

## Transcript – News Take Episode 102: Aram Zucker-Scharff, The Washington Post

13:34:51 Hi everyone. Welcome. My name is David Chavern and I'm the president and CEO of the News Media Alliance and this is episode two of news take, for those who view are joining us for the first time news take conversations are supposed to be somewhat wonky

13:35:06 chats designed to offer unique perspectives and insights around all of the innovation taking place in the news industry, and now different organizations are applying it are facing similar challenges.

13:35:18 We will get somewhat in the weeds with people who are changing the news industry, particularly those helping us make new, better news products and his perspectives aren't always heard, otherwise.

13:35:30 Today we're talking to someone who's absolutely at the forefront of evolving newsroom and publisher technology and improving the reader experience will talk about everything from core web vitals to privacy first products for newsrooms.

13:35:44 But all in all in the bigger context of why it matters for news and news publishing industry. Hopefully you'll walk away from today's conversation having learned something new that you can impress your friends right I'm not sure that's always impressed

13:35:59 your co workers with. I think I know I will but most of all, we hope that somebody you can take back and think about and ponder how you might use things you might hear here in your own businesses and and publishing enterprises and how you can continue

13:36:16 to evolve your news business. So with that, I'm super excited to welcome Aram Zucker-Scharff to the show is the engineering lead for privacy, security compliance at the Washington Post where he works with publishers to maximize site performance and revenue

13:36:32 is also worked on the post ad tech r&d and big data teams arm those developed open source tools for publishers and consulted on content strategy for digital newsroom workflows.

13:36:44 He's also want to follow those magazines 15 under 30 in the magazine industry that's awesome. And he's also got a killer Twitter game, so that's why I am super excited to have him here today.

13:36:55 Welcome to the show I'm thank you for being here.

13:36:58 Thank you for having me. it's great to digitally, speak with you, David.

13:37:03 Excellent. Well, super excited both because you're certainly well known as a big brain in the business. But also, frankly, or what, you know, working with one of the most digitally innovative and forward news publishers out there so let's start there.

13:37:22 Talk a little bit about what you do at the post.

13:37:41 You know what your role is there, and then maybe segue a little bit into how do you see news publishers broadly as being different or maybe similar to other folks and the digital content business or digital ad tech business you know how what's, what do

13:37:45 you do at the post and then for news How is news different than other kinds of pieces of this industry.

13:37:51 Sure. Um, well, right now I have two hats that I'm wearing at the post. I'm transitioning out is the senior solutions engineer for Zeus customers, which means I'm still currently and I have just previously been working a lot with small to medium and some

13:38:06 large publishers on getting them figuring out how to use technology how to integrate their our ad technology and how to implement it to improve revenue and performance, and as he said, My current sort of Top of Mind peace is the lead engineer covering

13:38:21 privacy within the part of our organization that covers subscriptions user data and identity. And so that means I am building out tools and support for privacy first designs prototyping next generation privacy respecting methods that allow us to accomplish

13:38:39 the goals we've previously started set, and really trying to figure out how to take on some of these big challenges that are rising in the privacy space, communicating with our users have been ineffective and clear ways about what we're doing and how

13:38:52 it can affect them. And, you know, that sort of brings us into the, the big changes for publishers in the digital space they're coming out of this shift towards privacy.

13:39:04 I think that for the last five to 10 years publishers have spent a lot of time trying to unwind the mistake of basically allowing third party ad tech to take over their business agendas without necessarily sharing their values, when we come from a publisher

13:39:22 perspective, obviously we are businesses and we have to work and make profit and all of the stuff that has to happen there, but I think that, especially as we get towards the more local end of this side.

13:39:34 The, there is a need to rebuild user trust outside of the third party environment, and really sort of think about how to transition towards a more privacy forward way of thinking, while still relying on sort of this bank of user trust and revenue that

13:39:55 is native to publishers, in a way that it really isn't across the rest of the digital space.

13:40:01 Yeah, it's interesting, you know, I have to be honest, somebody in them.

13:40:05 Public Policy front of these things in our news publishers not the post specifically but the industry broadly has sometimes been caught kind of meandering in the middle on privacy and ad tech, to be honest.

13:40:19 Yeah, this, the industry didn't create these systems, didn't create cookies didn't create all of the ad tech appliance were to which were subject, we kind of get pulled into them.

13:40:30 But then there's income attached to it right i mean there's a there's a lot of income from early, some income coming from the digital ad sector, a section of of the business that you don't want to lose particularly when you're financially constrained

13:40:47 otherwise. So, you know, I, you know, frankly, news publishers I've often been mad at the system but also depend on it to some degree, and I've been sort of stuck in this.

13:41:01 Again, for one of a better term meandering middle on privacy too often, you know, as we're moving into this our post cookie world.

13:41:12 You know the, let's talk about it, how should news pub what should first principles be for news publishers first of all what we're kinda interesting business because as you said, where trust based business where our value is almost entirely that we have

13:41:26 relations trusted relationships with readers who are willing to come to our properties and passport.

13:41:32 But, you know, in terms of moving to new products in terms of thinking about privacy from the world of somebody in the news business what do you think that core kind of first principles should be what are kind of our guides stars as we move through the

13:41:46 changes in this ad tech space.

