

## **Max Siegelbaum**

Co-executive Director, Documented

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined down the line from New York by Max Siegelbaum, co-executive director at Documented, the nonprofit news site devoted solely to covering New York City's immigrants and the policies that affect their lives. Max began reporting in post-revolution Egypt, and has written for Vice, among other publications. He delivers original reporting on the ground-level impact of shifts in labor policy and law on New York's immigrant community for Documented, which last year won two national awards for its coverage of the Coronavirus pandemic. Max, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you, Paul.

**I'm blown away by what you're doing. Congratulations on the impact that you're having. Tell us, how did this come about? What is the origin story?**

I got my start in my journalism career reporting from Cairo, Egypt, where I moved after college. I had followed the Arab Spring through college and was growing increasingly interested in journalism and reporting. And I had a few failed attempts at my college newspaper. So when I graduated, I had spent so much time looking into the stories that were happening in Libya and Egypt and Tunisia and all over the Middle East. And I knew I wanted to go there to start reporting and becoming a journalist. So I worked during the summer, I did trial building conservation work on the east coast and out west, and I saved up my money and I bought a ticket to Egypt, not really knowing what I was going to do when I landed. I had exchanged a few emails, but the English language newspaper editor there basically said, 'why don't you come and we'll talk when you get here, maybe you can have a job as a copy editor.' So I got there. I took the copy-editing test. I think he let me work there for an afternoon and then either he fired me or I was just not asked to come back. So I spent a few months sort of wandering around. I worked at an English language school, answering emails to people who wanted to come teach there. And eventually I found a group of Italian journalists who had been there for a while and sort of showed me the ropes on how to live there, how to work with fixers and just basically how to be a foreign correspondent. And from there, I started writing articles. As you

mentioned in the intro, I worked for Vice, I worked for Al Jazeera English, just covering Egyptian politics and culture and all sorts of issues there. I did a few big magazine features as well for Esquire Middle East. During my time there I had met refugees who had come to the country from Sudan and Syria, and I started to know them personally and hear their stories and learn about some of the issues they were facing. And those stories stuck with me throughout my time. And my focus became more and more on migration. There is a migration path that passes from east Africa through Egypt to Libya, and they would pass through Cairo. And there were a lot of organizations working there. I learned about it in that context. And eventually living in Egypt just became unsustainable for me and the money wasn't good. The security wasn't good. As a freelance journalist, you don't have a lot of support, you're just on your own. So there's been a lot of discussion and media about paying freelancers and how long it takes. And when you're really fighting for \$300 checks and you have rent and other things you have to pay and you need money to ensure your security in a country that has a strong security state. So I decided to leave. I applied to the Columbia Journalism School for their investigative program and I got in and on the way there, I met a journalist who was living in Egypt and Beirut at the time she was going back and forth and she sent me a Facebook message saying: 'You should meet Mazin, he's also going to Columbia.' Mazin is the co-founder of Documented. I came back to New York, had a month before the program started and I met Mazin for a beer and we immediately became friends. And throughout that year, I continued to look into migration issues - this time, stateside. And the more I looked into it, the more my mind was just blown by the system that exists. If you're a sort of a passive reader of news and look at immigration as an issue, you kind of get a sense that it maybe works like the criminal justice system, where there are flaws but there are standards that are upheld by the government in terms of detention and how people are treated and in the legal system and the immigration courts. And that's just not the case at all. So I just kept reporting on it, doing little stories, just sort of diving deeper and deeper into the subject and like many people in my current generation of media, I was sort of bouncing in between freelance gigs. I worked for The Trace, another non-profit newsroom for a little while. I worked at a newspaper in Pittsburgh called the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review for a little while. I ended up out in Colorado at the Denver Post, but nothing really felt like a solid job, nothing really materialized. And I think because of that, it gave me a sort of a high appetite for risk. And I came home and met up with Mazin one night, he texted me and he said something along the lines of: 'We may have to start these rounds.' And he had through an internship that became sort of a freelance gig that he had in journalism school with the local version of Politico, Politico New York. He had secured an opportunity to pitch this new startup called Civil, and Civil, which is now defunct, was an ambitious program that was funded by a blockchain development group called Consensus, based somewhere in Brooklyn, where they had this idea that you could take the blockchain, put it in the world of journalism for several different applications. And that could be a new model of supporting reporting. One of the things I think I see online and that I personally bumped into is you're doing research, trying to learn about a subject you land on Boston Globe or LA Times. You want to read this story, but you don't want to pay for a subscription to the LA Times. You don't live in LA. There's not a tonne of information that's relevant to you, but you would still want to learn about it to like maybe you would pay \$3 for an article. Maybe you want to learn about something in Boston and you pay \$3 for an article, but you don't want to pay for his description.

