

Transcript – News Take Episode 104: Mitra Kalita, URL Media

Hi everyone, welcome, my name is David Chavern I'm the president and CEO of the news media Alliance and this is News take our news take conversations are designed to be kind of wonky chats designed to offer unique perspectives

12:37:42 and insights around all of the innovation taking place in the news media industry and how different organizations are applying that innovation. We really do try to get into the weeds with people who are changing that is industry, particularly those who

12:37:55 are helping make better news products, and his perspectives aren't always heard today I am very very excited to welcome, welcome Mitra Kalita to the show. Mitra is a veteran journalist media executive commentator and author of two books.

12:38:10 She is the co founder and CEO of URL media, a network of black and brown community news outlets that share content and revenue URL media works with mainstream newsrooms to syndicate content and partner on diversity initiatives and content staffing and

12:38:27 culture.

12:38:28 She is a co founder and publisher of Epicenter NYC a New York newsletter designed to help New Yorkers get through the covid 19 pandemic, as well as newsletters the unmuted.

12:38:39 and the escape home. Previously nature was Senior Vice President at CNN digital overseeing national news breaking news programming opinion and features teams.

12:38:50 She also worked in leadership roles at the Los Angeles Times and it courts. She sits on a number of journalism boards, most notably, and most importantly, the board of the news media lions my board, so I'm super thrilled to have her welcome Mitra Kalita.

12:39:04 excited to have you. Thank you so much for having me This is gonna be fun. Super so let's just start, you know, talking about yourself a little bit. Tell us about your career journey you know how did you get into this business.

12:39:18 And then, how did that work its way to you decided to start your own news media outlet. Oh gosh, well we can start I think when I was 12 if you're a banker.

12:39:32 So I my parents were immigrants from India, and in the 1980s. My father got an offer to move to Puerto Rico.

12:39:42 And so I spent much of my childhood in Puerto Rico, and that's significant because as we were about to move to the mainland.

12:39:50 My parents broke us this news and just to kind of give you context we had a great house in Puerto Rico, we had a pool, we had a banyan tree.

12:39:59 It really was this amazing existence. As a child, and as a child of Indian immigrants, you know so often you grow up and you know I think people are familiar with hyphenated identities where you're in your American for me being in Puerto Rico was like

12:40:15 like this kind of curveball but was also really great because there's so much similarity with at least as a tropical island like the place my in from and so it's very warm upbringing.

12:40:30 And my view said, we're moving to New Jersey.

12:40:35 And my views said, we're moving to New Jersey, not different. Yes Why are you different, and in protests, and I look at, of course you look at your life with like the benefit of kind of 2020 hindsight, I quickly fashioned a newspaper to protest their

12:40:50 decision.

12:40:52 And I didn't realize what I was doing, until years later that I learned more about media understood, kind of the voice that journalism enables, but you know that's like my earliest memory of journalism in my life.

12:41:09 The newspaper was ineffective, it was great for my career and a kind of anecdotal story of where it all began, but did not, it kind of fell on deaf ears my parents didn't see New Jersey.

12:41:21 I was opinion have a problem.

12:41:25 terms of content is probably opinion wife comes full circle.

12:41:30 So, um, but, but anyway so I moved to New Jersey and I joined the school newspaper as an activity to make friends. And in my first week of seventh grade, I found myself interviewing the principal, and I thought this is so cool because I'm this new girl,

12:41:47 I never would have met the principal otherwise and so that's kind of how my career in journalism took off.

12:41:55 I ended up doing. I think it's important to note that I came of age in journalism during efforts to diversify newsrooms.

12:42:03 There is a program run by the Dow Jones newspaper funded that was pretty pivotal in my entry and kind of retention in newsrooms so in high school. It's interesting.

12:42:14 Yeah, I don't know, I'm sure you're familiar with these programs they just targeted high schoolers like me and said you know learn about this as a career.

12:42:22 And if you're from a background where your parents don't know about journalism you know my dad was an engineer by training and then went to work at a bank.

12:42:32 My mom was mostly a housewife and then she worked for the state of New Jersey as an unemployment clerk later in her life.

12:42:38 They didn't I mean news is something other people did. And so these programs were just amazing because there is much for you, as they are for your parents, like, just get them comfortable with this career.

12:42:52 So I did this program, I ended up going to Rutgers I worked on the school newspaper and then kind of I did the classic trajectory where you you know, work in one market and then you graduate to the next big market and then you kind of go on and on and

12:43:09 on. That was my career. So, you know it's interesting, a lot of these programs. When you hear people talk about them now at the results can be kind of ephemeral it's sort of like, it's a good idea but, you know, who knows the outcome.

12:43:22 And then to see to see it on the other side where you see these programs are very signs are like it, it changed the course of your career. Right.

12:43:32 That's. It's really I think it's really important to tell those stories so that you kind of people stay committed to. So, that know that those in similar programs now because they really do have effect could be long term effect but they really do have.

