

Pt. 1: TRiiBE's Core Values & Principles

A History of The TRiiBE

"We were part of a nationwide movement." – Morgan Johnson, The TRiiBE Co-Founder

[The TRiiBE](#) was founded on February 15, 2017 by Morgan Johnson and Tiffany Walden, in partnership with web developer David Elutilo amidst a complex political landscape. At the time, Trump was in the early stages of his presidency that would contribute to rising political and racial tensions across the country, not to mention change the public's perception of journalism. "We really felt compelled and driven to start building The TRiiBE once Donald Trump was elected to office and was using Chicago as kind of like a rallying cry for his supporters," Johnson said. The TRiiBE was established amidst a nationwide movement of Black journalists looking to reshape the media industry.

"Journalism was becoming a traumatic experience for me and my peers." – Johnson

In an interview with Northwestern Magazine, TRiiBE co-founder Tiffany Walden said, "it seems like Chicago is the poster child for really everything wrong with Black America." Media coverage of Chicago was especially damaging to the Black community. Both Walden and her co-founder Morgan Johnson grew up in the Chicago area, and found the media's narrative not familiar to what they felt growing up. Johnson had concerns about how biased media coverage could impact Black communities. "I had a lot of questions about journalism's role in retraumatizing the public through harmful images of black death," Johnson said. Johnson and Walden wanted to "[do] their Chicago-area communities justice," according to Northwestern Magazine.

In 2017, when Walden and Johnson started the publication, they realized that they would need a web developer so that they could have a proper platform to efficiently deliver the content they wanted to produce. With both co-founders being Northwestern University alumni, they were able to easily connect to fellow alumni David Elutilo, who had graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science.

"I had this feeling of, oh, this is something I want to be a part of, something I want to help build."
– David Elutilo, The TRiiBE Head of Operations and Lead Developer

When the co-founders pitched Elutilo the idea behind The TRiiBE, he immediately understood the importance of their idea and felt personally connected to the project. Thinking back to their pitch, Elutilo recalls, “I saw its potential value. Like, I thought it was incredible. It was an incredible idea. It felt like something that I think at the time I recognized wasn’t in Chicago.” Elutilo then became the head of operations and lead developer at The TRiiBE. With Walden and Johnson’s background in journalism and communication, Elutilo helped them develop a platform; together, all three of them were able to launch The TRiiBE’s website in 2017.

Value Proposition

The TRiiBE seeks to challenge traditional narratives around the Black community in Chicago by highlighting Black joy and culture.

The TRiiBE is a digital news platform whose goal is to help Black Chicago “reclaim ownership of its stories through reporting that humanizes and adds depth to mainstream, traditional media coverage of the city,” according to Northwestern Magazine. The TRiiBE strives to be a platform for Black people in Chicago to “come to and tell their different stories of what’s been going on throughout the city,” said Elutio to The Daily Northwestern.

Pt. 2: Who does The TRiiBE serve?

Scope of Coverage

“I wouldn’t say [The TRiiBE] is hyperlocal, but we do expand our scope with some stories.”

–Tonia Hill, multimedia reporter for The TRiiBE

Hill explained that when The TRiiBE covers larger stories and issues, the reporters will find a way to tie it back into Chicago. “[We] find a way of taking an issue that’s happening nationally and trying to find the connection; is it something that the community should be aware of?” Hill said.

Target Audience

The TRiiBE’s target audience aligns with its value proposition. Elutilo commented that currently their target audience is mostly Black millennials that live in Chicago. However, as a publication, they are currently trying to expand to other age groups. Hill further elaborated by saying that The TRiiBE’s target audience is “our community and who we are accountable for.”

Audience Size

In 2017, The TRiiBE published roughly 60 articles and had an average of 5,600 page views a month. The site now publishes four times as many stories and is averaging 42,000 page views a month, according to an interview with Johnson published by Crain's Chicago Business in October 2023.

"Now, we're at a place where we're actually starting to build a strategy on how to give our content to the masses to get people engaged and get people to subscribe." – Elutilo

Elutilo also mentioned that The TRiiBE has hired their first employee that focuses on audience engagement and the publication's marketing, so they are expecting an increase in their audience's size in the upcoming weeks.

Audience Trends

"People want to hear from our youth and young people. Any time we do a story related to youth and children we get high engagement." – Hill

Hill said that the most popular stories are "nostalgic," positive stories, and coverage on children & youth. She specifically referenced an article about Beyoncé and one about Chicago specific jingles. She also said that The TRiiBE hopes to expand their target audience and reach younger readers. Despite this, The TRiiBE may well be on its way to reach more Gen Z readers, as its video content is more popular than its written counterparts.

