

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Hey, friend. Welcome to "She Said, She Said." Here on this podcast, I'm joining forces with a broad array of top-notch guests to share important life and career lessons, always with an eye toward insight, inspiration, and the drivers that help us build influence. I've spent three decades studying and learning the art of influence. Whether you're starting a business, raising money for a cause, advocating for a promotion, or running your own household, understanding influence will increase your chances of success, whatever your goals may be. Listening to "She Said, She Said" podcast, may just be the smartest, most efficient investment you can make in you.

Hey, friend. Welcome to "She Said, She Said." Do you ever get so frustrated with the news that you literally throw up your hands, unable to find sources that you feel are objective and also committed to good journalism? Well, despite that frustration, we all know that challenging ourselves to continuously learn about and make sense of our world is key for building and sustaining influence. But where do we turn for good, solid, objective sources? This week's guest's passion and curiosity motivated her to create and offer up a solution to this very challenge. Jenna Lee walked away from a lucrative, high-profile dream job as a national network anchor at Fox News Channel in New York to follow her passion and create something that she believes is missing from the way most of us consume news today, smart, non-partisan stories and information for those who seek to be informed, like you.

Jenna's gamble is paying off, as her media company, called smarthernews.com, is attracting a loyal and dedicated audience. Now, if you don't know about SmartHER News, be sure to check out the link that I've included in the show notes for this episode, and also be sure to follow SmartHER News on Instagram, [@smarthernews](https://www.instagram.com/smarthernews). Jenna's regular updates and reporting are both efficient and objective, and they're designed to inform but not incite. A core value of Smarter News, much like "She Said, She Said" podcast, is this recognition that the time you spend consuming news and information is limited and valuable, and it's often squeezed between demands of work and life and kids. So, what you're getting needs to be a good use of your time.

Also, like our "She Said, She Said" audience, Smarter News audience is disproportionately female, but Jenna and her team are not dishing out girly news or pink news. The news is the news. You and I care about the same kinds of unbiased news as anyone else, including our male counterparts, and Jenna gets this. Jenna and I actually got acquainted at a recent policy circle back in November, and we had so much to talk about that it was clear I needed to have her on to share not only her perspective on the future of news, but her journey as a journalist, an entrepreneur, and a working mom. I think you're really going to love and appreciate Jenna's thoughts on career pivots, on growing her business, and on balancing life and work as an entrepreneur. I also think you're going to love how she thinks about influence and the connection to curiosity.

Most of all, once you have a chance to listen to this episode, I would love to know what you think, so please be sure to send me some feedback. But for now, here is my conversation with SmartHER News founder and journalist, Jenna Lee.

Jenna, welcome to "She Said, She Said."

Jenna Lee:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited about this conversation.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I am, too. I've been looking so forward to it. You are the founder and creator of something called SmartHER News, and while I imagine that my listeners, or many of them, are familiar with it, for those who are not, talk about what Smarter News is.

Jenna Lee:

Well, in a very basic, Smarter News is exactly what its name is supposed to suggest, which is that, what do we actually want from the news at the end of the day? When you strip everything away from what you actually want from a newscast or news delivery, you just want to feel a little bit smarter about the world. And specifically, when I was thinking about, what would a news platform look like if I took everything that I learned over the years as a journalist, working in a lot of different roles at a lot of different places? If I took all of that and then kind of burnt it down and started to rebuild it from a different point of reference, how could I deliver news in a smarter way as well? And specifically for an audience of my peers.

I feel like the life of the American woman has changed really dramatically over the last several decades, but the way that we deliver news to her hasn't changed at all. And here she is, arguably the most important consumer in the world, because America is the largest economy in the world, and she is the majority voting bloc in the country, so she's deciding elections and she's deciding leadership. And she needs information just as much as everybody else, but for some reason, I found many of my peers, it didn't matter who they were, where they were living, whether they were stay-at-home moms or huge corporate leaders, they all had the same problem accessing information because the news had become so partisan and so cluttered that even if they had five minutes, they felt like they couldn't access something without doing a serious fact check of it.

So, I thought, "Well, how could I create a platform dedicated to nonpartisan news that makes someone feel smarter, that's also delivered in a smarter way?" So, small bites of high-quality information. Sort of like your favorite tapas bar, that's how I imagined our news platform. I'm like, "A little bit of this, a little bit of that," because then at the end of the meal, whether that's the end of the day, the end of the week, the end of the month, you actually feel great. And those are sort of the loose concepts or the guiding lights for how Smarter News came about.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Talk about, was there a catalyst or a particular moment when you realized this was something that you needed to do? And we need to get into your origin story about what you were doing before, but was there some moment where you said, "Okay, I have to do this"?

Jenna Lee:

There was a moment where I was at a really critical point in my career. I was a national news anchor at the time, and what's interesting about that job, I mean, there's many things interesting about that job, but it really has an employment structure that's not very common. I guess it could be similar to professional athletes, where you sign up for a period of time. So you have these contract periods, and these contract periods are really important, because you have some semblance of job security in a world that job security really doesn't exist. You could always be taken off the air, but you would have a certain contract that would be owed to you, so in that way they were great. In other ways, it was difficult to think about how your life would look three years down the line.

And I was at a very critical juncture. It was right after the election of President Trump. There were a lot of changes that happened at Fox, Fox News was where I was working, and we were really

ground zero of the #MeToo movement, as people kind of retraced their steps back to that. So I was a new second-time mother, I'd just given birth to my baby girl, and I had all of these different decisions in front of me and a lot of different information. News was definitely moving towards more partisanship. And that's just not what I do, Laura. So there wasn't a way that I looked down the road and thought, "Oh, okay. Well, if news evolves this way, then I can fit in here, because I can always do a little commentary here or there." Like, I can do commentary about journalism, I feel confident about that, but I got into the news to actually deliver the news, and I really take nonpartisanship very seriously, and I think that a journalist doesn't have a license to practice, we have our integrity.

