PRACTIONER Q&A

OBJECTIVITY IS NOT NEUTRAL: QUEER JOURNALISM AS COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

JOSEPH JAAFARI, CONDUCTED BY CODY HAYS

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Practitioner Q & A

Objectivity Is Not Neutral: Queer Journalism as Community Accountability

Interview with Joseph Jaafari, conducted by Cody Hays

LOOKOUT Publications, Arizona State University

Joseph Jaafari's Biography

Joseph Jaafari is the founder and executive editor of *LOOKOUT Publications*, a newsroom dedicated to queer-centered investigative reporting. With a background in journalism and a commitment to equity and transparency, Jaafari has positioned *LOOKOUT* as a model for how queer-led media can hold institutions accountable while uplifting community narratives often ignored or misrepresented by mainstream outlets.

Project Description

This practitioner interview explores how independent, queer-led journalism challenges fundamental assumptions about objectivity, newsworthiness, and community accountability. Through the lens of *LOOKOUT Publications*, the nation's first nonprofit investigative newsroom focused on LGBTQ+ issues, founder Joseph Jaafari articulates an alternative model where journalism functions not as a neutral observer but as an active participant in community empowerment. The conversation examines how marginalized communities can reclaim narrative power when traditional newsrooms fail them, revealing tensions between institutional journalism's claimed objectivity and its documented biases.

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Question: *Could you take us back to the moment when the idea for* LOOKOUT *Publications was born? What gap did you see in journalism that you wanted to fill?*

Jaafari: I've been working in journalism for over 10 years—starting as a news intern in 2014 and moving into investigative reporting in 2019. I spent about two years at the *Arizona Republic* covering investigative stories, and before that worked at Spotlight PA and The Marshall Project. Now I'm running *LOOKOUT Publications*, the nation's first nonprofit investigative newsroom focused on LGBTQ+ issues.

When I would go to gay bars and talk about stories I was working on within the criminal justice system, a lot of people would say they didn't read the *Republic*. When I asked why, they kept saying they did not trust it to cover their community specifically, and that bled into them not trusting the *Republic* to cover any community specifically. That was not unique to the queer community. When I came to the *Republic*, it was a big, hard lift to get sources to talk to me about policing because the *Republic* had done such a poor job covering it for so long.

I was brought on and paid a decent salary to fix that, and I thought it was weird that there was no opportunity to try to fix that within a [LGBTQ+] population of a quarter million in Arizona. When I brought it up to my editor, saying I'm talking to quite a few people who say they don't trust the *Republic's* coverage of their communities, I thought there was an opportunity here to do deep reporting that isn't just fluff pieces during Pride or reactive stories. I was told "let's talk about it in the future," or in newsroom terms: no.

Months went by, nothing happened. Then the 2022 legislative calendar brought all these bad bills, and I kept saying we have an opportunity here to do good storytelling about how these bills are affecting queer people. I was told this is not important right now. I kept forecasting that this would be a problem in the 2022 and 2024 elections, and reporting from Politico and the *New York Times* confirmed this was going to be messaging from the Republican Party. But I was told we shouldn't care about it.

In protest, I started *LOOKOUT* as a Substack in December 2022, just saying I'd do a story every other week based on what I was hearing from the community. Our first story went viral. I put it under my husband's name because I could get fired—and it scooped the *Republic's* coverage. It showed that if we were on the forefront of telling stories that affected people in our community, there could be real change. It actually did: The mayor of the city where we did that story launched a hate crime investigation.

My editor knew I was doing it under my husband's name—he knows my writing, he knows my husband was working in real estate and was not a writer. His boss basically told him to shut it down or fire me. My editor refused to fire me because he believed in what *LOOKOUT* was doing. After a couple of months of me continuing to push out stories and scooping other publications, we applied for a grant from the American Journalism Project for $400,000, and we got it. The caveat was that I had to leave the *Arizona Republic* to do this full

time, and my husband had to leave his job too. He became the executive director and handles the business side.

LOOKOUT came about as a protest legacy news outlets that refused to acknowledge that our stories were more than just fluff or reactive trauma—that there was a real need.