12:43:48 Yeah.

12:43:50 So let's talk a little bit about URL media so you.

12:43:54 You've been in a lot of news outlets of various kinds and most notably it at CNN, how do you, this is an important space for entrepreneurism but also really tough space for entrepreneurs them.

12:44:11 And so how did you come around to the thing you want to start your own thing and then talk a little bit about it sort of the core business model your own media, What was what's your approach Ben.

12:44:23 So, it was the actually exactly two years ago so march of 2020 was when the world changed right and you know I remember we didn't send one daughter to school that day and then we picked up the other one early and we had these IKEA bags full of our lives.

12:44:42 We moved in with my parents to New Jersey because my father, unfortunately had suffered a second stroke, and we were in that is a case of.

12:44:53 Do you distance from your parents or do you kind of full on say okay we're cocooning together now.

12:45:02 It's one or the other, right but you they're gonna wave wave at them from the outside or right.

12:45:07 It felt like you had a split second to make that decision and he decided to go all in just because of the caregiving aspect. I live in Jackson Heights, Queens.

12:45:19 We're actually the pandemic struck earliest struck early and struck off and I mean we were really hard hit, and we became known as the epicenter of the epicenter which becomes important to a product I later launched, but you know I moved my whole family

12:45:32 the four of us in with my parents in New Jersey I had not lived with them since high school, so that was interesting. And, and went about.

12:45:42 I worked at CNN, I was a senior vice president my team was more than 200 people. I had, you know, the breaking news teams opinion team health opinion features and programming which is the digital distribution, all reporting into me.

12:45:58 And so you can imagine the pandemic was a challenging time where every single member of our team needed to be firing on all cylinders.

12:46:06 And for me, there was a transition that occurred in those months at CNN, which I had been advocating for for years because it's not coincidental that my entire backdrop at CNN was also the presidency of Donald Trump.

12:46:21 And as you might imagine working at CNN during the presidency of Donald Trump is kind of an all consuming affair I mean when you get to Friday, I would just like come back home and collapse and wait for the next week that would ruin my weekend.

12:46:35 My existence.

12:46:36 But for years I had been advocating for a more comprehensive, you know, we often use diversity in, especially for me and, in terms of race, but I had been advocating for diversity in our report, right.

12:46:49 Can we go beyond Donald Trump.

12:46:52 And, and, and digitally, you can do that but TV and you know, I think cnn viewers would feel like you turn on the TV and you see one story right i mean kind of the wait linear TV is the pandemic forced, not just diversity of storytelling meaning this

12:47:07 is a global event. Right, so the CNN this of it we're everywhere. We can tell you what's happening on the ground, married to an aspect that I think has been harder for our industry writ large man we talked about this a lot at the news media line says

12:47:22 you know to embrace of service journalism, right, how can we squarely, you know make ourselves utility to our user, even as we're covering the news so of course there's mask no mask, what's the CDC saying, but the truth is four months and you know even

12:47:42 I think to the present day, one of the top searched Google

12:47:47 terms is covert symptoms. Right. And so how do you continue to meet your audience where they are, which is as basic as covert symptoms, even as we're covering to mask or not masking the politicization of this which happened very quickly and so I share

12:48:05 that as the backdrop to the founding of Epicenter and URL media because there was a pivot, that I was able to be a part of at CNN that I think much of our industry, knew we needed to go down this road and was looking at the post Trump.

12:48:26 I mean, what would happen right like there is the Trump bump will end even if Trump had gotten to a second term. Right. And so what what becomes of us with kind of a ruthless question but also in service to our users like what will we continue to do so,

12:48:43 covert changed some of my work at CNN.

12:48:48 And then, it did another thing which is I was between New Jersey caregiving for my family and my home and Jackson Heights, it literally felt like every time we came back to get stuff for spend a night here before going back there.

12:49:01 I mean the sirens were constant and the, the, the fear in this neighborhood was quite palpable This was literally one of the hardest hit areas of the country by coven.

12:49:14 And so what happened my husband and I are pretty involved in our neighborhood and people just started asking us, you know, What's the line at Patel brothers like.

12:49:23 Does anyone know that has a ventilator. Does anyone know child, we can get when both parents have covered, you know, kind of the neighborly type questions but that are really rooted in survival.

12:49:37 And then picture me running CNN, the largest game on the internet, the largest website on the planet and trying to kind of figure out that ground game that I'm getting from Jackson Heights, but also I'm just getting from Google Search right like everybody

12:49:52 listens.

12:49:55 And how do you marry these two things and so I'm just as like a good neighbor and and you know my husband's been really involved in helping small businesses and so forth but, you know, years before we launched this company.

12:50:08 And one thing I'll say just as an aside about local news there's a lot of people getting into local news, but you kind of can't fake your commitment to your community right like, no, Jenna, suddenly you were like this national news executive but you never

12:50:20 gave your neighbors sugar like they will call you out on.