And so, I mean, all of this, you have to think about this big kind of pot of chaos surrounding me. And I had a two-year-old and a one-year-old and a big decision. And so, where Smarter News kind of was that lightning bolt moment, as I felt, and I, by the way, had actually pitched a few different ideas, I felt like the female audience was really powerful and no one was really tapping into that audience. So, periodically throughout my time at Fox, I kind of raised my hand, said, "Oh, why don't we do this? Why don't we try this? Hey, we should really think about this digitally." But there wasn't a real warm reception to that. So, I really felt this pull. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Like, "There's something there that I think I'm supposed to be doing, I'm not sure what it is."

And I was actually on a plane, sitting next to my 10-month-old at the time, and I had a one-year-old and the 10-month-old, so a one-and-a-half-year-old and a 10-month-old. And all of a sudden, I was sketching, sketching different words like, "What is this that I'm supposed to be doing? Like, what is this?" And I actually was sort of praying too, because I felt so conflicted, and that's when I wrote down the "smarter." And I was like, "Well, smarter sounds like SmartHER, but that has to be taken. I mean, it's such an obvious." I just said the word out loud. So I just thought, "Oh, this is for sure. Someone has thought of this before." And no one had, and so I bought the domain in the air, actually.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh my gosh.

Jenna Lee:

On the plane flight. And I didn't know what it would become, but I know there's a lot there to unpack, but that's sort of the evolution of how I arrived at Smarter News.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I mean, that's an amazing story, and it just goes to the power of having an idea or this itch that you can't scratch. You know there's something there, and you just kind of pluck away at it until you figure out some way of kind of pulling it together. One thing that's interesting to me that I especially love about Smarter News is the fact that it's not girly and it's not pink. It's news.

Jenna Lee:

Right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Because you care about news, my audience cares about news, in the same way that our male counterparts care about news. We don't need pink news. Pink news is fine, it's just that when we're looking for news, we want news like everybody else. And so, why did you make that decision? Because I think a lot of the platforms, if you will, sort of the newer platforms that are focused on women, tend to

be either pink or girly or sort of very female-oriented, meaning that gender drives the news selection, right? If that makes sense.

Jenna Lee:

Absolutely. Yeah. Absolutely makes sense, yes. I mean, because that's.... Quite frankly, couple reasons I didn't go in that direction. Number one, that's not what the audience was telling me what they need, right? And if you actually listen to people, they tell you exactly what they want, which is why I think it's so interesting that corporations, we have so many different ways, these large companies. And they're wondering, "Well, what does the consumer really want?" I'm like, "If you ask them, they will tell you. They will actually really, really tell you what they want." I never had somebody turn to me, a friend or a stranger, and say, "You know what? I really wish I had more opinion in the news. I really wish I had more opinions. That would be great." Or "You know, that was really interesting about the counter-terrorism efforts in Yemen, but I really wanted to find out about this season's favorite lipstick." Like, no one's ever said that. It's never been that.

I just thought if you really listen to people, they just want the news. It's really not that tricky. It's actually just the news. That's what they want. And I think for women specifically, there is a way that I think we do consume information differently than men, and this is not some sort of analysis that puts one side against each other, I think it's just different. I think there actually is a different way. No matter what happened in the day, my husband always figures out how to read something. I work in the news and sometimes I can't read a complete article, because I'm multitasking on so many different levels.

And I think a woman's mind works like that. So these small bites of high quality information, that's what I thought, "Well, if I created these quick card stacks that people could just read bullet points and if they thought it was something interesting, then they'd go to an article that I've already picked for them that actually is the best out of the 10 that I read, and then they had an easy pathway, that would work for me, because then I could get something." And if I really trusted the source, then I knew if I repeated it, I wasn't going to be wrong, and that I would feel somehow empowered by that information.

So, I thought, "When men go out to dinner with their friends, what do they do?" They go to a steakhouse, right? They're going to eat a steak, an appetizer, and that's what they're going to gather around a table and do. What do women go when we go out and eat? We go and we order 10 different appetizers and nibble at each other's plates and then we're good. And so that's why I thought that's sort of how we consume information, little bites of information along the way. And I think, again, going back to where the woman is in American culture right now, regardless of race, religion, or region, she's multitasking at a really high level. So I knew if I created something inspired by women and the way that they consumed information, men would like it too, which is exactly what happened. But I wanted to start with my peers because I thought, "I know them, and I'll be able to serve them better, and then as we grow Smarter News, there could be many different channels. It doesn't have to just be SmartHER." We also own Smarter News, no H-E-R.

But going back to the original question, Laura, at the end of the week, I actually do want to know a lot about the serious news. I actually do want to know about the lipstick, too. So I'll actually give you some preview. Depending on when people hear this, you could actually look back. We'll see if I actually execute this, but this week on Smarter News, we talked about the US southern border, we talked about a conflict in Europe between Russia, Belarus, and Poland, we talked about Yemen, a story out of the Middle East. We've talked about history, as well, some important historical moments. But I actually was thinking, "It would be really fun at the end of this week. It's around the time that Taylor Swift released her album, her "Red" album, and she's wearing this red lipstick. And I thought, "You know

what? It would be really cool to end the week with a little bit of a deep dive of, where did the red lipstick, when did that actually become a thing?" I think that would be interesting.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that, yeah.