Editorial Context: This origin story reveals how *LOOKOUT* emerged from a fundamental breakdown in trust between mainstream journalism and marginalized communities. Research confirms this pattern: Mainstream newsrooms have historically operated through "routinized selection and packaging of ostensibly 'objective' and novel information by professional journalists in accordance with long-standing news values" (Billard, 2024, p. 69)—values that systematically exclude marginalized voices. By prioritizing elite sources over community members, conventional journalism "solidifies and legitimizes the existing status quo and societal power structure" (Li, 2023, p. 541).

What Jaafari built represents what scholars call "alternative journalism"—a practice that challenges dominant frameworks by centering community voices and rejecting false claims of neutrality. As Byrd (2025) explains, alternative journalism embraces its mission "to tell the stories of the people and spaces the alternative press covers in the language of those who are in the group," recognizing that empowerment means giving "ordinary people" the opportunity to "tell their own stories without formal education or professional expertise" (p. 26). *LOOKOUT's* model demonstrates that accountability to community, not abstract objectivity, creates journalism that actually serves the public interest.

Question: *What does it mean, to you, to practice journalism through a queer lens—not just to cover queer stories?*

Jaafari: It's interesting because when you look at news coverage of queer communities nationally and locally, there's a lot of fluff. There are some serious pieces that I'd argue are the bedrock of good journalism. The *New York Times* does some really good work, like their piece on GLAAD, looking at the nonprofit status and how they mishandled money. That's a really good story written through a queer lens about an organization that's supposed to help this community but is fucking people over.

We did the same thing with our story on nonprofits in Arizona, looking at which ones are mishandling money. It's told through the lens of this is our community, they're supposed to be helping us, so let's look at how these organizations make claims but then actively work against us.

The question is: How do you report through a queer lens? I don't think it's unique. I think it's just looking at it through a lens of empathy and understanding that our lives intersect with every single beat that every newsroom has. It makes no sense why we can't report on our community the same way every newsroom does.

We have beats in education, safety, politics, business, and health. We have a culture beat, but it's woven into politics and education. It's not "there's a drag show happening." It's "there's a drag show being

canceled because the owner is a racist and explicitly said so."

We did a story about drag performers leaving gay bars because they weren't being paid there, but they were being paid at straight bars. These are nuanced culture stories—not about the fluff and glamour of putting on a feather boa, but about the real problems of what it means to be queer in Arizona. And you don't have to tell it in a voicey way. You tell it straightforwardly, as news.

What we're building is journalism that recognizes queer lives aren't separate from the beats that matter to everyone—they're integrated throughout them. It's about holding our own institutions accountable, covering the intersections of our lives with education, housing, employment, and safety, and doing it with the same rigor and seriousness that any good newsroom would bring to coverage of any other community. That's what a queer lens means: not novelty, not spectacle, but accountability and integration.

Editorial Context: Jaafari's approach directly confronts what Bell & Keer (2021) identify as journalism's tendency to treat queer lives as "an unremitting journey of revelation" filled with "rudimentary stories in which writers keep recycling the same narratives" (p. 1248). Instead of the "fluff pieces about the supposed 'novelty'" that characterize mainstream coverage (Billard, 2024, p. 59), *LOOKOUT* treats queer stories as substantive news requiring the same investigative rigor applied to any beat. This means moving beyond using community members solely for "personal life stories" to recognizing them as expert sources on broader civic issues (Li, 2023, p. 525).

Question: *How does your editorial philosophy challenge traditional ideas of objectivity or neutrality in reporting?*

Jaafari: At the very beginning, I struggled with this. I'd ask myself: Do I give space to John Kavanagh [right-wing Arizona politician] in our paper? We did interview him early on, but I quickly realized: Why am I treating this differently than I treated my beats in the military, prisons, and police? I'm not going to interview the head of the white nationalist movement when we're talking about the death penalty. So why would I go to John Kavanagh for comments when I know exactly what his talking points are? I know he wants to use us as a platform. I just will not do it.

We made that mistake early on, but then we pivoted. We said: These are our standards—the same standards as other newsrooms for other beats. We should treat it the same for ourselves. Other newsrooms aren't doing this. They go to Moms for Liberty, they go to Turning Point USA for "both sides" comments, even though they know exactly what their purpose is and what their comments will be. But they do it because it's the "other side."

Here's the thing: Any news organization that says they're classically objective is lying. It's impossible to erase subjectivity as humans. Only AI could arguably do it, but that's programmed by humans too. There's no way we can be fully objective.

