

Tiffany Shackelford, executive director Association for Alternative Newsmedia

Megan Cloherty, producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name's Megan Cloherty joined today by Michael O'Connell. And today we're talking about alternatives, specifically alternative media.

Tiffany Shackelford is executive director of the [Association for Alternative Newsmedia](#). Previously, she was the director of communications and marketing at [Phase2 Technology](#) in Virginia, and was the executive director of [Capitolbeat](#), the Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors. Tiffany also created and runs the [Online News Association's](#) Washington, D.C., group, which has more than 600 members.

Thanks for joining us.

Tiffany Shackelford, executive director, Association for Alternative Newsmedia

Thanks for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

Megan Cloherty

Tell us what exactly is alternative newsmedia. What does that mean?

Tiffany Shackelford

This is a question that I get a lot. If everything's alternative, what is alternative these days? What I've been saying a lot is "smart" is the new alternative. We're writing long form, but it's still popular. Kids love it, believe it or not. And we're writing really smart pieces that speak truth to power. And also, we cover local really from a really, truly local spirit. We're not like one of the big news chains that covers local in that they have a section about what crime might be happening. We live and die by local. And, we're the last ones covering arts and culture. So, when I'm talking about the alternative news media, those are some of the things that encompass sort of my organization and the members within my group.

Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism

I used to work at a weekly community newspaper. Do you distinguish yourself differently from something like that?

Tiffany Shackelford

We consider them lovely cousins. But we are a little bit different in a few ways. Number one, I sort of mentioned the truth to power concept. We really are focused on stories that no one else will tell. Often they're kind of underground. They're perhaps about members of society that you don't see or don't want to see sometimes. Let's just be honest. We kind of laugh now at the style of the Internet because I think in some ways the alternative press, we invented it, the bombastic style, the in-your-face, the some-

times profane sort of push. And that differentiates us, in particular, from a community weekly.

Tiffany Shackelford

But, what we share with community weeklies is that real dedication to our local communities and being a voice for our local community. I think that's what we share.

Michael O'Connell

Coming from a community newspaper background, I really see the value of that. We were talking about this before, with the whole "death of journalism" and everything and a lot of the challenges that community newspapers were facing. But, you know, we were just talking and you were telling us that alternative news weeklies are facing challenges, but not necessarily in the "everybody's going away, everybody's dying." What do you is going on right now?

Tiffany Shackelford

It's really interesting because what we're actually seeing is that small to mid-sized markets are doing great. Markets like Boise, Idaho; Colorado Springs; Syracuse, N.Y. But also, the mid-level markets like Huston; Orange City [County], Calif. The [OC Weekly](#) is doing great. Papers that are often sort of a beacon of progressive thought in a community that perhaps doesn't have as many voices, they end up having an absolutely committed readership, not to mention advertisers. They have great relationships with small and medium, local businesses, and they really look to them as their go-to for advertising. It's a little bit different. And remember also, unlike the larger media companies that are just having crazy times, we've always been a little bit scrappier, a little bit more nimble to move because we don't have the crazy overhead. Usually, the publisher in many of our papers is the owner or part owner or at least all in. You know, really committed to it. So, we've also been able to shift a little bit quicker in some ways.

There's also something that we've been quietly taking over in the alt-space and that's the events. People forget, [South by Southwest](#), that's an [Austin Chronicle](#) gig. That's where that started. We have now [Music Northwest](#) in Portland, which has 35,000 people and a technology piece. North by Northeast, up in Toronto, which is coming up in June. Tons of cool. But also like [Tech Jams](#) in Burlington, Vt., and here, around the corner, [Crafty Bastards](#) from the *Washington City Paper*. So, we have some really awesome events. Then again, that community piece that we're thinking about, that is again a way that our small to medium folks are really owning that space.

Megan Cloherty

It seems like tech is a huge part of alternatives, right? I mean, it was a focus early on and now it's sort of grown.

Tiffany Shackelford

Well, it's a little bit of both. In some cases yes and some cases no. We missed the original run for tech because our weekly papers were still doing really well.

Megan Cloherty

So, you didn't want to leave those to go online.

Tiffany Shackelford

Exactly. What's funny about weeklies and I think you see this in the community papers space too, people still love their papers.

Michael O'Connell

Yes.

Tiffany Shackelford

Even people like me who, I'm not going to read the *New York Times* or the *Post* ever in print again, probably. But I will pick up, I don't know if it's again that sort of physical, local feeling ...

Michael O'Connell

I was really amazed. It was really eye-opening when I was working at *The Connection Newspapers* that just how loyal people were, how they looked forward to it. Our focus was local news, local crime, local government and local schools. People want to see their kids' pictures. They wanted to see stories about the high school play and everything.

Megan Cloherty

And they want to cut them out and put them on their refrigerator.

Michael O'Connell

Yes. They wanted to cut them out from the paper.

Tiffany Shackelford

Oh, absolutely.

Michael O'Connell

And this is kind of a little interesting side bit to the whole conversation about digital media versus print. You're representing newspapers. Why aren't people, especially these tech people, why aren't they just, "Oh well, I'll just do a website." Why are they still hanging onto print? What do they see as the value of that?

Tiffany Shackelford

Again, it's sort of you read it in coffee shops. It's also still a little bit ageless. Our readers are averaging around 40, which is younger than the dailies but probably still older than it used to be in the alt-space. But look, the alt weekly, the tabloid style, which also most community newspapers use for the most part.

Michael O'Connell

Sure.

Tiffany Shackelford

It's still the ultimate in mobile tablet, right? Cause you stick it under your arm or in your bag.

Michael O'Connell

You read it on the Metro.

