

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

UNDERCOVERED REALITIES / INNOVATIVE REPORTERS: BIPOC MEDIA IN 2023

LAURA FLANDERS: This month our Meet the BIPOC Press Roundtable is looking forward. What are the stories that will be driving news coverage in the coming year, especially for communities of color and the media that serve them? Every month here on "The Laura Flanders Show" we invite the members of URL Media, a national network of Black and Brown owned media outlets to share their perspective on a key issue or issues. This time we're looking at the year ahead. What stories are the network's members watching on the economy, housing, finance, politics, not to mention reproductive rights, voting and public health. For this, I'm happy to be joined once again by Mitra Kalita, the co-founder of URL and the publisher of "Epicenter NYC," a newsletter based in Queens, New York. Also with us from Miami, Alexandra Martinez senior news reporter at Prism, an independent nonprofit newsroom led by journalists of color and focused on justice. And Malak Silmi, the local government reporter for Outlier Media, a Detroit based platform that works collaboratively with residents to keep government accountable. So where to turn up the heat, where to shed more light? We're talking about reporting in 2023 and I want to thank you all for joining the show today. Let's kick off with you, Mitra. You know, we always look forward, we start looking forward by looking back and as I look back, I was reminded that this is essentially marking two years of us collaborating on this monthly roundtable of URL Media existing. And I just wanted to ask you how it's going. It looks to me like it's going gangbusters.

S. MITRA KALITA: It's going great. Thank you Laura, and thank you for being a part of that journey. I think it's kind of impressive that we're starting 2023 with two members from Outlier and Prism that weren't with us two years ago when URL launched. So one, you know, kind of not to bury the lead, but the size of the network feels a really important part of our growth. And then the scope of the network. So being able to include an outlet like Prism that focuses on social justice issues and is for people of color by people of color. You know, someone like Outlier Media, I draw a lot of inspiration from its ability to text with its community and really use translations and, you know, languages besides English at the inception of its reporting. And so I just feel like the story for us has been both a broadening of our scope and our reach but not sacrificing the depth of service to our communities and the issues that we care about.

LF: We call this Meet the BIPOC Press. That term, BIPOC, was coming into sort of mass use when we started today. There's already some kind of pushback from different communities. How are you feeling about it? And remind people, you know, what it stands for and why it's important to you.

MK: So BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. It is controversial term, we've leaned into it because the roots of URL, we believe ourselves to be the only multi-platform, multicultural network of our kind, meaning we are Black and Brown. And you know, I've embraced the term even though I have to say it doesn't roll off my tongue. That being said, one of the benefits of being a network that is, you know, I'll use the term again by our people, for our people, is that we recognize the nature of being a part of this collective. Doesn't mean that you have to sacrifice who you are or the many facets of identity that we all bring to the table.

LF: Let me bring in our guests here. Alexandra, let's talk about your multiple identities both as an individual and as an outlet. Talk a bit about Prism, how you think about who it is you're serving, what your mission is and what you bring to it, especially, Alexandra.

ALEXANDRA MARTINEZ: Sure. Thank you so much for having me, Laura. So Prism, as Mitra mentioned we are a BIPOC led newsroom and that is incredibly important because we are telling stories about communities that we ourselves as reporters have experience in. So that creates, it allows us to bring nuance to the reporting that we do, which without that nuance you really can't have honest, truthful storytelling. And so you ask me about my identities, I am Cuban American, I'm Latina, proud Miamian, born and raised and I bring that in everything that I report on.

LF: And what about you Malak? What can you tell us about Outlier Media that we need to know?

MALAK SILMI: So Outlier Media is led by women of color and we do focus on Detroit. And Detroit itself is a huge city that is majority Black. So we really focus on some issues that pertain to Black Detroiters. Me, myself, I am Arab American Muslim, specifically Palestinian American, and there are some, there's an Arab American population in Detroit. And through Outlier Media I have been able to use my Arab heritage as well as my Arabic language to translate our services and our informational needs to Arab Detroiters but also focusing on a lot of issues that Black Detroiters and other immigrant communities really face in Detroit.

LF: So let's talk about greatest hits. I have to say, I looked at Outlier Media's greatest hits of 2022 story. You collaborated on that story. I couldn't take my eyes off the videos of that ridiculous slide but I do know that there were other things that happened in Detroit this year that you reported on. What would you lift up as especially important or work that you're particularly proud of?