The way we approach it is: Is it fair? Is it fair to say this is a racist comment? Is it fair to say this is transphobic? Is it fair to say this person has an agenda? Can we prove it? Yes? Then it's fair to say it.

We're not abandoning standards—we're applying them consistently. We're not being "biased"—we're refusing to pretend that our oppression is a matter of legitimate debate. Our editorial philosophy is rooted in what journalism can achieve when it stops pretending to be objective and starts committing to being fair, accurate, and accountable to the communities it serves. That means we don't platform hate under the guise of balance. It means we apply the same rigorous standards to coverage of our community that serious newsrooms apply to every other beat. And it means we're transparent about our values: We believe queer people deserve to exist, to have rights, and to live free from discrimination. If that makes us "biased," then every newsroom that believes in human dignity is equally "biased"—they've just been calling it "objectivity" for far too long.

Editorial Context: Jaafari's rejection of false balance reflects deeper critiques of journalism's claim to objectivity. As Byrd (2025) argues, alternative journalism explicitly challenges the assumption "that it is possible in the first place to separate facts from values" (p. 26). The problem intensifies when marginalized communities move from what Hallin calls the "sphere of deviance" into "legitimate controversy"—suddenly mainstream outlets feel compelled to platform voices that deny our humanity as if bigotry deserves equal time with lived reality (Şahin, 2021, p. 217; Billard, 2019, p. 166). *LOOKOUT's* approach of transparency about values rather than false neutrality acknowledges that notions of fairness and objectivity in mainstream journalism are themselves steeped in ideologies of whiteness and heteronormativity (Bell & Keer, 2021, p. 1248).

Question: *How do you channel that into the Reporting as Resistance training program you started?*

Jaafari: The *Reporting as Resistance* program came from the idea that we need people within our community to report. It came from both a resource thing at *LOOKOUT* and a community need. I get pitches all the time, but if we were just a fluffy news outlet, that would be fine. But we're not. If there's an event going on, I need to know the background story, what it's trying to solve. If it's a solution story, I need data, need to know it's scalable and replicated. I can't just have someone say, "There's a fantastic university event with a queer artist." That's not a story for us—go to the *New Times* for that.

Reporting as Resistance also came from recognizing that journalism school graduates weren't necessarily ready for the newsroom, particularly not for the kind of accountability journalism we do. Many had been trained to prioritize speed and breaking news, and while those are valuable skills, everybody wanted to jump straight into long-form narrative writing. As an accountability news outlet, you must start with small bits of community news quickly,

but through a nuanced lens. You find something beyond just the thing happening in front of you.

The program also came from my evolution in citizen journalism. I used to be a total curmudgeon about this—after the Boston bombing, citizen journalism identified two wrong people; one committed suicide because of Reddit misidentification, and the FBI had to stop it. For a long time, I didn't believe in citizen journalism. But now I understand that in community news, our community needs to tell their stories through a specific lens.

One of our first fellows wrote about what it's like to walk into Arizona gay bars as a fem-presenting person and how awkward it felt. It was an essay but backed up with data: This bar charges fem-presenting people differently, even if they don't identify as women. That's an important story that needs to be told by our community, but told by people with news acumen, people who know the difference between opinion and fact, who know where to find trusted sources.

It came from needing to stop pitches with bad ideas but also saying: "Here's how you do this." The program teaches participants how to identify newsworthy stories, how to gather and verify information, how to interview sources ethically, and how to structure narratives that serve both truth and community. It's about building capacity within our community to hold power accountable through journalism—not despite our identities, but because of our intimate understanding of the issues we cover.

That's what *Reporting as Resistance* is about: recognizing that empowerment isn't just about giving people a platform, it's about giving them the skills, standards, and frameworks to use that platform responsibly and effectively.

Editorial Context: The program exemplifies what Billard (2024) identifies as effective advocacy training: providing "transferrable communication skills" that teach community members the criteria of 'newsworthiness' and how to deploy "statistical information and other such verifiable facts" (pp. 56, 129). This transforms what Byrd (2025) calls the principle of alternative journalism—giving "ordinary people" the opportunity to "tell their own stories" (p. 26)—from untrained citizen journalism into trained community journalism that maintains professional standards while democratizing access to them. The result creates "community pillars" who can advance *LOOKOUT's* mission far beyond its immediate reach (Billard, 2024, p. 134).

