

## Tom Jackman, local reporter, The Washington Post

### Michael O'Connell

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name is Michael O'Connell. I'm here with Jeanne Brooks of the Online News Association.

### Tom Jackman, local reporter, The Washington Post

That was smooth.

### Michael O'Connell

Thank you. And the gentleman you hear is Tom Jackman of *The Washington Post*.

### Tom Jackman

That's me.

### Michael O'Connell

He's also the reporter/editor of the State of Northern Virginia. What is the State of Northern Virginia?

### Tom Jackman

It's excellent.

### Michael O'Connell

Excellent.

### Tom Jackman

Oh, you meant what is the blog itself?

### Michael O'Connell

Yes.

### Tom Jackman

You weren't just asking for an assessment of Northern Virginia?

### Tom Jackman

[The State of NoVa](#) is a blog that I created in 2011 of news and people in the five jurisdictions immediately outside of Washington, D.C., in Northern Virginia — Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William counties. Alexandria is a city. And, I've been based in Fairfax County for 14 years for the Post, covering cops and courts and various other stuff, big stories, little stories. And I grew up in Fairfax County and I know a lot of people that are actually from there. I think the target audience really is the people that are from Northern Virginia. And there's this sort of cliché that, "Oh, Washington's

a transient area. It's people washing in, washing out." Baloney. We've got to clean up our language here, right?

### **Michael O'Connell**

Yes.

### **Tom Jackman**

And so, no, that's baloney. There are a lot of people who are from here, who grew up here, who live here, who like it here, who are not ashamed to say they are from Northern Virginia. And there are a lot of great people from our area and there are a lot of really cool things going on. And so, it has a somewhat boosterish tone at times.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Right.

### **Tom Jackman**

Because I'm saying, "Look at this. A girl from Alexandria, who just won the U.S. women's figure skating championship" — Ashley Wagner — "Or, look at this guy from Springfield, who was the drummer for Nirvana and now might be running the best rock n' roll band in the land" — Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters. I'm an unremitting fan of that. I will be campaigning soon for a statue on Dave Grohl's behalf.

But anyway, I also write what I believe to be news that isn't being covered anywhere else, about the big, new roads being planned out there in Northern Virginia, which may or may not be needed; the [baseball stadium](#) that they're building in Loudoun County; the political weirdness in Prince William County. Today, I had a [story](#), it's in the newspaper, it started out on the blog, about the various battles that the counties out there and the little towns have had over water and who's going to provide the water and who's going to charge for the water. Call me wacky, but I think water is sort of a big deal.

### **Michael O'Connell**

I think you get your water the same place I do, which is a lake in Loudoun County.

### **Tom Jackman**

That's correct.

### **Michael O'Connell**

We both get our water from the City of Fairfax.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Even though I live in the county, but you live in the city.

**Tom Jackman**

But not for much longer.

**Michael O'Connell**

What?

**Tom Jackman**

Because they just decided they're going to stop doing that. You apparently did not read The State of NoVa, young man.

**Michael O'Connell**

No, I did not.

**Tom Jackman**

So anyway, yeah, the City of Fairfax just decided that they are going to get out of the water business. They've got a reservoir 23 miles away. They've got a pipe that goes 23 miles to bring us the water.

**Michael O'Connell**

Since 1961?

**Tom Jackman**

That is correct. It is as old as me. The plant, not the water. And so, they have decided, plus, they charge us almost twice what the people in Fairfax County pay. So they've got to upgrade that plant, which would cost bajillions. They're already charging us too much. They're going to charge us more, so they decided, "Why don't we just get on the Fairfax County plan?" And Falls Church and Vienna, which also operate their own water utilities, have decided the same thing. "We just need to get out of the water business and let Fairfax County do this."

**Michael O'Connell**

So, where will we get our water from, Occoquan?

**Tom Jackman**

From either Occoquan or the Potomac, but after it's been heavily treated and filtered by the 21st century technology of Fairfax County.

**Michael O'Connell**

It tastes so good that way.

**Tom Jackman**

There is an argument about that, you know. We get it from a stream out in Loudoun County and Fairfax County draws it from the filth of the Potomac. Those are someone else's words not mine.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Yes.

### **Tom Jackman**

But they clean it. They have an updated, modernized, two treatment plants that we've written about in State of NoVa, and I've also written about legislative stuff that is interesting to Northern Virginia. I try to stay out of politics because I think *The Washington Post* already does a lot of politics and I think it can be massively dull. But I have found some things that are interesting.

