***How do nonprofit news founders develop more robust business models that are sustainable while supporting quality independent journalism?***

It’s a question that I think about constantly. It keeps me up at night. It occupies my days and weekends. I started a nonprofit media company called Compiler Media, Inc., in the fall of 2023 with the goal of building an international tech policy outlet that would expand access to information, ideas, and developments shaping our digital future.

Compiler will focus on solutions and highlight the people and viewpoints that are often left out of mainstream press coverage of tech issues. We’re setting out to build a freely accessible platform for policy intelligence that leads to better decision-making about all the ways technology is affecting society.

It’s a great idea — but it’s a lofty one, too. It’s more necessary now than ever before. Still, turning Compiler into a sustainable and lasting business will be the biggest challenge of my career — especially given the current state of media, the fundraising landscape, and the ongoing challenges for anyone working in news to ensure that original reporting and facts remain the priority in the era of artificial intelligence.

I was fortunate enough to launch Compiler with $250,000 in seed funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation through its Cyber Initiative. That was a huge personal and professional accomplishment. It helped to begin building a new brand, establish an online presence, and begin to publish exceptional journalism. Hewlett’s funding helped turn Compiler into a 501c3 entity recognized as a public charity by the US Internal Revenue Service. This is an important milestone for any nonprofit news organization as well as a costly and time-consuming endeavor.

Nonprofit journalism has been enjoying a moment in the United States — and rightfully so. Not only is there a growing amount of money available to support independent media, but there’s also a strong support network. The Press Forward initiative in the US is investing over $500 million into local media. Several states have also established funds to support regional journalists and journalism efforts. The local news desert in the US is real, and hopefully, some of these efforts will help form more robust local news operations.

Still, the global media landscape remains in dire shape. Layoffs are common, and newsrooms are continuing to close. This is why, as the European nonprofit media consultant Adam Thomas wrote in NiemanLab, a publication about the news business published by Harvard University, “[r]ecognizing the necessity of innovative financial sustainability for long-term impact has always been the key to a truly independent media in my mind. It’s time for nonprofits to embrace profit.”

I couldn’t agree more. For independent media outlets to grow and thrive, founders, executives, and board members need to embrace for-profit mindsets. They’ll need to seek revenue from advertisers, partners, and sponsors and develop new and more profitable lines of business that can support quality journalism. Nonprofit newsrooms will need to think about developing their own versions of Wordle. Not literally, of course, but what can we develop that’ll provide the same kind of boost in revenue that this one incredible game gave The New York Times. Indeed, nonprofit founders should pursue more creative strategies to attract advertisers and new ways of building valuable membership offers. As Thomas says in his piece, which is largely aimed at European media nonprofits, “2024 will therefore see the quickened rise of innovative, unfamiliar, and even uncomfortable revenue streams for Europe’s nonprofits.”

Private foundations and individual donors will remain a valuable resource for nonprofit news. But foundations have shifting priorities and may soon back away from supporting journalism. I'm new to the nonprofit media space and fundraising, as well, and have already encountered a number of grantmakers who say their organizations are in a period of strategic rethink or undergoing top-to-bottom restructuring. There are larger, international endeavors that can fill the gap in some cases. The International Fund for Public Interest Media is a promising one.

The United Nations could also play a larger role in offering support for independent, nonpartisan media. It already supports training for journalists. A natural extension of this work would be to provide funding for many media institutions. Additionally, there’s an incredible lack of quality international journalism. A robust program inside the UN in service of supporting journalism around the world would be a tremendous asset not just for the growth of nonprofit and independent media, but for the survival of our democratic institutions globally. After all, the UN promised in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to “promote free and independent media around the world.”

***What can news organizations and civil society do to give reporters the technical skills necessary to investigate the programs, algorithms, and models that will change the world?***

Reporters are quick studies. When I was a journalist covering tech at The Boston Globe, I routinely turned in stories on tight deadlines about complex subjects: stolen encryption keys, nation-state hacks, data breaches. I learned on the fly and did it well enough to get the essentials into the paper the next day. Yes, I made my share of mistakes, but over time, I developed a deeper understanding of the topics I covered. However, I’ll admit that I was often out of my depth and too reliant on people inside tech companies to explain their software, illustrate how it worked, and describe how it was transformational (in a good way, of course), beneficial, and served the public good.

In most cases, I simply didn’t have the background or technical know-how to challenge their claims. I wasn’t able to examine the code, test their algorithms, or reverse engineer their products. Sure, I consulted sources and talked to experts, but tech companies had the upper hand. They had the resources and well-paid PR teams to shape the stories and manipulate the news cycle. Even if I didn’t write the story they wanted, another journalist would.

That was 20 years ago. Today, the stakes are much higher. We’re living in a moment of rapid technological change, witnessing the profound effects of a generation raised on social media, in front of screens, and manipulated by misinformation and disinformation. We see how technology affects democracies around the world, how online lies shape new political movements, and how anti-Western governments manipulate the internet to undermine democracies. Apply AI to these concerns, and the problems become exponentially worse.

It's so concerning that the Center for AI Safety said in May 2023 that “[m]itigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks, such as pandemics and nuclear war.” Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen wrote in 2011 that “software is eating the world.” Well, in 2024, there’s nothing left on the plate. Technology is *the story* of the moment and will define everything from this point forward.

Yet most journalists remain unequipped to hold tech companies accountable, challenge their narratives, and push back against multibillion-dollar campaigns to control media narratives. By and large, the media is lapping up what tech companies dispense. Collectively, we’re still too obsessed with the latest gadgets, apps, and innovations. The best example of this kind of glowing coverage is to take a look at what gets written during and after any of Apple’s Worldwide Developers Conference.

We need more accountability journalism focused on the global computer industry. That’s what’s needed to have a robust and informed debate on the role of technology – especially artificial intelligence – in society. Journalists need to gain the advantage. They need to look at these developments more critically and have the training and tools to truly investigate the software that will inevitably shape our future.

Efforts are underway to change this dynamic. The Pulitzer Center recently launched a series of courses for reporters covering AI, led by two exceptional journalists. The series, according to the Pulitzer Center, is “designed to equip reporters—whether on the tech beat or any other—with the knowledge and skills to cover and shape coverage of AI and its profound influence on society.”

This kind of program is essential, but news organizations and civil society need to go further. Every major newsroom should have its own team of public interest technologists working directly with reporters to help them tell these kinds of critical stories. Consumer Reports has done some of this work, combining journalists and researchers and is a great example for other media organizations.

Foundations should support more of this kind of training, too. The Knight Science Journalism initiative at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is a good model. Journalism schools should offer more courses in coding and computer science. And the growing number of public-private organizations exploring the societal impact of artificial intelligence could also set aside funding to train more journalists on technical reporting. The UN can play a role, too, expanding its journalism training programs to reporters who are focused on AI, privacy, cybersecurity and disinformation.

As we think about the future, and what role we think technology should play in that future, we need a strong independent press that is looking in the right places and asking the right questions to help us all weigh these important issues, especially around artificial intelligence. Let’s make sure we equip the media with the knowledge and tools to truly serve the public interest.