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The best ways to build audience and relevance by listening to and engaging your community

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People don't just consume news today. They participate in it.

People have access to vast and varied information. They pursue news on their own time, and on their own terms, connecting with others who share and help satisfy their curiosity about their world.

This presents an opportunity for news publishers strained by shrinking resources and growing competition: Now more than ever, journalists can engage their audiences as contributors, advisors, advocates, collaborators and partners.

This study describes in detail how newsrooms and independent journalists can grow their readership, boost their relevance and find new sources of revenue by listening to and learning from their audiences.

Reporters and editors can apply this knowledge to all phases of news production — including story selection, reporting, and distribution. These strategies also can help with the longer-term development of beats, sources, formats, and innovative news products. Over time, publishers embracing these strategies can strengthen their business and increase the impact of their work.

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This report is part of the American Press Institute's series of Strategy Studies, which offer detailed, practical strategic guidance about a critical issue that journalists and news organizations need to address.

For this study I talked with 25 news leaders and innovators to distill best practices in audience and community engagement. I consulted reporters and editors, managers and strategists, pioneers and leading thinkers in this field. These innovators work in many places: in legacy newspapers, digitally native outlets, radio and television stations, hyperlocal news outlets and technology startups. They serve national, local and hyperlocal audiences and have for-profit and nonprofit business models.

Collaboration is not about what your audience can do for you, but what you can do *with* your audience.

To be clear: This report is not a social media guide, a technical manual or a primer on marketing yourself or your stories. This is about how journalists can genuinely collaborate with audiences to improve their work, not simply to promote it. To the extent that certain technologies and promotional strategies help strengthen your work, we will address them. But this report was written with a point of view: Collaboration is not about what your audience can do for you, but what you can do *with* your audience.

To examine best practices, we'll work through the basics of how to effectively interact with and tune in to the communities that can most strengthen your journalism. Then, we'll look at a few ways newsrooms can build their capacity to engage their audiences.

- What is engagement and why does it matter?

- 5 steps to effective engagement

1. Target your outreach
2. Invite valuable contributions
3. Cultivate productive interaction
4. Honor community work
5. Learn and improve

- How to listen to your audience

- How to build an engaging newsroom

What is engagement and why does it matter?

Though “engagement” is a word journalists hear a lot these days, its function can be tough to articulate. For many, the goal of engagement seems to be largely marketing, chiefly on social media. How many shares can your story get? How many followers do you have on Twitter?

For others, engagement is about making your reporting easier, by getting your audience to send you useful material.

Journalists who have built the most valuable connections to their communities say that engaging people in their journalism aims to achieve something more fundamental than either promotion or crowdsourcing. It’s making sure your work matters to your audience. And to the publishers who oversee journalists’ work, engagement helps ensure that work finds the public support it needs to endure.

One strong example of this kind of engagement is The Seattle Times’ Education Lab project, which covers public education issues in conversation with the locals who most care about it. Before the project launched, staff organized a seven-stop “listening tour” with parents, students, teachers and community leaders whom they had identified as influencers in the education space. Education reporters and editors, a newly hired community engagement editor, and even the paper’s assistant managing editor attended.

“We got story ideas, but the most important thing that came out of that was confidence building — the confidence that what we were creating would be of value to the community,” said Sharon Chan, the paper’s director of journalism initiatives who helped design the engagement strategies for the project.

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[Engagement is] making sure your work matters to your audience.

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The Education Lab was scheduled to be a one-year project. It is now in its third year thanks in part to support from Seattle’s education community, Chan said. The education leaders whom Times staff engaged early on are among the project’s biggest advocates, passing on ideas and advocating to potential funders.

Had the education community not been involved, Chan said, that community “would put the onus on The Seattle Times Company to fund the sustainability of the project. They would be complaining to us, ‘You need to keep going,’ as opposed to the conversation being, ‘How can we help *you* find support?’”

When news publishers engage the public in their work, they open up avenues that can support it. Rather than merely consuming journalism, a member of the public can become a partner in sustaining it.

The real product is the relationship

Involving audiences in journalism changes what the news is in the first place. It's not a product created by journalists and delivered to an audience. It's an open, public conversation. Ideally, news in the digital world takes input from both journalists and the public to power what Tom Rosenstiel of the American Press Institute calls a "virtuous circle of learning."

The Seattle Times engaged in that conversation with the education community throughout Education Lab. It asked questions on social media, published guest columns by community members, held live Q&As with reporters about their stories and hosted events and even workshops to deepen conversations and make it easier for people to act. Project staff twice invited influencers to provide feedback over lunch, and held a "roadshow" to talk about the impact of the coverage.

"The newspaper helped turn often angry rhetoric into constructive dialogue that parents, educators and community members craved," noted judges for the Associated Press Media Editors Awards, which named The Seattle Times' Education Lab one of two winners of its inaugural prize for community engagement.

As the Education Lab advanced, Times staff learned how it could organize its reporting to better involve the community. In the first year, they covered many different subjects within education as the subjects developed, like traditional beat reporters would. Editors then realized they could build more community investment and engagement around certain topics by reporting several stories about that topic over several months, each building on the last.

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Staying with a topic gave Education Lab staff the opportunity to develop communities of interest, who could then suggest more stories. This proved particularly effective when the Times Education Lab took on the theme of school discipline. They organized two real-world events to take the conversation offline. They then created a Facebook group — "Discipline for all: A community conversation" — and invited event attendees to join. Reporters and editors engaged with the online group, keeping the conversation there fresh by adding links to relevant articles from around the Web.

When a member of the Facebook group shared that the Seattle School Board was going to consider a moratorium on school suspensions, the education editor saw it and assigned a reporter to the story. The June 25, 2015 story ran online that same day, and in the print edition the following day. It sparked a local conversation that grew and intensified. On Sept. 23, the board voted to halt school suspensions.

Meanwhile, traffic to the Education Lab blog grew. Over time, reporters noticed that their sources seemed to trust them more, and with that trust came better access, better stories and a more loyal audience. The stories, they realized, were building blocks for something else.

"The discrete product," Chan said, "was the relationship."

Tracking engagement ensures your work matters

Relationships are the most valuable products of strong community engagement, but any effort to involve, connect with, or even just understand your audiences has other rewards.

Benjamin Herold, a reporter at Education Week, had no idea how many people read his stories when he asked a colleague to help him design a way to learn from his audience. He had heard in scattered staff emails and industry articles that he should look at things like search engine optimization to make his content more findable to his audience. But he was busy enough writing stories.

“I realized at that point that I was dismissive of this stuff without taking it seriously,” he said. “I don’t like to be that way, so I said, let’s give this an honest effort, an honest shot. If nothing comes of it, I can feel warranted in my skepticism.”

Herold approached Education Week director of knowledge services Rachael Delgado for help. Working with web analyst Mike Castellano, the three chose seven indicators to track audience activity, such as page views and site registrations.

Then they developed 12 ways Herold could push that activity. Some of those tactics were simple, such as adding more images to his posts. Others got to the root of how he organized his work, such as spending less time producing “random, ‘We have to post something’ items” and more time producing and bundling stories about topics that most resonated with his audience.

Herold applied the tactics to his work from the fall of 2014 through the spring of 2015, meeting regularly with Delgado and Castellano to discuss his blog’s analytics and what he should do next. After six months of thoughtful tracking, Herold had doubled his blog’s readership, nearly doubled registrations to Education Week from the blog (a key part of the organization’s business model) and increased visits from the site’s core audience of school district administrators by 94 percent.

The experience changed how Herold felt about his work. Instead of moving from story to story with no public feedback, he found ways to check and boost his relevance, and, in the process, his company’s bottom line.

“The nature of my job has fundamentally changed from producing good content to producing good content and helping the right people engage it,” he wrote on a slide in a deck he presented to a group of journalists at the 2015 IRE conference.

“My relationship with my audience has changed from expecting readers to work to understand my reporting and publication habits to recognizing that I must regularly work to understand my readers’ interests and media-consumption behaviors,” he wrote on another slide.

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At its most powerful, engagement is not a layer to add on top of conventional journalistic practice, but a firmer foundation that links journalism more closely with the people it aims to serve.

In the process, engagement helps journalists answer a critical question about their future. As Kelsey Proud phrased that question in her report, *The News is Served*:

A note on “audience” and “community”

Conversations about engagement often use the terms “audience” and “community” interchangeably without being clear on what they’re talking about. This is in part because these terms are useful to this discussion but are helpful to distinguish. For this study’s purposes:

- A news publisher’s **audience** is the group of people who consume that publisher’s content. We often refer to a news “audience” in the singular, but it’s more useful when shaping newsroom strategy to recognize that a single news publisher can serve many different “audiences” with different needs and interests. In any case, the audience or audiences are the people you reach.
- A news **community** is a group of people who interact with each other around a shared interest or value. Most “communities” already exist independent of a news publisher. And just because your publication reaches or even engages a number of individuals in your audience doesn’t mean you’ve created a true “community.”

The idea of an audience as a group of people who merely consume a product provided for them is outdated in journalism, if not all media. You might as well strike it from your sense of who’s looking at your work.

The companies who already command much of the public’s attention view their audiences as creators as well as consumers of information.

“Twitter can’t just be the best window to the world; Twitter also has to be the most powerful microphone in the world,” Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, described his company’s approach to its users in a 2015 earnings call.

“You should expect Twitter to increase your reach and you should expect Twitter to encourage live and direct conversation and participation around whatever you share.”

5 steps to effective audience engagement

Engaging audiences in journalism can take many forms, ranging in scope from small actions to immersive projects.

There is no single formula for the best way to move from producing content to more fully listening and engaging with audiences. The most successful engagement efforts can look different and yield different results — from a couple questions posted on social media to an event designed to bring journalists and communities together. What they have in common is that they connect with communities of interest and develop relationships with them. You are not simply delivering a product.

Another important element in getting started is understanding that no good effort at engagement can be completed in just one step, one task to cross off a to-do list. Instead, engagement strategies unfold as a series of back-and-forth interactions between journalists and members of the public. They involve requests and responses, which then require gratitude and acknowledgment.

The principle behind effective engagement, those who have been involved in this effort say, is this: Whatever you do, make sure the members of a community know you value them — both by treating them with respect and by showing them that together, they have important things to teach each other.

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You are not simply delivering a product.

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If you miss the opportunity to show you value public collaboration, the people you motivate to strengthen your journalism may not do it again.

Seize the opportunities to unite people around their interests, however, and you'll find that your efforts to engage these communities will get easier and more productive. In that ideal scenario, the engagement process becomes a cycle. One that grows stronger with each iteration, and looks to develop connections with the audience not just for the sake of the current project, but for all the projects still ahead.

From the various people I talked to, I heard what boiled down to five steps that are involved in successful audience engagement efforts.

1. Target your outreach
2. Invite valuable contributions
3. Cultivate strong interaction
4. Honor community work
5. Learn and improve

Step 1: Target your outreach

Connecting with the public has so far been considered an afterthought in much of journalism — one of the last things you do in the life cycle of a story rather than one of the first. For that reason, we’ve gotten used to engaging on the fly: throwing up a tweet, asking the first question that occurs to us to spark conversation on a public forum.

