

Interview: Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab, December 2012

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

Jan Schaffer wants to help media entrepreneurs find new ways to succeed. A Pulitzer-Prize-winning business editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer, she left her daily journalism gig in 1994 to become one of the pioneers of the growing civic-journalism movement.

In 2002, she launched J-Lab [www.j-lab.org] to bring journalists together with innovative computer technologies.

Thank you for joining us in the podcast.

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I'm glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

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

Where do you see journalism at right now?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I think journalism is very much in flux. A lot of legacy news organizations have been disrupted. But at the same time, a lot of media entrepreneurs are coming up with entirely new media products that are very exciting. They are filling the gaps that have been created by old media, where old media has pulled out of areas or pulled reporters off the streets. So, there's a lot of innovation going on and a lot of entrepreneurship going on.

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

So, where does the J-Lab fit into this mix.

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

J-Lab is a 10-year-old center. We're at American University and we have funded media startups, mostly community news startups in some 70 communities. We also fund women entrepreneur news and information startups. So, we've been on the entrepreneurship end for years, but we've also funded innovations in journalism with the Knight-Batten Awards and innovations, and I think we've distributed more than 200 prizes for journalists' creative ideas.

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

How would you describe the journalists who come to J-Lab and try to get some support?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

We put out a national call for applications and ideas. So we're really reaching out to journalists who have an idea, think they can make it happen. We give them some seed money to develop kind of a proof-of-concept website and get it launched in hopes that

they can leverage that proof-of-concept into more funding in grants or advertising or however they elect to support it. The people who apply sometimes they are journalists, professional journalists who have taken buyouts in their news organization or they've been downsized by their news organization or they just see an opportunity that they want to pursue on their own. And other times, they are people we would call civic catalysts. They're people active in their community who see a gap in news-information and they have a lot of historical knowledge about their community and they want to convert their civic participation into a kind of media participation.

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

Your roots and that of the J-Lab come out of the civic journalist sort of approach. How would you define that and what is the role that is kind of playing in journalism right now?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

Civic journalism was very big in the 1990s to the early 2000s. It was an effort by legacy news organizations if they could do their journalism that would engage citizens a lot more actively, seeking out voter agendas rather than candidate agendas. Seeking out, I would say, visioning opportunities to seek what a community could be, what the solutions to problems could be. It was actually very interactive, but it was really before the Internet came on strong, and the interactivity took place in real rooms instead of virtual rooms. You'd have a town hall meeting, for example, or a focus group that deliberating some of this stuff. From there it was an easy transition to cyberspace, from real space to cyberspace, where you could do some of the same interactivity online.

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

You say this sort of came out of legacy journalism outlets who were reaching out to the community. One of the things about digital journalism, about the Internet, is that it's actually put a lot of those tools into the hands of citizens and less in the control, maybe, of legacy journalists, legacy journalism outlets. How has that sort of played out in the last few years?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I think we see it playing out in two ways. We have seen citizens become media creators on their own and startup their own initiatives in one way or another, the tech tools are very easy to use for anyone. We have seen them take a more active role in responding or sometimes criticizing media reports that come out when they think they're either unfair or incomplete, or they have something to contribute in the way of a tip or some knowledge so that they can crowdsource a story. And I think we sort of see it in a demand for more transparency in reporting. Citizens don't just take your word for it anymore. They can find out data themselves from other sources online, to even Truth Squad [<http://truthsquad.tv>] what media is reporting. They can take a role that way as well.

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

That's certainly a very valuable thing to do when you think about, I remember when ... we first starting to talk about citizen journalists they were thinking, "Oh, you know, mom and pop are going to cover the city council meeting and they weren't going to necessarily have the same approach." The fact that you're saying they're actually being media critics and monitoring the coverage and the fairness is a very powerful use of what's going on here. What are the challenges facing media entrepreneurs right now?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

We know that if you build it, that doesn't mean necessarily mean that people will come.

You have to figure out ways to get the word out about what you're doing. Often that means, you don't have a marketing budget, so it's a lot of guerrilla marketing, using social media and Facebook and Twitter and whatnot to get the word out.

I think scaling is a challenge. You're looking for revenues and revenues are sparse for everyone. So, if you want to add reporters, cover more territory, cover more issues, post content more frequently, usually you need more person-power to do that. And, sometimes people can do this as a hobby, more likely they need to get paid something for it, and so the challenge really is to raise revenues to make that happen.

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

Getting paid is value in and of itself.

