



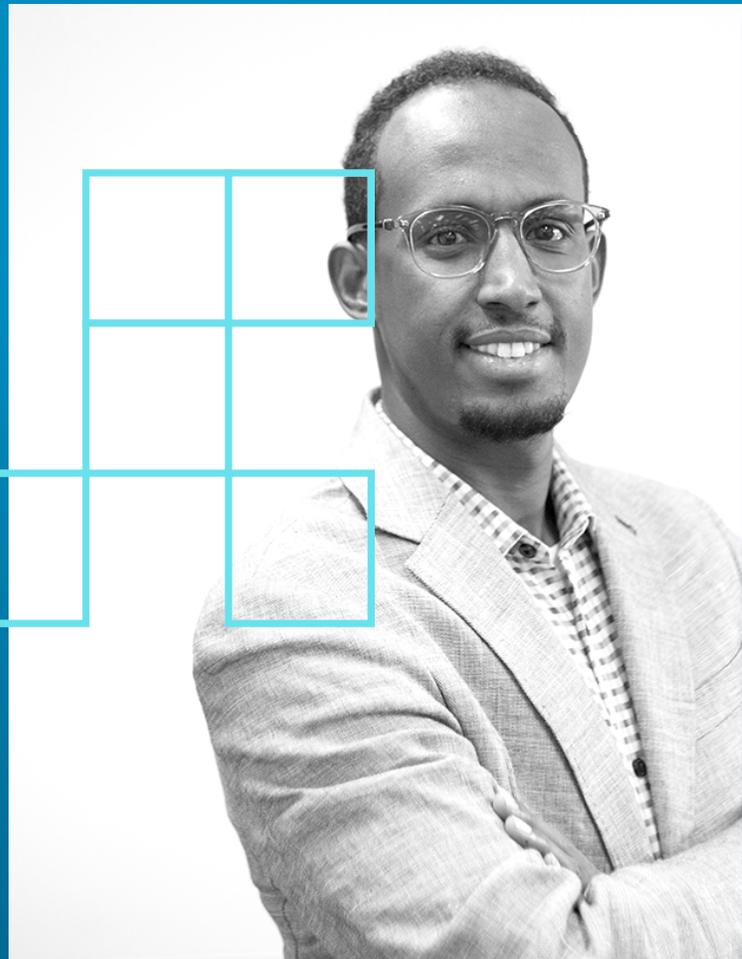
Institute for
Nonprofit News

NewsMatch

CASE STUDY

How Sahan Journal built community support to grow revenue by 50% in one year

A news startup for and
about immigrants and
people of color
leveraged NewsMatch
to increase donations
year-round



SAHAN JOURNAL



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This report was written by **Katie Hawkins–Gaar**, a freelance writer, journalism consultant, and founder of the newsroom mentoring initiative Digital Women Leaders. Katie previously worked as the digital innovation faculty at The Poynter Institute. She began her career at CNN, where she worked in audience participation.

ABOUT INSTITUTE FOR NONPROFIT NEWS

The **Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)** supports and strengthens a network of more than 350 newsrooms. In partnership with our members, INN is creating a new future for news: independent, inclusive, non-partisan, and dedicated to public interest rather than private profit. Our success supports informed communities and democratic life across North America. In a little over a decade, the INN network has grown tenfold. INN is now advancing another cycle of tenfold growth to build an American field force of more than 20,000 public service journalists.

For more information visit inn.org.

ABOUT NEWSMATCH

NewsMatch is a collaborative fundraising movement that is transforming how communities support the journalism that truly serves them. The program leverages the power of matching gifts to build a groundswell of support for INN members. The annual NewsMatch fundraising campaign is strengthened by a public awareness initiative and capacity-building program designed to support the long-term success of nonprofit newsrooms around the country.

NewsMatch is supported through the Fund for Nonprofit News, an open collaborative fund at The Miami Foundation. In 2020, NewsMatch funders included Democracy Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Facebook Journalism Project, Google News Initiative, the Abrams Foundation, the Inasmuch Foundation, Independence Public Media Foundation, the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, the Bernard and Anne Spitzer Charitable Trust, Natasha and Dirk Ziff, the Rita Allen Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, the Present Progressive Fund at Schwab Charitable, the Walton Family Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Wyncote Foundation, along with individual supporters across the U.S.

For more information visit newsmatch.org.



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Introduction

Sahan Journal was born in the right place at the right time.

The nonprofit news outlet, dedicated to providing coverage for and about immigrants and Minnesotans of color, launched in August 2019 with just one salaried employee—its founder and editor, Mukhtar Ibrahim. Two years later, the news outlet had 11 salaried employees and three contractors.

The digital news organization is a fundraising powerhouse. In 2019, **Sahan Journal** brought in nearly \$500,000 from supporters, including contributions from foundations and individuals. In 2020, it raised over \$770,000 in total revenue, more than a 50% increase from the year before. And as of July 2021, it's up to \$1,240,000 in revenue.

Compared with other local and state news outlets also founded in 2019, Sahan Journal has brought in roughly quadruple the median amount of revenue.

And there's more: Sahan Journal has dramatically grown its audience. In its first year of publication, Sahan Journal's monthly uniques more than quadrupled and its email newsletter subscribers increased by 1,400%. And, as the audience grew, so did individual donations. The number of donors more than tripled from 253 in 2019 to 785 in 2020.

One of the most important ways that Sahan Journal has achieved such financial success is by participating in **NewsMatch**, a collective fundraising campaign that

Sahan Journal's individual giving revenue since launch

*NewsMatch takes place in Q4 of each year





pools matching gifts from national, regional, and local funders to inspire millions of small donations to support nonprofit journalism.

