



## LEADERSHIP PROFILE

**President & Chief Executive Officer  
Deep South Today**

[Location Flexible]

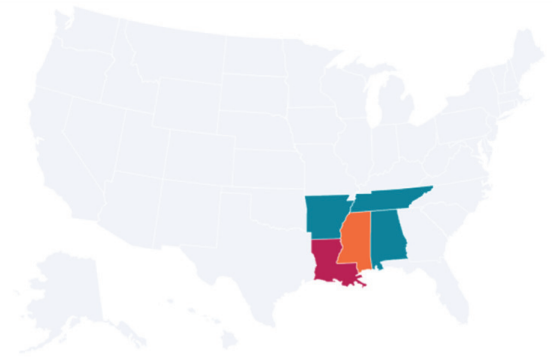
# The Context

Deep South Today, a networked hub of nonprofit newsrooms serving the most challenged region of the country, was born out of a shared belief in the inherent value of important *local* news reporting—robust, unfettered, nonpartisan—backed by a shared commitment to the essential role local journalism plays in a democracy.

“[T]he advertising-based model for local news has been under threat for many years,” noted one in-depth report.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, “One-fourth of the country’s newspapers have disappeared.... Without a source for local news, community members get most of their news from social media, leaving them vulnerable to mis- and dis-information and exacerbating political polarization.”

Between 2004 and 2020, more than 2,000 American newspapers went out of business,<sup>2</sup> and newsroom employment in US newspapers dropped 51% between 2008 and 2019.<sup>3</sup> The resulting news void is especially noticeable in the deep South, a void Deep South Today and its local news organizations are determined to fill.

The first spoke in the hub that would become DST was [Mississippi Today](#). Launched in 2016 by award-winning journalist and former president and chairman of NBC News and MSNBC, Andrew Lack, in partnership with Donna and Jim Barksdale (Co-Founder of Netscape and former COO of FedEx), Mississippi Today received pre-launch support from national foundations (Ford, Walton, Knight) and regional foundations (Pittman, Molpus and Scruggs).



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It’s fair to say we’re living through a crucial moment for local news and honest information in our country.

The work has never felt more important. This is a transformative time in journalism.

- DST founder Andy Lack

<sup>1</sup> [“Addressing the decline of local news, rise of platforms and spread of mis- and dis-information online,”](#) Center for Information, Technology & Public Life, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> NPR, August 3, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, April 28, 2020.

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Our journalists don't chase headlines or write for clicks. We dig deep to give [readers] the full picture of breaking news and systemic problems plaguing our state.

- Mary Margaret White,  
MT's CEO & Executive Editor



Founded as a statehouse watchdog, Mississippi Today still has its roots in Capitol coverage, but its beats now include covering education, public health, justice, the environment, equity, and sports through a transformative lens. Its most recent journalistic wins honor the doggedness of its reporters. Notes Mary Margaret White, MT's CEO & Executive Editor, "Our journalists don't chase headlines or write for clicks. We dig deep to give [readers] the full picture of breaking news and systemic problems plaguing our state. We believe that good reporting and the accountability it inspires can change the trajectory of our state."

Mississippi Today now has the most influential newsroom in the state,<sup>4</sup> and one of the largest, proving that free, in-depth nonpartisan local news is the antidote to apathy and an essential key to government accountability. Mississippi Today represents a more inclusive voice of the region and all its residents.

Emboldened by MT's success and funders' support, the second spoke in the hub was launched last year in New Orleans: [Verite](#), a nonprofit news organization with a twofold mission:

- Provide coverage and crucial information to under-served communities in the greater New Orleans area to help address, through a racial lens, systemic issues in education, health care, criminal justice, housing, the environment and more while providing a platform for unheard and overlooked voices
- Train, mentor and encourage the next generation of minority journalists "to bring diverse perspectives and life experiences to news coverage and storytelling."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Presently 16 editors and reporters and a total staff of 23.

<sup>5</sup> Recognizing that less than 3% of majority newsroom employees are people of color, Verite intends to create a pipeline of talent to be shared and celebrated.



From a standing start last September, Verite's Executive Director David Francis and Editor-in-Chief Terry Baquet assembled a staff of thirteen, including the first of its Journalism Fellows, Verite's pipeline for the next generation of journalists committed to equity in news coverage.

With the combined successes of Mississippi Today and Verite, the groundbreaking model of a central hub—Deep South Today (DST)—is being established to provide the infrastructure for impact-driven newsrooms across its footprint. The overarching vision is that the people and resources of DST will allow its local entities to focus on editorial content and audience development while they receive support in finance, administration, and fundraising from a centralized hub.

