First, a little bit about Mother Jones

- Founded 1976
- San Francisco based
- Investigative and in-depth reporting
- Budget ~ $17 million
- Audience: 8 million across all platforms
Named after an early 20th century labor leader, Mary Harris Jones
A word about me: Grew up in Germany and Italy, my father was a journalist, at the time I grew up, the memory of fascism was a live one, many of the adults around me had been perpetrators, victims, or looked the other way. That got me thinking early on about the fragility of democracy. But it didn’t seem like a really live issue when I came to the United States in my 20s. The problem with America was not a fragile democracy, it was extending a robust democracy to everyone. And the press could not have been more vibrant. I fell in love with investigative journalism, which seemed the perfect corrective to injustice and abuse of power. But what I didn’t realize was that the writing was already on the wall.
Fast forward through the next 25 plus years (oh god I feel so old), and I don’t need to tell you the details. The advertising business model has collapsed, more than half the journalists in the United States have lost their jobs, and it may not be a coincidence that the decline of news that began in the late 1990s has been accompanied by a rise in disinformation, propaganda, and now a serious threat to the fabric of democracy. So do we give up?
This brings me full circle. I never thought, when I came to the United States, that I would end up studying the history of democratic collapse in Europe to understand my adopted country. But here we are. In the United States, and in many of the countries represented in this room, we see leaders attacking the press even as they also manipulate and control it. But as a young marcher said January 2017: [
Mother Jones focuses on investigative and in-depth reporting—the stories that others won’t touch. This story is a couple of years old but to me it really epitomizes the work that journalists can do. Our reporter got a job in a private for-profit prison and spent four months there, plus another year of research and factchecking. There was no other way to find out what happens in these places. Government couldn’t do it because they awarded the contracts. A regular member of the public couldn’t do it. But journalists also increasingly can’t do it. Because there’s no time. Who can spend 18 months on a project? How would you ever pay for that with any of the traditional business models for journalism?
That’s why Mother Jones and organizations like it can’t rely on those traditional models. Everyone in this room knows that you can’t pay for investigative journalism with advertising. That’s why Mother Jones was founded as a crowd-funded nonprofit back in 1976 (the crowdfunding happened in the mail) and why today two-thirds of our revenue comes from readers. Some pay for a subscription (we don’t have a paywall, so this is a subscription to the print magazine, in print or digital form). Some give a donation.
We all know this, but do our audiences know it? No! And why not? Because we don’t tell them! Why don’t we tell them?? I remember when I wrote this column, to explain to our readers what it took to do that prison investigation. It went against everything we had ever done, and I worried: Should I really be specific? Wasn’t this competitive information? What if people turned it against us somehow? Worse, what if they didn’t care? But instead, they rallied.
And making this connection really works! Here you see Mother Jones’ source of revenue. The bottom three lines—the gray, dark green, and red—are all traditional publishing sources of revenue. The top two, major giving and low-dollar fundraising, are the things that were not historically part of how we paid for journalism. But now they are the mainstay for Mother Jones, and I believe that almost everywhere in the world, if we’re going to have independent, investigative journalism, it’s going to have to be sustained by the public it serves.
So what of this is duplicable? Here are a few key things we’ve learned:

### STRATEGY TAKEAWAYS

**A culture of reader support**

- Don’t “monetize traffic”—earn support.
- It’s journalism, not marketing
- Build a relationship
- Always be campaigning.
- Be nimble, react, and be opportunistic.
- Experiment publicly.
- Question conventional wisdom.
STRATEGY TAKEAWAYS

It’s journalism, not marketing

• Fundraising comes from the same values, quality, and voice as the reporting.

• Fact-based, independent journalism is the cause readers are supporting. (“Our budget” isn’t).

• Tied to news cycle, specific stories that are uniquely yours.

• Substance and transparency over gimmicks—unpack the boilerplate.

• Online asks that don’t look like ads.

• Try at least one new thing each quarter.
This isn’t a one way street. When you open up to your readers, they will rally to support you, but it doesn’t stop there. Now the readers are your boss. They are no longer “eyeballs” to be monetized. They are no longer the product that you sell. They are the reason why you exist, not just in an abstract sense of “we do this for the public interest” but in a very real sense of taking ownership. They want to be part of the conversation. This is a sample of responses we got from readers when we asked them how they were coping with Trump fatigue. But there are lots of different ways to do this. We asked our readers to contribute their stories of immigration troubles, and of the women’s march, and of grappling with their carbon footprint.
There are plenty of tools that can help us do this. We use Hearken, but a Google Form, which is simple and free, will also do. Whatever the tool, if readers are our bosses and supporters, we owe them accountability and an interest in their needs, values, and suggestions.
The title of this panel is “What we can learn from each other.” We learn from other nonprofits all the time—for me as CEO, every day is a reporting project. What can I learn from someone else? So let's gather some resources.
THANK YOU!

mbauerlein@motherjones.com

@MonikaBauerlein