

# S8E7 Transcript

[00:00] **Tai Huynh:** The provincial election is a different beast altogether than the federal because you have a party system. So, you only have so many candidates, right? But the municipal election, there's no party system. Anybody can go and like put in, I don't know, a hundred bucks and put their name on the ballot. So, it's hugely confusing for residents, right? Try to figure out who's who. And so that's really where you need good journalism to help people kind of figure out like who among all these people are the worthy candidates.

[00:29] **Dylan Kulcher:** Some stories are not killed. They're never allowed to exist. This is Pull Quotes. I'm your host, Dylan Kulcher. Today we're asking, who gets silenced? In part two of the coverage, we turn to Tai Huynh, founder and chief editor of The Local quarterly online magazine that began in 2019 and has since become something of the epicenter of independent news coverage on under-reported issues for the Toronto populace.

[00:59] With a grassroots focus, the local spotlights underrepresented communities with breaking coverage on urban health and social issues that reach far beyond the borders of Toronto to affect provincial and even national readership. The focus on healthcare in the most recent issue, The Cost of Care, informed our discussion, but Tai also drew attention to the locals pull out all the stops election coverage.

[01:23] Who gets overlooked? And why having all of the information readily available in one place is imperative as AI overviews seek to undermine and re-silence the voices that publications like The Local bring to light.

[01:40] **Tai Huynh:** Design thinking is like ultimately about thinking about the users, right? Like typically it's about designing objects, whether it's a chair or, you know, a microwave or whatever. How, like, who's your audience? How would they use this and how do you craft something that actually, you know, meets those

needs? But you can actually use the same ideas for not users, but readers, you know, what do readers need and how you deliver it to them

[02:09] in a way that they wanna actually consume and be informed by, right? And candidate tracker is a perfect example, right? Like for every election, municipal election, there is way too much coverage of the mayor's race, not enough coverage of the ward races for city councillors, because there's 25 in Toronto, and then barely almost no coverage of the school trustee races, right? So, something is not computing, like your needs are, I need to know about all these candidates.

[02:39] But what traditional media is giving you is just the top tier, the mayor's race, right? And so, using design kind of thinking is like, as a user, I need all this information. So how do you reverse engineer it into a product, in this case, candidate tracker, that gives people everything they need in one place so they can go and make decisions efficiently, right? So yeah, it has a lot of implications or a practical utility

[03:08] within the journalism space, I think. Yeah, I think I've been to every, almost every school in Toronto except TMU. I did my undergrad at U of T. That was a science degree. I did a MBA at York, and then I did a design degree at OCAD. So yeah, it's just for me like a mixed bag of skills that just happens to be handy to have. You know, like running The Local, my business degree.

[03:37] all of a sudden is relevant. Like I'm the editor, but I'm also the guy that puts our books together, right? The accounting, the fundraising, you know all that stuff. The money stuff is where I think some of that experience and some of that education has been helpful. The design stuff's been incredibly useful too.

[04:01] When we launched, like trying to work with our developer to design and build a website that would make sense to readers, you know housing our kind of content, to branding, to you know all of these other things that you need to do to

engage with your audience. I think it's good to be kind of ambidextrous in that kind of way.

[04:23] **Dylan Kulcher:** Tai's emphasis on design choice with The Local is at ends with big tech and they're push to streamline news through AI that can't be turned off from the search engine, presents information as if it's unequivocally factual and needing to tell the 5 W's from the journalism checklist.

[04:41] Oftentimes that information is unforgivingly misleading, and with the scope of the investigative stories that the Local and other feature-focused news outlets narrow-in on, only seeing part of the picture, or what the AI algorithm deems most important, can be completely missing the point. In a sense, it's not just the who that they've been silencing, they're also finding a way to silence the what, where, the why, and the when.

[05:06] **Tai Huynh:** We are now gearing up for the municipal election coming up this fall. And we're quite concerned about AI because for previous elections, what we normally do is we would hire a whole bunch of fact-checkers. We build a fact-checking team, and they go and they fact-check every single candidate on the ballot, from the mayor down to the councillor to the trustee. And we publish that as a bundle. It's called Candidate Tracker.

[05:32] You can go on there and look up for your ward, everybody that that's on a ballot and what they're about, fact checked. ~ And we spend a lot of resources doing that, right, you can imagine. And if a resident of a certain ward this time around were just to go on Google and do a search and found all of that info at a summary level and closes their browser, what does that do to candidate tracker?