While Deep South Today's newsrooms may have different areas of focus, each will be centered on serving their local readers' needs, not national news. That said, all DST entities will share the commitment to inform and educate a broad, inclusive readership via compelling stories covered with dignity and integrity.

Each newsroom will have editorial independence and local leadership. DST will build on the lessons learned about audience and editorial in each market, adjusting its growing operations, practices and processes based on collective experience and local market needs.

For example,

- Mississippi Today is dedicated to “providing Mississippians with reporting that inspires active interest in their state and equips them to engage in community life.” Verite is focused on New Orleans’s vulnerable minority populations, combatting the distrust Black and disenfranchised people have long held for media organizations.
- Mississippi Today aims to be the authoritative voice on politics and policy in Mississippi,



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Verite is the notion of a long-held desire to increase news and information access for underserved communities and to elevate journalists of color.

– Andrew Lack, Deep South Today's Founder and Chair

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whereas Verite will elevate voices from communities that have been historically dismissed or ignored to create thoughtful, solution-based coverage on crucial topics.

- Although at different stages of maturity, both entities will make full use of dynamic websites, web alerts, podcasts, social media, and mobile apps.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the two organizations' journalistic needs may differ, but their impact is informed by common values, and they have common needs for financial support, systems infrastructure, and business leadership.

For more information on DST's operating units, visit the extensive websites of [Mississippi Today](#) and [Verite](#), and peruse their various offerings. For more on nonprofit journalism, sites such as [Institute for Nonprofit News](#) and [Local Independent News Organizations](#) can provide useful context. For a window on founder Andy Lack, his 2020 essay, "[Journalism is under attack](#)," is instructive.

## The Opportunity

Deep South Today is fully entrenched in Mississippi and well underway in Louisiana. It is also in advanced discussions with funders interested in DST's readiness to establish local newsrooms in Arkansas and Tennessee.

The leadership of its current operating units are appropriately focused on their individual organizations, ensuring the editorial excellence and community presence their local missions and burgeoning organizations require.

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<sup>6</sup> As one indication of its digital reach, MT had an average of over 395,000 visitors to its website each month last year, and its newsletters have over 43,000 subscribers



who can refine the strategy, garner the resources, and ensure the staffing, structure and capacity-enhancing services required to support the growing needs of a rapidly evolving operation.

## The Organization

As a nonprofit business entity, Deep South Today is in transition from start-up to industry model. Entrepreneurial at heart, DST will remain a locally focused organization even as it develops regional systems and national resources.

The CEO of Deep South Today can expect to build and lead a hub with fairly classic components, as indicated in the adjacent graphic. Subsumed in “fundraising” is the need to develop a replicable revenue model supported through advertising.

While always respecting the editorial independence of the individual units, DST’s CEO will have both the opportunity and the mandate to develop appropriate wrap-around support, making sure the hub’s people, systems, services and funding align with the overall mission. To optimize the hub’s effectiveness, DST’s CEO must leverage data and digital resources to collective advantage while driving DST’s revenue strategy and its relationships with current and potential funders.

To help realize its ambitious mission, Deep South Today requires a proven leader with the creativity of an architect, the tenacity of a builder and the passion of an entrepreneur undaunted by the challenges ahead.

The backing of national philanthropic partners, individual donors and a growing readership will mitigate some of the shorter-term pressures of a true start-up. Nevertheless, the CEO must complement this foundation with the relationships and building infrastructure to ensure a sustainable enterprise worthy of the ambitious mission ahead.



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For example, DST Engine is an innovative audience hub under development that will deploy advanced digital technology across the network newsrooms to support audience building, content accessibility and financial management. Such a system might be out of reach for an individual newsroom, but it will be essential for a strong and growing network.

While the focus and immediate audience for Deep South’s journalism is local, the appetite for equitable and accurate local news has traction nationally. Accordingly, the CEO must create or solidify relationships with a broad array of stakeholders across the country. Communications with such stakeholders—current and potential funders, civic and political leaders, program collaborators and the like—could easily take up half of the new executive’s capacity.