Tiffany Shackelford

You read it on the Metro. More so than you do your larger dailies, because they're harder to just manage. So, there still is some of that. I'm also going to give an odd metaphor. I majored in poetry in college because I'm really into money.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah. And then you moved into journalism.

Tiffany Shackelford

Right. For me it was a step up. See, that's the funny thing. People don't realize. They laugh about money and journalism. I'm like, "Hey, I'm not a poor bartender trying to write a poem today." But there was something very, when I was composing poems, there was something very, very powerful for the pen to the paper connection when I was writing. And I believe that there is still, despite the fact that I'm a huge digital fan. I got brought into this organization because of my digital jobs, but I believe fully that there's still that connection piece of physical that, in all this talk about digital, we have to consider. It's just like your best conversations usually happen with people face-to-face. It's that kind of thing. We're sitting in a room here together. And Skype would've worked, but this works a hell of a lot better.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no, definitely.

Megan Cloherty

It's more the experience.

Tiffany Shackelford

Exactly. So I think that that's important. Now with that said, we are going, and to come back to your question, we actually in some ways have skipped over some of the mess that the mainstream media made of themselves in the digital space, which has been so awesome. And, we're going mobile first, digital first, thinking about smart partnerships with startups. So we are there now but maybe came, as my father said, "went around our ass to get to our elbow." And that's OK. And also, you know what, if I'm the last damn print standing, I'll take it. That's the other thing too about that so.

Michael O'Connell

This is great because it sort of melds into the [podcast](#) we just posted about the interview with the people from [Magic Bullet](#), which is a comics newspaper. And they were very much, they could've put all their stuff online, but they chose to do it in paper for lots of different reasons. One, is that they were able to get advertisers who wanted to be put in a newspaper, and two, they wanted people in shops, in comic shops and tattoo parlors and restaurants where they could leave copies, to find this material that they wouldn't necessarily find or necessarily seek out online and just sort of be surprised by this free newspaper. And that was a way for them to get an audience and get their work out there.

Megan Cloherty

For an alternative, is it easier to know who your audience is than for a major daily? You know that you're community focused. Or is it harder because you're so niche that you really have to get down in the weeds?

Tiffany Shackelford

I think for Gen-X and above, we know who they are for our audience. And, you know, I'm a Gen-Xer and so I grew up reading the local alts. I was kind of an artsy kid and was like, "I found my people, thank God." It was sort of that moment. I think we clearly know who the Gen-X reader is. It's someone who's interested in local but also arts and culture. Wants to be hip, even though they're probably raising kids and are most definitely are not anymore, but they remember what it was like.

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

What we are not as familiar with or not as clear on is the the younger demographics, the Gen-Y and Millennials, because some of them, if you talk to them they'll have no f-ing idea what the alt is in their neighborhood, but they do, because they go to the events. And there's some the conscious brand awareness but not like when we were coming up and were just like, "I must have the *Washington City Paper* every week."

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

Or, "I must go and get the Village Voice when it comes out on Wednesday because that's the only place I'm going to find the apartment/band/tranny prostitute I'm looking for." That was a joke. That was a joke.

Michael O'Connell

OK, let me followup on that. I remember when, again, we talk about journalism dying. I remember Tower Records, before Tower Records went out of business, they had a wonderful magazine section. We're all a little "verklemt."

Tiffany Shackelford

We're all having a moment.

Megan Cloherty

When you could actually go to a store and look around.

Tiffany Shackelford

And that was actually like a date. When I met my husband, we used to go to Tower Records and like, I mean.

Michael O'Connell

Well, and the reason there's no Tower Records is because all those people who went there to look at the magazines, they didn't buy anything. But, anyway, that's just my two cents. But they had a whole rack of alternative magazines, alternative newspapers, newsletters, zines that people put up. There's [Atomic Books](#) up in Baltimore, for people in the D.C. area, that still does that sort of thing. There are plenty of places like that, record shops, head shops, where people are publishing, getting their voice out there. They don't necessarily have a huge following, but it's sort of a different strata. And a lot of those people have shifted their voice to online. So, again, we go back to this discussion of digital versus print and sort of the powers of it. What challenges ahead do you see for somebody wanting to launch something like this? What decisions should they be making?

Tiffany Shackelford

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You're sort of hitting on that first, that sort of loyalty piece and there's a certain amount of, you have that serendipitous moment when you discover a magazine or a newspaper or just a piece of content that just speaks to you. Right? You know, you have this moment. I remember when I saw [McSweeney's](#) online, which is an irreverent website that I love. It's like, "I could've written this. This makes me happy and laugh. La!" And it was definitely that moment, but it was I randomly found it on some posting and I think that's the biggest challenge is how do you get to the right places? Because we've become so disparate online that there aren't even any, there's not the one go-to. There's not the Tower Records you can depend on in the digital space.

Michael O'Connell

Right

Tiffany Shackelford

There's 8,900 Tower Records-type spaces and some of it's weird and some of it's very The other thing I've noticed on the digital space around community that we need to, I think, figure out and solve is there's actually, weirdly cliquish and "You're not part of this" behavior that you'd never do in real life because you'd be such a dick.

Michael O'Connell

It's like a punk attitude.

Tiffany Shackelford

It's a total punk attitude and I respect it on some levels, but it's not appropriate for on-line. But people do it because they can, right?

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Michael O'Connell

"This is my voice. F--- you, I don't care about anything else."

Tiffany Shackelford

Exactly, and that to me actually is an interesting challenge that we haven't really overcome. Now I'm going to beat a drum that's a little, "This is where I go. This is where I go from like lovely community paper, la-la-la moment, to I have deep, deep nerd tendencies." So, bear with me as I go through this.