In shaping the next four interview questions, we drew from frameworks in public interest communications—particularly the *Back-of-the-Envelope Strategy* (Christiano & Bradbery, 2025), which emphasizes actionable, strategic communication over broad awareness campaigns. Jaafari's work exemplifies this by redefining journalism as a form of *queer praxis*, not only informing the public but actively redistributing narrative power. With this in mind:

Question: *What do you want to be true about the media landscape that isn't true now?*

Jaafari: I think it used to be true that queer people weren't in newsrooms. I was just at a conference in New York, and we showed there's actually a bunch of queer journalists in these spaces. There are people at the *Republic* who aren't openly queer for political or interpersonal office reasons, but there are quite a few of us in the newsroom.

What needs to be true is that we shouldn't be the ones used specifically to tell only our stories and only fluffy or generic queer stories. It used to be true that we weren't in the newsroom; now we are. But what's carried on is that we're in the newsroom telling the same stories. It's changing a bit, but not en masse.

The same people writing about transgender kids now are the same people writing about education 20 years ago. It's not being told through the lens of a trans person in the newsroom. That might make a difference—not a complete 180 on coverage but at least add nuance. Maybe someone goes to a more reputable source. Maybe someone knows that a journal isn't reputable and reports on that from the start. Or maybe that becomes its own story.

That's what we're hoping to solve: having trans people and other queer folks in newsrooms who can tell stories that matter. Though when I was a reporter, I didn't want to tell queer stories. I was happy in my beat as a prison and police reporter. I reported on queer stories on the side because I thought it was important, but it wasn't my full focus.

It's also important that these people have the opportunity to be in newsrooms or create their own news outlets and influence what people are ingesting. Showing there are other ways to cover this community is important.

Editorial Context: Jaafari identifies a critical paradox: queer journalists are now in newsrooms but remain pigeonholed into covering only queer stories and even then, only superficial ones. When journalists without lived experience cover trans issues, they produce what Bell & Keer (2021) call "ongoing recycling of very basic 'gender 101' explanations" that treat communities as perpetual novelties (p. 1248).

Yet Jaafari's vision of having queer journalists cover all beats while also creating independent outlets demonstrates proven impact. Research on intermedia agenda-setting shows that digital-first outlets dedicated to underserved communities drive "subsequent changes in legacy press coverage" (Billard, 2019, p. 172). Local and community media provide "an added layer of local connection that mass media cannot replicate," reaching audiences who would never encounter these stories in national outlets (Billard, 2024, p. 100).

Question: *Who has to do something they're not doing now (or stop doing something) for you to achieve that goal (Christiano & Bradbery, 2025)?*

Jaafari: Funders need to change dramatically. From a nonprofit news perspective, philanthropy has largely ignored queer journalism. The LGBTQ

Media Mapping Project found that 19 of 35 surveyed outlets reported receiving zero foundation support (Baim & Siemaszko, 2025)—while mainstream investigative outlets like ProPublica operate with $10 million–$15 million in their coffers. It's a dramatic difference.

But more than anything, this needs to be a top-down thing. We often say in newsrooms that it needs to be bottom-up, but this is a top-down issue. It's not enough to just put a queer person in a position of power if they don't have power to do anything. You're not giving them resources or agency to tell the stories that matter. When they propose important stories, they get shot down by an executive editor because it's not part of the beat.

My executive editor said this didn't need to happen. My editor said it could. My editor was shot down by the top. I'm hearing stories constantly of senior editors being shot down by executive editors or CEOs, saying it's not important, too complicated, costs too many resources, or just "put the intern on it."

LOOKOUT did a news clip analysis on queer stories between 2019 and 2022, and we found that 85% of the stories were done by interns or fellows—and they were all Pride pieces or solution stories, what we call "hero stories." Any stories done by staff were mainly about legislation, bathrooms, or Kari Lake. With trans issues specifically, it's only tied to bathrooms and transitioning. *Fox News* only reports on detransitioning. That's wild.

You're saying the movement is already happening—we've built from the bottom up, but the top is not pushing. We're hitting the ceiling. And this happened with the Black press; this happened with the Asian press. They still have a long way to go before feeling their stories are being told fairly, which is why we still have very successful Black press outlets in the nation compared to people just going to the *Washington Post*.