Part of the idea with Civil was that everyone would buy into this platform. You would buy a civil token, which is cryptocurrency. And that would be used to pay for a single article or to pay for a writer's salary or whatever. It would just be like journalism currency. And on top of that, they had ideas to where they wanted to publish articles to the blockchain. So the press would be permanent, but digital, I thought it was also an interesting idea, but for our purposes, they needed newsrooms to serve as a test case in sort of approving grants and Mazin talked to Josh Benson, who was one of the founders, capital New York which became Politico, and was now working with civil. And Josh was just like, we are looking for ideas for newsrooms, do you have any? And Mazin and I had talked about immigration reporting a lot over the past few years and it just sort of clicked. It was pretty straightforward for us. We wanted to cover immigration. We felt like it was a subject that was covered pretty widely, but we felt that in the context specifically of New York, when you're thinking of immigration and how being an immigrant affects the lives of people who live here, it's expansive and it's nuanced and an effect, all sorts of things. Just the basic fact that if you don't have documentation or if you're living here and you have a removal order, which is a notice that you can be deported at any time, it sort of creates this parallel life to the mainstream that really deserves daily level of scrutiny. And on a macro level, we felt that there are all these publications dedicated to business, to climate, to all these other subjects that are looked at through kind of vast amount of lens, you know, business, you have labour reporting, you have the finance industry of manufacturing, of local jobs, business, and politics. Immigration was largely, not entirely, but just what is happening to undocumented people living in the United States. And we felt like this was an opportunity to maybe try and expand that scope. And both of us have been to New York. New York is one of the most diverse cities in the world. And immigrant life is just such a part of the fabric of the city. So all of that came together to this idea of Documented and we pitched it to Civil and they loved it and they decided to fund us for a year. We pitched them a budget and initial chart of who we wanted to hire and for what roles. And originally it was Mazin and myself, a reporter named Philippe, we had an editor a little later down the line named Janet Guyon who was sort of a veteran business reporter. And we had a social media editor named Alan Arthur, and we just sort of hit the ground running. We tried to publish as much as we could and break as many stories as we could. And that was kind of the first year.

### **It's incredible. What was the initial reaction?**

The initial reaction was really positive. You know, the immigration advocacy and legal services community in New York is fairly small. I think word spread very quickly. We launched our newsletter before the site, and that started gathering readers and people who still read it to today. You know, in New York specifically, there's no one else who is gathering information for that audience in the way that we're doing. So it was very welcome. And I think that from the beginning has helped us build a lot of trust in the community. It's never been easy. It has always felt like we really have to fight for our space in this world, but we've received a lot of support and a lot of goodwills from the beginning, which has always been something personally for me, that's helped me to keep going.

**It certainly seems to me that New York's very large immigrant community just wasn't being represented by the established media.**

I think it's a complicated picture because New York has a plethora of community media outlets. So newspapers that write in Spanish or newspapers that are for the Chinese community or TV stations for Bangladeshi community and Facebook groups and all these different news sources. You know, we're doing research now into WeChat groups that provide information for Chinese New Yorkers. In terms of the English mainstream media, what we've seen since we started documenting on a very literal level, I used to write the newsletter three times a week. We would switch off, Mazin and I, and then we created a new system, but I used to write the newsletter and I used to look for local stories. And in the beginning you had to pick and choose. You had five stories to choose from, pick the top three. And it was easy. But over time there have been fewer and fewer immigration stories. And now it's just really hard to find coverage of these issues. I think if you look at it more extensively, I do think there's sort of a resurgence happening in New York local media outlets, like The City and City Limits and The New York State Focus, which all are doing great reporting and cover the issues that immigrant communities in the city face. But they're not specifically immigration. And yeah, it has been an uphill battle, I think for a lot of communities to get the space they deserve and the media.

**Is there a big future for community led digital journalism, you know, a time when tech giants have undermined the big city US papers. I mean, frankly has the New York Times fallen down on the job?**

I hope so. I think that we're sort of riding that future right now. And there are pretty big efforts. I mean, there are big efforts from organisations like the American Journalism Project who is a funder of ours and Report for America, who we currently have a core member working with us, Giulia McDonnell Nieto Del Rio covers immigration enforcement. Both of those organizations are looking at this issue at a national level. And I think that they are very savvy in what they're doing and they're supporting organizations who can stand behind that. They're supporting organizations who have real ties to the places where they work and they're small and they're facing an uphill battle in terms of media trust, especially for digital media and getting name recognition out there. But if you look at the work it's really high quality and it's really focused on community level issues. And right now you also have sort of a reckoning in big tech companies like Facebook and Google and Craigslist, Craig Newmark and all of their philanthropies programs, they're giving out a lot of money and it does have a real impact on those organizations. So I think an important part of the survival of nonprofit news is shifting the idea of news away from obviously a full-profit industry and more towards a public service, to other nonprofits in a big city that have existed forever, but are maybe seeing more as philanthropic causes than news.

