

A 2024 AGORA JOURNALISM CENTER REPORT

Advancing Community- Centered Journalism

A practical guide for a more
equitable and service oriented
form of journalism

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September 2024

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School of Journalism
and Communication



Foreword

There is scarcely anyone in the journalism world today who doesn't know about the crisis in journalism. Starting with the implosion of the traditional business model for news brought on by digital and social media, today's crisis is both a crisis of capacity and a crisis of relevance and trust, as peoples' news habits and attitudes are profoundly shifting. Newsrooms need deeper and more sustainable funding models in order to have the capacity to provide quality news to their communities. But we also need to find ways to reformulate the news to build trust and better meet communities' information needs. That means focusing on journalistic practices that show promise of making high-quality news more relevant, inclusive, and trusted.

In 2023, the Agora Journalism Center released [Redefining News: A Manifesto for Community-Centered Journalism](#), authored by our colleague Damian Radcliffe. That report outlined the principles and priorities that define the growing community-centered journalism ("CCJ") movement that focuses on doing journalism in ways that serve communities by partnering with them, not just reporting "on" them.

In this report, Damian goes deeper, interviewing over a dozen leading thinkers and practitioners about how CCJ is being implemented in a variety of news organizations, the challenges it is facing, and how this innovative approach to journalism can continue to grow even in the midst of declining newsroom resources and a fraught social and political environment. These interviews also reveal five key challenges – organizational culture, the time-intensive nature of CCJ work, demonstrating impact, building the journalistic skillset, and sustaining CCJ work – that practitioners are grappling with. How they learn to meet those challenges will shape the way community-centered journalism evolves.

We hope this report will offer a practical and provocative set of lessons and experiences for journalists who are new to the community-centered approach as well as for those already practicing it. Journalism may be in crisis, but there is no doubt that quality, inclusive, and trusted news is needed more than ever. We hope this report helps the promising practice of community-centered journalism forward.

Andrew DeVigal, Director
Regina Lawrence, Research Director
 Agora Journalism Center

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Introduction

This report is the second in a series exploring the concept and practice of Community-Centered Journalism. We hope that the ideas in this report will encourage more newsrooms, journalists and funders to support and adopt this approach.

In our [first study](#),¹ we outlined the philosophy behind Community-Centered Journalism, highlighting how it differs from more conventional methods of news production. This second installment builds on this by diving deeper into the practical aspects of implementing this model.

At its heart, Community-Centered Journalism emphasizes creating news for and with communities, instead of simply reporting on them. It's an approach that requires systematically addressing long-term inequities in terms of both whose stories get told and who gets to tell them.

To achieve this requires changes in reporting processes and the mentalities that often underpin them. Arguably, without this shift long-standing issues like [low levels of trust in journalism](#)² and [news avoidance](#)³ will only continue. As I [outlined](#)⁴ in a 2023 article for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism and Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), Community-Centered Journalism is not a panacea, but there is good reason to believe that it can contribute significantly to addressing these key challenges.

This new White Paper builds on these initial arguments by delving into the practical steps necessary to advance the practice of Community-Centered Journalism. To do this, we explore three key areas:

At its heart,
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1 <https://agorajournalism.center/research/redefining-news-a-manifesto-for-community-centered-journalism/>

2 <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2023/american-trust-in-media-is-near-a-record-low-study-finds/>

3 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2023/08/01/news-avoid-depressing/> - and <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/five-things-news-media-can-do-respond-consistent-news-avoidance>. See also Toff, B., Palmer, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Avoiding the news: Reluctant audiences for journalism*. Columbia University Press.

4 https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/reimagining-journalism-taking-a-community-centered-approach.php

- 1. Implementation:** What are the key steps and processes that newsrooms need to deploy to deliver Community-Centered Journalism?
- 2. Overcoming barriers:** How can journalists overcome internal and external resistance (i.e. within their organization and out in the field), to achieve their goals?
- 3. Mainstream adoption:** How can we make Community-Centered Journalism a more established practice across the journalism landscape?

