Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean. I'm mostly retired as a reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations, but I'm now serving on the Kansas Oral History Project board. Today is June 8, 2026. We're at the Kansas Capitol to interview Sherman Smith, the editor-in-chief of the *Kansas Reflector*. The *Reflector* is a non-profit reporting service focused on Kansas politics.

This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others who inform the public about state and local policymaking. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. As always, today our videographer is former Kansas Representative Dave Heinemann, producer Susie Murphy. Welcome, Sherman. Thanks a lot for being here. I appreciate it.

Sherman Smith: Thanks for having me.

JM: I have lots of questions about the *Reflector*. I think it's really important. But before we get to those, let me spend some time on your biography. I read it recently. You grew up in Lyon County, rural Lyon County.

SS: That's right.

JM: As you put it, "at the end of a dead-end road."

SS: Yes.

JM: What's the significance of including that?

SS: You know, I think it speaks to the kind of isolation that I grew up with. You kind of have to find ways to keep yourself busy at the end of a dead-end road. In an era before Al Gore invented the Internet, we had two or three TV stations. I spent a lot of time playing with sticks in the yard.

JM: Really? Was it a farm or was it just rural?

SS: We had ten acres surrounded by agriculture. Sometimes there were cattle; sometimes there were crops. I drove a little 8N Ford tractor for a little plot of corn on the land, but we weren't farmers.

JM: Anything about that upbringing in rural Lyon County that eventually sparked your interest in public affairs and being a journalist?

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SS: You know, when I think back on it, one of my earliest memories, I think, was my parents sitting me down in 1989 to watch the fall of the Berlin Wall and trying to explain to me the significance of this moment, saying "Someday you'll understand how important this is." There was just kind of a series of scenes like that in an era where in public schools, teachers would wheel in those big, heavy TVs on carts and say, "Hey, kids, look, there are people burning alive in Waco today" or there's a shoot-out in Ruby Ridge or the bombing in Oklahoma City. For whatever reason, I was just kind of drawn to those moments and in tune with them and wanted to know what was happening in the world.

JM: Were your parents engaged in—did you have conversations around the house a lot about public affairs that kind of a thing, about what was going on in the world?

SS: You know, not really until I started to show an interest in this. Part of being in a rural setting is riding the bus to school, you get there maybe an half hour early. I started going into the library at school and reading the newspapers there and showing an interest. My mom tells a story about how I would beg for a subscription to *Newsweek* when I was in junior high, and they thought, you know, "What kid wants to read *Newsweek*?" But they finally relented and got that for me.

JM: That was a predictor of sorts, the fact that at that age, you were interested in *Newsweek*. So, you grew up in rural Lyon County. You eventually attended Emporia State, right?

SS: That's right.

JM: You had a dual major in English and journalism?

SS: Yes, a major in English, a minor in journalism. They didn't have a full major.

JM: I got a degree in political science. It's amazing. A lot of us didn't go to journalism school. At least that wasn't our primary emphasis. But neither of those degrees are still offered at Emporia State?

SS: No, there was a lot of drama a few years ago when they got rid of some tenured faculty and got rid of a bunch of programs. Those were on the chopping board.

JM: I think we can talk a little bit about the value of a liberal arts education as it leads to journalism. You already said that you had an interest in world affairs and national events. You subscribed to *Newsweek* in order to keep in touch with what was going on, but a liberal arts education, you have to know a little bit about history and the language, all

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those kinds of things. It seems like that was an emphasis for so long, but now it's being deemphasized.

SS: I loved reading and writing and thinking about the things that I was reading and having conversations with people about that. That drove a lot of my interest in pursuing this.

JM: So, you graduated from Emporia State when?

SS: 2004.

JM: And immediately or quickly you landed at the *Topeka Capital-Journal* on the copy desk.

SS: Yes. That's right, within a couple of weeks. It happened very quickly. I sent resumes off to a bunch of places. I remember getting a response from the *Wichita Eagle* that said, "We only hire people who have five years of professional experience." This is a sign of how things have changed. I got a call from Amy Bauer who was the copy desk chief, and I think she had learned that there was going to be a hiring freeze coming up, and she said, "Can you come here for an interview tomorrow?" and I said, "Sure."

I think I had maybe the world's worst interview. I bombed the spelling test. I don't know why they hired me other than I was a warm body who was on hand, but she said, "If you can pass a drug test tomorrow, you can start on Monday." Then I get there Monday, and they announce the hiring freeze.

JM: Really?

SS: She was able to get the paperwork in. There were for the first time ever, layoffs shortly after that.

JM: How did that happen? You failed a spelling test, and you become a copy editor. That seems antithetical somehow.

SS: I was passionate about journalism. I had the English degree. I had good editing experience, and I had good references. My mentor is Sally Renaud who is in the College Media Advisors Hall of Fame. I think she spoke highly of me.

JM: I don't think I would have ever gotten into reporting or succeeded at it in the pre-spell check era.

SS: Right.

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JM: So, you're on the copy desk. Explain to people what kind of job that is at least at the time at that newspaper. I remember that it was a fairly substantially sized newsroom, and the copy desk was at one end. I drove people on the copy desk crazy. I would turn in a story and want to revise it like six times before the paper would go to print. I remember Pat really getting angry at me. Describe what that was and what you did. What I'm after here is a description of how robust the editorial process was at newspapers at the time.

SS: I'm only halfway through my career. I already feel like a dinosaur here.

