

VFS Episode 13: The End of Extractive Journalism

Description:

Extractive journalism—reporting on communities without input or accountability—is the model for a lot of journalism in the U.S., especially journalism about low-income people and communities of color. But lots of people are and have been actively resisting this model. We hear from Sarah Alvarez of Outlier Media in Detroit and Bettina Chang of City Bureau in Chicago about building journalism organizations based on power-sharing rather than extraction, how information can save lives in pandemic times, and how the COVID-19 crisis has changed their work.

Episode 13 The End of Extractive Journalism Credits:

Host and creator: Lewis Raven Wallace

Producer: Ramona Martinez

Guests: Sarah Alvarez, Bettina Chang

Editor: Carla Murphy

Social Media Producer: Roxana Bendézu

Music: Dogbotic (theme music) and Podington Bear

Logo and Kickstarter art: Billy Dee

Episode 13 The End of Extractive Journalism LINKS:

[Six Tips for Ethical Reporting on Police Violence and Black-led Resistance](#)

[VFS Episode 2: How Black Lives Matter Changed the News](#)

[Gender Reveal Podcast](#) with host Tuck Woodstock

[Outlier Media](#) on the web and [on Twitter](#)

[Muck Rock](#) Collaborative Journalism

[City Bureau](#) website

[City Bureau COVID Resource Finder](#)

[“How We Built \(and Translated\) the COVID Resource Finder”](#)

[Sarah Alvarez on Twitter](#)

[Bettina Chang on Twitter](#)

Lewis Wallace’s [2016 Marketplace story on Eddie Cave and land contracts](#)

[A Guide to Less-Extractive Reporting](#) by Natalie Yahr

[Extractive Versus Healthy Storytelling: An Interview with Jade Begay](#) of Indigenous Rising Media

[View from Somewhere book](#) via University of Chicago Press

Episode 13 The End of Extractive Journalism Music Credits (in order of appearance):

- **Una Cosa** by Podington Bear
- **Falling Falling** by Podington Bear

- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowski
- **Ember** by Podington Bear
- *Variation One, Bass + Accordion by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Fantasy** by Podington Bear
- **Kitten** by Podington Bear
- *Accordion Vamp by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- BREAK MUSIC: **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowski
- **At the Curb** by Podington Bear
- **Little Black Cloud** by Podington Bear
- **Sry** by Podington Bear
- **Back Stairs** by Podington Bear
- **Whiplash String Swell** by Podington Bear
- *View from Somewhere Theme (Chill Version), Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowski

Transcript:

Ramona: This is Ramona Martinez, the producer of the View from Somewhere. For folks just joining us, we know there are a *lot* of conversations going on right now about Black Lives Matter and the current uprisings in response to police violence. We have a few resources on our website including a list of tips for ethical coverage of Black-led resistance. And episode #2 of The View from Somewhere, How Black Lives Matter changed the news, really digs into a lot of this stuff. All that is on view from somewhere dot com. Okay...on to the show!

<<**MUSIC: Una Cosa** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis Raven Wallace: Speaking truth to power. Challenging the status quo. That's what I started into journalism for...but almost five years into it, I found myself doing some of the very things I had been skeptical of.

For example: I was working at Marketplace in 2016, and I went to Detroit to do a story about predatory home sales and how impossible it was for low-income people to actually BUY the inexpensive homes in that city. I was looking for someone who'd been a victim of one of these unregulated predatory loans, land contracts...and found this guy Eddie Cave.

He lived in a beautiful blue-gray house on a sunny Detroit street—all the houses are big wide two-stories with lush front lawns. But half of them on his block are lying empty, the lawns are overgrown. And Eddie’s victorian-style home, with dark oak trim and blue painted walls, has no electricity, no running water, no heat in the winter. He uses an electric wheelchair that he charges from a generator out back, cooks on a propane stove in his dark kitchen. He’d almost lost this home to a predatory seller who had tacked on all these secret fees and back taxes to the contract.