12:50:26 Thankfully, my husband and I like were legitimately involved in our neighborhood. And we were sending emails every day with these requests that were coming in we would amplify them to groups of let's say like 50 of our friends.

12:50:38 And finally we said, Gosh, this is like we're going to go broke, and this is not we're going to the same 50 people over and over for help. Is there another way and so we launched Epicenter as a newsletter.

12:50:48 We launched in July of, 2020, we intended to launch in May, but there's another event that we might talk about that happened at the end of May and 2020.

12:50:59 And which of course is the death of George Floyd, and up so we were delayed a little bit, we launched the newsletter. It takes off. It's pretty beloved in the community, but remember my lens on the world is CNN.

12:51:12 I am the biggest game on the planet and here's this newsletter. And while it's Beloved.

12:51:19 I know the importance of scale, not just for impact, but also because in order to be successful in the internet in order for something like coven symptoms to be a search term that everybody knows, it is entirely rooted in your numbers and your scale know

12:51:46 Sustainability Yeah, there's no sustainability of kind of what I just described Epicenter a newsletter for this neighborhood that needs it. Great, but how do you, and again, we'll get to the revenue in a moment, but how do the people even know about you,

12:51:54 because if you're living in Jackson Heights and you're searching. Is there a line at Patel brothers, I guarantee you the New York Times is not covering that cnn is covering that even the Queens Chronicle is not covering that.

12:52:05 So how am I going to be discoverable. Right. And so this predicament, which I you know proudly wore the hat of you know the woman at CNN who can make anything go viral who could get traffic on a story like I am not ashamed of that, right, is trying to

12:52:26 reconcile this local news product that I've just launched by the way I'm still at CNN, mind you, I still have a day job with literally how do you serve a community when the internet actually makes it impossible to serve a community, right.

12:52:41 Yeah, actually this is I've talked about this before about, and this is very interesting about 2020 2021 and that there has been this long term.

12:52:51 It's an internet phenomenon I've nationalization of news attention rate, meaning you know because of the internet, people in Anchorage we're talking to people in Atlanta more often and they want to talk about things they had in common, which was national

12:53:04 political and Kim Kardashian all sorts of general interest, and that, you know.

12:53:10 So for my parents and your parents generation my parents generation, in particular, you know, national would have been further Nixon was further down the news funnel then what happened locally and of course battle flipped that but there.

12:53:25 But there was something empty and Trump by the way was the gasoline on the fire right everything at the top 15 of everything became about Trump, but there was something and you've described it very tangent, you know, very texturally of of both Cove ID

12:53:42 and racial justice issues and the rest that really spun the telescope around right all sudden all sudden people cared with their Mayor had to say when, frankly, most people had no clue their mayor was in most places like, what, you know what, you know,

12:53:57 and then how do you how do you grab this moment right and figure out how to build a business around it, it's so it's, it really struck me as you're describing is your story really is a.

12:54:10 There's a hole that's happening in at some level in every community but everybody's not figuring it out as well. Yeah, I mean one of the epicenters taglines is you know the 20 blocks around you is never mattered more right and I think we really great.

12:54:25 I mean, and. And so what happened was even though neighborhoods like Jackson Heights were so hard hit in the pandemic. They were also oddly Ascendant right the same reason that my husband and I live here which is, you know, we embrace diversity we embrace

12:54:42 family life, we're kind of lazy so we love that there's a lot of takeout, you know, really good produce really good restaurant, the dry cleaners right here I mean you can center your life in new york city neighborhoods and I think a lot of neighborhoods

12:54:55 across the country have similarly seen being Ascendant because they offer the ability to kind of live your life and work, and remember there's a lot of the work from home phenomenon as a part of this now.

12:55:10 But what about this issue of scale that you've, you've also just outlined from, from what we're up against and it's you know and I presented as local news but I think in many ways we're all up against this.

12:55:23 And so, um, there's a woman who runs a radio station WURD which is Philadelphia is black talk radio station that's one of only three black talk radio stations that are independently on left in the country.

12:55:34 She's a friend of mine, we had done a program together years ago, and.

12:55:39 And we bonded and after the death of George Floyd we would just talk to each other because I was, you know, launching this newsletter. She knows a lot about community and being in constant conversation with them in a way that I think you know kind of

12:55:52 to your point, there were all these conversations happening on social media, the conversation was getting very national, you know, black Philadelphians connecting with each other in sort of the lead a telephone to radio station.

12:56:09 really offered me this pulse on what was possible.

12:56:14 In a transformative way so we would have these conversations.

12:56:17 And we said, there has to be something that allows us to band together.

12:56:23 Some of it was inspired by George Floyd but honestly, Dave a lot of this was the economics of the internet, how do we feel bigger than we are without sacrificing who we are.

