry-wide problem,” NewsGuard reported in July. Even in the midst of the House Select Committee's investigation into the events of Jan. 6, it noted, “business is still booming for the misinformation websites that spread false claims about election fraud in the 2020 election, according to a new analysis of ad placements on (these) websites ...”

Christo said flatly: “I find the whole online advertising business to be deeply unethical and harmful.”

But even within this industry, Decide is a “bottom-feeder,” Christo said.

One reason is the ads themselves. Some are politically focused and are attempts at ferreting out personal data for potential future targeting. Many Decide ads, for example, are framed as political survey questions: One running August 15 on BigLeaguePolitics.com, for example, showed photos of Presidents Biden and Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris and asked, “Do you want Trump to be president again?” To submit a vote – yes, no, or I'm not sure – the reader had to provide his or her full name, email address and zip code. The fine print showed that the ad served by Decide was from WinRed, an online GOP fundraising platform.

Only one Decide ad on the BigLeaguePolitics site that day was political. All the others were non-political and mainly

for miracle cures – weight loss, tinnitus, erectile dysfunction, and sciatica. A bottle of pills for the latter costs \$69. Other ads were for get-rich-quick schemes.

One Decide ad led – halfway literally – to a promotion for snake oil. The ad is for “Exodus Effect,” an “Anointed Oil” that does everything from improving digestion to relieving inflammation to enhancing “brain functioning” and “blood circulation” – not to mention providing an “Antidote to Old Age.” The product is promoted with a video that promises to “Blow Your Mind” if you are one who “Believes in God.”

Writing in The New York Times, Farhad Manjoo in August noted the identical pattern with Alex Jones' website, which is also loaded with ads of this nature. Manjoo identified a “symbiotic relationship between bogus, unregulated health products and bogus political claims,” and asserted that Jones' conspiracy theories are best seen “as a marketing tool for his real products,” the supplements. The best way to attack disinformation, he suggested, may be to better police the market for alternative health products.

More prestigious brands might face blowback if ads for their products showed up on alt-right sites, observers noted. But the advertisers behind miracle cures and get-rich-quick schemes might actually want their ads placed on such sites, because the target markets for both – the buyers of such products and the consumer of alt-right news – are so similar.

## A Code of Conduct

Some companies in the digital advertising industry, Google included, have announced guidelines to keep them from monetizing sites that promote hate, racism, and even disinformation. But Google has been accused of ignoring its own guidelines, and it would appear that Decide may be following the same pattern.

On its website, Decide lists its “Customer Content Standards,” which apply to both its advertisers and publishers. Here is some of the specific language:

“Customer Content must not: Contain any material that is defamatory, obscene, indecent, abusive, offensive, harassing, violent, hateful, inflammatory, or otherwise objectionable.

“Promote, support, or incite (or be possibly capable of inciting) violence or unlawful acts, or incite individuals, groups, and/or entities which engage in violence or unlawful acts.

“Be likely to deceive any person.

“Promote or disseminate anything that qualifies as “fake news” or any information that is at high risk of being false.

“Cause annoyance, inconvenience, or needless anxiety or be likely to upset, embarrass, alarm, or annoy any other person.”

But above this list, Decide includes a huge caveat: “We are not responsible or liable to any third party for the content or accuracy of any Customer Content posted by you or any other user of the Service.”

In any case, it wouldn't be difficult for Decide to adhere to its Customer Content standards, Matt Skibinski, general manager at NewsGuard, said in an interview. Ad networks can simply exclude offending publishers from their networks, as Google has done with a handful of the most notorious.

But the incentives in the digital advertising industry are with expanding networks, not restricting them, he and Christo both noted. “There's a lot of intentional looking the other way in this industry,” Christo said. The networks want to be able to tell advertisers that they have an extensive inventory of publishers with whom they can serve their ads, and they want to be able to tell publishers they have an extensive inventory of ads they can serve.

Decide has shown a willingness to push the envelope in the past, Christo said. In a peer-reviewed study published in 2018, he and his co-authors called out LockerDome as one of just a few companies that had been using a bug in the popular Chrome browser to deliberately evade efforts by websites to block unwanted ads.

“This demonstrates that there are ad networks who were willing to exploit the ... (bug) ... to serve ads, and that unsurprisingly, these shady ad networks cater to shady advertisers,” the authors wrote.