In tackling these pivotal questions, we have drawn from expert interviews with 18 leading journalists and journalism scholars. Their insights, as well as numerous [case studies](#)⁵ featured on the [Gather platform](#), have informed much of our thinking.

Underpinning this report series is a belief that more newsrooms and communities can benefit from Community-Centered Journalism. For this to happen, we must explore the key principles and practices that newsrooms need to put into place, as well as openly discuss the challenges that may hinder this growth and development.

More widely, this report aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about how to make journalism more sustainable, inclusive and valuable. Journalism has never stood still and we hope that Community-Centered Journalism will play a crucial role in its on-going evolution and development.

Damian Radcliffe

Oregon, September 2024

5 <https://letsgather.in/case-studies/>

Chapter 1: Implementation - five key practices

Although not without its challenges, there are many opportunities for Community-Centered Journalism to thrive and be successful. This chapter explores some of the key ingredients needed to deliver on this promise.

The early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic [demonstrated](#)⁶ a [demand](#)⁷ for accurate and relevant news that met clear information needs. That requirement is [most apparent](#)⁸ at times of emergencies.

Newsrooms must work more closely with communities to identify - and tackle - the issues that matter most important to the public.

Yet, in an increasingly polarized political and media landscape, good journalism is [needed more than ever](#).⁹ Many communities already [suffer from major information deficits](#),¹⁰ aggravated by a lack of original reporting, a tsunami of online misinformation, and content that too often fails to reflect everyday lives and needs. At a local level this situation is only [predicted to get worse](#).¹¹

A community-centered approach should be at the core of moves¹² to address these systemic issues. In practice, that will mean that newsrooms must work more closely with communities to identify - and tackle - the issues that matter most important to the public.

While efforts to encourage these types of collaboration are far from new, many of the principles of Community-Centered Journalism remain an anathema in a number of newsrooms.

[Irene Costera Meijer](#), professor of journalism studies at Vrije Universiteit

6 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/14648849221095335>

7 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/02/local-news-is-playing-an-important-role-for-americans-during-covid-19-outbreak/>

8 <https://www.mediasupport.org/hy-good-journalism-is-crucial-in-times-of-crisis/>

9 <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-has-ravaged-american-newsrooms-heres-why-that-matters-141955>

10 <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2023/>

11 <https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/news/2023/more-than-half-of-us-counties-have-no-access-or-very-limited-access-to-local-news.html>

12 See, for example, <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/press-forward-will-award-more-than-500-million-to-revitalize-local-news>, <https://www.freepress.net/news/press-releases/roadmap-local-news-signals-shift-focus-communities-invest-new-models-civic> and others.

Amsterdam, [argued](#)¹³ over a decade ago that local news outlets “will have to learn to address seriously the public's desires and sensibilities and to make effective use of their knowledge, experience and expertise.”

To achieve this, however, Meijer recognized that “representing the public more comprehensively requires, in short, a change of culture.” This echoed earlier sentiments shared by NYU professor Jay Rosen who [observed](#)¹⁴ resistance to public journalism practices “in the name of traditional values - especially the imperative of distance and detachment.”

Too often the barriers that Rosen and Meijer described remain in place. It's time for that to change.

Without a reinvention and reinvigoration, journalism will continue to fail in its efforts to meet the needs of many diverse communities, particularly in an era marked by widespread misinformation and declining trust in the media. By embracing Community-Centered Journalism, newsrooms can better serve their audiences, enhance the relevance and accuracy of their reporting, and build stronger relationships with the communities they cover. This shift is crucial to address the existing gaps and challenges in the media landscape.

Below we outline five fundamental steps to help newsrooms transition from a traditional top-down approach to one that is more community-centered.

1. Ensuring content is grounded in information needs

At the heart of Community-Centered Journalism is a belief that journalists are not, and should not be, the sole guardians of the news agenda. In many cases, community information needs might not be the same as those that newsrooms would first identify or prioritize.