12:56:33 And so we said well what if we banned, instead of launching yet another website and again epicenter was a newsletter notice I didn't launch the website right we really embraced the distributed for him.

12:56:45 And there was a there was a trend for sure after the death of George Floyd and the racial justice protests of launching new initiatives, you know, this mainstream outlet will launch the race team or you know they'll be this, you know, black news channel

12:57:02 and I don't disparage any of that there needed, but we wondered whether leaning into what already existed both helped us from.

12:57:10 I knew this from CNN right just from a search and trusted legacy perspective, age actually helps you on the internet you've been around, you're not going to.

12:57:28 on Facebook. Now, I've watched many products on Facebook. Yeah, maybe 20 I think we had wrapped, we said no, forget it.

12:57:36 And so you are a media was born out of really to publishers who said, we're facing challenges. We're going to keep going it alone in our publishing realms, we still believe we can innovate a model for wrd.

12:57:47 There's a model for epicenter. But is there additive revenue that we can get as a network and importantly, Is there an ability to achieve scale.

12:57:58 Yeah, can we achieve scale so coming out of the gates so just to kind of fast forward URL media launched in January of 2021 days after the inauguration of Joe Biden very intentional, and we launched with 7 million users, because the strength of our partners

12:58:15 is really our collective strength individually.

12:58:20 You know it's a lot harder to achieve kind of that scale in the manner that we were able to launch with yeah that's really powerful first of all for a bunch of reason I'm, I'm a big fan of networks networks of local for their data reasons for that their,

12:58:41 their reasons related to just capacity and assets and ever sort of I mean I think that idea is super compelling all, and also, I should tell you one of the things I really liked.

12:58:53 When you launched URL is, you were pretty explicit about being at least in format and for profit.

12:59:02 Yeah, Enterprise, and I think that's important for a number of reasons you know we've, there's been this whole sort of flood of a viewpoint that only, not listen I got both kinds of my membership I got.

12:59:20 Yeah, I got one of everybody. And so I'm fine with all that but you know there is a power that you know economic dependence and diversity of revenue sources is its own assurance of viewpoint independence, right, they and getting money from a lot of different

12:59:40 means. And monetizing a lot of different means i think is the best chance you have to have viewpoint independence you know economic independence is important part of the deal.

12:59:59 So you know, just talk just for a minute about that and then how you think about revenue models for your for URL. So I think we're in some ways benefited by this moment of launching where a lot of legacy media outlets had to kind of rag to drink diversified

13:00:08 revenue model, out of the water or like off if you will, right, like they just had to embrace multiple streams.

13:00:18 Now what we're up against is kind of legacy media and the one thing it does I think we're also a little bit up against Silicon Valley, and the startup model of You do one thing and you do one thing well and don't do anything else and media is just a different

13:00:32 ballgame. So when you are a launch the for profit model was, it was important to us for a few reasons.

13:00:38 One, I've just articulated that I come from CNN which is the biggest of the big our ambitions are big. Right. I have not had I have a very good life as a media executive, and I don't think we talked about that enough Nora we upfront about the wealth creation

13:00:58 that is possible.

13:01:00 When you launch a business, and so Sarah and I were really upfront about our desire to be ambitious, or desire to be bold our desire to be profitable, not just sustainable, right, I think that, too.

13:01:14 And really significantly from a mission perspective we did not want black and brown audiences to be only charitable endeavors, we actually see our people as a very important vital necessary market.

13:01:30 And so when we launched URL we were 100% aligned we didn't even have the nonprofit conversation because we said this is a market.

13:01:38 We believe in wealth creation for our communities. And guess what the best way to upset the power dynamic is its money. Right, absolutely. We did not want to kind of hide behind that now for two women of color to come out with that.

13:01:57 Ambition someone yesterday from a large financial company that's a household name was like that's really ballsy and we were like, I mean, it's not, it's your company right like.

13:02:11 So we were upfront about that and the other thing I'd say is that we also similar to what you just said we have room for all different types so we have a mix of nonprofits and for profits as our members, the for profit model has also allowed us to launch

13:02:25 an arm that's been really successful have a b2b recruitment coaching and executive placement arm. So we are doing business with fellow media outlets and that I think, you know, I'll be honest in the diversified revenue model we often talk about you know

13:02:43 like print digital TV broadcast, you know, the b2b arm.