There's a guy from Northern Virginia who proposed a bill that would study the creation of a new currency for Virginia, in the event the United States currency goes down. So I wrote about that and suggested who from Virginia should be on the new Virginia currency and then I conducted a reader poll, which, by the way, Dave Grohl won. He was selected by the readers as the person who should appear on the new Virginia coins.

### **Michael O'Connell**

The phrase that we haven't mentioned here, but I think you have adequately described is "community journalism."

### **Tom Jackman**

Right.

### **Michael O'Connell**

You are a community journalist.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right.

### **Michael O'Connell**

You're embedded. You're covering it. You didn't come to *The Washington Post* to cover Beirut or the political situation in Washington.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right.

### **Michael O'Connell**

You're covering where the tire hits the ground.

### **Tom Jackman**

I think it's important. Again, call me crazy, but I think people should and need to know about the news where they live. Where are we getting our water from? You were pretty interested in that whole water dispatch I just related to you.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Well, yeah.

### **Tom Jackman**

Or what's happening at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., which is the biggest university in Virginia now.

### **Michael O'Connell**

And whose basketball team did go to the Final Four but is not particularly good this year.

### **Tom Jackman**

That's right. So, a lot of actual news. And as the *Post* has gotten bigger and smaller at the same time, bigger in scope, smaller in people, our focus on local news has diminished.

### **Michael O'Connell**

I would agree with that.

### **Tom Jackman**

I think that we should continue to cover local news and that we have people here that will pay for that.

### **Michael O'Connell**

My own experience in Northern Virginia, I was a reporter then editor at [\*The Connection Newspapers\*](#), which was a chain of newspapers — it is still a chain of newspapers — that covers mostly Fairfax County, Alexandria, Arlington, but also they have a paper in Potomac, Md. And I gained a real appreciation for community journalism. And I think it's, you know, I've had conversations in the past where people say, "Oh, the potential on the Web for community journalism is huge." But nobody seems to be like going after it. Nobody seems to be going after it, certainly as well as you have, which is the reason why I asked you in here, is to talk about community journalism. Why is it important? You've sort of touched on that, that it's important because it's where people live.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right. But, and this is where we draw on Jeanne's expertise, we can write all the local news we want but will people a) pay money for it and b) will advertisers advertise in it? And that, the answer has not been so great so far.

### **Jeanne Brooks, digital director, Online News Association**

Well, that leads me to a question of, you've clearly identified who your audience is, what's their preference for news consumption now? Are they still buying the paper? Are they going to your website? Are they looking for it in other platforms and sort of how does the distribution model impact your, maybe not your reporting but ...

**Tom Jackman**

It depends on how old they are. If they are under 40, they are absolutely not buying the newspaper. There's nobody under the age of 40 that'll be caught dead holding a print edition of *The Washington Post*.

**Jeanne Brooks**

Oh, that's not true.

**Tom Jackman**

Well, not many. A small number.

**Michael O'Connell**

Oh, wake up Jeanne.

**Jeanne Brooks**

I'm only 32. I'm in that demographic.

**Tom Jackman**

I appreciate that and I'm glad. We're going to give you a certificate later as one of the few.

**Michael O'Connell**

Tom, I'm sorry. I'm not paying your salary. I don't subscribe anymore.

**Tom Jackman**

So both of you are outliers in this demographic that I've just definitively defined as "young people, not buying the newspaper; older people, still buying the newspaper." We still sell 500,000 print editions a day, 700,000 —

**Michael O'Connell**

That's a lot of trees.

**Tom Jackman**

That's right. Well, we're growing them, so we can cut them down.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, if they're yours ...

**Tom Jackman**

So, 500,000 during the week, 700,000 on Sundays, a print edition. But that number, steadily going down.

**Michael O'Connell**

And with it, the display advertising is going down as well.

**Tom Jackman**

Right. The amount newspapers can charge for print advertising is way more than Web advertising. And so, the question is, even as the Web advertising rises, the rate for that is much smaller and so the money made is far less. And for *The Washington Post*, their online presence is worldwide, so vast amounts of readers come from overseas and from elsewhere in the country. And so, stories about national politics and world politics get huge readership. When I do a story and I get a lot of readers, if I get 200 or 300 comments on a story, that's massive for me. But for something on the national desk, that's nothing. That's like nobody even saw that story.