As noted in a [previous Agora report](#)¹⁵ exploring Local Journalism in the

13 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700903500256>

14 Rosen, J. (1995). Public journalism: A case for public scholarship. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 27(3), 34-38.

15 Radcliffe, D., Alvarez, D., Powers, A., & Schenone, J. (2019). *Shifting Practices for a Stronger Tomorrow: Local Journal-*

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Pacific Northwest, asking questions - and ceding occasional control over editorial commissioning - is an easy way to start to put these principles into action. This, in turn, can help to identify topics and community information needs that can take journalists by surprise.

By way of an example, back in 2014, Seattle-based KUOW Public Radio asked its audience to propose questions they wanted reporters to answer. They then used votes on social media to determine which stories to explore. The winning question led them to the bottom of Lake Washington¹⁶ and its findings went viral. It wasn't a story the newsroom typically would have covered, which made its impact all the more significant.

Image: Feedback box on the KUOW website asking for input from audiences.

This type of approach can be part of a range of tactics being used by newsrooms to reassert their relevance to potential audiences. Reflecting on this business and philosophical imperative, [Jennifer Brandel](#), the Co-founder and CEO of Hearken, and the journalist [Mónica Guzmán](#) [contend that](#).¹⁷

“In the future, we’ll be in constant conversation with the public to learn

ism in the Pacific Northwest (2019). University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication, Local Journalism in the Pacific Northwest.

16 <https://www.kuow.org/stories/whats-bottom-lake-washington-planes-trains-and>

17 <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/12/the-editorial-meeting-of-the-future/>

what information they need... success will depend on becoming essential to those we aim to serve. We’ll know it if the public feels invested in our work by contributing their insights, questions and ideas.”

To help do this, there are a wide range of tools, reports and other resources that newsrooms can draw on. This includes the approaches pioneered by [Hearken](#),¹⁸ [The Listening Post Collective](#)¹⁹ and [Groundsource](#),²⁰ as well as information needs reports produced (and shared) by other news outlets. [Jersey Shore Hurricane News](#) has shared an [Information Needs Assessment](#)²¹ which helpfully walks through their goals, methods, findings and recommendations. An [Information Needs Assessment](#)²² from [Internews](#) covering a refugee crisis in Bangladesh offers further pointers. Both of these reports can easily be adapted and remixed by newsrooms.

Alongside this, news outlets can also harness materials from other sectors. For example, [The Community Tool Box](#)²³ from the [Center for Community Health and Development](#) at the [University of Kansas](#) offers templates and case studies that are highly relevant to journalists. This content is available in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Farsi.

Similarly, in 2018, the journalist [Amanda Ripley](#) published an influential essay, [Complicating the Narratives](#),²⁴ exploring what journalists could learn from mediators, lawyers, rabbis, and others “who know how to disrupt toxic narratives and get people to reveal deeper truths.” It’s a topic she [explored in more depth](#)²⁵ as part of [Listeners Podcast](#)²⁶ produced by the Agora Journalism Center.

Understanding community needs requires [deep listening](#), building trust and collaboration. And it’s not just established outlets that can adopt

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— JENNIFER BRANDEL,
the Co-founder and CEO of Hearken
— MÓNICA GUZMÁN
Senior Fellow at Braver Angels

18 See: <https://medium.com/we-are-hearken> for more about Hearken in action.

19 See: <https://letsgather.in/case-studies/how-the-listening-post-collective-identified-community-information-needs-in-omaha/> and https://www.listeningpostcollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/LPC_Playbook.pdf

20 <https://www.groundsource.co/>

21 <https://speakerdeck.com/jcsteams/jersey-shore-information-needs-assessment>

22 <https://communityengagementhub.org/resource/information-needs-assessment-coxs-bazar-bangladesh/>