JM: Yes.

SS: We had twelve or thirteen copy editors, but there were also layers of section editors elsewhere in the newsroom. It felt kind of like a machine where it didn't matter what product you put in one end; you were going to get a really well-written story on the other end. The copy desk had a big role in that. A section editor had to sign off on it before it got to the copy desk, and then as a copy editor, you're editing that story. You're also laying out a page or a section, which means you're making decisions about what's the most important story, ranking those on the page, deciding the headline size, that sort of thing accordingly. You're taking that page, and you're giving it to one of your peers on the copy desk, and they're going to edit it even though you've already edited everything on there. And when that's done, you take it to what we called the slot editor, whoever was designated to be the person in charge on the copy desk that night.

JM: And pulled it all together.

SS: Yes. They were going to give the final look to everything. So, at a minimum, there were four layers of editing in there between the section editor, you as a copy editor, one of your peers, and the slot editor, before it ever got to print.

JM: I think that's important in this series of conversations we're having about reporting on state policymaking and politics. I think it's really important for people to understand again how robust the editorial process was at least in those days. I think people have this notion that a reporter just shows up at some place and dashes off some copy, and then it just ends up online or something like that, but that process was really important because questions were being asked along the way, particularly the first edit where the person in charge of that section of the newspaper would edit it and say, "Who is your source here?," checking quotes, checking spelling, all that kind of thing.

SS: Yes. You weren't just looking for missing commas or misspelled words. You were going, "Does this make sense? Is it fair? Is it in good taste?" Even things like "Is this going to seem suggestive to somebody?" The number of headlines you would write

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where people would go, “I don’t think that means what you think it means.” That kind of stuff. All of that was part of the discussion.

JM: That’s a good point about “Is it fair?” I can remember being sent back by an editor to get another comment to balance out a story.

SS: Oh, yes. There were times where “Why is there only one side of the story?” Those things wouldn’t make it through those layers of firewalls.

JM: So, you’re on the copy desk for roughly how long?

SS: For a couple of years, and then I had an opportunity to do this alternative storytelling project.

JM: What’s that? What’s alternative storytelling?

SS: It was kind of a flavor of the month for how they were going to sell more newspapers. We turned the second page of the A section of the sports section into a full-page infographic, basically. There’d be like a mini column, like 350 words, a kind of commentary.

JM: Contextualizing whatever the graphic was about.

SS: It could be unrelated. But then that story, the centerpiece of that page would be something that might be a Q and A or a bullet point, something other than a straight written news story, something that would be easy to digest, or it could be entirely design driven—charts or that kind of stuff.

JM: I was really interested in looking through your bio how many different things you did relatively early on at the *Capital-Journal* with this alternative storytelling being one. You got into the digital realm and page design and a whole bunch of other things.

SS: Yes, I was the lead page designer for a little while. I had started really pushing for a position on the online staff probably by 2006, realizing—I felt like “We’re going about this wrong.” It was still like “Here’s everything that was in today’s paper” and that would go up online that morning. I felt like we needed to be at the front of getting news to the audience online. I realized at a young age that more people were reading us online every day than would ever read us in print or had ever read us in print at that time.

JM: And this was when roughly?

SS: 2006, 2007.

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JM: I remember being there at the beginning of that transition when online was starting to be emphasized. It became a really important thing when you were there in the sense that you had that realization. I'm sure other people had that same realization, and the emphasis was on getting stuff online. It wasn't the daily newspaper anymore.

SS: It sort of flipped to where the newspaper became the best of what we had online yesterday. It was that kind of transition. I had the opportunity to go lead the online stuff starting in 2011, really at a young age to have that kind of a responsibility in the newsroom.

JM: How independent were you if you were leading the online staff relative to the other editors who had sections to be in charge of? How much cooperation was there between—

SS: You have to remember in 2008; we had the big economic downturn and lost a lot of staff due to attrition for a few years. So, where it was targeted was really removing all of those middle editors from the process. What it meant was hardly anybody was looking at copy before the copy desk came in in the afternoon.

I decided to approach the online side. I would get in at 7:00 in the morning, and I thought, "I'm going to approach this like a slot editor for a new medium." I would go wrangle the breaking news reporters, start talking to the other reporters like, "What are you working on today? When is it going to come in?" having those conversations.

JM: Even before the morning meeting? Did you still have the morning meeting in those days?

SS: Those were long gone.

JM: Long gone.

SS: I think I kind of filled that void a little with how I was running the online staff, really acting like an assistant managing editor for a while. Nobody told me I could do this. It was just sort of like, "If we're going to have a viable online product, this is what we've got to do."

JM: It's actually quality control. That's what you were trying to do.

SS: Yes.

JM: Just for context, when I was there, all the section editors and the managing [editor] would meet in the front office there and have a conversation about what was going to be

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covered that day, what was going to be that paper, and relatively speaking, what was the most important story, and kind of right down the line. But, as you say, when those section editors were eliminated, that meeting became moot. There was no reason to have it.

SS: By that time, we had a managing editor still and a sports editor and a photo editor.

JM: So, you then were in charge of the online product, and eventually you rose into the position of managing editor, right?

SS: Yes. For a couple of years there, I was the director of digital audience, which meant not just for the newsroom but across the other departments, circulation and advertising as well, which really just showed me just how much I missed only focusing on journalism.

JM: I can imagine.