To do engagement well, to learn from it and to ensure it connects with the people your work should reach, it is important to think it through. Before you begin, get a sense of what you and the people you work with can achieve.

Who do you want to reach?

When journalists ask themselves who their work is for, it’s easy to answer, “Everyone.” But to rise above the noise of digital communication, it helps to target your outreach to a more narrow group.

To identify what communities your work ought to involve, consider the beat, topic or issue you’re exploring. The key question to ask, as phrased by engagement strategist Joy Mayer, former director of community outreach at the Columbia Missourian, is this: “Who’s already talking about what you’re covering?”

When ProPublica and NPR exposed how the American Red Cross had squandered aid funds after the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, their story became the most-read piece in ProPublica’s history. Much of the story’s spread was social; 40 percent of its 914,000 page views came from Facebook.

Reporters and editors knew, however, that the people most intimately impacted by the story — the Haitians on the receiving end of the Red Cross’s inaction — would not read an English-language story. To engage them, ProPublica translated the story into Haiti’s native French and paid a small amount to boost it to Facebook users in the country. The French story went on to earn 153,000 page views, with 84 percent of that traffic coming from Facebook.

“The Haiti story is a great example of an engaged audience making the case for impact,” ProPublica senior engagement editor Amanda Zamora wrote via email. “We hit both mass and niche audiences, and when we’re able to get people on both ends of that spectrum to pay attention, that’s when we see action.”

Editors’ outreach to the people most impacted by the Red Cross story helped ensure the story’s power. Weeks after the story was published, Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Sen. Charles Grassley sent Red Cross CEO Gail McGovern a list of questions and a deadline to account for the charity’s spending in Haiti.

“We’re still waiting for answers,” Zamora wrote.

What do you hope to learn, spark or build?

When news publishers engage audiences in their work, it is difficult to predict precisely what kinds of contributions they will get as a result. Even so, it is helpful to have an idea of what you hope to accomplish.

Whether your goal in engaging people is as simple as sparking an interesting conversation or finding the answer to an intriguing, ambitious question, “what you want to do” and “who you need to reach” are closely linked decisions.

This spring, staff at The Guardian decided to count something that no public agency was reliably counting: The number of people killed by police officers in the U.S.

Because the members of The Guardian’s team knew they couldn’t do it all on their own, they asked for help from the public. On June 1, 2015, the Guardian launched its project, The Counted, and laid out a thorough description of what it was looking for — tips, details, resources — and what kind of incidents did or did not fit the bill.



American Red Cross a récolté un demi-milliard de dollars pour Haïti après le tremblement de terre en 2010. Le groupe affirme avoir fourni des maisons à plus de 130 000 d'Haïtiens. Mais nous sommes allés à Campêche, Bon Repos et Leogane, et nous ne pouvions pas trouver beaucoup. Lire notre investigation sur la Croix-Rouge:



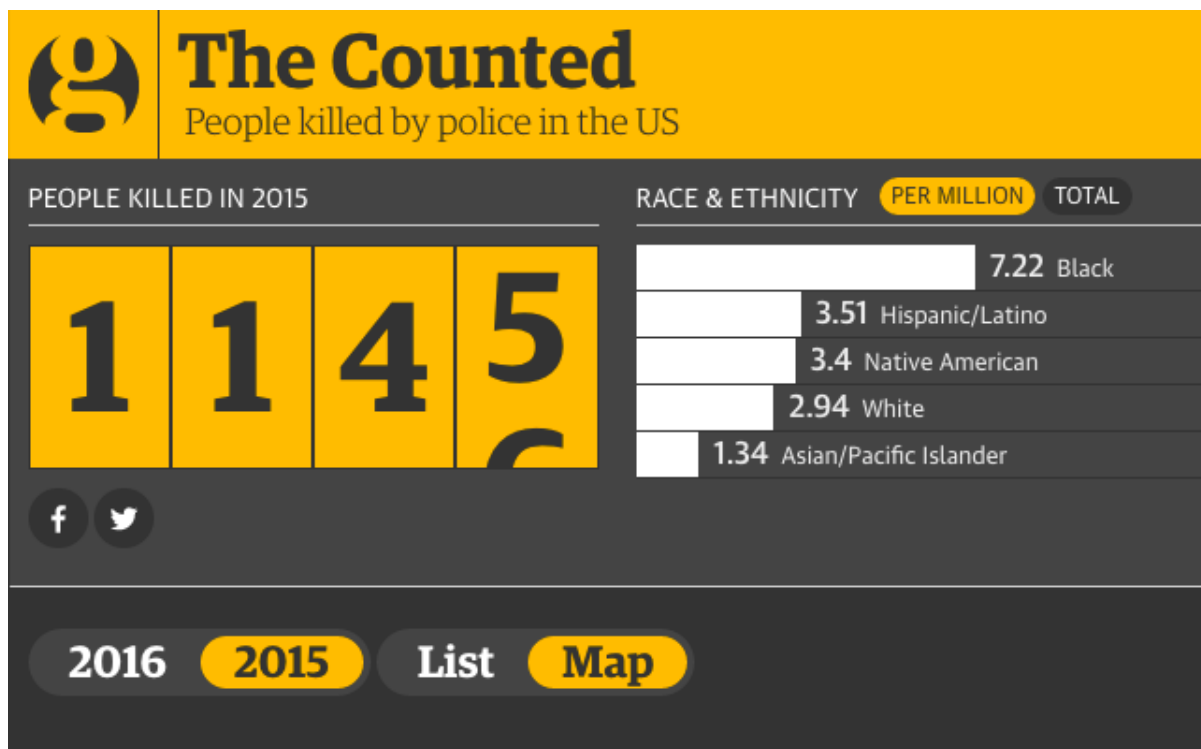
Comment la Croix-Rouge a récolté un demi-milliard de dollars pour Haïti — et construit six maisons

Alors que le groupe s'est réjoui publiquement des résultats obtenus, des témoignages internes décrivent une succession d'échecs

PROPUBLICA.ORG | BY JUSTIN ELLIOTT

312 Likes 50 Comments 325 Shares

Share



Notably, The Guardian did not launch with a blank page. Its reporters gathered what they could from news reports and crime databases to give the count a solid start. That showed their commitment to seeing a tough task through, which strengthened their engagement. Many people, including relatives of those killed by police, sent in tips. As often happens with project-based communities, a small, core group of regular contributors provided many of the tips.

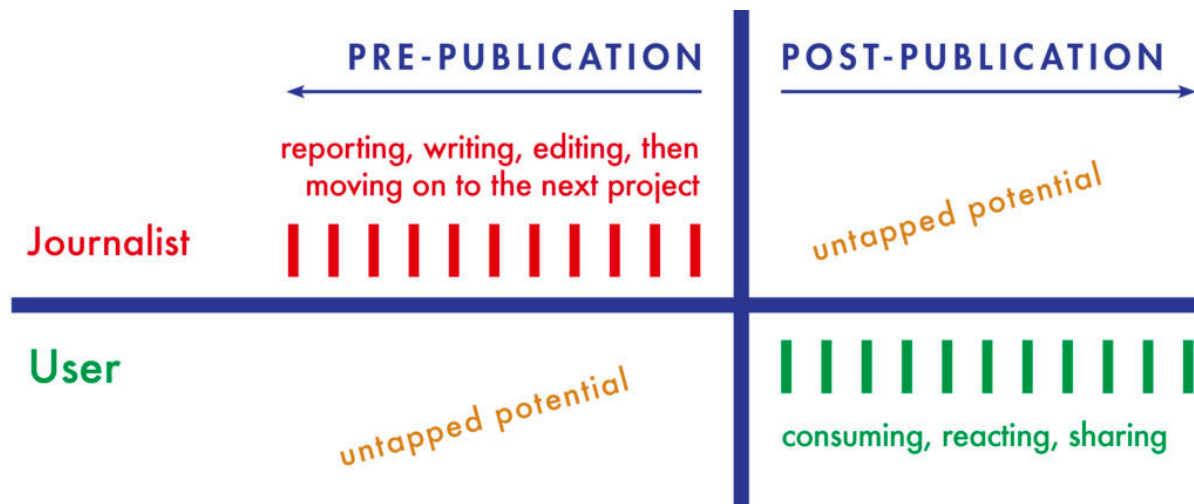
By the end of 2015, The Guardian had counted 1,138 cases of people being killed by police, and both the Department of Justice and the FBI had announced plans to ensure the government keeps better track of these figures (the 2015 count has since increased to 1,145).

It's easier to help someone who knows what they're building, especially if they've already begun. Whenever you want the community to contribute, it is always helpful, I heard over and over, to seed your request with examples of what you are looking for.

When will you invite participation from the public?

Creating the news with people, rather than for them, puts them at the start of the process, as Josh Stearns of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation has noted. The sooner you involve your audience in your story, the more invested they can be in the project, and the richer and more popular the coverage can be.

Meg Pickard, former engagement editor for The Guardian, developed a framework that considers community outreach before publication as untapped opportunity. The chart below, drawn up by Joy Mayer, is one of the most-cited resources to explain where engagement can do the most good:



There is, though, such a thing as involving the public too much too soon. Journalists who design interactive projects agree that the sweet spot can be tricky to find.

If you're reporting on a sensitive or complicated issue, think about the legwork you need to do to put it in context, and make sure you've gathered and structured that foundational material before you throw open the doors too wide.

But don't be too quiet: Private, limited-audience outreach to the right communities can still add value to your reporting as you're doing it, particularly as you're gathering accounts or looking for interview subjects. Even a broad call-out on social media networks, carefully worded if necessary, can bring unexpected sources if your network trusts you enough to point them your way.

As for uncomplicated issues, involving the public too early means asking for help before you've articulated why they should be involved, or before you're able to demonstrate that you're committed to a difficult project.

Where do you go to connect?

If you want to involve new audiences in your work, you will need to go somewhere new to find them.

Where will you go to find the people you want to engage in your work? Wherever people are already talking about what you're covering. Is there a website, group, or even a hashtag that's bringing together a conversation? Consider offline activities, too: Where are people gathering in the real world to discuss their interest in your beat or topic?

When Columbia Missourian reporters were working on a series of features about local history, they went to a popular Facebook group called "You know you're from Columbia MO when..." There, thousands of people were connecting over their shared lives in their town. Over the course of three weeks, Missourian reporters asked three questions of the group, about their favorite teachers growing up, their favorite hangouts and their first jobs, noting that some answers would be published in the paper and online.

Hundreds of people reminisced, and the resulting stories — collections of the richest answers — were widely read and shared.

“This is like the easiest possible content,” Joy Mayer said.

In another example, *Missourian* staff went offline to find a target audience. The paper had produced a package of stories about the 100th anniversary of Hickman High School’s unusual Kewpie doll mascot. It knew it wanted to reach the school community, particularly fans of its sports teams. So in addition to posting in Facebook groups where alumni hung out and tweeting school-related Twitter accounts, they printed teasers to the stories on paper fliers and handed them out at the stadium during that weekend’s game.