23 <https://ctb.ku.edu/>

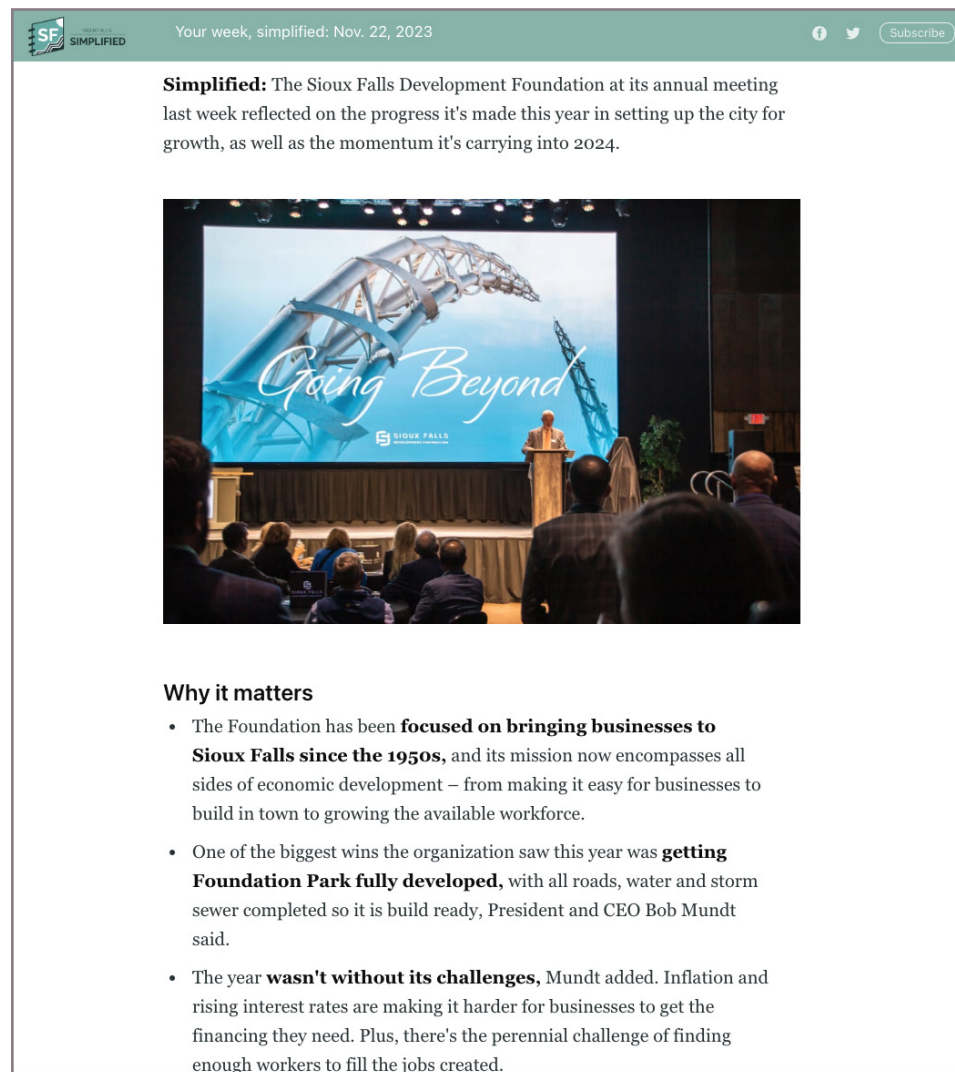
24 <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63>

25 <https://listenerspodcast.uoregon.edu/2019/07/06/18-amanda-ripley-adding-complexity-to-the-stories-we-tell/>

26 <https://listenerspodcast.uoregon.edu/>

these types of engagement practices to help determine, or reimagine, their editorial priorities. Start-ups can bake this into their approach from the outset.

Whatever method(s) you choose to help determine community information needs, the key is to be intentional with the findings. Insights must be documented and analyzed, Lisa Heyamoto, formerly the Director of Programming, Member Education, LION (Local Independent Online News Publishers) and now Vice President of Portfolio Learning at the American Journalism Project, reminds us, “so that they truly do become useful data that the organizations can use to say, with confidence, ‘we understand that this is what the community needs.’”