I know, it's funny, they way you sort of described it, it's what legacy newsrooms are facing in reverse, where they're coming at it from a big company trying to scale down to a place that they can work with, now, a smaller staff, tighter budget in leaner times. On the other hand, you have people coming up from sort of the bottom who have nothing that are trying to gather enough information, gather enough skills, create a product that people will want to pay for or at least use to reach that level. Everybody's facing the same problems as you were sort of saying.

Have media entrepreneurs, have they changed a lot in the last 10 or 15 years just with the Internet? Are they looking for different things or is it really kind of the same, just a slightly different "coat," for lack of a better word?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I'm not sure the word "media entrepreneur" was around much 10 or 15 years ago, I mean, or if they were, it would be people like Ted Turner who founded CNN. They're not the kind of media entrepreneurs we think of as today. I think that there are sort of front-end and backend media entrepreneurs. There are media entrepreneurs who are looking to create content out front, cover gaps in coverage, cover niche topics that are not being covered, covering communities that are not being covered, doing sites with narrative science reporting, long-form journalism reporting, all kinds of opportunities out there.

And then, there are media entrepreneurs that are doing backend creation, which would be to create projects that might be a way to visualize data. They might be a way to develop a mobile app for something. They might be a way to aggregate or crowdsource something in unique ways. But it's a different kind of entrepreneurship.

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

They're not so much building the whole shop, but maybe they're building something that could make somebody be able to do their job a little bit better.

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

Exactly.

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

Also at American University, you're teaching the graduate program media entrepreneurship. I think you just recently finished up the first round of that. Tell me about that program and what your experience was in teaching.

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

This is a very innovative program that just launched in September, and American University's School of Communication is doing it in partnership with the Kogod School of Business. It's designed for mid-career people who have in mind a media project they want to develop. And so, the communications courses meet every other Saturday. The business school courses meet one night a week, so you can still hold a job and do this. It's a 20-month program, 10 courses, 30 credits, and I just taught the Seminar in Media entrepreneurship. It was a great cohort group of students. We had a really good time. They had great ideas for projects.

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

Certainly, you don't need to go into specifics. How would you describe the projects?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

Without disclosing anyone's proprietary ideas, they ranged from news projects on special topics, from education to geographic sites in parts of Coastal Carolina to a sports app to opportunities for public radio to do some creative things, to opportunities for USA Today to do some creative things. They were very interesting.

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

And the class was pretty much made up, I think you said, of mid-career people?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

Yep. Everybody had a full-time job and there are nine in this cohort group. I think the next cohort group will be much bigger.

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

What was your sense of the students who were coming in at the time? Did they all come in with an idea? Did they develop an idea as they were there. How did that sort of change?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

They were given a heads up that they would need to develop an idea in their first courses. So they often came in with an idea, but several of them pivoted over the semester to figure out that their original idea was not maybe the best one they could pursue. And so they kind of refined it and came up with something different.

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

In a nutshell, can you describe what the program is trying to do?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

We realized that media ideas are coming from a lot of different places. They're coming from traditional journalists. They're coming from nonprofits and NGOs [non-governmental organizations] who are now creating a lot of media products that can be commoditized, but they don't think of them that way. Everybody needs to figure out there are opportunities for e-books. There are opportunities for websites. There are opportunities for niche news and information, and this is an opportunity to help those who see what they could do actually do it with some skills and finance and marketing and understanding the landscape and understanding, you know, how to get something off the ground.

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

Let's talk a little bit about this report that you released a few weeks ago. It's called *Networked Journalism: What Works*. [<http://www.j-lab.org/publications/net-j>] Talk about what went into this and ... well, let's talk about, first, what was it about?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

We just released a report called *Networked Journalism: What Works* and it's a deep dive into nine collaborative pilot projects we launched in news organizations around the country. The deal was we asked one legacy news organization — eight of them were newspapers, one was a public radio station — to try to partner with five independent, hyperlocal news startups in their communities for a year and see how it worked. And by and large, the projects were very successful. We had cases in Seattle, they grew their networks from five to more than 50 partners. Similarly, in Portland, Ore., they now have something like 40 network partners.

We had a couple projects fail. They didn't quite make a go of it. But by and large, those that did, did a really nice job. We had two topic networks in there, one on sports and one covering hydraulic fracking in Pennsylvania. So it's very innovative, all different models.

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

Tell us about the report and how it breaks things down.

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

We give an overview section that talks about what you need to do to make these collaborations work and I think a couple of our takeaways were that the hub news organization really needs to give their partners visibility on the homepage to drive traffic to them, because they're not paying them for content. They're really doing outbound links. So, you need to give them traffic as an incentive to participate in any kind of network. I think the partners, on the other hand, need to produce enough content that they get the visibility on the homepage that drives the traffic so that it's a win-win for both partners.