Jenna Lee:

And I actually said that to a friend recently. She's like, "Well, how do you make plans?" I'm like, "It's very simple. It's like Capitol Hill, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda, lipstick. That's how I think about the week." I was like, "Very serious. Serious, serious, serious. Something else." That's how I think about how you'd want your week to go, kind of front-loaded Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday with some of the serious stuff, and then as we get into the weekend, we kind of are off, and we kind of just let you go and give you a couple conversation starters, which is what we call our lighter topics that have a little more substance.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. I love that. We obviously are including links to Smarter News and to your Instagram in the show notes for this episode, of course, because I want folks to make sure that they check it out. I have a lot of different questions. One is, this idea of... And I love the fact that you listen to your audience and that you're so connected to her. But one question that I have is, how do you know? Like, when they're conflicting points of view or when you're getting a lot of input and it doesn't necessarily reconcile, how do you stay true to the mission and listen to the audience at the same time when there may be conflicting points of view? Does that make sense?

Jenna Lee:

Yeah, absolutely. And an example this week is that there's a court case that's getting a lot of attention with a lot of different points of view, and the way that we approach the news differently than, I think, other outlets, is everybody rushes past some of the basics of the story to get to highlighting these different opinions, because of a concern of, I think, sometimes trying to make sure that all sides are represented, or in some cases just trying to promote one side or the other. So, when I see that there's a lot of static around a story, where it's like you can't really see clearly, then I really go back to, "Do we even know why we're here? Like, why does this story even matter? Why are we even talking about Yemen? Like, why would we even talk about it? Why would we even talk about this court case? Well, what actually happened that got us here?"

And that's how I think we add value, is we always go back to some of the basics and we're not afraid to do that. I never think, "Oh, they already know that." Like, you probably have already seen something like that, but maybe not as clearly as you potentially could. So, I think that's one of the ways that we navigate that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. I want to go back to your career pivot, because there are so many people that are facing disruption in their lives or have just really done a big rethink of where they're spending their time as a result of the pandemic. It's sort of crystallized in many people's minds, "What I'm doing is not what I want to be doing." And so, a lot of people are pivoting and trying to figure out what's next and how do you find that. You had spent your entire career in journalism as a professional journalist, on-air talent.

Making this pivot into something that was very different, talk a little bit about the process that you went through, the soul-searching that you went through before you pulled the trigger. You talked a little bit about kind of thinking about the creation Smarter News, but maybe for you personally, how you had to rethink your personal story.

Jenna Lee:

Well, that's a great question. There were a couple factors at play. There was this, as you mentioned, that sort of sinking feeling, or that itch that you can't scratch, that, "I'm not sure this is exactly what I was supposed to be doing." I loved being a journalist, I really wanted to be a working journalist. I wanted to be a news anchor. I didn't foresee myself necessarily in that role on a national level when I was thinking about my career. And the national level was amazing. I mean, you couldn't really be at a higher level. So, when that was an opportunity and I was able to do that, it was a dream.

But there was a point where I was wondering if that's what I was really supposed to do. And especially, it came with, I was trying repeatedly to report stories outside the studio. For whatever reason, that wasn't being allowed, or I was put in these very strange situations. I'll give you an example. There's the busiest bridge in the entire world, the George Washington Bridge. They actually hang the largest free-flying American flag in the world from that bridge during different holidays. Thought, "That's such a great story. I'd love to go tell that story. That's a story that our audience would really like around Flag Day or July 4th, and it's right here in New York City." The only way that I got approval to do that on a two hour show was that if I only missed the first hour, and then I had to be back on air the second hour.

So, let me tell you how this works. I show up to the George Washington Bridge, end up meeting this great group of guys that work on the bridge, and they're like, "You're going up, right?" And I'm like, "What do you mean I'm going up?" They're like, "Well, we're going to bring you up to the top of the bridge, right?" And I'm like, "I guess." They're giving me a harness. I'm like, "Okay, I guess." I mean, I'm in hiking boots. I mean, I'm dressed for it, but I didn't think I was going up. My producer is afraid of heights, so she actually doesn't go up. My camera guy and the audio guy, I'll never forget it, they were like, "This is great. We're going to go up."

And the workers allowed me to walk off of the top of the bridge, down part of the span, to get a shot, and I actually did a standup, what we would call a little appearance in the middle of a piece where I give you a fact, on the span of this bridge. And little did people know that I had to get off the span of the bridge, get back to the studio, put on my high heels and a dress, and do the second hour of the show. And it was stuff like that, where I was one of... I don't know, actual news anchors at Fox at the time that weren't doing a hosted show or a panel show. I was probably one of maybe six or seven people.

So, the fact that I was having to... It just started... That was sort of soul-crushing at a certain point. I'm so glad that the piece came out well, but at a certain point, like six, seven years into the job, you're like, "Why is this happening? Hey, I'd really like to be part of the coverage for the inauguration." Big things that every single show was going to and our show wasn't, and the reality is that they weren't really investing in news. So, I had to be very honest about that with myself. So it wasn't just like, "Hey, I'm not sure this is exactly what I'm supposed to do is just sit on air and deliver the news." I loved doing the live interviews, but I really wanted to be able to stretch a little bit and practice the journalism that I really thought the viewers were asking for, which was sort of more historical stories and getting outside of the regular news cycle and the constant debates. I felt like people really needed a break, that's what they were telling me, and even if I did a couple pieces a year, that would be great, but I couldn't really figure out how to do it.

The second thing is just I spent a lot of time in business news, and where people spend their money tells you a lot. And the money just wasn't being spent in news. So, if I really felt that I wanted to practice the news and deliver the news, then if I was being very honest with how the company was moving, they weren't investing there. So I couldn't say, "I'm going to stay and I'm going to fight this." Like, it just wasn't happening. So, I either had to be in it to have this huge fight that I was going to lose, or I was going to have to figure out another way. And I thought maybe I could do that and still stay within the family of Fox, but it just didn't seem that that was possible, and that was a very difficult decision, and it very much confounded my bosses. They were like, "How could you walk away from this job? How could you do this?"