The bug has since been fixed, but Edwards, of Check My Ads, said it appears that Decide is still operating “by its own rules with unclear quality standards, disinformation standards and technical standards.” Rather than following the standards Google has set for advertising platforms that collaborate with it, Decide is “attempting to build a runaround of Google and rewrite their own rules without telling anyone what those rules might be,” he said.

## The Future

After the premature death of his wife, Lozano felt the need for a change in scenery, and moved to Austin, Tex., where Decide now has a small office. That doesn't mean, however, that Decide can't continue to grow in St. Louis if its business model continues to work. St. Louis remains the company's home base.

In the opinion of critics like Jammi, however, companies like Decide shouldn't even exist.

“Millions of advertiser dollars are being sucked into these black holes that could be directly funding real local journalism,” she said. “That money could be so easily reallocated toward things that benefit our communities, if advertisers would only take more responsibility with their ad budgets.”



# Sally Defty: Heralded journalist and first woman executive city editor at PD

By Robert Duffy

Sally Bixby Defty, a heralded journalist known internationally for the depth and beauty of her writing and editing, as well as her ability to take on a variety of subjects, died Wednesday, June 29, in a nursing facility at Ticonderoga, NY., of the infirmities of age. She was 89 years old, just a month shy of her 90th birthday.

She lived most of her life in St. Louis, but had lived in Bolton Landing, NY, for 14 years where her family had long had a summer outpost. Her house there was designed by her son Matthew Defty, a Chicago architect.

She was a long time member of the staff of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and was the first woman to be named executive city editor at the P-D. She was highly regarded by her colleagues, and her resume of stories was extraordinary for variety, great style and readability and accuracy. She covered everything from a mass murderer's grisly graveyard to the doings of debutantes at St. Louis's annual society ingathering, the Veiled Prophet Ball.

Sarah Tuttle Bixby Defty was born and reared in St. Louis, Missouri. She graduated from John Burroughs School in St. Louis and from Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY.

She held a variety of jobs after graduation, and once was in the movies as body double for Jane Russell. She was proprietor of a popular restaurant in St. Louis called Sarah's. When times were tough, she and her sister, the late Lucy Bixby Bertelson, worked sorting mail at the downtown Post Office during the Christmas crunch.

But her true calling was journalism, which she pursued with vigor and enthusiasm at the Post-Dispatch. She began her career there as Women's Editor, then worked her way into the newsroom as a reporter, the first woman to have a desk amongst a population of men in white shirts, many of whom resented having their male bastion infiltrated by a woman. She proved her value quickly and was a respected member of the staff.

Borrowing from the lyrics of Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore," she, as a member of the highly peopled Butler and Bixby clans, is survived by cousins, nieces and nephews, whom she reckons up by the dozens; as well as her sons Matthew Defty of Chicago; and Stephen Defty of Berlin, Germany; and her daughter, Sarah Defty McCutcheon of Elkhart, Illinois; and five grandchildren and one great grandchild.

A memorial service was held Aug. 5 on Mohican Landing where Defty played as a child.



Sally Defty

Photo courtesy of Robert Duffy





Bob Adams interviews El Salvador's President Alvaro Magana in the Presidential Palace in 1982

## Remembering St. Louis Post-Dispatch journalist Bob Adams

By Robert L. Koenig

When former *Post-Dispatch* Washington bureau chief Bob Adams died in January, he was laid to rest quietly at his home town in Illinois. There was no memorial service in Washington or even an item in the St. Louis newspaper where he had been a stellar journalist for 27 years.

Former colleagues remember Adams, who died at age 80, as an tenacious reporter, an elegant and fast writer with a prodigious memory and a fierce dedication to national and international coverage by the *Post-Dispatch*. He won numerous awards and was among the St. Louis Journalism Review's founding board of directors.

"There was a purity to Bob as a journalist

that I may never have seen elsewhere," said Bill Lambrecht, a fellow Illinoisan who worked under Adams in Washington and later led the *Post-Dispatch* bureau. "Anybody who ever worked with Bob was a better reporter ever after."