**Well, I mean, you don't charge for Documented, but you invite signups and \$10 community, monthly membership. Indeed, I should declare to our listeners, I'm a supporter. I give you guys \$10 a month. You mentioned about the funding there, what's the funding balance then? Is this sort of community centric? Do**

**you want lots of people paying you \$10 or do you want Craig Newmark, who is a personal friend, as you know, to write a big check? What's the sort of balance? if it was a pie charter funding, where would it come from?**

In an ideal world, we would want full community support. In the world as it exists, we are majority foundation funded. And I think that's true of all nonprofit newsrooms, or I shouldn't say all, but I think that's true of most nonprofit newsrooms. It is a tremendous uphill battle. As I keep saying, you have to really reach a large number of people to make enough money to really support yourself, especially if you're thinking about growth and to get to that point, you need to grow. And if you have a nonprofit mission, it sort of closes some doors in terms of funding. So I think everyone at Documented would love it if we were fully supported by our community. But I think to get there, we're going to need to continue to garner foundation support.

**I mean, what's fascinating about the way you work is you genuinely do rely on the expertise of readers. You're not like a local newspaper or one that's an industry newspaper with a specific vertical, people who work in the immigration field or immigrants themselves helping you navigate the complicated bureaucracy in New York City seems to be a genuinely sort of bi-directional relationship that you have. Do you feel that you're building a movement, that you're building a community rather than a, can I say, a media brand? Albeit be it one that obviously has a very, very noble cause.**

I think what we've done throughout the time we've been in existence is to create news and reporting and events that reflect our personal values. And I think that's connected with a group of people who live in New York and in a wider audience and has appealed to them and reflected their interests and their professional needs. And yeah, I think there is a really core contingent that has been really inspiring and encouraging in our work and the media companies that I admire, they reflect the world vision and a set of values and beliefs. And that's what I try to do in our work. And I think that if you don't have the capability to be the news source for where you are on all a number of different fields and topics, then presuming that strategy, which personally I find the most fulfilling.

**Immigration is already a hot button issue of the Biden presidency with Democrats passing a bill to give a legal path to citizenship so far undocumented immigrants, where do you see this going? Has Trump poisoned the well?**

It is so hard to tell, it is such a contentious issue and it's so federalized that with a lot of things in the US a small majority of the country can impact the entire country in a way that is not favourable locally, but represents the full scope of opinions on the issue. We have a fairly large readership of undocumented people living in New York City. And so far, I think their concerns have revolved around the coronavirus and the extreme economic impact that it has had on the city and their lives. And there hasn't been a radical change to the immigration system that sort of filtered down that

audience as of yet. I think it depends on the Senate and I think it depends on what happens in Congress and what Biden decides to push through and how hard he tries to push and all of the other political factors around that. But on a day-to-day level, our readers are worried about paying rents and their jobs and the conditions that they're working in.

### **Real world things?**

Yeah, exactly. And the immigration system is already so slow and the immigration court system has just become even more hamstrung by the pandemic and all of the work delays that that created.

### **I suppose my question was, to what extent did Trump create yet more hostility, a hostile environment for the immigrants that you write so well about?**

Oh my gosh, when he was president ICE, which is the agency that I'm sure many of your listeners have heard of, but ICE the agency that detains and arrests immigrants, puts them in deportation proceedings and then deports them back to the countries where they were born. They were probably the most aggressive they've been maybe in their history. And he weaponised all levels of the government against people entering this country and people who are staying in this country. In terms of non-government actors, it continues to be extremely hostile. And especially in states outside of New York and in the south and in border states, there continues to be a lot of anti-immigrant legislation being passed and anti-immigrant actions happening. And you can see that in the way it affects people's minds. You know, we had a lot of attacks against New Yorkers of Asian descent this summer.

### **Disgraceful.**

Yeah, it's hard to say why it happened, but you can't imagine that it has no connection to Trump and propagation of the idea that China was exporting COVID to the United States. And he had an extreme and almost immeasurable impact on immigrants living in this country.

### **I'm of the view that he is a disgusting human being and I'm glad he's gone, but anyway, half of America shares that view with me, but the other half don't so far. What are the biggest issues that keep coming up? You mentioned earlier that it is sort of a day-to-day things that you read like rent and all of those kinds of things, but the politicians in the city, the officials in the city, do they engage with Documented?**

They do. They definitely do. We know who reads our newsletter. And we know our stories. It's a lot of city council members, state politicians, some federal government politicians, and they tweet about the issues we cover. They comment on our stories. Sometimes they respond to them at press conferences. So there is engagement

there. And, you know, we've had examples of real life impact, our reporter for America core member, Guilia, who I mentioned earlier, she wrote a story about a jail in New Jersey that had just renewed its contract with ICE to continue holding immigrants. And a bill had just been sent up to the governor of New Jersey to sign that would forbid all facilities, private and public in New Jersey, from extending ICE contracts and Guilia published that story. And shortly after that, he signed the bill into law when he'd been sort of dragging his feet for some reason.