And I was like, "Well, for these reasons. Here's what I'm thinking." And it was like we were not speaking the same language. I mean, I don't think I'm going out of bounds here to say there wasn't a big blowup. And I think in a lot of ways, when people leave the news, there's some big drama. Like, they're going somewhere else. And I was like, "I just don't think this is the place, and I think the longer that I actually stay, even in a temporary role or something like that, I'll actually become more vulnerable." And that was the case. There is a story, though. I mean, Laura, not to go... I'm sorry I'm being a little long-winded, but there is a moment, I think, that people have to really reflect on.

I had this moment in a very specific situation in South Africa in a cage diving experience with great white sharks. So, dramatic turn, but let me tell you, there's a lesson here. I promise. So, there was this point where you're in this cage. I mean, it's this amazing experience. I'm happy to fill in some blanks here. But where you realize, "If the shark wants to get in the cage, the shark is getting in the cage. This is the largest predatory fish in the world. There's not a lot that's going to keep that fish away. So, are you really safe or are you really stuck?" And I think that's the biggest lesson that I really had to reflect on. I was in this great role. Was I safe or was I actually stuck? And you never want to be stuck in your role, the less you can move.

So, even in the cage, the less you can move, the less that you can evolve, the less that you can grow, the tighter that you're being held, the more vulnerable you are. I think that's true of any work relationship, personal relationship, for any of that. Like, you need to be in a place where you're able to move. And I've had that feeling all of a sudden, which is, "I'm actually very vulnerable. I'm in this great role but I'm actually stuck in it, and that's not security. That's something else." And so, that was a big moment where I felt like I had to make a move to even kind of save myself.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. I love that story, that analogy. I think that's absolutely spot-on. One question that I have, just because it's something that I struggled with when I made a big career pivot, it was different than yours, but still a big one, is there's pieces of my past life that I still miss, even though they wouldn't exist in the same way if I had just continued on the same path. And everything you've said about learning and growing and challenging yourself, it completely has held true for me, and it's such an important component of this idea of building and sustaining influence, continuing to challenge yourself in that way is so critical to that. But I'm curious as to whether you still have those moments where you miss elements of that job.

Jenna Lee:

I was completely unprepared, Laura, for the grieving process, because it wasn't just leaving a role that I never thought that I would have and that was a dream in many ways. We ended up leaving New York, a city that I love. Like, when people talk about having a love affair with a city and I feel like that sounds a little cliché, to me, it's still difficult. It's still difficult for me to talk about. And again, I had two little kids.

We ended up moving outside of Austin to a fairly rural place, just because there wasn't some great plan. I didn't have this great, orchestrated, well-branded exit. And people were telling me I'd ruin my career.

I'd interviewed a lot of different places. I had a lot of, I felt, good relationships with other networks, but every other network... And this is really critical for people to know, they were the same conversations. They were looking for more panel shows, more debate, and really didn't believe me when I said, "No, no, no. I really believe in nonpartisanship and I actually think more people, even if they are partisan, even if they are Republican or Democrat, I think the market is bigger for an independent news source that just interesting, because no one's doing that. And I think we create real estate in that. I think we own that. I think that's where we need to go." But the conversations were all the same. They were all the same.

And so, I thought, maybe, "Oh, maybe I'll parlay, like doing a little work on the side. Maybe I'll do something like that." And that didn't happen. I kind of threw myself into building a digital platform, which I didn't expect to become an entrepreneur necessarily. And there's lots of parts to building a business I didn't know anything about. I mean, actually, all of it. And I had these two little kids, I was in rural Texas in the middle of the summer. I mean, just to give people a perspective, my husband was traveling all the time. I had supported the family so he could build his business, and it started to take off, which was great. I mean, that was really important to us, but I was alone. And I had never been... This is going to sound crazy. Like, I had never loaded my kids in the car to go to the grocery store. I never had to do that, because I just walked out into the store, like on the way home from work in New York. I never did that, I didn't own a car.

Like, even that exercise was totally exhausting and sort of depressing. And I miss so much. So, there's definitely times I miss. I miss the city, I miss the crew, the people that you work with behind the scenes. Like, those are the people that I talk the most to, that I absolutely, heartbreaking miss them, but they're also the sort of relationships that you didn't necessarily have a relationship outside of work because you saw each other so much all the time in the most intimate ways. So, it wasn't something that you had well-practiced to sort of continue. I'm in touch with a few of them, and I'm sure I could reach out still, and it's still such an important part of my life. But yeah, the grieving process is very difficult, and I still think I'm in it.

And it is a little confusing, because I don't miss the politics of... There was a lot of parts where I was appearing in front of a million plus people every day on the news and incredibly lonely. And that was a very difficult juxtaposition. So I don't really miss that, and I feel like the service that we can provide in Smarter News, in a lot of ways, Smarter News saved me, because when I started talking to the audience more, then I regained that purpose. But yeah, it's a tough one. I mean, it's tough. It's not without loss. And I think that's the thing. With all this sort of flashy, "Mom boss, girlboss, this boss," [inaudible 00:30:05]. Everyone's like, "Entrepreneurship is so great." Like, there's a lot of parts to entrepreneurship that are awesome. There's also parts of entrepreneurship that are terrible and very difficult, and there's some very depressing... I mean, totally honest, there have been some very dark days, and they still continue. Even with Smarter News growing and thriving and you see that the audience is there, it's still difficult.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, for sure. It can be a very, very lonely existence. So what's your support network look like? Maybe talk a little bit, too, about the infrastructure of Smarter News. Like, what's going on behind the scenes? We see you, and I want to talk about that piece, but what does it look like? How did you build it?

