

‘Not normal’

What local newsrooms can do now to prepare for a series of historic elections

INTRODUCTION

How do local newsrooms cover elections at a time when democratic principles are under attack, basic voting procedures are questioned, and many people fear the future of personal rights?

It’s a challenge that fiercely emerged during the 2020’s political and social unrest. Now, with another unusual and significant election cycle underway, a growing number of journalism organizations and newsrooms are responding. From community meetings in [Ohio](#) to “[democracy reporters](#)” and a focus on [diverse voters](#), journalists are experimenting and finding better ways to cover an election like no other.

This American Press Institute report is meant to help news organizations think about their politics and campaign coverage in different and more effective ways. The report is part of API’s Election Coverage & Community Listening [program](#), which has awarded grants to several organizations to help fund ideas to create journalism that better serves the needs of the public.

New chapters of this report will be published by API each day this week, each with a singular focus that we believe is essential for any media organization covering elections and democracy.

A first step in redesigning election coverage, as Harvard University professor Steven Levitsky has noted, is recognizing that democracy-eroding rhetoric and actions aren’t politics as usual — and shouldn’t be covered that way.

“They are not normal,” says Levitsky in a new [guidebook](#) for media. “There are real and consequential differences, to which we must pay close attention.”

He's not the only expert who contends that the yeeting of democracy must be met with an equally forceful yoink. But many local newsrooms aren't ready to deliver more powerful coverage. Massive [layoffs](#), hedge fund [ownership](#), dwindling budgets and a lack of training and experience in covering an intensely divided culture — those realities have left media leaders distracted and unprepared.

Media critic Dan Froomkin is among those who are concerned that political journalism will continue with some of its bad habits: “anachronistic, algorithmic combination of false equivalence, distance, and deadened tone,” as Froomkin [describes](#) it in his Press Watch blog.

There's little time for busy media leaders “to think about the big picture of our coverage, to step back and look at all of it and the overall story it conveys to our audiences,” CNN editor Alex Koppelman wrote in a recent [analysis](#).

“But now, right now, we have to make that time,” says Koppelman.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY & WHY WE CARE

Among the many strange spawn of 2020 was the realization that journalists needed to step in and help teach the world's leading democracy about democracy.

This is when a project called [Democracy SOS](#) launched a 10-month fellowship program and distributed emergency funding to newsrooms “to support reporters and editors in significantly strengthening journalism's role in advancing our democracy through innovative approaches that build civic engagement, equity and healthy discourse.”

Large and small organizations launched “[democracy teams](#)” complete with democracy editors, reporters and audience engagement specialists. [Democracy Day](#), an initiative created and supported by about 400 [media organizations](#), was held Sept. 15.

And a high school government teacher [quit](#) her day job and became an [Instagram](#) influencer and a voracious consumer of news, which she uses to inform her 1 million followers and her top-rated podcast.

DEMOCRACY SOS

The program will help newsrooms transform their coverage:

FROM candidate/horse-race focused coverage **TO** constituent-focused coverage;

FROM journalists deciding what information the public gets **TO** journalists listening to the public to cover the information they're missing;

FROM problem-focused reporting **TO** solutions-focused reporting;

FROM assuming the public knows how journalism is made **TO** explaining how journalism is made;

FROM conflict-oriented reporting that contributes to polarization **TO** “good conflict”-oriented reporting that builds understanding;

FROM undercovering/miscovering communities **TO** inclusive, equitable coverage of communities;

FROM coverage of democracy that revolves around one day (Election Day) **TO** year-round coverage of democracy (with elections being one important event).

Democracy SOS offers a fellowship [program](#) to help newsrooms “build civic engagement, equity and healthy discourse.”

Why democracy?

Jaisal Noor, democracy initiative manager for the Solutions Journalism Network and a former producer with Baltimore’s [Real News Network](#), told API: “I think there’s a realization that our democracy is something that is fragile, and it’s something that needs engagement to survive. There’s a hunger for that. Journalists need to step up and provide people with information on how they can engage in the political process.”

So how do you cover and explain democracy as a journalist?

First, your newsroom may need a refresher course. Can you adequately define democracy for all readers? Can you explain what happens in a non-democratic society? If not, no real shame there: Courses in “reporting on the democracy beat” generally weren’t a thing in journalism school.

But your democracy-focused coverage needs to be clarified for your newsroom so that you can define it for your audience.

“Democracy is in peril because people don't know what it is. And it's very, very difficult to protect something that is unknown,” says Sharon McMahon, the Instagram influencer whose followers are known as “Governerds.”

The former teacher told API that “a one-semester government class in high school probably means very little to a 45-year-old auto mechanic. That was a long time ago. I'm not using my geometry either, turns out. You don't use it, you lose it.”

GBH News, a public media news organization in Boston, earlier this year posted a job opening for “an intrepid reporter to cover Massachusetts politics and policy at the intersection of voters and democracy.” But democracy isn't a niche beat, Lee Hill, executive editor of GBH, told API. “It's in our bones. It's what we do,” he says. “And to be a part of this newsroom is to cover threats to democracy in all of its many forms.”

To Spotlight PA, the word “democracy” is simply about values. “We're not afraid to have values as a newsroom,” editor-in-chief Christopher Baxter told API. “We're not partisan. We don't take sides on policy debates. But we do say that we believe the government should be transparent. We believe if we pay for the government, we should have access to records and understand how it's spending our money. We believe that the more people who get involved in our democracy and the more people who vote the better.”

Here's how The Texas Tribune [defined](#) for its readers what democracy-based reporting means during the upcoming elections:

The Texas Tribune's coverage of elections seeks to empower informed participation in our democracy. We hope to achieve that in five ways.

