

[A Local Focus: A Conversation with Steve Ahlquist of UpRiseRI](#)



Steve Ahlquist is the founder of UpRiseRI.com. He's a reporter and photographer who has become a force for shining a light on stories other local media in Rhode Island seem to be unable to cover with the kind of nuance these complex issues sometimes demand. I became aware of Steve after my theater seized onto a story out of Woonsocket that only he was covering, and since then, he's been a go-to source for no-holds-barred, on-the-ground reporting. He reminds me of the kind of journalists we used to be accustomed to — those who went looking for the news instead of letting the news come to them. He is frequently a champion for the underrepresented in the state, and I was thrilled when he agreed to speak with me about his work.

Kevin Broccoli: Steve, you're someone who I first encountered as the result of your reporting on the Woonsocket Town Council and its antics, but I know you were around well before that. Still, it feels like you've been someone people are looking to more and more for coverage of issues that other media aren't covering. Can you talk a little about your background and career?

Steve Ahlquist: I started writing for RIFuture about eight years ago or so. Smaller stuff, opinion pieces

and stuff. I became interested in the ongoing hotel worker unionization efforts in Providence and their push for a \$15 minimum wage. Having been a minimum wage (or at infrequent times slightly better) worker for most of my life, I was interested in their efforts. I started attending their picket lines and listening to their stories. The majority of people working in these hotels were low-income women of color, who were sacrificing important parts of their lives in an effort to get living wage for the essential work they were doing.

They started an effort to get the City of Providence to establish a municipal minimum wage for hotel workers. They organized and worked to gather signatures to place the idea on the ballot. The ballot question seemed popular and likely to pass, but we'll never know if it would have passed because the General Assembly, led by Speaker Mattiello, passed a budget that included a prohibition against municipal level minimum wage increases.

These women would carpool to events, bring their children along with them or secure childcare, or miss out on additional hours at work or at a second job to advocate for themselves, and to see their work, their hopes and their dreams crushed by the speaker and other members of the General Assembly in such a cavalier and disdainful fashion was absolutely disgusting to me. I knew then, early on in Mattiello's career as Speaker of the House, that he was a man who lacked ordinary compassion.

Over time I parted ways with RIFuture and now I have UpriseRI, which I run with the help of Greg Brailsford and now Will James, who has really upped our game.

KB: The last time I saw you, I asked how you possibly manage to cover as much as you do and we spoke a little bit about your process for deciding which meetings and events you need to attend.

SA: This is the terrible thing about doing this kind of job: There are so many important issues to cover, and so little time and resources at my disposal to cover them all. My process for covering things is pretty haphazard. Sometimes my day is wide open and I can easily cover a press conference here and a protest there. After that, I try to prioritize issues and advocacy groups that I have covered before and that are important to my readers.

I started by covering the efforts of the hotel workers because I wasn't seeing their story, their point of view, being accurately portrayed in the traditional media. I searched for those groups who have a strong message but the media routinely dismissed, ignored or misrepresented. Too often a community group like DARE, PrYSM, the Providence Student Union or many others would hold an event, only to have their views overly simplified. I wanted to show up for these communities and as well as I could, represent their ideas — not my interpretation of what they were saying, but their words, as they said them.

KB: You're someone who I think reports fairly while still not trying to create equivalency in terms of playing the "All sides" game. How much thought do you give to bias and whether that's become more difficult now times have become so polarized?

SA: There is a tendency to defer to power and so-called "experts" when covering difficult stories. In today's climate of Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police, for instance, when a group of people say something like, "Black bodies are over-policed and criminalized" many reporters check with the police to see if that is true. Or they go to the governor.

When hotel workers say that the hotel they work at makes millions and pays them poverty wages, the experts, economists and business interests say that these jobs, these women and their families are not worth more money. We act like affected communities and people with political power and money are on a level playing field. They are not. If the governor wants to say something, she calls a press conference and all the news outlets show up. When a community group wants to say something, it's me and one TV station — maybe.

KB: You've been in a few situations I would describe as tense if not perilous. Have you ever been afraid for yourself or are you more concerned with some of the people you cover, especially protesters?

SA: I think about the danger to myself after it's over. When going into a tense situation, I worry more about the people on the ground. For instance, when I was covering the protest outside the Wyatt where a prison guard drove his truck into a group of sitting, peaceful protesters, I really thought that I would see someone under the tire of that truck, badly hurt or killed. I really don't want to video someone dying or being hurt.

