

An Interview with Jon Ralston

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas
The Lincy Institute
2024

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The following interview was a part of the “Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada” research project. The recorded interview and transcript were made possible through the generosity of The Lincy Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The goal of the project was to understand and document how Nevada organizations and leaders responded to the myriad challenges that the pandemic engendered. The interviewees thank The Lincy Institute and their supporters for the opportunity to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of the project: Dr. John Hudak, Dr. Makada Henry-Nickie, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Taylor Cummings, Peter Grema, Kristian Thymianos, Saha Salahi, Madison Frazee, and Katie Lim.

Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Jon Ralston, CEO of Nevada Independent, and was conducted on 2/24/22 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Jon Ralston

Date: 2-24-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Jon Ralston

Kelliann Beavers [00:04]

Okay. To start off, just to confirm that you've reviewed the consent form, and you are agreeing to it.

Jon Ralston [00:10]

Oh, good.

Kelliann Beavers [00:11]

Alrighty. So, one of the first questions is really basic, just for you to describe your role in your organization and your organization.

Jon Ralston [00:22]

I'm the CEO of *The Nevada Independent*, which is a nonprofit website that was started in January of 2017.

Kelliann Beavers [00:34]

Great. And the second question is, how do you see your role or the role of *The Nevada Independent* during and throughout the pandemic?

Jon Ralston [00:43]

Well, we took our role very seriously, and we had one of the best healthcare reporters in the country, Megan Messerly covering the pandemic. And we also kind of had an "all hands on deck" approach in that we came up with a data page that was constantly updating with scattershot information coming from the county health district and the state itself. Our data page, I think, became the centerpiece for people to go to, to get good information.

And, in addition, Megan did a coronavirus contextualized piece every Friday, in which she tried to put all of the numbers in context for everybody. We didn't want to put out the reckless tweets that a lot of other news organizations were doing, or clickbait headlines, "Cases [are] up to 7,000," these kinds of things. We don't want to do that. We wanted to give people useful information without any kind of sensationalism. And Megan also did some very deep reporting, as did some others, on what the response was both politically and substantively. So we took our role very seriously, to be a place during a time of chaos, and confusion, and fear. That people could come to, and if not find peace of mind, at least find information they could trust.

Kelliann Beavers [02:11]

Absolutely. I remember using both of those resources, the updated facts that you guys provided, as well as her daily posts. So, thanks for mentioning that and reminding me of them.

The next question is, which groups do you believe were hardest hit by the economic downturn from COVID and the pandemic as a whole?

Jon Ralston [02:36]

Well, I mean, the same groups are always the hardest hit in any kind of economic downturn, maybe, especially in the pandemic, and that's communities of color and poor people. And people can't access easily resources that people with means can. Somehow, wealthy people manage to find COVID tests. Others could not, especially in the early days. And so it's the same cohort, I think, that's always hit hard in economic downturns in America.

Kelliann Beavers [03:13]

The next question I think you've already spoken to. I'm just going to mention it in case anything else comes to mind, and if not, we can move on. It's, how, if at all, did your organization's goals change to accommodate this specifically as groups hardest by the economic downturn. But I feel like what you spoke to earlier may speak to that.

Jon Ralston [03:34]

Yeah. I mean, listen. Again, even though a lot of those people hardest hit didn't have access necessarily to the internet, a lot of them did. And so, we were going to make sure that people knew where tests were being offered, and when vaccines came around, where they were being offered. As I said, our data page was the most comprehensive in-depth look at all aspects of the coronavirus, and it did win at least one award and should win a lot more.

Kelliann Beavers [04:09]

Right. I wholeheartedly agree. And this is actually making me think of a question that's not necessarily on our list. But I wonder if you want to speak at all to the efforts that it took, not only to keep that page updated but to constantly prepare something as accurate and readied as what Megan was putting out there. And I can't imagine how you guys did it, to be honest. It was so hard to find information, period. So if there's anything you want to share about how you made that happen, of course, we'd be interested.

Jon Ralston [04:43]

Well, I mean, Megan is one of the most conscientious and hardest-working reporters I've ever worked with. And she was determined to get it right; so she not only got access to all of the data points that she could, but she developed sources, as any good reporter would, and knew which ones would have quality, verifiable truth. As opposed to others who might be shooting from the hip, or not have accurate information. Only a really good reporter who was conscientious could do that. And you know, I think it probably took a toll on Megan to some extent. She worked *so* hard. She needed some time off, and she took it, and she reset. And as you may or may not know, she actually got a job offer she couldn't refuse from *POLITICO*, and I'm just so proud of her. As much as I hated to lose her – she's the first reporter we've lost since we started the Independent – and she is thriving there and showing them why we valued her so highly.