Here's what you need to know

- How we explain voting
- How readers inform our work
- How we hold politicians accountable
- How we choose which races to cover
- How we cover misinformation

From The [Texas Tribune elections guide](#)

A conversation earlier this year that started with a casual [tweet](#) became Democracy Day, launched for the first time on Sept. 15. The organizers — Jennifer Brandel of Hearken, Democracy SOS and Election SOS; Stefanie Murray of the Center for Cooperative Media; Bridget Thoreson of INN; and Rachel Glickhouse of News Revenue Hub — persuaded about 400 news and civic organizations to join the effort.

By mid-September, those organizations had set aside competition and created nearly 400 democracy-related stories that can be [republished](#) by anyone, free of charge. The response surprised even the organizers, who were “bootstrapping it,” Brandel told API.

“We didn't have any money to organize it,” she said, “so we thought, what can we do that is a minimum viable product version of what the hope is for the future... Can we inspire folks to at least turn their attention to reporting on, editorializing or having conversations about democracy within their newsrooms?”

The group, which since has received grants from the Democracy Fund and the Knight Foundation, plans to expand Democracy Day in 2023 — including the possibility of making it a recognized holiday. “There’s so many possibilities,” said Brandel, simply by “putting it on people’s calendars and thinking about all the different ways that not only newsrooms but other civic

organizations and even companies could honor that day.” (Disclosure: The author of this report was a volunteer with the Democracy Day effort.)

While The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Associated Press, The Atlantic, and a growing number of local and regional media including [KPCC/LAist](#) have [created](#) specific democracy coverage, there’s some skepticism.

Perry Bacon Jr. noted in his Washington Post opinion [column](#) that a crucial segment of the mediasphere appears tentative about jumping into the democracy coverage pool: local and national television. And that’s because democracy coverage means reporting on the Republican party’s key figures who “are acting to erode democracy and voting rights,” he says.

“Honest coverage of the GOP’s radicalism might alienate viewers and ultimately hurt these outlets’ bottom lines, so it’s disappointing but not surprising that [the outlets] have not changed course,” [says](#) Bacon.

And as often happens in a polarized society, words are weaponized, memefied and become their own source of divisiveness. It’s gradually happening to the word “democracy” — a word that President Biden repeated 34 times in his partisan-tinged [speech](#) in Philadelphia in September.

“I guarantee you really every time I bring it up, I get a million messages,” says civics podcaster Sharon McMahon, informing her that “‘we don’t have a democracy. We have a republic.’”

She uses history lessons to help explain the term, pointing out that the United States was created as a democratic republic. (Here’s a [plain-language explainer](#) from the U.S. Customs and Immigration Service.)

McMahon also suggests a solution: Use the word “civic” to help describe the new beat, and repeatedly refer to “the democratic principles of our republic.”

But she encourages journalists to continue the focus on democracy. “I would really like to see local news organizations use this to their advantage, repeating the same important concepts of the principles of democracy over and over, as they then begin to take root in the hearts of Americans.”

HOW TO BE DIFFERENT — AND BETTER — THIS ELECTION

To future Americans, this period in the history of democracy will no doubt be seen as chaotic and fractured. But how will journalism be seen? As a catalyst to save democracy from implosion? Or as an industry that blames market forces for its struggles and whinges about the loss of newsprint and the scent of printer's ink?

"The potential for this to be a breakthrough moment for the press is real," New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen said in a July [webinar](#). But to begin to do that, he added, the media industry must "ask really tough questions about how we're going to do our journalism differently, given the threats to democracy that we see all around the country."

In this section of the American Press Institute's guide to covering elections and democracy, we'll look at some traditional ways of covering elections, and offer advice on more effective methods that could make a difference.

The first step: Study your election reporting, planning and staffing from previous years. Journalists can be notorious savers and likely can document any anachronistic stories, poor returns on investment (hours spent vs. readership), and trouble spots as well as successes.

If you're a newer newsroom or startup without a long history of election coverage, start here: Scrutinize how other media around you cover elections, and then determine where your opportunities are. Newer media organizations often are set up to think differently and creatively about news coverage, and should resist the temptation to slip into old journalism habits.

As you're charting your new path, here are some ideas to turn your coverage from traditional to impactful.

Traditional: "Seasoned" political reporters and editors

Make a difference: Add fresh voices. Don't get trapped into staffing your election coverage only with the same team, year after year. They might be less inclined to acknowledge flaws in their coverage or consider new ideas. And they're more likely to be [white and male](#). In a Pew

Research Center study released in June, 52 percent of journalists said their own newsrooms didn't have enough racial and ethnic [diversity](#).

At the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, covering elections is “an all-hands-on-deck” effort, director of digital news Rachel Piper told API. And that helps broaden diversity in the election reporting staff and in story ideas. Reporters who haven't been mired in political reporting bring new perspectives because they can “think more like a reader,” says Piper, and come up with coverage that speaks to “someone who might not have voted before or for several years.”

Traditional: “Horse race” reporting and other journalism habits

Make a difference: Really, truly, put your reader/listener/viewer at the center of your coverage.

A focus on “horse race” reporting — who's up, who's down in the polls or fundraising — is ineffective because it “views political battles not as issues of democracy, law, order, or the well-being of humans, but as races that need to be won,” [writes](#) Lyz Lenz, a politics and culture writer and former columnist for the Cedar Rapids Gazette. “Every bit of news suddenly becomes about how it will affect candidates while the rest of humanity sits on the sidelines and loses.”

And it can quash new voices, because it typically excludes any real discussion of issues. That hurts female candidates who often campaign on those voter-centered issues, [according to](#) California State University political scientist Meredith Conroy.

Horse-race reporting is a hallmark of national political coverage, and for many reasons local and regional reporters should avoid emulating it. Here are a few, [says](#) Denise-Marie Ordway in The Journalist's Resource:

- Distrust of politicians.
- Distrust of news outlets.
- An uninformed and confused electorate.
- Inaccurate reporting of opinion poll data.

“If you're only using a traditional lens to report on politics, you're only speaking to pundits and

politicians,” Jaisal Noor, democracy initiative manager for Solutions Journalism Network, told API. “Very quickly, your work can become ungrounded from your actual audience.”