Screenshot from the [November 2023 newsletter](#)

Heyamoto points to the work of [Megan Raposa at Sioux Falls Simplified](#) (South Dakota) as an example showing this principle in practice.

Launched in early 2021, Raposa publishes a weekly email newsletter that provides a “bullet-pointed, bite-sized version of the local news.” Inspired by the [model of reporting pioneered by Axios](#),²⁷ the newsletter - and her [other reporting](#) - uses punchy headlines and bullet points to distill stories down to their key points. Each weekly round-up takes 5-7 mins to read.

Prior to this, Raposa had spent five and a half years in the city as a reporter for the Gannett-owned [Argus Leader](#). As a result of this experience, “she had a lot of ideas about what she thought the community wanted,” Heyamoto recounts.

Nevertheless, before launching [Sioux Falls Simplified](#), Raposa undertook some basic audience research. “It was transformative,” Heyamoto says, noting that Raposa “reshaped the focus of her organization before she launched, based off of what people actually wanted.”

Through 1-1 interviews with prospective readers, Raposa [identified](#)²⁸ how her potential audience was more interested in K-12 reporting than early childhood news, that they wanted to see coverage of city government and community trends, and to learn about non-profits in the area. “I didn’t expect to hear that, but I was like, ‘OK, cool, people like knowing what these groups are doing in the community,’” Raposa told LION. “I can do more of that.”

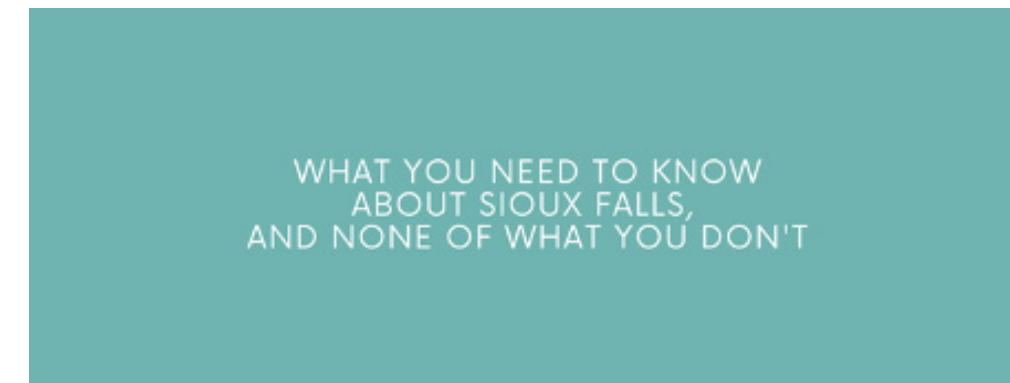


Image [via Sioux Fall Simplified on Facebook](#)

²⁷ <https://www.formatsunpacked.com/p/formats-unpacked-axios>

²⁸ <https://www.lionpublishers.com/more-journalism-founders-are-building-their-businesses-by-putting-community-first/>

2. Understanding community information flow

In addition to identifying community needs, newsrooms should also seek to understand how communities find, share and discuss information. After all, journalists aren't the only information providers in communities. Citizens [find out about their community](#)²⁹ via local libraries, organizations, agencies, forums, newsletters, friends and family, as well as other sources.

Local journalists can often be more effective when they work in partnership rather than in isolation.

Subsequently, Andrea Wenzel, an Assistant Professor at Temple University (Wenzel has since been promoted to Associate Professor), recommends newsrooms determine the “layout” of a community by engaging in asset mapping, an exercise which involves identifying “places where people connect and share stories and information.” Recognizing that each community is different, the distinct layout of each community is crucial for tailoring how - and where - newsrooms should focus their energies.