MS: I would say one article that we did work on this year was in collaboration with the "Detroit Free Press." At Outlier Media we do collaborate with a lot of local media partners and we focused on this new water affordability program that Detroit, the City of Detroit launched. And

it's to really make water more affordable for residents. And we have this problem in Detroit where in past years water shutoffs was something that a lot of Detroit residents would face, and it's frankly because they could not afford the water bills. And so the City of Detroit launched this new water affordability program back in August and we wrote about it and we looked into it. But something that we have been focusing on is to see where that future funding is. The program right now is using federal dollars as well as state dollars and regional dollars but it's only meant to be funded for 18 months. Past that 18 months, there isn't really, there are some efforts, but there isn't anything permanently secured. So that's really something that I've been proud of focusing on and highlighting on last year and hoping to continue reporting in the next year.

LF: What about you, Alexandra? Greatest hits of '22?

AM: I think for me the, the coverage I did on workers' rights is something I'm very proud of. We did a lot of coverage on Amy's Kitchen. So Amy's Kitchen is a vegan food company out in California and they, the workers decided to unionize back, it's been a year now, I think since January of last year. And their employers immediately started union busting and most recently the workers are calling on a boycott of Amy's Kitchen products. And you know, I've done a couple follow-up stories on that. And as a result of that, folks from No Evil Foods, another vegan food company reached out to us at Prism and they as well experienced extreme union busting when they tried to formalize a union a couple years ago. And what was most interesting in this reporting is that these companies, you know, tout themselves as being ethical or morally conscious and you know, being humane towards animals but they're not treating their workers humanely.

LF: Mitra, I'm sure you have many things to choose from as you look back over the year, but what stands out?

MK: I think this is the year that much of mainstream America is accepting that we are either in or about to enter our recession. I think for communities of color we've been there for the last year. And so you're seeing this with demand at food pantries, utilities, housing. One of the things I'm proudest of is that we covered the explosion of food insecurity. What are the factors that are leading people to seek this help, feels like the undercovered story in mainstream media.

LF: Malak, you talked about it, you touched on it about relief programs and it seems like that is going to be one of the big stories, at least for the first half of 2023. I mean, Detroit under the American Rescue Plan saw its biggest ever like investment of federal dollars, a one time deal, I think it was over \$800 million to Detroit. Much of that is set to expire.

MS: Yeah, definitely. So it's specifically with the water affordability program that is using ARPA funding and that's something that residents would want to see continue. And so having the

opportunity to have regional and specifically federal funding back into the local communities and able to fund these programs that could potentially be long-term and help our Detroit residents is something that local activists and local residents have been pushing for. And really to see that the city is listening to their concerns and able to come up with this program in order to end, you know, city shutoffs like the mayor has promised, has been something that's been on the minds of a lot of advocates and residents.

LF: And Alexandra, you've been seeing this, I think in relation to temporary rights and visas for immigrants, federal action on abortion pills. Like we are in a tremendous sort of tipping point moment it seems to me for all these kinds of actions.

AM: Yeah, absolutely. There's been a lot of changes. Most recently the FDA did approve, you know, ease. They eased access for the abortion pill over the counter, Mifepristone and Misoprostol, which is great. But Prism actually just came out with the story this morning that it, you know, that ease of access is not really for everyone. You know, BIPOC people are still going to have a harder time accessing these pills and this service because of where they are and what the laws are because abortion remains banned so many states across the country.

LF: Yeah, I mean the availability of the morning after pill, so called, at chain stores doesn't help you if there isn't a chain store in your area.

AM: Absolutely.

LF: The expiring of a whole set of emergency legislations when the emergency especially for your constituents isn't over seems like an enormous story. And alarm bells do not seem to be ringing in mainstream media so-called.

