



## The virtual SciCon conference series | Transcript

### **Aron Pilhofer: Visions & business models for journalism in the near future (15 April 2021, 3 pm CEST / 9 am EDT)**

Moderation: Christopher Buschow

[Christopher Buschow] So welcome, everybody, to the virtual SciCon lecture series. Thanks for joining us today. My name is Christopher Buschow and I am your host today. I am an assistant professor at Bauhaus Universität Weimar in Germany. And my work in Weimar is primarily focused on questions of organising and financing journalism.

First of all, let me start with some words concerning the background of today's lecture. The virtual SciCon lecture series is part of the conference "Science Journalism in the Digital Age", which is organised by *Wissenschafts-Pressekonferenz*, this is the Association of German Science Journalists, and Acatech, that is the German National Academy of Science and Engineering. And in May this year, the SciCon Working Conference will take place where we want to discuss what can be done to help science journalism in the digital age, and especially in these times of turmoil. And these recommendations are especially developed against the backdrop of the expert lectures that we heard in the last couple of months, that we hear today and that we will hear in the next weeks.

The Working Conference, as well as our online lecture series, are made possible thanks to a grant from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. All lectures in the series will be recorded and transcribed to create a knowledge reservoir as input for our discussions in May. And if you want to take a look at this knowledge reservoir, just open up [www.science-journalism.eu](http://www.science-journalism.eu).

Everybody that has joined us today, please note that we will record this Zoom session and we'll also transcribe it. So, with your participation in today's session, you accept that the lecture, your questions and your voice and video will be recorded.

So, now I'd like to proceed as follows: we will first hear a 30-minute lecture, and if you the audience have any thoughts or questions, please don't hesitate to write them in our chat here in Zoom during the talk. After the lecture, we will come back to your questions, to the questions from the chat, and we will also have a further Q&A for around 15 minutes.

So now it's my big, big pleasure to introduce to you as our guest today, the guest of the virtual SciCon Conference, our speaker, Professor Aron Pilhofer. Aron Pilhofer is the James P. Steele Chair in Journalism Innovation at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States. And in addition to his teaching, his

work is focused on new business models, digital transformation and innovation in the news industry. Before joining Temple University, Aron was an executive editor, digital and interim chief digital officer at The Guardian in London and the managing editor for digital strategy and the editor of Interactive News at The New York Times. Aron also co-founded several news startups, and at the moment he is one of the co-initiators of the Tiny News Collective, a new platform that will provide tools and resources to help people build sustainable news organisations, especially local news organisations, and he will also talk about this project today and we're very happy.

So, Professor Pilhofer, thank you so much for joining us today. We are very delighted to have you with us to, for you to give a talk, a presentation, about visions and business models for journalism in the near future. And yeah, well, the floor is yours.

[Aron Pilhofer] Great, thanks. OK, so you can all hear me, I'm assuming. Great. Awesome. All right. Yeah. Thank you for having me, I'm really happy to be here. This is obviously a topic that's near and dear to my heart, and it's something that I've been working on for a very, very long time.

I'm relatively new to academia. I've only been at Temple now, this is my fourth year, I'll be finishing my fourth year. And one of the reasons I came to academia was because I felt pretty strongly that something needed to be done from outside the industry, that more needs to be done, particularly at the local level. And it's almost impossible to make any real change inside the industry. And we can... happy to talk about why that might be.

Right now, in addition to my teaching and other activities, my main project – and I'm going to share a slide show, I hope you can all see that – my main project right now is a project that, it's about a year-and-a-half old, called News Catalyst.

So News Catalyst was launched as a project of the Knight Foundation Lenfest Institute, which owns the Philadelphia Inquirer here in Philadelphia, which is a really interesting business model in and of itself. Facebook is another funder. And News Catalyst, the intent was to create an organisation that would work to make local news sustainable digital businesses. And that's obviously, it's a big charge. But our focus is on local news and it's on the business of local news. We do that... we do a lot of different things. Some of the projects that we're working on, for example, we helped launch the News Product Alliance, which you may or may not have heard about. The News Product Alliance is a new global membership organisation that is focused on elevating the product discipline and role within news organisations.