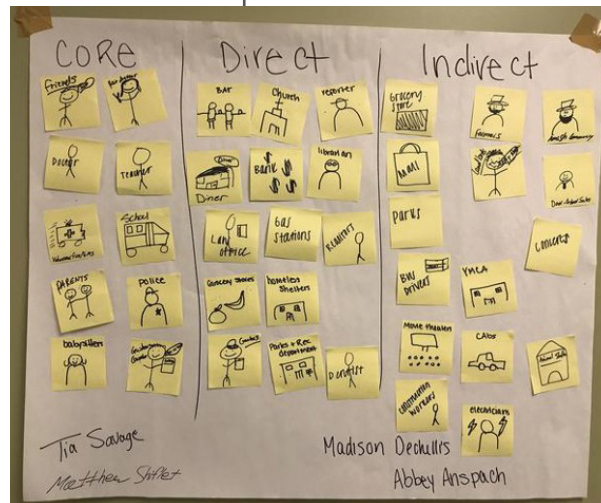


Image: Stakeholder map created by students showing information flow in a community, via [Michelle Ferrier on Medium](#)

Alongside this, Michelle Ferrier, the Principal Investigator and Project Creator of The Media Deserts Project, emphasizes looking at who else produces content that informs a community's information ecosystem. Understanding this, including non-journalistic channels that create and distribute content, is crucial because it can help newsrooms identify potential partnerships and distribution strategies. That matters, because local journalists can often be more effective when they work in partnership rather than in isolation.

Moreover, this type of mapping can also help newsrooms realize they don't have to do everything. Ferrier described to us the role of “journalists as community weavers,” whereby news outlets do more than just highlight their own work. They can also act as a conduit for communities, helping them to navigate other communication sources (e.g. government, other citizens, etc.).

²⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/03/26/for-local-news-americans-embrace-digital-but-still-want-strong-community-connection/>

[Up the Block](#) - a product of [The Trace](#) that we highlighted in our [first report of this series](#) - shows this principle in action. The nonprofit, which is dedicated to covering gun violence in America, [launched](#)³⁰ a list of “resources for healing and rebuilding after shootings” in June 2021, based on feedback from the residents of Philadelphia who indicated this was something they needed.

To produce resources like this requires journalists to familiarize themselves with sources and community assets, so that they can signpost communities to them. This may include physical and digital spaces (such as libraries and barbershops), as well as key influencers and community leaders.

However, Andrea Wenzel told us that newsrooms and journalists seldom take the time to truly understand community assets. Yet, she suggests, doing so is crucial for the success of community-centered journalism.

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Perhaps one reason for this is that many newsrooms don't know where to start, or they struggle to understand these concepts. If so, then it's worth highlighting the work of the [Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#) at DePaul University, which offers a number of [Asset Mapping and Facilitating Tools](#)³¹ that journalists can use to help undertake this work.

Mapping how communities communicate may feel like a lot of work for busy overstretched newsrooms. But, a key benefit is that it enables newsrooms to see their place in a local information ecosystem. “Understanding how these sources operate can inform your listening,” the American Press Institute [notes](#).³² Moreover, “by examining the information assets within a community, newsrooms can see where they have strong relationships and where they are lacking.”

³⁰ <https://www.thetrace.org/2021/06/philadelphia-gun-violence-shooting-survivor-help/>

³¹ <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/tool-kit.aspx>

³² Goins, C. (2018). How a Culture of Listening Strengthens Reporting and Relationships.



Image via Instagram

These insights can therefore be used to inform efforts by newsrooms to meet community information needs, as well as increase the likelihood of success by helping journalists to identify - and build relationships with - the key organizations, institutions and influencers in their community. Without this, it can be difficult to undertake impactful community-centered work and its full potential may go unrealized.