MK: Thank you for raising that, Laura. Over the last two years, I think we know that the government wasn't perfect in its response to the pandemic, but at least there was federal funding behind a lot of initiatives, whether it was for small businesses to stay afloat or COVID testing or treatment and vaccines of course. And so one concerning trend right now is that in our efforts to pretend that COVID is behind us, that the pandemic is over, you know, in the last three weeks alone of January "Epicenter" has been both reporting and receiving loads of reports on small businesses that have closed. Whereas two years ago, I think they saw that there was this lifeline, this year I don't think anybody is seeing that, you know, just for "Epicenter" as well. We were the recipient of several grants to ensure that our vaccine equity and COVID testing work would continue both in information dissemination and working in underserved populations. That money has all dried up. Our site supervisor in Southeast Queens which has been a really hard hit area, a lotta restaurant workers there just told me this morning in an email that she's going to continue to

visit the site once a month and make sure that people are up to date on COVID information and testing. So that's the really concerning scenario that we're seeing right now.

LF: Let's talk a bit about how you do your reporting. And I want to come to you Malak with Outlier because we just talked about lifelines and emergencies. It, correct me if I'm wrong but I think Outlier grew out of a kind of emergency that your community was not being served. And the lifeline that you discovered for doing some of the reporting was pretty close to hand, was local people. Talk about your Documenter program, how it works and I was excited to see that in some of your stories. You can actually go and find online the full notes that your Documenter took at a meeting.

MS: Yeah, so we operate, we have a text message service system as well as a Documenters program. And both of these are really to connect with residents as well as to connect to local meetings. And so with our Documenters program we actually employ citizens from across the city, from across the state to really go into these local meetings whether virtually or in person and just simply document which means live tweet or open up a Google doc and write down what you're hearing. And this has helped serve a lot of reporters as well as a lot of citizens and really anyone who's curious to hear about the different local meetings that are happening, regional meetings across the county and state and city.

LF: And who are some of your documenters, tell us, are these experienced journalists who've been doing it forever, went to school for it?

MS: Not at all. These are local citizens who are just, who might be like, who might be interested in just going to the city council meeting and sharing public comment or who are just interested in their local government. They are students. We have Wayne State University students local to Detroit, we also have older senior citizens. We have Detroiters, we have from the suburbs. It's a very, I would say, diverse pool of candidates who are applying for these meetings to go and really just document for the sake of having that information out there.

LF: It's such a great program, so exciting and spoke to a crisis in journalism that those were exactly the meetings that local media no longer had the resources to fund. How about you, Alexandra? What would you lift up in terms of how you're doing reporting that's maybe new or different or innovative and how do you decide what to cover?

AM: Right, well, I know that I, I cover a wide breadth of topics, workers' rights, immigration, LGBTQIA and gender justice, the economy, housing. As Prism's senior news reporter. I, yes, I cover a wide range. So, my reporting is mostly remote while I'm based in Miami I do try and highlight, you know, everything that's going on here in Florida with Governor Ron DeSantis.

There is no shortage of news from the Stop W.O.K.E. Act to Don't Say Gay to all of the horrible legislation that he is putting out there. There's a lot to cover.

LF: Mitra, you always have your eye both on the network as a whole, nationally, even internationally and also right here at home. And I saw a tweet about what happened at your local city council person's home. Was it the night of Dr. King Holiday?

MK: Yeah, so City Councilman Shekar Krishnan, who, you know we've both done a lot of work with and covered his rise. He's the first Indian American city council member in New York City and represents Jackson Heights who the area that "Epicenter" was born out of. There've been much anti-gay protests across the country. And so one issue in Jackson Heights has been a group of protestors against Drag Queen Story Hour. So Drag Queen Story Hour has been around for years but the protest about two weeks ago really bubbled over where there was like dozens of protestors. Thankfully the attendees to the Story Hour outnumbered the protestors. Our city councilman when he was coming home on MLK Day after a day of service encountered protestors on his doorstep who had all sorts of, I mean, I think you can call them epithets are carrying signs and they're very offensive. His children are inside and you know, this is New York City, I mean, I just want to really like kind of clarify like the neighborhood we live in has been a haven for Immigrant America, for gay America. I would even say for everyone America. That's what defines us.

AM: It's absolutely horrific speaking to the anti-trans legislation that's popping up now. It's only been a month and we're already seeing, I think it's 11 states that have anti-trans legislation on the books. And what's scary about this legislation is they're trying to ban transitioning unless you're older than 26 years old. So these are adults, grown adults that are having their autonomy stripped from them, which is absolutely horrifying. And then in addition to that there's anti-abortion legislation that is being considered that could potentially incriminate the pregnant person. So it was never, you know, how it all ties is that it's this continued turn to the right.