The Chatham News + Record is letting readers know [what the newsroom will cover](#) in the elections, and what it won’t: No fundraisers, no partisan events, no endorsements.

That kind of focus also is part of the mission statement at [Spotlight PA](#), a statewide collaborative newsroom in Pennsylvania. “Decisions made on the state and local level have a far larger impact on people’s lives than those made in Washington, D.C.,” executive director and editor-in-chief Christopher Baxter [wrote](#) for Nieman Reports. Spotlight PA’s most-read election coverage this year has included “guides, explainers, election integrity, election education,” Baxter told API. “There is an awareness now of how much people want that.”

Bonnie Newman Davis, managing editor at the Richmond Free Press, an independent [publication](#) aimed at the Black community in Richmond, Va., told API that nothing is more important than making sure people get educated about elections. “It’s up to us,” says Davis. “People are so hungry for basic information” on voting laws, recount rules, duties of election workers, even what federal judges do and how they impact everyday lives.

Due to the “shrunk” state of mainstream local media, Davis says, readers are counting on community-focused publications like the Free Press for help. “That’s daunting for a small operation like mine,” says Davis, whose newsroom has five full-time employees.

Traditional: Competing for “scoops” with other local, regional and national news organizations.*

Make a difference: See other news organizations as potential collaborators rather than “the competition.”

This can be difficult for journalists who’ve savored news rivalry for their entire careers. But today, nearly every local news organization has staffing or knowledge deficits, and collaborations can help fill those gaps.

“We can't afford as an industry to be duplicating efforts,” says Baxter, whose Spotlight PA newsroom now has [92 partner organizations](#). “Those notions of competition — if you're still holding on to those, frankly, I think that's going to be your demise.”

For example, if you've got a staff with no Spanish speakers or a newsroom with no video or podcasting abilities, can you fill those gaps by creating a mutually beneficial partnership with another regional news organization?

Media organizations in The Granite State News Collaborative in New Hampshire in 2020 worked together to produce projects including a [voter guide](#) in Spanish and English. Media writer Mark Glaser [says](#) the project was a highlight in a year that will “go down as the U.S. election with the most cooperation ever among local news outlets.”

“What really stands out is how competing news organizations were able to come together to cover the election in the state of New Hampshire,” says Glaser. The collaborative initially was launched to cover COVID-19 and has jointly covered [state politics](#) and other issues this year.

Boston media have long been competitive, says Pam Johnston, general manager of GBH News. “But what we are learning is there are some tremendously valuable, smaller editorial outlets all around Boston and New England and they know their audience, their audiences engage,” Johnston told API.

The public radio station now seeks out partnerships with media including with Boston Black News. “We're better together,” says Johnston. “We learn from each other's audiences.”

Traditional: Politics reporters and editors have a meeting with themselves and decide which issues and races to cover.

Make a difference: Involve the community in your planning.

All your thoughtful election planning and coverage is wasted if no one's buying what you're selling (literally or figuratively). What does your community actually want and need to know about the election process, candidates, issues?

Those questions can't be answered by journalists sitting in a stuffy meeting room or on a Zoom call. But residents of all backgrounds — old, new, active, quiet, wealthy, struggling, voters and

non-voters — can help with the answers. And, as a bonus, they'll be more engaged in your coverage because they provided input.

Richland Source, an independent digital news organization in North Central Ohio, held a series of community meetings called [“Talk the Vote”](#) last year. Brittany Schock, the newsroom's engagement and solutions editor, and other staff members listened for hours as residents detailed the local issues that were — and were not — important to them.

It made her realize that long-held assumptions made by journalists about “important issues” were off-base.

“When you're in news, you feel like you're seeing all the issues at once and you have to care about all the issues at once and report on them. That can make it feel like the world is very big,” Schock told API.

“What surprised me is that the world is very small for a lot of people.”

Community residents typically focused on just one or two issues that were intensely important to them; for instance, problems with noisy trash pickup and laws regulating chickens in backyards.

“It's humbling to me that this matters so much, that this is so important to this person's life. It carries the same weight to them,” says Schock, as housing shortages and downtown improvement carry for the journalism community.

Later in this report, we'll talk about more ways news organizations have included their communities. But here's a good starting point: Write a [mission statement](#) to help guide your election coverage and hold you accountable for it.

Those mission statements “should include specifics about how you select which stories to cover and what you invest your resources in,” [says](#) Lynn Walsh, writing for TrustingNews.org. Along with [Solutions Journalism Network](#) and [Hearken](#), Trusting News worked with journalists to help them cover elections differently through the [Democracy SOS](#) program.

WyoFile, a Wyoming non-profit news [organization](#), created a mission statement with a list of specific actions:

In its coverage of the 2022 election, WyoFile will:

- Cover forums and debates throughout the election cycle so you know the issues candidates are prioritizing and their answers to pressing questions.
- Publish profiles of the candidates running for state elected positions and U.S. House candidates with an eye toward understanding each candidate's background, influences and qualifications. Profiles will also focus on past behavior or involvements that might raise questions or provide insight into how a candidate will perform.
- Investigate big campaign donors to understand what interests might help decide races and influence how they govern.
- Gauge former President Donald Trump's influence on Wyoming's elections, which many see as a test of the former president's grip on power. His influence is evident in the race for Wyoming's lone U.S. House of Representatives seat. What's his influence on other races?
- Answer readers' questions about how elections and the voting process work. [Submit a question here.](#)
- Examine the involvement, impact and effectiveness of Wyoming's predominant political parties and their internal behavior.
- Follow how redistricting impacts races for the Wyoming Legislature.
- Monitor the impact of Wyoming's new voter ID law.
- Be transparent about our approach and answer readers' questions about how we cover politics and why. [Submit a question here.](#)

Traditional: Your &!*@^#\$\$! voter guide.

Make a difference: Make it better by focusing on basic needs.