**Michael O'Connell**

But for the people in the D.C. area, people in the suburbs that you're covering, that's, again, that's what I learned by being a community news editor. That really touches a lot of people, that type of reporting.

**Tom Jackman**

It does. It absolutely does.

**Jeanne Brooks**

And I also wondered 200 or 300 comments is a lot of engagement. What's the conversation that's happening? So, instead of valuing the quantity, what's the quality there?

**Tom Jackman**

It's not bad. It can be pretty good. They go back and forth. Last week, I posted a short [story](#) that said it was Gun Lovers Support Starbucks Day, in which people who support the right to openly carry your weapons in Virginia, which you can do.

**Michael O'Connell**

Northern Virginia ...

**Tom Jackman**

Not just northern, all of Virginia, you can walk around in the state with a gun on your hip. They appreciate the fact that Starbucks does not keep them out of the store, so they all organized to go into the Starbucks, pack heat and buy joe.

**Michael O'Connell**

They need to be alert. They're carrying guns. They need to be alert.

**Tom Jackman**

A ferocious discussion ensued about this in the comments. It was largely civil, over 700 comments.

**Michael O'Connell**

Wow. That's really good.

**Tom Jackman**

People discussing whether or not this is a good idea. And it was pretty good. Now, I'm not going to say there aren't a lot of badness in those comments, but the *Post* at least has started putting humans on the moderating and are trying to keep things clean.

**Jeanne Brooks**

So here's a buzzword for you, "impact." What was the impact out of those comments? Did anything happen as a result?

**Tom Jackman**

No one got shot. That's a good thing.

**Jeanne Brooks**

In the arguments, though, that happened, the conversation that happened and the comments ...

**Michael O'Connell**

Did people's minds seemed to get changed? You said there was a civil discourse.

**Jeanne Brooks**

Did any organize in any way?

**Tom Jackman**

I don't know. On that issue, I think people have pretty much made up there minds. Now, I will say that I've written a number of stories and I'm working on some about George Mason that have had impact, that have changed things. I wrote about a kid wrote a book, a little picture book. He's 7-years-old and he wanted to raise \$15,000, so he could buy a dog cause he was autistic.

**Michael O'Connell**

Oh yeah, we wrote about that too. That was a huge story for you.

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, traffic-wise.

**Tom Jackman**

He had printed like 400 books that he was going to sell at \$10 a book and, well, the people just turned out massively for this book sale and he raised \$50,000 or \$60,000 and bought dogs for other people as well as himself. And so, because I have access to this website and this audience, I can have that kind of impact with stories, which is the same with the print edition. But, in general, local stories don't do nearly as well on the Web as world and national stories.

**Michael O'Connell**

This is one of those things where it's difficult to sort of measure the importance of it, because I know that my experience in community journalism was that certain types of stories we would do would have huge impact. We wrote about, you know, the tank farm —

**Tom Jackman**

Sure.

**Michael O'Connell**

Outside, or in the City of Fairfax and we got a ton of traffic on that. We got a ton of comments on that. Whenever we did anything about Clifton Elementary ... community school, long-time community school in a small community was closing and it turned into this huge fight in the county, at the Board of Supervisors and there were all these political ramifications that came out of it. We got so much, we got traffic on our website. We got people writing letters to us, and then also just the very human stories of the teenagers who were killed or something —

**Tom Jackman**

Sure, I'm down. But how do we monetize that? Jeanne, I need answers now.

**Michael O'Connell**

Maybe we can't monetize. Maybe it's all a matter of the level of how big your audience can be.

**Jeanne Brooks**

I think it's more about creatively experimenting with new revenue structures. So, when we fall back on, well ads, they don't make as much on the Web as they do mobile, that is an old model being applied to a new structure. If I were on the business team of *The Washington Post*, I would probably be digging —

**Michael O'Connell**

What's left of the business team of *The Washington Post*.

**Tom Jackman**

Keep going, keep going, don't interrupt.

**Jeanne Brooks**

I would probably go and look and examine, do an analysis of your user behavior, your audience behavior and identify ways that they are willing to contribute in some way. So, might that look like, I know *The Washington Post* is toying with subscriber models, but maybe that looks like an event that raises money or, I don't know, something outside of the box, but I think as we're looking at these traditional models and they don't work digitally. So, where is the creativity there? I think we're not seeing newsgroups experimenting.