SS: A new publisher came in, and I had the opportunity to be the managing editor. It was like, "Finally I get to go back to doing this." It also felt surreal. It was the fall of 2015. Again, at a young age, having these opportunities primarily because of where the newspaper industry was at. The ones who stuck around were the ones who got the opportunity.

JM: Right. So, managing editor, I think you make the point in what you submitted as your bio that you oversaw a staff of more than forty people.

SS: Yes.

JM: And those weren't just reporters, right?

SS: Yes, that includes sports staff, photo, the remaining copy desk, and all the news reporters.

JM: Still a fairly—

SS: Yes, pretty robust.

JM: Pretty robust, yes, but it wasn't long before that changed, right?

SS: Right. It was difficult to see this happening. We had what I felt like was such a strong reporting team on the news side for that point. I would put them up against anything else in the state at that time, people like, of course, Tim Carpenter, but Jonathan Shorman, Celia Llopis-Jepsen.

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JM: Andy Marso?

SS: Yes, Andy Marso. Megan and Justin Wingerter. You could just keep going and going, the people who did such great reporting. Katie Moore started when I was managing editor at the *Capital-Journal*, is with The Marshall Project now. So many talented reporters at that time, all together in the same newsroom.

JM: Yes, you could go down the line. Tim Carpenter is with you at the *Reflector*. Celia is with KCUR public radio in the state. Jonathan Shorman—

SS: He's now with the DC Bureau, States Newsroom, our parent organization.

JM: He left the *Star* then?

SS: He did.

JM: So, anyway, you had a good newsroom chock full of good reporters.

SS: It went away very quickly. There's still good people left behind, but just the numbers rapidly deteriorated. When Jonathan left, we were also able to hire Allison Kite, who had been with the AP, for a brief period into that role at the Statehouse alongside Tim, and then the *Star* hired her away. I just kind of looked around and thought, "We don't have enough people around to have an executive editor and a managing editor and a couple of other editors still. I need to go make myself useful." So, I went over to the Statehouse.

JM: You assigned yourself to the Statehouse.

SS: That's right.

JM: Did you still retain the title of managing editor even while you were at the Statehouse?

SS: I did, but it was like in name only. I should say, too, I had these opportunities where I had interviewed for other positions including one for you where it was just kind of like I couldn't prove I had any reporting ability. I had been managing editor or online editor or in design, but I'd never been a beat reporter. It felt like I have to go show that I can actually write compelling news stories if I ever want to have another opportunity.

JM: You mentioned—I remember that when you came by. We were looking for essentially a managing editor for the Kansas News Service at the time.

SS: And a reporter before that. There were a couple of rounds.

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JM: This isn't gratuitous for the sake of the interview, but I told you directly that I think one of the biggest mistakes I made was not hiring you. I mean that. You were a jack of all trades. You had a lot of skills, particularly with the things that were changing in journalism. You were on top of a lot of that.

SS: I appreciate that. I don't think I was quite ready at the time. I was able to grow into it by adding that reporting space.

JM: I think you would have been ready if you had had the opportunity. That's kind of what your resume suggests to me. Let's go back a little bit because the staffing cuts, GateHouse, which was a big—they owned a lot of papers across the country. They purchased the *Capital-Journal*. Did those staffing cuts come as a direct result of GateHouse's purchase of the paper?

SS: Their model was "You buy at three times cash flow, and as the cash flow deteriorates, you cut staff to match." That played out in newspapers all over Kansas, but also all across the country. The revenue declines from both advertising and subscribers. People have to go with it.

JM: What's the point of that? You say you buy at three times cash flow. You're suggesting they bought it at a premium price and then had to cut staff in order to make economic sense?

SS: If you cut staff to offset the revenue losses, you've broken even within three years. Everything after that is profit.

JM: All right. Then GateHouse eventually merged with Gannett, right?

SS: They swallowed Gannett and stole their name is kind of how I looked at it.

JM: Did things get worse then?

SS: You know, this was right before COVID. I think initially what we saw were kind of legacy Gannett papers trying to incorporate some of us into the fold. It was kind of like a diplomatic thing. I was briefly assigned to *USA Today*'s immigration reporting team. I went down to Arizona for a while in January of 2020. I think it was sort of Gannett's way of saying, "If we welcome some of the GateHouse people into the fold, it will insulate us from that." Then COVID hit, and everything went out the window.

JM: I looked around. One of the things we've talked about in this series of interviews was just the changing nature of reporting, specifically at the Statehouse and the attention

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being paid to what was going on in the Statehouse, but also the political atmosphere in the state and things like that and the disappearance of local newspapers, particularly the state's history of very influential editors in communities across the state and the role they played in really keeping watch on the politics and the policy and all that kind of thing. It was very much a changing landscape over the last thirty, forty years, and you were right in the middle of those big changes.

The Brookings Institute did a report at the time that the GateHouse and Gannett merger took place. They said, "Both Gannett and GateHouse have a reputation for cutting staff across their newsrooms. In the past two years alone, the number of employees at Gannett has fallen by one-fifth. The merger will likely entail another round of layoffs for local newspapers across the country." That same report said over 2,000 American newspapers have ceased publication in the last fifteen years. You felt that pretty directly in your position, didn't you, in terms of trying to do what you thought was a responsible job of doing what you needed to do to cover things?

SS: I felt that where I was and also just looking across the landscape, we talked about GateHouse/Gannett, but every kind of ownership model of a newspaper had to cut staff, and it was because newspapers weren't profitable anymore.