13:41:49 Yeah, I think the first thing is to really sort of identify exactly what you're talking about in that meandering middles piece of it right. A lot of the technologies that publishers have sort of become addicted to on the business side by these invasive

13:42:02 and visible user tracking systems poorly performing ads scripts and Emily cat and endless cascade of like third party network requests, and these are all threatened by this big shift and I think that it is reasonable to look at that and say you know kicking

13:42:17 these things that we have perceived as dependencies for our business is going to be rough, but the flip side is it's very much worthwhile These aren't actually the dependencies, this is the situation that emerged because publishers were not as involved.

13:42:31 And when we get out the other side it's going to be a little bit more healthy because we've become so hamstringing by this established ecosystem, the post cookie and privacy regulated world is sort of an important opportunity to clip our strings and figure

13:42:46 out how to walk on our own. And there's going to be a hard push identifying users through logins various types of signups and registration walls. I think this is an important intermediary step, as the digital ecosystem shifts and, but also I think that

13:43:01 this is something that publishers should approach not necessarily as a new thing. Understand your audience isn't a new suggestion to any publisher.

13:43:11 And so it'll be important. It's important now it was important before it will continue to be important, even as the regulatory environment. And we can see for example the language and the recent Hausfeld that came out, which while it may not pass or it

13:43:24 may be vastly changed it sort of shows that we're in the midst of this long term shift away from individualized user targeting one way or another. So I think, you know, when we think about first principles.

13:43:41 A good thing is to understand any technology in terms of the impact on user experience, and that impact is sort of broad reaching, we have to understand that it exists that any technology exists sort of within the context of overall site performance,

13:43:58 and that's really important for us because that is an aspect of user experience and user experience really needs to be sort of the guiding light and how we handle these things.

13:44:09 And when we sort of look at that as a filter for how we adapt new technologies. That's the process or decide to build technologies if we are capable of doing so as different publishers are.

13:44:21 And that started the approach that goddess for example to the Zeus performance products that the Washington Post now sells we originally started it as a look at the existing ad tech landscape and saying this doesn't perform.

13:44:34 And this was before core web vitals even we were just looking at pre bid JS at the time. And we said their performance metrics that we think we're capable of hitting as a publisher and we want to hit those, those metrics.

13:44:47 And so we built something different and there's a lot of opportunity for an approach there and. And I think the other thing to keep in mind though is that it's bigger than just one script or one ad tech company or anything like that.

13:45:00 It really is sort of a rebuild and how we maintain our websites and how we build new websites or rebuild our existing websites, it becomes this sort of filter on our decision making process that we need to be clear and transparent with our users and we

13:45:17 need to be performance as well, because that's what users are going to be looking for more than anything else. I think publishers are going to also have to take as one of their part first principles, a shift towards contextual as part of an overall strategy

13:45:31 away from third parties.

13:45:33 This is important to us. We put a lot of time and investment into this and I think it's a wide variety of ways to approach this right, we can develop software because we're the Washington Post, but obviously not every publisher has that capability.

13:45:48 But every publisher does have tagging and categories and verticals and that type of stuff, and taking a look at that and being more organized and clear and more specific is going to be an important way to sort of make your content more clear and available.

13:46:04 And we also look at like ways to partner with technology, or to build technology that focuses in on those principles around contextual.

13:46:14 This is another example of how we ended up building a product for this the Zeus prime product became one of our big priorities to build out because it is a contextual targeting product.

13:46:26 And because we believe that's the absolute bedrock of the future of publisher revenue. And because it's the most important way that publishers can clearly distinguish themselves in the larger digital landscape, good high quality well edited content.

13:46:44 Writing journalism, right, the creation of that is a value that publishers have, but not everyone in the digital landscape does. And so, emphasizing building out things that support contextual is a way to emphasize a new ecosystem of digital monetization.

13:47:02 That is aligned with publisher priorities.

13:47:07 And I think the last really sort of guiding principle is that we always have to approach things privacy first, and there's obviously this change in third party cookies and regulations but even beyond that.

13:47:36 We have a relationship with readers and that relationship is fundamentally built on trust. And when that trust starts to fail. And that's going to cause problems all across our organization and every possible piece of it. And so being privacy first allows us to

13:47:39 maintain that trust in that space.

13:47:43 That first sort of contact between the user of the browser and the website they're looking at. And that's really important to hold as well.

13:47:55 Yeah, wow, there's so much in there, let's just, let's say pieces of it at a time. First of all I do. I tell you what I'm hopeful about is, again, we have been on the sort of receiving end, have for want of a better term of the ad tech ecosystem.

13:48:09 Right. And we haven't as an industry we haven't really been able to drive, many of the technical or other outcomes.

13:48:19 If we ever regulator it's Google, as we saw it today by the way they're just coming out with a new regulatory answer on on the topic product.

13:48:30 But also, it is a this. Yeah, this massive some as you know, much better and I in which there's a whole host of middlemen who are just have drains to value, all through, you know I've, I've often said we end up a situation where you have advertisers both

13:48:47 overpaying and publishers under receiving right and then there's a huge match in the middle.

13:48:54 Kind of exploiting both ends, so it's a long way to say I'm hoping this may be one of those terms of the wheel, where news publishers can start to assert their own ideas and values about their ecosystem.