Michael O'Connell

OK

Tiffany Shackelford

So, the semantic Web, which is the contextual linking, which is really what Tim Berners-Lee thought the Internet should be. Screw Google. It was never about that. It never should have been about that. It should've been about linking contextual content that was natural language processing to other content of the same. And to me, the digital opportunity is still not even close to being, we talk a lot ... I go to all the journalism organizations and I hear the white guys in suits on panels tell me about the 17 things they're doing and that's awesome. I go to hear the 24 by 24s. That's the media buyers, you know, they're 24-years-old and they have 24 million to spend. I go hear all these people, but I'm missing on a lot of levels, and this is just one piece of it, and this is my challenge. I am answering the question. I'm just --

Michael O'Connell

That's OK. I'm just filling up space here. Go on.

Tiffany Shackelford

So, my issue is there's these disparate groups in the media space. There's nothing connecting. There's no connectors. Just like in the local media space, there's a ton of, there's Yelp and Seamless and all these technology pieces that are supposed to be going to the local person, but they don't have any ins to the actual community. They need the publishers. So, we're partnering with a lot of them and that's an aside. But, my whole point in coming back to this contextual linking thing, we're not making these connections online in a smart way, and that is a real challenge. And I think, maybe it's not semantic technology that does it. Maybe it's something else. But we're missing this piece. Until we get that together, I think it's still going to continue to be sort of pods. And you're going to see some successes, but I don't think that really, until we change some fundamental things about the digital media space, we're never going to see true success.

Megan Cloherty

Just because people don't know where to find things?

Tiffany Shackelford

Exactly. The trails are odd. You know, when you're trying to find content, or for instance, I try to find very smart speakers for my convention that bring in fresh ideas. People I haven't heard from, you know. I timed myself. I think about this fairly often and this kind of process. I Google. I Bing. I use several different other. I use some semantic, you know, and I follow strings from place to place to find smart people to talk to. That process takes me hours sometimes to get to what really should never have taken that long. And we have the technology for it. I just think again, a big mistake, the reason I actually went to, in my bio you mentioned I went to Phase2 Technology. The reason I did that is because I needed desperately to see how the sausage was made on the technology side. And I feel still very strongly that, yeah, we can invite Google to ONA to give us free drinks, but what are we doing? Are we talking to the super-smart start-ups? Are we talking to the VCs [venture capitalists] and seeing what they're funding? Are we seeing what's out there in open source technology? And really seeing how that could work? No. We don't have the translators between technology and media. This is true. This is my across the media moment, where I say, we're not connecting the dots. Until we do that, frankly, I'm a little worried about the future of digital to get back to your original question.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no. I agree with you on a lot of those points. I think Google is probably a wonderful thing for all of us, but I also think it's a very dangerous thing for all of us. I don't mean that in a super-scary way, but I think they bring us a lot of stuff. For example, Google Maps. They make this wonderful application so that people can put maps on their website. They encourage newspapers to work that feature in there so that their advertisers will show up on the map. People will be able to locate and follow things in stories. So, they're bringing you stuff. We're journalists. We should always be questioning when people bring you stuff. Even though it's wonderful and even though it saves us so much time and stuff. At the end of the day, we're at the control of whatever decisions they make on how their search engine works.

Megan Cloherty

It makes it comfortable, right?

Michael O'Connell

It's comfortable.

Megan Cloherty

It's comfortable. You don't have to think about what you're not finding if it's delivered right to you, which is your point.

Michael O'Connell

And I agree with you very much that, I don't know necessarily, especially as we find that there are so many people out there talking about SEO [search engine optimization] and how to game the system, how to game search, that if I want to find about a particular comic book or a particular movie or something and I may search for something. But, I may have to dig down into websites and follow links to really get something that I find interesting that isn't just a broad sweep. As wonderful as search is, cause I think search is very wonderful at this point, I don't think it's always giving us what we really need and want and could move the conversation further.

Megan Cloherty

And God help you if you try and follow those links again to try and find the same thing.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Megan Cloherty

The same outcome, I mean, that's the interesting part too, you have to literally leave breadcrumbs for yourself so you can get back or bookmark or whatever.

Tiffany Shackelford

And this kind of leads to, what is our role in the alternative press?

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

It's to ask questions that no else does and to push where no one else will. And so, I see that not just as stories about politicians and muckraking and investigative, which is very important and we do a great job of it, but also I see my role running this association as I've got to mirror that in some ways, which is why I really am coming out and saying, "Screw you, Google. What are you doing for me?" I do want to push a little bit. And I know along the way I'm going to probably make some enemies, but it's the alt-press

way. It's kind of what I do. So, i mean, I think again journalists are missing a really interesting opportunity to push, not just on the stories and on the information that's handed to them, but even on the way it's handed to them. Isn't that what we are naturally? Why do we get into this business? Because we believe in small "d" democracy because we're naturally curious, among other reasons. We got tricked. I don't know. There was drinking.

Michael O'Connell

If the government hands you a press release and they're, "Here's all the information you need." You're not a journalist if you just take that and just run with that. You need to verify. You need to find other sources. You do stuff. "Here's search. Just take this and go with it." Well, what does this mean? What are you coming from? What are you getting out of this? We should always question everything.

Tiffany Shackelford

Exactly. It's like what is the oldest cliché in Georgetown? In Georgetown? Or journalism, whichever? What is the oldest cliché? "If your mother says that she loves you, check it out." Right?

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

Why aren't we doing that with our tools too? And I feel like that's really important for ...