JM: So, you were at the Statehouse. When was it that this opportunity with States Newsroom came about and the *Reflector*? How did that come about?

SS: A couple of years in. To tell the story, I like to back up a little to—at the *Capital-Journal*, I had a publisher who really wanted me to apply for this next gen program, a mentorship program with the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association. It was right before the transition from we were owned by Morris Communications based out of Georgia to GateHouse. It's the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association. I didn't want to do it. He told me I had to, and I was looking at the application. One of the questions was like, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I said, "I want to be working for a digital-only news operation" and really thought that would disqualify me from consideration.

But they called immediately and said, "We want to give you this opportunity. We're pairing you with the editor down in Louisiana," a guy named Mark Lorando at the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. They had famously killed the print product for a while and then brought it back. They were way ahead of the curve in terms of "Let's figure out how we do an online operation for news."

So, I got to go learn from that, but also, I spent a week down there, and I got to meet the equivalent of publisher. He had a fancy title at the time. He sat me down over lunch and walked through this exercise where he said, "I'm going to give you a blank check equal

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to however much money the *Topeka-Capital Journal* newsroom requires each year. You're going to model out what your newsroom is going to look like that's going to compete head-to-head with the *Capital-Journal*. Who are you going to bring with you? Who would you want to keep? Who would you get rid of? How would the jobs change?" All of that.

We went through this exercise. The point was I should go back to the *Capital-Journal* and just implement this, although I saw that was never going to happen at the *Capital-Journal* at that time. But I spent several years daydreaming about "What would I do if somebody did give me the opportunity to go start a digital news operation? How would that function."

So I felt like I had prepared for this opportunity at States Newsroom. The early days of COVID, of course, Tim Carpenter and I are over at the Statehouse covering state government. We were churning out I think on average 150 inches of copy a day about what was happening in COVID. That's about thirty words per inch. So, you can do the math on that, dedicating our lives 24/7, informing the state about what's happening.

And, of course, there's the statewide shutdown at this time in April [2020]. Gannett/GateHouse, Gannett decided this would be a great time to make every reporter, every employee in all of their newsrooms have one week of unpaid furlough every month for the foreseeable future. So, as I was going into that, I put something out on social media that just said I was doing my part to support the bottom line of shareholders in New Jersey. If you want to stay up to date on what's actually happening in these scary times, here are people who will actually be working this week.

JM: Wow. That was pretty brave.

SS: I got an uncomfortable amount of attention, but unbeknownst to me, the guy at the top of States Newsroom, Chris Fitzsimon, a brilliant visionary in this, he had come to Kansas in March of 2020 to start scouting to see if he could find an editor. Several people had said, "You should talk to Sherman."

JM: I remember that.

SS: He may have talked to you. He talked to my good friend, now my opinion editor, Clay Wirestone. He was at Kansas Action for Children at the time, and Mark McCormick and others said that he should talk to me, but he had to get out of town within two days because COVID had hit.

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I think it was about the time that tweet had gone out, my ill-advised tweet, Clay called and said, "I met this guy from North Carolina. Who has this crazy idea about launching a news service in Kansas. I think the two of you should talk to each other."

So, Clay put me in touch with Chris. I had a conversation with him and a follow-up with him and Andrea Veryoukis, and I think within a week or so, they had offered me this opportunity that I've been dreaming about for several years at that point.

JM: That's a great story. What prompted you? What was in your head when you posted that online? Obviously, you were frustrated.

SS: This is an unprecedented moment in our history, an unprecedented appetite for news and information about what's really going on.

JM: Life and death to some degree.

SS: There had already been signs, but it could not be more clear that the people in charge of this company don't actually care about the product they're selling. That's what I had in my mind.

JM: When you posted that in a pique of frustration perhaps—

SS: Yes.

JM: Did you have any notion that it was going to catch fire, catch the attention that it did?

SS: I didn't. To their credit, nobody actually ever said a word to me about it from inside the company.

JM: Really?

SS: But you can check the impressions. It made the rounds.

JM: It speaks well of Clay, too. He had a conversation about perhaps getting this position, and yet he thought you were the person that might—

SS: Clay and I have a little bit of a different version of the story. The way I see it, Clay thought it would be borderline insane to go and try to create a news organization out of scratch on the Internet in the middle of the pandemic, and I thought it was a great opportunity.

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JM: Talk a little bit about—you mentioned all these names and States Newsroom and the origin of that and what the idea behind it was and what they perceived the need to be.

SS: Chris had been doing some really innovative stuff in online journalism since the early, mid-nineties. About ten years before States Newsroom, he had launched a news organization in North Carolina as a nonprofit, public service driven, let's get journalists back into the Statehouse, focus on policy, really inform people about what's going on so they can make informed choices when they go to vote. At some point, they realized, "Maybe this is a model that can work across the country."

JM: At the same time that was happening, the Kansas News Service was an attempt to do that as well, and we ended up starting that at the Kansas Health Institute and then migrating it out to the point where we became partnered with all the public radio stations in the state. But I can remember going to Menlo Park in California because the Kaiser News Service was just—they were contemplating it then, and there were a few—there was the *Texas Tribune*. There were models around the country starting to pop up and be successful.

SP: *Mississippi Today*, *Cal State Matters*.

JM: The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* ceased publication. Then they tried an online product up there. That stuff was happening across the country. People were trying to find a way to do it, make it viable.