13:49:09 But, and I'm going to get back to that in terms of the processes out there in the world, sort of deciding these things and our influence but let's, let's pick out two particular things you talked about because they do strike me as places where news publishers

13:49:24 can make their own sets of decisions one is performance, and also developing contextual products that that really work now.

13:49:37 Let's talk about core web vitals.

13:49:41 In particular, in this moment, interesting because again comes from Google, right, is that essentially that a regulator talking about performance but it's also not all wrong and we've done some studies through American press Institute in the past that

13:49:54 actually showed, one of the things that impacts readers trust in a new site is performance weirdly. If the pages load slow or you're getting hammered by ads.

13:50:06 People trust the content less, and I don't.

13:50:09 That is a connected thing so in terms of let's take those two things. Performance core web vitals, you know, how do you do you look at that is yet another sort of Google, you know, regulation the space, or as a, you know, a valued set of targets to design

13:50:31 around and meet and, and there are ways for publishers to take advantage of that. And then after that I want to talk about the context is sort of the incipient building a new can textual products and the digital ad space but let's start with core web

13:50:54 I mean how do you how do you look at that I am, I have to tell you I'm always reminded that when Google rolled out amp. It was all about how this was for readers right it was all about performance and isn't as great because it turned out to be amp was

13:51:02 mostly great for Google. But, you know, how do you think about core web vitals and how publishers should be reacting to that.

13:51:10 Yeah.

13:51:12 I actually really liked for web vitals I think it's a mistake that a lot of people make to look at them as like abstract numbers are arbitrary requirements.

13:51:21 I think you hit sort of the nail on the head that performance is a sign of trustworthiness for our readers. And so, making the site performance better is about making it easier for readers of all types to engage and trust with the site.

13:51:37 And I actually really liked talking also about the posts experience with carbon bio specifically because we looked at that as an opportunity to extend and grow and overall focus on page performance that had started significantly earlier actually back

13:51:51 in the day of and when we looked at how amp was performing and looked at how our pages were performing and said hey, these things, some of these pieces are underperforming and ways we can definitely improve.

13:52:04 And, like that's actually we don't talk about a lot but this is actually one of the reasons why we initially started development on Zeus, because we looked at how ads performed on amp and said, Why can't they perform that way outside of it.

13:52:19 And so as soon as core web vitals started being discussed.

13:52:23 We were very early adopter. We built a cross team collaboration to cover our entire organization, and really sort of thought holistically about how to improve this process and what's going on there because we saw this as an opportunity to win, both in

13:52:39 terms of like, sure the requirements are coming from Google and this can mean and improvement in our SRP placement and that type of stuff, but also just generally the, the ability to have a better website and to have a better reading experience to have

13:52:52 a better relationship with our readers through performance. And so, to be really effective we really approached it holistically on the ad tech scripts have always been one of the biggest blockers of page performance.

13:53:08 And like I said, Zeus was one of the things we built out in order to be really effective again the Washington post to the highest levels of core web vitals scores.

13:53:18 And as much as I'd like to pitch, all of your listeners on buying Zeus is.

13:53:24 Okay, go ahead.

13:53:26 Yeah, yeah, it's a great tool for that and it's been super helpful. I should ask for a sponsorship money. Damn, I miss.

13:53:35 I miss something there are no no, feel free. It's a great product so feel free to talk man.

13:53:39 Yeah, so I think like Zeus has been a huge help those ad tech scripts and performances, and how they load on the page and are handled on the page. Those are big blockers, but they're not the only factor, and our Director of Product in red, Amanda Hicks

13:53:57 wrote a great article on that about examining page layouts and page designs, along with the creative formats that exist inside ads that a lot of publishers direct cell and looking at those as part of the process of handling usability processes and usability

13:54:15 problems, especially because layouts and some of these creatives are big causes of layout shift and the work she's been doing combined with the way Zeus optimizes towards view ability means that we've seen our ad metrics are high performance metrics like

13:54:33 click through rate and it er, and even view ability, really sort of tick up, because people are seeing the ads load and seen and just pages jump around.

13:54:43 So not only has this moved towards core web vitals level performance help the page performance but it's helped our revenue performance as well.

13:54:52 And then the excellent folks working with our engineering manager Julie bacon worked on our site engineering team and built an entire release pipeline that leverages the Google Search Console, our analytics tools and continuous deployment process that

13:55:09 allows us to move towards an active feedback loop pushing every release towards greater performance, and then part of that process as well was rethinking about how we sort of build our website from the ground up.

13:55:23 We choose. We chose to emphasize server side rendering as much as possible, and looked at the best design solutions for client side features like placeholders and overlays, with the goals to really improve fit it's the last that the core vitals main metrics

13:55:41 right. Um, and then on top of that we even incorporate this process into understanding how we handled pay walls and walls. And, you know, I there is. These things can pop up and often the processes that people use for rendering paywalls and rituals can

13:55:59 be very ill performant.

13:56:02 We originally handled these with I frames and now we've switched to using site components instead. So that way they're built into the page instead of having to load yet another network request.

13:56:15 And even those components get themselves performance testing and tracking using core web vitals as sort of our guiding post, we can I interrupt for one second what it, what do you think is.

13:56:27 I would say the most common work on mistakes. The most common incorrect approaches that news publishers in particular, just because that's what we're talking about, you know, if you if you were to walk into XYZ news publisher.