Michael O'Connell

Because I think a lot of people in journalism feel that they're playing catchup at this point. And maybe they shouldn't. I think we've been dealing with this for a few years and maybe we shouldn't be feeling that way.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yes, I hear that all the time and are we playing catchup or did we just make some terrible mistakes and we should fail and get the hell out and rethink it? That's what I think. So, the catchup thing, I think actually has gotten so deep into our psyche that it's actually holding us back. Because then you make bad mistakes. If you think you need to catchup, what do you do? You drive too fast and you hit someone or, think about that. I really think we need to have kind of a come to Jesus moment or come to goddess or Allah or however you roll, like I'm cool with that.

Michael O'Connell

You're so alt-media. I love this.

Tiffany Shackelford

I am. You know. Come to Buddha moment. You know, and really have this moment of, "What is working and what's not?" So, after ... I ran this online news funded thing called [Stateline](#). It was actually funded by Pew Charitable Trust. It was like, I felt like, it was before [ProPublica](#) so I was doing something weird then and now it's the model and I think it's hilarious. But after that, one of the things that I kind of came out of there thinking was, you know, maybe, this is going to be controversial, I'm just going to say it.

Tiffany Shackelford

I went and got an MBA, because I was convinced that my journalism chops weren't going to cut it in the industry anymore. Now, was the MBA the greatest thing ever? No. I spent too much money and I'm not really sure what I got out of it, but I really believe that we need to just, again, what do good tech companies do? They fail fast. What did we learn in MBA school? To get a business plan together and figure out what's working and what's not. What have we not done in the media business? Any of that. So, maybe it's not about catchup anymore. Maybe it's about scrapping the whole goddamn thing and—

Megan Cloherty

Starting over.

Tiffany Shackelford

— starting over. Obviously, we have businesses to run and we have things to do. I understand that. And I'm not saying, "Let's all call McKenzie and rethink for a week and go on a mountain." But I think you can be experimenting and moving the dial forward if you aren't caught up in what used to be or reinventing a model or maybe you're just inventing or maybe you're just thinking.

Michael O'Connell

This podcast has been a real revelation for me. That talking to a lot of very smart people and getting lots of different perspectives and in my own head trying to figure out, "Is media dying? OK, it's not dying, but what's next. You know, where are we going? What should we be doing?" And the thing that I'm sort of moving towards is that a lot of the conversations we've had in the last five years have been, "How are we going to save legacy journalism? How are we going to translate that into a new model?" And I really think, I don't know if all the legacy journalism, if they can't figure it out, haven't figured it out, should they survive? Should they?

Megan Cloherty

At what they're doing.

Michael O'Connell

At what they're doing. Should we be putting that effort into that or should we instead be moving toward a new model of what the newsroom is? And figuring out, OK, this is what our delivery system is, either it's a combination of print and online or it's all online or whatever, and actually put our effort into that and building a new type of newsroom. And I think that's the type of model that's probably going to succeed as we move forward. I

think this idea of wasting money trying to prop up something that was built for something different is just a waste of time in a lot of cases.

Megan Cloherty

Well, a lot of the things that legacy journalism is doing to try and reinvent itself is by investing in multimedia options. And I think it might be a good transition and I would love to know, what are alt-weeklies doing as far as multimedia? Do reporters sort of have, because they have a little more space and less constriction, they can go out and do a story the way they want to do it? Or, is it so small, you kind of have to get it done and churn it out?

Tiffany Shackelford

It's a combination. You'll see a little bit of all possibilities across the, you know, in my association we have about 130 papers.

Megan Cloherty

Depending on the market.

Tiffany Shackelford

Totally, it depends on the market and sometimes it depends on the publisher. I use [Boise Weekly](#) a lot as an interesting example. So, the daily in the Boise market, I mean, just withering away. They're running a lot of AP copy ... so, the publisher Sally Freeman sees this and she says, "All right, we're going to transform ourselves from just an alt-weekly to a multimedia company. We're going to do breaking local news. We're not going to mess with ... we're going to do breaking, local news. I want everybody out with an iPhone. If you see something interesting, you're going to do video on that, you're going to do pictures on that." She hired a guy whose title is, I think, New Media Czar, something silly, something hilarious.

Michael O'Connell

It comes with a neat hat, I bet.

Tiffany Shackelford

It does. There is a whole headdress involved. It's fantastic. And so, really transformed them into what the community needed, what they responded too, but also really with a multimedia focus. And she absolutely considers herself an alternative multimedia company. And if you're not Tweeting, if you're not coming in with those sorts of skills, you better pick 'em up fast. And that's how she's moving forward. She's also done some really interesting things. She partnered with a local technology company there called Urban Shock to rethink their voting. You know, all the alts have the "Best Of ..." in the cities that they're in. And she totally rethought the voting process and she has a constant Best Of ..., so it's not just one huge thing. There's Best Of ..., I mean at this point there's Best of Dog Groomers, all kinds of Best Ofs. People love it. People love it because everybody's got a thing that they ... "No man, my guy is" Like if I could, I would vote my daycare provider is the Best Of. Like, I would say "yes."

Michael O'Connell

I so wish I had the patent on Best Of. Because people just love that.

Megan Cloherty

Everybody loves lists too.

Tiffany Shackelford

Well, actually, just so you know, most of the alts have the trademark, so don't try it. We'll sue ya.

Michael O'Connell

Damn. Damn.

Tiffany Shackelford

Because it is a serious part of our brand and we're thinking a lot about how to push that.