More than half the people who received the fliers went on to visit the link to the coverage, staff learned after tracking clicks on the custom link. Their creative community-seeking even brought in a little money: The local booster club, when staff emailed them about the handout, agreed to sponsor an ad on the back for \$150.

100 years of Kewpies: Hickman embraces its unusual mascot

The Kewpie is turning 100 at Hickman, and the Columbia Missourian is celebrating with a special package of stories honoring the century-old baby.

These stories are at ColumbiaMissourian.com/kewpies

- ▶ **A PROUD COMMUNITY:** After 100 years with the Kewpie nickname, players, teachers, coaches and alumni take immense pride in their mascot.
- ▶ **BUT ... NOT QUITE UNIQUE:** While there are no other known uses of "Kewpies" in American athletics, there was a nun at a high school in Illinois that used it as her class' mascot. There's also an Australian club soccer team that has called itself the Kewpies since 1919.
- ▶ **MR. KEWPIE:** Charley Blackmore, also known as "Mr. Kewpie," is the mastermind of Kewpie.net, a website that is loaded with information about Hickman High School's graduating classes and its unusual mascot.
- ▶ **TEST YOUR I-KEWPIE:** Can you answer 10 questions about Hickman and its mascot?
- ▶ **THE KEWPIE BEHIND THE BABY HEAD:** Watch a video interview with the mysterious person inside the mascot. (Hint: He's a current freshman.)



JOSH BACHMAN/COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

We want to hear from you

The Missourian has served Columbia since 1908. Learn how to help us do that at ColumbiaMissourian.com/about. With story ideas or feedback, contact Joy Mayer, director of community outreach, at 862-8182 or mayerj@missouri.edu.

Facebook.com/ColumbiaMissourian Twitter.com/CoMissourian Twitter.com/CoMoSports

This flier from the Columbia Missourian was sponsored
by the Hickman Athletic Booster Club.



HICKMAN FAMILIES

*The Hickman Athletic Booster Club
needs your help!*

We are selling tickets to the Fourth Annual **LAST KEWPIE
STANDING** Fundraiser Dinner, Raffle and Auction

Sunday January 18th, at 5 pm at Hickman High

All proceeds benefit the 19 Hickman athletic teams and their
600 student athletes

- Each ticket costs \$100
- Each ticket gets you dinner for two that night and one chance to win a grand prize of \$5000 or a second prize of \$500.

Buy your ticket TODAY! Only 300 tickets will be sold for this event.
Do not miss the chance at winning \$5000!

*If your business is interested in sponsoring or helping this
fundraiser in any way, please contact us thru our website:
KewpieBoosters.com*

To purchase a ticket, please stop by the Hickman Main Office
or e-mail hickmanathleticboosterclub@gmail.com

How much can you do?

Strong engagement, like strong stories, takes time and resources to develop, and not everyone has the capacity to do everything. Many efforts start strong and end with little to show because the initial enthusiasm didn't match the newsroom's capacity to follow through.

This goes for individual engagements — will you have the time to figure out what to do with the contributions you get? — as well as an organization's overall strategy. Do you have the resources to see your projects through? Do your reporters feel supported in their own engagement efforts? If not, you might discourage your staff and hurt your credibility with your community.

Anika Anand, former director of product at nonprofit education news site Chalkbeat, thought hard about what the journalists at Chalkbeat's bureaus could reasonably do to engage their communities. She also considered which strategies would have the highest return on investment. She settled, at the time, on strategies involving online reporter interaction with readers, hosting key events, and building a database of sources and influencers to fuel outreach and community development.

While an objective assessment of your time and resources helps you learn what you're capable of, there's something to be said here for inclination. For some journalists, much of the work of engagement is not only interesting, but fun. That cuts less into their time, or at least, it feels like less of a burden. Identifying and empowering these journalists can be a big step for news organizations, as I'll discuss in the section on building engaging newsrooms.

Step 2: Invite valuable contributions

You've thought about who you want to reach, where you will go to reach them and when in the reporting process you want to involve them. Now it's time to spark that involvement. Usually, you'll want to invite your community to participate in your journalism by making a request, either for material or just to start a conversation.

There are several things you should ask yourself when deciding what to request from your community, and how. Here we'll look at a few:

- Are you asking for something you will use?
- Are you making it easy for people to contribute?
- Are you rewarding your community for participating?
- Are you asking good questions?

Value: Are you asking for something you will use?

The first thing to consider when you make a request of your community is whether what you are asking for has real value. If you're asking for ideas or material, will it actually influence your work? If you're sparking a conversation, is it one the community will want to have, and value you for guiding?

The civic tech organization Code for America has articulated best practices in public engagement for its staff that are valuable to anyone looking to connect with communities — especially journalists. One of its most useful directives to staff is to consider what they’ll do with public contributions before they ask for them:

“Make sure what you are asking people to do will actually add value to your work. Otherwise, you won’t use it and people will feel discouraged.”

You don’t need to incorporate all the material your community contributes. But if you don’t use any material, use it dismissively, or, in the case of a conversation, spark what ends up being a dull or toxic dialogue, you’ll have limited the benefits of your engagement. You’ll have gained little, and the people who responded to your request will have not felt their contributions made a difference. They may hesitate to collaborate with you again.

Access: Are you making it easy for people to contribute?

Once you’re sure the contributions you seek will be valuable to your work, you’ll want to structure your request so it draws as many strong contributions as possible.

If you’re asking your community to share material with you, you’ll want to be clear about what you’re looking for, how contributors should participate, and how you plan to use their contributions. Providing this information helps establish trust and minimize confusion. Most importantly, it helps draw useful material.

If you’re asking for people to share personal, complicated or delicate material, it will help to provide private as well as public ways to share that information.

Thirdly, it’s smart when making requests of your community to invite their feedback on the process. If something about your request is unclear, you’ll want to know about it. Making yourself available for feedback also allows community members who are on the fence about participating to reach out to you with any questions or doubts. That gives you a chance to enlist more good contributions.

The Guardian U.S.’s “The Counted” project offers a clear breakdown of how community members can contribute on its About page. In short sections with titles like “What is included in The Counted?” “What is not included in The Counted?” and “How does the Guardian define ‘armed’ and ‘unarmed’?” staff draw clear distinctions between what

material is and isn’t helpful. The page then invites contributors to send information on police-related deaths via email, Facebook, Twitter and a “Send us a tip” button at the top of The Counted’s site. Mindful that the project involves government agencies, it even provides what’s called a public PGP key to allow people to contact them confidentially, and a secure drop system to allow people to share files anonymously.

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Be clear about what you’re looking for, how contributors should participate, and how you plan to use their contributions.

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The Guardian also invites people to contact them about any part of the project. And it has kept its reporting very much open to the public: With the press of a button, anyone can download the data it has collected so far. Releasing the data let people build on it. One follower of the project went so far as to develop an app that alerts users every time a new name is added to the count.

Another thing to consider when deciding what to ask of your community is how easily they can respond.

If you are accepting contributions on your own site, how many hoops do people need to jump through to do it? Is the interface clunky or confusing? Will people know what to do instinctively? People are used to doing what they want to do online in a very small number of steps. If they can't begin tapping out the content of their contribution in seconds, many may give up and move on.

One way to dodge the problem of having to maintain your own platform for public contributions is to accept contributions on high-performing platforms with which people are already familiar, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. As these platforms are already well populated and highly social, accepting contributions there has the added advantage of making your project more visible. This is why many if not most crowdsourcing projects accept contributions on social platforms.

Be mindful about the limitations of platforms, however, especially if you are using them exclusively to accept public contributions to your project. They don't reach all demographics equally, and wide reach is hardly guaranteed. In the case of Facebook, newsrooms often spend money to boost their posts' visibility.

Another way news organizations make it easy for their users to contribute is to do some of their work for them.

TheSkimm is a young news operation that relies on its readers' actions to grow. It's an email newsletter, and it secures new readers only when they have signed up to receive the daily email. One way theSkimm drew 1.5 million subscribers in three years is by making it very easy for readers to invite others in their networks to subscribe.

Each daily newsletter asks subscribers to share theSkimm and provides a link. When a user clicks on the link, she's taken to a page where users can share invitations to the newsletter with their networks. But rather than leave users to write these invitations themselves — a time-consuming task — theSkimm provides suggested text for tweets, Facebook posts and email messages they can compose right on the page.

With its email text suggestions, theSkimm also goes one step further: It provides pre-populated, customizable text depending on which type of person a user want to invite. Among the options are: "Co-workers you tolerate," "Your family," "Your college friends," and "Mega busy moms."

SHARE WITH
DIFFERENT
PEOPLE

GO CRAZY

DO YOUR
OWN THING

YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

kturcott@umass.edu

YOUR MESSAGE TO

CO-WORKERS YOU WANT TO IMPRESS

THEIR EMAIL ADDRESS(ES)

Please separate email addresses with a comma

theSkimm is the only way I start my morning. It seriously gives me everything I need to get up to speed on the news and know what people are talking about—I love it. Thought you would too!

SEND EMAIL

Incentive: Will people feel rewarded for participating?

People who are eager to share their knowledge with you won't need much nudging. But journalists can work to draw participation from more than just their most vocal contributors.

A good way to encourage broader participation, newsroom innovators say, is to ensure that people feel rewarded for their effort.

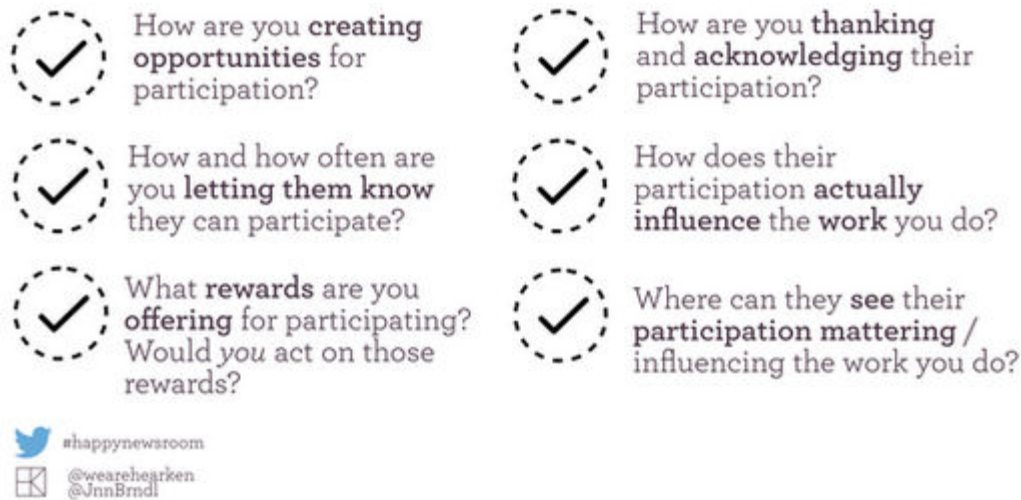
Journalist Jennifer Brandel has designed methods used successfully by many newsrooms to draw in audiences not just to their reporting, but to their story selection. She was the founder of Curious City, a project she developed jointly with Chicago Public Media's WBEZ and the Association of Independents in Radio's Localore project that invites locals to share what they're curious about and select from among their submissions which of their questions they'd like reporters to explore. She has since spun off the technology behind the project into a private startup called Hearken.