During its first NewsMatch campaign, from Nov. 1 to Dec. 31, 2019, Sahan Journal raised \$25,500 in individual donations. The following year, the nonprofit raised more than \$58,000 in eligible donations during NewsMatch and—more notably—leveraged the program learnings to establish best fundraising practices and launch its own small-dollar donor fundraising campaigns. In total, Sahan Journal raised \$110,000 from individual giving in 2020.

Organizations like Sahan Journal that participate in NewsMatch don't just receive matching funds. As part of the program, they are required to be members of the **Institute for Nonprofit News** (INN), which means

they participate alongside a cohort of hundreds of other nonprofit news outlets. They also receive training resources and fundraising support from INN and learning partners like the **News Revenue Hub**. Altogether, participating organizations receive unrestricted financial support, new skills and tools to strengthen fundraising capabilities, and valuable engagement with supporters who care about quality news.

This case study outlines Mukhtar's vision, details how he and his staff have raised funds, and includes advice and tips for other news outlets looking to build support from individual donors and major funders.

How NewsMatch works

NewsMatch centers on a collaborative fundraising model that leverages the power of matching gifts to build a groundswell of support for members of the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN).

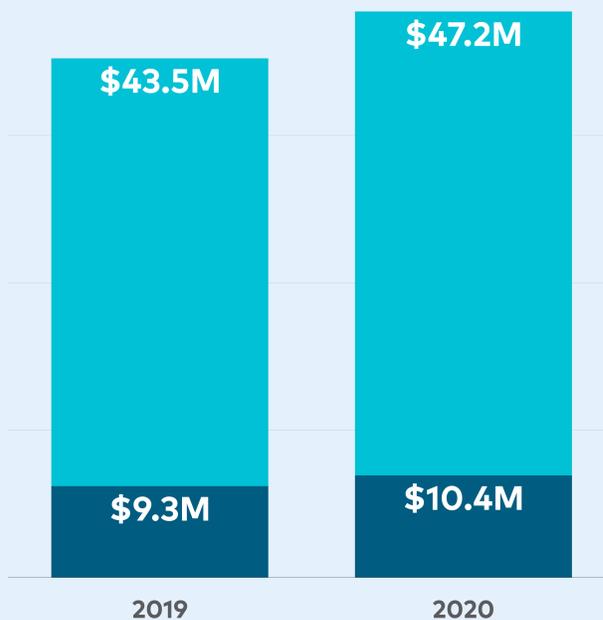
Over the last four years, more than 260 newsrooms have leveraged nearly \$20 million in NewsMatch matching grants to generate more than \$150 million in gifts from people around the country—almost seven times the initial amount.

NewsMatch's success is powered by three key program

- 1 A **matching gift program** that sparks giving to nonprofit newsrooms and ultimately increase community impact
- 2 **Learning resources and experiences** that help newsrooms strengthen their fundraising capacities and increase the dollars coming into their organization
- 3 A **public awareness campaign** that engages new supporters and highlights the impact of quality journalism

Total dollars raised, 2019-2020

- Individual donations
- National and local match funds





Sahan Journal launches

In early 2019, Mukhtar left his job as a staff writer for the [Star Tribune](#) with an idea for a new media venture: a digital-only publication dedicated to covering Minnesota's immigrant communities.

Deeper, more nuanced coverage of the immigrant experience was sorely needed in a state with nearly 10% of its residents immigrants. Mukhtar—who was born in Somalia, spent his childhood in Ethiopia and Kenya, and moved to Minnesota as a teenager—had the vision to fill that need.

"Minnesota is a unique state. It has a lot of different immigrant communities, from different parts of the world," explained Mukhtar. "It is known as a place that welcomes refugees with open arms, but as I was getting my start in journalism, I felt like the stories of these communities were not being represented well in the mainstream news media."

Mukhtar wanted to put the stories of Minnesota's immigrant communities "on the front page—every day," he said. "It's not a one-off, like when something

Mhonpaj Lee stands in the field at her family farm, Mhonpaj's Garden in Hugo, MN. The heat and drought conditions have been hard on farmers like the Lee family.

[Read this story.](#)



"[Minnesota] is known as a place that welcomes refugees with open arms, but as I was getting my start in journalism, I felt like the stories of these communities were not being represented well in the mainstream news media."

Mukhtar Ibrahim

Founder, Editor & Executive Director, Sahan Journal





bad happens or when tragedy strikes. It's constant coverage of these communities as they're going about their lives." Mukhtar explained that his goal was to publish a range of stories that "represent the rich experiences of these communities in a more authentic way."

On August 12, 2019, Sahan Journal launched, with Mukhtar as its sole salaried employee. Fortunately, he wasn't alone. The journalism veteran had reporting help and funding from his previous employer, [Minnesota Public Radio \(MPR\)](#); a solid three-year business plan; and some individual donor support that had already been secured.

The support from MPR was vital to Sahan Journal's launch. "While I was working at the Star Tribune, I really wanted this idea of launching a nonprofit newsroom to take shape," explained Mukhtar. He reached out to his former boss, Nancy Cassutt, then-executive director of MPR, to share his vision. Nancy liked the idea and agreed to pay Mukhtar's salary for 18 months, allow him to work with MPR editors, and pair him up with then-executive producer Kate Moos, who had experience leading new projects and could offer guidance and mentorship. In return, MPR would get access to Sahan Journal's content to post on its website.

"They invested in me to fulfill my dreams and ambitions of trying to launch a nonprofit news organization in service of these communities. I am really grateful for that," Mukhtar said.

Mukhtar also had one more lucky break: Valerie Arganbright, a longtime public media expert in fundraising strategies and sustainable donor programs, was drawn to the site's mission and offered to oversee Sahan Journal's fundraising as a volunteer through the end of 2019.

"It's an incredible publication," Valerie said. "There's nothing like the stories that the Sahan Journal journalists are putting out. They're [incredible stories](#) that just have never been told before."