Anyone who's worked on a newsroom voter guide knows that it can be frustrating, labor-intensive and time-consuming. Candidates won't respond to your pleas for biographies and photos. Their answers to your candidate questionnaires clearly need to be fact-checked. The software is glitchy, your publishing system doesn't like it, and the boss keeps adding elements. Publishing a voter guide may never be easy, but there are ways to make it more manageable and valuable.

A tip from those who've persevered: Forget trying to track down candidates who won't respond to you, and focus on voter knowledge instead.

During the primary season, KPCC/LAist decided to prioritize its voter guides over incremental daily election coverage. Their research showed the audience was most interested in information about smaller local races "they couldn't get anywhere else," like city assessor and judgeship candidates, Brianna Lee, the engagement producer for civics and democracy coverage, told API.

They also made the guides [voter-centric](#). "You're centering voters, not politicians," says Lee, when you're explaining the purpose and history of the office, rather than chasing down

politicians to get their prepared statements. The election team also wrote candidate biographies based on publicly available information, and linked to trusted sites for more information.

“If you help people understand the job,” Ariel Zirulnick, senior editor for community engagement at KPCC and LAist, told API, “it helps them understand how to read the candidates’ platforms” on political websites and in campaign literature.

The guides produced record-setting metrics, says Zirulnick, in readers’ engaged minutes and recirculation. Page views for the guide exceeded a million. For the state’s upcoming general election, the voter guide will include an overview of how ballot measures, or propositions, work and a detailed breakdown of all seven measures on the November ballot. The staff also will publish a “pop-up” newsletter explaining the five most confusing items on the ballot.

“Context is the thing that people want the most,” says Zirulnick.

Spotlight PA’s successful voter guide also de-emphasized candidates’ contributions, says Baxter. “Candidates have their own mechanisms and pathways to get their messaging out,” Baxter told API. The news media’s role isn’t strictly “connecting the people with the messaging of the candidates, which is sort of a legacy way of thinking.”

Rethinking the elements of your voter guides and their efficiency can leave time for other initiatives. For the fall election, all of Spotlight PA’s guides will be translated into Spanish, Baxter said. The Philadelphia Inquirer also has [translated](#) its guide into five languages.

Sample ballots are a great help to new voters or those who haven’t voted for years. [Scalawag](#) and [Carolina Public Press](#) were among the newsrooms that used a WordPress Election Kit to create a sample ballot project for readers. Funding came from the API’s [Trusted Elections Network](#) and Hearken’s Election SOS.

**A related suggestion: To avoid adding fuel to anti-media sentiment, journalists might reconsider their use of the retro term “scoop” on Twitter and other public platforms. Journalism isn’t a sport and celebrating in the end zone may not be a good look.*

REPAIRING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

By now, this should be a given in journalism: Decisions for and about readers cannot be made without input from those readers, and that “If we build it they will come” is a doomed plan.

But longtime journalist Melanie Sill, who’s working with North Carolina newsrooms on [local election coverage](#), is concerned that too many newsroom leaders are still making coverage decisions based on outdated assumptions about readers. “I worry that some people in the newspaper industry still don’t grasp that disconnect,” Sill told API, “that they’re focused on what they put out versus what people are looking for or using.”

That discordance is one reason confidence in the media, which has been a challenge for decades, has now [fallen](#) to record lows. At a critical time in history, what can local journalists do to fix the longstanding lack of connections with communities?

The concept of “rupture and repair” — a term typically used in therapy but one that can be applied to relationships in general — examines how and why relationships are broken and explores ways to build trust. Efforts like [Trusting News](#), a project of the API and Reynolds Journalism Institute, have chipped away at repairing those ruptures. If you haven’t been following advice from [Joy Mayer](#) and her team, now is a good time to start. Trust-building is a slow and intense process, and it can’t be achieved over an election cycle that promises increased partisanship, divisiveness and continuing erosion of democracy.

Meeting and talking with the community also is an opportunity to dive deep into what they want to read and why. Yes, your audience-tracking software can provide a guide for where and how to focus your content. But you can’t measure what you’re not providing, and you can’t track those who don’t read your content.

At the Charlotte Observer, executive editor Rana Cash says the staff plans to use “mobile newsrooms” to maintain a presence in the region’s Black communities. Journalists will “invite people to come in and tell us the stories they want us to write about,” Cash [told](#) WFAE.

At the Richmond Free Press, new managing editor Bonnie Newman Davis told API the publication plans to focus on a more specific audience: Black [women](#) over 50. “It’s a constituency to be listened to,” says Davis, with a substantial record of voting in elections. “There’s a growing number of Black women coming to the polls” who are interested in key issues including health care, infant mortality and the economy.

In September, a group of North Carolina news and journalism organizations, organized by the NC Local News Workshop, [held](#) a community dinner in rural North Carolina, inviting residents to “share your views about local issues that matter to your community and tell news and information organizations how you want to be informed.”

For help in engaging communities, news organizations have turned to collaborations with local civic groups, a partnership that can be complicated but not impossible. The Richland Source newsroom in Ohio launched a series of community conversations last year and worked with the North End Community Improvement Collaborative on one of its largest sessions.

“They really came along with us as partners instead of just allowing us to use their facility,” said Brittany Schock, the newsroom’s engagement editor, told API. “For us, it’s been very important to partner with people who are already doing the work and doing it well,” said Schock.

Instead of duplicating civic education efforts, she advises, newsrooms should “find people who are already doing this work. They understand that elections matter very much.”

Other ideas to keep newsrooms and the community engaged:

- Local opinion pages that include reader-submitted letters and regular local guest columnists. Media researchers have made a case for local-only opinion pages, and API [has advice](#) on how to start.
- The [Norwood News](#) held a “voter turnout contest” among districts in the Bronx City Council special election.
- “Pints and Politics” nights, which often include a community meet-and-greet or a trivia contest, are popular at several news organizations including [The Gazette](#) in Cedar Rapids, [The Post & Courier](#) in South Carolina, and [WABE](#) in Atlanta.
- Expand your definition of community leaders and think in terms of influential residents. A community’s most knowledgeable and effective representatives could be a local store clerk, a grandmother, a middle school teacher, a librarian. GBH reporters had a

roundtable discussion about the city's mayor with YouTube "influencer" [Java with Jimmy](#), a popular resident who had begun live-streaming conversations about city life and politics during the pandemic. Interacting with those influential residents helps to "make sure we know what we don't know, and to understand that they might have influences in the community or inroads that we don't yet have," Lee Hill, executive editor of GBH News, told API.