I've been to several events and protests where people have been arrested. Those can be tense, especially when the protesters don't plan on being arrested. I've been to events where protesters plan to be arrested, and smart cops understand their role in the events, and they arrest the people gently, recognizing that this is how free speech, free assembly and civil disobedience work.

White supremacist and Trump rallies are scary because there's a lot of emotion on both sides, and the situation is so volatile. It seems anything can happen. And again, I really don't want people getting hurt.

KB: How do you like to use imagery to cover stories? It seems to be the driving force behind your reporting, and some of the images you capture are really stunning.

SA: I have a still camera and a video camera with me at all the rallies and events I cover. I also have my cell phone for back up, live streaming and social media. The idea is to be patient, and to take pictures of people that reflect their inner selves. I like the pictures that say something, when possible, and the way to get those pictures is to take a lot of them, and then throw most of them away. The video is something I use because sometimes people say things, and later deny saying them. So I take the video and I use the video to show that the politician speaking said what he said. It's harder for a politician to walk back their statements when they say them on video.

I have large batteries for my cameras so I can run video for hours, sometimes just to get two minutes of video that seem dramatic and amazing.

KB: With Rhode Island such a small state, I would imagine that as you cover stories that involve some of the same people over and over again, you would naturally build up relationships with some of those people. Is that something you want to do as it might help, or do you try to avoid it to maintain neutrality?

SA: I think journalistic neutrality is bogus. Everyone has a point of view, a place they come from, and a reason for reporting on an event the way they do. Journalism isn't about simply reporting what happened. It can't be. What a journalist chooses to cover, what lines they decide to quote from a 10-minute speech, what video they clip to show on TV that night, these are choices and none of these choices are value-neutral.

Also, there is a long history of journalism dedicated to social improvement. Think Ida B. Wells. She wasn't neutral on the subject of lynchings. She didn't cover a lynching and then seek out a statement from the KKK. She was addressing racist crimes being committed against innocent people, and exposing it. The same is true for many great reporters.

I think the concept of journalistic neutrality has more to do with selling newspaper advertisements than with fairly covering a story. One of the reasons it took so long to uncover the abuse of children in the Catholic Church is because the news did not want to offend their Catholic readers and lose subscriptions. In my opinion, it wasn't about balance, it was about protecting the bottom line.

As for the relationships I have with various protesters and activists, I value them. I've worked to earn their trust. I work to fairly portray their points of view and many have expressed appreciation for that. When you watch people struggle mightily against an injustice, whether it's people in Providence fighting for racial justice or people in Burrillville fighting to prevent the building of an unneeded power plant, you can't help but start to fall in love with them.

KB: Are there any stories right now that you think aren't getting the kind of coverage they should be and if so, what are they?

SA: It's really hard right now because of COVID. The upcoming 2021 budget will be disastrous for Rhode Islanders if our General Assembly is allowed to make the kind of draconian cuts they want to. Everyone assumes that Federal aid will save us, but what if it doesn't? The people in charge of Congress and our General Assembly believe in austerity, in small government, and low taxes for the rich. Even as they say things like, "Supply-side economics doesn't work," they pursue supply-side economic policies. They lack basic human compassion, they lack any kind of economic understanding, and they are ready to hurt the poor.

KB: I feel like more and more what happens on the national level affects what happens locally faster and with more of an impact. Do you see that happening as well?

SA: Trumpism has impacts on the local level, no doubt. Environmental policies across the country hurt us here in Rhode Island. Immigration policies affect us in the form of broken families and the situation at the Wyatt. Trump's racism results in white nationalist rallies on the State House lawn. Shootings by police in other states can result in rallies in Rhode Island and the mobilization of the National Guard on the streets of Providence, defending the Cheesecake Factory with automatic weapons.

So yeah, I see it. But I also know that my ability to impact national events is small. So I stay hyper-focused locally. I can't stop Trump per se, but I can certainly work to expose the actions of the governor, speaker and senate president when they impose Trump-like policies here.

Think of what's happening right now to Kennedy Plaza. Think about the fact that we can't pass a bill that guarantees fair and equal pay for women, or a bill to cover doula services with Medicaid, or an eviction moratorium, or a price on carbon, or a ban on assault weapons, or an effort to put nurses and mental health advocates into schools instead of armed police, or any number of other good things. These are national issues with local solutions, or at least local attempts at solutions.