"We did see a boom in growth during the 2020 uprisings because we were providing something that other news outlets were not providing." – Johnson

Johnson attributes their growth in readership to how The TRiiBE covers events, working with young Black people and community organizers from throughout the country.

This observation suggests that audiences are not only responsive to differences in the content The TRiiBE puts out, they are also heavily influenced by current events — Johnson also commented that they saw similar upticks in readership with the COVID-19 pandemic and during election cycles.

Pt. 3: The Business of The TRiiBE

Competitive Analysis

The TRiiBE seeks to get away from the idea of competing with other publications, especially those that are aiming at a similar target audience. Elutilo described the journalism industry as a “landscape where everyone is needed.” Johnson explained that The TRiiBE’s overarching goal is not to compete but just “to be useful to the people of Chicago, specifically Black Chicagoans.”

However, there are indeed other publications in the Chicago area that produce content specifically for the city’s Black community. South Side Weekly and Block Club Chicago are news companies that publish with a similar hyperlocal intent. The TRiiBE is able to stand out among its competitors because it is more focused on reshaping the Black community.

In fact, one of The TRiiBE’s founders, Tiffany Walden, is working on a “how-to” guide for other reporters trying to write to Black communities around the United States. This is because The TRiiBE was able to perfect a formula for their writing that allows them to produce content targeted towards Chicago’s Black community — something that Elutilo believes distinguishes them from their competitors.

Costs

Currently, the largest inhibitor to The TRiiBE’s growth is its large hiring costs. The TRiiBE is composed of a team of nine individuals, two of whom work part-time. Newsroom salaries run The TRiiBE nearly \$400,000 each year. According to Johnson, legal fees have been their second highest cost, which they were not prepared for. The TRiiBE has often had to defend its articles which has proved costly. “Especially us being a Black publication, you have to be prepared to battle,” Johnson said.

Another cost to The TRiiBE, although much smaller in comparison to how much they spend on legal fees and salaries, is how much The TRiiBE’s spends on marketing themselves and trying to reach potential readers, especially those that make up their target audience. At first, the publication’s strategy was to build a repertoire and focus on putting out quality content. Now, Elutilo says that they are at a stage where they are starting to invest in marketing/advertising channels, as until now, most of their marketing has been done through events targeted towards the Black community and subsequent word-of-mouth.

Revenue Streams

According to The TRiiBE co-founder Morgan Johnson, the company was founded because there was a need for Black voices in the journalism industry. Johnson, who has a background in communications, remarked on the difficulty of transforming The TRiiBE into a

profitable business. “At first, we had no money, we had no investors — we suffered to pretty extreme levels,” she said. During the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, The TRiiBE depended on crowdfunding campaigns and an annual fundraising event. As of today, 70% of The TRiiBE’s revenue comes from philanthropic sources.

Throughout the 2020 uprisings, The TRiiBE saw a substantial increase in donations. This made Johnson and her peers realize that people would pay for their product. The TRiiBE began to build out a subscription-based newsletter made up of opinion pieces and “behind the scenes” access to their stories. The TRiiBE differentiates itself from others in the industry by letting customers pay whatever they choose for the newsletter. “People can give at any level they want to, starting at \$10 a month but some people contribute hundreds a month,” said Johnson. The third component of The TRiiBE’s revenue model is advertising. They have found success setting up partnerships with companies directly, while little has come from programmatic ads. “They’re really robbing us there,” Johnson commented.

Another major form of income that contributes to The TRiiBE’s revenue is their events website, [The Scene](#). They post about events with the same target audience as The TRiiBE, Chicago’s Black community, on the website. Some of these events are organized by the publication, some by existing businesses in the community. A few events that The Scene has advertised for include: “Black by Popular Demand” (a show in Second City), and showings of movies about the Black community. Elutilo, who also works on developing The Scene’s website, said that the publication makes a large portion of their advertising revenue from the events they market.

Revenue & Editorial Balance

“As long as you’re not completely, you know, blocking the user’s means of reading their content, then you do it.” – Elutilo

With regards to balancing revenue and editorial goals, The TRiiBE’s mission is not juxtaposed against the need to make a profit; rather, it fuels the team’s desire to produce quality work that will inherently drive financial growth. Elutilo elaborated on how important it is to produce quality content that aligns with their value proposition, and how advertising should not come between the reader and that content. Furthermore, Elutilo said that the publication is able to maintain a “decent balance” between their revenue and editorial goals.

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