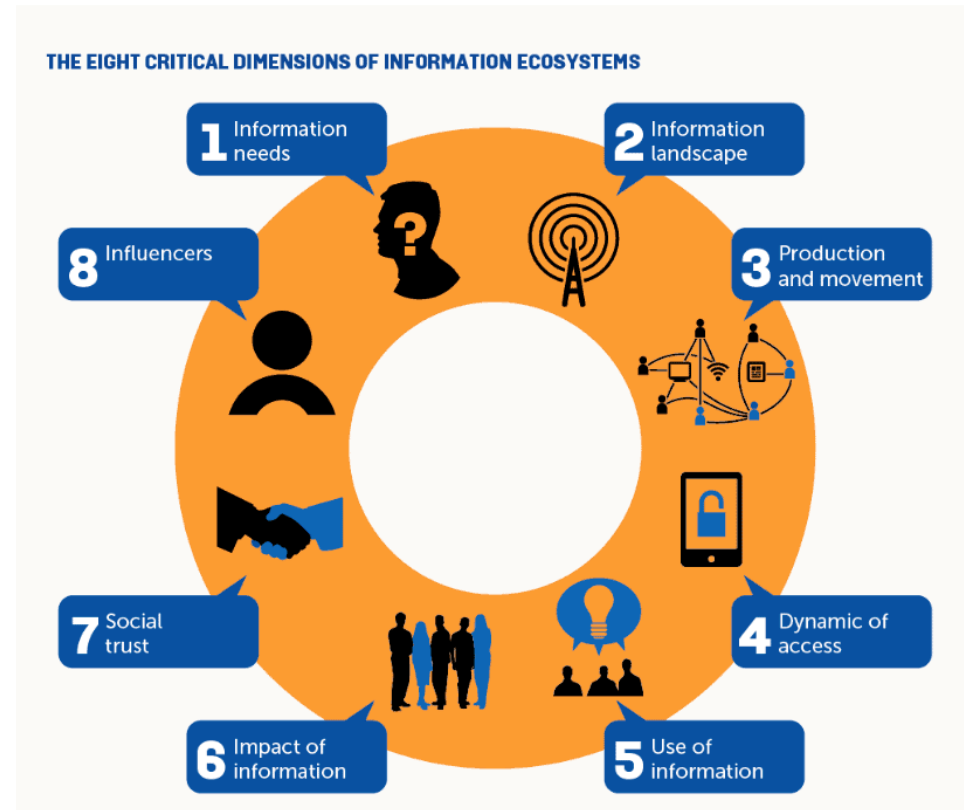


Image: Internews' eight critical dimensions of information ecosystems [via](#) The Local News Lab

3. Meeting your communities where they are

It's not just your content that should be shaped by community needs. Distribution must also align with a community's information habits, assets, and preferences.

In Community-Centered Journalism, it's not just your content that should be shaped by community needs. Its distribution must also align with a community's information habits, assets, and preferences. That means serving communities by delivering useful information in familiar places and accessible formats, without necessarily relying on high-tech solutions. Collectively, this approach ensures that both the final product and the story-gathering process are reshaped to make journalism more inclusive, accessible, and effective.

As Candice Fortman, then the Executive Director of Outlier Media, and now a JSK Journalism Fellow, Stanford University, explains it: "If you're putting good information in people's hands, and you just printed [it] on an 8x10 piece of paper and [are] passing it out at the library, and it's actually helping your community in some way, that's valuable enough. It doesn't have to glitter. It doesn't have to shine, it doesn't need diamonds, it just needs to exist and be useful."

KPCC-LAist's work at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic exemplified this approach by [asking their audience](#)³³ what they wanted (and needed) to know. Addressing over 4,000 questions led to the discovery of new sources and stories, at the same time as delivering a valuable community service.

"I've learned, journalism can be — and sometimes needs to be — the simple, straightforward answering of somebody's question," [noted](#)³⁴ intern (and now Assistant Producer, Engagement) [Caitlin Hernández](#). "It's not just 3,000-word narratives or a sound-rich audio feature. It's meeting information needs — in whatever form that needs to take."

"Journalism can be — and sometimes needs to be — the simple, straightforward answering of somebody's question."