**Wow!**

Yeah. It's always amazing when that happens.

**Well to actually see evidence there even in the early period, you've only just really got going and to see the difference you're already making must surely be heartening. Wow. Can I ask you about the future? I know you haven't brought your crystal ball with you, but you're based in New York, do you plan to extend Documented to other cities with similar large immigrant populations or support system news sites. What about a Documented for other countries with immigration issues and to tackle like Britain, for example?**

Yeah, that's a good question. Our feeling in the beginning is that we were going to do that one day and we still might in the distant future, but there are 8 million people living in New York. I think many of them, I don't have the statistics off the top of my head, but a good chunk of them are foreign born. A good chunk of them primarily speak a language other than English. And a lot of people in the city aren't being served in the way they need to by the current media or for that matter information from cities and non-profits are not reaching them in the way that it should. And we, in this past year and a half or however long the pandemic has been going on for, we've really grown in our ability to serve as a bridge between the community and these organisations that are trying to reach them. So for the time being, our goal is to expand to New York. We want to develop into new languages specifically in Chinese, and we want to reach new immigrant communities, specifically immigrants from the Caribbean who speak English as their primary language. We want to reach them with information that's specific to those communities. For our near future that's how we see ourselves growing. There are these large populations of people in the city who are not sure if I may be well, and I think it fits within our personal goals, but also our mission as an organization to reach them before we start thinking about other cities.

**Tell us about your day-to-day life. What does a typical day, a typical week look like for you in terms of how you go about producing this?**

So I edit all the stories on our site and I also consult, we have a development director, who has been helping us to systematise our fundraising efforts and kind of grow it into new spaces that are sort of traditional to the nonprofit space. But it's kind of unfamiliar to the for-profit journalism world, which is sort of where we know most about the model. So most of my days are spent corresponding with writers, editing copy, checking in with reporters on long-term projects. I do some reporting, still very

sparsely and mostly with special projects. And we have a lot of strategy conversations. You know, we're building a media organisation, but also a business. So we have to think about company culture, values in the company, how those values are expressed through benefits and what it's like to work with a company and employment, building an employee handbook. And we're also nonprofits. So we're building a board as well. And we just have to think about who are the board members? How do we reach these people? How do we want to set the stipulations of being on the board? So there's always so much to do. But I think as we've grown, we've been able to pull some of the jobs that we were all doing at once that personally, I was not very good at, at some point I was a social media editor. I was editing stories. I was reporting stories and was having to reach out to foundations. And as we've grown, I've been able to cut out some of those things. And frankly, it's good for everyone. And yeah, that's kind of what the day-to-day looks like

**Other than being a regular reader like me, which also gives you ten bucks a month. How can people support you? How can people help further this amazing project, this cause? How can we get involved?**

You can support us financially, as you said, that's an important one. You can always send us the story tips. We're always looking for that in our email, to [info@documentedonline.com](mailto:info@documentedonline.com). And you can just help spread the word. We always need more readers and we always need more supporters and just even subscribing to our newsletter and reading it as a form of support. We are trying to think of ways that if you support us, we can meet your needs and kind of provide some special privileges. So that's currently in development, but we run a monthly event series where we ask reporters who have a background in immigration or issue that we cover to interview three or four experts in a panel. And that has been hugely successful. And if you're a member, you get behind the scenes access to those events for the recording and kind of things to be developed later. And so that's another promising stream of revenue that we will be developing in the coming year. So anything helps.

**Tell us about the partnerships that you're developing.**

In the beginning, I think our first partnership or one of the first was with The Guardian. Mazin used to work there and we had good relationships with the editors there. And I had written a story about the Canadian pension plan and how it had owned shares of American private prison companies. And we passed it along to The Guardian to see if they wanted to publish it. And they did. And in Canada, after that sort of all hell broke loose. There was immediately a petition that got over a hundred thousand signatures. Advocacy groups started to hound pension plan managers and employees. When they were doing meet and greets with the public all over the country, they would show up to these meetings, someone told me it was on a small island somewhere. I think in British Columbia or a deep remote place, they showed up to the meeting and started shouting at them. And it was brought onto the parliament floor. They introduced a law to, to prevent this from happening and provide more oversight of what the pension fund is invested in. And after that,

eventually they divested, I don't know what the status of the law is, but that really showed what a powerful partnership can be.

**Max, that was a hugely interesting conversation, obviously wishing you the very best of luck, which is not only an incredibly worthy project, but one that's been executed incredibly well. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thank you, Paul, this was fun.