Tiffany Shackelford

But we're doing some pretty interesting things in the market as far as advertising and mobile. But some of them are so basic but so smart. The publisher and part-owner of the [Charleston \(S.C.\) City Paper](#) and they are killing it. They are rocking it. They do great stuff around the Spoleto Festival. They do great stuff. But they do just thinking about, "What's going to work here?" For instance, if you get a mobile, if you get their mobile app, and you access their paper from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. on a weekend night, you get an ad for a strip club. Because really, probably, it might be, there's a good chance that might be something that you might want. But the rest of the time it's for restaurants. So, they're just using an old-school day parting kind of concept, but it's working great. Again, they're really thinking about what their users want, when. You know, and looking at things like that.

Megan Cloherty

I was going to say, I mean can dailies, the major legacies pick up something from alts? Can they learn from you guys?

Tiffany Shackelford

Screw them. I don't want them to learn anything from us. No, I'm kidding. They could if they were smart enough to listen. No, that's mean. I won't say that. You know, it's interesting, since I took this job and I'm fairly well-connected in the media-space in D.C. and so I talk to those and they're a lot of my friends. I go to lunch in the *Post* cafeteria sometimes. It's delicious.

Michael O'Connell

Well, that's your indicator right there. A newspaper having a cafeteria.

Tiffany Shackelford

Well, exactly.

Michael O'Connell

Should that be where the money is being spent? Justing saying. Go on.

Tiffany Shackelford

But, you know, I think that they're sort of fascinated in same way that you're fascinated by the cool rocker that wears leather pants. I think we actually who we get better response from and the people that want to partner with us and really are like, "Yeah, you guys get it," are the public media, which is interesting. But if you think about it, we have a lot of the same ...

Michael O'Connell

Challenges.

Megan Cloherty

And audience.

Tiffany Shackelford

Challenges but also similarities and audience. Exactly. You read alts when you're young. When you grow up, you listen to NPR. You know, it's like add a tote bag, lose the ratty jeans.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Michael O'Connell

Listen to bluegrass.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yeah, you move from punk rock to bluegrass. It's a weird phenomena, but it happens. It happened to me once and I'm not really comfortable talking about it. Let me just throw in another thing. The alts are also taking advantage of the sort of community and local in some smart ways too. You know, we've got a company that's ... the [Arkansas Times](#). They will do all your social media. So they're actually there for you. They'll be your Twitter handle, your Facebook, etcetera. So, the [East Bay Express](#) is doing this thing where they work with the local chamber of commerce and do do-it-yourself ads for local companies as long as they're part of the chamber. So it's a directory plus a local ad play. So we're doing some pretty innovative monetization things too.

Tiffany Shackelford

And the thing that we're working on as an organization that I'm just going to, I've got to say because I'm pretty excited about it. We're working with a Norwegian company called

CSense to build a recommendation engine across alts. We also have partners like the Media Consortium and Investigative News Network and some public media partners that are also. So we'll have this amazing progressive recommendation engine. Think about the deep verticals you can get out that.

Megan Cloherty

Recommending what, though?

Tiffany Shackelford

Different content. So, if you read a piece of content on reproductive justice in the [Wilamette Week](#) in Portland then you get a, it's a widget or a different page that says, "You might be interested in these other five pieces of content." We're going to throw an interstitial ad up in between it so everybody gets a cut. And interstitials you sell as sponsorships as sort of a high end ad. So we're actually thinking about and pushing monetization models in a lot of different ways, but, again, we're not trying to reinvent. We're trying to go around and rethink.

Michael O'Connell

You're sort of almost creating a wire service for alts and then building a advertising system around that.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yeah, and it may fail horribly. But, it's kind of a new play on things that hasn't been done before. And if you look at all of the, you know, I obsess about what Pew Research Center and Burrell and Forrest are all saying, "Oh, what are people doing?" And we know that they're going deep and they want to read verticals and they actually do, if there's a leaning, they want to read more in that leaning. They don't want to go to Fox News if they're ...

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

So, how can we take advantage of that? We also know the local to national play is huge and understanding things on both those sides is pretty interesting to people, particularly our reader. Our readers, unlike the dailies, which is actually kind of cool if you think about it, for advertising or targeting sakes, they are by large percentages, educated voters or activists and very conscientious. Now, they usually have pet issues obviously, but very conscientious about those. How can we take advantage of this kind of reader in a way that the daily doesn't have that kind of reader nor will they because it's a general swath. And that's look, a different kind of thing.

Megan Cloherty

A different audience.

Tiffany Shackelford

I do eventually get back to your questions, but just to get back to your question, that's sort of a unique way that we're trying to take advantage of the digital space and our audience in a way that the dailies really can't or other media types can't.

Michael O'Connell

Speak a little bit to something that we were talking about before, the long form. The instinct has been, especially as we involve digital in the way that we're distributing our content, that short, people want little bites. They want this. But people still want to read longer form. They want to read longer form online even.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

What are your thoughts about that?

Tiffany Shackelford

Well, I think that's a really interesting one. That actually scared me a lot because I thought how are we ever going to get Gen-Y and Millennial readers because they got, I was going with the sort staid, cliché of, "They tweet. They have no attention span." Totally wrong, it turns out. Actually, and hell, add a recession and they have more time on their hands than anybody.

Michael O'Connell

And the Internet is cheap, relatively.

Tiffany Shackelford

Right. And what we actually know now from the latest research is on the contrary, the Millennials and the Gen-Y, they might not want to go wide, but they do want to go deep. And they love long form. Look at the success of ----- and [Longreads](#) and [Longform.org](#), all this bubble up of these online sites that are dedicated to the love of long form.

Megan Cloherty

Well, I wonder if it's because all they've gotten is short form. I mean, Twitter, not necessarily Facebook, but like everything's shared so quickly and everything's so short that if you present them with something that's long and interesting, they're like, "What's this?"