Editorial Context: Jaafari's analysis reveals how power structures within journalism prevent change. His data shows that 85% of queer stories are relegated to interns, while the LGBTQ Media Mapping Project found that 19 of 35 surveyed outlets reported receiving zero foundation support (Baim & Siemaszko, 2025)—quantifying systemic marginalization in both newsroom labor and philanthropic investment. This reflects what Li (2023) calls power exemplification, where coverage features only elite sources while overlooking "ordinary or lower-class transgender people" (p. 533).

The persistence of identity-based media like Capital B News and The Root proves mainstream journalism's ongoing failure to serve marginalized communities (Billard, 2024, p. 92).

Question: *For those stakeholders to change, what do they need to believe about journalism's role in power, representation, or community accountability (Christiano & Bradbery, 2025)?*

Jaafari: Philanthropy needs to understand that these stories matter the same way they understood the importance of Black publications like Capital B News. People need to understand there's a need to tell queer stories in straightforward news ways.

That needs to change, but I'm not sure how. That's why the *LOOKOUT* Executive Director has traveled across the country this year looking MacArthur and other funders in the face and saying, "Please fucking care."

It's working—but it shouldn't have to be this hard. Since launching as a monthly Substack on December 22, 2022, LOOKOUT has raised over $1.2 million through relentless relationship-building at conferences, securing a $400,000 grant from the American Journalism Project and raising an additional $475,000 in 2025 alone. But this hustle—attending 19 conferences in a single year, creating color-coded spreadsheets of funders, treating every conversation as relationship-building rather than pitching—is unsustainable for most queer outlets that lack the resources for constant conferencing.

I don't think there's an overnight solution. It won't be a switch. It'll probably be well past my time dead that this is solved. But that doesn't mean it can't be incremental and continually moving forward—it can't be steps back.

Editorial Context: Historical precedent suggests change requires dual pressure: during the AIDS crisis, the gay press Impact's persistent alternative coverage eventually influenced mainstream outlets to mirror their approach (Byrd, 2025, p. 25). Jaafari's strategy of combining bottom-up community journalism with top-down institutional pressure follows this proven model for systemic transformation.

Question: *How do you get those messages or values in front of the right people (Christiano & Bradbery, 2025)—through your reporting, partnerships, or newsroom model?*

Jaafari: This is where I diverge from a lot of editors. I am a watchdog. My job as a reporter has always been to fight for the underdog—people being harmed, dying, fired, or targeted by positions of power or people backed by power. I don't think there's that same acknowledgement of journalism's role.

This is why we don't have an entertainment beat or a culture beat in the traditional sense. I don't feel that's journalism's role today—that's PR. At this moment, the "good news" model everyone's been pushing feels like you're burying your head in the sand. I do believe in solutions journalism. We do it in our magazine, which is exclusively solutions, but I believe journalism's role is to ask: Who is being harmed, and is that harm at scale?

When we talk about trans issues, it's 1% of the population, yet we have this much coverage about 1% of people. You can easily look back historically and see how we talked about Black people, Irish people, Asians during World War II. It's so easy to look back.

As a head of a newsroom, I don't have the luxury of looking back at *LOOKOUT* archives from 1922, but the *Republic*, *Times*, *Washington Post*—you've been around 100+ years. You could easily train your data team to look at your archives and see exactly how you talked about marginalized groups and check if you're doing it the same exact way now. And you are. You're talking to the

same people with the same biases and same goals, and you're not recognizing it.

Maybe it's naiveté, but these are smart people, so whether it's naiveté or willful blindness, the patterns are deeply embedded in institutional culture.

What LOOKOUT does differently is refuse to treat queer harm as a matter of legitimate controversy requiring "both sides." We recognize that journalism's watchdog function means asking who is being harmed at scale, and holding power accountable for that harm, not platforming those who perpetuate it under the guise of balance.

Editorial Context: Jaafari's watchdog approach directly challenges what Li (2023) identifies as journalism's tendency to "solidify and legitimize the existing status quo" by "overrepresenting elite sources and overlooking non-elite sources" (p. 541). His historical comparison is apt—during the AIDS crisis, mainstream outlets initially "decentered gay and lesbian individuals from the AIDS story" (Byrd, 2025, p. 25), repeating patterns of what scholars call "symbolic annihilation" or the media's systematic "condemnation, trivialisation and omission of certain groups from their representation of society" (Şahin, 2021, p. 217).