2019: Hitting the ground running with NewsMatch

On June 12 and 13, 2019—just two months before Sahan Journal's launch—Mukhtar participated in the INN Days conference in Houston, Texas. Mukhtar, who attended the conference with support from the [Knight Foundation](#), met other nonprofit news founders and sat in on a variety of sessions. But there was one moment from the conference that really stood out to him.

"There was a panel about NewsMatch and fundraising. That was really an eye-opening experience for me," Mukhtar said. "As a newcomer into the nonprofit media landscape, I found it so valuable." He took several pages of notes and returned to Minnesota with his sights set on participating in the NewsMatch program.

There are a number of steps news organizations must take before participating in NewsMatch.

First, organizations apply to join INN and then are vetted by staff members to ensure they meet standards for ethics, transparency, independence, and quality of journalism. From there, applicants are approved for membership by the INN Board of Directors.

Once news organizations are accepted into INN, they have access to pre-campaign training, offered by INN and the News Revenue Hub. This training includes webinars on topics like digital fundraising strategies and how to increase newsletter engagement; one-on-one coaching with industry experts and other specialists; and a weekly newsletter that breaks down how to run a year-end campaign. Newsrooms also receive access to a campaign toolkit, which provides a library of time-saving materials that can be used to run fundraising campaigns. The toolkit includes a messaging calendar, email language, banner ads and social media assets.

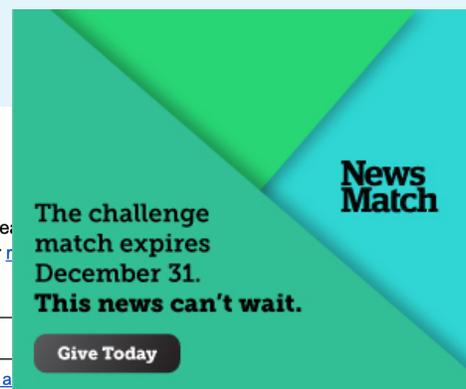


NewsMatch Campaign Toolkit, 2019

Campaign Roadmap

Here is a recommended campaign schedule. The core of your campaign should be email appeals, rounding out your efforts with social media ads, personal outreach, events, etc. Check out our [resources](#) for inspiration and ideas.

Date	Activity	Notes
Oct. 28 - 31	Prepare for NewsMatch kickoff	Customize and schedule any NewsMatch appeals and donation forms.
Nov. 1	Send Email #1 and promote on social media	Announce NewsMatch and ask people to give. Continue promoting on social media and drive to your donation page or NewsMatch.org profiles. Consider tailoring the message for higher level donors or other groups that require a different approach. Try to resist from linking to stories. Drive readers to your donation page .



And then comes the actual NewsMatch campaign: From Nov. 1 to Dec. 31 each year, participating newsrooms solicit donations from individuals. Whatever funds they raise, up to a predetermined cap, are doubled by NewsMatch.

Mukhtar had to act quickly for Sahan Journal to participate in the 2019 NewsMatch campaign. After being accepted into INN, Mukhtar participated in webinars, received individual coaching, and experienced a crash-course in fundraising.

“It was all really new to me, and we had less than three months to prepare and understand everything,” he recalled. “But the good news is that NewsMatch offers so much training before [the campaign begins].” Armed with his notes from INN Days and the pre-campaign learnings, Mukhtar felt ready to launch Sahan Journal’s first fundraising campaign.

Sahan Journal raised \$25,500 from 253 donors, exceeding its NewsMatch campaign goal of \$20,000—that year’s cap for matching funds. Mukhtar and Valerie sent out fundraising campaign emails, posted

appeals to Twitter and Facebook, and took advantage of local fundraising opportunities, like Minnesota’s Give to the Max Day, a 24-hour fundraiser.

Most of all, they benefited from the advice and encouragement of INN staff and fellow members. “Even though I have over 30 years of fundraising for the media, I have loved having access to that whole group of experts,” Valerie said. “They’re constantly giving feedback, and I’m still learning.”

“When you’re new, it’s great to have people support you and motivate you,” Mukhtar added. “Without NewsMatch, I think it would have taken me probably a couple of years to figure out how to frame the message around local news,” he continued. “With NewsMatch being very close to our launch, I didn’t have any time to waste. It was a big moment for Sahan Journal.”

Valerie added that the 2019 NewsMatch campaign provided a confidence boost for the brand-new Sahan Journal. “We were impressed,” she said. “We learned that there were a lot of readers who were going to support Sahan Journal going forward.”



2020: Shifting and refining fundraising strategies

Mukhtar headed into 2020 feeling optimistic. He hired Valerie as a part-time contractor and started making plans for several full-time hires, including former MPR News colleague Kate Moos, who became Sahan Journal's managing director. The year was looking bright.

Then, in March, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. As at many news outlets, the Sahan Journal staff worked around the clock to offer valuable resources for its community, including publishing multilingual coverage about the virus. Mukhtar and his team pivoted—learning how to work remotely and report from the field while following health precautions. Finally, they looked for ways to keep fundraising afloat during the COVID crisis.



Farhiya Aden receives the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at the Minneapolis Convention Center on February 5, 2021.

[Read this story.](#)

"You always want to have a good strong base of fundraising strategies and tactics ... And then you want to be able to use that base to spring into other new tactics to continue to keep your audience engaged and giving."

Valerie Arganbright

Fundraising strategist, Sahan Journal

Just two months later, George Floyd, who was Black, was murdered while being arrested in Minneapolis, not far from where Sahan Journal is located. Video of the incident, which showed white officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, sparked protests and riots locally, and eventually, around the country and world. Minneapolis became the epicenter of racial reckoning in the United States—and the Sahan Journal staff stayed incredibly busy covering it all.

Through all of the challenges of 2020, Sahan Journal continued to take root and grow. With support from foundations, including national organizations like the Knight Foundation and local funders like the [Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation](#) and [McKnight Foundation](#), as well as assistance from [Report for America](#), Mukhtar hired seven full-time employees. Meanwhile, the staff never lost sight of its mission, which was more important than ever.