MK: One other theme that's come up repeatedly for our "Epicenter" audience that's dividing our communities which is the migrant influx into New York City. Part of our community continues to use the refrain, "We came in the right way." This is of course in immigrant Jackson Heights, the right way, you know, during my father's time in 1971, green cards were plentiful, that's no longer the case. And so I think there's a question over the right way in 1971 versus 2023. I just wonder how you all are covering this and, you know, I'm going to go out on a limb and say where three either immigrants or children of immigrants or how this is playing out in your communities.

AM: I'm actually working on a story about the latest Biden administration policy on folks arriving at the border. So now if you're coming from Haiti, if you're coming from Cuba, if you're coming from Nicaragua and if you arrive at the border you're immediately going to be turned

back. And the rhetoric that I'm hearing as well in Miami is the exact same. "Well, our people came the right way," but the infrastructure is not nearly the same and we're not being met with the same resources as, you know, our ancestors were or our parents were. So it's scary and a lot of the advocates that I speak to and a lot of the immigrants that I speak to are scared because human lives are being politicized essentially. You know, Ron DeSantis and Governor Abbott in Texas are playing political games with people's lives putting them on a one-way flight to Martha's Vineyard or to New York City and essentially saying good luck and figure it out without any concrete resources being available to them.

LF: And Malak, to you and I haven't forgotten that you said you're Palestinian American and that's a story, the story of what is happening under the new extreme right government in Israel is one that is heating up just now and we know is infamously challenging, let's just say, for our media to cover fairly

MS: As a Palestinian American, as an Arab American as a Muslim American, I am in tune with a lot of the rhetoric across the country as well as, you know, local immigrants here. We have a law in Detroit as well as surrounding communities like Dearborn who houses the largest Arab American community in the country. One story that I was trying to pursue was really talking to local immigrants in Detroit about having trouble accessing these vital documents in order to get their driver's license or get to be able to vote and to get their citizenship as well. And it was really hard to really pin down some people who were willing to speak to the media and of course it's understandable due to their circumstances. So Alexandra and Mitra talked a lot better about it with their coverage areas. But here we definitely do keep it in mind when it comes to Detroit.

LF: It is such a joy to have all of you on and I think that conversation could continue and I'm glad that we get to do these roundtables every month, Mitra. I would love to turn to you, are there questions that you want to ask our beautiful guests here? And are there priorities you want to make sure that we name before we wrap up this 2023 Looking ahead preview?

MK: I do want to dive into the question of growing audience. This is a very selfish question, but in this age of, you know, what the heck has happened to Twitter, Facebook has said it wants nothing to do with news, controversy or giving people right information. I guess I'm just wondering how you're reaching new audiences, if you have any thoughts on that.

MS: At Outlier, we, other than our Documenters program, we work collaboratively with a lot of newsrooms. That means that our reach is a little bigger than just our own reporting. And that way we're able to connect to audiences who might be listening to radio or might be reading through a magazine. And so that's one way that we reach out as well as through our SMS service system where we're really one-on-one connecting with people through text messaging specifically because we can't ignore that there is a population out there that doesn't have access to their

internet. And in that way we're able to still inform these communities and still inform these people with what is happening as well as what issues they may be facing that we may not be knowing about through really this one-on-one, this one-on-one communication.

LF: And Alexandra, how are you doing it?

AM: In terms of outreach, I think we're we have a very committed and very loyal audience. We have our newsletter, we are posting more on Instagram and we're just doing our best to stay connected to our communities the way that, you know, we always have through trust and honest reporting.

LF: Yeah, I mean, Mitra, to answer your question from the point of view of "The Laura Flanders Show," I will say we've taken a major hit from whatever the algorithmic changes have been at Facebook meta. I mean, it is very hard to reach our online audience in all the ways we used to because as people may know when you post a link to a site that is outside of the Facebook meta universe, you get deprioritized in everybody's feeds. So if you come up with any great strategies for us, let us know. And in the meantime, we're kind of reliant on our audience. So thank you all for being both participants and with any luck kind of allies in this joint effort of how do we reach our audiences and grow them and connect them and introduce them to one another. All right, well we are stronger together. Thank you all. And I thank you Mitra especially for your continuing collaboration in this Meet The BIPOC Press monthly roundtable. It's a pleasure to have you part of our lineup.

For more on this episode and other forward thinking content subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.