13:56:41 What would you likely see that they're doing off on the performance side ms Mila you know what are the most common things that sort of drive you crazy when you see it that people should be thinking about off the top of their heads.

13:56:53 Yeah, I think the first one actually goes back to what I was talking about earlier, which is the layout shift problem too many publishers don't really think about how their components load on page, how things like add float on page but also non add components

13:57:08 and can cause stuff to move around and I think, you know, the easiest way to really push your development and production process towards pay more attention to that, that I do personally, and I encourage other folks within our organization to do, is you

13:57:22 know the browser's have the ability to set your rendering process based off of a 2g connection instead of your hyper fast home connection or whatever it might be, right, I think, a big mistake a lot of developers, make is they think that everybody who

13:57:40 connects to the website has the same connection speed that they do. And so a lot of these shifts that happen. They don't even notice it because everything loads so quickly, but a lot of people.

13:57:51 I mean, obviously less under coven, but even under coven you know are using phones and slower devices and slower internet connections to to parse the site and getting a much worse experience because things load in slow, and then they change position on

13:58:06 the page they grow they shrink whatever it might be. And I think the other big thing is, you know, the, there has been a really big trend among web developers to move towards.

13:58:22 I won't get too technical into it but basically react or react inspired technologies for building web pages, and I don't think there's anything that is fundamentally wrong with those technologies, but how you choose to render them onto the page can have

13:58:37 a huge impact the sort of default approach for someone who's picking up react is you have a big package of JavaScript that loads on to the site, and then sort of builds your site really quickly.

13:58:51 And thankfully I think a lot of people are moving away from that and moving towards server side rendering of the site. And that's a huge win that a lot of publishers can make.

13:59:02 But it is a long process if you're not already doing it, especially for those of us engineering resources, because it's an infrastructure change.

13:59:13 But I think it's worth it, it's worth it for the reasons you said right it's about establishing trust users.

13:59:21 it's worth it for core web vitals. And one of the things that like really helped with us is that I think, as people look at should we improve our performance.



13:59:30 And how should we prioritize this is that our core web vitals scores are improved and high enough now that the post has dropped almost all of its AMP pages.

13:59:43 So, we do not need to maintain a whole separate code base for amp anymore. That's engineering resources we can free up you know that's that's a great.

13:59:56 That's a great tip right there. It's great to avoid amp when you can right and and essentially you're building your own performance in it that allows that allows you to avoid doing that but also is increasing your core performance.

14:00:09 That's, that's really interesting, again because I do feel like, as we talk all the time in this industry about resource constraints, and particularly in the local side yeah there's a lot of financial constraints, and that's all completely real right

14:00:23 and I wake up every day, focused on how we can change that environment. That being said, there are things that may be right in front of you, that you can start doing to improve the quality of the product that, again, really does matter to to readers immediately

14:00:42 and really does. You want them to enjoy the experience, particularly if you want them to affirmatively pay to keep coming back to experience it.

14:01:00 Let's shift a little bit and talk about contextual right so it's an, it's a relatively easy intellectual jump that you know cookies are going away various forms of identifiers will be constrained Although to be determined.

14:01:09 We'll talk more about that, that there may be a shift back to more contextual advertising advertising, based on on what else is being read and consumed at the time.

14:01:25 And then, the interesting ideas, then how do you build technologies around that rather than just, You know, having some person.

14:01:35 Deciding hey that's it's a travel column let's do a travel add next to it, you know, how to build the technologies around it. I am a little worried that these publishers will again be on the receiving end too much of other people's solutions around this

14:01:52 again will be providing the context.

14:01:54 Without benefiting from the contextual ad so I do, I want us to have our, You know points of view.

14:02:04 Now and understood embrace here but talk a little bit about obviously you're thinking about a lot in the context of Zeus and otherwise how you guys are thinking about it and and what sort of excites you, and maybe what you little worried about in that

14:02:16 shift.

14:02:17 Yeah, yeah. I mean I think that the important thing to keep in mind.

14:02:22 Like we're getting a lot of incoming, you know pitches, every publisher is for all of these like post cookie technologies, etc. And we talked about like how there's a path, it's not we're not gonna be flipping a switch to one state and then going into

14:02:36 the next stage, necessarily, but I do think, sort of, it's important to keep in mind that the end of the third party cookie and the end of individually addressing addressable advertising is inevitable, like it's not a maybe or a, or who knows or anything

14:02:55 like that. I think a lot of people out there have an interest in pitching it that way. I think that these things are coming, no matter what. And, and so that means really, we thinking sort of how we handle these approaches you know not not letting other

14:03:15 people handle it not letting other companies decide how do these things work, how does our business work that type of thing.

14:03:25 And, and so I think that the important thing for contextual especially is thinking about who you partner with and being very careful with it, and thinking about how we can sort of influence the future of these, you know these processes this feature of

14:03:44 ad tech. And I think I've I've said this already but this is like a real inflection point and publishers have an opportunity to to change things.

14:03:57 Even small publishers, don't have to just come along for the ride.

14:04:03 Their voices, the voices of small publishers medium sized publishers large publishers and not to mention trade organizations like yourself that represent publishers, whose voices are more weighty than ever before.

14:04:20 And I think that articulating and talking about how their business works is going to be an important part of it, and. And then the other thing is thinking through sort of contextual as a opportunity to enrich the site, beyond just as.