The end of 2020 brought one final challenge: Because of an increase in the number of nonprofit newsrooms participating in NewsMatch, the matching funds offered to each organization, including Sahan Journal, decreased from \$20,000 to \$12,500. Still, that didn't stop Mukhtar and his team from setting their fundraising sights higher.

"As an organization, we decided to use NewsMatch as a way to cultivate additional donors," Mukhtar explained. "We feel it's our responsibility to increase the matching funds [provided by NewsMatch] by going out to local donors to see if we can bring in additional matching funds."

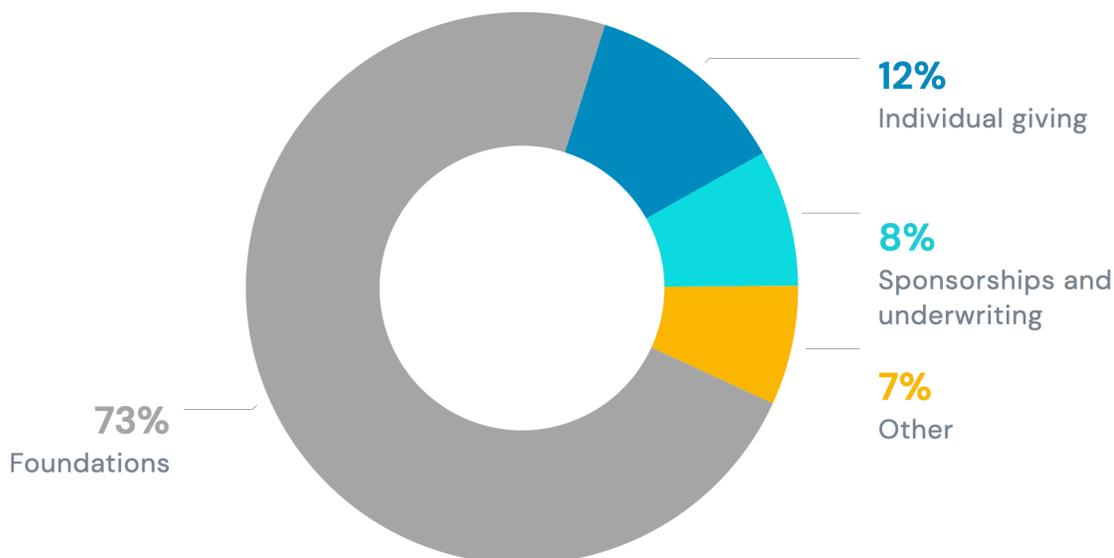
This approach worked. "It was a really successful year in terms of fundraising and also reporting," said Mukhtar, adding how proud he was of his team. By the

end of 2020, thanks to a mix of careful planning, new fundraising tactics, and stellar coverage that was needed more than ever, Sahan Journal raised more than \$772,000 in total revenue.

Sahan Journal not only benefited from using NewsMatch as a way to leverage more local funders, but also took advantage of the training resources offered by INN, which helped its staff develop fundraisers throughout the year. "Working with INN validates our fundraising experience," said Valerie.

"You always want to have a good strong base of fundraising strategies and tactics," she added. "And then you want to be able to use that base to spring into other new tactics to continue to keep your audience engaged and giving."

Sahan Journal's revenue, 2020





Lessons learned



Craft a unique value proposition for your outlet.

The work that Sahan Journal does is unique. No other publication is dedicated to providing news reporting for and about immigrants and communities of color in Minnesota. The challenge is how to capture that uniqueness—what truly makes Sahan Journal stand out—in its fundraising appeals.

Last summer, Valerie and the Sahan Journal staff gathered to brainstorm phrases that separated their nonprofit from other publications in the state. “We didn’t want to just say that we provide in-depth stories. Everyone says that,” explained Valerie. “This was about gathering unique language for fundraising and social media.”

The meeting, which lasted hours, was a success. By the end of the brainstorm session, the staff had put together a one-pager of phrases to use for fundraising appeals. Some of their winning lines include:

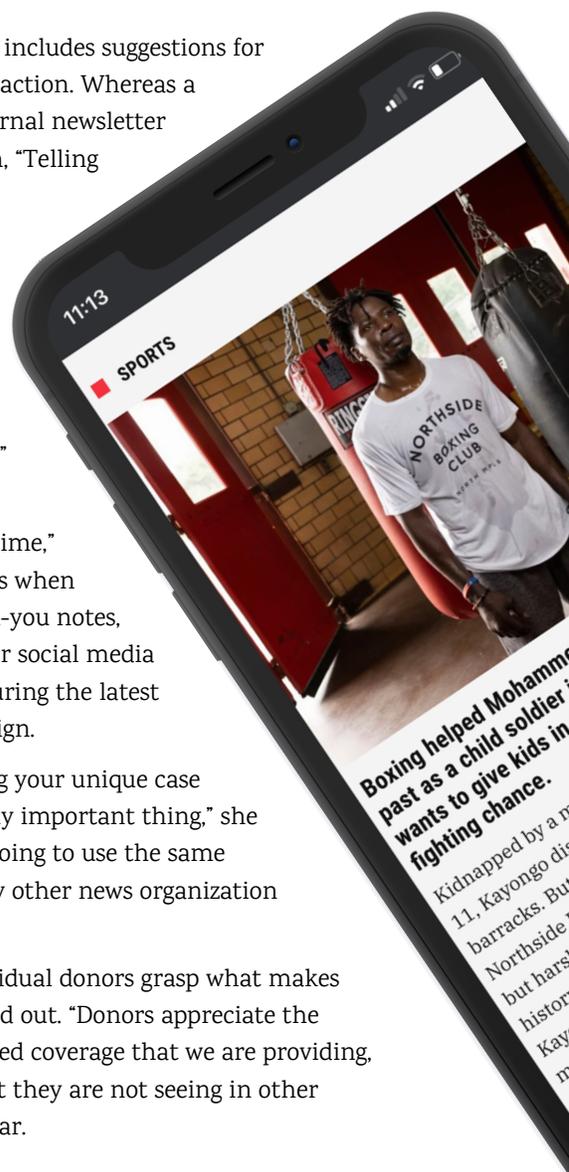
- Sahan Journal is for people who want real, honest news about immigrants and refugees.
- Sahan Journal tells accurate stories about the lives of immigrants and refugees.
- Sahan Journal provides exclusive, real reporting by, for, and about Minnesota’s immigrants and refugees.
- Sahan Journal tells stories that no one else does.