Jenna Lee:

So, the idea, also, with Smarter News, and this is sort of ironic, before the pandemic, is I really felt like the five day work week really wasn't working, especially for young women or young mothers. Not even young mothers, any mother. I know I'm not a young mother anymore, doesn't work for me. I'm working seven days a week now. That's what happens. You're like, "Five days doesn't work, so I'll do seven." But I really thought there's a lot of people that, especially when their kids are very young, they need more flexibility with their jobs. They have expertise, they need this flexibility for a period of time, probably until their child is like five and gets into more of a school routine, whatever that looks like, or maybe beyond that. So they really can give two to three days a week, but a lot of those people that can give two to three days a week, that's about what other people can give 60 hours a week.

So, the way that the structure of Smarter News was supposed to work, and what I'm trying to build towards, is have kind of this crew of contract employees that step in and out with a certain expertise at a certain time. So, at one point, we have someone with a legal background. I have a really great researcher now that does a lot of fact-checking. She's, in fact, full-time at this point, because we just need it. We just can't be wrong. And I need that support. I do have now... This is just new. I mean, these are really over the last 60 days. Just hired someone that is doing more video production and brand development, so some of the more artsy videos that we're doing, those are in her hands. I have a copyeditor, that's also very important. Again, a mom that kind of steps in and out at different times.

And that can actually create, not her, but sort of the situation that I've built can be a little bit more chaotic than I would like. So, I have a couple part-time, very part-time writers. I have a full-time researcher, full-time video content producer, and a part-time copyeditor. And what I'm hoping for is to kind of build up some people with more of a specific expertise of, say, business, for example, and they're going to be responsible for two or three business stories a month and kind of pull in those people that have their beats, kind of old-fashioned journalism beats. Like, "Well, you're going to do the courts, you're going to do the business news, I'm going to do general news," that's what I still sort of do.

A lot of the content that you see on the site, I'm still very, very, very involved in, and sometimes completely creating. And that's not great for the company, it needs to be able to grow. And that's why I called Smarter News, Smarter News and not "Jenna's network," it needs to be able to exist without me, and it needs to be able to have a lot of different voices that are a part of it. So, that's what we're moving towards, and it's just looked very different at different times over the years.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. How do you think about the monetization model? I mean, this is one of the big challenges with existing media, is oftentimes, what can be, these are my words, not yours, a misalignment of incentives, perhaps, right? And this moment in time that we're in, you really, I think, are feeling that in a big way, so how are you, based on what you want to accomplish, how are you thinking about a monetization model that really works and supports your audience and the product?

Jenna Lee:

So, it's a big idea and it's different in so many ways, and it's almost like the whole media world is attached to clutter, addicted to clutter. And it's from very bad metrics. So, when you go on a website, you see just clutter of ads, or you get this popup ad that you got to get through to get to the other side, then you get to an article, then you have gated content. I mean, it's like that's not customer service, and I just cannot do it to our audience. And that's unfortunate because it basically eliminate all established forms of revenue for a media company, which is not what I'm trying to do.

And what I see are a couple things. I do see moving towards complete app development. We didn't have the audience, necessarily, that I thought that if we developed an app and made that investment, that it would kind of work itself out. I think we're at that point now. So that's definitely where we're going, so you have a contained kind of real estate piece of property that people would have to invest in in order to have. And that's about the only subscription model that I'm really comfortable with, because information is also just out there.

And I think we do add value, it's not that. But if I really am putting the customer first, I really have to think about them and what would work for them. So, what I think of Smarter News is that we want to have smarter partners. These are going to be products and things that we really like, and we're going to tell you a little bit of the backstory of the company. So the advertisements that we could give are more like old-fashioned radio testimonials, where they would interrupt a radio broadcast and be like, "Oh, yeah, by the way, this is what I really like. This is a family owned company, this is how they came up with this idea."

The value that we can add to companies that way, and do it better than anybody else because we're actually a trusted source of information, is that people remember that story. And I realize that that's a real value add, how we're able to position companies as partners that would pay us a fee to be in front of our audience, but that we actually believe in. And by the way, I've made it this far, three years, without making any money. What do I have to lose now? I've already lost. Like, I'm not going to just take anybody's money. It's like, no. If I actually think your product's great and you want access to our audience, there's a barrier to entry, sure. But we're going to do things differently, that's going to add a lot of value.

And eventually, what I do see is definitely branded content. And we've seen some of that to be successful. So yeah, I don't like subscriptions, but if I could sell you a water bottle that has our logo on it that is something that you like carrying around, and that also gives me a little bit of money that's sort of like a subscription, and we do that every quarter, maybe that sort of works, too. So I want people to love the news so much that they actually want to represent. And so, we kind of have this branded content, branded gear, or branded products, and I don't see there's any reason why someday I can't work with the Neutrogena and come up with a smarter sunscreen and have the audience there.

I mean, people are doing, you have a lot of beauty influencers that are doing that for, let's say, an eyeshadow palette. Well, we could do it at Smarter News and we could actually talk about how you develop this thing. So, we have that kind of line, we have more traditional, smarter partnerships, and then I do see some sort of app development, something along that line that would be a revenue stream. Hopefully someday, though, we would have some partners that are just sort of... For example, like a grocery store chain. That could be our partner for the year. And let's say every three weeks we do a smarter recipe with them, with a product that we could buy in their store. So we're creating value. It's always about a little value, right? Like, "Oh, by the way, avocado prices are up for this reason. You could do this." It's a way to mix in the news with...

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Something fun.

