

Alameda Post

Remarks by Adam Gillitt, publisher of the *Alameda Post*, to the California Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing, held December 5, 2023, at the UCLA School of Law.

Good afternoon. Thank you for the chance to speak today on a topic that is so vital to us and to the community we serve. It's an honor to be here to tell you about our experience as a hyperlocal nonprofit news site.

My name is Adam Gillitt, and I am the founder, president, and publisher of the *Alameda Post*. We cover the city of Alameda. We're still young; December 15 marks our second anniversary.

Paradoxically, Alameda is a small town located in the middle of a big city metropolitan area—our population is about 78,000, while the Bay Area is home to seven and three quarter million people. In other states, a city of our size would be a major city; instead, we are the smallest of our neighbors.

Our city has two parts, the main island of Alameda, and Bay Farm Island, which, despite its name, is not an island. However, Alameda as a community is an island, due to our geography—no freeways or major state roads pass through the city. Alameda is a destination, or a place you chance upon, not a stop on your way somewhere else.

When it comes to finding local news that affects the residents and businessowners of the city, choices are slim. Despite being next to Oakland, San Francisco, and Berkeley, our city's issues and interests are unique. Coverage of Alameda by media outside the city often focuses on incendiary or mawkish clickbait, not on everyday concerns that matter to the community.

For decades, the city got local news from a series of print newspapers that got acquired and folded into larger chains. Only one weekly paper remains. But its local coverage has dwindled—most content comes from other cities around the East Bay. It doesn't have its own website, and the print version is available primarily to those who have a driveway they can deliver it to.

Alameda also had an independent weekly newspaper for over twenty years. Well, they just published their last edition on Thursday and have ended their operations. Covid hit them hard. They stopped home delivery, which lost a great deal of their circulation, and pared back staff and cut coverage, while printing costs skyrocketed. Now they're gone.

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It became clear with two diminished weekly papers and few other reliable options, Alameda was in danger of becoming a news desert. This city might not be considered an under-served or under-represented community, but a local newspaper is a vital conduit for information, whether in print or online.

I started researching what it would take to start a new local newspaper. I consulted with some friends who had decades of newspaper publishing experience and convinced them to join our nascent board. While planning the budget, it was obvious that the cost of printing and distributing a weekly paper would be too high.

And news consumers are no longer willing to wait to find out what happened last week. They want to know what is happening now. Just about everyone has access to a digital device that can get on the internet—a phone, tablet, computer, laptop etc. Digital media allows immediacy that print can never provide.

Plus, the advantages of being online are clear. Multimedia offers much deeper illustrations. No worrying about cutting articles to fit available column-inches. Being online allows for real-time updates. And readers don't have to wait for a paper to be delivered; they can consume content on any device at any time at any location.

Yes, there are some who will miss holding a newspaper, seeing their name or face in print, and having a physical keepsake, but at this point, digital publishing is the best option.

At the end of 2021, AlamedaPost.com launched to the public. We provide daily local coverage not available anywhere else. Most local topics hold little interest for those living outside Alameda. So, being a source for unbiased news and information for Alameda is a huge responsibility. And, as of this week, the *Alameda Post* is the only local newsroom left covering the city.

Although we are a hyperlocal small-town news site, we embraced the strategy of distributing our content everywhere news is available online. We use our strength as a digital platform to meet our readers where they look for their news, to keep them informed. We don't use obstacles like paywalls to block access to our content.

Alameda Post articles are available daily in Apple News and Google News, as well as in aggregator sites and apps. Every week, we send out an email roundup of the week's news to thousands of subscribers. We produce the city's only weekly news podcast, a 10-minute digest every Friday morning.

And we rely on social media. Every story published to our website gets posted to our accounts on a half dozen social media platforms. The combined reach we have on these platforms exceeds the traffic we see to our website. We depend on the ability of our readers to post and share our news articles to help get our stories out even further on social media.

Our staff is made up of journalists with decades of experience in reporting, writing, editing, and publishing, as well as newer voices, and some in-between. We all recognize the importance of a well-informed community and have made the commitment to serve the needs of Alamedans, even if it means making sacrifices to do so.

Those of us behind the *Alameda Post* are contractors and freelancers, or, like me, volunteers. Our dedicated reporters and staff produce our local journalism with the few resources we have available. As we endeavor to grow, we continue to appeal to benefactors and apply for grants and newsroom fellows. For now, the resources to fund our first full-time employee are still out of our reach. But our newsroom is not an outlier, this is the state of local news in many small communities. And half of Californians live in communities of 100,000 or less.

Fundraising for nonprofit news is a major challenge, but the buy in from our readers is encouraging. We chose to be a nonprofit organization because we understood the importance of being an independent service to the community. But we are operating on a shoe-string budget. We will most likely never have an audience larger than 100,000, and we are not going to make a profit off reporting the news. Advertising dollars are limited in city of our size and shrinking by the day. We are trying to establish a sustainable newsroom that people can rely upon for accurate, unbiased, timely information about our city. In the age of twisted facts, unreliable sources, and outright lies, Alameda deserves news it can trust.

Residents need to know about what City Council and boards are considering, or what they have decided, and how it will affect them. They want to learn about our rich history, read reviews of performances, share opinions, and celebrate their neighbors' accomplishments. Our readers are interested in Scouts who donate food to the Alameda food bank, they want a chance to say goodbye to a revered artist, and they want to know when the lighted yacht parade will take place on the Estuary.

Last year, we held the only in-person forums for candidates running for Mayor and City Council. We recorded the forums, indexed them, and posted the videos to YouTube for those who couldn't attend in person. 2024 is another election year, and we are strongly committed to informing Alamedans about local issues and candidates on the ballot. This is local journalism. It's not always Woodward and Bernstein but it matters a lot to the people who live in this city.

Being a small newsroom doesn't mean our standards are any lower, nor our attention to detail any less exacting. Digital publishing allows us to produce news coverage that is as urgent and necessary as any statewide or national publication. But we need reliable resources to continue publishing. Local news needs investment and committed funding to ensure that the needs of smaller communities will continue to be served.

When two thousand residents read one of our articles, that means a significant portion of Alameda learns about a local issue that would otherwise go unreported. But those same

two thousand impressions on social media sites are a drop in the bucket compared to the millions generated by clickbait from publishers with greater reach.

Getting more clicks and impressions does not accurately correlate to the value of content to smaller communities. There are better ways to allocate revenue big tech companies gain by advertising against other publishers' content. We suggest taxing advertising revenue to create a public fund that would support publications based on need and value to the communities they serve with guaranteed minimum payments, instead of based on the number of clicks and impressions they receive. And we encourage creating tax credits for newsroom payrolls as well as for small business advertisers. These solutions would provide real funding for local news and support for smaller communities.

Journalism in the digital age is equally as important and fraught with peril as it was in the print era. Local news is in crisis. People always want to know what happened and how it affects them. The steady extinction of local news media has not quenched that thirst. Small communities need local news sources like the *Alameda Post* that they can truly rely upon, or the vacuum will be filled by those with less civic-minded intentions. Digital publishing and unrestricted access to digital content are essential to providing reliable, trustworthy journalism to all communities, not just the city of Alameda.

I urge you to join with us to support and foster the growth of local news throughout California. Prevent out of state publishers and the largest organizations reaping a financial windfall at the disadvantage of the smallest newsrooms. Instead, we encourage you to create solutions that will fund local news for communities throughout the state that will otherwise be deprived.

Thank you.