One of our hypotheses, one of our theories of change at News Catalyst, is that the product discipline focusing on building better, more responsive news products is one key way local news organisations can be more sustainable. The product discipline itself, the framework of product thinking, is, in my view, one of the keys to digital transformation. It provides a systematic, measurable, results-oriented process by which news organisations can apply, can make change, make measurable change, in their businesses. So product is a key pillar of what we're doing at News Catalyst, and we're hopeful that the News Product Alliance will be a big piece of that. There has not been a product-specific membership organisation in

news and now there is. And there's more than fifteen hundred people who are involved in this project.

Another piece of work that we're doing is a, ongoing, it's around training and again, very much again focused on product. We launched with funding from Google last year. We launched a pilot programme that now is a full-blown global training programme where we are taking small groups of journalists, twenty-five people. We have three cohorts, we have one that we finished up about two weeks ago based in the Americas. We have one that's going on right now that's Europe, Africa, Middle East. And we have a third cohort coming up that's going to be APAC. But the goal here is to, over an eight-week period, to take journalists who are in organisations, small organisations that may not even have a product discipline, may not even really know that much about the product framework, and over an eight-week period, train them to the point where they can operationalise the knowledge that they gained through product immersion. So this is another big programme of ours and we hope that will expand.

But we're really mostly focused right now on the Tiny News Collective. The Tiny News Collective is, well, it sort of materialised for us, kind of out of nowhere, in a way. Right at the height of the pandemic, when my team and I were trying to figure out what it is, how we can respond to this dire situation in local news, this is the time when in the States there were thousands of journalists who were being furloughed and laid off. It was a really frankly very depressing time in, within a much longer, very depressing time for local news. And we really felt like we needed to do something that is growth-oriented. So much of what we do is transformation-oriented or, you know, essentially just sort of help stop the bleeding. But we weren't really doing anything that was sort of future-focused, optimistic, growth-oriented.

And so we started looking around and in particular at news deserts, by which we mean – this is a very big topic in the States, I'm sure it is elsewhere as well – but we're looking at places where there is limited or no community... there are communities that are not being served or are underserved by media, by news. And we are looking at this growing problem, in the States in particular, of communities that have no media, no news to turn to, no source for news and information, and wondering why this is and why is it that we have, you know, large places where nothing exists and you think about it, it doesn't make any sense. You would think that where there is no competition, you would think this would be... you would be seeing some sort of something happening in these places, but you really aren't.

And so we looked into this problem and we started focusing on, well, we used to talk about small newsrooms, but we sort of, our initial kind of insight was that our concept of small isn't small enough, that small newsrooms, newsrooms of four or five, six – I'm talking about startups now for the most part – are actually quite large, are actually quite mature for the most part. There is this entire missing category of news organisations, we believe, which are sort of less common, the sort of the saplings, right? There's really not a lot of focus on the smallest newsrooms, newsrooms that are starting from one person or two people focusing on a very, very, very small community. And why we feel this is really important is because we think if we can scale this idea big enough – and our ambition is pretty big, we want to launch and grow five hundred sustainable Tiny newsrooms over the next three years

– if we can scale this, then suddenly you can, we will start to see, you know, little saplings, little newsrooms that we hope will ultimately grow into smaller, medium and even large newsrooms.

There's an example of this. There's actually unfortunately, there's very few examples of this, but there are a few. VT Digger in Vermont, grew from one journalist, who was laid off from her job. She wasn't ready to leave the industry. She saw that there were many communities in Vermont that weren't being served. Fast forward and Vermont Digger, VT Digger, is now the largest newsroom in the state of Vermont. So we think this is an approach that has possibilities of really making a significant impact in the real big problem of the news desk.