Brandel created a useful checklist for encouraging newsrooms to engage in audience participation. Among its six items is this question: "What rewards are you offering for participating? Would *you* act on those rewards?"

Brandel explained that the rewards you offer potential contributors can be subtle. When someone submits a story idea to the Curious City project, for example, that contributor has a chance to see other locals support it. If it's selected by the newsroom to be fleshed out and reported, the reporter may invite the contributor along to her interviews.

Checklist for fun

Fun = participation



Investing deeply in participant rewards can pay off. One of the most important contributors to theSkimm’s quick growth is its “Skimm’bassador” rewards program.

When theSkimm sends out the day’s newsletter, it encourages users to share the newsletter with friends. It also provides each recipient with her own unique link to share that her friends can click to be taken to the sign-up page. These unique links allow theSkimm to track how many people sign up to the newsletter because of a particular recipient’s sharing action.

The fact that theSkimm can draw this straight line between one user’s action and its results allows it to reward its users for sharing the newsletter in a powerful way. When a subscriber’s shares result in 10 new subscriptions, that subscriber becomes a “Skimm’bassador.” She is then eligible for extra perks, including membership in a lively closed Facebook community and recognition in the newsletter. Importantly, any subscriber can check how many people have signed up to theSkimm via their link at any time. TheSkimm had 200 Skimm’bassadors in the summer of 2014. By summer 2015, it had 6,000.

While news organizations may prefer a different tone, the notion of helping your audience share, making it easy for them and rewarding them for it is one that can be employed in many ways.

Prompt: Are you asking good questions?

If you’re asking your community to share its own knowledge and experiences, it’s best to ask questions that draw those out easily and thoughtfully. Ask questions that are too broad, too vague or too convoluted, and the responses — if you get them — may miss the mark. Asking questions that lead to more reaction than reflection can have the same negative result.

Sharon Chan at The Seattle Times found that the questions “What do you wish you had known about college ahead of time?” and “How do you save money on textbooks?” sparked good conversations around its Education Lab coverage. The question “Would you hire someone who dropped out of high school?” drew out too much negativity. The question “Based on your own personal experience as a parent, student or teacher, what helps students who are behind catch up?” was too broad to get much response at all.

Many news organizations offer a space for conversation to happen, usually at the bottoms of their stories. In many cases, though, they do little to prompt conversation in those spaces with a specific question or theme.

These open forums — the familiar comment threads — give people the freedom to bring up anything in association with a story. They are also, however, more likely to attract reactionary comments from people who are already eager to say something. Often, those comments are angry and disruptive, leading many journalists to dismiss comment sections as a failed experiment in engaging the public. But there is reason to believe that the toxicity of some comment threads is a problem of their design and management, rather than an accurate reflection of the value communities can bring.

Sparkling good conversations takes work. A key to asking the right questions, Chan and others said, is just to take the time to think about which questions to ask. Will your question inspire thoughtful reflection people could build on to improve their understanding, or shallow reaction that could alienate readers and degrade the work?

Some of the best reflection comes when people share stories. The Listening Post Macon is a community media project that gathers local perspectives by texting with a community of residents. When it wanted to convene a conversation on gun violence, it asked its community a series of questions, starting with an easy one: “Do you own a gun?” When a local responded with “Yes” or “No” to that question, The Listening Post followed up with a second question: “Why or why not?”

But it wasn’t until Listening Post journalists accompanied that follow-up question with another — “Why or why not? *What have you experienced that shapes your attitude toward guns?*” — that the most compelling stories came in, including one from a woman whose son had been shot and killed and who wanted her remaining children to know how to defend themselves.

“On social media and in comments, there’s an open box to type into, but it’s not as if someone’s tapping you on the shoulder saying, ‘Tell me your story.’” Andrew Haeg, founder of GroundSource, the company that powers The Listening Post’s text-based platform, told Nieman Lab. “That’s an endlessly compelling request for most people, and if they know someone is listening and that there’s a purpose for it, they will step forward and tell it.”



Step 3: Cultivate strong interaction

Once you've asked the public to get involved in your work, it might seem like your next move is to sit back and see what you get.

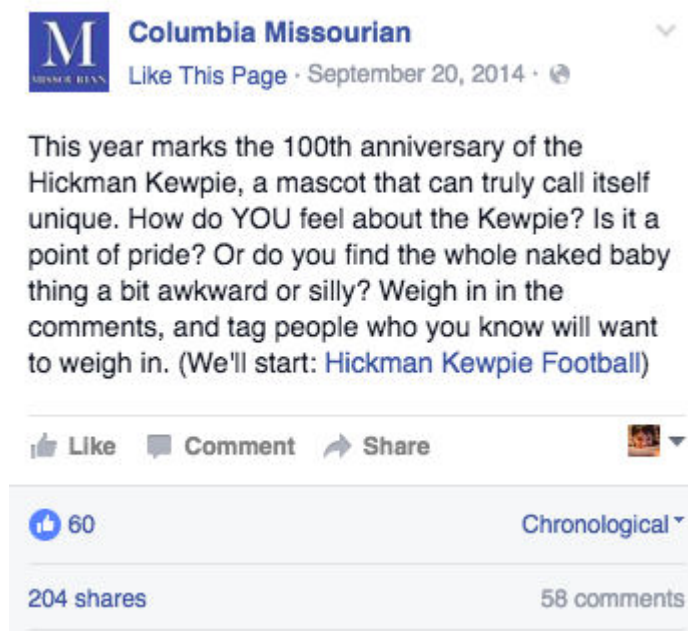
But if you want your engagement to have its maximum effect, there are two important things you can do to fuel it. You can reach out directly to people who draw the strongest contributions, and you can participate in the discussion or exchange of material yourself.

Reach out to influencers and influential communities

In any community of interest, there are people or groups who have an outsized influence. They might lead activity, spark new ideas or channel conversation.

When these influencers participate and share your project early on, word of what you're doing spreads more quickly and more people who respect those people are likely to participate. You'll also gather stronger material for a more relatable story that more people will want to share. For that reason, it's worth spending the time it takes to reach influencers directly and ask them to weigh in — whether you connect by phone, email, or a simple ping on social media — and to build relationships with them that support your future work.

When the Columbia Missourian wanted to cover the 100th anniversary of the unusual Hickman High School Kewpie doll mascot, it reached out to the local community and a key influencer in a single post:



Tagging the school's football team in the post drew a strong voice early in the conversation. But the post, which was shared 200 times and reached 15,000 people on Facebook, was particularly effective for another reason. Using just a few words, it invited people to tag the "people you know will want to weigh in."

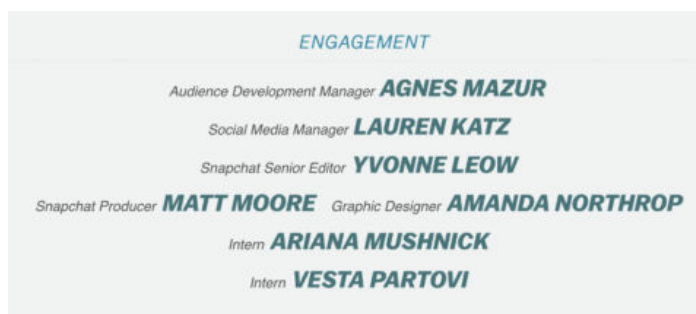
The Missourian reached out to an obvious influencer it could identify — the Hickman High football team. But it also tapped the community’s knowledge to find influencers who are not so obvious. Hundreds of thoughtful comments later, it had material for a strong series on the mascot’s history.

There are other ways that engaging a community’s most influential members helps you engage the whole community. A key way, journalists active in engagement projects say, is to speak *with* them — in a style and language that feels familiar.

Speaking a community’s language is a challenge in spaces where people have developed unique ways of communicating and outsiders stick out. The communities on online forum site Reddit are so distinctive, for example, that a developer created a game in which people try to match a user comment with the forum in which it was posted.

Snapchat is a popular platform whose mostly young mobile users communicate with pictures and videos they enhance with drawings or text. To bring its news and brand to the app’s engaged user base, CBS News has given some of its younger staffers free rein to post to its Snapchat feed. The younger staffers, who are more familiar with the platform and the way its users communicate, post in-the-moment, behind the scenes snippets that fit the tone of the app.

Other news outlets have focused attention on one or another community or platform to ensure that their content connects with an audience there. Vox News, for example, employs both a Snapchat senior editor and a Snapchat producer. It’s important, news leaders stressed, to keep in mind that developing content for some platforms takes more resources than others, and to deploy those scarce resources wisely.



Participate in the exchange

Perhaps the simplest and most important thing a journalist can do to strengthen online conversation is just to show up.

A study of 2,500 political comments on 70 political posts by a local TV station showed that when a reporter jumped into a comment thread, uncivil comments declined by 15 percent (though, importantly, when the TV station’s own branded account jumped in, there was no effect). It’s difficult to say for sure why this happens, but many leading journalists offer the same explanation: People speak more thoughtfully when they know someone is listening.

“They’re so used to showing up on these pages and nobody’s paying any attention,” said Connie Schultz, a syndicated Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist who’s built an unusually engaged community of tens of thousands on Facebook.

When you show your public that you are listening to what they tell you, you encourage greater participation. But once you “show up” to a public exchange around your work, what do you do? We’re going to talk about three possibilities. Think of them as the beginner, intermediate and advanced ways to strengthen interaction by participating in public conversations:

- Respond
- Encourage
- Guide

Respond

Not all journalists have the time or inclination to talk deeply with the public. But there is one small step all journalists can take to support the public exchanges their work inspires. That is to respond to relevant questions. It takes little time, it is simple to do, and it does much to strengthen the quality of public interaction.

When you respond to valid reader questions publicly, you help clear up misunderstandings others in your audience might have. You also send the message that you care about how well your audience understands what you’re sharing with them.

In a set of internal guidelines from 2015, Chalkbeat suggested that its staff “should always try to respond to questions that readers ask in the comments section” of their stories.

Below is an example from Chalkbeat’s Tennessee bureau. Note the word of praise at the end of reporter Jackie Zubrzycki’s response to the reader’s question about something a district development specialist had said:



BluffCityEd • 2 days ago

When link said that 61 percent of TFA teachers stay for a 3rd year, did she say that they stay in their placement schools for a third year, or simply that they continue teaching in the Shelby County metro area for a third year?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



J. Zubrzycki → BluffCityEd • 17 hours ago

Hi - -

Link was not specific. It seemed like she was saying they remain within the district, but she didn't say whether that includes charter schools or other schools in the metro area. Great question though.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Even when they don't pose direct questions, comments can show you what readers remain curious about and where you can provide more information. Chalkbeat New York reporter Geoff Decker updated his story after reading one such comment:

Example 2:

This commenter didn't necessarily ask a question, but Geoff saw an opportunity to provide clarification and he updated the story with the clarification and thanked the commenter for his observation.