Kelliann Beavers [05:50]

Right, I did know that. And I think it's probably the first time in my entire life that I've seen someone announce someone like that who's in a journalistic role in which I was like, oh, no. This

is a serious loss for us. We will miss her greatly. I mean *POLITICO* – I used to live in DC, and I do recognize that the role she's playing there is really important too, so good for her. But I am grateful to hear about all the diligence that she provided during such a tough time here.

Okay. So, can you discuss if there were collaborative efforts across non-government organizations, or agencies and governments, that allowed your organization to do its work throughout the pandemic, and/or that you observed in the community?

Jon Ralston [06:38]

Well, that's a pretty broad question. I mean, there certainly was a collaboration between governments, local, and state. But it wasn't always smooth, and it wasn't always without political calculations: who's going to get credit? Who's going to get blamed for certain things? And there are various bureaucracies that tried to interlock and interact, but they didn't always do a great job of that. And so that became a problem, but there were plenty of charitable organizations that pitched in that we tracked as well.

Kelliann Beavers [07:19]

What do you wish the different levels of government would have done or could do differently, in response to the economic downturn in the pandemic itself?

Jon Ralston [07:30]

That's a really difficult question. And I know that the governor especially has gotten a lot of criticism for his response to COVID. But here's what people forget: I mean, this is a, hopefully, knock on wood, a once-in-a-lifetime challenge for the government – and so they were reacting on the fly. I think their biggest failing was not what a lot of people would say, they kept us locked down for too long. They didn't consider the impact on kids in schools. They didn't communicate in an effective way all the time why they were taking certain actions. The governor himself was pretty accessible, but even he, I don't think, explained very well at times, why he was taking the actions that he was, or his government was taking the actions that it was.

So I was much more critical and would be today, of how they communicated things, as opposed to the actions that they took. And it seems, as the pandemic – knocking on wood again – appears to be ebbing a bit. It seems like during an election year that more of the actions can easily be seen through the prism of campaigns, and politics, and through data. Ending the state of emergency because he's gotten so much criticism for that, at a time when there's another variant, and cases are rising, is a little bit harder to defend, and they haven't communicated that very well either, again.

Kelliann Beavers [08:58]

Yeah. There was definitely a change over time, as to what seemed like was motivating these decisions. From your perspective – actually, I'm not sure how long you've been in the Valley. But if this question is relevant to you, from your perspective, were there – it's okay if you need to take care of something else too.

Jon Ralston [09:18]

I'm just going to close the door.

Kelliann Beavers [09:18]

Sure, no worries.

Jon Ralston [09:24]

Sorry. Go ahead.

Kelliann Beavers [09:27]

[cross-talking] What did you say?

Jon Ralston [09:30]

I've been here since '84.

Kelliann Beavers [09:31]

Oh, okay. Great. So, from your perspective, were there – wow, you've seen a lot of change. That's fascinating. Were there more effective policies or programs in place to deal with the Great Recession, relative to this recession, associated with COVID; whether that's below, quote, a federal level, or tools that the state implemented? Just your perspective on any distinctions between those two moments in time.

Jon Ralston [10:04]

Well, you're asking me to go back a long time, right, to remember what happened 15 years ago. But it was different in the sense that yeah, tourism collapsed, the housing bubble burst, and we were hit disproportionately. But we didn't shut down the strip for a couple of months. This was a completely different situation. And so, I find it difficult to compare the two. I really do.

Kelliann Beavers [10:36]

Yeah. Some of the other folks who we've spoken with have noted that obviously, the reason for the recession was different, but also, that the impact on the construction industry was very different, versus the impacts throughout the economy.

Jon Ralston [10:49]

That's certainly true because of the housing bubble back then, yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [10:55]

Yeah. I wonder, too, with respect to housing, a lot of what we have been speaking with folks about, in other interviews specifically, has to do with the affordable housing crisis here, particularly, after the pandemic. And so, I'm not necessarily asking you this as a housing expert, but because I know that you are exposed to a lot of folks from a range of roles throughout the community. Is there anything in particular, either that you'd like to share about your perspective about what's going on with housing in the region, or anyone, in your organization or otherwise, that you think we should speak to about that?

Jon Ralston [11:35]

Well, our reporter, Tabitha Mueller has done phenomenal reporting on affordable housing and the housing crisis in Nevada. I mean really, what the pandemic did is laid bare how bad the problem is here, especially in both urban areas, where housing has skyrocketed, and people can't make

ends meet and get shelter. And so, she's done a lot of reporting on that. And the behavior of certain landlords during the pandemic has been abysmal. Others, not so much. So, I don't know what more to say about that. She's the expert.

Kelliann Beavers [12:17]

Great. No, that's really helpful. And minimally, I can take the time to go and look at the things that she's put out there and learn from her. So that'll be wonderful to do.