SS: And States Newsroom had started this in 2018 and started launching all the—Nevada was first and then maybe Florida, Virginia. Two years later, we were 16th or something to come along. Since then, they've built out to thirty-nine states, and they stopped there because, as you say, there were some of these existing efforts in other states where they thought, "We can have content-sharing agreements with them. We don't have to go compete with them. We're not going to beat the *Texas Tribune*."

JM: Right. There was the equivalent of the *Kansas Reflector* in thirty-eight other states around the country.

SS: That's right.

JM: And they're all focused particularly on covering state government.

SS: Yes. Why we exist is to cover state government and politics to really have boots on the ground in statehouses where—even just since I came over here in 2018, the ranks have been severely depleted.

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JM: Yes. I can remember the press corps where I first came in the early eighties. It's just not comparable at all in terms of the numbers and the expertise.

SS: The size and experience and expertise is—when I came over in 2018, there were still these titans, not just Tim Carpenter and John Hanna and you. You guys were all people who could command attention from—let's put it this way. If Governor Brownback was coming to the *Capital-Journal* to talk to the editorial board, he would only do it on the contingency that they informed him whether Tim Carpenter was going to cover it, that kind of thing.

There was a whole layer of experienced reporters then underneath you guys who were the best of the best in Kansas. We've lost so much of that expertise. A lot of times, what we see now is reporters who may become exceptional, but they're in the first couple of years of their career, and they're not going to stay here very long.

JM: There just wasn't the opportunity.

SP: Right.

JM: So, the *Kansas Reflector*, let's talk about it. You have a staff of how many?

SS: We have a staff of five including myself.

JM: Entirely focused on covering the state. You count Clay among those, right?

SS: I do. Me, an opinion editor, and three reporters.

JM: Does the model in every state have as robust an opinion element to it as you guys do? Clay Wirestone is the opinion editor, and he's very good. He does what columnists and opinion writers should do. They're provocative, right? And he's provocative.

SS: Yes. He's provocative, but he's informative. All of our opinion writers—Max McCoy is one of our most popular contributors every Sunday. They're informative. A lot of it is reported columns. It's not just—

JM: Explain that. What is a reported column versus just somebody dashing off their opinion?

SS: They're out gathering information and talking to people, looking at documents and watching committee meetings, and pulling all of that together to inform what they're writing about.

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JM: So, it's essentially analytical, is what it is. You can call it analysis because there's an opinion to what they're writing, but they're quoting people, and they're looking at documents as you say and doing the reporting to make sure that what they're putting out there is credible and resourced.

SS: And I should give credit to C.J. Janovy who was my first opinion editor. When Clay thought this was too crazy, C.J. was just unhappy enough to come join me from where she had been before. She really helped chart this course for the opinion section. We had a lot of meetings before we launched about what we wanted to accomplish and what it should look like. What we settled on was really putting an emphasis on amplifying voices of people who typically left out of public policy debate.

JM: You have a lot of people who contribute columns, not just Clay. And Clay oversees that, right?

SS: Right.

JM: A lot of people who want to contribute things. He filters through that and picks the ones that he thinks are responsible.

SS: I think that one of the keys is, as I say—it's a phrase borrowed from elsewhere or adopted for us, but it's "These are Kansans writing about Kansans for Kansans." A lot of times when you see commentary about Kansas, it's either written for a national audience, or it's somebody parachuting in. There's kind of a voyeuristic aspect to it. "Get a load of how things are working over here in this state." We are serving the people of Kansas with this.

JM: In that sense, it replicates the old newspaper model where you had—again, you had straight news reporting, and then you had an opinion page, an editorial page. So, that was the model in newspapers, and yet when I look at the *Reflector* and the product that you put out, it seems that some people take that opinion page and what's written on the opinion page and they extrapolate, and they think it somehow slants all your news coverage.

SS: Yes. There's also a lot of people who assume that Clay's the editor-in-chief because that's the figure that they know. Clay does do a great job with the opinion section, and I think that the attention that he gets is a testament to the job that he does. At the end of the day, we publish exactly one opinion article every day. There are two to five and sometimes more local news stories plus stories from the States Newsroom DC Bureau, occasionally stories from our partners. *Stateline* is an enterprise reporting outfit started by Pew, and it was handed off to States Newsroom a few years ago. So, really that one opinion article is like just a drop in the bucket for everything else that we're doing.

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JM: I remember *Stateline*. I didn't know that that had been handed off. When you go to your website, you have coverage not only of what's going on in Kansas, but you have articles from the other States Newsroom publications around the country.

SS: I try to curate these to make sure that what we're republishing are things that people in Kansas would actually care about.

JM: An issue that's prominent here that's also prominent someplace else.

SS: That's right. And also make sure that the balance is in proportion, that we have—most of what we're offering is still what we're producing here in Kansas.

JM: If you put it together, it's a pretty substantial resource because you have all those partnering opportunities across the country.

SS: It is. We see this again as a public service. We make this free for everybody to read. We also make it free for all the other publications to republish. I think as newspapers have continued to feel the strain, they've had to cancel their AP [Associated Press] contracts just because they can't afford it anymore. This provides a way for their readers to still have direct access to what's happening in state government.

JM: I think that's important, too, because I remember we had John Hanna, the Associated Press reporter, the long-time veteran reporter here at the Statehouse in a previous interview, and we talked about the model of wire service reporting when he broke in. They covered every committee meeting. They pumped that out on the wire. And not only that, there were three full-time reporters in the AP Bureau, three full-time reporters in the UPI [United Press International] Bureau right next to one another in the Statehouse, and they just cranked out material all day long. That model is long gone.