KB: We spoke about my frustration with the lack of follow-through some news outlets have when it comes to bigger stories, particularly the rioting that happened in downtown Providence where stores were vandalized. It felt like we never got a complete picture of what happened there. Can you talk at all about your experience covering that story and how possible do you think it is with all that's happening to keep going back to older stories to update readers on them?

SA: I heard about the so-called riots after the fact. I slept through them. I know a lot of the activists

involved in Rhode Island and I'm not sure anyone I know was involved in that action. That said, look at what happened in the aftermath. For years, these actions have been happened in the aftermath of police shootings of Black and brown people. For years we've been talking about the school-to-prison pipeline, racial profiling by the police, the over policing of BIPOC communities, the criminalization of ordinary actions by non-white people. And the first reaction to those overnight "riots?" More police. National Guard, Humvees, automatic weapons, helicopters buzzing over Providence. Why is the solution to police violence more police?

KB: What's your impression of how social media, particularly using social media to amplify reporting, has affected that reporting? Do you find it to be a useful tool or do the cons sometimes outweigh the pros?

SA: Social media allows a small news organization like mine to find an audience. Yes, it has its cons. Trolls abound and I block people every day. Ugly, racist shit is said on Facebook and Twitter every minute of every day. But there is also beauty and wisdom being shared. Yes, Facebook was used as a weapon to harm our elections, and it will be again. But people also get their local races noticed there, and they make their pitches to voters who might not otherwise have heard of them.

So it's a mixed bag, I think. I respect what ecoRI is doing. They're experimenting with getting off Facebook. I think that's brave, because Facebook brings a lot of traffic to small news sites like ours. Will the day come when I can no longer be part of Facebook, and I have to write that evil platform off for good? Yeah, maybe. So check back in six months and we'll revisit this.

KB: How do you separate yourself from your reporting enough to not get too mentally depleted?

SA: I have a great family. I also read comics, watch movies, go for walks. I am mentally depleted sometimes, but I believe that optimism is a choice. Maybe it's an illusory choice, but it allows me to keep going, get the work done, so it's working, for now.

KB: As someone who covers stories all over the state, how vast do you feel the difference is between the stories we see coming out of Providence and the rest of Rhode Island? Sometimes it feels as though we're a microcosm of the county-at-large.

SA: We are. Rhode Island is more purple than blue. We have a dense urban core of liberal-ish Democrats surrounded by deeply red areas. That said, it doesn't have to be that way. Burrillville used to be represented by Democrats. That changed in part as a response to Governor Raimondo's insistence on championing an unwanted power plant. She decided to sacrifice Burrillville politically as a favor to a

rich, connected out-of-state power plant developer. Our state Democratic Party doesn't champion ideals. They champion money and power.

KB: What issues do you see becoming more heightened as we approach the election in November? Do you think the pandemic will continue dominating the news the way it has been or will electoral politics ever taken over the way it would during a normal year?

SA: The pandemic isn't the only story. There's the pandemic, the economy, Black lives, and a looming environmental disaster that threatens everyone on Earth. Right now, we're acting like we have the pandemic under control, because the windows are open and we can eat at restaurants outside. That may all change in the winter months.

Additionally, the people who are out to destroy the environment are the ones least affected by the economic downturn. Rich white people haven't had the same hits to their economic well-being the rest of us have. And they're all continuing, business as usual, to make as much money as possible while the world collapses around them.

KB: Where do you see valuable reporting happening either on a local or national level? I'd love to know where you get your news from.

SA: I like Julia Rock's A Little Rhody. I like Bill Bartholomew's reporting. I like The Public's Radio, I still pay attention to local and political reporting from the ProJo and the Boston Globe. I like Channel 12's investigative pieces, and have a lot of respect for Steve Klamkin at WPRO. ecoRI is great as well. I can't forget the reporting Motif does, they've really stepped up their game. I also like many of the reporters I see doing the job out there on a daily basis.

KB: How can we continue to support your reporting?

SA: Every story I do have a link for people to send us money. We are entirely supported by readers who like what we do.

You can find and support Steve's work at [Uprise RI - Rhode Island's #1 Source for Political and Government News](#)