<<**MUSIC: Falling Falling** by Podington Bear>>

I sit out on his cement front steps, holding my mic up to Eddie in his chair, look into his eyes for hours and record this super moving story.

I learn other stuff about Eddie, too...how he’d lost most of his friends to AIDS or crack. How he used to be a DJ. How he wishes he could get through this financial trouble so he could give back more to his community. How he wants to be a journalist...*he* wants to be the one telling stories about Detroit. Eddie cries and hugs me, saying, you’re a beautiful person. It can be so healing to feel listened to.

I go straight from his front steps to the airport in a rental car, depressed beyond words about this feeling of powerlessness, and this feeling that I’m doing a thing I kinda hate...parachuting in to someone else’s life, someone else’s crisis. Leaving to produce a four-minute story that won’t actually change anything for him. He had cried, I had what radio people call “good tape...” But there I was, a white person extracting a Black person’s painful story...and for what. For the benefit of an audience that was mostly elsewhere, who might feel BAD for Eddie, but wouldn’t actually change things for him. I knew there had to be another way.

<<**THEME MUSIC: Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky>>

Lewis: A couple years later, a Detroit-based journalist named Sarah Alvarez changed my *whole* perspective on this interaction.

SARAH ALVAREZ: It’s not about what can what can we do? Like as reporters, you can only do so much. It’s like what are the skills and the tools that you have that you could give to other people? Right. It’s not. Why wouldn’t you do that?

Lewis: This is the View from Somewhere: A podcast about journalism with a purpose. I’m your host Lewis Raven Wallace. If it’s your first time, and you like what you hear, we recommend listening back from the start. For repeat listeners...welcome back, we’ve missed you!

Today we’re gonna share a few examples of how journalism can be less about extraction, and more about power-sharing—AND, talk about just how important community-driven journalism is

in times of crisis like this pandemic we are in. We'll hear from Sarah Alvarez of Outlier Media about text-message based reporting for low-income Detroiters, and also Bettina Chang of City Bureau about filling information gaps on Chicago's South Side. It's not all hopeless! I promise! Stick around...

<<**MUSIC: Ember** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: So I had all these questions about what the eff I was doing, reporting on low-income people and housing inequality for Marketplace, from my perspective as an upper income person. It felt a little bit like poverty porn...I remember after my story came out, a listener sent Eddie Cave two hundred dollars. But I knew that those individual acts aren't going to change the structures harming people like Eddie all over the country, all the time. And it's an issue with journalism more broadly—so often, marginalized people are reported *about*..but they're not assumed to be the audience *or* the creators of those stories.

And the theory of change—meaning the model for how journalism affects social change—is that powerful people elsewhere will hear a story about oppressed people and *care*, and then the change will kinda trickle down, in the form of policy or legislation or electoral choices, it's the “objectivity” theory of change. But often it doesn't actually work that way...

In 2018 I was on a panel with Sarah Alvarez, who founded Outlier Media—that's a media outlet in Detroit that's all about power-sharing. And she had some solutions to this...I interviewed her afterwards...

Lewis: What's the story of starting Outlier media? How did that start?

Sarah: It took a long time. So I first I started it in at Michigan Radio when I worked there as a reporter and a producer and I was covering low income families. But the audience of Michigan Radio is primarily high income individuals and I was dissatisfied with that dynamic. I didn't feel like that was the way that I could be most useful and I really wanted to figure out how to deliver content to the group that was being reported on. So it would be more of reporting with and more reporting for.

Lewis: She spent a year researching approaches to reporting *for* and *with* low-income people, and concluded that the best way to make the information really accessible would be to use SMS—text messaging—to get it out. And, she was very focused on *valuable* information.

Sarah: And valuable doesn't mean I like it. Valuable doesn't mean like I feel close to it. You know valuable is like I could use it, and it helps me with a problem that I had.