14:04:51 This is an opportunity for personalization and opportunity, increase sort of the depth of each visit more page views per visit that type of thing. And we sort of have spent a lot of time thinking through and working on stuff like schema.org markup for

14:04:58 structured metadata on each page, and that can help, not just google but other mechanisms. Other address and mechanisms as well.

14:05:08 I'm not sure if that answers your question but yeah guys hey you know I have to tell you, I hope, whatever the next chapters are one of the things that allows us to do better as an industry, by the way, is I've, I've always made the argument that a news

14:05:25 audience is a qualitatively different and qualitatively better audience for many advertisers because is our people consuming realm, in a relatively serious way relatively serious content right there is a news audience is there to do something serious

14:05:48 which is read about their community and read about the world, you know, and, and that that is an audience that's paying attention, by the way, and that too often in the iterations of ad tech systems we've been subjected to somebody reading about you know

14:06:07 what's going on in Russia is valued similarly to somebody, flipping through 50 celebrity beach bodies. Right. And that, and that's because that equivalent that suppression of difference works best for the ad tech ecosystem, you know they don't want to.

14:06:25 They don't want to figure out what's what. So we're going to just plow everything down to dust and roll over top of it.

14:06:33 I'm hoping that as we move into these contextual things there may be some opportunity to kind of recapture that perspective which I believe in that is a news audiences, a different kind of audience idea.

14:06:47 Would you agree with that or not or yeah I do agree I think like this gets to sort of the trouble of user targeted advertising which is it undercuts and drains the ecosystem, away from publishers and towards you know outright fraud malicious sites misinformation.

14:07:10 We've seen these effects all across the ecosystem in a lot of different ways and a lot of different places. My favorite stat about like digital advertising is there was a study of study a few years ago, a study of studies.

14:07:26 A few years ago, that looked at all of the different studies that showed how much fraud was in the ad tech ecosystem. And they were like, the conclusion of the authors was basically, it's anywhere between 2% and 98% somewhere, or the high degree of confidence

14:07:42 within that distribution.

14:07:45 Yeah, and I think that's very telling them how really bad the ecosystem is right now.

14:07:54 And I think that's sort of an opportunity that publishers have to realign themselves, in some ways, the necessity of how the tech ecosystem has worked means that we've sort of been like you've said at the mercy of some of the ad tech decision making in

14:08:12 the ecosystem. And, and, as a result, I think, and I think readers have perceived this, it's misaligned publishers away from readers. And when you hear someone complaining about like whether or not they don't trust a site or whether they think it's misinformation.

14:08:32 The most common term to come up in those conversations is always clickbait or fake news right, and those terms are driven out of the fact that our readers understand in some way how this ecosystem works, even if they cannot articulate it, and they find

14:08:50 it untrustworthy, and I think that's important that informed readers are the publishers bread and butter and so we have to align with them, because it's a core principle for them.

14:09:02 And it benefits us for it to be a core principle for us. If it wasn't, and it is, and you know the users don't want their data sold off to this black box of unaccountable corporations.

14:09:14 The last the last chart of ad tech participants tab like over 8000 products and it might even be more than that.

14:09:24 And you know, we've been fighting, our readers in a war over ad tech for over a decade. It's been a lot of work it's been a lot of time and effort and thought put into that.

14:09:37 And it's never benefited publishers, it's only benefited these entities that claim to speak for publishers, these, these sort of ad tech middlemen who tend to where the publisher identity, like a sock puppet and these conversations are absolutely out

14:09:54 how this happens. Yeah. And so, as a result, we've ended up fighting our rears over individualize user tracking, and that's a war that it's impossible for us to win.

14:10:06 But when we look at context is a product that aligns us with our readers in a really strong way and exactly what you were talking about right informed readers are the type of readers that advertisers want, and they're the type of readers that are only

14:10:19 going to come through publishers legitimate publishers and.

14:10:24 And so, moving towards privacy in that regard is going to be something that, you know, different publishers are going to have an easier or harder time with it.

14:10:35 I think that's unavoidable and I think you know a lot of people won't necessarily talk much about this but I do think that like 8000 products that are in the ad tech ecosystem.

14:10:46 With all of that lack of transparency and potential fraud cannot survive privacy.

14:10:52 That's why there's so much resistance in the ad tech space, there's going to be a lot of these products that they have built their promises off of user targeting and when that becomes impossible.

14:11:05 It goes away right and so I think that we have to look as instead saying hey, we need to focus not on these sort of ad tech principles or concepts but instead on being publishers on serving our readership, and on doing what we have always done best which

14:11:23 is being trustworthy and informational. And then our contextual properties should support that.

14:11:31 And that means that, you know, not all context is a topic tag, things like authors things like information about publishing principles, which is a piece of metadata you can include and structured metadata conversations.

14:11:46 One of the important things for helping search engines and therefore readers who are looking for content, understand sort of how pay walls and rentals works is, is there is a metadata property in schema.org JSON objects that says hey this access is gated,

14:12:04 and that's a way to understand performance and that's a way to understand what you're entering there. And I think, making it clear and more transparent is really sort of the most important principle.

14:12:16 And we've, we've been pulled away from that the information publishers it hasn't necessarily been a choice right but this is the time, right, time for us to speak up and talk about it and change things.