Brother Allen · 13 days ago

Of course, charters have the autonomy to determine their own retention/promotion policies. In that vein, and with centralization seeming to be the next reorg, I can't help but wonder as principal autonomy in district schools is eroded further (mind you they have little enough of it it left now) whether we will see more educators decide to start charter schools. Definitely a trend to watch.

^ | v · Reply · Share



gdecker1 Mod → Brother Allen · 13 days ago

Thanks, Brother Allen. I clarified that charter schools are exempt from the city's grade promotion policies.

^ | v · Reply · Share

How do you know what questions constitute serious readers questions, and are therefore worth a response? Telling the difference can be tough. Some valid reader questions are communicated with a sense of anger or urgency. Other times, reader questions seem meant to express cynicism or to provoke a personal response rather than to engage honestly in debate or discussion. These questions can distract from a good conversation. Responding to them may further that distraction.

To ward off toxic comments and unproductive conversation (more on that later), it can be helpful to be the first to speak. Investigative reporters at The Desert Sun in Palm Springs, California, have at times left the first comment on the newspaper's Facebook posts about their stories — just a quick hello to let others know they're there. This encourages good discussion, Gannett social media leaders say, by providing readers with a human face with whom to interact.

Encourage

Another step journalists can take to strengthen public interactions around their work is to highlight strong contributions as models for others to follow.

There are several ways journalists can elevate strong contributions in whatever spaces people are talking. The key is to do it visibly, so the contributor feels appreciated and others can see and model the behavior.

With a minimal time commitment, you can:

- **Thank:** Thank contributors for their productive comments. This is as easy as a reply to a comment on a forum ("Thank you for your thoughtful response") or an upvote on a forum that includes that feature. Even a "like" on Facebook communicates some gratitude

- **Elevate:** Place a strong comment somewhere prominent in your story or website, to both reward the contributor and give others a model to follow. You might consider updating the story to include the comment as a way of encouraging others to join the conversation through a specific angle.
- **Share:** Re-distribute the model comment in the channels where you hope to reach more contributors. If the comment is a tweet on Twitter, for example, you could simply retweet it to your followers, ideally with your own comment explaining its value to the story or project. If you're blogging, you might create a whole post or section of a post to feature and reflect on the comment.

To highlight its readers' contributions, The New York Times recently launched a "Best Comments of the Week" feature in which it rounds up the most insightful reader reflections from across its channels and notes their popularity. "His comment received more than 900 reader recommendations and attracted over 100 replies," Times community staffers wrote about a comment by "Glenn in Los Angeles."

As with any social gesture, the more effort you put into your interaction with your public, the more significance your words will have. With a little more investment in time, you can encourage strong contributions from the community you engage in a familiar but powerful way — by asking questions.

Journalists don't always think of people who speak out on forums or on social media as sources, but that is precisely what each of them can be. If someone expresses something interesting and therefore shows a willingness to engage with a topic, respond to her publicly and ask her to elaborate. Essentially: interview the people who are showing you they want to talk.

A woman named Katherine Johnson mentioned on Connie Schultz's Facebook thread that her 88-year-old aunt, Lois Mickey Nash, was going to march in protest of a decision to absolve a white Cleveland police officer in the shooting deaths of two unarmed civilians who were black. Schultz asked Johnson for more information, interviewed Nash for two hours in her living room, and made her the subject of one of her columns.

It is natural for journalists to feel anxious about the mean, angry or otherwise disruptive public contributions they may receive. By encouraging good contributions — either by highlighting or engaging with them — journalists also discourage bad ones. This cold shoulder approach does not deliver results as immediately as banning users and deleting comments, news leaders admitted. But the more you and your well meaning contributors can turn toward each other, the less disruptive those angry voices become.

Guide

A powerful way journalists can strengthen the quality of public interaction is by adopting the role of a full-fledged moderator. This means doing what we discussed above — and more — to make the conversations you spark around your work as valuable to their participants as possible.

Moderating conversations around your work is a big commitment that can bring big rewards. The more people get out of the conversations you spark, the more they'll want to come back, deepen their participation, and cultivate their connections with you and each other. The result is a slow but steady accumulation of trust, loyalty and mutual support. Over time, the contributors you gather become a community that cares about your work, largely because you've shown them it's their work, too.

One of the most beneficial things journalists earn from a *community*, as opposed to an occasionally engaged audience, is the privilege of getting strong contributions even when we don't ask for them.

"The good thing about building a community is that people will let *you* know what's going on," Connie Schultz said. "You're building a real source book. Long ago I've lost count of how many times that's helped give me an idea of something to write about."

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The more people get out of the conversations you spark, the more they'll want to come back, deepen their participation, and cultivate their connections with you and each other.

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I have argued before that at a time when anyone can participate in newsgathering, cultivating strong self-informing communities around key interests or values is itself an act of journalism.¹ Some hold that much of this work should be delegated to newsroom staff skilled in community engagement and moderation. Others argue that some aspects of community building should be a new bullet point in the job descriptions of all journalists.

There's one rule of thumb regarding engagement about which leading journalists seem to agree: Journalists should engage in conversations with the public only to the extent that we are able to manage what we spark. Engagement efforts work best when they show that we value contributors and their contributions. If we spark an important conversation, it says a lot if we strive to make it great.

Schultz spends hours keeping her conversations on Facebook civil and productive. The loyalty of her community easily translates into high readership for her stories. Stephanie Schwartz, audience development editor at National Memo, said that when Schultz shares her syndicated columns published on nationalmemo.com with her Facebook community, traffic to the site picks up significantly.

Enforce civility

Online, an otherwise interesting discussion can easily devolve into a pointless war of words. Beyond encouraging civility in the ways we discussed above, there are at least three other things you can do to help keep conversations productive, journalists who moderate discussions said.

One is to enforce a civil tone. The second is to model it. And the third is to provide a gateway: give your community easy ways to practice being civil, so they're more likely to do it even when it's hard.

Let's look first at influencing tone through policing or enforcement. This means deleting comments or banning users who inappropriately distract or otherwise disrupt the conversation. Some journalists are able to do this on their websites' comment threads. Others depend on their colleagues to take these steps for them. Many newsrooms rely on technical features in their comments sections to help keep the peace, such as a flagging system, upvotes and downvotes, and threaded conversations. All journalists are able to control who speaks and who doesn't on the conversational spaces they own, such as their Facebook pages.

But people also told me that unjustified enforcement can invite a community's anger and erode trust. For that reason, if you enforce certain standards in the conversations you host, you should set out specific policies that will guide your decisions, remind people of them on a regular basis, and stay consistent in how you enforce them.

Model civility

A more enduring way to cultivate a desired tone is to set it by example, modeling the voice and approach you want others to use.

Strong contributions to public conversations tend to share certain characteristics. They stay on-topic. They build off each other. They don't get personal. And they're generous, adding real value to the group by contributing new perspectives or new knowledge.

An obvious place to set a civil tone is at the start of a conversation, when you pose a question or broach a topic. A more powerful place to do it, however, is in the conversation itself, where you can model the best ways to respond to and build off people's contributions.

Conversations with engaged journalists yielded some concrete tips on how best to build off contributions in a public discussion.

First, identify a contribution that strikes you as valuable to the discussion. Then, compose a reply to it that uses it as a launching pad to advance the group's thinking in a good direction. Reflect on the comment's significance to the larger story or topic. Call out any new angles or questions the contribution opens up. Where possible, address these new angles or questions: add whatever extra knowledge you bring as a journalist.

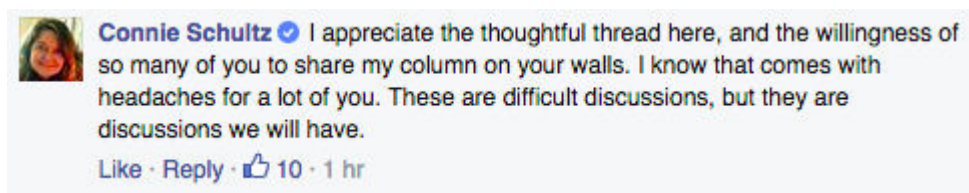
In doing this you accomplish several things at once: You flag the comment as particularly valuable. You add to the group's store of knowledge. Most importantly, you encourage contributors to express their own curiosity and to help each other out.

For a strong example of how even beat reporters can model strong interaction, see this comment thread from The West Seattle Blog, a neighborhood news organization in Seattle. Editor Tracy Record, who replies in the thread as "WSB," responds 14 times, reflecting on readers' observations and adding her perspective to build the group's understanding of a developing crime story.

Practice civility

Journalists who cover the news might find it silly or counterproductive to ever talk with the public about anything other than the news. But when you aim to build community by moderating strong discussions in spaces where you and the public interact freely, it can make sense to pepper heavy topics with lighter ones that bring people together.

Connie Schultz deals with many contentious issues in her reporting and on her Facebook page. She manages to moderate productive conversations with her diverse Facebook community over topics like race, same-sex marriage and criminal justice. She encourages her community to stick with tough debates, as she did when an April 2016 column criticizing the chief of the Cleveland Police Union stirred up tensions on Facebook:



In between these serious discussions, though, Schultz invites people to join her in occasional light-hearted reflections. In one popular post, she invited people to simply share what was on their minds. In another, Schultz reflected on a photo of her dog, Franklin, when he was young, and invited her community to post their own pet pictures.

The purpose of these posts is not to distract contributors from serious issues, Schultz implied, but to help them build the camaraderie it takes to tackle those issues productively. These prompts get people to be friendly with each other, regardless of their views, and make it easy for everyone to contribute. In effect, mixing easy conversations with tough ones gets people to practice both being civil and contributing to discussions you convene. Those are handy habits for your community to have when you present them with more challenging topics.

“You’re trying to close the distance between you and your readers,” Schultz said. “How do you remind people that we have more in common than people think, regardless of our worldviews?”

Getting personal and responding to criticism

To many journalists, public engagement seems risky if they work to project neutrality on their beat. They can rest assured: Sharing your personal views, perspectives or experience is by no means a requirement for strong engagement.

Many engaged journalists strike a balance that is comfortable for them, sharing just enough of themselves with the public to ground a good conversation, but not so much that they alienate people, compromise their ability to report their beats or invite unwanted attention.

Engaging more frequently with the public exposes journalists to more criticism — some of it fair, some of it vicious. Telling the difference between what to take to heart and what to push away is never easy, engaged journalists told me, though the distinctions get crisper with time and practice.

When responding to fair public criticism, it helps to keep in mind that your goal in interacting with the public is always to advance people’s understanding — including your own. If the person who has publicly criticized you has a point, even a small one, it’s good to say so, and be grateful for the help.

Most angry, personal posts are best deleted or ignored. But the emotional and psychological toll that persistently toxic conversations can take on journalists and vulnerable story subjects should factor heavily into newsroom decisions about how to manage this work.

Some newsrooms do not allow comments on stories about charged topics. Others, like Re/code, Reuters, The Daily Beast and The Toronto Star have shut down comments on all their stories, preferring to engage readers on social media. Whatever the strategy, managers would do well to take on moderation work wisely, assign it responsibly, and ensure that staff have the support they need.