Jenna Lee:

With something fun, and that creates a value that's different. It's just not throwing things in front of people and saying, "Oh, well, a million people visited our site, so this is what this advertisement is worth." I've never shopped from a popup ad. I don't know why anyone thinks that still effective or the

clutter is working. But somehow, we've tricked ourselves in the industry to think, "Oh, well, it's all about quantity." I don't think it's about quantity. I think it's actually about quality, and I think with the Smarter News audience, they are very smart, no pun intended, and we're not going to just put anything in front of them. Like, they don't deserve. So I think that, and we owe it to them, and that's how we can be different.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Is it hard to be patient and pace yourself as you have this big vision and these big dreams and aspirations? How do you sort of gauge yourself in terms of, "Okay, now we're ready for this"? [crosstalk 00:39:12] I mean, because you're going a million miles an hour and you have a small team, and...

Jenna Lee:

Yeah, I didn't expect a pandemic or all those other things that happen. You're like, "Oh, right. Oof." Yeah, I mean, it's important for the news industry, as far as being able to provide information to people during a critical time. I'm terrible at that, Laura. I have no good solutions or thoughts on it, because I'm not good. This week is a perfect example. I barely slept all week, my husband's traveling all week, I got three kids. I mean, it's crazy. And every week, we sort of pull it off, and I wonder how we did it, and then we do it. And if I could even think to myself, "Well, maybe I'll just take a break. Yeah, I'll take a couple weeks off and reassess," but there's something in this that I can't do, and I really have to keep asking myself that question about why, because I want it to be for the right reasons. I believe, obviously, that it is. I've proven that when I don't, I leave.

But what's been really helpful with that is my husband's experience. He got out of the military and thought he was going one direction, ended up building a leadership business. And it took him five, six years to do that. As a family, I was totally unprepared for that. I did not know that my first year of marriage would be that, like all of a sudden, these change of gears, and what that does to a family financially, how that affects your relationship. But my husband, in being able to build a successful business, also provides me a lot of support and encouragement, because he's been there. And even though I saw it and I know how long it takes, I still need him. So I think he's very critical to keeping me on the path, as he likes to say, because he believes in the mission and he also knows that it takes time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Do you envision the two of you ever collaborating on projects? Have you ever?

Jenna Lee:

Yeah, absolutely. And sometimes just sort of for fun or for friends or those that actually have a need, I'll do some strategic storytelling, like almost consulting. And a lot of companies need that, a lot of people need that. Everyone thinks that they know what their story is, but they don't really know how to connect it to the time period that we're in. Again, that's something, I think, that we add at Smarter News that others don't do as well. And so, yes, we've thought about collaborating in a few different ways, and maybe in the future we can, because leadership has a lot of familiar storylines that we see in the news, and a lot of our stories, if you strip them all away, really are about good or bad leadership.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. One of the big pivots that you did, which you seem to really love, that seems to really resonate with you, is this ability to be particularly authentic with your audience in order to build up their

trust. It was something that I think probably would've been difficult if it was accepted at all in your network anchor job. This is a very different platform, but you're very real, and you show real vulnerability with your audience on a near-daily basis. Maybe talk about why that's so important.

Jenna Lee:

Well, I just think it comes back to honest storytelling, and there's no way for me to be able to function. I'm sure there's other people that can do this very well, but this is what it is. I'm going to be very honest about smarter news and the obstacles that we're confronting or what's going on in my life. I get support from the audience. I mean, that's such a wonderful relationship. And they feel like I support them, but they really support me and, really, the mission. So, there's definitely almost a self-serving factor to it, Laura, now that I say this out loud. But it just is what it is, and there's no way not to just tell it like it is. And I don't really know any other way.

And even now, if I had to get all dressed up and fancy in the anchor clothes and makeup, I mean, I'm sure I could do it. I would still do it. It's still me when I'm delivering news in a more professional setting than over a cup of coffee in the morning in my workout clothes, but this just feels right right now. So, yeah. I think that the answer to that is just that's the way that feels right, and that's what I do. When it feels right, it's just like, "Well, I'm just going to tell you what's going on."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Social media has been a big part of your strategy and reaching and finding your audience where they are, but it has also come... It's a blessing in many respects, as I think most people would acknowledge, but there are some downsides. Maybe talk a little bit about some of the challenges. I know you had some challenges earlier this week.

Jenna Lee:

Oh, yes. I mean, I love social media. Social media is a running magazine, it's a running news feed for me. I use mainly Twitter as a news wire. I'm not really active on Twitter anymore. But Instagram is really where our audience is, and I want to be where the audience is. So, if you got up and you're like, "I'm not going to be on Instagram anymore, I'm going to be on Spotify," I'd be like, "Great, we're moving everything to Spotify." You really have to be convenient for people. Part of the problem with the news is it's not convenient, and you're not even getting it in a way that's easy to digest.

So Instagram has been a huge force for us, but we've also realized how vulnerable that also makes us. I just can't help it, Laura. Every week, I'm like, "Oh, I should just post half of the content so that people have to come back to the website, so that they could visit our website." But they're there and they're going to be frustrated with that, and I know I'm giving it away for free, but I feel like the path will be made clear to me as long as I keep serving them the best that I can. The problem with Instagram right now for me is that I can't call anyone, I can't talk to anyone, and our audience has grown to the size that it's really critical to our company.

And I feel very mixed about that, because, for example, we've had very strange things. Instagram's put through a series of updates over the last couple weeks, and in those updates, it's disrupted traffic in a way that doesn't make any sense. And I'm talking about huge drops and rises and things that are very bizarre, and I'm getting a lot of complaints from our users that they're not able to find us, they're not able to pull up. In the past, we have tackled really difficult topics, but we're committed to nonpartisanship. Even when we do that, sometimes the algorithm can remove content without telling us, or put warning signs up for whatever reason. And there's no way for me as an

entrepreneur to fight back against that, and that's really scary, but it's also something I agreed to by using the platform.