So, let's talk about a little bit about what it is. So our mission is to help communities build newsrooms basically themselves. We provide tools, resources, knowledge, training, all of the things that you need to make a successful news organisation. But we're doing this with a mission. We're not just trying to create five hundred newsrooms of any kind located anywhere. We want specifically to focus on voices that have been historically excluded from media and in particular from media ownership. The States in particular right now is going through a significant reckoning around race, in particular in journalism. And historically there have been massive communities that have been completely excluded from media and media ownership. There's study after study that shows that founders of colour are disproportionately less, have less access to capital, either philanthropic or from private sector. And this in part is what we are trying to address. Our partners in this, I should note, are LION Publishers. LION is local, independent, online news, L-I-O-N. It's an organisation of about two hundred very small community news organisations and they were the perfect partner for us. Where News Catalyst is focusing on the tools and technology and product components, and LION is focusing more on the sort of the training and community. And all of this together we think makes a pretty compelling package.

So as I said, what we heard when we started talking to founders of small news organisations, we started hearing the same things over and over and over again. Technology is confusing and expensive. Training and support is almost non-existent. Insurance, libel insurance, liability insurance, is prohibitively expensive. The US being the crazy country that we are, not providing health insurance through, as a right. Health insurance isn't accessible. It's a big, that's a big problem, by the way. We heard a number of founders of news organisations who could only create, who have only done what they did because their spouse had health insurance through their job and therefore they could go on their spouse's health insurance plan. Things like the legal components: incorporating a business takes time and money, setting up and running a business. Journalists, maybe they know how to report, they probably don't know how to run a business. On and on, we kept hearing the same things over and over again.

So that's where that is what we started focusing on as a challenge. Like, could we create something that provides all of these services and technol... and tools in a single package that would scale so that we could reach the goal of both changing to the best of our ability, the sort of ownership equation, but also reaching a significant enough scale that we start actually making an impact.

So our focus, our target market here, is the Tiny News founder. That's sort of what we're, that's sort of the person we're talking about. Most of these small news organisations that launch independently fail. The vast majority, the vast, vast, vast, vast, vast majority of the ones that start fail. We're more concerned about the ones that never get off the ground because the founder either doesn't have the resources or doesn't have the training and knowledge or because they can't afford to leave a situation, right? They can't afford to leave a job because that's where they get their health care. They can't afford to leave a job because that would create financial insecurity. So we are trying to broaden the field, the potential field of founders, of people who are willing to make this leap with us. But we're looking for very specific kinds of people. We're looking for people who are very committed to their local community. We're looking for people who are open-minded about what local journalism can mean and the shape of local journalism. And we're looking for people who are really committed to doing this as a full-time job. You can't... this isn't a part-time thing. This isn't Substack, for example.

So what we are offering, we're offering, and actually it is... I don't mean unusual, I mean unique. It's a unique structure. There is nothing like the Tiny News Collective in the US. We are, we're leveraging a really sort of very uncommon part of nonprofit law that allows us to create this sort of legal cocoon, if you will, around our newsrooms. And what that allows us to do is we can spin up a new newsroom in a couple of days. It's super easy. When they are spun up, when they are created, they have, they are protected by the bigger collective legally. They have, immediately they have tax exempt status. They can provide their donors, if they have donors, they can provide a tax deduction to donors. That's usually something that takes thousands of dollars and over a year sometimes to get. And because of this structure, we can make contracts, we can make agreements with third parties to provide services and technology that an individual newsroom of this size could never afford. An example of that, we just announced, I think it was a week-and-a-half ago, we did a deal with Reuters. All of our Tiny newsrooms will have full access to Reuters images, which, if you talk to any small newsroom, even relatively medium-sized newsrooms, photography, still photography images are one of the most difficult problems newsrooms have.

We're providing a tonne of support. We have an incredible group of partners and advisors and third-party folks who are helping us out. And we're providing an incredible technology platform, which I'll talk about in a minute.

We're different for a lot of reasons and one way, one reason, I'll just – I won't bury the lede here – is cost. We as a sort of product challenge internally, we set a challenge for ourselves to say, "What is a price point that an individual or a couple of founders would look at and say, 'OK, maybe I just got laid off from my job. Maybe I'm just tired of working for a hedge fund. Maybe I'm just not really enjoying this'." What's a price that we could put out there that an individual might be able to say, "Oh, you know what, if it's \$100 a month, I could do that"? You know.