<<**MUSIC: Variation One, Bass + Accordion** by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*>>

Lewis: Seems pretty basic, but it's actually a really different priority than most news organizations. They might say they're focused on valuable information...but the assumption is that the *reporters* and *editors* somehow *know* which information that is, based on instinct or something. But reporters and editors are often also from middle and upper income backgrounds...so she was super deliberate about finding out, *before* she started Outlier, what did low-income Detroiters actually *want and need* to know about? She used data, not just instinct.

Sarah: The way that I figure out what to cover is by using different data sources that show me what people are complaining about most and asking questions about most. And I rely very heavily on United Way's 2 1 1 data, and so I cover housing and utilities which are Detroiters number one and number two information needs.

Lewis: And what's an example within housing and utilities in Detroit of actionable information.

Sarah: So utilities is really hard to figure out. I'm trying to figure it out right now. Housing was very easy. Housing renters have very little information and even buyers in Detroit have very little information because it's almost exclusively cash sales market. I think I said this before but that there were fewer than a thousand mortgages in the whole city of Detroit last year means everybody's buying with cash. And when you buy with cash and you don't have a contract that's like buyer beware right. You need good information to be able to make good decision. So information that is actionable here is who really owns this place? Because unless you're going to the register of deeds you may not be able to figure that out. So who really owns this place. What's the tax debt associated with this place. Because that is a tremendous problem here is it on the tax auction list already or is it at risk of tax auction.

<<**MUSIC: Fantasy** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: So it was literally *people like Eddie Cave*, who needed info on the homes they were buying or renting, and who owned them, and the back taxes, and so on. But she would be getting to these folks *before* they got into those transactions and became fodder for a sad story like the one I told. The theory of change was totally different. It mattered a lot that people like Eddie who don't have computers or fancy phones *get* this information, you couldn't just put a story on a website somewhere and expect them to find it—

Sarah: I buy lists of phone numbers. I use a platform called Ground Source that allows me to send like you know 5000 people at a time a text message and I commissioned from Ground Source the ability to put a database basically on the back end so that when someone enters an address, says, like oh OK I'll try this. There's a little intro text that says this is Outlier Media we are a free community journalism service for Detroiters. If you would like information on your property to check to make sure it's not on the tax auction list or that it has blight tickets you can get started by entering your address. And so if someone enters their address then the database

gets pulled from. And you get property specific information and then everybody is given the opportunity to say they want a journalist to follow up with them.

Lewis: And a lot of people, hundreds per month, were doing this...

Sarah: So yeah about 40 percent of my users do ask for follow up and then I follow up with them again over text message but that is not bot driven. That is like, person to person, hey this is Sarah Alvarez, I'm from Outlier, what question did you have?

<<**MUSIC: Kitten** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: All of this has a big picture goal.

Sarah: My news consumers are very focused on accountability, as am I. And that's why they want the information.

Lewis: Sarah says lots of people have saved their homes or avoided eviction by using Outlier's text service. Basically, gotten OUT of the situation Eddie Cave was in, rather than becoming a statistic. It's direct financial journalism, answering urgent questions, for low-income people. Kinda the opposite of what we did at Marketplace, where we did stock market numbers—financial information for high-income people—and then talked about poor people at arm's length For Sarah, flipping the model on its head is about power-sharing, AND about rebuilding trust with the people whose information needs are actually most urgent...

Sarah: But I think it's a really good way, also, this method, of instilling trust in journalism you know because I am always making promises that I can keep and giving people an inside look at how journalism works and what it can do and how you can have a good experience with it you know because it is not extractive. It's really about being useful.

Lewis: So the theory of change is about putting information in the hands of the people for whom its most useful, to stem problems with housing and utilities before they even start. And making promises you can keep to increase trust in journalism. Sometimes Outlier will also do a big feature story ased on things they're hearing—you can see their work at Outlier Media dot org. But mostly, they are revolutionizing the news industry...by texting people.

<<**MUSIC: Accordion Vamp** by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*>>

Lewis: Coming up...

Sarah: We built this infrastructure for an urgent need. It was housing and it's it just wasn't recognized as an urgent need by people who weren't experiencing it.

Lewis: How Outlier is responding to the desperate need for information in pandemic times.