As you put it, a lot of newspapers in the state subscribed to both UPI and AP, and then just one or the other, and eventually because of economic imperatives, they stopped subscribing to the wire service all together. You were trying to fill that void.

SS: Yes, and I think that we've also had to figure out, "How do we balance the combination of 'Here are things that are happening right now that we think are important to cover in terms of committee meetings?' " We can't cover them all, but we can cover quite a few of them. How do we cover those so that they're still meaningful for people out across the state who maybe don't necessarily see themselves as consumers of political news or government news? But if we can deliver it to them as "This is a policy that's going to affect your daily life," maybe it will engage them that way.

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JM: Yes, you want to talk about it in its formative stages, not at the very end where there's nothing that can be done or said about it.

SS: Sometimes it's like we'll cover some of these things as they're coming up in committee, but we know because we can't cover them all, there are those other opportunities. We can get it when it comes up for debate on the floor, when it comes up in conference committee, when the governor signs or vetoes, all of that stuff.

JM: Do you have a handle on how many newspapers, television stations, radio stations, media outlets, online outlets are using your material?

SS: I think it's about forty or fifty in Kansas on a weekly basis.

JM: Forty or fifty.

SS: It's hard to track some of them. They don't have much of a digital footprint. There are some national reporting services that try to monitor these, and so it's automated. They don't get a lot of the ones that are picking us up in Kansas.

JM: That's important to have your stories not only online on your site, but then they could be replicated all over the state. That gives you quite a bit of reach.

SS: Yes. I heard one of the numbers that they were talking about at States Newsroom headquarters the other day. It was just on our websites across the thirty-nine states, we reach twenty million people each month, but there are also 200,000 reprints. Countless other people are reading that work.

JM: You reach twenty million people just from the product you put on your websites, and then 200,000 you say?

SS: Yes.

JM: You haven't quantified how many people you're reaching through those.

SS: Right. We don't track page views. We don't see that as a valuable metric. We're thinking about, we're reaching people on our site. Are we serving other publications that are picking us up? Are people having conversations about what we're writing? We look more at things like, "How much time are people spending on a particular story?" and less about "Is this driving clicks?"

JM: That makes a lot of sense. It tells you a lot if they're spending a great deal of time. They're actually reading it and not just cruising through the headlines. But you're also

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engaged in Kansas, if I understand it correctly, in other ways. You're going around the state and having essentially—I would call them "town hall meetings," conversations with people and communities around the state. What's the purpose behind that? Just to educate them about the *Reflector* and let them know it's there? Are you trying to gauge the impact of what you're doing or just trying to have your finger on the pulse of what's going on around the state?

SS: We call them town halls as well. Back when I was the director of digital audience at the *Capital-Journal*, I had an opportunity to work with the American Press Institute on some ways about how they were tracking audience. That was really informative. I started paying attention to those national polls that came out that talk about—people fixate on whether people trust the media or whether they know certain jargony terms that we use. The number that I always look at is "What percentage of people in our polls say that they've met a journalist or know a journalist?" I believe that number has dropped into the twenties now, 20 percent, 20-something percent. I think what it said to me was like "This is a fundamental problem that we have with our audience. People don't know who we are, what we do, or how we do it."

So, from the moment we launched, I knew that that had to be part of the equation. We had to go out and find people where they were and have conversations with them, but it was during the pandemic. And so it got put on the back burner until we got a call from Jennifer Kassebaum, the daughter-in-law to Senator—

JM: Former Senator Nancy Kassebaum.

SS: Yes. She runs a bookstore in Council Grove. She said she was doing a series of discussions at the local brewery there, Riverbank. Maybe we could come down and be part of that discussion. We immediately seized this opportunity to go do that because we wanted to go do this for so long and also figured out through that how to kind of make this a blueprint for doing this around the state. The short answer being, make somebody else do all the work of organizing the time and the place and setting up the mics and all that stuff.

JM: You just show up.

SS: Yes. We just have to show up. So, we've accepted these invites now around the state. I don't know how many we do, maybe a dozen or so each year, maybe more, going out to various towns, big and small, but mostly small, everywhere from Washington, Kansas to Lindsborg to you name it. I've got one in Park City coming up in a few weeks.

JM: What's the elevator version of the opening that you use in those meetings?

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SS: I give a very condensed version about what the *Kansas Reflector* is and how we operate and how many staff we have, trying to hold that to five minutes. If I have other staff with me, people come as they're available, little introductions as to who we are, and then we open it up for questions and take questions for an hour and a half. I just think this is so valuable in hearing what readers really find interesting, what they're in tune with, what they want more of, the reporting that has impacted them, the reporting we're not doing that they're mad about, that kind of stuff. It allows us to sell our story a little bit, connect with readers, kind of strengthen that. More people find out who we are because of this, but it informs us in our reporting and in our understanding of the news as well.

I would also say that it's been really rewarding for staff, especially if you're in the throes of the legislative session. You're working long hours. Everybody from lobbyists to lawmakers are raining down, telling you what terrible people you are, and then you go out on the road, and there's a room of 100 people, and they're cheering for you. They're interrupting what you say to clap and show their approval. That can be really rewarding.

JM: Do you get any contrary reaction when you're out there? What do you sense the reputation of journalists is when you go out and you meet with the public like that? Every poll suggests that journalists are not held in very high regard these days.