LOOKOUT's refusal to platform hate as "balance" reflects Hallin's sphere theory: For too long, LGBTQ+ issues existed in the sphere of deviance where journalists felt justified in "excluding [them] from the public agenda" (Şahin, 2021, p. 217). Now that these issues have moved into "legitimate controversy," mainstream outlets feel compelled to include bigoted voices. *LOOKOUT* rejects this framework entirely, recognizing that harm at scale demands accountability, not false equivalence.

The next questions focus on impact and success stories.

Question: *Can you share a story or investigation that best represents* LOOKOUT's *mission to hold power accountable through a queer lens?*

Jaafari: With the attendees of *Reporting as Resistance*, I view it as somewhat remedial but important: we all start from ground zero. Even if you're from grad school, undergrad, first year, or just a community member, we're learning the inverted pyramid together. It's good to refresh, but we're also rebuilding synapses to rethink how we talk about community journalism. We don't just interject the middle; we start from the beginning. How do we talk about the lead in a way focused on community? How do we craft a lead with anecdotal or hard news information through the lens of what we're learning in this program?

Reporting as Resistance participant Daniel Mills is a great example of what the program can achieve. He's spent his entire life in PR writing, and through *Reporting as Resistance*, he's now doing journalism that goes beyond just covering events. He's asking deeper questions: okay, so what about sexual education? Why does it matter? His story about LGBTQ education for the immigrant population brought in something completely new. We published it in our magazine and online, and someone reached out, saying they had no idea there was such

poor sexual education in Arizona—it was a creative solution. He's working on another piece now, demonstrating exactly the kind of transformation we're aiming for: taking people's existing communication skills and channeling them into accountability journalism that serves the community.

That's an example, but the bigger thing is getting people into our pipeline to tell stories and helping people learn about the community in different ways.

Question: *How do you define or measure "success" when your work is about systems change and visibility, not just page views or clicks?*

Jaafari: Our Executive Director tracks clicks and views. I'm very happy because I don't touch any of that—if I did, I'd just get really pissed off. I've been in so many newsrooms where clicks and views are hammered as impact, but Jake has been able to say, "Don't focus on that. That's a metric I show funders and the board. Focus on capital J journalism impacts."

Capital J journalism impacts are: legislation proposed, laws changed, people fired, people held accountable, public statements made, our news placed in other outlets, our news going national or being republished, or our news being mentioned during legislative sessions. We've had all of those.

Lowercase j impacts are: people reach out and say, "I'm so grateful for this story because I finally feel seen." Or "Thank you for looking out for this portion of my community! This story would have never been told." One person said they couldn't read our stories because they're blind, so we worked with the Foundation for Blind Children and now have large-format magazines in Braille at their library. That to me is a lowercase j impact—we met the community where they are because they asked for it.

That resulted in our print distribution doubling. We went from distributing 1,000 per quarter to 3,500, and now we're looking to distribute 5,000 next year. We're spending more money on print for a free publication with no advertising because people want it. That's what happens when you meet the community where they're at.

Question: *What steps are you taking to sustain and scale this work without compromising editorial independence or community trust?*

Jaafari: We got a grant from MacArthur to do regional expansion. We're expanding to Colorado next year, then to Utah, Nevada, and New Mexico in 2027. We also got funding to explore if we can expand to the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest—specifically places with zero queer news outlets. Iowa, Oklahoma, Idaho, the Great Plains—there's lots of anti-LGBT legislation, not just anti-trans legislation. There's no news outlet there covering these things.

The goal is that everyone across the nation says they need *LOOKOUT* in their state. The goal of *LOOKOUT* is to shut down. I don't want *LOOKOUT* to exist in five years. I want it shut down because every news outlet with power says, "Yes, we will invest in this beat as its own beat." That's the goal. I don't want to be doing this

forever. I want to go back to what I was doing before.

For *Reporting as Resistance*, we're expanding to include young journalists from other newsrooms outside the state and people who want to learn to report better in their communities, especially in areas without newsrooms. We have something called the Queer News Network where we partner with news outlets across the nation to republish work. We did this during the 2024 election—gave each newsroom $500 to report on down-ballot races through a queer lens. It was successful.