**Michael O'Connell**

We had a, the name escapes me at moment, we had an [arts reporter](#) from *The Denver Post* and he was talking about, and they have a very successful entertainment section, and they do sponsorships for events and bands and things as a way to bring in revenue. So basically looking sort of a different way. I don't think the three of us are going to crack this problem, because it's a problem that a lot of people have been putting their minds on.

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Michael O'Connell**

Certainly much bigger brains than us.

**Tom Jackman**

But I'm frustrated because I want community journalism to continue. I do think it's important. I do think it has impact, but the numbers are not comparable in readership, at least at our paper because we also have access to, you know, people coming in at 2:30 in the morning from France who are reading about Obama.

**Michael O'Connell**

But who knows? Maybe there's a way to ... because a newspaper, everything that was in the traditional newspaper was not producing audience. There were specialized sections of it that had targeted ads to it. Maybe there's a way to target ads. Maybe there's a way to let the huge sports section pay for the garden section which may not have, whatever.

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Michael O'Connell**

Or the comics section. There are ways to let the strengths of the website pay for some of the other things that are, I don't know if we still get in these conversations where what our mission is? Is the mission strictly to make money and to figure out what's the most popular thing? You know, *The Washington Post* does not have cats on its front page every day.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right. I think it should.

### **Michael O'Connell**

If it was strictly that — yeah, if it should, then, yeah, you want to get your traffic up.

### **Jeanne Brooks**

But that local audience is highly engaged and loyal, which says to me that they would be willing to pay for this, but we're not asking them the right way.

### **Michael O'Connell**

We used to get high school sports, schools particular in community reporting were really valuable. People liked it when you went to the play, when you covered football games or when you interviewed award-winning students and stuff. Parents liked to get their kids pictures in the paper. So, I mean, there is value. There is something people see that in.

The problem is, and I share the concern that you have, that this is a type of reporting that a lot of people don't talk about as important in the larger conversation of what's going on with journalism. The fact is, like Jeanne observed very correctly, that people are engaged with this type of reporting. They want to know if there's going to be a stop sign going to be put at this one intersection. They want to know if the school is going to close or ... they want to know these very, very, very local stories that are just not going to get the huge audience. So, how do you monetize that? How do you cover it? I don't know.

### **Tom Jackman**

That's why we created *The State of NoVa* is to give people a place to go to get at least some of that news, if not all.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Yeah. And I think it's a really great, great site. Give me a typical day. What is it you do to get that content on that site?

### **Tom Jackman**

I have a lot of sources of info. I certainly check the community papers and the blogs, but I get tips from people I know, from folks at the courthouse where I worked for many years. I know people all around the various counties. I get tips from people I never met, who are familiar with the blog and think that this is a story that should be out there. I get

pitches from public relations people sometimes that I think are interesting. I see things in the paper. I keep my eyes open. It's easy. It's easy.

### **Michael O'Connell**

The stuff never dries up.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right. I mean, if you couldn't come up with a thousand stories on this beat, then you need to get another job.

### **Michael O'Connell**

One of the things before we started recording, we were sort of joking back and forth about, when I first contacted you one of the things you said was, "Well, I'm a print journalist." I was like, "Well, yeah, we're talking about digital journalism, we're also talking about journalism in general." Your approach, you haven't necessarily changed your approach. You still do the things that you would always do.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right, although I try to do more, cause I feel like the Web is this yawning chasm that needs to be fed all the time, and I was trying to do two to three things a day for a while and was killing myself. And so, I tried to do one to two things a day or at least one thing a day. Try to keep them a little shorter and snappier than the newspaper. Because it's online and because it has my little smiling mugshot at the top, I'm granted a little leeway in terms of maybe inserting a little attitude or, you know, wordplay into the stories that wouldn't make it into the print editions. And a lot of times when they take stuff from the blog and they put it in the print edition, they have to denude it. They have to clean it up. They have to de-blog it or de-Jackmanize it.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Take the soul out of it.

### **Tom Jackman**

That's right. Take all the jokes out. The first thing to do — remove jokes.

### **Michael O'Connell**

All the profanity and humor.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right and so no jokes. I have that leeway to write about what I like. They give me very little direction in terms of what they want out of it because I think they have faith that, "Well, he's the one out there." *The Washington Post* is all down in Washington, D.C. I'm in Fairfax, Va., and I've been out there for a while now, 14 years.