Michael O'Connell

Well, I think the way we're digesting the Internet is a little bit different than it was just a few years ago. And I think you can point to things even like Netflix. The availability of having digital downloads of TV shows where you end up watching a whole season in a

weekend that you're dedicating more time in an online environment so you're feeling more comfortable. If I'm going to invest a couple of hours in this TV show, why don't I know spend a little more time reading this. So I don't think the initial reaction of, "Oh, they're only going to be on for a few minutes. Video can only be two minutes long." I think that's all gone by the wayside.

Tiffany Shackelford

Well, I think for us, our long form is a little different. The *National Journal* is a wonderful publication, but that long form, that's a lot of broccoli up in your face. You know what I'm saying? That's a lot of policy.

Michael O'Connell

It's all how you present it.

Tiffany Shackelford

I know.

Megan Cloherty

Broccoli.

Tiffany Shackelford

Listen, I am the Washington nerd who still reads the *National Journal* religiously. I love it.

Michael O'Connell

Oh, you're that one.

Tiffany Shackelford

I'm the one person, yes. And they call me. I get cards from ... and no, that doesn't happen. But, you present some long form that's really kind of meaty, a little bit, pushing it a little bit about something you know nothing about or a little something about or something you can relate to. That's the other thing that the alts do, not just long form, but it's really a personal narrative style and that style really speaks actually not just to people that have always read it, but the younger generation actually really loves that. And again, I go back to, we had Matt Thompson from NPR come and spoke to us and he said, "Y'all invented the Internet." And it's true. That sort of voice and you put it into long form narrative, you've got something. You've got, it's like a delicious salad with bacon in it, right? It's a little vegetable but like, you know ...

Megan Cloherty

There's a treat in there for you.

Michael O'Connell

And what does that play into? That plays into interactivity. That plays into Facebook and Twitter and the ability to have your audience dialogue with you.

Tiffany Shackelford

Exactly. Exactly. And that's actually something, we're trying to build tools. Playing on this wire service idea, we actually built, with a company called Content.com, we built actually an exchange platform that our folks can exchange, but they can also use it to really engage with their community. Almost like a [CNN iReport](#) but for alts. Get like photos from them, but also kind of get these conversations going. Because we think that that's pretty important. Obviously, again, with an alt, you definitely get a new kind of crazy, but you also get —

Michael O'Connell

Prickly pears.

Tiffany Shackelford

You also get some people who really are dedicated in a way that you're not going to get in other media forms. That's always a lovely thing.

Megan Cloherty

She's great.

Michael O'Connell

No, yeah. She just keeps talking.

Megan Cloherty

It's funny because I don't, full disclosure, I don't know a ton about alts. Especially growing up in D.C. and then I went to Missouri, which is like where legacy was born.

Michael O'Connell

I grew up in Indiana and once you found stuff, it was like a revelation that you'd find these zines. These things that some guy would do on mimeograph and drop off at the record store, a hundred copies. This is the craziest thing. It really is message in the bottle journalism or narrative that you're just putting it out there and hope that somebody connects with it. And then they'll have their mailing address on it. You write them and suddenly you get a subscription.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yeah, you're friends for life. That's not different from a blog now, I mean, the concept of blogging now.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah.

Tiffany Shackelford

But yeah, the thing is that the alt press was born in a concept of radicalism. It really came out of the '60s radicalism. It's different again, which is interesting because the whole attitude, we've got a different attitude from the "boys on the bus." And I say screw — all my mentors of my early journalism days are going to listen to this and be like, "Tiffany." But, screw the boys on the bus, right? Getting back to this concept of the "how did we get here" with the mainstream media solving these problems, well, part of it is a real lack of vision on their part. Right? Like why didn't they stop staying at The Ritz while they were on the road with Kennedy and saying —

Michael O'Connell

There was a lot of fat on that bone.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yeah, say, "What is going on here? Why do we have this 'Chinese Wall' between editorial and business? Why? Why?"

Michael O'Connell

Oh my God.

Tiffany Shackelford

Is that really the best idea?

Michael O'Connell

I am so glad you said that.

Tiffany Shackelford

You know.

Michael O'Connell

No, no, I mean, it surprised a lot of people. It was church and state. It was like the two never talked to each other, but the fact is —

Megan Cloherty

They still don't.

Michael O'Connell

And guess what? The reason why we're in the situation that we are is because it's the Wizard of Oz. The curtain's been pulled back. The person who's been running everything is the business side and that's been, I think, the bitterest pill for people to swallow is to suddenly realize, "Oh, for God's sake, newspapers are businesses. That all these decisions, that my budget's being cut, my staff is being cut, having nothing to do with journalism, they have everything to do with business." If the business is not properly fed, it will eat on you. So, this is, what you said before, this whole idea ... journalists should

always have been aware, they should always have been aware that they were part of a business. And the way that we sort of in our minds created this barrier that separated us, just for our own ethical whatever, to make us feel that we're better or whatever, I mean, we had to put newspapers on people's doorsteps and the way that was paid for was by advertising. And when the advertising went by the wayside, then you would maybe lose a job.

Megan Cloherty

But all those general managers knew. It's not like maybe their cub reporters didn't know, but all their general managers knew that's where the money was coming from and they had to ... and the model never changed. People did know.

Michael O'Connell

We're dealing now with a decision that was made over 100 years ago that journalism would be linked to advertising and that when the ad sales went down, again, this has nothing to do with the Internet. When the ad sales went down, newsrooms started shrinking, papers started closing, it had less to do with the Internet and had more to do with the economy, with all the other stuff that was going on, with the price of paper, the price of distribution. All of these things are really what spelled the trouble that we're in now, not anything to do with the rise of the Internet. Internet as a savior? We'll see.