Break:

<<**MUSIC: Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowski>>

Ramona: *Hey everyone! It's Ramona, the producer of the View from Somewhere, coming to you from my kitchen where the Kovfefe is hot and the quarantine is ongoing. But I'm excited because now that we're DONE fundraising for the show—thanks to our Kickstarter supporters and online donors—we are gonna spend these breaks promoting OTHER shows we like.*

Today, we're talking about our friend Tuck Woodstock, the host of Gender Reveal.

Gender Reveal is an award-winning podcast that's just trying to figure out what the heck gender is. Each week, Tuck speaks with trans authors, artists, and activists about the hidden ways that gender permeates our lives and intersects with race, class, ability, age, and sexuality. As one reviewer wrote, "if a podcast does change your life, it will probably be this one." Listen and subscribe at genderpodcast.com or wherever you get your podcasts.

For our show notes, transcripts, and other recs, check out View from Somewhere dot com. Okay Back to the show!

PART II:

<<**MUSIC: At the Curb** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: Detroit, which is in Wayne County, has been a coronavirus hotspot. From March 10 through May 23, 2020, there were nearly 20,000 cases in the county alone, and 2,361 deaths. And at the same time, of course, there's been all this disinvestment in news and information and really in *everything* in Detroit... part of the story of the city is its abandonment over half a century by people and companies with resources. But Detroit's is also always a story of resistance—the city has an incredible community of activists and media projects doing things for themselves, which Outlier is a part of.

Of course, when the pandemic was beginning to unfold, we thought of Sarah Alvarez and reached back out, to find out what's happening now...

Sarah: Detroit's been incredibly hard hit, and so it's been very, it's been very hard to really watch this play out like it's really I mean, the people who are sick...every life matters equally. But the people who are sick and passing away here, not only do they have like value because they

have value. But there's there, it's also been a lot of people who are community leaders. And I think that that's really very difficult for everyone.

Lewis: My God, that's awful.

Lewis: Yeah. Are you rolling, by the way, on yourself?

Sarah: I've been recording. Old habits die hard, man. Soon as I picked up the phone.

Lewis: Great, love it.

Lewis: Right now, with COVID, everything and nothing is different.

Sarah: We've merged with another organization called Muck Rock. We merged with them fairly recently. And so we're transitioning some of that SMS based work over to a collaborative in Detroit. And now what we're working on is kind of how to integrate more tools into what we do. So like we wanted to redistribute the watchdog function of journalism. That's what we were doing with Outlier. Muck Rock is a transparency organization and they have really good tools for filing Freedom of Information Act requests and also like keeping up with those requests. And the systems would file, like when an agency doesn't get back to you, so they have like five days or 10 days to get back to you, if they don't get back to you, the Muck Rock system follows up with that agency automatically. So it lets them know, like, we weren't kidding about this request. We really do want this information and we're going to continue to bother you until you give it to us. So those are...that is also a tool that is this like redistributive tool, right? It lets everybody do what journalists do, which is try to get public information into the hands of more people. And that's what we were trying to do. So like now we're kind of working with this idea of given that there are fewer newsrooms and especially fewer newsrooms focused on small communities or low income communities or communities of color. How do those communities arm themselves with the same tools that journalists have used to create accountability and open government?

How do we arm them with those tools so that they can do this for themselves? Right.

Lewis: Mmhm.

Sarah: That's what we really want to do and that's what our text message system can do. And that's what these other tools can do. Because we have to be ready for that. This is, it's not about what can what can we do? Like as reporters, you can only do so much. It's like what are the skills and the tools that you have that you could give to other people? Right. It's not. Why wouldn't you do that?

Lewis: Yeah

Sarah : Why wouldn't, if we care, if we really think that our jobs matter, if we think that they're so important, then why would we hoard these skills and these tools? Right? And these practices.

Lewis: I saw that you all put out a message that that asks people to text the word corona to a number to tell us what you need right now. So how does that work? What's that involve?