Adams' longtime partner, poet and editor Laurie Stroblas, said he died in a Baltimore hospital on January 12 after a lengthy battle with cancer. She said he was buried in the Adams family plot in his home town of Geneseo, with no formal service because of Covid-19 restrictions. Adams is survived by a brother, Richard, of Champaign, IL. Stroblas said Adams, who had been an editor for the League of Women Voters and was active

in the Gridiron Club in Washington, was working on a memoir at the time of his death.

It was a quiet ending to an outstanding career. Adams, a graduate of the University of Illinois, got his first taste of journalism as news editor of the *Daily Illini*. He joined the *Post-Dispatch* as a City Desk reporter in 1966 after working part-time at the *Champaign-Urbana Courier*. In St. Louis, Adams distinguished himself covering civil rights and poverty issues.

Promoted to the Washington Bureau in 1972, Adams covered aspects of the Watergate scandal, the FBI and CIA investigations in 1975, and the presidential





campaigns of 1976, 1980, and 1984. In the mid-70s, Adams won an award from the National Civil Service League for exposing widespread political patronage involving the U.S. Civil Service Commission and other agencies.

Among Adams' numerous foreign assignments were trips to the Middle East, Central America, Mexico, and President Reagan's visit to Europe in 1984. J.B. Forbes, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer who accompanied Adams on two Post-Dispatch reporting trips to Central America in the 1980s, remembers Adams as an extremely well-prepared and tenacious interviewer.

"If he wasn't satisfied with an answer, he would ask it again in a slightly different way. He wanted real answers from politicians and not the usual political speech," Forbes said. Adams and Forbes won an award from the Overseas Press Club for their coverage of turmoil in Central America.

Jon Sawyer, who succeeded Adams in

1993 and led the bureau until 2005, credited Adams for much of the bureau's success during the decade of his leadership. Adams had replaced Thomas W. Ottenad as bureau chief in 1983 at a time of generational change that brought aggressive young reporters to the bureau who won major journalism prizes in the late 80s and early 90s. At its height, in 1990, the bureau had a staff of eight journalists.

"Those of us in the 1980s generation spent our careers hearing about the so-called 'golden era' that had come just before," said Sawyer. "But for my money our team from those years ... was every bit the equal of the predecessors we had so admired."

Sawyer, now executive director of the Pulitzer Center in Washington, D.C., said Adams set a stellar example with his international and political reporting: "He wrote fast, he wrote clean, and he wrote elegant, with memorable interviews and a clear command of often complicated history and context."

Carl P. Luebsdorf, who was bureau chief of the *Dallas Morning News* when Adams led the *Post-Dispatch* bureau, said Adams "was very different from many Washington reporters who become bureau chiefs in that his passion was serious investigative stories, rather than the nitty gritty of campaigns and politics. That is evident from the many journalism awards he won."

Kathy Best, a former *Post-Dispatch* Washington correspondent who later became editor of the *Seattle Times*, praised Adams' stellar reporting, writing, and his steadfast support for her and other young journalists. Best now directs the University of Maryland's Howard Center for Investigative Journalism.

"Although Bob was a slight man, his intellect was towering," Best said. "He could quote passages of historic speeches stretching back decades, cite key facts about foreign policy and defense spending from memory, recount the fine points of policy debates about scores of topics. And he could do that all quickly."

Lambrecht said Adams' deadline prowess recalled "what the legendary *New Yorker* writer A.J. Liebling once said of himself: *I can write faster than anybody who can write better than me and better than anybody who can write faster than me.*"

"He was a sight to behold, say, at a political convention," recalls Lambrecht. "As I pecked away aimlessly on something, Bob would already have blasted out 50 or 60 inches and set his sights on a hamburger."

Adams also prided himself as being a voice for the common man and woman. "My trademark is 'ordinary' people," he once wrote. "Workers, shoppers, campesinos, donkey cart drivers – all found voice in my stories. And, of course, the poor. People

in dirt floors and bamboo huts. Children playing in human waste. The teen-age mother holding a baby with matchstick arms and legs.... Always they're with me – this day, and all the tomorrows."

Best, who also comes from a small town in Illinois, said Geneseo's history "may have influenced Bob's passion for telling the stories of those left out or overlooked. It was a stop on the Underground Railroad and a town that deeply valued education."

Sawyer, Lambrecht, Best and other former Bureau journalists credited Adams unerring support for his reporters. "He loved enterprise, investigations, and taking down big shots who had abused the public's trust," recalled Sawyer. "And he was the constant champion of every one of us who worked with him."