13:02:51 I think is another I know a lot of media companies are thinking about that in terms of research insights or consulting or so forth but that's, that's something we kind of fell into but we really embraced and I would say that this model also has allowed

13:03:09 us to pivot towards opportunity pretty quickly. That's how we're going to dive next into into that, but I just. First of all, there are a lot of publishers thinking about the b2b opportunities now because, by the way, where information organizations,

13:03:21 it just, you know, we forget about the information we had yesterday because it's still there and it's valuable to somebody, but some of you also you said was super powerful that I think is under appreciated which is, there is a very much a tack Silicon

13:03:36 Valley kind of idea of go narrow do do your one singular thing and do well I do it well and it pushed. I think some number of publishers to thinking like super narrow, it actually turns out that a lot of media consumers, particularly in the news space,

13:03:52 still like the buffet. I mean, by the way, look at what the New York Times is doing they're trying to get the biggest buffet can possibly get. You know you want games we got that you want sport, you know, because they are responding to people who, you

13:04:08 know, people don't go on Netflix just to watch documentaries right they want a buffet of options and and some degree news consumers like that and and that's a that is a kind of its own way newly revolutionary idea in the space in the digital media space

13:04:23 but that's that's super powerful but let's talk for for let's start high level and then we're going to talk about sort of the, you know, what URL is doing to help in this space.

13:04:38 So, diversity and news industry or most profoundly lack thereof, for a really long time.

13:04:46 You know, there's just been very low progress for a very long time, that, you know, despite all of the announced intentions otherwise right many news organizations have made it a priority.

13:05:00 They talk about it, they're actually leaning trying to work internally somewhere obviously more focused than others.

13:05:08 You know, you hear about me organizations that are doing different things to show how they're increasing diversity and inclusion. But again, sometimes it seems like the needle is barely moved.

13:05:19 What kind of what's your take on you know how much progress the industry has really made. And then, what, what are the key elements before we have to start saying, you know, sort of profound change in the industry and the diversity inclusion side.

13:05:36 So I'll give you the kind of half glass full answer first which is, as somebody who's devoted her entire career to diversity in hiring and content, and coverage and never had diversity in my title for what it's worth, like, you know, and this is my immigrant

13:05:56 parents like every job that you aspire to in the newsroom should be the biggest job you could get right let not.

13:06:03 And so there are big jobs in the center of the action, but really the three line of my 20 plus years in journalism has been get trying to get the biggest job I can get in a newsroom, and making sure that diversity is absolutely the way we're going to

13:06:20 do business right from a half full perspective I have never in those decades, seen as much attention to the subject, as I have over the last two years.

13:06:35 And that is heartening in some respects because we're playing catch up to decades even centuries of neglect, not say there's an urgency to, I must find x type of person and the other conversation I would say that I never saw as having publicly is the

13:06:56 need to be black centered, as opposed to using terms like people of color or diversity or kind of more catch all phrases.

13:07:12 The idea of centering blackness which I think people have talked about within movements within even newsrooms and coverage for a while, with kind of a quieter conversation.

13:07:18 And now I feel like we can talk about what that looks like. And for someone like me who's not black, it really becomes even more incumbent upon us to show the way to learn the way to sort of stand up, began my co founder is black, but you know we talk

13:07:37 all the time about like not having her be the only voice saying you know here's a list of making this up a freelance web designers, is there a black vendor among them, and that's not only on her that's on me too and guess centering diversity like we're

13:08:06 we're going through this right. So, I think that for me is incredibly invigorating and then I made the pivot when I did.

13:08:02 It gives me a level of power that I quite frankly don't think I would have had five years ago right and just having the harder part is examining the power dynamics that we want, diversity to exist within and that's really hard.

13:08:19 It's really uncomfortable. And you and I have talked about this before, because sometimes it feels like.

13:08:29 Of course we're committed to diversity, but we just have to do this thing we just have to move forward, you know, and that sort of leads to business as usual, when actually what the last few years have shown us there hopefully lead us to is a need to

13:08:55 reset on the whole thing, right. I think that is a really hard exercise, and it's not fast it's not. It's uncomfortable. And I don't know that everybody's ready for that so now we're in this interesting time where there's still a lot of attention and

13:09:03 lip service and quite frankly dollars towards diversity. But we've also and I would argue the election of 2021 showed us this the backlash to diversity initiatives is very palpable right critical race theory was framed as an issue that's voting against

13:09:21 what's happening in your kids school, but I think it was really fueled by the guy who was just told by his chief diversity officer at work which is a new hire that he needs to be doing things differently now.

13:09:34 Right. And so there is this backlash that I think many of us, fear because we're like no no we just got you to the place that a lot of us have been talking about for decades, don't slide backwards.

13:09:46 Yeah, keep going. Can you don't be afraid of what's, because this is going to be uncomfortable is just the beginning. Right. This is just the beginning.

13:10:03 So, that's my honest assessment on the other hand, like we just have our 10th member of the URL media network is native news right now.

13:10:06 I'm elated that we have a native news partner, but also I can't, and I am guilty of this in my whole career I can't think of a moment beyond the last year that I've seen native issues in the same breath with black and Latino and Asian issues like it was

13:10:21 so again I'm guilty of this. So I also think that there's a change in how we're talking about things who were talking about who we're including.

13:10:33 That's going to be new to all of us. And, you know, I guess my message there would just be to be ready for that conversation because I really feel like we haven't seen we haven't seen much you know it's it's still to come.