The one-pager also includes suggestions for improving calls-to-action. Whereas a previous Sahan Journal newsletter signup box led with, “Telling news stories that matter,” the new version is much clearer: “Telling stories about immigrants and refugees you won’t find anywhere else.”

“I go back to [that document] all the time,” said Valerie, such as when she’s writing thank-you notes, campaign emails, or social media posts—including during the latest NewsMatch campaign.

“I think that having your unique case statement is a really important thing,” she added. “We’re not going to use the same language that every other news organization uses.”

It’s clear that individual donors grasp what makes Sahan Journal stand out. “Donors appreciate the community-centered coverage that we are providing, and the stories that they are not seeing in other places,” said Mukhtar.





One of those donors is Nusheen Ameenuddin, a pediatrician and recurring supporter of Sahan Journal. “As much as I love living in Minnesota and working in different areas as a pediatrician, I have always noticed that there is a lack of representation of the immigrant experience,” she said. “When I read stories from Sahan Journal, not only am I getting high-quality journalism, I am getting perspectives that I don’t see elevated in the mainstream press.”

The unique mission and quality of reporting are what inspired Nusheen to make one of many financial

contributions to Sahan Journal in 2020. Before then, she had never made a donation to a news organization.

Nusheen, who is Muslim American, said she’s aware of smaller, niche publications targeted to specific communities, but had never encountered a news outlet like Sahan Journal. “I hadn’t seen one source say that they are going to tell the stories of Minnesota’s immigrant population,” she said. “I think it’s a tremendous initiative.”



Leverage local funders to grow your NewsMatch pool.

As the nonprofit news field grew and the national matching funds offered to each organization by NewsMatch decreased correspondingly, Sahan Journal responded by turning more to local funders.

“I figured, let me just send emails to people who might provide matching gifts. So I did,” Mukhtar said. In those emails, the Sahan Journal founder explained what NewsMatch is and how local foundations and corporations can help by providing matching gifts. He named an amount—\$20,000—and asked if they would be able to provide it.

Mukhtar said that those emails to local funders were crafted from NewsMatch templates. After sending requests to several corporations and foundations, he heard back from three local funders offering support: [Minneapolis Foundation](#), U.S. Bank, and Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation. Combined, the local foundations offered \$40,000 in matching funds.

Pahoua Yang Hoffman, senior vice president of community impact for Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, said that its investment in Sahan Journal was a natural fit.

“At the foundation, we already are doing a lot of investment in the community around narrative change, and Sahan Journal’s mission is to represent the immigrant voice,” Pahoua said. The Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation had already given money to help get Sahan Journal off the ground in 2019, and enthusiastically agreed to provide a matching gift for the 2020 NewsMatch campaign.

“When I learned about NewsMatch, I thought, what a great opportunity to help seed some money so that they can build individual support,” said Pahoua.

There are three big questions that the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation staff asks when reviewing grant proposals: Who is informing this work? Who’s doing



the work? Who stands to benefit from this work? “We hope that the people informing it also stand to benefit from it,” Pahoua explained.

Pahoua said that Sahan Journal meets all of these requirements. “They have writers with immigrant experience—they’re the ones crafting the headlines, reporting the stories—and their stories are actually for the immigrant community,” she said. “For us, we like to lift up organizations like Sahan Journal that

represent and benefit communities in such a clear way.”

As for the 2021 NewsMatch campaign, Pahoua said that Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation “would love to” support Sahan Journal again.

“This year continues to prove that what they are delivering through Sahan Journal—and what NewsMatch is supporting—is critical to the media landscape here in Minnesota,” she concluded.

Scaling philanthropic support for quality journalism

Local foundations, philanthropists, and businesses join national funders with investments in nonprofit news.

Many newsrooms have leveraged NewsMatch by replicating the collaborative fundraising model at the local level by securing additional matching funds from major donors, foundations, and local businesses. In 2020, newsrooms secured nearly **\$3.1 million in additional community match funds** from more than 300 supporters.

“When I learned about NewsMatch, I thought, what a great opportunity to help seed some money so that they can build individual support.”

Pahoua Yang Hoffman

Senior Vice President of
Community Impact for Saint
Paul & Minnesota
Foundation

National and community match funds, 2017-2020

● National match dollars ● Community match dollars





Use NewsMatch as a framework to build your annual fundraising plan.

NewsMatch was the first fundraising campaign for Sahan Journal, and it's provided the framework for all of the campaigns since then.

"With all of the success of our first NewsMatch campaign, I realized this is something we could refine and duplicate going forward," said Mukhtar.

Valerie and Mukhtar know that NewsMatch success isn't just about making fundraising calls-to-action at the end of the year. It involves building their pool of donors throughout the year—looking for opportunities to catch readers and audiences where they are at any given time.

With this in mind, Sahan Journal put together an aggressive plan of six fundraisers throughout 2020, including their spring, summer and fall campaigns, plus two campaigns organized by [Give Minnesota](#). Each fundraiser is organized through an internal spreadsheet full of dates and tasks, starting with identifying local foundations for matching funds, and ending with sending thank-you emails and acknowledgements to everyone who contributed.