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Joining existing conversations

As journalists we may find ourselves wanting to engage with people in trusted community spaces with which we are not familiar, such as on Reddit, a close-knit Facebook group or some other online forum. We may want to ask something of the people, share something with them, or learn — often in a rush — how to get something done with their help

When you arrive as a visitor in someone else's community hub, it is to natural be a little unsure of how to act. Online communities, like communities everywhere, might have developed their own customs, norms and even language. Just as journalists would want members of the public to learn and respect certain rules when they engage in conversations we manage, journalists should do what we can to learn and honor the customs of the communities we want to engage.

The first thing you want to do when you want to speak to a new group of people, those active in engagement say, is to listen. Scan the threads. Read a few posts. Get a sense for what kind of exchange the community values, and how they approach each other for ideas or requests. Then speak.

In its ethics handbook, NPR stresses the importance of behaving appropriately in someone else's space:

“... all NPR journalists understand that to get the most out of social media we need to understand those communities. So we respect their cultures and treat those we encounter online with the same courtesy and understanding as anyone we deal with in the offline world. We do not impose ourselves on such sites. We are guests and behave as such.”

Step 4: Honor community work

When people contribute ideas or material to your work, they are in essence co-creators. As such, they have more incentive than others to look at the story or project, improve upon it and share it.

One of the easier and more powerful ways to give your project an early boost is to let contributors know it's published and thank them publicly for their role in shaping it. This acknowledgment begins to establish a relationship between yourself and the communities you engage, paving the way for richer future collaboration.

Fail to acknowledge the people who took the time to help you, and you send a very different message. You qualify the engagement as a one-off transaction with little enduring value. The next time you want to engage the community, you'll have to spend more effort to make it fruitful, rather than less.

The civic tech organization Code for America refers to these essential acknowledgments as feedback loops. Without feedback loops, each engagement effort stands alone, rather than helping build toward the next one.

"Feedback is how the public knows and trusts their input is making meaningful change in their community," the organization states in its best practices for community engagement. "If citizens can't see that their investment of time resulted in a clear outcome they won't be incentivized to participate again."

To build cumulative connections with the people who contributed to your work, news leaders agree, you need to show them that their involvement was valuable, and that there is more that you all can come together to do.

Acknowledge contributors

The degree to which you should acknowledge an individual contribution, conversations with news leaders suggest, depends on how much that contribution influenced your project and how much effort the contributor took to make it happen.

If you quote directly from a person's contribution, acknowledge the contributor by name, as you would with any other quoted or important source. When applicable, include the link to the material the person contributed. If a discussion by a crowd of people inspired your project in a broad way — even if it didn't introduce specific material — a general thank you to the group is enough to make its members feel appreciated.

If a handful of people or fewer went out of their way to help you, a general thank you falls short. A specific acknowledgment of that person's contribution will be necessary to honor the effort.

We'll turn to public radio for an example. In December 2013, NPR's Planet Money reported a series on the afterlife of American clothes. While journalists browsed donated American clothes that ended up in African markets, they came across one t-shirt that bore the label "Jennifer's bat mitzvah" on the front, along with the date of the event and the name of the owner on the tag — "Rachel Williams."

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The degree to which you should acknowledge an individual contribution, conversations with news leaders suggest, depends on how much that contribution influenced your project.

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For a unique angle on their series, Planet Money asked its readers to help track down Rachel and Jennifer. When one reader found the women through considerable effort, NPR's follow-up story not only acknowledged him by the name, but also made his social media sleuthing part of their tale:

"Adam Soclof of JTA, a Jewish news service, saw a post about our search and set out to find Rachel Williams. He used Facebook Graph Search to look for people named Rachel Williams who had a friend named Jennifer, who would have been about 13 in 1993, and with whom he shared common Facebook friends," the story read.

Planet Money also linked to the contributor's blog post about finding the women, which included his own interviews with both. This essentially made Soclof's story part of Planet Money's own.

Planet Money's decision to involve its audience in its storytelling paid off. The story it produced about solving the mystery was the most popular story in the Web series by far, according to Melody Kramer, who was a digital strategist at NPR at the time.

"Involving the audience in the process was key to bigger reach and a bigger [public] investment in the outcome," Kramer said.

Notify contributors

Letting people know when stories they contributed to are published is not just good marketing. It's good manners, and a key way to affirm to contributors that what you built you built together.

Again, the specificity with which you notify contributors depends on their impact and level of effort. If people in a certain community discussed your project in a way that suggests they'd be interested in seeing it, leave a post in that community or in a thread discussing the project letting members know it's up. If some people contributed in significant ways, notifying them directly, via email or a simple tag as an @ reply on Twitter or a tag on social media, honors the effort, and gives you the opportunity to thank them in the same note.

It's difficult to over-thank contributors. What you and your work stand to gain from a closer collaboration with communities is significant, and their obligation to work with you is nil. As news leaders stress, showing you value contributors is a key step toward building connections with them that can strengthen your work.

"All those people out there have so much more knowledge than you do," said Jennifer Brandel of Hearken. "If you want access to tapping into that, you need to treat it as a privilege rather than something on your to-do list."

Invite further participation

Even when you've shown your community what you've done with their help, there's more work you can come together to do.

In a 2013 speech, former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger outlined 10 principles of what he terms “open journalism.” Among them were that open journalism “encourages public participation,” is “open to challenge, correction and clarification,” and that “publishing is the start, not the end, of the process.”

So once your story is up, what’s next? How can people continue to contribute?

John Cook, co-founder of technology news site GeekWire, discovered the power behind these questions while he was a venture beat reporter at the now-shuttered Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

Cook was reporting about layoffs in the years after the dot-com bubble burst. He’d get repeated calls from people in the industry wanting to know about the situation at one or another company, and got an idea. He was friends with the paper’s only developer, and recruited him to help build an ongoing public database on his venture capital blog of local companies’ layoffs.

They called it the layoff tracker, and it became one of the more popular things on the blog. Cook soon realized its biggest benefit was not that it kept him from having to repeatedly answer questions. People started calling and emailing him to tell him which layoffs he was missing. People found the work so valuable, they couldn’t help but make it better when they could.

Today, GeekWire, the news site Cook cofounded with fellow former Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporter Todd Bishop, maintains several evergreen lists and directories. Entries in the lists, such as those in their tracker of Seattle engineering centers, often link to their own coverage of the companies.

	Company	Address	News Coverage	Category	Established
	Adobe	701 North 34th Street, Seattle	 Read More	<i>Software</i>	1994
	Alert Logic	1501 4th Ave, Seattle	 Read More	<i>Security</i>	2015
	Alibaba	1511 6th Avenue, Seattle	 Read More	<i>E-commerce</i>	2014

Educate

Sometimes, people don’t contribute to your effort because they don’t know how.

You may hear frustration or criticism. Or you may see people contribute in ways they think best but you know to be ineffective. The trick is to listen carefully to these communications so that you recognize them as opportunities to educate people on how they can help you help them.

When people call The West Seattle Blog to complain that the neighborhood site missed a good story, editor Tracy Record tells them how they can call in a tip the next time, making sure to use a generous rather than frustrated tone. When people contact the site with a tip the staff does not have the bandwidth to pursue, Record suggests that they post the item on the site’s forum, or that they take some other action. “At least give them a direction,” Record said.

Even when people already know they *can* use West Seattle Blog’s features a certain way, Record said, hearing encouragement from the site editors that they *should* cultivates more frequent communication.

Record’s advice to neighbors extends beyond the services of West Seattle Blog. At one civic event that was not well attended, Record spoke with a woman who doubted her presence would make a difference. Record insisted that it would, justifying her observation with personal experience.

Record takes the time to help potential contributors become better contributors to their community, not just to her site, she said, out of “enlightened self-interest”: The more people there are in West Seattle who are invested in the goings-on of the community, the more likely they’ll be to want to read and contribute to the West Seattle Blog.

Step 5: Track and learn

When it comes to building relationships with people and communities, practitioners told me much of what counts can’t be counted. A key skill to understanding your audience is the unquantifiable personal touch.

News leaders agree, however, that tracking the impact of your engagement efforts is a big step toward improving them. The trick is to select meaningful metrics that track your specific goals, and to make informed decisions about how you’ll interpret them. Fail to be proactive in deciding what metrics matter, and your staff may default to overvaluing broad metrics like social follower counts and page views while undervaluing incremental progress in building community support.

More fundamentally, monitoring the outcomes of what you do, as specifically as you can, gives you the ability to put each of your engagement projects to the test, and learn from the results.

Choose your metrics

It’s tempting to want to measure the success of your engagement by the metrics that are most accessible or most familiar. Page views. Time on site. Facebook followers.

The key to choosing metrics, news leaders say, is to make sure they tell you what you need to know. Before you pick what measures you want to track, then, it’s important to know what your goals are.

Benjamin Herold, Rachael Delgado and Mike Castellano of Education Week identified specific ways they wanted to help Herold improve his blog’s relevance to its audience. He wanted to boost his blog’s reach, its “findability” on the Web, and its ability to draw people into the sales funnel of the Education Week website, on which people can register to access some features, then pay to gain full access to content.

“What our mission is, what the organization’s values are, the paywall, the business model, that all factored in,” Herold said.

Once they had identified these goals, the Education Week team selected seven quantifiable indicators it wanted to track, such as mobile page views, Twitter visits and site registrations per 1,000 unique visitors. The team then developed strategies Herold could pursue to move those metrics in the right direction. In this way, it ensured that each metric tested a concrete action, and helped the team decide how well it was working.

“It’s like we were running these mini-studies,” Herold said.

Some behaviors can only be measured qualitatively. Others are only trackable if you take steps to make them so. When Columbia Missourian reporters passed out paper fliers at the Hickman High School football game encouraging attendees to read their coverage of the mascot’s 100th anniversary online, they included a shortened link from bit.ly, the URL shortening and tracking service. Thanks to that, reporters were able to see that more than half the people to whom they gave fliers ended up visiting the site.

Extract lessons

Once you’ve decided what metrics best track what you’d like to accomplish, the next step is to interpret them.

Herold collected six months of data and took away several lessons from his attempt to understand his Education Week blog’s audience. He included photos in more than 60 percent of his posts, when previously he’d added them to only 17 percent. He placed keywords more prominently in his headlines. He also clustered his content, taking posts that were doing well as cues to blog more around those topics, and presenting those stories together and linking them.

Then he used his metrics to measure the effect of the changes. Page views went up 67 percent, and 102 percent on mobile. Site registrations jumped 89 percent.

“I’ve come to believe the accumulation of those little things makes a big difference,” Herold said.

Much also can be learned from observing community behavior, even when you can’t count it. The key is to remain observant and to develop a process for translating observations into potential actions.

Editors and reporters working on The Seattle Times’ Education Lab fill out impact reports when they see ways in which their stories have a discernible impact on public discussion. On those reports, staffers note whether stories resulted in such community responses as notable online comments, calls or emails from readers, changes in policy or mentions of the story by education advocacy organizations or the school districts. The data go into a database that the project’s engagement editor consults to draw up monthly impact reports for the team to learn from. The data are also analyzed in other ways.