14:12:30 I've been very happy to see some publishers and some publishing organizations, showing up in LA making sessions and that type of stuff. I think that sort of thing, is going to be a very high value and for the first time in a long time.

14:12:45 We actually have the potential to create a real shift that benefits our users, our business and our society.

14:12:56 And that's a win win win, I can't get any better than that.

14:13:02 Amen brother.

14:13:06 Talk about preaching to the choir. Let's talk, by the way, I love the whole your statistics right AD AD tech fraud, you know.

14:13:14 50% of my ad by I just don't know which 50%, and really in the ad tech space, you'd wish over 50%, but it's really an industry built on being able to sell perceived effectiveness as opposed to actual effectiveness it's it's something amazing case study

14:13:38 in that but anyway, we're moving to different chapters so let's talk about that. The, the processes for figuring out the new standards the new approaches the new products, the rest right it's, it's confusing.

14:13:56 Even though folks in it and really confusing folks out of it you have you have Google essentially really acting as a as a as a regulator mothership to some degree you know they're the announcement today about their topic product.

14:14:12 It wasn't like there were a lot of discussion drafts at least that that we saw have, you know, it was in a group think it was their announcement. So you have Google is a regular but then you have w three see activities.

14:14:25 You have IB meandering around, then you have regulatory pressures on top of that, which just out of curiosity, I don't know which of those Do you participate in and and where do you see things actually making progress and good ideas surfacing, and if

14:14:43 you're willing to say, you know, after where do you.

14:14:46 Where do you see things not working very well.

14:14:48 Yeah.

14:14:50 I participate in sort of every venue that will allow us to talk about our values and our interest in this stuff. I think that the WC is sort of a prime place to participate, it's easy to see sort of Google WCIAB regulators, etc as this sort of amorphous

14:15:10 mass of influences on us. But I think the flip side of that is that very are really a series of pressures. And a lot of those pressures are on Google right now.

14:15:24 And, you know, you don't have to be a Google booster or Google detractors to look at the situation as it is now and see, they're getting oversight from Attorney General's they're getting oversight from regulators laws are impacting their business, their

14:15:40 ability to move

14:15:43 without asking the input of others is as constrained as it has ever been. And so they participate in the standards making process for stuff like the topics API or the other standards they've been working on through the WC.

14:16:09 And while they can make a lot of press and announcements out of announcing something that they are now trying out.

14:16:09 It still has to go through a path towards standardization and through convention, and through Google's choices and other browsers choices. And, in fact, at this point, even through, to some degree, and our favorite phrase, when we talk about this stuff

14:16:26 in the WEC is we're engineers not lawyers so not legal advice.

14:16:32 But some regulators have even seen the W three see is this venue for coming to a standard coming to sort of reconciliation over many proposals, many of which are coming from Google.

14:16:48 And so I think by the, the WCC has become sort of the best place for publishers to attempt to weigh the scale of this conversation. and these technologies in their direction, but like last year I sort of went and talked about this more extensively, but

14:17:09 the WBC is immensely important for publishers to bring their use cases to to bring their interests and concerns to.

14:17:18 We talked about this earlier right publishers have been misrepresented by ad tech and big technology that claims to speak on their behalf. And that's happened, basically, forever, like, since publishers started entering the web.

14:17:33 And so, the WC is an opportunity for us to speak for ourselves.

14:17:39 Even an hour out of every week in one community group can have an outsized impact in a way that participation in almost no other venue, I think, would because it's an opportunity to make our opinions public our use cases public and to make it clear what's

14:17:58 going on with a publisher businesses that these different proposals impact. And that is, is really appreciated by all participants and I will include to their credit Google here I think that it's been so long that publishers have not had a direct voice

14:18:15 in these conversations that one of the things that sort of amazed surprised and pleased me I guess about when we started talking to WC is how little our perspective has been represented how unfamiliar, it is to so many of the participants and how when

14:18:35 we made the choice to speak up, people listened and that they listened and they took that feedback and they took our use cases. And they turned them into real impact and changes within these proposals.

14:18:51 The Washington Post is a WC member, which means we have access to the whole suite of WPC meetings, we have engineers we send them to a bunch of different meetings.

14:19:02 But I think it's super valuable, and I think publishers can look at it as an opportunity one to be able to put their voice in and have it have a weight that it might not have in other places, because their voices really been unheard in the process of

14:19:20 building out the web, basically from like 2002 now like we've had 20 years where publishers really haven't spoken up.

14:19:33 You know, you know, technically influential way.

14:19:37 And by that I mean influencing the technology. And this is an opportunity for them to do so in a place where it has a difference. I think the other thing that makes it worthwhile on is it's an opportunity to understand find and figure out how to implement

14:19:50 best practices across a lot of different interests, but just take a step at a privacy for example, we have a engineer who attends the accessibility group within the W three C, and they came out of that with best practices of useful things we can do to

14:20:18 better websites, let's say with. We have an engineer who participates with one of the CSS working groups, right and that also are really hope great host of best practices and useful knowledge and things that we can start building out now to prepare for

14:20:30 the future. Now that we are sort of seeing it coming. And the thing that a lot of people get wrong about sort of the standards making process is they assume that everything has to be gated through discussion first but it really is someone like Chrome

14:20:47 part of the way the process is supposed to work is someone like Chrome team sets up a standard that they are proposing. And then they put it into their test environment and they say, here's an opportunity to test that we're going to collect metrics on

14:20:58 and then we're going to use those metrics to help talk about it. So as we move towards a finalized standard. And that means that there's an opportunity to build prototypes and to understand how these things have impact and to even, like, just understand

14:21:14 what's coming better. I understand, you know, I spent a lot of my career working with smaller publishers and local publishers and, obviously, they don't have the resources to prototype every Google proposal right but reading it and understanding what

14:21:29 it is and understanding how it impacts of documenting how it can impact us is not the huge lift that doesn't require code deployment, or anything like that, but it can have a big impact.