There's a lot of focus right now in the States on newsrooms that are being launched by, through philanthropic, or in a for-profit sense, through venture capital. And those are big and expensive affairs. And they can be... and that is absolutely a path

to success. There's no doubt about it. We're seeing it through the American Journalism Project and other organisations.

We don't think that that alone is going to solve this problem. We think there needs to be a much bigger, much more scalable small effort focused at the tiniest newsrooms. And that's what we're trying to do here. So that's how we differ from some of the other efforts that are out there. And we think these things are completely compatible. So \$100 a month is roughly what we're talking about as a price point. And there's literally nothing out there that's even remotely close to this in terms of price. We see the life cycle of a Tiny Newsroom as being about twenty-four months roughly. We won't really know until we dive in with our founders and... but our hope is within twenty-four months or so, give or take, that these small newsrooms will reach a point of sustainability where they will be able to then go off and be independent. That's our goal. We want these newsrooms to reach a certain level of sustainability and then go off and do their own thing. They may continue with using our technology, but they may then leave the collective and go off and be independent.

This, by the way, this is our group of – if this slide ever actually changes, there we go – this is the team and our founders and the board and advisors. We've got an incredible group here. I mean, I have never been involved in a project that's this collaborative that involves this many people and nobody has said no yet to us when we've described what we're doing and have asked them if they would want to be involved. Nobody has said no.

So, we see our competition is kind of different than other efforts. So Substack, I think, is probably our closest competition. Substack is a fine platform, I think it's... OK, I'm lying to you. I don't actually think it's a fine platform. I think they are charging what I would call borderline usurious rates, I think. For what it is, you know, it's OK. But the idea that if you have two thousand subscribers paying ten dollars a month, you are paying nearly four thousand dollars a month to Substack for what amounts to a newsletter and basic blog with some lightweight analytics and payments and CRM. We think this is absurd and so we think we can do better than that.

Newspack was, is a fantastic CMS and it was the thing that we talked about as being sort of targeted to small to medium-sized newsrooms. It's \$5,000. Well, no, it's more than that. Sorry, it's \$12,000 a year or more, which is way more than a single founder could afford. So it actually, in our view, sits a layer above. It's the sort of thing that a Tiny newsroom would grow into in our view. There are other small companies out there trying to do this sort of thing. TAPinto is one of them. TAPinto is an all-in-one publishing platform. It doesn't include like the training and a lot of the support elements that we do. And it's much more expensive than we are. So we think we are extremely competitive compared to what... the alternatives that are out there.

This is our platform, just so you can see kind of how it all comes together. The big challenge that we had is, can we build a scalable, replicable platform that can be maintained by an incredibly small team that doesn't cost a lot of money because we can't with, at \$100 a month per news organisation, we are going to have to be able

to scale this up significantly. And so we, I think, have one of the most creative solutions to this. We're just getting other people to pay for our technology cost, Google in particular. So our CMS is basically Google Docs. All the content creation, editing, sharing happens in Google Docs. We've written a, you can see that on the side there, we've written a plugin that is basically, that's where you do all the things that you would normally do in a CMS: tagging social headlines, authoring, all the rest of it. You click a button, it goes to the cloud where it's rendered into a static page. We do have – and when this slide flips any minute now, come on, Google, there we go – we have obviously other platforms tied in where we provide newsletters, we provide comments via the Coral Project. There's all sorts of third-party tools as well, like, we have completely aligned all of our analytics with the best practices for small news organisations and have completely aligned them with Newspack. So ultimately, when you as a small newsroom, if you leave, when you leave the collective, if you want to go to Newspack, all of the jargon and all the language, all of the assumptions, everything, the methodologies, is all the same. We want it to be, to make sure that we were as compatible as possible with the platforms that our news organisations would be graduating to.

The finance part is actually pretty interesting. We've partnered with a company called MonkeyPod. MonkeyPod is automated accounting essentially, and does for you a lot of the backend finance-oriented work that otherwise human beings would have to do. So our news organisations won't have to worry about accounting, that this is all going to be handled for them through MonkeyPod.