So, it's a conundrum. I'm not quite sure how to navigate it. This week in particular has been a very, very difficult week, because I'm worried about the audience in a way that I haven't been worried about them before, and I don't know what to do about it. There was some indication that some of the settings were changed to help people avoid sensitive content. And let me tell you something, news is definitely sensitive content. So maybe that's the reason. Maybe that's why you have to go into your own settings as a user, change your settings to allow for sensitive content. I mean, who knows? But no one's even telling the user that they have to do it.

So, stuff like that, it leads you to kind of spin up, and I really don't have a great answer. I want to continue to use social media, but this week has been very much a soul-searching week of, "Okay, I've got to move quicker on that app development. We got to be okay with telling people to go back to our website. We are going to lose them." It's kind of like you're in a storm and people are linking arms and they're getting kind of ripped away from you, and that's a terrible feeling when you've poured so much into building a business, but that's also the barrier to entry, so I want to be fair to Instagram, too. I mean, this is what they put out there, and we're agreeing to use their platform.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. But you've mirrored most if not all of your content onto your website as well, so that people who either don't use social media for whatever reason, which blow my mind why someone wouldn't use social media, but some people don't. And so, they can find SmartHER news at smarthernews.com, which is a mirror image of what you're putting out on Instagram, including your regular video updates. Are you providing those updates on a daily basis?

Jenna Lee:

Yes, typically it's Monday through Thursday, and sometimes there's an interview on Friday, sometimes even Thursday is that, so I really just focus on that. But yes, all of our video content is loaded to YouTube, and then from there, we are able to pull that video onto our website. So even if you didn't want to visit the website but you wanted to sign up on YouTube, you could even get an email that'll tell you when there's a new video up. So, Instagram's just been the place where most people are, so that's where we've really invested. But yes, 100%, our content is many different places, and it's all the same, so that's a positive, that those little card stacks that you see on Instagram are the same way you flip through them on our website, and so I'm proud of that. It's just that the audiences are all different and they're all different people, and so you always want to reach as many as you possibly can.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. How about a bit of advice for someone out there listening who maybe is interested in challenging herself in a different way, taking on entrepreneurship? Whether it's news platform or something completely different, what advice do you have for her?

Jenna Lee:

It's hard, because at this point in the week I'm like, "Could I give any good advice at this point?" I think one of the things that I underestimated is the amount of support that you need. So, in my case, I really needed to be more serious about childcare. I was trying to do everything, I was trying to have my mornings with my kids and have a babysitter come in the afternoon, and I was trying to piece together

that. I was piecing together that with piecing together contract workers, and that sort of chaos wasn't good for the family. It's actually the sort of situation that I'm back in now, because my kids ages have changed, they're in school, so now I'm kind of battling a different thing.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

But now your youngest is three?

Jenna Lee:

Is two, is two.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Two.

Jenna Lee:

Yeah, he just turned two.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You have a two to... Oldest is...

Jenna Lee:

Seven.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Seven?

Jenna Lee:

Just turned seven.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Seven, okay.

Jenna Lee:

Yeah, so my two year old, and the only reason I can do this interview, does a little preschool two days a week, which is great. And that's how I'm able to carve out a little time during the week. But I think the whole family needs to understand that entrepreneurship gives you that feeling that, "Oh, you have a really flexible schedule. You're going to work when you can. It's going to be great, you're going to have so much freedom." I mean, some of that's true. Some that looks much different than you would imagine, though, like blasting down the highway in the passenger seat, using your phone as a hotspot, trying to get something up at like 10:00 at night. That's what that looks like sometimes.

And you just need to have an honest conversation with the family that, "Hey, I'm working. There are some boundaries I'm going to need. I'm going to need some protected time." And I've done this very unsuccessfully, Laura, so I'm saying this, saying I wish I could figure that out better, and one way you can do that is when you hire someone. It makes you get out of the house because you're paying money to

do that. As a mom, you feel torn, because you want to be around your kids. It's better for everybody if Mom does have some contained periods where she can actually work.

Unfortunately, that also means those contained periods are, "Oh, you could take the kids to the doctor's, and then there's leak in the yard." So that gets infringed upon, so you kind of got to get [inaudible 00:51:28] you need [inaudible 00:51:29], is what I'm telling you. That's right. You need to get [inaudible 00:51:31], you need to be honest with yourself. This is actually work. It isn't just something that you could pick up your phone and do while your kids are at the jump park. You're going to need to have that dedicated time. And if you take yourself seriously, then other people are going to respect that a lot more.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And you also have to be smart about how you use that time, right?

Jenna Lee:

Yes.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

To your point, you can't just run downstairs and throw in a load of laundry when you've got that two hour window and you've got 14 things to accomplish, or maybe it's three, maybe it's not 14. But really being honest with yourself and being very disciplined about how you use your time is so incredibly important when you have so little of it.

Jenna Lee:

Right. Yes, absolutely. And also knowing... Like, for example, there's some things today that I could spend all day. I mean, there's endless tasks. But I have a babysitter that's going to come this afternoon and I'm delivering some food to some family friends. I'm doing some things that you also need to set aside time to do those things. Like, you have to do it. Otherwise, your company also suffers. So it's about that hyper-discipline that you're talking about, and knowing what actually needs to be accomplished. What Leif talks about, my husband, is "prioritize and execute." You really have to think like, "What is the priority that I need to do today?"

And you need to knock those out. But you also need to create space to say, "Hey, there's going to be a time that actually just getting out of this house and away from this computer and away from the other demands is where the new ideas come from." And that can be very difficult to do, too, because it's hard to give yourself that time of just saying, "I'm going to run to TJ Maxx," which is my favorite place to go, or go to HomeGoods, or whatever it is. You just go somewhere and walk around for a second. And I think that's something about motherhood that no one ever told me about, that you do need those moments, and it's not like a spa day. It's just a second to yourself. And that's really critical.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. No, I think that's very good advice. Because our focus is on influence and the different levers that help us build that, talk for a minute about how you think about influence. What does influence mean to you?