14:21:43 Oh, no, no, no, I was just gonna say less than that, again, man I'm glad we're recording this because there's so much good stuff in here good stuff that I agree with you know frankly, I spent a lot of my life.

14:22:00 You know I am I am a paid to be a voice for news publishers I actually do represent these publishers as opposed to people who say they do right and one of the things I found is this industry had such little muscle memory, advocating for itself on a whole

14:22:18 range of different ways and that is surprising to people right because it used to be a huge industry and obviously journalism editorial pages and all that were were highly influential, but weirdly on terms of the business side of things, advertising environments,

14:22:38 you know the issues I get involved with in terms of platform issues. There's really amazingly little kind of muscle and muscle memory in terms of standing up and say no no these are our unique views as news publishers and that's important to be heard.

14:22:55 And so one, it's sort of creating that and I, you know, what you've been doing is amazing.

14:23:00 But also I have to tell you, sometimes we get angry reactions from folks like, yeah, shut up, you're not here. Who are you yeah and and sort of being able to add in those spaces say no no we did something important sustains democracy, among other things,

14:23:18 and we have our own particular views which we're going to express it and want to be heard. So, I think you're absolutely right that grabbing this moment, to where we can, we have the opportunity and openings to sort of assert our points of view is super

14:23:33 important. So with that, let me.

14:23:37 This has been a great conversation, let me circle back to our last question, which is already hinted on in your last answer a little bit, which is, if you are smaller local publisher who's not Washington Post right it doesn't necessarily have the resources

14:23:52 or the resources, you know, financial capacity is whatever just doesn't have the same capacities, but you're doing incredibly important things right you're sustaining your communities through great journalism.

14:24:05 What are the what, what piece of advice could you give somebody to hear some relatively easier ways to keep up to get involved to assert your, your points of view.

14:24:22 You know what, what can you do as somebody who's running a lot of these issues and small local publisher to help assert your points of view in this new chapters.

14:24:32 Yeah, I think, like I said, being verbal and talking about this stuff is really important to documenting what your requirements are the troubles you hit in these processes that's really important.

14:24:45 I think that it ties back to some of the other stuff we said the sort of North Star for every publisher be should be establishing and maintaining these trusted relationships with readers and understanding that, like when they do sign up for things is

14:24:59 out of trust.

14:25:01 And that trust can be very easily broken. I think one of the big sort of issues. I've seen happen with smaller publishers, is that they don't, they don't understand how valuable their user basis you know they don't understand how even something that is

14:25:21 as basic as an email list right can be the sort of thing that they might not want to share with everyone, because then they they impact that trust in a way that readers are not going to be happy with.

14:25:33 And I think that the question of sort of the the low hanging fruit the easy wins that they can build on immediately within their own organizations, sort of all stem from that.

14:25:46 I think there's that we've talked a lot about corporate vitals and I think that even if it didn't improve search placement which it does. Um, it improves user experience and that always pays out dividends.

14:26:00 And so, that and considering that and considering some of the stuff we've already talked about is going to be a big win for them. I think my, my favorite example of that I have from working with Zeus customers is, we had one publisher who's performance



14:26:17 we really improved through Zeus, and when they flipped on Zoom's really increased site performance really increased or web vitals, and they came back to us.

14:26:26 A little while later and told us that that increase in performance directly was relatable to an increase in subscription numbers, and right now says that holistic level of user trust means treating our users with respect treating giving our users the

14:26:42 performance they need to interact with our site, and that pays out it pays out in better advertising experiences it pays out and better subscription experiences it pays out in pretty much every way, when we talk about core web vitals, we talked about

14:26:55 as sort of like the the best example we have like a win win situation.

14:27:00 Our core, our attempt to improve our sites performance has lead to better outcomes in every sort of category when it comes to advertising when it comes to SEO when it comes to user relationships at every level.

14:27:15 Um, and so where you can improve performance on your site. I think that always is going to pay off significantly.

14:27:25 And I think the other thing is, start really sort of reassessing your partnerships looking at the technology to see us looking at the scripts that are on your pages, not just for performance reasons but because of the stuff we talked about that some of

14:27:38 these ad tech providers may not be serving you as directly as you might thought it's worthwhile to try turning things on and off narrowing down your window of providers testing these things, to some extent, you know, turning a tag, turning a script tag

14:27:53 tag on and off, does not require a lot of work does not require a lot of work for engineers, but a lot of publishers use tools like Google Tag Manager, which means it's literally a checkbox that they could do, and test for a little while.

14:28:07 And I think that the contextual conversation comes back into it, and especially in terms of building out metadata on your site. I think one of the interesting sort of trends that we've seen, and this, you know, is one of those things where some in some

14:28:21 cases it's for the better in some cases it's for the worse, depending on who are interacting with his site content is being pulled into other contexts, it's being pulled into reading tools it's being pulled into stuff like Google News.