Tiffany Shackelford

Right, exactly.

Megan Cloherty

We're tangent-ing. This is a large tangent.

Tiffany Shackelford

It was a large tangent, but I think, I don't know, I think that's irrelevant for me because I say that's why, people ask me why I took this job because I was more of a digital person. Why was I interested in coming in here and being a, I hate this word, but this sort of change agent.

Michael O'Connell

Change agent.

Tiffany Shackelford

I wish it came with a like a hat or a patch or something really crazy to make it an agent.

Megan Cloherty

A jacket.

Tiffany Shackelford

But it's because I feel that because the alt press has this sort of this revolutionary idea and this contrarian start that isn't that hundred-year's, yes, there's obviously some of that in it, but I feel like we've got the best opportunity as anybody out there to push it forward and to redefine what we are and to actually survive as anyone. So, yes it's a tangent, but it's relevant for me when I think about how I'm going to push this organization forward and its members to really get to where they need to go. At the end of the day, I trash a little bit of it, but I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't believe in journalism and if I didn't believe in telling stories and holding power accountable.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, no.

Tiffany Shackelford

We're sitting here in this Federal News Radio studio and what we're all doing is still the most important job at the end of the day. So, let me trash, but then let me love.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no. We all love journalism at the end of the day. But to say that the model for journalism is one thing is ridiculous.

Tiffany Shackelford

It is.

Michael O'Connell

It can be lots of different things. And I think that people need to understand that as soon as possible. I need to ask you this about your organization. If you are such a bunch of divergent individuals, alternative attitudes, how do you band together?

Tiffany Shackelford

It's often like herding cats to be very honest. And there's, you know, larger chains. We have the Voice Media Group, which has 11 papers. We have SouthComm, which has eight papers. We have a lot of independents. We also have small like free papers and then we have some members who own the alt and the Hispanic paper and the Auto-Trader. We have a lot. We do have a lot of different kind of ideas and it's not really, it's kind of like spokes on a wheel sometimes. But, at the end of the day, they're all there together again because of these fundamentals. They want to speak truth to power. They want to do this and they believe in it, because they could go make real money elsewhere. This is not a cash cow, as we all know.

That has actually been one of my major challenges, to make sure that we're doing enough to get the tiny paper that just wants help thinking about getting a CMS [content management system], but we're also helping the papers that are ready to really, really push forward and go to the huge next level and think about all multimedia, mobile first, really everything digitally oriented. What I've been doing is I've partnering with startups or companies that are overseas that want to get into the U.S. market, so I get cool stuff

for free, to get very blatant about what I'm doing with that. And I'm trying to get a lot of different kinds of solutions. Like I mentioned the CSense partnership, [Content.com](#). We've got a couple of other things that we're doing, one with Onswipe, which is a free tablet solution that we like. And we're trying to get enough solutions in there so that we can serve all kinds of different members wherever they are.

Megan Cloherty

Whatever level they're at.

Tiffany Shackelford

Whatever the level they're at. And the other thing I'll do and this is a slight tangent and I'm sorry about this but it has to happen, one of the things that I identified about a year ago that was frustrating to me is that when we talk about foundations and philanthropic money and all this money is going into the development of new editorial ideas. I think it's great that Knight and Patterson and all these foundations give money to all these new editorial ideas, but this is irrelevant for our overall conversation. We've got to get paid, yo.

Michael O'Connell

Right. This whole non-profit thing is —

Tiffany Shackelford

And editorial tools are helpful, but at the end of the day, has it moved the business model forward? No. Probably not. Maybe, but probably not. And I looked around at where is that money? Where are those labs? Where's the Knight Innovation Lab for Business? Where's the Duke ...? There's all these places, but nobody is really looking at the R&D for business.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

New York Times has its own lab, *Washington Post*. So the big guys do and of course they would because they have the money. But nobody's doing it for us, for the smaller radio stations, for the community papers, for the alt weeklies. So that's the other thing that I'm actually focusing on and I just got a fellow from Georgetown University to help me research this. And, I'm putting together kind of a lab for lack of a better way. It's to help consult and identify free tools that are already out there and holes in the market, things that need to be developed. And, that's another way that I'm trying to get to serve all these different members, but it's not easy and it's hard to be an association that speaks to all the members, but we're doing our damndest to try. And sometimes that's poking them a little in places that they're not comfortable, which is sort of ironic considering that's what they do. And then I come behind them and like, "Oh." But I think it's important and they're receptive to that. So we're trying to push forward all of our mem-

bers. And then, some won't and that's cool. If you're comfortable doing your thing and making money and you're where you need to be, I'm not going to mess it.

Michael O'Connell

Maybe share with us what's working for you.

Tiffany Shackelford

Right. And actually that's something that's interesting. Despite, all the sometimes competition aside, although we don't have many, we have a few two paper towns, but not many. We are actually one of the better groups at truly sharing ideas. You know that I'm part of ONA obviously as you mentioned and there's sort of big presentations of success, but we don't really have those conversations of this is working, this is how we tweaked it, this is the dashboard that we put in. We don't have that on the national ONA level. That, as you guys know, is something that Matt Mansfield and I, who direct the ONA DC program, have really tried to do though, is really grow potential ideas out there for people in a way that, and that's really the point of the locals. So, that's not to say it's not happening. But, for AAN, we try to make our conventions really about ideas sharing, sometimes that work and that don't work. We have panels that like, "Tell us about an event that just blew up in your face."

