NINA MOINI: There are more than a quarter million Somali Americans in the US and more than 80,000 in Minnesota. The diaspora is a frequent target of attacks from the White House down to online influencers and commenters. Two Minnesota journalists aim to combat racist misinformation with true stories about Somali American life, with a new digital platform called The Somali Brief.

Founder Mukhtar Ibrahim has been rethinking how to cover immigrant communities in Minnesota for years. He worked at the Minnesota Star Tribune here at MPR News. We sat across from each other for a little while before founding Sahan Journal in 2019. He's now back in the studio to tell us about this latest project. Thank you for being here, Mukhtar.

MUKHTAR IBRAHIM: Thank you so much, Nina, for having us.

NINA MOINI: We are also thrilled to be joined by journalist Ubah Ali, who became the Twin Cities' first Somali American TV news reporter when she started at WCCO-TV a few years ago. Now she's lead reporter for The Somali Brief. Thank you for being here as well. Nice to meet you.

UBAH ALI: Nice to meet you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Mukhtar. Congratulations first of all, to both of you. And thank you. Thank you for this amazing resource that you're starting. Mukhtar, you wrote a piece about why you're starting The Somali Brief. You talked about some of the attacks that the community is under right now, and what people went through during Operation Metro Surge and beyond. Tell us a little bit about why now felt like the time.

MUKHTAR IBRAHIM: First of all, it's so great to be back to MPR newsroom.

NINA MOINI: Great to have you.

MUKHTAR IBRAHIM: A place where I started my career. So as you know, I've been a journalist for more than 10 years and have covered our communities here at MPR, Star Tribune, and then founded Sahan Journal when I felt there was little information and coverage for immigrant communities and people of color in general. And I have led that organization for almost six years and stepped away for almost two years.

And what happened in our communities in the last year or so really made me realize the role of journalism and information and how things move, and the techniques and strategies that led a lot of people to be inundated with misinformation and information that lies about certain communities and how well coordinated that information is. and I felt as a journalist, I had some skills that I can use to help our communities to get better information that's reliable, that's trustworthy, that is professional, that's of quality.

And Ubah and I were talking about that, what happened to our communities and all the attacks that we are seeing, even as we speak right now. And we felt there is a need to fill that gap and not letting one-sided misinformation dominate the media ecosystem. And we felt a sense of obligation to do something about it.

NINA MOINI: And Ubah, you've had such a beautiful journey. It's so amazing when somebody is the first. And there's pride with that. And there's different emotions with that. But there's also something amazing about being able to tell stories the way you want to tell them. Tell us a little bit about just your decision to join The Somali Brief.

UBAH ALI: Well, first of all, coming back to Minnesota and joining WCCO was monumental for me because I left as an intern so excited. And I was like, "I'm going to do this." And I worked with the best of the best, day in, day out. And I think I was ready for a new challenge and I was ready to tell stories in a different capacity. It's no secret that digital media is where people go to consume information, and I wanted to try that and give that a try. I'm grateful for my time at WCCO. I learned a lot. We covered great stories and brought truth to the community. And I plan to continue to do that with The Somali Brief.

NINA MOINI: What do you think this allows you to do being in the digital space? Because to your point, it used to be there were few places for people to go and people maybe didn't want to branch out as much because oh, what if there's no audience? But the audience is there and it continues to grow. Ubah, what are you hoping to be able to bring to the digital world?

UBAH ALI: I think the biggest thing is people don't want to wait until 10 o'clock or 5 o'clock to get timely information. I think the stories that we post during breaking news get the most views because that's when people are hungry for that information. So meeting people where they are is crucial and imperative. And I think that's why I'm most excited to join The Somali Brief and flex some of those muscles. And I'm excited. And since the launch, I think we've seen there's hunger for that. And it's been a great rollout and we're excited to see where things go.

NINA MOINI: Mukhtar, for folks who are listening, who don't know Sahan Journal, which you founded, has become a really imperative part of the media landscape in the state of Minnesota and beyond the growth that occurred there, I can't imagine this media market without it anymore. And I hope I never have to. So I wonder, with that in mind, building on that with The Somali Brief, what are your hopes for the future and just growth?

MUKHTAR IBRAHIM: I think there's always more space for our communities to see themselves reflected. Well, especially when it comes to media and journalism. And The Somali Brief is filling a big gap that we have seen in light of the President of the United States constantly attacking my community and influencers and the algorithm being used against our community. And we just want to have a space that truly reflects the lived experiences and everything about Somali Americans across the country.

So we are starting actually in Minnesota, which has, of course, the largest Somali American community. But also we want to see what we can do for other Somali American communities in other places across the country. And we are going to be social first. So we'll be producing a lot of multimedia content for these platforms that millions of people are using. As you know, Nina, the old way of doing journalism has completely changed. People now are getting the information on a lot of different platforms, and even if they come to our websites, they don't stick around. They just read a few paragraphs and move on.

So how can we be where people are, where they are getting the information, where they are interacting with different content? And as Ubah said, we have seen a huge momentum and engagement on our videos that we just produced on new accounts. Hundreds and thousands of people are actually watching it. 250,000 on X, over 150,000 on TikTok. They are sharing, they're engaging. And that's the type of content we want to produce more often.

NINA MOINI: It does take courage, though. It does take bravery to step into new spaces like this. Ubah, what stories are you looking forward to telling that you feel like that they've been missing from the current ecosystem?

UBAH ALI: That's a loaded question, Nina. But to boil it down, I think when it comes to the Somali community, there's only one narrative being pushed, and that one narrative is gaining traction. And so all the good that Somali Americans bring to the community is being overlooked. So I want to do stories, that I wouldn't be able to do previously-- whether that's trying to figure out why a student organization put together this event and the need, the gap. Why matcha over latte? Like, it could be something so mundane, but I want to just lean in.

And we're going to allow the Somali community and the larger community kind of lead the way for us, allow us to tell their story, but come to us and tell us what matters to them, what they want to see. And I think it's time. It's overdue. And I think it's going to leave its mark, and it's going to be something that the younger generation in particular can be proud of because that's something that they're not consuming right now. And that's the dangers. That is the world we live in today. And I think The Somali Brief is going to bring a lot more happiness and excitement to not just Somalis, but Minnesotans at large.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. I'll give the last question to you here, Mukhtar. All of this is amazing. But it's also important to have representation and a wide variety of comprehensive stories to be told across news outlets and across newsrooms. And that's something everybody can work on. What would you say to other legacy or media organizations, us included, folks who've been around a long time who have a big audience. What are you hoping to see from everyone else?

MUKHTAR IBRAHIM: I want all newsrooms in our state to really establish deep trust with the communities that need to be covered well. It's obvious that journalism is the least diverse profession in this industry. And there are very few people from immigrant communities, from the Muslim community, from the Black community. And it's up to the reporters who work and editors and the managers and decision makers at those places to encourage everyone to venture out, build trust and relationships so that they can service deeper, richer stories.

Then the superficial stories that any reporter can cover, which is very easy. But the hard work starts when people get out of their bubble and get into new communities and build trust and relationships. And that's how you get good stories. That's how you build trust that that's how people, when something happens, they will call you because they trust you. And I hope anyone who's listening, who is a journalist or a reporter or produces content can be out in the community and build those relationships and trust.

NINA MOINI: Thank you both for your time. And congratulations, again. We appreciate it.

MUKHTAR IBRAHIM: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Mukhtar Ibrahim is the founder of The Somali Brief, a new digital media source focused on Somali Americans. And Ubah Ali is the outlet's lead reporter.