14:28:37 I think that as we move away from individualized user targeting that sort of trend will only continue because context is going to be more important, and making the context clear for readers and for tooling is going to be really important as well so putting

14:28:53 stuff like making it visible on page in some cases but also better metadata tagging better use of stuff like schema.org tags and JSON LD. These are things where like there's a lot of pre existing tools that publishers can leverage that can act server

14:29:18 that don't have to decline their performance and can have good payouts for them. Um, and I think, like, the other thing is to really sort of focus in.

14:29:26 I suspect that as you go through this podcast are going to have a lot of people who have suggestions for publishers and what they can do and what to get involved with and I think that I'm thinking of those through in some detail and being very focused

14:29:38 is is important. One of the things that sort of worries me more than anything else is thinking about how the ad tech landscape is going to shift as browsers become more private.

14:29:52 And I think like there's, we're always seeing this move towards connected TV or CTV and we're already seeing this shift towards Oh out of home type of advertising.

14:30:02 And I think you have to engage in conversations with the advertisers you have relationships with, because a lot of that stuff is built on top of the exact same problems that browsers had the promises of specific metrics and specific targeting that just

14:30:16 are not as possible as what the marketing is promising it is.

14:30:22 I feel like in some ways.

14:30:25 You know I am a I've been a big fan of watching the coverage and reading the books and podcasts on whatever around like the theranos stuff. Yeah, I think, you know, a lot of people sort of look at that and think of it.

14:30:50 But when I look at it I say Oh, she's just applying all the techniques that every ad tech company applies to their startups. Yeah. The only difference is, it's very easy to prove.

14:30:51 When your blood is not being tested correctly, but it's very difficult to prove when your ad is not being targeted correctly. And so when we are moving towards contextual.

14:31:03 The other piece of it is moving towards transparency.

14:31:07 When we talk about Zeus one of the sort of core principles we bring up the publishers is, even though our code is closed source.

14:31:19 The operation on the page is highly transparent. We even give our publishers, a developer tool that they can load into Chrome to see what's happening on the page, and that like comes out of this principle of transparency, you, you know, like I said I'd

14:31:30 You know, like I said I'd love to sell everybody Zeus, but it's not just use that can do this and it's not just on the ad tech side they can do this, being transparent with advertisers and readers and the other systems that interact with your page is

14:31:44 only going to become more important towards making that pitch.

14:31:47 On one hand to readers to say, you can trust us sign up, subscribe, and making the pitch. On the other hand, to advertisers, saying, you can trust us, the metrics we are giving you are accurate.

14:32:00 This has always been the struggle, you know, one of my, what my favorite things I think they tell people who are entering the news engineering or news product space is that they should always do at least four things when they enter the space, which is,

14:32:25 on their native machine with what you've built. you look at what your marketing team is doing, and understand what their goals and expectations are and how they try and meet them and you sit in on at least one editorial meeting.

14:32:47 And I think, as we're thinking about building these things out thinking about those challenges that those people face and re centering on those problems, is where we can sort of think about how to rebuild our impacts and our sites, the sales people like

14:33:02 one of the things that is always the problem is getting advertisers to trust our metrics right. And there's a great.

14:33:11 There was a great article about agencies and clawbacks that came out a couple years ago, that triggered an FBI investigation into this right and like the or.

14:33:23 It's actually not clear if it did trigger the FBI investigation I guess it's an alleged to have triggered an FBI investigation. But, um, the, the thing is that, like the problem there is transparency and publishers have never really found a way to pick

14:33:39 up where ad Tech has fallen there, you know the ad tech landscape is this huge black box. And like you said so much of the money falls away in that in between part before it gets to the publisher, put so much effort it's falling away for his things that

14:33:55 are supposed to make it accountable.

14:33:58 And so publishers saying hey accountability is our prime, one of our prime principles. Right. And we're accountable the readers let's take that same accountability and make ourselves, clear and more transparent to advertisers and try and talk to them

14:34:12 about this process, because we have to be a counterweight to the forces within the ad tech landscape that are trying to shift, an advertiser spend towards the you know, the CTV or Oh stuff.

14:34:30 The the big thing that has to change there is advertisers spend right now is, is always shifting towards the least accountable process.

14:34:41 You know, and yeah and why. And to your point, where we always get criticized are about metrics and accountability when the alternative is over so in every respect, much less accountable.

14:34:54 Right. But that seems to be okay right.

14:34:59 That's amazing. It was an awesome thank you so much. This has been incredibly compelling. Our I think it's a lot of high value for news publishers out there and our audience I just, I really appreciate your doing this, and I look forward to doing it again

14:35:14 something tells me they'll be a lot more stuff to talk about as you're going forward. I'm Zachary Scharf Thank you so much, very much appreciate your being with us today.

14:35:22 Yeah. Glad to be here and I think you know if there's one thing that your listeners can sort of take away from this, it's that they should not be afraid of privacy.

14:35:32 This is the biggest opportunity we have to restructure the the business we exist in towards a positive for us for readership, and for the society we existed.

14:35:45 And I think that's really important to take away from this.

14:35:47 If you take away anything I know we've talked a lot. Maybe you can have this conversation and go ask us about buying Zeus too but that is the most important thing really is to improve how everything runs.