### **Michael O'Connell**

They wouldn't know where Fairfax was.

### **Tom Jackman**

No. I couldn't say what a person might or might not know, but i'm out there and they trust my judgment when I say to them, "I think I should write a story about this giant road that's being built through Loudoun and Prince William. Or I think I should write a story about these problems at George Mason University. I think I should write this story about this really cool person at George Mason University." And they just basically nod their head and say, "Yeah, do that." I think I got away from your question, which was, what's the difference?

### **Michael O'Connell**

Well, what was my question? My question was really about your approach. I mean you interview people.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right.

### **Michael O'Connell**

You do all of the same things that you've always done.

### **Tom Jackman**

Research. Legal research, in a lot of cases, because a number of my stories still tend to have some sort of legal prong to them. Finding experts. Talking to both sides.

### **Michael O'Connell**

You do all the same sort of ...

### **Tom Jackman**

Like right now I'm working on a story about a woman that was denied in-state tuition at George Mason under controversial circumstances, shall we say, and that is a difference of \$10,000 a semester or \$20,000 a year. That's a big deal. So I've had to educate myself about what the rules are on that. There's state law. There's state guidelines. There's experts. There's people that do this. George Mason has lawyers who help them make these decisions on these people.

And so, I've gotten the — this actually arose from a comment. I had written about a Navy veteran who'd been denied in-state tuition, after she'd been transferred out of Virginia by the Navy. When she was done in the Navy, she moved back and George Mason said, "No, you're not in-state." And she appealed and appealed and lost, then took it to court and won. And now it's going to the state Supreme Court and could set a precedent.

So anyway, write that story. Somebody posts a comment that says, "Well, you should hear this story. My daughter blah-blah-blah-blah." And I'm like, "Really?" So I posted a comment that said, "If you want to talk about this more, here's my email address, email me." So, they did. And I met the guy Monday and then I went to George Mason and said, "What's the deal here?" In the meantime, I started really digging into how do you define who lives in Virginia and who's eligible to get the good rate? It's really affordable to go to George Mason, if you're in Virginia. If you're not from Virginia, whoa.

### **Michael O'Connell**

So, do you get an opportunity with being on the Web as opposed to being in print, if something comes up where you just want to go big, can go big on something?

### **Tom Jackman**

I can. the Internet is infinite, I like to say, so I have a lot more space there. And it's not bloggy in that way. It's not like in a blog in that I will write a 35- or 40-inch story and people can stop reading it anytime, I have found. If you don't want to read a 40-inch story, you just go to the next thing. And in newspapers they have to have these set limits for space, because space is finite and they decide, usually before even the story is even written, how long this story will be. "Editor Bob, I'm going to write a story about 'X.'"

"Well, that should like it's 14 inches."

"Ok." And there it is, 14 inches. If I find out that the story unveils who actually killed John Kennedy, "Well, we blocked 14 inches out of it." That's what you get.

### **Michael O'Connell**

The priests of journalism setting the rules.

### **Tom Jackman**

So, I have unlimited length. I don't try to abuse that, but then when those stories go in the paper, they of course get hacked down. They take it from the bottom and they take the jokes out. It looks different. But, it is a great luxury to have and I think that readers on the Web appreciate that they can get the whole story. I know for many years, 28 some years that I wrote for print, that we couldn't fit the whole story in stories because there wasn't enough space to give all the details that might really flesh out what's going on here. You have to boil it down to the basics and get it into 14 inches or 400 words or whatever.

### **Jeanne Brooks**

Do you find yourself following up on stories more frequently than you would in print?

### **Tom Jackman**

The same as I did. I always followed up in print. It's a revered gimmick of print is to, you know, go back to that story and see what's happening now.

**Michael O'Connell**

Recycling.

**Tom Jackman**

And I don't think it's done enough on the Web. I think a lot of people on the Web write a story and never go back. A lot of the stories I put in the headline "Update." Yeah, I found a story about, I was interviewing the president of George Mason back in the summer and a guy was there watching gave me a story tip about a woman who was embezzling from a guy who turned out to be a world famous DJ. I never heard of him, but he is a big deal. When he plays clubs, I mean, he gets thousands of people to come watch him play his music. He's located in Great Falls, Va., of all places. He's a world famous guy to those people.