[06:04] We put all this money into this, all these resources into it, and we're not actually getting any traffic at all. It's all being used by these big tech platforms for their own products. So, I think there's something quite not right about that. And so, we're trying to figure out ways we could maybe mitigate that. If this, like, if you

took this to the extreme, like, what would be the reason why any of us want to do this going forward, right?

[06:33] If it's just going to feed this machine that people are going to access directly and not even come to your site, right? So that's, think, a bit of a problem that we all have with where this is all going.

[06:48] There's a lot of data that governments have, whether it's election data or whatnot, that is just poorly kind of produced that is very difficult for the public to access and understand. And I think a big part of our job is to try to make that easier for people, right? It's important information, and they should be able to get it easily.

[07:11] **Dylan Kulcher:** To make headway for this kind of reporting, The Local and others such as The Narwhal and The Tyee have registered as Journalism Organizations, or RJOs that are tax-exempt qualified donees. Tai likens his approach to journalism as that of a public service, one that Canada should be fighting for larger investment in, especially if you are in an area that is undergoing decreasing local news coverage.

[07:38] **Tai Huynh:** This is a pretty recent kind of structure, corporate structure that was created to help journalism organizations in Canada that are kind of mission oriented, that are more charitable in nature. And I would argue, like lot of news outlets aren't making money anyways. They probably should be thinking of themselves as a public service, right? And maybe getting some sort of a charitable status would actually help them sustain themselves, so.

[08:07] Unfortunately, and you just rhymed off a few other publications there on that list. It's not a long list. I think maybe just over a dozen RJOs right now in the country. I think a big reason for that is to be an RJO, you have to be a nonprofit to begin with. And most journalism organizations in Canada weren't set up to be

nonprofit. For this election coming up this fall, we are going to try to expand beyond Toronto a little bit.

[08:35] We know just to the west of the city, Mississauga, Brampton, these are now kind of news deserts, they call it, not enough media compared to the population. And so, we wanna expand and try to produce similar election information for residents there. And so, all of this just means that we have to fundraise a lot to actually have enough staffing to make it all happen.

[08:59] So yes, fundraising is a big thing happening right now at The Local to try to make sure that by the time fall rolls around, we have all the resources we need to do everything that we need to do, including going into Peel Region with the coverage.

[09:14] **Dylan Kulcher:** It's not often you hear of a local paper expanding their coverage well beyond their own city borders to include all of the sprawling Toronto census metropolitan area, but that's exactly what The Local is doing in advance of the October 26 Ontario-wide municipal elections. This in the face of AI search engines that will be deterministically providing favourable search engine optimized synopses of prominent candidates in a process that's supposed to be non-partisan.

[09:43] **Tai Huynh:** This type of journalism, definitely, I think for readers who want to get deep into something, you can't get that from a simple AI overview or summary. At the same time though, like our stuff is getting scraped by these big kind of AI platforms. We know that because we were just talking about it yesterday, like looking at our own kind of, like looking at places that have been scraping our website. We know it's been scraped by a lot of AI companies, so.

[10:09] And many other publications are in the same position. So, I think it is a bit of a struggle trying to figure out, you know, what is the future of journalism as we know it, when a lot of what you're producing is just going to be given away for free

through a search engine without any link back to your website. What does that do to your traffic? And if you're a publication that is getting revenues from ads, that's a lot of money lost.

[10:35] So I think it is, um, bit of an existential moment for a lot of us in the media industry thinking about what might be next with AI and their ability to just summarize everything we're doing.

[10:48] **Dylan Kulcher:** Ability may be putting it facetiously. AI summaries regularly hallucinate, or as Wikipedia puts it at the start for its definition on hallucination artificial intelligence, also called BSing, information as anyone who has studied large language models can attest. BSing is often the determinant factor in divisive elections, if not in the sense of the AI definition of the term, but by the way candidates mislead or misrepresent their opposition.

[11:18] In a way, now all anyone has to do to steal an election is misrepresent or silence their opponent in a way that presents a favorable AI overview synopsis, with the only obstacle in their way being tireless fact-checking by the investigative journalists whose 20,000 words or longer candidate tracker isn't consulted by the general populace.

[11:38] In the case of Google, the Online News Act had worked to the benefit of Canadian media, permitting an annual payment of \$100 million to Canadian news publications, but it's irrespective of which smaller publications might be putting in harder work. In the case of The Local, the short fallings of the deal are all too apparent.