Sarah: So that's the, that's kind of the Coronavirus specific information needs survey. And that helps us change our housing product. Right, our SMS reporting around housing to be more inclusive of people's immediate needs. So we already know that people's needs are clustered around shelter, food, health and safety, employment and kids and school. So we're working with reporters around the city to do reporting. So Chalkbeat is an education journalism organization and they're reporting out the kids and child care piece so that then we can take whatever reporting they have when they go and they say, like these are people's most frequent questions. This is the reporting that we have. And we can like basically put that in a format that can be distributed over SMS. Same with food, right. We know that that's really going to be about food distribution sites. Hunger is a real problem in this city. And what people need to know is what are the...what places are giving food? What times? And all of those different sites. And we can put that into an Excel spreadsheet, basically, and link it to our SMS system so that when someone puts in their zip code, we can give them the food distribution sites for their neighborhood. And we can keep that updated.

So that's what we're using that survey to help us figure out what people's most common questions are and what kind of information we need to be able to give them, and also like what we need to follow up on. But we've also heard from people who are like, I don't have a roof on my house. I need to get my roof repaired ASAP. That's not about coronavirus. That was a need before coronavirus. It's a need now. And it's going to be harder to get that need met now. So even though everybody's focusing on this current crisis in a place like Detroit, we have these underlying challenges that still need to be met. And as reporters, I think we still need to keep our eye on those things because it's what matters most to people.

Lewis: So you've been working for years now on answering questions and helping people answer questions about utilities and housing, tax foreclosures, evictions and so on and now all of a sudden, the city of Detroit has a moratorium, right, on water shutoffs and on tax foreclosures and on evictions. How does it feel to see that kind of response and just that kind of rapid change in the environment that you're covering?

Sarah: It's so interesting and I think it's so appropriate. Our job now is to follow up and make sure that those things are actually happening right as soon as the moratorium on utility shutoffs was announced. I got a call from a young woman who had just had her electricity shut off and had lost her job because of of Corona virus. And so those things can still happen. Right. And we need to follow up and make sure that that these promises are being fulfilled. So, you know, we did. And her electricity, you know, it has been restored. It feels, though, like that was a really

appropriate government response. And I think it will be interesting to see, you know, after this immediate crisis is over, what is business as usual after that? How are water shutoffs going to resume, how are utility shutoffs going to resume, how are tax foreclosures going to resume? I feel like part of the reason why these things got to be so bad is because there wasn't a lot of focus on them during that time, when it was happening. It was this kind of like slow moving crisis that folks did not really want to pay attention to. And it was not in the media. When these things resume, I wonder if people are going to pay attention, you know?

Lewis: Yeah. I mean, it strikes me just how amazing it is that Outlier Media right now has this infrastructure for answering people's urgent questions so directly and just like how useful it would be. I wish we had that everywhere. [laughs]

Sarah: Me, too. And, you know, it's interesting because like we built this infrastructure for an urgent need. It was housing and it's, it just wasn't recognized as an urgent need by people who weren't experiencing it. But we knew that it was an urgent need. Now, everybody understands that there is a different urgent need. But after this virus goes away, there will be new urgent needs in communities. And that's one thing that like, I think why it's important to redistribute these news resources, these news and information resources, is because like if we as reporters are just trying to assess what we feel is urgent, that is a huge disservice to communities.

We need to be able to respond to what communities say is urgent. We can believe them like why wouldn't we trust them, right? Why don't we want to just respond? Why do we have to be in charge and say no? I believe that this is urgent. This is what I would like to work on. Right. That's so selfish.

<<**MUSIC: Little Black Cloud** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: And it *is* urgent: Outlier now responds to about 200 messages *per day* about a whole range of information needs for Detroiters—food and jobs are the biggest. But the most surprising thing Sarah said to me in this followup conversation was actually personal. When we met a few years ago, she was **ONLY** interested in reporting on actionable, practical information. She was really *over* the focus on empathy and personal storytelling and even the romanticized idea that journalism is about writing the historical record. Which was kind of amazing to me, as someone who's so focused on story and history. But in this crisis, surrounded by all this death, the loss of key elders and community leaders in the city...things have changed for her.