Sometimes, tracking engagement impact leads you to abandon an effort. Chalkbeat used to host open-ended chats at local libraries it called Chalkbeat Conversations, inviting members of the public to join the staff and chat about the issues. Few people showed up, leading editors there to conclude that the event wasn’t working, and they should focus on other events to gather the community.

What happened? *

- ☐ Online comments
- ☐ Direct audience response (email, phone call, etc.)
- ☐ Guest column
- ☐ Award
- ☐ Advocacy org uses or mentions story
- ☐ Public official refers to story or project publicly
- ☐ Change in policy/action
- ☐ School district refers to story, hosts it on website, etc.
- ☐ Other publication (newspaper, TV, radio, website) references or republishes story
- ☐ Other

Outcome description *

1. The New Ethics of Journalism: Principles for the 21st Century ↵

How to listen to your audience

In between the projects that often fuel engagement efforts, there are other opportunities for journalists to listen. The phrase “Grow bigger ears” has become a popular one in public relations and social media circles. It suggests that the best way to respond to a world where more people are talking is to find smart ways to learn from what they say.

Here, we’ll discuss five broad ways publishers can listen to and learn from their communities:

- Be accessible
- Be responsive
- Be present
- Check in
- Deliver (and capture) new value

Be accessible

A simple step newsrooms can take to “grow bigger ears” is to make themselves more accessible to their readers in more ways. Many journalists publish their email addresses, phone numbers and social media accounts. Not all journalists and newsrooms, however, make this information easy to find, or themselves easy to reach. Staff directories might be buried in website menus. Social media messages might go unanswered for days.

A newly powerful way for newsrooms to grow their audiences, engaged journalists say, is to be accessible and approachable when others are not. You want it to be easy to speak to your community. But you also want it to be easy for your community to speak to you. That takes being responsive and present on more of the channels through which the people you serve communicate.

In many cases, publicizing and staying responsive on just a couple channels, such as a central email account and a Twitter account, make more sense than trying to be available everywhere, especially if you’re just one journalist. The key is to communicate expectations clearly and follow through.

“Thank you for contacting the public editor,” reads an auto-reply message from Margaret Sullivan, the New York Times public editor. “My assistant and I read every message that we receive. ... Due to the number of emails that we receive on a daily basis, we are not able to respond personally to everyone who writes.”

Few journalists can rely on an assistant to help them sort through audience messages. But few need to. The journalists who have the most to gain from opening more channels to their communities are journalists who serve smaller, more defined niches, such as those in local markets.

Be responsive

The West Seattle Blog credits its success in competing with the longstanding neighborhood newspaper, The West Seattle Herald, to its commitment to respond to neighbors.

“We’re living proof that a disruptor may come along, and if they’re more responsive, suddenly your 90-year-old audience is gone,” said editor Tracy Record. “If I’m still getting emails, crime watching tips and things, that’s how we know we’re still alive.”

West Seattle Blog’s contact page lists a phone number at the top, “answered 24/7 — if breaking news, you’re welcome to text, too!” the site explains. It also lists email addresses for the blog, for Record and her co-founder Patrick Sand, along with their social media channels — where they remain responsive — and specific tips about when to contact who for what and how best to format certain emails:

Contact

Phone: 206/293-6302 (answered 24/7 – if breaking news, you’re welcome to text, too!)

News tips/releases, event announcements, lost/found pets, obituaries, wedding announcements – please e-mail editor Tracy Record: editor@westseattleblog.com – if it ever bounces, secondary account is westseattleblog@yahoo.com but please try the primary account first.

SEE IMPORTANT INFO BELOW RE: FORMAT OF YOUR E-MAIL

Record and Sand mean it when they say they answer their phone 24/7. That’s how they get some of their best tips, they said, helping them scoop other media in town. “One third of the time, they call us before they call the police,” Record said.

Even when what they hear is less urgent, Record and Sand consider it valuable to make a direct connection with their core audience of neighbors over the phone or via text.

Be present

Another way to listen to your communities is to join them in the spaces they gather — especially when you don’t have a particular story to report. This goes for both online and offline spaces, whether it’s an online forum, a Facebook page, a community meeting or a civic event. Turn up because you have a story to write and you show you value the story. Turn up because you want to get to know people and you show you value the community.

Becoming a familiar presence in the communities you serve has straightforward advantages. You position yourself to have more direct insight into a community’s evolving interests and needs. When you request something of a community that already knows you, they’re more willing provide it. And when they have a story they want told, they’re more likely to come to you.

Some journalists can commit huge chunks of their workweek to establishing a powerful presence in their community. Not everyone could commit that kind of time, or would want to. What all journalists can do is think strategically about where they could benefit from establishing a reliable presence.

Is there an online space where people trade ideas around your beat? Are there meetup groups or mixers you could visit? Where do the people who most influence your beat show up — at a local event, a blog, a group on social media?

Being alert to what's said in your own channels can give powerful cues. When Boston Globe digital projects editor Laura Amico saw the subject of an in-depth feature answer a reader's question in the story's comments, she scheduled a live online chat with him readers appreciated.

Check in

Is your work connecting with a community? What could you be doing better? The best way to find out is to check in with your audiences and communities, and listen carefully to what they say.

Surveys are one way to ask your community for feedback on your own work. The New York Times has a customer insight team that regularly designs surveys for its news products. Users of the organization's mobile news app NYTNow see a survey once every couple months.

The survey aims to understand what users value about the app and what keeps them coming back. App editors and product developers meet to discuss the results of the surveys, among other feedback, every couple weeks as they work to improve the app.

Which of the following describe why you read NYT Now?
(Select ALL that apply)

- ☒ To pass the time
- ☒ Tells me all the news I need to know so I never feel like I'm missing anything
- ☒ Tells me what's changed since the last time I checked the news
- ☒ To be prepared to talk about the news of the day
- ☒ Sorts through the clutter of news and information to tell me what really matters
- ☐ To read stories I wouldn't have known about
- ☐ It has stories I can't get elsewhere
- ☒ Helps me get caught up on the news quickly
- ☐ Thoughtful analysis and opinion to provide context on the day's events
- ☐ Other (specify)

Of course, you don't need anything as official as a survey to ask users for feedback. Soon after the NYTNOW app began offering its "morning briefing" — a roundup of the day's top stories — it included an email address at the bottom of the list and invited feedback. When the team developed an evening briefing, it put out the same invitation for readers to share what they thought.

"In an email someone said, 'I'm desperate for news, and I don't have time in my day for it. Thank you for giving me a way to the news.' That was the theme of the response," said Michael Owen, editor of NYTNOW. "These are things we wouldn't know from our user testing panels, or from metrics in our CMS."

Chalkbeat, the education publisher, goes one step further when it comes to hearing its readers' feedback. Its New York and Colorado bureaus have put together reader advisory boards that meet regularly to advise the bureau's reporters on how their stories can better connect with the education community.

The concept took hold after founder Liz Green talked with someone in the education community about the site's mission to cover the issue. The person got excited and wanted to help. From there, Green began to put together a group of community influencers the site would consult as it grew, such as teachers engaged in policy discussions or people who had spent time in the education nonprofit sector.

Among the things Chalkbeat’s reader advisory boards have done when they meet is a “read along.” Members of the advisory board will take turns reading Chalkbeat stories out loud, stopping to note when things seem unclear to them. “We could easily spend half an hour on one story,” former Chalkbeat director of product Anika Anand said.

For one advisory board meeting, Chalkbeat asked its advisory board members to come prepared to talk about three published Chalkbeat stories. One woman on the board arrived with a matrix chart she’d drawn with feedback so rich and thoughtful it stunned the staff.

“For readers to be that engaged, give that kind of feedback, why wouldn’t we tap into that?” Anand said.

Deliver (and capture) new value

News publishers deliver value to their communities through their news content. But to find other ways to deliver value, it helps to get to know those communities, learn what they want, and be the one to give it to them — even if it sometimes seems counterintuitive.

NYTNow hypothesized that busy mobile news readers wanted an easy way to access the news that mattered, no matter who produced it. So when it launched, the app offered users a core stream of New York Times stories as well as a second stream of standout stories from other sites, which drove traffic to the Times’ competitors. When a new version of the app went live in 2015, the two streams merged.

“If we were going to be your guide to the news, we had to be your guide to all of it,” Owen explained. “Most people in the newsroom understand that we don’t have a monopoly on our readers’ attention in the first place — which means there’s even more value in getting people to engage with us consistently. Being a filter — helping people figure out what is worth paying attention to — is one of the best ways to keep them coming back.”

Essentially, the value NYTNow delivers its users is not just The New York Times’ news, but the New York Times’ perspective on *all* the news. The strategy appears to be working: Editor Michael Owen reported a “persistent rise in our monthly active users and in their engagement” since the merger of the two streams of content, as well as an increase in the number of non-subscribers using the app.

Events are another way some news publishers deliver value to their communities. Events give communities a space to connect with each other in person around their interests. They also deliver value to merchants and sponsors who want to reach those communities. At a sufficient scale, events can grow to become significant sources of revenue for news providers, while also delivering other benefits.

Seattle-based technology news site GeekWire draws 40 percent of its revenue from events. These range from its annual conferences, the GeekWire Summit and GeekWire StartupDay, and its holiday party for local startups, the GeekWire Gala, to a host of meetups, mixers and editorial events throughout the year.

The annual GeekWire Awards event delivers value to the region’s tech community in a particularly powerful way: It gives the members of that community a way to celebrate, on a regular schedule, what they’ve achieved.



More than 900 people attended the ticketed 2015 GeekWire Awards, and more than 25,000 readers voted for winners in categories like CEO of the Year, Newcomer of the Year, and Geekiest Office Space. Hosting the awards event benefits GeekWire in three ways, editor John Cook explained. It brings people in the community together, it generates new story ideas and brings in revenue.













GeekWire monetizes the growing awards event through more than just ticket sales. Each of the 13 categories in the 2015 awards had a presenting sponsor — a company or service provider that wanted to reach GeekWire’s audience. The sponsors’ names appeared next to the category title online. At the event, a representative from each company handed the award to the winner.

GeekWire’s highly photographed and tweeted events have helped the company make a strong case to advertisers and site sponsors that it commands the attention of a highly engaged community, Cook said.

“We’re a convener online already,” Cook said. “If we can extend that to new experiences, that gets beyond online chatter to a real-world connection.”

Cook cautioned, however, that events take lots of work to do right. “Don’t go into it lightly,” he said.

Acting on its understanding of its community, GeekWire has also found other ways to monetize its most popular content. Earlier in this study I mentioned its live directory of Seattle engineering centers. Another live directory it manages is the GeekWire 200, a ranked index of the top 200 Pacific Northwest startups. The directory, which uses “publicly available data to identify the tech companies most popular and trending among key online communities,” has become a frequently visited and cited resource in the tech scene. Knowing that the leaders of the companies on the directory are searching for top tech talent, GeekWire started selling “We’re Hiring” buttons on the page.