**Michael O'Connell**

I bet he's got a nice house.

**Tom Jackman**

I'm sure he does. I'm sure he has a lot of dough. He's won Grammys. He won a Grammy for remixing Dido's song "Thank You," which probably needed to be remixed more. But anyway, he won and he's a big deal.

Well, anyway, this woman just was stealing him blind, left and right. And, it was a great tip. Then it turned out that she has been married a number of times but not quite divorced as many times, and that she'd been convicted and done time already for somebody else and this world famous guy hired her. And so, from the first story and then, I've gone to see her in court and she spoke to me and told me an even wackier story and so I've written about it two or three times. Yeah, I always follow up.

**Michael O'Connell**

These stories have legs.

**Tom Jackman**

There you go.

**Michael O'Connell**

Since you brought up crime, you spent a good deal of time covering the courts for the *Post*.

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Michael O'Connell**

And that can be real challenging but also it can be kind of a fun and rewarding experience. I know one of the cases you covered was the D.C. sniper.

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Michael O'Connell**

Tell us about that case and how many stories di you write about that and what were the challenges of that?

**Tom Jackman**

A thousand. Just a thousand. So, when the shootings happened, everybody at the Post was writing about that. That was in 2002. Then the cases were sent to Virginia for trial, so that's where I became one of the lead guys. There was one case in Fairfax County for [Lee] Malvo and one in Prince William for [John Allen] Muhammad, so I had the Fairfax case and Josh White had the Muhammad case.

I thought, "This is great. This is in my courthouse. I know where everything is. I know who everyone is. And plus, whenever they file stuff, I'm here. CNN's not in Fairfax. NBC News isn't in Fairfax. I'm going to own this baby." Well, they set up a website and posted everything on the Web, that dumb circuit court. And so it gave everybody equal access to all the pleadings.

**Michael O'Connell**

It'd be nice if they did that for all of their cases.

**Tom Jackman**

Exactly. But it was still highly competitive and it was great to have the world media there, and then we all trucked down to Chesapeake, Va., for the trial. I had a terrific advantage over them by having been in that courthouse for years and knowing all the players and having people maybe whisper things in my ear when the thing wasn't going on. And so, it was neat. It was a horrible, sad story and the people who suffered from it were there as well. I went out the night that the shooting happened at the Home Depot in Falls Church, where Linda Franklin was killed and covered that from the first day. It was a historic, horrible thing and we covered the heck out of it.

**Michael O'Connell**

We had [Laura Amico](#) in a few weeks ago. I don't know if you're familiar with her, she does a website, [Homicide Watch DC](#).

**Tom Jackman**

Oh, yeah.

**Michael O'Connell**

Where they cover every murder in D.C. And we talked a bit about — we talked a bit about? That's all we talked about, crime reporting. How important is that?

**Tom Jackman**

Did she actually go out and report or did she just sort of create the database?

**Michael O'Connell**

She created the database. She would go to the court. She would cover the trial. She would cover the hearings. It was a bit of both. But anyway, let me ask you that as a, how important is it to be that beat reporter, to follow that case through?

**Tom Jackman**

I think it's huge. I think that the people that want information about these cases benefit from that and there's a lot of people that wanted information about the sniper case and there's people that want information about every crime case. By knowing the cops and knowing the prosecutors and knowing the defense lawyers and knowing the judges, somebody that's been there for a while provides way more, way better public service to everybody who wants that information, which you aren't otherwise going to get just by taking the handouts from the press releases. That was my goal, to write better, do better stories and more informative stories and be more informative than everybody else.

**Michael O'Connell**

This is me getting on my soapbox again. Do you know Mike Pope from the [Alexandria Gazette](#)?

**Tom Jackman**

Sure. Yeah.

**Michael O'Connell**

He's had a bit of a crusade about FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] and the fact that in Virginia, well, he covers mostly Alexandria, about what the police are telling and what they're not telling the press.

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Michael O'Connell**

As newspapers are folding, as big newspapers cut back their staffs, as different aspects, including community journalism, including crime reporting, gets cut away, you're losing that layer of oversight.

**Tom Jackman**

That's exactly right. I mean, guys like Mike Pope do a great job and a great service and they ... he has written stories that have showed the public, "Look, this has happened and this is what the police aren't telling us, consistently. I made a request to the Arlington Police and they said, 'Yeah, we'll give you that for \$500. That's our copying fee or

something." The last story he wrote was just straight outrage. And he writes one about every six months or year or so just attempting to get public information from a publicly supported body.