Sarah: I've not ever felt like I had anything to contribute in terms of creating a record. I felt like my job, I could be most useful by helping people get accountability when they needed it. And now, as we see these stories about Detroit and about how hard hit we are, you know, those stories, that is it's important to do the documentation and it's going to be important to document how residents are experiencing this and to create a record for the future of what it was like to be in the middle of this of this crisis. And I've just never had I've never been a reporter during a crisis.

And so it's interesting that I'm I'm understanding that that's a I've always known that that's a valuable role and that that's a valuable service. But I've never felt the need to to do it until now.

<<**MUSIC: Sry** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: This pandemic is changing all of us. Probably forever. While Sarah's fired up about writing the historical record, now I'M fired about SMS text messaging and how to build information infrastructure that we need right now. Information saves lives y'all—next up, Bettina Chang of City Bureau in Chicago on how *they're* doing it...

<<**MUSIC: Back Stairs** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: I got into mainstream journalism in a sort of roundabout way, through community organizing, and then kind of worked my way BACK to where I started. Bettina Chang, on the other hand, went into journalism through the front door: she went to journalism school, did well, got internships, and not long after she graduated, got a job at Pacific Standard, a national print magazine at the time...and. It wasn't what she'd hoped.

Bettina Chang: You know my whole life and my career I had heard that like that the, you know really really great journalists end up working for national magazines and they do you know this important work they write like cover stories for The Atlantic and they do all this important work. And then like actually getting in there and seeing how insular it was and seeing how like the incentive structure was like around like saying the smart thing quickly rather than like doing the work and like getting your hands dirty like that started to really grate upon me.

Lewis: It was a problem that she *also* said has to do with journalism's theory of change—there wasn't one, really. Or there was, but it was assumed to speak for itself.

Bettina: I think it was just like this overwhelming feeling that like every time I wrote and published a story that was just going out into the ether and I had no idea who I was writing for. And I didn't really know like what was the point of me writing this, and like, all of the feedback, not the feedback but what I was hearing from my peers about like the reason that we do this work it just wasn't, it didn't make sense to me. I was like, I don't really believe that right. Like people would say like, oh you're writing this to like change the conversation, and then I'm like the conversation for whom, like whose conversation?

<<**MUSIC: Variation One, Bass + Accordion** by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*>>

Lewis: It was these same questions about power sharing...she was doing stories *about* people but not *for* or *with* people. She was skeptical that the kind of trickle-down theory for journalism was really working for the most targeted people...

Bettina: I want people to read my story and be able to like immediately take action in a way that like you know makes people feel like they have a sense of agency. Because I do feel like a lot of the stories that we read nowadays especially like these like outrage stories are just like meant to rile you up and then make you feel powerless. And I'm like why would I want to do that. Like it doesn't seem like a good use of my time.

Lewis: So, even though it was supposed to be a dream job, she left national journalism and started working at DNA Info, doing hyperlocal reporting in Chicago. And then left that to become a founder of City Bureau...a community driven newsroom, covering Chicago's South Side. She and her co-founders were asking questions that aren't asked enough in journalism:

Bettina: You know, like, how do we democratize this process? You know if journalism is so important to democracy then how could journalism be so undemocratic in itself? And trying to address that issue. It really started out with a simple idea, which is like, can we have a fellowship where the reporters instead of publishing a story and then asking for feedback, if they could just ask for feedback as they're reporting earlier on along the way. And you know be more connected with the communities that they're reporting in, instead of just like dropping into it, like you said like extract a quote from a random Ohio person when I can. And then like never be back. Right. The Fellowship was set up to build in those processes. So it's not like like, oh hey like you'll get rewarded if you do this, like no actually like we're gonna stop halfway through the cycle and we're gonna get feedback and then we'll change based on what we hear. And it doesn't matter, we're not gonna like hang on to this idea that we had unless we get the feedback that it's worthwhile

<<**MUSIC: Whiplash String Swell** by Podington Bear>>

Lewis: So they launched this fellowship program, where they train people every year to do journalism and that journalism is grounded in community input every step of the way. They created these public newsroom events, where people who make journalism talk to members of the public about their process and ideas. And, they started a thing called documenters, where they train and pay people to do the most basic nuts and bolts local journalism: covering public meetings, government meetings, doing research on government agencies and sunshine laws... they have hundreds of Chicago residents on their documenters list, and they've launched the program in Detroit and Cleveland too...