Are there other niche areas that *The Nevada Independent* has reporters focusing on that you think experienced – basically, a completely different life throughout the pandemic, in terms of the impacts that were happening in that area, like housing? Obviously, for Megan, who is focusing on the pandemic, that's very specific. But I don't know exactly what other subjects or specific reporters you have, but I'm curious to hear if there's anything in there that comes to mind.

Jon Ralston [13:00]

Say that again? I guess I missed the beginning of that.

Kelliann Beavers [13:01]

So, well, it's okay. It's a question that had just come into my mind. And so, I was sort of formulating it as I spoke, and probably didn't do a very good job. As you're describing a specific reporter, like Tabitha, that writes about housing, or, like Megan, who wrote about the data related to the pandemic. It's making me think about whether – what other reporters you have, that is focusing on a range of areas, that I may not be aware of. And whether any of them, you feel like, had to pivot their focus to do like a whole new world of pandemic-related reporting related to their area. Or if you think – I mean I know that housing specifically is very impacted by that, and obviously healthcare. I don't know if there might be other areas just for us to consider.

Jon Ralston [13:48]

Well, I mean, everyone did pandemic-related stories. Remember, we, to some extent, have a smaller staff than other news organizations, although we're growing. But for instance, our gaming reporter, Howard Stutz, who is the best in the state, did a lot on the impact on the gaming policies, and different policies at different casinos. What powers the Gaming Control Board had or didn't have? And so, that's just one example, but everyone pitched in.

Kelliann Beavers [14:17]

Yeah, that's a great example, though. And you know, we've only spoken so far with respect to that industry with Virginia Valentine, who shared with us some that folks experienced in having to implement, essentially, massive overhauls. And how they operated, basically overnight, or within 48 hours, based on what was released as the "new standard." And it was really eye-opening to realize how little involvement there was directly with the folks who were being impacted by some of these changes and were just waking up in the morning with the news that they now had to do X, Y, Z, which may or may not have been a reasonable ask.

So it was very interesting, as someone who was viewing it as just a citizen's perspective, right and trying to see whether the things being proclaimed seemed like they were in the right interests of the public. It really gave me a different perspective.

Jon Ralston [15:16]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [15:18]

So that's good; I'll be able to take a look at some of the things that he has also written during that time. That will be really meaningful.

I know you spoke a little bit about the community organizations earlier when I asked about collaborative efforts, and you said "yes." You had observed some – I don't know if there's anything in particular that you saw happen, that you thought was commendable or creative, that we might want to be aware of, or look closely at, just throughout the community. And it's okay if the answer is "no" to this. I just-

Jon Ralston [15:49]

I just can't think of anything specific now. It's just not something that comes to mind, that I'm sure we reported on, and you could find it on the site.

Kelliann Beavers [15:58]

Sure, no worries. I understand. Every time I do one of these interviews, I realize how much of the pandemic I have, essentially, just blacked out, and forgotten, until someone brings it up and I recognize how intense it was.

Jon Ralston [16:08]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [16:13]

Related to that – and again, it's okay if there isn't anything in particular that comes to mind. But is there anything in particular in terms of policy that you feel like should be improved or changed, in terms of maintaining a more robust economy during the crisis? Like what unfolded?

Jon Ralston [16:30]

Your connection got a little bit unstable there at the end. What were you saying?

Kelliann Beavers [16:34]

Anything you would like to share about your perspectives on how policy could help create a more robust economy during a crisis like this?

Jon Ralston [16:44]

Well, there's one obvious thing. But they've been talking about it for decades, and that's to not be so reliant on a few miles of road in southern Nevada for the entire economy of the state. And the efforts to diversify the economy have only occurred at the fringes. They're starting to get better; certainly, Reno has diversified its economy more than Las Vegas has, but gaming is still the dominant force. It's still going to be a huge force. But unless you can improve the K-12 system, and get the universities ramped up as much as you can, with funding and with faculty, it's just not going to happen.

And so, do I think we should be diversifying the economy? Of course. But as long as we're dependent on tourism for so much of it, any time there is a recession, we are going to be hit in a different way than almost any other community would be.

Kelliann Beavers [17:46]

Absolutely. At Brookings Mountain West, our Executive Director just put out – well, it was a part of preparing a report about the future of economic development in southern Nevada. And reading that has been, obviously, very concentrated on what you just articulated, but it does make one recognize what a great challenge it is. I think it is both an imperative and a great challenge to be sure.