I've been banging my head this wall for a long time and I'm used to it. I write those stories too. I'm getting ready to write another one. Fairfax County Police told me on Friday, "We are no longer going to release the cause and manner of death in any case." Really?

### **Michael O'Connell**

Did that come from that recent case that you just wrote about?

### **Tom Jackman**

It came from the case of the kid who died in the woods in Fairfax, who had disappeared from his high school. He just didn't show up for school one day. And then they searched for him and the police didn't find him and a week later, his friends found him in the woods.

And the police, at the time, in October of last year, would not say how the guy died. Did somebody take him into the woods and beat him to death? Did he kill himself? Did he fall asleep and never wake up? What happened? And the police said, "Well, we're going to wait for the medical examiner." So, I kept calling the police and saying, "What's up? What's up?"

And finally, they said, "It's over. We're not telling you."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you can call the medical examiner."

And, in the meantime, because I'd been covering this beat for a long time, I wrote a [story](#) back in October that said, "Look, I'm sorry to tell everybody this, but this kid hanged himself in the woods."

And this caused something of a stir, but I felt people needed to know. There were discussions going on. I watched them at Little League because my kids play at those Little League fields where parents were terrified, as if there was a murderer walking around, snatching people out of the parking lot and dragging them in the woods. Well, that wasn't what happened. That kid got out of his car, walked into the woods and hung himself. It's terrible. And it raised the other issue which is the media in general do not cover suicides because we don't want to glorify them. They're private matters. We don't want to encourage people to do it and go out in a blaze of glory. And there's too many. You wouldn't believe how many people commit suicide.

### **Michael O'Connell**

At The Connection, we had a family that had come to us to talk about a girl who had committed suicide. And it was very unusual. And we heard from both the police and the school about the fact that we had reported this. And they were like, "Oh, you shouldn't do this and everything." But it wasn't so much, we weren't telling about the suicide, we were telling about the effect it was having on the family and that it was having on their friends. And these are stories that impact.

I mentioned Mike Pope and you touched on this a little bit, I mean, the oversight that the press has on public bodies is hugely important of the journalistic mission. These staffs are getting cut. This is a level of news that people are not getting.

### **Tom Jackman**

And at the same time, there's a tendency among the government agencies towards less transparency. We're seeing this now with states wanting to hide their concealed weapons permit holder databases and having some success with that. I think it's going to happen in Virginia. That's happening in New York State.

And now here's Fairfax County saying, "Well, we're not going to tell you how this person died anymore. That's for the medical examiner to do." And I suppose technically that's right and I feel sorry because the medical examiner is going to start getting a lot more calls than they ever did. But, it's just how it's been done through history and it was not violating anyone's rights to privacy to say, "That guy over there was hit by a car, or that lady fell out of a tree and she died of accidental death, broken neck."

"No, we can't tell you that."

### **Michael O'Connell**

These are important stories that need to be told. And I can certainly respect the perspective of the government agency or the police who may want to protect a case.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right. We all get that.

### **Michael O'Connell**

We understand that there are things that we can't write about for reasons. Under that umbrella, other things are getting swept under it. Things that the public has the right to know about what their agencies are doing. I mean, police shooting. How do we know if the police are [negligent]? Who's investigating them? Well, they're investigating themselves.

### **Tom Jackman**

Right.

### **Michael O'Connell**

If you don't have oversight over that, what does that mean? What will that lead to?

**Tom Jackman**

There was a police shooting in Alexandria last week where there's virtually no information out there out there.

**Michael O'Connell**

Yeah. No, it's frustrating to try to go out there and cover it.

One of the things we try to do in these discussions is the type of beat that you have, what is somebody who is coming into the field, what is it they need? How should they prepare themselves? And why should they be a community reporter?

**Tom Jackman**

I would like to say it is rocket science, but it is not. It is simply going out with a pen and paper and asking people what's happening? Why? How? Who? What? Where? It's really easy and it does involve, you know, getting out from behind your desk and going out and seeing people and finding out information. I think the fun thing is finding out stuff people don't know and telling it to them. That's the service that we provide is bringing them new information forward. I wish it did require a lot of training, but I don't think it does. I think anybody could do it. I think I'm proof of that. I didn't go to journalism school and I started out needing a lot of training.