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Tiffany Shackelford

The nice thing is that people are really willing to share in a way that maybe others sometimes can't. We bring in for our conferences it's the publishers and the owners and the higher on the food chain, not the 22-year-old producers who maybe don't have the full view. They're doing amazing stuff on their own, but it's a different group.

Megan Cloherty

So given, obviously we've talked about a lot, given how alternatives seem to be open to reinventing themselves and open to new technology and rethinking things, do you feel like it's going in the right direction? Do you feel like journalism, as far as alt weeklies go, is moving forward?

Tiffany Shackelford

I do. I feel like it's moving forward. Now, I feel like I wish it was going more faster and more furious like everything else. I have a piece of art on my wall in my office that says, "Change takes time. Be patient." And I have to often remember that. That it is onboarding people onto new technology, getting training, getting people ready to go, but also teaching them how, if something's not working that what can we do to get you out of that really fast.

Tiffany Shackelford

For instance, at our upcoming conference we're doing a mini-MBA. It's like we're going to do a half day where you figure out how to do a business plan, not for your whole business, that's too big. But business plans for each new monetization model. We're talking like it should be a one-pager and you should have in there what the ROI [return on investment] looks like, what success looks like, and what failure looks like, so you know quickly.

Megan Cloherty

You identify it quickly.

Tiffany Shackelford

Yeah. Cause that's huge. And that's just what papers across the board have not done well. And so, I do feel like we're moving forward. Of course I wish it was faster, because also I'm not known for my patience across the board. But I think that we're moving forward in a way that other people aren't. We're doing it a bit under the radar, which is OK with me right now. And I kind of say like you know let the mainstreams circle around and shit themselves again twice, I don't care. Cause right now, my success looks like the alts and I am going all in here because I feel that they've got the best chance of pretty much, public media and alts I'll say, actually, and some of the entrepreneurial bloggers if they do it right. Those entrepreneurial hyper-locals and community and let me say, I'd put community weeklies, lovely cousins, as I mentioned earlier, I put those in there. Look, just break it down one other way, which has nothing to do with digital but is a good way to think about it. Right now, in this country, at the macro local, or whatever you want to call it, movement is huge. Local food. All over D.C., "Oh, this was harvested at a farm a mile away." And I think, "In Anacostia? Oh my God." But that's ...

Michael O'Connell

Get to know your chicken.

Tiffany Shackelford

Right. Be like on "Portlandia," go pick your chicken. But local food, local artisans, local everything. We don't see it probably as much being Washingtonians because this is more of an international, transient place. But, you bet your ass that in all these smaller cities, local wins. I went up to Burlington, Vt., where one of extremely successful papers is, [Seven Days](#). I was treated to a smorgasbord of delicious local food. Of local artisans. Of local everything. And it really is lovely. And local feels good. Going to a farmers market feels awesome, right? You don't get there that often because that thing happened and you fell down. I don't know. You don't do it as much as you should probably but local feels good. Think of that in terms of your news consumption. Local feels good, right? And it doesn't matter if you're consuming it on a tablet, in your Google Glass, which we are actually experimenting with Google Glass. We've got a great experiment happening in the alts. So look out for that. Or whatever. Maybe that should be the new tagline, "Local feels good." I just thought of that.

Michael O'Connell

There you go. Trademarked here.

Tiffany Shackelford

Is it?

Michael O'Connell

No.

Tiffany Shackelford

Can I trademark it? I've got my attorney on speed dial.

Michael O'Connell

I'm sure you do.

Tiffany Shackelford

I'm like Hunter S. Thompson. I like to travel with my attorney and go to the bar with him and get him to allow me other shots.

Michael O'Connell

Here's my attorney. Yeah, we're going to go out and shoot some guns after this and drink some scotch.

Tiffany Shackelford

Right. And take some peyote.

Michael O'Connell

There we go.

Tiffany Shackelford

That's very alt. Wait, we're not.

Michael O'Connell

That's wrong. We shouldn't do that. This has been an invigorating conversation. Thank you very much for coming in Tiffany. You gave us a lot of things to think about.

Tiffany Shackelford

Thanks for having me. I love talking about it. I love thinking the big thoughts about it.

Megan Cloherty

Where will people find you online?

Tiffany Shackelford

www.altweeklies.com is our website. We've got a lot going on there. I tweet [@Tiffany-Shack](https://twitter.com/Tiffany-Shack). They're not always family friendly. I apologize in advance for offending you. And I'm pretty available online. I love to get feedback. Call me. Facebook me. Whatever you want and I'll answer eventually.

Michael O'Connell

How about D.C. journalists who want to hook up with your group at ONA?

Tiffany Shackelford

For ONA, it's a MeetUp group on MeetUp.com and it's just ONADC and the hashtag for that is #ONADC, so you can look us up on Twitter.

Michael O'Connell

A lot of creativity in that.

Tiffany Shackelford

I know, right? We have monthly meetups for that group. We have those every month.

Michael O'Connell

Oh yeah. Always interesting things.

Tiffany Shackelford

Also, Alt Weeklies conferences are open to the public, if you'd like to join us. And I do have to say, I've been to every journalism organization that there is in the U.S., we throw the best damn parties in the business. If you just want to get your mind blown. We've had burlesque shows and gospel singers and brass bands and an acrobatic troupe.

Megan Cloherty

You won't find that at SPJ [Society of Professional Journalists].

Michael O'Connell

No.

Tiffany Shackelford

No you won't.

Michael O'Connell

This is the fun side of journalism. Exactly. Well thank you very much, Tiffany.

Tiffany Shackelford

Thank you.