13:10:46 Yeah. And, yeah, just keep it we're all learning but also, I am most profoundly have to get.

13:10:55 I don't know how you get more comfortable with the uncomfortable if that's a phrase but you have to get more okay with dealing with, you know, hard subjects hard perspectives things that aren't always, you know self reflection that's not always fun, but

13:11:13 is important. Nonetheless, I mean you and I you know i'm not i'm not saying this is to say this but I think you modeled this in many ways because it changes the culture of the organization when the leader is willing to be publicly discomfoted, and to

13:11:30 say, you know, we're still learning and we're just that admission and vulnerability, it's not just you who's gone through that it's the entire organization that then kind of shows a path for how we got to do this thing.

13:11:46 And that's the part that I've seen really mixed results because we're also by the way in a pandemic and communication is really complicated right now, people want to be as crystal clear as they can be.

13:11:59 So the murkiness is not necessarily welcome, and yet.

13:12:04 I mean what are these conversations, if not really complicated and necessary.

13:12:09 Yeah, actually, I wrote an article A number of years ago, that that particular article was about, it was in San Jose Mercury News about tech and pick up women in tech at the time but we had done in my old employer we had actually done some studies about

13:12:25 who who did better, like why, why did some companies perform better.

13:12:30 And it almost always just came back to, there was a leader, know the CEO who just demanded better, you know, and just talked about it all the time and force standards, you know, just made it a complete focus because you'd like to think, you know, particularly

13:12:50 larger organizations like to think there's just some procedure we can put in place there's something that's exactly right, we can have some plugin that all sudden bang you know we get this good result and really why the core that really moved the mass

13:13:03 of the jello of the organization was just somebody who was willing to do hard things and be sort of obsessively focused on difficult topic right now we're going to do this.

13:13:16 And by the way, if you don't if you work for me and you don't do it, you're not gonna work for me anymore. I mean that kind of level of obsession. But the truth is if you do that, you can make a big difference.

13:13:27 you can, the jello can be moved but you know it takes true leadership so in that let's circle back to URL and in particular, which I think is super innovative the sort of b2b business you're building around helping companies notably people in the media

13:13:46 about, you know, hiring retention.

13:13:50 The whole range of issues related di.

13:13:54 So this happened pretty organically we were meeting with mainstream newsrooms to pitch our syndication services, meeting we have you know at the time we had a partners we can give you a daily report, and the newsroom's we were meeting with we're like,

13:14:22 we really would love to diversify our content we're on board but we don't have any diversity in our newsroom right or maybe we don't have any diversity in our leadership ranks is another thing here. And so it's very difficult for newsrooms to do the diversification

13:14:27 of their content without having the leaders and I said, Well, I need to put leaders in place in your newsroom so that they understand the value of our content like I was right about.

13:14:39 We're starting at zero so we have to get better than zero.

13:14:55 And at one point you know somebody say we have an editor in chief search can we hire you to do that and I had just left CNN, I just left CNN and the at the end of 2020, and we're, you know I have Epicenter and epicenters okay but you, I'm reading the

13:15:10 same articles as you I know local news is sustainable you must do it this way right I'm reading all those articles and URL is just a glimmer at that point where we're going to launch it in January.

13:15:22 And we, you know, and so somebody had asked for help with their editor in chief search and I said okay sure and I just took it as a consulting contract.

13:15:30 And in the course of the search.

13:15:34 When the word was out that we were looking for diverse candidates a really interesting thing happened and some of this is just because I have been hiring for so long, people started contacting me and saying, These are diverse candidates, the talent pool,

13:15:47 seeing what's the secret to getting a top job.

13:15:51 What should my memo look like, and I have been advising, you know, I mean I I always joke like people of color, women, and even white men asked me for help right like it's all, it's all of them.

13:16:05 And so I've been doing this for a long time and so we started to to two tracks were developing at the same time, right and they both needed each other.

13:16:15 And you remember it I mean 2021 the story of 2021 was really labor force. It was a tight tight market.

13:16:30 So newsrooms started to approach us and initially it was just my Rolodex and I said you know I have a certain you know I've been at a certain age I'm in a certain industry I'm also in New York City.

13:16:36 Why don't we cast about and get some more recruiters and so on. Today we have four recruiters from literally every pocket of the country and the Midwest at different age levels different industries within media.

13:16:52 And it's just diversified our own searches and what we offer because in the beginning it was a lot of executive placement editors and Chief, you know cheat at the sea level.

13:17:03 What we're seeing now is mid level. Some entry level so there's also so many startups as you alluded where they need to make like 40 hires in the next few months so we've been contacted by a number of those types of outlets now.

13:17:17 We're not a traditional recruitment firm for a few reasons. A lot of executive searches like unless we're going to get six figures out of this is not worth our while right so there's some of that.

13:17:27 It just shut the door and I think a lot of newsrooms have not gone, the route of traditional search. Because of that kind of blanket like, you know, we retain your business right.