Adams was also legendary at the newspaper for his colorful idiosyncrasies. "When the management of his apartment building announced that after 25 years it was replacing all of the ovens Bob balked," Sawyer recalled. "He had never used the oven, he said—and besides, it was where he kept his important papers."

Adams loved poetry. He could quote T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" on demand and his partner Strobilas, a poet herself, said he often wrote and recited poetry. Luebsdorf recalls that Adams, who was elected to the Gridiron Club in 1989, "enjoyed annual participation in Gridiron shows and joining the rest of us off-key participants in the Gridiron chorus."

Forbes recalls that Adams' "shorthand note taking was unreadable to me, but it worked for him. He would spend days doing interviews and then disappear into his hotel room for several more days writing."

While Adams had a good sense of humor, Forbes remembers, "he didn't like it when I took his picture when he was walking through the jungle wearing his trench coat."

Adams enjoyed meals at Washington's tony Hay-Adams Hotel, which young correspondents called the "Hay Bob Adams Hotel" after him. And he warned to any journalist who knew enough about Illinois to locate his home town.

Best said her knowledge of Geneseo helped smooth the way to a productive relationship with Adams. "Our shared backgrounds gave me the courage to pitch stories to Bob, and the confidence to keep pitching even when he shot down my bad ideas," she said.

"He was a wonderful journalist and an even better human being."

Aloysia Hamalainen, whose three-decade tenure as the Washington bureau's office manager started in 1976, said Adams was "the kindest and most generous" bureau chief to her. "After he retired, he stayed in touch and was a dear friend who was always upbeat and interested in my life."



## Democracy editor position at Associated Press should be model for all newsrooms

By Jackie Spinner



Photo by Thomas Hawk via Flickr

When the Associated Press announced this summer that it was creating a new position for a “democracy editor,” it tapped a long-time AP veteran and state government editor for the position. Tom Verdin, who is in Sacramento, now oversees coverage of stories about voting rights and election processes.

In making the decision, AP’s executive editor Julie Pace acknowledged that such topics were often covered by political and government journalists. “The challenge that a lot of news organizations are facing when it comes to covering democracy is that, yes, this is of course a national issue, a macro issue, but it’s playing out all across the country in very local ways,” Pace told CNN.

She pointed, in particular, to a standoff in a New Mexico over certifying local election results. One of the key figures in that dispute was a county commissioner who was just sentenced for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol.

AP’s move is a good one and should be replicated in every newsroom in America, including the smallest ones. (The Washington Post unveiled its own Democracy Desk earlier in the year.)

Far too many of our readers, as evidenced by the support the Jan. 6

insurrectionists still have, do not seem to understand how government works and why threats to it undermine the core of our democratic principles.

Half of Americans (49%) said it was accurate to say that arresting those who entered the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 to disrupt the certification of the presidential election violated the Constitution because they were exercising their constitutional right to petition the government for redress of grievances. An equal number (49%) said the statement was inaccurate, and arresting those who entered the capitol did not violate the Constitution, according to the 2021 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey.

It certainly doesn’t help when politicians themselves spread misinformation about how government works. Or when partisanship so taints the conversation that it becomes difficult to hear each other. That misinformation then leads to distrust.

A late 2021 poll by Pew Research found that just a quarter of Americans had faith in their government, a striking and near historic low.

We need a new approach.

In addition to covering local school boards and local elections, we owe it to our

readers, and to ourselves as watchdogs of our democratic institutions, to explain better how the system works. In fact, we can and should do a better job of explaining to our readers what our role is in holding these institutions and processes accountable.

This doesn’t have to cost us money to add new staff to our newsrooms. We can follow the lead of the City Bureau in Chicago to deputize our readers to help us cover local government.

The Documenters Network has trained more than 1,600 people across four cities to attend and annotate government meetings. Part of the training involves teaching people how to document objectively, without a partisan agenda.

With their mobile devices, our readers can help live stream public meetings, provide multimedia reports and take notes. It will give them a bigger stake and provide us with partners in holding government accountable.

In Detroit, a network participant reported recently from the Board of Water Commissioners on an affordability plan. Another provided coverage of a City Council meeting where a new tax abatement was debated. In Cleveland, a citizen tweeted from a school board meeting in which members unanimously approved a ban on guns in schools.