I once, early on in Kansas City, was sent to a murder scene and I came back and the editor said, "Well, how did she die?"

"Uh, I didn't quite ask that question." And so, you learn, and I went back out to the crime scene and found out how she died, which the police wouldn't tell me anymore. But, you learn and you get better and you learn how to find things out. And you learn how to talk to people and how to listen.

Listening, massively important. It's really the biggest skill is listening. And then, being persistent and being patient and being thoughtful, all of which are not qualities that you teach anyone in school. "I'm going to the persistence class today." These are things that you get to experience and that you get by doing. And it's really fun to do. It's a great job.

And after you've done your persistence and patience and listening and your note taking and your research and you write it all up, you have this cathartic release because you've created something and then you get to see it. And then, even better, a lot of times, especially, this is the part I like best about being online, you get to have reaction.

You know, for many years, you write an article, it goes in the newspaper and you don't know if anybody read it. Now here, boy I know. And also, if I have anything wrong, I know. They tell me.

**Michael O'Connell**

And it's a lot easier to correct it online than it is in print.

**Tom Jackman**

And I'm happy to do that. I want it to be right. I want people to tell me when I get stuff wrong. I want it to be right. I want it to be definitive and accurate.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, I think that's a great place to stop. I really appreciate you coming in. This was really great. Again, *State of NoVa*?

**Tom Jackman**

Right.

**Tom Jackman**

Dot-com?

**Tom Jackman**

[WashingtonPost.com/stateofnova](http://WashingtonPost.com/stateofnova)

**Michael O'Connell**

State of Nova. How if somebody wants to reach you by email or Twitter.

**Tom Jackman**

[jackmant@washpost.com](mailto:jackmant@washpost.com) for email and [@stateofnova](https://twitter.com/stateofnova) for many, many tweeting insights.

**Michael O'Connell**

You do tweet.

**Tom Jackman**

I do tweet some.

**Jeanne Brooks**

You have quite a following on Twitter.

**Tom Jackman**

Yeah, you know, I'm a wiseguy.

**Michael O'Connell**

You are a wiseguy. I remember seeing you — this is my opportunity to ask you that. Do you tweet from court?

**Tom Jackman**

Sometimes. I don't cover as much court as I used to.

**Michael O'Connell**

I remember seeing tweets of some case last year.

**Tom Jackman**

Well, there was a case where a guy was claiming that he couldn't be drunk driving on the Beltway because he was in the backseat of the car having sex at the time. It was a complete lie. And it was just a pleading that somebody had tipped me off to that I wrote three, maybe four paragraphs about. Well, it went berserk on the Old Intronet, and so, the trial was the following Monday and the guy tried to stick to this defense. That he wasn't driving, when the car smashed into the back of a cabbie and caused the cab serious damage and caused the cab driver serious damage. So, it wasn't a completely frivolous case, but it was a frivolous thing that the guy said on the side of the highway, which was, "Hey, Mr. State Trooper, I wasn't driving. I was here in the back, with you know."

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, then who was driving? Or was he driving with his feet?

**Tom Jackman**

Well, we have a small problem. He tried to say there was another guy in the car but he got out and ran, which is easy to do on the Beltway.

**Jeanne Brooks**

Have you ever been told you can't tweet from court?

**Tom Jackman**

Yeah. I haven't. I know that is an ongoing issue with courts. They're trying to figure that out. Fairfax County, so far, has allowed it. I haven't tried it anywhere else.

**Michael O'Connell**

But your phone, what you're tweeting with, you don't have a camera on it, right? Cause you can't bring that in.

**Tom Jackman**

They've changed the rule in Fairfax and do let you bring in phones with cameras now. And before that, I had a, because I'd been covering he beat for so many years, I had a special card and I could get around the metal detector and bring in my heater.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, good for you. Thanks for coming in Tom, this was really an enjoyable conversation.

**Tom Jackman**

You're very welcome. It was fun.

**Michael O'Connell**

And this is Mike O'Connell, I'm here with Jeanne Brooks from ONA.

**Jeanne Brooks**

Thanks for having me.

**Michael O'Connell**

From the Online News Association. If people want to find out more about ONA, how can they do that?

**Jeanne Brooks**

They can visit our website at [journalists.org](http://journalists.org) That's journalists with an "s" at the end or follow us [@ONA](https://twitter.com/ONA).

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, thank you very much.