I interviewed Bettina for the first time a couple years ago...but obviously, given COVID, we had to follow up....

<<*Lewis: Hey, Bettina, it's Lewis & Ramona.*

Bettina: Hey good to hear from you.

Ramona: Hey there how are you?>>

<<Lewis: Well, yeah, basically, I'm just hoping to hear about what City Bureau has been up to since the pandemic really hit. I know that Chicago has been really hard hit and that you all have changed course pretty quickly, so we didn't want to bother you during those first few weeks, but we're bothering you now...[laughter]>>

<< Bettina: The first thing we did was we reached out to our community partners, some folks we'd already been in contact with about longterm projects and some people who were just on our list of groups that we'd interacted with before and really respect the work that they do. And we sent out a survey really early on, just to be like, What are the barriers for you and people in your network to getting information right now? With the recognition that information in a pandemic, more than ever, even though a lot of people are already in this situation, but during a pandemic it's very much that information could save lives.>>

<<Bettina: We heard over and over from people that, it's not that the information isn't out there, but that's there's too much and we don't have the time to be sorting through it.>>

Lewis: They responded by creating an online resource-finder, a tool to sort through resources and information about COVID based on what you're looking for — money, food, mental health, unemployment assistance — that's all online now, with over 1300 vetted resources and the source code for people in other places who want to build a similar tool, it's pretty awesome.

They've also launched a new interview project with the documenters. And, they're building an information aid network specifically for people without internet access, calling people up to ask them what information they need.

<<Bettina: It's becoming more and more clear how much the news needs to adjust towards like really urgent information needs, and that like a lot of the news that we spent time and effort on before was more like, Oh it would be good to know that, and not like, I need to know that right now in order to survive It's so unfortunate that so many people are at that brink, but at the same time it really forces us to reconsider how are we providing equitable access to information, and when folks are really in need, is there somebody there who it's their job to be able to fill that in, because if not, what is even the point of the rest of the information system?>>

<<MUSIC:

Lewis: That's Bettina Chang, co-founder of City Bureau in Chicago. They have posted links to the source code for the COVID resource finder, plus lots of other great stuff about the documenters program and the Information Aid Network—it's linked on our website, view from somewhere dot com, or find them directly at city bureau dot org.

THEME: Tango Mécanique (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky

Lewis: I'm so stoked about Sarah Alvarez and Bettina Chang and everything they're doing to change journalism and build organizations that are actually accountable to the communities they serve. And I wonder, if he'd had access to Outlier or City Bureau, how Eddie Cave's story in Detroit might have been different. I wonder how every community would be different in this pandemic if we had information infrastructure based on the real needs of the most vulnerable people.

But I also just keep thinking about that day sitting in the sun with Eddie Cave, walking through his shadowy house, looking into his eyes and hugging...how it felt to be *close* to someone, a stranger, and how much I took that for granted. The ways people are responding to this pandemic are inspiring. And...I just *miss people*. I wanna give you all a hug.

Okay I'm gonna stop before I get emotional. This is the View from Somewhere. On the next episode, we dig into the idea of *movement journalism* with Tina Vasquez. I'm so excited! Meanwhile, give us those stars on iTunes, check out our website for links and swag, and stay in touch.

This podcast is produced by Ramona Martinez, our editor on this episode is Carla Murphy. Our theme music is composed by Dogbotic, additional music from Podington Bear, our artist is Billy Dee, and we're distributed by Critical Frequency.