And when this slide flips, any minute here, but come on, there we go, we'll provide CRM, we'll provide fundraising, we'll provide anything that you think all the things that you would think a news site would need, we will provide. And this just gives you a sense of the kinds of the full-featuredness of the Tiny News Collective compared to other alternatives that are out there.

And finally, the piece of this that we haven't talked as much about, but really I find, I think, is the one, the biggest distinguishing characteristic and one of the most important pieces of what we're doing, is something that, well, we're not calling it the Founders' Fund anymore, I have to change this slide. We're calling it the Launch Fund. There is a thing we found out called the Founders' Fund, and it involves unsavoury characters like Peter Thiel. So we are going to change the name. It's now going to be called the Launch Fund. And the Launch Fund was, is specifically targeted to solve one of the most consistent problems that we identified, and that is the ability of potential... otherwise qualified founders to launch local news sites because they might be economically insecure if they were to leave a job. They would need to have the ability to pay a mortgage, a student loan, healthcare, things like that. So think of this is almost like financial aid. We are hoping to raise \$1,000,000. We were hoping to raise that by Q1 2021, we did not do that. Particularly to support founders of colour and in particular those launching in underserved communities. Founders would be able to apply for grants, subsidies of up to \$100,000 to offset any costs that they would need to offset in order to make the Tiny News doable for them. And that grant would get, would decline over time. So it would be, let's say, a two-year grant where you would get 100 percent for the first six months and then it would go to 80 percent, that would go to 60 percent and so forth, with the idea that as your site ramps up and as revenue starts coming in, that those, that there would

be this inflection point where your site would be supporting you versus the Founders' Fund.

So that's kind of the project in a nutshell. Oh, and I should mention this too. We've, the collective itself is sustainable, which was a key challenge for us. What we will... we didn't want to build something that would forever be dependent on philanthropic support to sustain itself. And so because of the way we architected the technology piece, because of the way we have built all the partnerships, we can sustain the collective with an incredibly small staff. We're talking about two or three people to sustain it. At \$100 a month, if you reach 200ish newsrooms, the collective can pay its own bills. It's completely self-sufficient. At 500 Tiny News sites, it's actually generating surplus that we can then reinvest through the Launch Fund into new newsrooms. So it's an important piece of this that we wanted to build not only a sustainable newsroom, or actually 500 plus of them, but also the effort itself is sustainable. We felt that was a super-important component of the project.

And so that's kind of the Tiny News Collective in a nutshell. Happy to... I know that was a lot. So happy to take any questions you have at this point.

[Christopher Buschow] So first of all, thank you so much, Aron, for giving us insights into this really, really interesting and fascinating organisation that you build up there, are just building. I'd like to... you just told us pre the lecture that you had 50 applications for the programme that just started its first pilot, right. So....

[Aron Pilhofer] Right.

[Christopher Buschow] Great. Congratulations. It's fascinating. A great success.

So, um, yeah. So I'd like to invite the audience to ask questions, to write them in the chat or raise your hands so you can, like, activate your microphone and ask a question here directly. And I wanted to start with highlighting that it's very interesting to see that we have some organisations in Germany and Europe that do some parts of the things that Tiny News Collective does. For instance, we have *RiffReporter* in Germany, which is a science journalistic project that really aims to help people who'd like to start a science journalistic project but are not able to deal with all these things that funders have to do, like tackle all the technology and the business side and all these kind of things. And what *RiffReporter* does is that they only let in people who are journalists and who stick to a, to like a real codex. So I wanted to ask you, are you aiming at journalists or can anybody apply as a founder of a Tiny News project?

[Aron Pilhofer] So that's a great question. So the answer to that is, yes. We are open to, and actually believe that a substantial number of our founders will come from sort of with non-traditional backgrounds. We will through LION be providing a very substantial training programme for our founders, things that include all the technical sort of onboarding you would imagine: how to use your CRM, how to, what do all these analytics mean, what are best practices. But also, we'll train our founders around questions of what is libel, what is defamation, and even potentially for founders who are relatively new to journalism, how to write a good news story. We, I mean, there will be a community of support and knowledge built around this

so our founders can come from a traditional news background or not. We're working with, we're working with both.