- Using the [Citizens Agenda](#) reporting model developed by NYU professor Jay Rosen — and assisted by [Solutions Journalism](#), [Hearken](#), [Election SOS](#) and [Trusting News](#) — these newsrooms are among those that have developed successful ways to reach specific communities:
 - **San Luis Obispo** created the [Outspoken](#) project to reach young voters in the county. Guided by community conversations and answers to surveys, the newsroom wrote stories and newsletters directed at millennials and voting-age Gen Z-ers.
 - **Santa Cruz Local** also asked residents about their top priorities in the 2020 elections, and published "[The People's Agenda](#)" to guide their reporting. The project continued for this year's primary election. The staff used residents' responses to develop [questions for candidates](#), such as: *"Many District 3 residents told us they or someone they know needed immediate help to pay rent. They can't wait for an affordable housing project to be developed. What will you do as a county supervisor in your first year to expand rent assistance programs? Where could that money come from?"*

The San Luis Obispo and the Santa Cruz projects were supported by the Solutions Journalism Network's Renewing Democracy program in partnership with Hearken "not just to do one project but to start taking the first steps toward change in a sustainable way," Linda Shaw, editorial director for the Solutions Journalism Network, told API.

HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE. ALL OF THEM.

How do you interview people who believe conspiracy theories, righteously share misinformation, and profess to hate the media? Can you frame questions in a way that avoids loaded words? And what if no one in the community will talk to you?

The historic lack of trust in journalism certainly will impact reporters covering democracy and election issues through 2024. Interviewing “groups that typically hold low trust for mainstream news organizations” — including conservative voters, immigrants and communities of color — will be tricky, [writes](#) Mollie Muchna, project manager at Trusting News.

The organization has a [list of questions](#) that can help guide those tense, complicated conversations. An important tip: If you begin with questions that acknowledge the lack of trust in media (“*What do journalists often get wrong about you or things in your life?*”) you can gradually build to the issue you’re there to cover.

“Even just acknowledging that journalism as an institution could be doing a better job goes a long way,” Jaisal Noor, democracy initiative manager for Solutions Journalism Network, told API.

He recommends this [list of rules](#) developed at the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Journalism Ethics. Called “Why Should I Tell You?,” the rules are “written from the perspective of a white journalist going into a Black community” that historically has received little coverage from local media, Noor says.

Trusting News also has a [step-by-step guide](#) for “identifying audiences you’re missing, finding people to talk to, hosting a (non-defensive) conversation, and acting on what you learn.”

If you’re interviewing someone with a firm belief in a conspiracy theory, make sure you don’t come off as dismissive, says journalism professor Whitney Phillips and the author of “You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape.”

Instead, consider why the person believes in something that seems nonsensical to you. Where did they first receive this information, and what convinces them that it’s true? “People are serious in how they relate to these beliefs,” [says](#) Phillips in an interview with International Journalists’ Network.

Others working on the polarization problem include [Braver Angels](#), an organization that holds community workshops and training to “bring liberals, conservatives and others together at the grassroots level — not to find centrist compromise, but to find one another as citizens.” Nextdoor, the neighborhood social platform that can be notoriously nasty, is exploring a partnership with Braver Angels. In an August email to users, Nextdoor said Braver Angels’ training “teaches the knowledge and skills to avoid contributing to polarization in your neighborhood and how to help keep political conversations from becoming overheated.”

[Resetting the American Table](#), a non-profit organization that promotes civil discourse, has created training for journalists that “focuses on integrating mediation tools into everything from how journalists ask questions to what stories they choose to tell.”

Here’s an example of [deftly crafted questions](#) for a political story written by Richland Source and cited by Jennifer Brandel, co-founder and CEO of Hearken.

“What made it so notable is they used questions that depolarize and complicate the narrative, [and] explained to readers they were doing so,” Brandel writes in the [Election SOS newsletter](#).

She added: “If every newsroom copied this technique for candidate interviews, it would go a long way toward turning down partisan heat and injecting nuance into what’s become a very over-simplified public narrative.”

Richland Source learned the techniques from Good Conflict’s Amanda Ripley and Helene Biandudi Hofer (formerly of Solutions Journalism Network).

***Richland Source:** Is there any part of Tim Ryan's position on that issue that you just discussed that makes sense to you? And what do you think the other side wants? Where is there common ground between the two of you?*

A Richland Source reporter crafted interview questions like these that are designed to “depolarize.”

Words matter. In a [study](#) published in March, researchers from Yale, NYU and an Israeli scholar looked at “troll rhetoric” often used by foreign instigators on Twitter and other social media

platforms. They mapped hundreds of top words and issues that triggered the most polarized responses, and then created a “polarization dictionary.”

The polarization dictionary

Researchers studied inflammatory words used by trolls on social media.

- Do not use euphemisms for racist or racism when the latter terms are truly applicable. *Mississippi has a history of racist lynchings, not a history of racially motivated lynchings.*

- “Death tax.” *Do not use this politically charged term. Use inheritance tax instead.*
- The Philadelphia Inquirer made news when they refused to use the word [“audit”](#) in news stories about Republicans’ attempts to overturn election results.
- Avoid repeating the phrase “rigged election;” use “election integrity” instead.
- Avoid labeling issues and actions as “red” and “blue” because they’re often more nuanced than that. And don’t hesitate to point out intra-party disagreements where they exist — on abortion rights, the Jan. 6 investigation or whether a past president can store confidential records in his home.
- Should you use “the Big Lie” — even in quotation marks — in your politics stories? Sharon McMahon, a former government teacher who’s now a non-partisan podcaster with a million Instagram followers, isn’t fond of the term. “People will immediately stop listening to you” once the phrase “Big Lie” is uttered, McMahon tells API.