Valerie says that Sahan Journal's secret to fundraising isn't much of a secret at all. "We have a plan for fundraising. We make a plan, we work the plan. We change it when we need to," she said matter-of-factly.

That plan is an aggressive and tenacious fundraising strategy—asking donors for small-dollar contributions multiple times a year. "We're trying to meet the donor where the donor is, right?" Valerie said. "It's not about us and when we can do it—it's about making contributing convenient, and getting in front of potential donors on a regular, ongoing basis." All

campaign emails, social media posts, and thank-you notes are pre-written, with room to update copy as plans or goals change. The planning is key to a successful campaign, Valerie said. "You've got a very precise schedule on what needs to be done when, and you follow it," she stated. "That's our business."

TIP

Analyze audience data to determine fundraising goals.

By 2021, Sahan Journal had two years' worth of data to learn from. "One time does not a trend make," said Valerie. "But now we've got enough information that we can start to see the trends and what our audience is telling us about how much they like to give." Valerie and team track information such as whether their readers like to make recurring gifts or single donations, and how much they typically donate. From there, they use that data to set fundraising goals.

"One example of that is to make sure we're never asking for too little, which is a big mistake that has been made in many nonprofit organizations," said Valerie. The Sahan Journal staff pays attention to the amounts they ask audiences for and what readers tend to give. They then use that information to adjust their suggested minimum donations. "It's a silly little example, but it's important," she added.



Be nimble with the value you can provide, and fundraise accordingly.

In addition to their scheduled fundraisers each year, the Sahan Journal staff looks for every opportunity to put fundraising calls-to-action, or CTAs, in front of their readers. They include CTAs in emails, on their website, and embedded in stories. They leverage their following on social media. And they find the silver lining amid events like the pandemic and local protests, remembering that people want to give in times of crisis.

“Here’s what we’ve found out about the nonprofit world,” said Valerie. “When it gets tough, people want information. They want to be educated. They want to know what’s going on around them. And a lot of times,

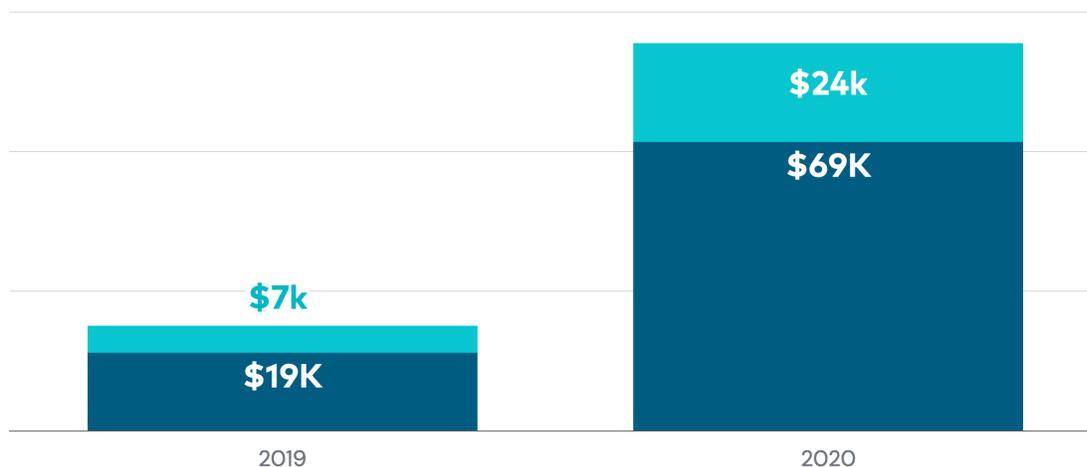
in the nonprofit media world, fundraising does not suffer.”

That was the case for Sahan Journal. As average monthly uniques and newsletter subscribers skyrocketed (in 2019: 20,500 uniques and 228 subscribers; in 2020: 93,654 uniques and 3,461 subscribers), so did donations. In 2019, individual donations totaled \$25,075, with \$18,600 from 300 small dollar donors and \$6,500 from five midrange donors. The following year, Sahan Journal more than tripled revenue from individual giving. The outlet raised \$92,504 total from individual donations, including \$68,899 from 1,077 small dollar donors and \$23,615 from 14 midrange and major donors.

Sahan Journal's individual giving revenue by donor type

● Small donations (gifts below \$1K)

● Large donations (gifts above \$1K)





In August 2020, Sahan Journal participated in a call-to-action seminar hosted by INN. The goal of the workshop was to distill best practices for embedding fundraising appeals and newsletter subscription invitations directly within news stories. “Because that’s meeting the reader where the reader is,” explained Valerie. She said the workshop was helpful, and reiterated everything she knew from decades of fundraising work.

“It’s a really smart thing for fundraisers to do,” she said. “With digital publications, it’s like, how do we show up where the reader is? Well, you do that by embedding those calls-to-action right in the story.”

Throughout 2020, those stories were more important than ever. Sahan Journal reported on COVID-19 cases and updates, created a memorial project for lives lost to the disease, and provided information about COVID hotlines and other resources that were available in multiple languages. After George Floyd’s death and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement, reporters covered local protests, interviewed immigrant business owners affected by vandalism and looting, and provided updates on the ways local institutions vowed to take tougher action against racism.

“They produce such high-quality, well-done work,” said Nusheen, the Minnesota pediatrician who has made several donations to Sahan Journal. “I think about how big organizations—I’m sure well-meaning people—have a bit of a blind spot when it comes to reporting on communities of color,” she said. “I rely on Sahan Journal to give me that information, on the ground, first-hand information from communities that are directly affected by all of these issues.”

Seeing so many local families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic inspired Sahan Journal to add another dimension to its fundraising campaigns: Raising money to feed Minnesota families in need.