13:17:40 On the other hand you have a plethora of staffing agencies right newsrooms really never did that because if you need a freelancer it's kind of short term we don't hire in that way.

13:17:48 So I would see us as a, as a marriage of a few different models that are uniquely of this time and again we happen to launch in a year where if you were going to try anything.

13:17:59 Everything was being reinvented so it was a good year to try different playbooks mid level managers are really important area for us, because for two reasons one the candidate pool is often asking how do we break in and they'll tell us that before they're

13:18:18 telling their own managers. So in the marketplace I think among diverse talent.

13:18:36 There's a rule that we're serving obviously we don't charge them for that we make our money from the B side of it from the business from the from the media from the newsrooms themselves, but that can be pulled by seeking us out there's a lot of faith,

13:18:39 where we're treated.

13:18:42 Kind of as their own people like help me get my career to this level. And what I love about that is that it's showing an assertion of what you want, you know as a manager, one of my greatest frustrations is when I would meet with someone let's say for

13:18:57 their annual review and I would say well what do you want.

13:19:01 And they would say but nobody's ever asked me that before. If they will have you asked yourself that before right like I mean, there's just a lot of it that's just good management that I feel like we're able to still in part in the industry and URL is

13:19:15 small Epicenter is small, but my background is in running teams that are large teams and so I do feel like I get to flex a lot of that coaching and guidance of people's careers at a pretty large scale now with a lot of the most important newsrooms in

13:19:30 the country, which for me feels like another gift that I've been given. The second piece, which might come off as negative but I hope you see how this can be spun positively many newsrooms when they take diverse talent through their interview processes,

13:19:45 there's not a single interview with an editor of color right it's all white. You're all white man maybe there was a woman mixed in there I mean it's a real challenge to say our newsroom wants to do better when these are the faces you're putting forward

13:20:02 of your newsroom right so that's just a reality that we have been able to call newsrooms out on it and they're very upfront about why they're turning to us.

13:20:11 So admitting that that's not the way they want business to go actually sends a signal to the marketplace that's one thought. The other is on the mid level manager there's number of managers that we coach through the process of how do you hire diverse

13:20:27 talent is actually pretty intense. So one example I'll use is, you know, if you have a manager who's so overloaded and what news your manager is not.

13:20:38 And they're not responding to the emails of a candidate.

13:20:42 It's not just that you're ghosting someone in the course of an interview to the candidate. You've suddenly shown them what it's like to work for you. Yeah, yeah, yeah you're auditioning for them.

13:20:55 Right, so there's a lot of that coaching that, you know, because we come from the industry I think it hopefully lands a little different than if it's an HR or staffing or recruitment agency that I hope you know my hope is people work with us and never

13:21:09 do business the same again, that's that's really my hope.

13:21:14 It's the coaching Part two is really interesting this gets into the retention issue which is again like search by the way, if you want to get high level intense coaching, a lot of that is focused on co CEOs I think most, a lot of people don't know that

13:21:31 like most CEOs have these intense executive coaching relationships with with folks. And, you know, figuring out then how do you. So, you know, first of all, anybody new to like a middle middle management position could use somebody to bounce ideas off

13:21:48 of and sometimes that can be their boss but it often isn't, but in particular if you feel like you are the only one for any variety different dimensions, but particularly if if you're minority and you feel like you're the only one, you know, where are

13:22:07 you going to get really straight up help and advice, honest, kind of help and advice and sort of the idea of cut, you know, having some level of coaching executive coaching available to people there at that level I think is is a really rich area, but

13:22:22 also must be critical to retention right because you must deal with a lot of retention issues. We have a lot of people who are you know the only in their newsroom are, and what we have started offering there's three contracts we have right now that are

13:22:37 people we've placed, and you know they'll, they'll have a few months to get acclimated but in some cases they are their newsrooms have come forward and said, Do you offer coaching services and we do so we're actually this year piloting a few different

13:22:52 models one is the cohort model where you have a group of managers together which I think has worked well.

13:22:59 But I think the one on one attention that you're describing that allows you to get 360 feedback that you know allows people to be upfront about scenarios they're contending with and talking them through that's really important.

13:23:13 It just one aspect is and I glossed over this but it's really key to our model.

13:23:18 We approach talent of color from a perspective of affirmation versus fixing you. And I think that's something else that's a little bit different from the ground truth is so many, not just newsrooms have so many companies, you know have like a playbook

13:23:35 of,

13:23:38 You know, sit up straight, or. Yeah, that's right.

13:23:42 Yeah, a lot of rules, you know there's like the introvert and the this test you taken that and I'm, you know I have done all that I have added executive coach and I, I'm a believer in it and yet, so much of coaching is trying to get you to be like everybody

13:23:56 else and if the last two years have taught us anything, it's that organizations need to be meeting leaders and infusing more of that diversity magic, and that's so powerful in such a powerful insight right where that you shouldn't be wanting to drive

13:24:18 everybody be like here's our formula for success in Jamia into that formula right that's that that's really, that's misguided for a whole bunch of different reasons, but that's really powerful major.