PROTECTING YOUR JOURNALISTS

During the summer of 2020, local newsrooms around the country learned hard lessons about safety while covering protests, rallies and campaign events. But journalists need to understand that summer of unrest “was just a good warmup for what we’re going to see in the next election,” says Nadine Hoffman, deputy director of the International Women’s Media Foundation.

“I would say the level of concern is very high,” Hoffman told API. “It’s going to be really a problematic time for journalists’ safety.”

Do you know how to stay safe during protests, rallies and interviews?

It’s particularly urgent if you’re in a high-risk “identity group” — female; journalist of color; LGBTQI journalist; or a reporter who covers controversial issues in education, science, health or politics.

IWMF is among the safety organizations urging newsroom managers to do identity-based risk assessments for their journalists, so they can make plans for protection online and in person during campaigns and elections.

“That needs to happen now,” says Hoffman, “so that we aren't dealing with a much worse situation — cleaning up after an attack or worse, seeing somebody at your front door who's tracked you down online and possibly is coming to do you harm in a real-world setting.”

The New York Times has joined with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) to convene media security staff around the country. “What will come out of this, we hope, is a better way for us all to communicate, but also understanding the gaps” in media safety during the elections, Lucy Westcott, CPJ's emergencies director, told API. The group's work will be shared with other U.S. newsrooms, Westcott says.

This will help smaller local and regional newsrooms that not only don't have designated security staff (The New York Times has a director of newsroom safety and a vice president of corporate security) but may not even think there's a problem.

Westcott recalls sending a survey a few years ago to all U.S. state press associations to ask about their security concerns and issues — and getting only about five responses. Those responses, says Westcott, were: “We're not worried. This isn't a problem.”

“And then we had an explosion of protests across the country. And then of course we had January 6,” says Westcott.

So what should local newsrooms do now? First, do risk assessments for your journalists; CPJ offers [this template](#) as a starting point. And remember that reporters who cover beats that include extremist groups or election security, for example, may be high-risk.

“We never want to stop the best reporter from going out there and covering the story,” Maria Salazar Ferro, director of newsroom safety and resilience at The New York Times, told API.

“We just want to think about all points of vulnerability and mitigate for them.”

Reporters should also be ready to do real-time risk assessments, for example, before covering a rally or a protest at a campaign appearance. Beat reporters typically have the sources to get intelligence on which groups might be at the event and the threat level. Journalists can also use the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#) for past threats against the media, where they took place and who was involved.

But the most immediate task, especially for journalists of color and women, is to prepare for digital attacks. CPJ's [checklist](#) includes:

- Change all social media accounts to use two-factor authorization. And don't reuse passwords.
- Search your name on the Internet, using a variety of browsers. If you see anything that could be used against you or could identify personal information, remove it using a service such as [DeleteMe](#).
- Remove any personal identifiers from all social media accounts: phone numbers, spouse's name, and (warning to all journalists making back-to-school posts) photos of your kids on your front porch — especially with your address in plain view.
- Ask family and friends to remove photos of you from their social media sites, or change the level of access.
- Keep a record of not only threats, but posts, emails and phone calls that raise concern. Of course, report threats of physical harm to police.
- Make sure safety equipment is clean, in working condition, fits properly, has batteries.
- Management should be involved in the newsroom's "online hygiene" process, plan for incidents in which an employee needs to relocate to another home, and help craft responses to online harassment.

TRAIN AND RETRAIN

Are you "fit for purpose"?

If you've read the "[Elements of Journalism](#)," you know one of its basic tenets: The purpose of journalism is to make sure people have the information they need "to make the best possible decisions" about actions that impact their lives.

Being fit for purpose — a term more often used in industries outside media — requires designing a process and then maintaining quality through constant testing, training and learning. Even if you've covered elections for years, you still need to update your knowledge in an ever-changing political society.

"It's a different day now," Jaisal Noor, democracy initiative manager for Solutions Journalism Network, told API. "It's time to throw out the old rulebook. We're living in a different reality than we did just a few years ago."

Lee Hill, the executive editor of GBH News in Boston, has called this year “the year of training” for his staff. “We’ve had our reporters in bootcamp since February, every kind of training you can imagine,” Hill told API. He wants to do additional “cultural responsiveness” training to help his journalists build trust with underrepresented communities.

Do you have the current skills, knowledge and training to be “fit for purpose” during this election season? Here are some questions to assess your readiness.

Can you effectively use fact-checking and debunking in your coverage?

Fact-checking has become an essential part of some local newsrooms’ election coverage. If your newsroom has fallen behind, here’s a reason to step it up: More misinformation has been shared so far in 2022 than in 2020, according to a [study](#) released in August by two New York University researchers.

Even for seasoned fact-checkers, it’s tough to keep up with new methods of spreading misinformation. At the same time, better ways for journalists to write and deliver facts are evolving.

For instance, journalists also should practice “prebunking” — anticipating illogical beliefs and proactively addressing them in coverage, according to a [study](#) from a group of top European and U.S. media researchers.

Journalists can use “inoculation” in their coverage by shooting down misinformation before it goes viral. “The idea of inoculating people against false or misleading information is simple,” [explains](#) First Draft News. “If you show people examples of misinformation, they will be better equipped to spot it and question it.”

This is good content for your voter guide, as KPCC/LAist learned. They began by asking readers to send in their questions about voting and elections.

“We received more than 120 questions, several of which led to stories to address points of confusion or common misconceptions,” [writes](#) Brianna Lee, engagement producer for civics and democracy coverage at KPCC and LAist.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel decided to produce more election explainers and how-to stories on voting, in part because of what director of digital news Rachel Piper called “other

forces at work” spreading misinformation in the community. “We knew we needed to be out front and correct the narrative,” Piper told API.