[Christopher Buschow] So we have a question by Karl Urban, who raised his hand, so if you like Karl, you could unmute yourself and ask your question.

[Karl Urban] Yes, sure. Thank you, Aron. This was quite interesting. And I'm also glad, Mr. Buschow, that you mentioned *RiffReporter*, because this came to my mind as well. I'm a member of *RiffReporter* for more than two years now. And I found many, many aspects which I like very much in our project. And one of the ideas which I see, also saw also on your slides is that a lot of, in traditional industry, there's a lot of path dependency which can block transformation and the idea to have some kind of collective where you can start over, over and over again and try new magazines or business models or whatever is very, very interesting, very helpful. But what I observe in *RiffReporter* is, so what I like about it is, there's a lot of community which helps me for my morale, my working morale. But the business part is underdeveloped so far, I would say. So it's hard for... to most of us, I would say to really earn money with it, even though our organisation tries to tackle this. So my question would be, what are your ideas? How can Tiny News newsrooms get... where do they get money from?

[Aron Pilhofer] Right.

[Karl Urban] So how do you help them in this respect?

[Aron Pilhofer] Right. Yeah. So the... we have a multi-stream revenue model. So it includes a... obviously donations and membership, which is for small, particularly nonprofit newsrooms are key revenue sources. But also we have a local advertising platform. Our partners at WhereBy.Us are providing a tested system that they use. They have been running local newsletters successfully for many, many years now, and they've recently turned their ad platform into a third-party service. It's very different from Google Ads, by the way. It's very much targeted to a very, very local ad advertiser. So ads, membership, subscriptions, events – all the revenue sources you would think should be included are there. What we don't have, obviously, because there's just not enough of these sites out there, and we will eventually, is a full, is a fully fleshed-out playbook for how you get from zero to what we think, at least in terms of dollars and cents, is sustainable. So we think that number is somewhere between \$100,000 and \$150,000 of revenue, annual revenue. And once you reach that, that we think is a solid foundation to build from.

So we are working with a consultant right now, a guy named Tim Griggs, who used to be at The New York Times, we worked together there. He's a... and he's going to help us develop a sort of a framework business model for our Tiny newsrooms. So and that is, I think to your point, I think this is where we will be spending a disproportionate amount of our time is on the business model, because without that, the journalism's impossible.

[Christopher Buschow] I think this also answers Franco Zotta's question yes, he nods, yes, perfect.

So we have another question from [Stephen Lang] and [Anja Nosta] who like to know if you are going to extend the Tiny News Collective model to other countries. So Stephen asked if you could think about bringing this to Africa. And obviously, a lot of the technologies that you're building is really scalable and could be applied to other countries without any costs, actually, right?

[Aron Pilhofer] Yeah. So just so you know, our entire platform is open-source. You can grab it now if you wanted to. The answer to that is yes and no. Right now, at least initially, the structure, the legal structure in particular, of the Tiny News Collective is very much embedded in US nonprofit law. So we are a US-only effort right now. But I think this is a model that can be replicated around the world. So, what I would love to see, I don't believe there should be a Tiny News Collective Global, for example. What I would love to see are local efforts in different countries taking the idea, the model, and applying it in their community. The one area where I think we can be super helpful is on the technology platform when, you know, once we have five, six, seven sites up and running and we've kind of, you know, worked out all the kinks, I think this is a platform that can scale infinitely. We've built this, we've built scalability in mind for this. And it's simple and it's dirt cheap to run. So, whether that's us providing the technology for Tiny News efforts in other places or whether that is us providing open-source source code that they can adopt and use and contribute back, I don't know. I would love to see that happen. I'm having conversations right now with somebody in the UK about this very question. I think this, I think this can and should spread. But obviously we're just at the very, very, very beginning of this effort, even in the US.