But here's the honest answer: I don't know how we're doing it without compromising editorial independence or community trust. That's the thing, right? We pride ourselves on being a local newsroom. When it comes to community engagement and building trust in new communities, that's something I worry about. We still have so much work to do in Arizona. We've always been statewide, but 70% of our coverage is Maricopa, 20% Tucson, 10% Southern and Northern Arizona.

What does that look like? I don't know, because so much of what we do is how Jake and I interact with the community. We're the only two people. The challenge is finding trusted people in those places, like we did here.

I used to argue that change needs to be top-down in newsrooms, but when it comes to community engagement and building trust in new communities, it needs to be grassroots up. Not going to HRC every time there's a problem, but going to the Pansy Society, a local queer community-aid group on Discord. Go to small grassroots and ask how they feel, if they feel inclined to tell the story.

Editorial Context: These examples demonstrate three interconnected strategies for systemic change. The training program creates what Billard (2024) calls "transferable communication skills" that equip community members to become "community pillars" advancing the mission beyond *LOOKOUT's* immediate reach (pp. 129, 134). The dual impact metrics reflect what Şahin (2021) identifies as journalism's capacity to provide both systemic "mediatised recognition" and individual visibility that combats social exclusion (pp. 216-217).

The expansion challenge reveals a fundamental tension: Organizations must "be everywhere" while maintaining authentic local relationships built on trust. This is a process that requires sustained, place-based engagement (Billard, 2024, pp. 91, 100). Jaafari's shift from top-down to grassroots approaches aligns with research showing effective community journalism requires working "from the inside, rather than as outsiders parachuting in" (Billard, 2024, p. 123).

The following questions highlight advice for public interest communicators.

Question: *What advice would you give to other communicators who want to use storytelling as a tool for advancing the public interest—particularly in issues related to representation, justice, or accountability?*

Jaafari: It's hard because it's a weird time to be a journalist. Five years ago, I would say focus on building your resources, building your source list, and constantly being in community to build trust and tell those stories. I still agree with that, but right now is an interesting time to publish stories that matter. I feel like we're failing the moment as journalists. I feel like even at *LOOKOUT* we're failing the moment.

We're not doing as much as we could. It's resources but also framing. I want to know there's a group of journalists unafraid to call what's happening right now authoritarianism. But we can't, right? Because we rely on republication. I can't get the *Arizona Mirror* to republish my story if I put "authoritarian government" in it.

In a more succinct way: Continue building resources within the community you're willing to report on. Make sure their stories are amplified in a way that pushes against authoritarian figures. Find the most radical people doing the work and unafraid to be in the face of power. Do not be afraid to scale your reporting to tell those stories.

Oftentimes, even my own reporters hold back because of fear. That pisses me off because our job is to be unapologetic. It's in our mission statement to be fearless. This is a time to be fearless. We're going to get DOS (denial of service) attacks on our website. This is the job. I've had correctional officers come to my door with guns. This is the job you're going to be in. If you can't handle that, then this isn't the job for you at this time.

I also get pissed off when people in news agencies say, "Let's not go over our skis too much on this." News leaders often hold back for fear of retribution or lawsuits. That's why we pay thousands for media liability insurance. Fucking go over your skis. You know what you know. Be clear about what you don't know. But fucking do it.

Question: *As we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share about the role of queer storytelling in transforming journalism from a platform of visibility into a practice of power?*

Jaafari: The biggest message I tell people is that there is a need for queer journalism—not just flashy news. We need the same nuanced storytelling you'd give health, education, and policing. You need to attack queer stories the same way you provide stories to those beats across the landscape. That's something I've been screaming from day one, and I continually say it to everybody: It needs to be treated the same.

It needs to be given the same resources, the same care, the same attention, the same ethics.

Editorial Context: Jaafari's closing message confronts journalism at a crossroads. His frustration reflects what Şahin (2021) identifies as institutional forces that create "an enabling or constraining environment" determining whether journalists can "support or oppose change" (p. 227). The call for fearlessness isn't rhetorical—it's a recognition that effective accountability journalism requires what scholars call "a more interventionist role" in "challenging dominant narratives" even when doing so carries personal or professional risk (Şahin,

2021, p. 227). His demand for equal treatment of queer journalism challenges the documented pattern of relegating such coverage to interns producing "fluff pieces about the supposed 'novelty'" rather than sustained accountability reporting (Billard, 2024, p. 59).

What's needed isn't just visibility but transformation: treating queer stories with the same investigative rigor as any beat affecting civic life.

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