Are you familiar with social media platforms beyond Facebook? Do you have a plan to keep up with the conversations and misinformation on Nextdoor, TikTok, Snapchat, Reddit, TruthSocial, Parler, Twitch and others?

About a third or more of readers under 40 get news each day from YouTube and Instagram, and about a quarter or more from TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter, according to a [poll](#) released in August by Media Insight Project, a collaboration between The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the American Press Institute.

The poll also found that readers under 40 blame social media companies, politicians and journalists equally for the spread of misinformation. More than half the respondents also said “media outlets that pass on conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated rumors” are a major problem.

That might indicate that journalists not only need to be cautious about repeating or sharing misinformation, but they also need to explain why and how they use the platforms.

The Knight Center at the University of Texas is offering a [free, self-paced course](#) that will open with a look at “how the Internet, social media, as well as Artificial Intelligence (AI), affect electoral processes.” The course is available in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese.

Do you know what you need to know about election laws in your state, voting deadlines, campaign finance reports?

These topics can be ever-changing and confounding, and journalists need to stay informed. Fortunately, several organizations offer training and resources on these issues. The North Carolina Local News Workshop [offered](#) campaign finance training for journalists this year (and is sharing [video and handouts](#) from the event), and the Society of Professional Journalists has [training](#) on issues including disability rights at the polls and other voting topics.

Do you know your rights at polling places?

In 2020, reporters had trouble [covering](#) polling places, and access during upcoming elections [are expected](#) to get worse. Rules for journalists can vary by state and even locality, so it's imperative to know what to expect and how to handle it.

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press explains access and other issues in their [legal guide](#). And there's more detail for reporters who live in these swing states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

PolitiFact also [published](#) a summary of polling-place issues and solutions for journalists this year.

PAYING FOR IT

The cost of holding events, paying travel expenses, finding training and even filing FOIA requests can add up quickly. But with some research and creativity, news organizations can find funding for election coverage.

Your first stop might be your local or regional community foundations, which have shown an increased interest in [funding journalism projects](#) related to democracy, governance and education. Hundreds of community foundations across the country have launched [efforts](#) to financially help local media cover governance and democracy. Media in Color, the California Press Foundation and the League of California Community Foundations also have launched a beginner's [guide](#) to foundation funding. (Disclosure: The guide was co-produced by the author of this report.)

More ideas:

- The American Press Institute's small grants [initiative](#) is designed to "help newsrooms improve and deepen their relationships with their communities in this year's elections," says CEO and executive director Michael Bolden.
- The Fund for Investigative Journalism is offering [Emergency Grants for Threats to Democracy](#).

- [NewsFuel's journalism grants directory](#) is continuously updated with funding and other support for journalism projects. Search for election-related keywords. (Disclosure: The grants directory was co-produced by the author of this report.)
- [The Pulitzer Center](#) is offering grants for “enterprise stories that focus on threats to democratic institutions in the United States.”
- [Lenfest Institute](#) has advice and workshops to help with journalism funding.
- The International Women’s Media Foundation offers [emergency funding](#) for “U.S. journalists in need so they can resume work essential to our functioning democracy.”
- The [Election SOS Rapid Response Fund](#) distributed just over \$200,000 in 38 grants to newsrooms and freelancers around the country in 2020.

In Mississippi, the Black Voters Fund underwrote the Mississippi Free Press [voter guide](#). Marquette University is supporting the salary of a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel political reporter who is a fellow at the school’s Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education.

A [Democracy SOS](#) grant also allowed the Sentinel to hire two democracy reporters; one wrote election guides and one tracked political misinformation online. Democracy SOS involves 21 newsrooms, who have received a total of \$100,000 this year, and “is aimed at long-term change in how news organizations cover politics, civic life and elections,” Linda Shaw, editorial director for the Solutions Journalism Network, told API.

The Richland Source in Ohio spent an estimated \$1,000 on hosting community events last year, with the help of a Renewing Democracy [Grant](#) from the Solutions Journalism Network. [Solutions Journalism](#) is a non-profit organization that promotes and teaches reporting on promising responses to social problems.

But even community events can cost very little, says Brittany Schock, a Richland Source editor. Organizations may provide free meeting space, residents may open their homes for small meetings, and catering isn’t really essential. “We provided food as a little experiment, and I realized that maybe that’s not very important,” Schock told API. “Next year we can save money by not doing that.”

At KPCC and LAist, a grant helps support the organizations’ new Civics and Democracy Beat. And there are other ways to offset costs, Ariel Zirulnick, senior editor for community

engagement, told API. For example, they created reusable templates for their labor-intensive voter guides. And their popular primary-election quiz, [Meet your Mayor](#), is being reused for the November voter guide, focused on the two remaining candidates. (The concept of the quiz and the code came from nonprofit newsroom [THE CITY](#). Email info@thecity.nyc for information.)

Some journalists in North Carolina received stipends to attend an election training workshop, a necessary step in attracting a diverse group of journalists from around the state. The variety of backgrounds — journalists who had never covered elections, reporters from the Cherokee community and from struggling towns in eastern and western North Carolina — proved to be a highlight of the workshop.

“They shared a lot of great insight and perspective about covering communities of color and communities in rural areas that are struggling with issues like access to high-speed broadband,” Shannan Bowen, executive director of the NC Local News Workshop, told API.

“We must equip journalists in these areas with the tools and training they need to provide this essential service to these communities, or we’re not at all effective.”