[Christopher Buschow] An inter-related question from the United Kingdom is from Jonathan Heawood, he's from the Public Interest NewsFoundation. And he asks if founders could join the project that have already worked for some years with their own sites and now...

[Aron Pilhofer] Right.

[Christopher Buschow] ...like to, need to, like, to realign the business.

[Aron Pilhofer] Yeah. So our answer to that question is, "Yes, but". One of the, you know, one of the kinds of concessions we had to make in order to build a fully-featured, widely scalable technology platform that can be more or less operated for next to nothing and supported by a technology team of one or two at most, is that we don't, we're not migrating content over to our platform, number one. And we are not providing customisation. You can have all the customisation on the Tiny News platform as long as it's none. That's our philosophy. It is a one-size-fits-all platform. And unfortunately, that's the way it is. Now, within what we are providing there are some customisations: you can change typography, there are multiple layouts, there are different, there will be different article templates, there are different homepage templates. But our philosophy is: if it is a feature that is important enough... the feature itself has to be important enough to a majority of our sites to be implemented and anything short of that is just not worth doing. So it's not like WordPress where there's just like... it's not like plugins and plugins and plugins and plugins. It's the opposite. We're the anti-WordPress, actually, and that's how we can build this system to scale and support it. It's literally pennies to operate.

[Christopher Buschow] Obviously, there are parts where standardisation is not applicable in the same way.

[Aron Pilhofer] Right.

[Christopher Buschow] Let's take legal support. That was something that was also on your list.

[Aron Pilhofer] Right.

[Christopher Buschow] I was wondering if you have somebody doing investigative journalism in the local news area coverage. And I mean, in the States, you really have people like trying to really like trying to really...

[Aron Pilhofer] Yeah.

[Christopher Buschow] ...trying to destroy news organisations by legal attacks.

[Aron Pilhofer] Right.

[Christopher Buschow] Right. So how is this model structured in the Tiny News Collective? Because I think it's much harder to do than the technology part, right?

[Aron Pilhofer] So, yes. So the thing that... one of the other reasons why there, I think, there may be so few of these small sites out there, most of them can't afford expensive lawyers, most of them can't afford libel insurance. Many of the – most, I would say – LION members are operating without libel insurance, which is a recipe for disaster and a significant disincentive to producing hard-hitting, aggressive, investigative – particularly investigative reporting. We're trying to provide something that doesn't really exist anywhere right now. So because of the legal structure of the collective, essentially all of the newsrooms will be created as standalone businesses, but they're all creatures of the Tiny News Collective. That's our legal structure. It's actually a very complicated and little-used form of fiscal sponsorship, if you want to know, it's technically a Model-L fiscal sponsorship structure. But because of that, we think – and we're in the process of nailing this down right now – we think we can do a deal very much like we did with Reuters with an insurer, and provide blanket libel and liability insurance for our newsrooms. So that's one way we're protecting them.

The other way: we have through an organisation called Lawyers for Reporters, it's run by Alex Papachristou from the Vance Center, they've come on board as essentially our legal, kind of our general counsel in a way. And they are going to be both providing training for our founders on libel, on defamation, all the things they need to know. They'll provide prepublication review if there's a story that potentially is actionable, and they will provide access to pro bono legal support, they will be providing that. So our Tiny newsrooms will have lawyers, they'll have insurance, I hope – we're still working through that, it's still, it's kind of tricky. But if all things

align, they will have far more protection than most newsrooms, actually quite a few newsrooms that are much larger than they are.

[Christopher Buschow] We have one question from Franco Zotta, who is interested in the funding structure of the Tiny News Collective, and he asked if it was hard to find financial supporters. [Audio drops out] bootstrapped by the people who built the collective. So how is the financing structure of the Tiny News Collective at the moment? We heard that you want to raise one million in the next couple of months, but how is the structure at the moment?