With a slight reframing of our coverage and with new involvement from our civic-minded readers, we don’t have to wait for the national and bigger media outlets to find us when controversy erupts, as it did in New Mexico.

We need more “here is how it works” features, community forums, invitations to our readers, transparency.

We do not yet have the trust of the public back after the battering we took under the former president. One way we can rebuild that trust is by inviting people into the process, by taking away the mystery of how reporters do their jobs, how we cover government, how we watch.

Because the fact is that we are watching. We’ve always been watching.





Photo by Esther Vargas via Flickr

## Journalism educators need to up their game to stay relevant in their own changing industry

By Jackie Spinner

For a decade now, I have been teaching journalism without officially having left the business.

I keep one foot in journalism because I cannot imagine life without it, which sounds admittedly old-fashioned and also is something I cannot teach. Nor is it necessarily practical. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts journalism jobs will decline by 4.8% by 2030.

It's not all bad news. Although newsroom employment in the United States has dropped by 26% since 2008, most of the losses have been at traditional newspapers. Digital news jobs are growing, according to Pew Research. As I remind my photojournalism students, there are plenty of jobs for them in broadcast TV.

Nonetheless, this creates a dilemma for many of us who love journalism and teach journalism, especially with fewer students going to college. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the undergraduate student body dropped by nearly 1.4 million students or 9.4% during the pandemic. (This incidentally is a good story for local news organizations in communities with colleges or universities. Now, more than ever, is the time to hire a higher ed reporter or at least give the beat to an aspiring student journalist, something

I've recommended before in this space.)

In journalism education, we've had to rebrand what we do to some extent so that our students have marketable skills. We teach "storytelling" because non-profits and ad agencies and corporations need storytellers. We remind our students that being able to write concisely on deadline is a skill that many employers seek and not just newsrooms. Their web design and social media skills are also transferable.

We've had to make certain anyone who teaches journalism has crack digital skills. Maybe a decade ago, you could get away with being the digitally illiterate professor in the cardigan if you had mad writing skills and stellar publication credentials or multiple Emmys. (I have nothing against cardigans. I keep a sweater in my office and laugh at myself everytime I wear it.) But no more. Students, and rightfully so, simply do not want to learn from someone who cannot carry on a conversation about artificial intelligence and TikTok (the fastest growing platform for news.) This summer, as someone who oversees a photojournalism degree, I made certain to learn about photogrammetry and capturing in 3D.

Our academic institutions are slow to respond to changes in the industry. Academia itself doesn't encourage

experimentation. It demands that we be methodical and researched. It says it wants collaboration but allows individual departments to retain ownership of words and equipment and knowledge, which is the exact opposite of what is happening in the industry itself.

We worry about the future of the journalism industry when we really need to be worried about our own future as journalism educators.

This is not a moment to study where we should be headed. This is a moment to start walking, taking in as we go, responding as we need to, listening to the future readers and consumers of news in our classrooms, pivoting when we need to. We need to remind the leaders of our institutions of the importance of journalism, the role we play in our democracy. All of that matters. In fact, it matters now more than ever as the Jan. 6 insurrection at the US Capitol showed.

This is also not a call to abandon copy editing and ethics and the inverted pyramid. I still teach objectivity. This is a call not to cling so tightly to the way we did things that we don't help our students navigate a business in which many journalism professors themselves would have a hard time finding or staying employed.

That is the truth.





## OPINION

# Media need to talk about abortion as self-defense

by Susan Frelich Appleton

We need to talk about abortion as self-defense. Terminating a pregnancy as an act of self-defense has been missing from the public conversation, despite media saturation with all manner of news and viewpoints about abortion—from the

unprecedented leak of a draft Supreme Court opinion to the striking defeat of an anti-abortion ballot initiative in Kansas and the complications in miscarriage and cancer treatments that abortion bans impose.

Even if the present Supreme Court insists on making women invisible when discussing abortion, as it did in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, that hardly explains the media's inattention to abortion as self-defense.





Photo by Miki Jourdan via Flickr

The idea of abortion as self-defense has a long history, promoted over the years by philosophers and legal theorists. This understanding becomes especially salient today not only because the Supreme Court majority's opinion in *Dobbs* eliminated both liberty and gender equality as underpinnings of a constitutional right to abortion.