[11:57] **Tai Huynh:** I mean, they are striking deals with the big publishers, right? I think the issue is, what about smaller publishers that do not have the volume or the negotiation power to actually sit at the table with some of these big guys? And that's what the Online News Act was created for, is to say that, yes, New York

Times, yes, Globe and Mail, you can, you struck a deal with Google, you struck a deal with Facebook or whatever,

[12:24] but we need to level the playing field by having a piece of legislation out there that says all journalism organization in the country needs to be compensated if their content is being used to really support your product, your search product, in Google's case. And Google decided to play ball, and there's \$100 million each year that's divvied up among the industry, and The Local gets some of it too. But the Online News Act was conceived before chat GPT and AI.

[12:56] So it's like a pre-AI piece of legislation. But I would argue that it's more relevant now than ever before because AI, what AI is doing to journalism is way, way worse than what search engines were doing to journalism previously, right? With their summaries, et cetera, traffic's gonna get crushed.

[13:21] And so, there needs to be some compensation for that. And small publishers, there's no way we can go and knock on Anthropic's door or Google's door and say, hey, can we negotiate? That's not going to happen. So, you need governments to step-in when markets fail like that. And I think there's a need for the Online News Act to be opened up within the context of AI. Maybe the compensation level needs to be bigger than \$100 million.

[13:47] **Dylan Kulcher:** As the neologism for the Washington Post puts it, democracy dies in the darkness. We might phrase that for this episode of Pull Quotes, it dies in silence. It can be difficult to put a price on holding governments or rather democratic process to account, but someone has to do it. Tai illuminates on an early instance of The Local affecting policy at the provincial level with stories that were written that affected the rollout of the vaccinations for COVID-19.

[14:15] **Tai Huynh:** I mean, I think you known in this industry, it's hard to have one story that you know, makes a change that leads to some outcome. I mean, I think those are very rare examples. Even big, big, giant publications would have

trouble telling you how many of those they have. But I think at The Local, we've had stories that have been impactful in that sense. Like, again, going back to COVID-19

[14:43] when Fatima Syed did that trio of stories in Peel, no one was covering Peel. Right after we did that story, I think the Global and Mail set up a Peel like office to report on Brampton, et cetera. But right after those stories got published, the province actually changed the way it approached the vaccine rollout. Previously, it was rolling out vaccines to different cities based on the size of the population.

[15:10] Regardless of like, how much infection or how many deaths have occurred. And that Peel story kind of highlighted, wait a minute, this is really the home of the essential workers of the warehouses, you know, of all the people who are working, going to work every day and getting infected while everyone else is kind of in their bubbles, right? And because of that, they deserve more support than just based on their population.

[15:40] And so as a consequence, I don't know if you remember, the province decided to do this hotspot approach where they're going to send vaccines out to hotspots, places that were facing huge infections and problems as opposed to on a per capita basis. And so that was clearly one example of how The Local's reporting kind of affected policy and then in turn affected lives, right?

[16:05] **Dylan Kulcher:** Speaking on the research basis Tai had done on life expectancy by ward in the Toronto area, Tai elucidates how this thinking of journalism as a public service materializes. Be that long-term projects that consult experts and present new findings that the public ought to know, or that packaging of the information into a collection of personalized news introspectives that inform public perception.

[16:27] **Tai Huynh:** The local was started in 2019 and so we were like, just a few months in, into the publication. And our first issue, it was called the Geography of Difference. And the idea was to talk about these longstanding issues that take generations to, to build. We call them the social determinants of health. And that's really the intersection of health and society, right?

[16:57] Income, education, poverty, all these things come together to create the conditions that lead to good or bad, they take a long time to materialize. And during COVID, that literally happened overnight. Like you saw areas that didn't have the resources suffer greatly. And so, I think COVID was a great lesson in terms of kind of equity issues in the city.

[17:24] These are very complicated things to report on. First of all, for that piece, I probably spent a year just trying to figure out where to get the data and how to use that data to produce the life expectancy measures. And we had to partner with some real experts out there to actually figure out the methods for it. First of all, the methods didn't even exist. Like we know life expectancy on a global scale, like country to country, but life expectancy within a city.