SS: Our experience has been very different at the *Reflector*. I think part of it is we don't have the institutional baggage of a legacy media. I think part of it is that we're nonprofit. We're not doing this so that somebody can get rich. I think that helps. I think the fact that we're going out and talking to them and making ourselves available helps. We've gone just on reporting projects in parts of the state where people are happy that somebody is there and cares about them and what's happening in their community.

So, our experiences have been almost entirely positive. The most common feedback we get might be from somebody—I remember an individual in Lindsborg was upset about a story one of my reporters did where she covered the USDA Secretary, Brooke Rollins, had come to Kansas City and announced some new roll-out of funding support for farmers, and my reporter just covered this from the live event coverage of "So and So was here, and this is what they said, and this is how it's going to affect people." The complaint from the person in Lindsborg was we didn't go out of our way to tell everybody what a terrible human being Brooke Rollins was. We had to explain, "Well, that's not actually what we do. That's not part of reporting or how we would tell these stories."

JM: If you want to do a personality profile, it could come from any one of the States Newsroom entities if that was important, but that wasn't your job that day.

SS: That's right.

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JM: What do you say to people—obviously you don't get much of this when you're out on the road, but what do you say to people who think that there's a progressive or a liberal slant to your coverage? Do you hear that at all?

SS: You see that sometimes on social media.

JM: And you hear it in this building some, I would expect.

SS: Oh, sure, of course, in this building. But I have to tell lawmakers all the time, "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for the public." I think one of the things that would surprise people is that I think the majority of our readers are what I would describe as Republicans who are upset with Republicans. Especially in places like Council Grove, virtually every person in that audience is a Republican or would identify I think as a Republican. I understand there's that slant or that attack that somehow, we're slanted. I think all journalists see that in some form or another. What I've seen particularly from readers on the right or critics on the right is this sort of mentality of like, "If you're not with us, you're against us." That's sort of how I characterize a lot of their criticism. I think what I see from the left is like that guy in Lindsborg, "You're not going far enough to support our cause." Of course, I have to say to both of them, "That's not our objective here."

JM: If you're in the middle of those two contentions, you might be in the right place.

SS: One of the things that I think has been a good selling point, we'll say, when I've talked to people who maybe have been skeptical about whether they even want to talk to me at events is to say that "We are real people who live here in this state who are having face-to-face conversations with people, and we're using real names and real people to inform our stories. We're not using unnamed sources. That separates us from the so-called "fake news." These are real people in our stories talking about what they think about the news.

JM: Is that a policy throughout the organization? Is that your policy here locally in Kansas that you don't use unnamed sources?

SS: That's primarily my policy. States Newsroom does have a policy that you can see on the website about the rare circumstance where we would consider it. The most common use would be—and we've done this—we're dealing with survivors of sexual assault, for instance. We're not going to identify them publicly without their consent.

JM: As I view the media writ large these days, I think a lot of people conflate aggressive reporting with being liberal and/or progressive. Those two things aren't the same thing.

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You would aggressively dig into the subject matter you're reporting on, and if you get overly aggressive—we all know from journalism school that the relationship between a reporter and the people they cover is necessarily adversarial. That doesn't mean—it's a kind of a softer version of adversarial. You're not doing the same thing. You have a job to do, and it doesn't mean hostile, but that's how it gets interpreted sometimes these days.

SS: Our role is to be inherently skeptical.

JM: Skeptical.

SS: There's that old adage, of course, that we comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

JM: Right.

SS: We're going to question authority and challenge their decisions, and it doesn't matter who's in charge. Some of my peers are in states where there's a Democratic super majority. The people there will say, "You guys must be secretly Koch funded." Here it's "You guys must be secretly Soros funded." I wish the critics in these two states could figure out who we're supposedly paying allegiance to because it's really about holding powerful people accountable.

JM: How are you funded? Where does the money come from?

SS: The great thing about doing this at the state level is that States Newsroom is doing the bulk of the fundraising for us. They're going out and selling the idea of States Newsroom to people all over the country who are supporting this mission. They publish the list of donors who have given $1,000 or more on a page on their website. It's all there. It's an impossibly long list that I really don't look at. I don't know who those names are, but those names are out there.

JM: So, there's not some big billionaire, millionaire who's backing this with a political agenda.

SS: No. Nobody has ever told me what I'm allowed to cover or how I'm supposed to cover it from States Newsroom. Those are decisions that are decided locally about what we're doing. One-third of our funding does come from local donations that average about $35 a piece.

JM: Is it subscription based? Do you have people who subscribe to the *Reflector*? Is that how it's done?

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SS: It's all free to read.

JM: I can go to the website. I don't have to subscribe.

SS: We have a daily newsletter that's probably the primary driver for getting audience to our stories. The daily newsletter, of course, is free. And there's no advertising. It's all free to read and look at. Once every three or four months, we'll send out an email to our subscribers and ask if they can contribute.

JM: How many people receive that daily newsletter?

SS: About 12,000.

JM: That's not the sum total of your circulation, but it's an indication, right?

SS: Yes. I think we'd say we typically reach a couple million people over the course of a year. That's kind of the way the Internet works these days. When we wrote about the raid in Marion County, a million people looked at that story just on our website within a couple of days.

JM: I know you're modest by nature, but would you say that the *Reflector* at this moment in time provides the most comprehensive coverage of the policymaking process and politics in Kansas?