[Aron Pilhofer] So right now, the project is being funded by News Catalyst, which I think I mentioned. We were provided... we're funded through a \$2 million grant through the Lenfest Local News and Transformation Fund. And LION, LION is providing financial support as well, all in kind. My team are managing the product and technology platforms, LION is providing training and support. We haven't... we've raised \$200,000 to this point. We had hoped to raise quite a bit more. We were very close with a couple of funders and for a variety of reasons it just hasn't come through. So right now we are on a path to essentially bootstrapping as much as possible the organisation. We have all the resources we need to launch our first group of sites. My thinking, my hope, my belief is that once there is something to show – I'm not out there aggressively fundraising right now – once there is something to show, once we have five up... working sites that we can point to and see and say like this, right? Because the concept is kind of hard to explain. I mean, it really is. There are very few traditional funders of this kind who really get it immediately. And so, you know, it's kind of hard to explain to people what we're doing, because we get questions like, well, "Why is this different from the American Journalism Project?" And it's like a million degrees different. But it's hard to immediately convey that to somebody when you don't have anything to show them except a slide deck.

So my approach here is to get through this initial launch and then, once we have a handful of sites publishing, and that should happen over the summer, once we have a handful of sites actually working, then go out and try to raise the additional money that we're hoping to raise for the Launch Fund and for Tiny News itself. We, it's really just a matter of gap at this point. Once we reach 150, 200 sites, the collective is self-sufficient and doesn't need any more philanthropic support. All of the philanthropic support from then on can go into launching new sites.

So it's just trying to get that, trying to solve that gap, which is, given the projects I've been involved in before that didn't have any money, so, you know, we're in OK shape. I'm pretty happy with where we are right now.

[Christopher Buschow] Now, let me say, I hope in the name of all our participants and our audience that we really keep our fingers crossed for your project.

[Aron Pilhofer] Thanks!

[Christopher Buschow] It's really a fascinating and very interesting organisation that you were building there and very, very new and innovative organisation, I have to say. We are doing research and new organisation forms in journalism here in

Weimar and as we saw the Tiny News Collective, we were really impressed by what you're building there.

[Aron Pilhofer] So, I should throw in just two quick things on that front. We're actually having a meeting later this week with a couple of academics here. We are going to be developing, if we are successful, we will have a completely unique data set. There'll be nothing else like it, of small news sites. We'll have visibility into every aspect of what is happening with these sites, everything financial, analytics, you name it. We'll have access to it. And because these sites are substantially similar in terms of structure, UI, UX, it is a total apples-to-apples comparisons, but you'll have an incredible data set that I think researchers will want to have access to. And we're building that. We're baking that into the project from the jump.

The other thing that might be of interest is, we've been focusing on geographic community as our focus initially. But we also think there are other kinds of communities that we can focus on later on, like topic and interest. So, if a founder came to us and said, "We want to, I wanted to launch a site that is specifically around science or environment or something like that", down the road, that is something we want, we would want to support. And we think there's a viable model there as well.

[Christopher Buschow] That sounds really fantastic, because I think what we need, really need to, like, foster the journalistic ecosystem of, you know, like journalistic founders is really data and this kind of support.

[Aron Pilhofer] Right, right.

[Christopher Buschow] So thank you very much. We would love to hear from this, I would say, a side project in academia. And, yeah, we keep our fingers crossed. Thanks so much for joining us today Aron and for giving this very, your lecture.

[Aron Pilhofer] You're very welcome. And I'm going to put my email here in the chat...

[Christopher Buschow] Great!

[Aron Pilhofer] ...in case anybody wants to get in touch.

[Christopher Buschow] Yes. Great. So thank you so much for being with us.

[Aron Pilhofer] Thank you.

[Christopher Buschow] I'd like to point all our audience to the next SciCon lecture that will be held on the April 21st, 5:00 p.m. Central European Time. And we will have guests, two guests: Matt Rogerson from, he's the head of public policy at the Guardian Media Group in the U.K. and Martin Jönsson, he's the head of editorial development at *Dagens Nyheter* in Sweden. And they will talk on the future of newspapers and publishers. And this will be moderated by Jeanne Rubner. So join us on April 21st. And if you'd like to check out the programme, then just click at

science-journalism.eu. Thanks for being with us. Thanks for joining us today. And Aron, all the best. And thank you so much. Bye bye.

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