MORE RESOURCES

Research

[Is More Better? Effects of Newsroom and Audience Diversity on Trait Coverage of Minority Candidates.](#) Mingxiao Sui and Newly Paul

[Troll and divide: the language of online polarization.](#) Simchon, Brady, Van Bavel

[Recommendations to Journalists Covering the Pre- and Post-inauguration Period.](#) Election Coverage and Democracy Network

[Psychological inoculation improves resilience against misinformation on social media.](#) Science Advances

['Horse race' coverage of elections can harm voters, candidates and news outlets.](#) Denise-Marie Ordway, The Journalist's Resource

[The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction.](#) Nature Reviews Psychology

[Republicans are increasingly sharing misinformation, research finds.](#) Maggie Macdonald and Megan A. Brown, NYU

[Person-Centered Terms Encourage Stigmatized Groups' Trust in News.](#) Caroline Murray and Natalie Stroud, University of Texas-Austin

The Democracy Beat

[The Rise of the Democracy Beat.](#) Andrew Donohue

[American media wants to save democracy. Is it helping?](#) Matt Pearce

[My final column: 2024 and the dangers ahead.](#) *Before signing off, Margaret Sullivan offers advice to her fellow journalists on how to cover a perilous election*

[Midterm Essentials.](#) The Poynter Institute

[Newsrooms must reframe abortion coverage and the worn-out debate around the rules of objectivity.](#) Kelly McBride, Poynter

[The Authoritarian Playbook: A Media Guide.](#) Protect Democracy Project

[Democracy Day Project.](#) News organizations across the country have shared content that demonstrates democratic principles, current threats to democracy and dangers on the horizon. Anyone can republish the stories [listed](#) on the Democracy Day website.

[How journalists can spot the signs of autocracy — and help ward it off.](#) Margaret Sullivan

[Democracy SOS resource list.](#)

Election coverage basics

[Free online course: Information and Elections in the Digital Era.](#) The University of Texas at Austin

[Extremism & Political Violence 101 webinar.](#) More in Common

[Free Workshop: Covering Political Extremism in the Public Square.](#) Poynter

[22 Lessons for the 2022 Midterms.](#) ONA Conference Workshop, Sept. 22, 2022

[Let's end horse race political coverage.](#) Rich Barlow, WBUR

[Election SOS newsletter](#)

[Election Legal Guide.](#) Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press

[Make your Voter Guide iconic.](#) Jennifer Brandel, Hearken.

[13 tips for covering likely election scenarios.](#) American Press Institute

[What journalists need to know about the laws on covering elections.](#) Poynter

[How can local news help inform voters? Here are a few good examples.](#) Richard Tofel, Nieman Lab.

Meeting the community, interviewing, listening

[How a small-town paper is applying conflict mediation skills to its opinion content.](#) Julie Hart, Poynter

[A Minnesota-based Instagram influencer is bringing Americans out of their echo chambers. How?](#) Elaine Godfrey, The Atlantic

[How can journalists help communities overcome division?](#) Kevin Loker, American Press Institute
[Election SOS handbook](#)

[Make your reporting less polarizing.](#) Trusting News

[“Why should I tell you? A guide to less-extractive reporting.”](#) The Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin-Madison

[Being honest about how journalists are different from their communities.](#) Joy Mayer, Trusting News,

[Newsrooms must reframe abortion coverage.](#) Kelly McBride, Poynter

[Trump Supporters Explain Why They Believe the Big Lie.](#) Sarah Longwell, The Atlantic

[Book Review: How to Resolve a Conflict When You Hate Your Opponent’s Guts.](#) Yascha Mounk, The New York Times

[One Conversation at a Time.](#) CBS News

[Online course: How any journalist can earn trust.](#) Poynter

[Community Member Interview Guide.](#) Trusting News

[Facilitating difficult election conversations.](#) James Madison University

[Civic Media training.](#) Listening Post Collective

[Step-by-step guide: How journalists can talk to people who don't trust news.](#) Mollie Muchna,
Trusting News

[Braver Angels](#) events, debates and alliances

[Resetting the American Table](#) training and programs

[Good Conflict](#) training and workshops

[“Complicating the Narratives”](#) and [“High Conflict.”](#) Amanda Ripley.

Writing about polls, surveys and research

[Learn how to cover polls and research.](#) Journalist's Resource

[How to survey your audience.](#) WhereBy.U.s and Letterhead co-founder Rebekah Monson

[The Midterms Are Coming. Here's How to Cover Polling.](#) Celeste Katz Martin, Nieman
Reports

Journalist safety

[US Emergency Fund.](#) International Women's Media Foundation

[MOOC on How to Report Safely.](#) International Women's Media Foundation

["A Guide to Protecting Newsrooms and Journalists Against Online Violence."](#) International
Women's Media Foundation

[Resources for protecting against online abuse.](#) Committee to Protect Journalists

[Online Harassment Field Manual.](#) Pen America

[U.S. Press Freedom Tracker.](#) Freedom of the Press Foundation, Committee to Protect
Journalists

[Risk Assessment Template.](#) Committee to Protect Journalists

[Editor's checklist for protecting journalists against online abuse.](#) Committee to Protect Journalists

[Creating a Culture of Safety for Freelance Journalists.](#) ACOS Alliance

[Scenario Planning Guide.](#) Election SOS

Fact-checking

[How 'pink slime' journalism exploits our faith in local news.](#) Ryan Zickgraf, The Washington Post

[Free Workshop: Disinformation, Midterms, and the Mind: How psychological science can help journalists combat election misinformation.](#) National Press Club Journalism Institute, the American Psychological Association, and PEN America

[Minimizing Misinformation: Conveying Legitimacy in Your Election Coverage.](#) ONA, September 22, 2022

[Twitter Analytics Tools \(free\): Networks, Trends, BotAmp.](#) Indiana University Observatory on Social Media

[Fact-checking may be important, but it won't help Americans learn to disagree better.](#) Taylor Dotson, Nieman Lab

[Event: United Facts of America.](#) Poynter

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CLOSING

The American Press Institute will continue to report on democracy-centered journalism and political coverage throughout the election cycle, especially during the next two years as we head toward the particularly consequential presidential election of 2024. We want to hear from you about your projects, successes, and your efforts toward improvement.

Do you have suggestions for helpful how-to's and research for the report's Resource page? Email them to elections@pressinstitute.org or let us know on [Twitter](#). And you can still respond to our [one-question survey](#) about your needs.