I think that we also began to see, very clearly, how fragile the nature is of some of the startups. I think only one of the nine projects has all of the partners it started out with. Many of their partners have gone belly up. Their founders moved, changed locations, gave it up, got another job, whatever.

And we also saw there are some other trends. There's kind of a rise of advocacy journalism. There's a rise of sponsored content, where people are paying for content onsite. There's very limited bandwidth for innovation in mainstream news organizations, so that surfaced as well in this. But we've gotten nine chapters in here that look at each site individually.

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

Where can people find out or get a copy of this report? Can they find it online?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

They can order a hard copy online. I think it's 12 bucks, and you can read it, the html version, at <http://www.j-lab.org/>.

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

Thinking about going forward with journalists and entrepreneurs, where would you like to see ... where do you think there's a need in journalism for more entrepreneurship?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I certainly think we'll see, and I hope we do see, watchdog sites happening in every one of the 50 states. We've got a quite a large handful now — California Watch [<http://californiawatch.org>], WisconsinWatch [<http://www.wisconsinwatch.org>], Vermont Digger [<http://vtdigger.org>], Texas Tribune [<http://www.texastribune.org>] — that are really paying attention to what's happening out of state government. They're doing investigative and enterprise stories. And they seem to be making a go of it. Many of them have organized into their own professional group, the Investigative News Network [<http://www.investigativenewsnetwork.org>]. I think we'll see more of that.

I think on the hyperlocal level, we'll see more and more sites crop up that are covering local communities that really are too small to get much attention from the mainstream

news organizations. People want to know what's happening and small towns and rural areas that get very little coverage. Nowadays, they don't even have a weekly newspaper much less a daily newspaper, so there are opportunities there as well.

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

Before we wrap up, I want to go back and ask you one more question about education and entrepreneurship. As, sort of, the industry is evolving with new technology, how well do you think the journalism education is keeping up with what's going on?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I think that the lightbulb has gone on and journalism schools realize that they have to change their curriculum. This no longer about teaching people to write long-form narrative journalism anymore as it is learning how to re-architect your stories for the Web, do smaller components, put things in different bundles, get the lede and the nutgraph much higher up in the stories.

And I think that the curriculum is also changing to include entrepreneurship. There's a realization that a lot of students will take some of the media tools and multimedia skills they are learning and use them to develop their own initiatives, their own projects. And so, how do you give them the business skills, the marketing knowledge, the understanding of what it would take to run an operation as well as just report a story.

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

I know that way back when I was in j-school, way back when, that I think there might've been a business-track group, a business component of it, but I think it was either as an elective. It wasn't something that was part of the base curriculum. Maybe that's one way the focus needs to shift or may be it has, I don't know. It's been a long time since I've been in school.

So, what are your hopes for the next five or 10 years with entrepreneurship, with journalism, with journalism education?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

I think that universities are going to undergo the same disruption that news organizations have undergone, and, as new competitors come on, much more technologically savvy, we'll see a lot more online learning. And so, journalism schools need to figure out how they fit into that and how they can come up with creative new products, new degree programs, stackable degrees. Certificates or whatever. I think that will happen in academia. It has to happen.

In the world of news and information, I think we'll probably, unfortunately see a lot metro dailies suffering even more, maybe even going belly up, but a lot of startups, taking their place, probably all digital and focused on smaller slices of topics than the mass market daily used to cover.

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

And the fact that people are able to search, I think that's changed the way people have been able to digest news. They've been able to search for topics they want to do or they follow people through social media and get links and things like that. Not only are they digesting the news differently, they're getting it in different ways, so it's difficult for having a one-stop-shop anymore.

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

Right. There's just not that interest in the audience anymore for a one-stop-shop. It's a lot of wasted dead trees, I guess, to produce it.

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

I think if you only got the newspaper because you wanted to find out the ball scores or how your favorite team was doing, now you've got so many websites and so many radio, TV, I mean, there's so many other options you have available. You get the scores and play-by-play on cellphone. It's sort of the fracturing our industry in the way it sort of reinventing itself.

Well, this has been really interesting, really fascinating. I really appreciate you giving me the time. Is there anything else you want to say about J-Lab? That you want people to know?

Jan Schaffer, executive director, J-Lab

No. We've got a lot of online learning modules for people who want to start their own websites. We have a lot of tutorials on how to do it, a lot of information on the changing news ecosystem, so people might find that valuable if they want to step into this space.