[17:54] and differences among neighborhood. That's pretty difficult and unheard of territory. ~ So there had been some work in the US before we undertook it here, but we were pretty much the first to do that work in the city of Toronto. And it's not something that a newsroom on a normal kind of operating basis could just like pick up and do a story on. We actually had to invest a lot of time and resources to.

[18:20] figure out where the data exists and figure out how to actually use the data to calculate it. And then the stories came once we had the results. So, it was a very complicated and labour intensive set of stories actually to produce.

[18:34] **Dylan Kulcher:** Once the larger pieces of unprecedented data analysis and research findings are in place, the final piece of the puzzle is turning the lens inwards to the community. A textbook city photographer first point of contact for

getting authentic true to life images is to find a place to photograph that has the lighting, the scene, and the energy to make for a good photograph, recognizing this and then remaining on site until that image jumps out of the viewfinder.

[19:01] Speaking on the Finch West issue of The Local, Tai candidly recalls moments where this early post-COVID issue really came together.

[19:08] Tai Huynh: Just to be more specific on that Finch-West issue, we did some community discussions and one of the community members mentioned that he lived in a co-op and that the co-op he lived in, he was part of the founding group that used to work at one of the aircraft factories and the people didn't have a place to live. And so, a bunch of them got together with the union to build this co-op. We're like, that's fascinating.

[19:35] Never heard of a co-op starting from a workers' kind of collective perspective. That became the story. Like that was one of the stories. Somebody we met that happened to live in this community that could link us up with a whole bunch of other people that were part of the formation of this co-op back in the late 80s. And that became a story that ~ was about like, why don't we have more co-op housing in the city today?

[20:04] So yeah, these things you just stumbled upon just by being in a community and talking to people.

[20:09] **Dylan Kulcher:** Talking to people is a good way to break through the silence. And if there's one thing my studies into feature length investigative or literary journalistic reporting has reminded me, it's that the stories that are worth reading and that get people invested in journalism are often the ones that by digging deep humanize the stranger than fiction stories and in the process give voice to the voiceless.

[20:32] There was one final question that I asked to Tai that had pertained to, if one could be chosen, what may have been my favorite story from The Cost of Care issue.

[20:41] **Tai Huynh:** Even stories like that, like shoppers that's been reported before by the CBC, if we were going to do a story like that, we're always trying to think about like can we be more in depth about it? For that particular one yes, it was very well covered. The issue of these corporate pharmacies forcing their pharmacists to do these med check, ~ which is a pretty simple process that generate a lot of profits for the pharmacies that's been covered. What we wanted to do was to go in and talk about well what does this do to the labour force, what does this do to the level of burnout among the pharmacists that are working within the space, right?

[21:18] And that was what the story was about. And what we found was huge amounts of burnout. People are just, you know, leaving the profession altogether because they can't deal with the kind of pressures that some of these corporate pharmacies are putting on them. So, what does that do to the healthcare workforce going forward when we already have a shortage of you know, doctors and other professionals.

[21:14] So yeah, always trying to like find a new, find a new story. I mean, that's perfect world. We're breaking news. We're doing stories that no one else is doing. But if stories are already published, we want to go behind the scenes. We want to introduce a new angle or look at something slightly differently. We don't want to compete and do the same story. I mean, that would be a waste of our resources, right? We don't exist to compete with the Star or with any other publication.

[22:07] Although that's kind of how journalism typically works. Everybody's racing to break the same story and you end up with five different stories coming out within an hour of each other about the same thing. That's not what we want to do. We want to actually go and produce something that no one's talking about or from a slightly different angle.

[22:26] **Dylan Kulcher:** With all this in mind, it seems that working against the current of silencing in journalism boils down to a simple practice, that of educating the readers through a format that also plays on the visceral poignancy of the difficult stories that good journalists are instinctively drawn to the profession to tell. Tai had gisted at one point in a recording that long-form journalism as a solution to the journalism practice's sustainability is a yes and no catch-22.

[22:53] But with carefully integrating design thinking into every level of the online interface, maybe it's a yes and a yes? We've all dealt with technological interfaces that work against us as we try to leverage the supposedly more powerful technology to achieve a larger end goal. But as this two-episode coverage of who gets silenced draws to a close, it's ultimately left to the question of who decides that will be covered in my next and final episode that the conundrum of silence and journalism becomes more of a question of why is that?

[23:23] If we know who's being silenced, then why is it still happening? I've been your host Dylan Kulcher and this has been another episode of Pull Quotes, a podcast about the forces shaping journalism.