When readers make a monthly gift to Sahan Journal, they’re also donating to a Minneapolis-St. Paul food

bank, Second Harvest Heartland. “When you make a monthly gift, you automatically make a donation to Minnesota kids, moms, and dads—meals for them,” explained Valerie. “If you give \$10 a month, it’s 10 meals; \$15 a month, it’s 15 meals; \$20, 20 meals. It’s a very simple message and it’s very effective,” she said.

“We want to be a really, really great community player, and we know that our readers want to help their community be a better place,” Valerie added.

Sahan Journal’s 2020 NewsMatch campaign also benefited Second Harvest Heartland. That meant that, in addition to readers’ contributions being matched, their donations also provided meals. “My philosophy on this is as a fundraiser and as a part of the community is that we have this access to do fundraising that other nonprofits may not have,” Valerie shared. “Why not stretch the impact farther?”

TIP

Invest in agile and responsive fundraising technology and systems.

Sahan Journal uses the technology stack provided by the News Revenue Hub in order to easily and quickly segment email appeals.

On Sept. 30, 2020, when an operative from the right-wing activist group Project Veritas attacked the Minnesota news outlet on Twitter, Mukhtar used the incident as a fundraising opportunity. He quickly sent out a pitch and tailored the call-to-action to three different segments: nondonors were asked to give a contribution; monthly donors were asked to give an additional, one-time contribution; and one-time donors were asked to give monthly.



Looking ahead

It's serendipitous that NewsMatch was Sahan Journal's first fundraising campaign. The program gave Mukhtar the information, templates, and connections he needed to get started, and it provided a springboard for Sahan Journal's other scheduled fundraisers throughout the year.

"NewsMatch has given us an extraordinary opportunity to experiment with different ways to do online fundraising," said Mukhtar. He and his team have learned how to leverage their social media followings, extend the value of individual donations, and make a clear case for the valuable work that Sahan Journal does.

"From the start, it was obvious that we had a community that was eager to support us and was really excited about the project," he added.

"Mukhtar is the perfect person to start up a nonprofit because he really believes in ongoing, strategic-based

fundraising—and he doesn't shy away from it at all," said Valerie. She said she's encountered many people who run organizations who only want to do one fundraiser a year. "Mukhtar is not like that at all, and that makes a big difference."

After completing their spring, summer and fall 2021 fundraising campaigns, Mukhtar and team expect to turn their attention to NewsMatch. Valerie already has her spreadsheet in place, and Mukhtar is at the ready with email templates and strong relationships with funders.

What's different this year, though, is that the Sahan Journal team is bigger than before, which means that they'll be able to make their campaign even more robust. "In our last NewsMatch fundraiser, in 2020, we used pretty straightforward copy on our emails and the design was a Sahan Journal logo," said Valerie. Now, with new staff members, the team has created custom headers and footers for emails, plus fresh images for social media.

"By the time we get to NewsMatch this November, we'll already have three 2021 fundraisers done, which means that the people I'm working with will be that much smarter, more knowledgeable, and experienced," Valerie said. "I'm imagining we'll be firing on all cylinders by that point."

Mukhtar is looking forward to the campaign, though he freely admits that fundraising isn't always easy. "It's full of ups and downs—especially when you get to the end of the month," he said. "But you feel a sense of relief in the end when you get all of that support from the community."



Yanelis Camacho speaks with Sahan Journal reporter Becky Dernbach about her upcoming graduation from Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Minneapolis. [Read this story.](#)



APPENDIX A

HOW SAHAN JOURNAL BUILT COMMUNITY SUPPORT TO GROW REVENUE BY 50% IN ONE YEAR

SAHAN JOURNAL

Sahan Journal's advice to other news outlets

Host a brainstorming session to determine language for fundraising appeals.

Before their 2020 NewsMatch campaign, Valerie gathered Sahan Journal's reporters and editors via Zoom—they were all working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic—and shared “a list of the sad, old, tired fundraising campaign language” that nonprofit media outlets often use. “Then I asked how we were different.” From there, the staff shared their ideas, and Valerie asked follow-up questions. “You’re not saying to the content team, ‘Help me fundraise,’” she explained. “You’re saying, ‘What’s so great about your stories? What makes Sahan Journal so special?’ And they came up with great answers.”

According to IDEO, a global design firm that specializes in helping organizations innovate, one of the key rules of brainstorming is encouraging as many ideas as possible. Other rules include deferring judgment, encouraging wild ideas, and building on the ideas of others. With these concepts in place, they say, brilliant ideas will thrive. Valerie didn’t know IDEO’s rules for brainstorming, but she unconsciously followed them. She organized two brainstorming sessions with the Sahan Journal staff—one to come up with as many ideas as possible, and another to choose the best of those ideas—and came away with an invaluable list of phrases to use in fundraising campaigns and appeals.

The brainstorming was beneficial for everyone involved. “It really was a morale booster for the staff and it clarified a lot,” said Valerie. “I highly recommend it.”

Get comfortable asking for money as a journalist.

Asking donors for money did not come naturally for Mukhtar at the start. Like many reporters-turned-founders, he didn’t have experience in fundraising and wasn’t sure where to begin. After expressing his discomfort to Valerie, she gave him some valuable advice. “Valerie told me that you are not asking for money personally—you are advocating for the mission of the organization,” Mukhtar said. “That really helped me to take the personal feeling out of it.”

Because Mukhtar believed strongly in the mission of Sahan Journal, he was able to more confidently ask people for financial support. Starting with the first NewsMatch campaign, Mukhtar took advantage of his large social media following and connections in the community, and began to solicit donations.

Mukhtar offered advice to news organization founders, like him, who may be inexperienced when it comes to asking people for money. “Founders of news nonprofits tend to be former reporters or come from the editorial side. They’re fairly new and fundraising can be uncomfortable,” he said. “But if you believe in the mission of your organization, then you should approach fundraising as if you’re reporting a good story: You call your sources multiple times, you show up, you’re persistent. You do everything possible to get the story.”