## The Mandate

The CEO of Deep South Today can expect to have several overlapping priorities, among them

- Confirm DST’s overarching vision with the Board, then develop and execute the strategy to make that vision real
- Build a supportive relationship with the operating entities, respecting local autonomy while delivering collective value
- Marshall the innovative thinking and financial resources required for a financially sustainable enterprise characterized by diverse revenue streams
- Develop or tap best practices in technology and data management
- Establish relationships with sponsors and advertisers to facilitate growth and expansion
- Embody DST’s commitment to the region by being a connected, embedded presence

- Ensure a pervasive commitment to excellence throughout the organization.

## The Relationships

<b>Reports to:</b>	Deep South Today's Board of Directors
<b>Direct reports (an evolving concept):</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEO, Mississippi Today</li> <li>• Executive Director, Verite</li> <li>• Chief Development Officer/Chief Revenue Officer</li> <li>• Finance, Information Technology and Human Resources functions (including outsourced resources or consultants as appropriate)</li> </ul>
<b>Other key relationships:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DST's local Editors-in-Chief</li> <li>• Philanthropic leaders, donors, and supporters, current and potential</li> <li>• Appointed and elected governmental leaders</li> <li>• Community leaders (corporate, academic, civic) throughout the region</li> <li>• Peers in nonprofit journalism</li> <li>• Thought leaders on issues relevant to DST, its mission, and its markets</li> </ul>



**Jackson is issuing new water boil notice every other day**

**Mississippi's child abuse pediatrician works between medicine and the justice system. Can he be objective?**



**Freedom sounds: Musicians helped a movement overcome racial injustice**

**"We are still here": Native Americans have historic legacy in Louisiana**

*- Recent headlines from DST newsrooms*



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The ideal candidate is someone embedded in and culturally attuned to the deep South, an evangelist for progress who embraces the region despite its flaws.



## The Candidate

Deep South Today is an equal opportunity employer committed to social justice and racial equity, and the Board will be proactive in pursuing a diverse set of prospects.

As the organization's public face, DST's CEO must be comfortable and confident in engaging well-educated, well-informed leaders no matter the setting—combining an entrepreneur's passion with a manager's discipline in pursuit of bold aspirations. The ideal candidate is someone embedded in and culturally attuned to the deep South, an evangelist for progress who embraces the region despite its flaws.

Among other qualities, we seek a visionary, inspirational and motivating leader, possessed of a love for place; a bridge builder, an energizing force, and a credible, compelling champion for the mission.

### **Competency: We seek an executive with**

- The business acumen required to lead an ambitious, evolving organization built on community trust
- The experience to develop teams, structure and process that can serve as a model for like-minded missions
- A proven record of fundraising & successful donor engagement at scale; someone experienced working with philanthropy & philanthropists
- A history of success within fast-moving organizations from start-up to relative maturity; better yet, someone who has helped scale a successful organization, anticipating and adapting to the changing needs of a growing enterprise operating across multiple markets

- Working knowledge of publishing and journalism; a leader who understands and respects the distinctions between general management, leadership, and editorial oversight.
- Digital fluency, a builder's mindset, and an abiding commitment to the mission, markets and people who define the organization
- Sufficient experience with governing boards and advisory boards to be a worthy partner for both
- A demonstrated commitment to social justice.

### **Culture: We expect a CEO who is**

- Inclusive (our newsrooms reflect our communities)
- Transparent & accessible; civically engaged and grounded in community
- A champion for justice, equity, access, and truth who gets the nuance of a nonprofit news service focused on government accountability (vs. politics)
- Experienced in nonprofit leadership and governance, as a senior member of the team or a veteran of nonprofit board service
- Independent-minded but fundamentally collaborative; a natural relationship-builder
- Clear-minded about the interdependence of mission and margin
- A pragmatic optimist who thrives in fast-paced environments; someone who gets things done
- A critical friend re the issues, institutions, and people of the South; someone who is neither naïve nor cynical; an advocate, not a zealot; a leader who operates from a sense of abundance rather than one of scarcity



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Deep South Today aims to solve the challenges facing local news through a networked hub of nonprofit newsrooms serving the most challenged region in the United States.

- A leader with a finely honed sense of curiosity; a truth-teller
- Empowering and humble; a leader who listens well.

## The Location

The CEO must reside within DST's service footprint (Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi or Tennessee), but the precise location is open to discussion. There are advantages to basing the CEO in either Jackson, MS, or New Orleans, but the Board is open to other considerations as well.

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For potential consideration or to suggest a prospect, please email

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or **Michelle Hall**

at 404-BoardWalk (404-262-7392).

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All photos courtesy of Mississippi Today photographers, Vickie D. King and Eric Shelton.