SS: Well, we're fortunate to have the staff size that we have. I think the other outlets typically just have one or two reporters who are over here covering it. So, that gives us an advantage. But I will say that we're very fortunate in Kansas to have talented journalists in a lot of different places, covering a lot of different things with different models trying to succeed. We're fortunate that a lot of the so-called new media is successful, I think. I think we're all united in this idea of creating quality journalism.

JM: Talk to me a little bit about what else—you talk about new media. What else is operating in Kansas that qualifies as new media that you think is doing a good job?

SS: I include the Kansas News Service. Of course, they're going away now, but I think about somebody like what Mackenzie Clark is doing at *The Lawrence Times*, challenging the local newspaper there. It's really made both of those publications better. Joey Young with his venture down in a rural part of the state with *Harvey County Now*. It may be the only print publication to have cropped up in the past fifteen years in Kansas. It seems to be pretty successful. And, of course, there's a high schooler out in Hutchinson who decided to create a newspaper to challenge the *Hutch News* when it was depleted by

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GateHouse/Gannett. It was so successful that Joey has now had to acquire that so that kid could go off to college at KU.

There are ventures like that. I think *The Beacon*, another nonprofit, they were in Wichita for a while. They're still in Kansas City. They're really covering the community at a smaller level. The *Johnson County Post*.

JM: Yes, the *Johnson County Post*. They were an early entry into the new media sphere here in Kansas. It started out as the *Shawnee Mission Post,* didn't it?

SS: Yes, I believe so. There were some other initiatives that I think are interesting happening at the college level. There's the *Tiger Media Network* out of Fort Hays, trying to cover a region that doesn't have hardly any coverage out there. I think what Teri Finnerman has done with *The Eudora Times* at the University of Kansas, really just creating a small-town newspaper for a small town that didn't have a newspaper.

JM: The partnership between the J-School [William Allen White School of Journalism] at KU and Eudora. Don't they supply the reporting?

SS: Yes. It is a KU product, *The Eudora Times*. It's students who are taking classes. There are some paid positions out there. They're trying to make that work.

JM: Any parting words of wisdom for people? I do know that—how is the *Reflector* and your coverage, how do you navigate the Statehouse here? I know there's some criticism. Tim Carpenter, the award-winning, aggressive reporter, we've interviewed him for this series, too. Hasn't he been barred from certain news conferences and so forth at the Capitol?

SS: I don't know that he's been barred from news conferences. I think that we're both respected and hated at a whole other level than some of the other outlets here right now. Part of that is just how we cover, having the audacity to tell people what's really going on sometimes. I think we're the only people who—we're the only outlet that reported at least initially about the decision to kick reporters off the floor of the House and restrict us to just taking photos along the back wall, the only ones to report that the House Republicans had decided to close their caucus meetings for the first time ever as a matter of rule, the only ones to report about the efforts to jack up the rent that the reporters pay if they have an office in the Statehouse. We don't even have an office here. It was made clear that they were doing this because they didn't like the reporting that was coming out of the Statehouse. We were the only ones that reported about the COGE, the Committee on Government Efficiency's problem with handling open record requests from us or what the people of Kansas had submitted to them as what they wanted to have covered. We

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can keep going down that list. Sooner or later, if you're the only ones saying, "This is a problem," it kind of puts a target on you.

I'd say it also goes the other way. We had an issue here recently where the Kelly administration put out word that they were going to have an off-the-record news conference. We had to agree to certain terms to not identify the people who were going to be delivering the information at the news conference in order to show up to the news conference, and I threw a fit about it and said, "I'm going to write about this policy. There's no way I'm going to agree to these terms to cover this." The initial pushback was like, "Hey, man, all the other reporters agreed to this. What's your deal?" and I had to go through why this is problematic. Eventually like five minutes before the news conference, they decided it will all be on the record. You can name everybody, the same rules for everybody. So, if we're the only ones who are willing to take on those battles, then so be it.

JM: What did I not ask you about that you think is important to chat about?

SS: I'd just kind of like to make the point that even though we talk about how the news industry is struggling, more people are reading news stories than ever before. The appetite for quality journalism has not gone away. I think that gives me hope for the future. I don't know what financial models will survive or thrive in this climate, but I think as long as we stay focused on providing compelling news stories of public interest, there will be an audience for that.

JM: I would agree with you that the appetite is there, but what's important is that the product gets delivered is a responsible product.

SS: It is.

JM: So, the editorial process, having a robust editorial process is still vitally important.

SS: I think having the experience that I had at the *Capital-Journal* prepared me for what we're doing at the *Reflector*. I think a lot about a particular newsroom leader we had at one point. He said to us, "We have to stop thinking about journalism with a capital J and just start thinking about content." What he was getting at was we were awful fussy about what standards we had for a news story and the editing for that, and all he cared about was having more things that people could click on on the website because that would make more money. I think the lesson was we should have been leaning into the so-called journalism with a capital J because it's a very specific kind of content that we provide that increasingly few actually do. This is a very specific thing that people want. They want quality journalism. They want reporting with ethical standards and some skill behind it. I think we have to as an industry, we have to focus on that as our north star.

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JM: So, as a parting line here, you are committed to journalism with a capital J at the *Reflector*, right?

SS: For lack of a better term, yes.

JM: Sherman Smith, editor-in-chief of the *Kansas Reflector*, thank you very much.

SS: Thank you for having me, Jim.

[End of File]

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