13:24:30 Yeah. And also it just changes the posture of, not the literal posture in the way that a coach I talk to you about but like, it changes how somebody sees themselves because they, and I always say I said this at CNN it's not like a new thing I really do

13:24:46 believe that a manager believing in his or her people or their people is fundamental to the success of those people and the belief part.

13:24:59 Amy you've worked with managers where you know it's disingenuous they just don't I mean it's just not going to. And so, that belief for me is pretty fundamental now there are people I've had rocky relationships with that work, but if I could find the

13:25:12 one thing where.

13:25:14 Oh my gosh you you know you do this better than anyone else, and I just kind of focused on that my entire demeanor towards you changes in a way that is affirming and so your insecurities, hopefully kind of start to melt and how many candidates also if

13:25:31 I talked to, were with me they wow me and then they go to the organization, and they kind of shrink, right, something happens in that. And so much of it is the energy that they feeding off of.

13:25:43 So there's there's definitely two sided coaching that that occurs.

13:25:47 That's fantastic. I could talk to you for like hours and hours and hours, and now a lot to do another one of these, which are just that we're probably come up to the end of the time here but again such a rich room so many rich and powerful insights.

13:26:02 Let's just ending just listen, there are a lot of folks who want to do startups in the media space right in every kind of dimension and you're kind of doing a couple at once right there's a content business there's the coaching business there's that network

13:26:19 businesses, which I really, I think that is a powerful insight and modeling of itself but. So when somebody comes up to you and says, you know, make sure I'm super excited about what you're doing, I really want to do.

13:26:32 My, my own startup in the media business, what, you know, leaning in on the optimism, I guess there's a lot of cautionary tales, but you know what what kind of one piece of advice to you would you think about giving somebody is at least a good start,

13:27:00 in terms of thinking about how you would do that.

13:26:54 I'll give you two only because the first one is super fast but, um, you know, I think what we don't talk about with startup life, enough is can you pay your mortgage Can you put food on the table.

13:27:09 Have you gotten the basics worked out because once that happens every, you're still hungry but things definitely become easier and I, we just it just people just don't talk about that, and I always want magically like where are they getting this money,

13:27:26 you know, and in some cases, people will say to me, you're everywhere you're launching three businesses you write a column for time you're on these boards, and I'm like I'm everywhere because that's my survival game though guys like I have to do this

13:27:37 in order to emerge. But I think one is just it's okay.

13:27:52 That is okay and then some cases, our business was able to pivot, because we were hungry for the opportunity. And I think a lot of that is in the roots, you know that Sarah and I share as a family and she's black, my family as I mentioned were immigrants

13:28:01 from India raised in Puerto Rico, but we always had like extra people living in our basement and, you know, not like a whole lot but enough food at the table for extra will to join so really operating from this place of abundance but seeking opportunity

13:28:18 I think is just a good framework. The second piece is really pretty audience focus so if you heard me talking about, people are searching for this people need this.

13:28:30 We were trying to solve for organizations that were struggling with being discoverable on the internet right.

13:28:38 What is the need. Again this is like probably Captain Obvious but what is the need for your business.

13:28:45 Feels like a good question to answer at the outside. And then the audience piece I think for so long, audience and this is a shift that I'm delighted by but if there's a part two of this.

13:28:59 I'd love to get other people's input to or maybe yours.

13:29:04 We really short handed audience for the last few years is social media right it was your audience on Facebook your audience on Twitter your audience on Instagram, and you grow businesses that way.

13:29:15 What we're building with both URL and Epicenter is harder, but it's my goodness so much more rewarding because people come up to me and say, You helped me get a vaccine and then you helped my mother get a vaccine and then you did this.

13:29:34 And so that relationship with audiences being I think redefined some of it, you might say well that sounds like newspapers 30 years ago and so be it right maybe it's just kind of a cycle and we're coming back to that.

13:29:47 But I think any product you launch, and the ability to get that affection from your user is a product worth launching and I really lean into that relationship in a way that is surprising to me because cnn is so built on the number of people who come to

13:30:06 you, I might have interactions like the one I just described through Epicenter URL, maybe once or twice a week but really I, you know, when we talk about the sustainability of businesses for an entrepreneur that's really all sustaining oh yeah depth of

13:30:21 relationship right that'll carry you through all sorts of times, area Metro thank you so much thank you for being so generous with your time, super great important conversation and which we can only scratch the surface so we have to do it again but listen

13:30:37 for news media lies I just want to really thank you very much, this was, this was great, really, very much enjoyed it and I think it's important for our audience.

13:30:44 Oh, thank you. It's great to be here. Thank you. Take care.