Arguments based on self-defense are also timely because they command so much support, exemplified by the Supreme Court's opinion just a day before *Dobbs* in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen*. In striking down New York's

license requirement for carrying a weapon in public, Justice Clarence Thomas's opinion for the majority ruled that the regulation prevented "law-abiding citizens with ordinary self-defense needs from exercising their right to keep and bear arms."

Self-defense provides the underlying rationale for popular stand-your-ground laws and the "castle doctrine," an affirmative defense that allows residents to use force against intruders, without the duty to retreat, on the theory that one's home is one's castle. In a recent high-profile case, Kyle Rittenhouse successfully invoked self-defense against homicide charges despite facts indicating that he faced danger only because of a situation of his own making.

Why shouldn't the same principles and values apply to abortion? If we have a right to protect our bodies from outside threats, why not from inside threats? If we can protect our brick and mortar homes from unwelcome intruders, why can't we similarly protect our flesh and blood homes—our bodies?

According to one implicit answer from the past, voluntarily engaging in heterosexual intercourse meant that one assumed the risk of pregnancy. In other words, to avoid an unwelcome embryo or fetus, one should simply avoid sex. (It would not suffice to avoid only unprotected sex because we should all know that birth control can fail.) Rape and incest exceptions to abortion bans rest on the understanding that sex in such settings is involuntary. Yet, rape and incest exceptions are evaporating in modern abortion bans.

Perhaps even more significantly, Kyle Rittenhouse's case reveals that the ability to have avoided the situation prompting the need for self-defense is not controlling. Accordingly, voluntarily engaging in sex should no more make self-defense unavailable than did Kyle Rittenhouse's voluntary trip to Kenosha with a semi-automatic AR 15 style rifle to intervene in protests in that city.

Although the *Dobbs* majority spent only a single paragraph rejecting the contention that abortion bans discriminate on the basis of sex, the argument merits a second look through the lens of self-defense, in both law and the public conversation. What does it mean in this era—when force in defense of oneself or one's home is not simply legitimate but celebrated—to single out pregnancy as a virtually across-the-board exception? It won't do to say that most bans allow abortions for "medical emergencies" or life-threatening pregnancies because self-defense is more capacious than that. Besides, the already shockingly high maternal mortality rate

in the United States, ever increasing for Black and Hispanic individuals, shows that pregnancy itself presents considerable physical danger.

A related argument, again long part of the literature, relies on the principle that our laws never require us to be good Samaritans for the sake of another. Even when law imposes a duty to help, that duty does not apply when the aid to be rendered poses a physical risk. I have a duty to rescue my child only when I can do so without danger to myself. Although my child will die unless I donate a kidney, I have no legal duty to do so because of the risk to me.

Yet, abortion bans treat pregnant bodies differently, signaling that they belong not to their "owners," but to the state, which can conscript such bodies in service to an embryo or fetus, notwithstanding the dangers. Without access to abortion, pregnancy requires exceptional self-sacrifice for the sake of another—exceptional because law imposes no similar obligations on anyone else.

Both the self-defense and the exceptional self-sacrifice arguments sidestep the question whether the fetus is a "person." Self-defense allows ending the life of a person, as does the failure to aid another in the face of danger to the rescuer.

Because the inability to invoke self-defense and exceptional self-sacrifice requirements follow a gender-based track, relying on all the traditional stereotypes, we should have a violation of equal protection. Ordinarily, that would require the state to show an "exceedingly persuasive justification . . . under a Constitution that requires the Government to respect the equal dignity and stature of its male and female citizens." Yet, even if we must accept the Supreme Court's refusal to see such inequality in *Dobbs*, so that the state's approach needs only to be rational, still the singular treatment of the pregnant body stands out as irrational. It ignores not only respect for what Bruen calls "ordinary self-defense needs" but also the longstanding legal privilege to choose whether to place our own safety above the lives of others, another form of self-defense.

Abortion as self-defense rests on compelling legal arguments, with considerable history, a respectable pedigree, and provocative connections to the contemporary ascent of gun rights for self-protection, stand-your-ground laws, and the castle doctrine. The media should help the public understand the gender discrimination inherent in excluding pregnancy from the legal rules of self-defense.