Jenna Lee:

I think influence is about service. It's less about getting someone to believe what you believe and more about enriching their life. So, that's how I would think about influence when it comes to what we're doing at Smarter News. If we could provide you great information that's solid about current event, that's the way we could be a good influence. If we could also set a model up that could show news in a new way or give people a different way of thinking about the business community, whether it's for mothers or thinking about a new pathway of how we would develop a company, then that could be positive influence.

But I think everything for me comes back to service. I believe news delivery, and what we call it, news service, because it actually is service. And I think every time you get off of service... Most every industry is a service industry, except a lot of people pretend that they're not. And I think that's where you get lost. So when I feel like I'm getting lost, I go back to, "Well, what does someone actually need to know today? How can we best complement their life this week?" And sometimes that also means stepping away from them a little bit, because you get a sense. People, they've got a lot going on. But just that sense of service is what I think influence is all about, and it makes influence seem a little less dark, because I think this idea of... Sometimes influencing people is like, "We're going to bring you along to the dark side." That's not what I would ever hope to accomplish. I know that's not the priority for a lot of people.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. I love that. Okay, if you could go back and give young Jenna, as you were just launching your career, maybe a single piece of advice, what would that be?

Jenna Lee:

I would tell her that even as a younger person, that her standards are pretty high. And I'm not saying that in a weird way. I think that could sound, Laura, so I don't really know. But that I've realized throughout my life that I... Sometimes people would call me intense, "Oh, you're kind of intense." There were very few people that were willing to wake up at 2:00 in the morning, work a writer's shift, and then take a camera out and then go shoot a story and not get paid for it, which is exactly what I did early on in my career. And I thought, "Oh no, a lot of people are going to do this." Like, "Isn't everyone doing this?" No, actually, not a lot of people were doing that.

And there was a point in my career where... And it was right when I got really promoted. I was a younger news anchor and my quote-unquote "intensity" got me to that point, and it's also what aggravated people, because they were really happy with the status quo or they were very comfortable. They didn't really want to do extra work, and I was really into that. And I think I got a little bit discouraged and didn't know how to navigate that, "Oh, you're so intense" comment. And I think I would've pushed a little harder. I don't regret not pushing hard. I think I did the best I could. But if I could go back and tell her, "Yeah, you actually are a unique individual." And this is true of anyone that's listening, you are unique. The way that you're looking at the world is unique and there is a value in that, and not everyone's going to see that, and not everyone that's older than you, that has more experience, actually has better advice.

There's a certain point in adulthood that you reach and you're like, "Wow, this is adulthood? I thought everyone knew what they were doing. No one knows what they're doing. We're all just trying to wing it every week." And I think I would've just said, "That's okay to not know everything, and it's okay to try things, and you just want to keep on trying things." So I think that was the source of a lot of heartache for me at times, of not understanding why we get that sort of reaction. And I would've been more accepting of that reaction and then also more dismissing of it. And I think that's something that I

hope to instill in my daughter, too. Because when someone labels you as intense as a woman, we all know what that really means.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. No, exactly. Exactly.

Jenna Lee:

Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Maybe just one somewhat related question, and that is, how do you deal with the little voice in your head that can be a great source of strength but she can also be sometimes your biggest enemy or obstacle at times? How do you deal with that self talk or that tendency that we can have to be really hard on ourselves?

Jenna Lee:

What I'm trying to do is to actually live the mantra which is Smarter News, which is "Curiosity over commentary." That's something that we said over the last year or so, it rings true. And anytime you approach a difficult topic or a difficult situation with curiosity, your whole posture changes. And we're in a world where commentary and getting your point of view and branding and all that stuff seems to really be prioritized. But curiosity actually lets the story develop. And what I'm trying to do when those voices come up, because they do, is to continue to ask myself why they do. Like, why is that a reoccurring theme? Like, what is that really about? The more you kind of provoke yourself for honest conversations, the more likely you will be to get to the answer.

I believe it's like an interview. The more directly you can ask yourself about that, hopefully the more direct answer you will get. But also the eliminate the constant commentary on your own storyline is maddening. And it's like a play-by-play. You just got to turn down the dial on that. Like, I'm not really interested in my commentary on any topic, to be honest with you, which is why I'm a journalist. Like, I'm not really interested in how I feel about US politics, anything. I'm just not interested. Like, this is not what I do. But about myself, oh yeah, I got a lot of opinions. And so, that needs to be dialed back a little bit, because it's really not where the value is.

The more you approach the world with curiosity, I just think the less pressure you put on yourself and the more you're able to accept the wonder that is around us, and there's a lot of it. And so, we want to put ourselves in the position for that, wherever we are in our life, rather than the opposite.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. And it's that secret to building good relationships, including relationships with people who have a very different point of view than we do. It's all about curiosity and approaching it from that standpoint. I love that, that's really great. Jenna, it's been such a pleasure. I've really loved the conversation.

Jenna Lee:

Well, thank you so much. It's hard to tell my own story, Laura, so I really appreciate the opportunity and I really appreciate your listeners, too. Thank you so much.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

This transcript was exported on Nov 28, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Well, you're so welcome. I really loved it. Great to see you.

Friend, thanks so much for joining us today. I'd love to know what resonated with you from my conversation today with Jenna Lee and how you think about your own curiosity as a means to challenge yourself to make sense of the world and to differentiate your knowledge and your know-how. Send me a note and let me know. Also, I could really use your help. Be sure to leave a review so that others who are looking for content like this can find it. Until next time, have a great week and take care. I'll see you again soon.