“That’s how I view fundraising,” Mukhtar added. “If you are constantly calling and emailing people, some of them will eventually respond.”



Be creative.

Something that made Mukhtar's appeals stand out on Twitter was how he kept track of donor names. In a tweet sent on December 3, 2019, he wrote, "We are committed to producing high-quality and authentic journalism about immigrants and refugees in Minnesota. It's what we do. But we can't do it without you. Will you support us today through #NewsMatch and double the impact of your donation?" He paired that ask with a photo of his reporter's notebook, and a handwritten, numbered list of names: 27 contributors and counting.

At other points in the campaign, Mukhtar expanded the contributor list to a whiteboard in his office. Again, his tweets were paired with photos that showed donor names in his distinctive handwriting. It made the appeal personal, and it worked.

Valerie said that the whiteboard approach was effective. Seeing names fill up the board reminded contributors that they were part of a bigger movement. "It was very low-tech," she said. "I think that was—in our world of high-tech fundraising—a clever way to keep people informed about their involvement in Sahan Journal.

ABOUT SAHAN JOURNAL

Sahan Journal is the only independent, 501(c)(3) nonprofit digital newsroom fully dedicated to providing authentic news reporting for and about immigrants and communities of color in Minnesota.

The journal aims to chronicle the struggles, successes and transformations of Minnesota's immigrants and communities of color, whose stories are often overlooked by traditional news organizations. As Minnesota becomes more diverse, Sahan will bring the stories of immigrants and communities of color to the mainstream, with the skill and deftness that they deserve.

Sahan Journal is a member of the Institute for Nonprofit News. To learn more, visit sahanjournal.com.

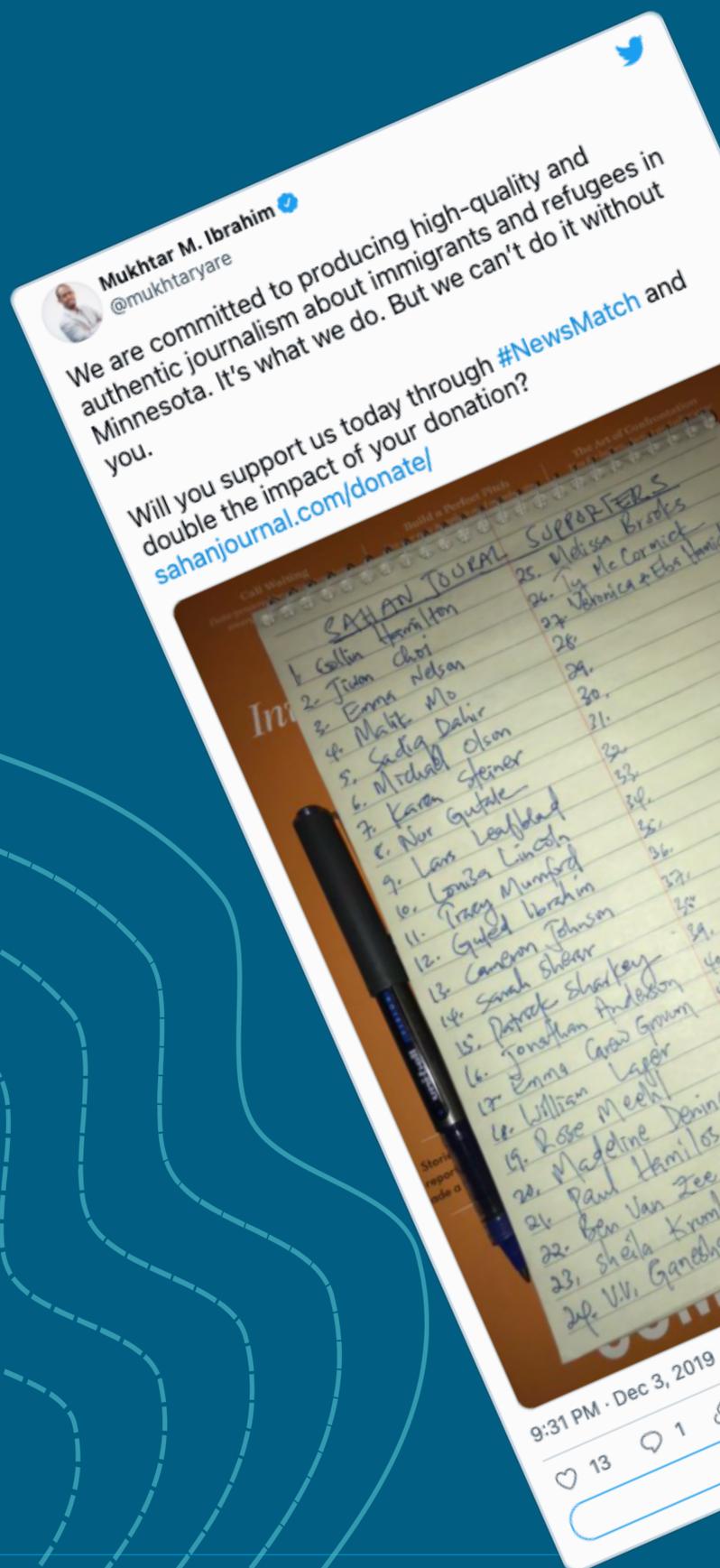




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Portrait of Mhonpaj Lee taken by Jaida Grey Eagle for Sahan Journal

Portrait of Muhktar Ibrahim taken by Guy Wagner for Sahan Journal

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Farhiya Aden receiving vaccine taken by Ben Hovland for Sahan Journal

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Image of Yanelis Camacho speaking with reporter Becky Dernbach courtesy of Sahan Journal