21		Smartsheet ↑ +2 SAAS - B2B	★ We're Hiring		
22		creativeLIVE Education - B2C			
23		DataSphere ↑ +1 Media - B2B			
24		Simply Measured ↑ +1 Analytics - B2B	★ We're Hiring		

How to become a consistently engaging newsroom

Not many newsrooms are designed with engaging audiences in mind. Many newsroom leaders find it more natural to approach tools of engagement as tools for marketing and promotion. And many staffers hear more loudly that they should use social media to work on their brands rather than to work on their relationships with sources, subjects and communities.

Marketing your stories and yourself is a big part of what engagement can accomplish. But when you engage audiences, you pursue other goals. You work to build loyalty with your audience and surrounding communities by interacting with them in ways that prove you matter and help secure your future. And you do it over the long run, not just for any one story.

“There are more individuals who are good at it than organizations,” said Andy Carvin, editor of the social media-based news organization Reported.ly and former social media reporter at NPR.

“Too many times I’ve seen where you see a particular news site or blog that really excels at it, then when one person moves around, they’re not doing it anymore, and you realize it was all through the sheer force of will of that one person.”

“

You work to build loyalty with your audience and surrounding communities by interacting with them in ways that prove you matter and help secure your future.

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At NPR, Carvin became known for his innovative coverage of the revolts of the Arab Spring. He listened as people from those countries shared information on Twitter, and curated with them a stream of the most valuable real-time witness reports and perspectives. As he got to know key sources, they led him to others, and before long the relationships he’d built had made his Twitter stream one of the most critical sources of news from the region.

NPR supported and celebrated Carvin’s work, but was not well equipped to embrace it, Carvin said. Publishers are still discovering how to build their capacity for engagement in the newsroom. Conversations with Carvin and others suggest several strategies.

Empower those ready to engage

Successful engagement strategies are often sparked by one or two people who are eager to try them. When you identify and empower staff who are already inclined toward engagement, news leaders say, you can begin to build your capacity for productive audience interaction.

Who are these journalists? Managers have observed that they often share certain qualities. A tendency toward transparency. A certain level of openness. A mix of enthusiasm and restraint that both keeps up with the pace real-time conversation and knows not to get reckless with the facts. Most of all, they display a comfort with online interaction, and a good nose for seeking out communities of interest when they want to learn about a certain issue.

When Andy Carvin hired his team of social media-embedded journalists at Reported.ly, he looked for people who showed they already valued what a participatory public had to offer. He also looked for humility.

“What kind of empathy do they have? Not only in the type of reporting they do, but in how they feel they should relate to the public,” Carvin said. “There’s a certain kind of personality that comes with that. They’re not only going to ask questions of their sources and things... They want to have conversations with the public.”

One way to identify these people in your newsroom, Carvin said, is to take note of who is already spending time in online communities. Of course, there’s a fine line between engaging productively in online spaces and allowing them to become distractions. Still, establishing a presence, when done strategically, is a key part of getting to know a community.

“Spending time online and interacting with people isn’t that different from a beat reporter hanging out at the local bar and buying a cop a drink,” Carvin said.

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Take note of who is already spending time in online communities.

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Some newsrooms have already formalized the search for and empowerment of journalists inclined toward engagement. Gannett is a notable example. As the result of a 2014 restructuring initiative it called “Picasso,” it created newly defined newsroom positions and required that all newsroom employees fit into one of them.

Here’s part of the job description for the Engagement Editor position at Gannett’s Pensacola News Journal:

“Plans and executes engagement opportunities to maximize community impact and story resonance in print, digital, community event and social media settings. Oversees content that highlights discussions and debates on important community issues. Should possess expertise in social media, marketing and events planning. Connects content with creative ways to generate community interaction both virtually and through events. May directly supervise the work of producers.”

Gannett’s Picasso initiative was met with skepticism from some for its company-wide application. But it reflected Gannett’s belief that redefined newsrooms, with redefined job titles, might be just what newsrooms need to meet the needs of a participatory public.

“The engagement loop is better when we make good adjustments and always let readers know how we’ve changed to serve their needs better,” said Jodi Gersh, director of social and strategic brand marketing at USA TODAY. “Engagement is the thing we feel will make a difference for us.”

Staff for engagement

Even reporters who love interacting with people online can’t do it all. Many newsrooms have begun to hire staffers to take on some of the heavier tasks in long-term engagement strategies, such as project design, events coordination, and partnership development.

Gannett offers one example of a company that has mandated that these jobs exist at least to some extent in all its newspapers. At the Fort Collins Coloradoan, managers have taken the initiative one step further. A 10-member engagement team guides the paper's capacity for productive audience interaction.

The Coloradoan engagement team consists of an engagement editor who works with reporters to build out individual engagement strategies and oversees social media; a planning editor who makes sure content reaches relevant communities, works well across platforms and represents a mix of deep pieces, investigations and quick takes; a reporter who covers local culture, entertainment and trends; a reporter who curates social media conversation and video; three digital producers and two photographers. Another staffer, Alexandra Smith, leads the team.

"There's no story that goes online or into print without being looked at through that engagement lens," Smith said. For her, that means both making sure newsroom content is optimized to reach its intended audience and integrating interactive components that can strengthen the stories, such as a poll, a request for public perspectives, a real-world event or a live Facebook chat with the reporter.

The paper tasked 10 people with "empowering the newsroom to help the community," Smith said, because its leadership recognized that there was a gap between the value the newspaper thought it was providing and the value that was actually coming through to the community.

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There's no story that goes online or into print without being looked at through that engagement lens.

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"We wholeheartedly believe the future of local news rests on us doing something different to engage with the people who live here," Smith said. "I don't know that local news reporting is enough, because people haven't seen the value recently. How can we show them that this is valuable and worth something?"

Assembling a team of reporters is not feasible for many publishers. The advantage comes from having at least one person who can think broadly about engagement strategies for the whole organization, rather than just for themselves or their beat.

The Seattle Times hired its first-ever community engagement editor as it assembled a team to support its Education Lab project. Three years into the project, director of journalism initiatives Sharon Chan insists that separate role was a critical step to making the project succeed.

"You can't expect a reporter to take it all on. Also, the reporter is also looking for leadership, and training, someone to bounce story ideas off of," Chan said.

Chan cautioned, however, that visible support from leadership goes a long way to showing a community that you take seriously your efforts to listen to and engage them. When the Times set out on its listening tour before the Education Lab project launched, the assistant managing editor and editorial page editor joined the project editors and reporters on some stops. That signaled to the people they consulted that the Times was committed to the project, and to hearing them out.

Share tools and success stories

Another way publishers can build their capacity for engagement is to develop tools and processes that help support it.

At NPR, engagement editors recognized that images were shared more widely on social media than posts with just text. Adding an image to a tweet produced 35 percent more retweets, a study from Twitter showed. NPR's digital strategy team wanted the boost, but faced a challenge. How could they help reporters make radio stories visual?

In 2014, then-NPR digital strategist Melody Kramer helped create the “Quotable” tool to address the issue. The tool allowed any NPR reporter to turn a quote from their story into a well designed image bearing that quote and the NPR logo:



The tool drew more people to NPR stories and was a hit among staff, but Kramer's work was not done. Over time, she and other NPR strategists tested different ways to use the tool and shared their lessons with NPR staff. For example, they learned that posting these “quotables” on Facebook more than three times a week had an adverse effect on sharing, and that shorter posts traveled much farther than longer ones.

Giving staff space to share their engagement success stories is a strong way to spread the use of effective tools and methods.

At NPR, staff share their experiences on a blog called Social Media Desk, which allows NPR reporters — not just digital strategists — to share their victories. This is important because reporters and digital staffers can feel they are in conflict if they believe they serve different underlying values. In reality, all journalists pursue the same goal — to ensure their material connects with the community.

“I was happiest when people at NPR wrote up their own thing and it wasn’t me writing about them,” Kramer said. “I’d say, ‘That looked like it was really successful, why don’t you write it up?’ People were more likely to listen to them than to me.”

Pace yourself

No one can build connections with audiences and communities overnight. The same can be said for any effort to improve your work by tuning in to community behaviors and needs.

Reporters and editors need to understand why certain strategies work, not just what they are. For that reason, news leaders suggest, you can often build your newsroom’s capacity for audience collaboration more powerfully with step by step methods than quick mandates.

After Education Week reporter Benjamin Herold and his colleagues Rachael Delgado and Mike Castellano doubled his blog’s readership by being more tuned in to his audience, they wanted to share their strategies with other Education Week reporters. The team knew, however, that simply telling other reporters about their strategies would not be enough to replicate the results Herold saw on his blog. They believed that pacing the work and making space to talk about and learn from their results was critical to the success they saw.

“

Reporters and editors need to understand why certain strategies work, not just what they are.

”

“One key learning from all this for me was, this is really high-touch work. It’s not a memo, it’s not a list of things to do,” said Delgado, director of knowledge services for Education Week. “If you’re looking to build engagement and reach, that’s not something you can do in a day and say in a week, ‘It works.’”

The Education Week team presented its results to newsroom leaders. In the summer of 2015, they invited two additional Education Week reporters to go through a process similar to Herold’s. Over the course of three months, Delgado and Castellano met weekly with each of the two reporters, guiding them through new strategies they applied to their work and tracking the results using a similar set of indicators.

Once again, the process produced results. The two Education Week reporters’ blogs saw combined increases of 77 percent in page views and an increase of 27 percent in registrations on edweek.org.

Build with communities

No newsroom has an abundance of time. But thanks to the participatory public, all newsrooms have abundant access to their audiences. The ability to develop new ideas with the people who will ultimately benefit from them is changing the ways newsrooms innovate. When a newsroom can support and protect that process, a lot can be learned.

Sharing an unfinished product with anyone outside the newsroom will seem risky. You expose your process, open it up to public debate and put yourself in a position where you will have to publicly defend your choices. But allowing an audience in early can help you develop in the right directions sooner. In certain situations, it makes sense.

When BuzzFeed hired Millie Tran (disclosure: she is a former API employee) to head up the team that would develop BuzzFeed's primary email newsletter, managers gave her few instructions and a lot of freedom to experiment publicly.

At first, an early version of the newsletter went out to 30 people in BuzzFeed's own newsroom, including top managers Ben Smith and Shani Hilton. A week later, it went to 60 people there. Tran and her team also shared ideas for the newsletter with people on Facebook, asking for feedback.

"The process of having an audience really helps, so you're not working in a bubble," Tran said.

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All newsrooms have abundant access to their audiences.

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The public feedback helped the team home in on its own objectives and find better ways to meet them. At one point, readers on Facebook let them know that a map in the newsletter was missing information critical to understanding the map. They had known that they wanted the newsletter to deliver a strong reading experience all on its own. Thanks to the feedback, they realized they needed to think more broadly about where the reader experience can slip.

By the fall of 2015, BuzzFeed's newsletter served 60,000 subscribers and claimed a 30 percent open rate. Two Facebook groups of 500 beta users for products like the newsletter and, primarily, BuzzFeed's mobile BF News app, help Tran and her team extend their reach.

"I'm not concerned about forcing this product into someone's life. How do I make it fit into someone's life? That's a critical question we forget to ask sometimes," Tran said.

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