Jon Ralston [18:09]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [18:15]

So much of what you've shared has been so meaningful. I'm sure it seems run-of-the-mill to you, but there's a lot of knowledge that you have that is very specific, so I really appreciate you sharing your perspective on things with us. I'm looking through to see if there – oh, there's one thing I would like to ask you because we are not interviewing a lot of folks who are from the journalism community. We've been sort of select in who we've spoken with. But one thing that I am interested to learn about is, based on my conversation with others when you were basically in the early days of the pandemic if you can even remember those moments because it's hard – and throughout. The relationships with, I guess, the leadership – be that through the health district, or the county, or whoever it was, locally, that allowed you to gain "This is the day's most current information." Were there group efforts to get together and gain that information? Was it sort of direct relationships that you had to be able to get those updates, other than just looking online? Because obviously, I know there was a collaboration between news sources and the government to ensure that those messages got out to the public.

Jon Ralston [19:38]

Yeah. I wouldn't describe it as collaboration at all. Certainly, there was cooperation in general. But as I've said, Megan had the sources. She knew who to go to to get what she considered quality information, but in the beginning, they didn't *have* the information.

Kelliann Beavers [19:54]

Mm-hmm.

Jon Ralston [19:55]

They didn't have a way to access it, or process it, or put it out, and so it was much more difficult. But we were lucky to have Megan – and I know I keep invoking her, but we really were. There was no one like her. No one worked as hard as she did. She was resourceful and took the time to understand the issues to make sure the information we were putting out was accurate. That doesn't mean that we didn't make mistakes, you know? She's a human being. We're human beings. But for the most part, we only put out credible contextual information, and that is priceless during something like this.

Kelliann Beavers [20:37]

Definitely. And I agree, I don't think you could really commend her enough, over the course of a lifetime, for that work, and you and the organization as a whole. But I definitely was scrolling through my feed, trying to find whatever she posted every day.

I just have a couple more questions, some of which may or may not be things that you have knowledge of or a perspective on. But one question is whether you have any perspective on how the pandemic has affected small businesses or small business closures.

Jon Ralston [21:10]

Well, it was devastating to many small businesses, some of which don't exist, some of which were crushed, some of which adapted, and were able to do very creative, innovative things to survive. But it crushed small businesses in this state. Those that were dependent on the gaming industry, those were – and there are so many of those – those were hurt very badly when the gaming industry was hurt so badly. But just people having to change their lives hurt a lot of different kinds of businesses, from restaurants to retail. And so those that adapted survived, and those that didn't, did not. But it's very sad, so many jobs were lost, dreams crushed, all that. And we did a lot of stories about this, and it's very, very, sad. And as I said, some will never recover, and will never be seen again, or are yet to know that they're already dead.

Kelliann Beavers [22:06]

Yeah. Thanks for mentioning that. And I'll do my best to look for some of those stories. But if anything specifically comes to mind, that you think I should make sure to find, if you want to pass me a link or mention-

Jon Ralston [22:19]

We did a series of stories. I've forgotten what we branded them, but yeah. I mean, you'll be able to find those very easily on the site.

Kelliann Beavers [22:23]

Okay, great. I'll definitely look for them. And thanks so much for all of these little guideposts you're pointing to. That will give me some ability to find content that you guys have already produced.

Jon Ralston [22:34]

Sure.

Kelliann Beavers [22:36]

I think that's mostly it, other than if you don't mind taking a minute to think about anyone else that you think we should speak with. It doesn't necessarily have to be with your organization but just throughout the community. We want to be sure that we are talking to leaders from a range of fields. And ultimately, we also do have parallel research that we're doing with citizens that worked more on the frontline, as opposed to leadership. But with your role, keeping in mind leadership.

Jon Ralston [23:01]

Yeah. And you're just talking about southern Nevada, right?

Kelliann Beavers [23:04]

We're also doing Nevada as a whole. So the questions for you, I posed them mostly for southern Nevada. But yes, anywhere throughout the state.

Jon Ralston [23:12]

Yeah. I mean, I have to think about it. We have a lot of great op-eds. You should search our op-ed page – there's a great doctor from up north – what's her name – [Dr.] Bayo [Curry-] Winchell I think, something like that. She's great.

Kelliann Beavers [23:25]

Mm-hmm.

Jon Ralston [23:27]

She's written a number of columns for us, and she has great perspectives on COVID, and the medical impacts, and what's been misunderstood. But I would just command you to our op-ed page. We've written a lot of great op-eds during the pandemic from really smart voices. We tried to, again, think about people who would not be alarmists and would be able to put things in perspective. So that's what I would advise you to do.

Kelliann Beavers [23:55]

Okay, great. I definitely will. And I really appreciate you sharing that, as well as the other things you did. I've made note of them. And thank you so much for speaking with me. I'm really grateful for all that you guys do and make possible in the community. So, you're greatly appreciated by us, especially for your capacity to share your perspective with us today.

Jon Ralston [24:13]

Thanks so much for saying all of that. If there's any follow-ups, or you need anything else, just let me know.

Kelliann Beavers [24:19]

I sure will. Thank you.

Jon Ralston [24:20]

All right. Bye-bye.

Kelliann Beavers [24:23]

Bye.

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