— CAITLIN HERNÁNDEZ,
Assistant Producer, LAist

A 2020 report by the Center for Community Media provides further examples of how media organizations can serve audiences in fresh ways.

In many cases these efforts are digital-first, harnessing platforms - like WeChat and [JadooTV digital television](#) boxes - which are seldom used in the USA outside of migrant communities.

The study, [Digital First Responders: How Innovative News Outlets are Meeting the Needs of Immigrant Communities](#),³⁵ profiled 50 outlets (17 of them in-depth) and the public service role they play. In each instance, the content these outlets produces meets clear audience needs, cover-



Image [via](#) Twitter

³³ <https://membershipguide.org/case-study/how-kpcc-answered-4000-community-questions-about-coronavirus/>
³⁴ <https://medium.com/engagement-at-kpcc/how-kpcc-embraced-its-role-as-las-help-desk-and-what-we-ve-learned-along-the-way-10b548ea23ca>
³⁵ <https://immigrantmediareport.journalism.cuny.edu/>

ing stories and angles that are often overlooked - or seen as too niche - by mainstream media.

Stepping away from traditional media platforms to deliver impactful work can be further seen in the SMS services provided by [EL Tímpano](#) in Oakland and [Outlier Media](#) in Detroit, as well as on [WhatsApp](#)³⁶ by [Documented](#) in New York. These outlets support the information needs of their communities by delivering valuable information in the digital spaces that their community frequents. Doing this effectively is only possible if you understand the media habits, as well as information needs, flows and assets within that community.



Image via Sembra Media

Physical visibility can be another aspect of meeting audiences where they are. Alana Rocha at INN shares the example of [Honolulu Civil Beat's "pop up newsrooms"](#)³⁷ to demonstrate how journalists - especially those covering large geographic beats - can do this. Working with the [Hawaii State Public Library System](#), Honolulu Civil Beat's editorial team committed to working out of a public library somewhere in Hawaii, at least one day a week. In doing this, they sought to raise awareness "about how we work and why we make the news decisions we do," as well as seeking to "find out more about issues that are important to specific communities."

For geographically diverse communities like those in Hawaii, this ap-

³⁶ <https://letsgather.in/case-studies/how-documented-uses-whatsapp-to-help-undocumented-latinos-navigate-through-covid-19/>

³⁷ <https://www.civilbeat.org/2022/10/coming-to-a-library-near-you-pop-up-newsrooms/>

proach also recognizes - as the Civil Beat team put it - that many people "just don't have the time or the capacity to come to us." "So," they added, "we are coming to you."

[Greater Govanhill](#), a multilingual community magazine in Glasgow (Scotland), has taken this concept a stage further by [opening a community newsroom](#)³⁸ in the heart of one of Scotland's most diverse and densely populated neighborhoods.

Sharing a space with [The Ferret](#), an award-winning investigative journalism cooperative, the newsroom is designed to be used as a space for workshops, talks, discussions and other community building events. They also want community members to drop in and connect with the team. A hand painted sign above their front door reads: "Everybody has a story... what's yours?"

"Already we've had so many interesting people stop by to say hello and share the issues that matter to them," Rhiannon J Davies, founder and editor of Greater Govanhill community magazine, [says](#). "We are trying to make journalism accessible again by not being behind closed doors but having somewhere for people to come in and have a chat," she told³⁹ the [UK newspaper](#) i.⁴⁰

4. Address issues of inequity and rebuilding trust

Many of our discussions about Community-Centered Journalism focused on how it can help address long-term inequities within journalism. It does this, in part, by intentionally serving more diverse audiences, expe-

³⁸ <https://www.greatergovanhill.com/latest/greater-govanhill-opens-the-community-newsroom-on-bowman-street>

³⁹ <https://inews.co.uk/news/media/glasgow-community-newsroom-local-news-return-scotland-uk-high-street-2059018>

⁴⁰ <https://inews.co.uk/>

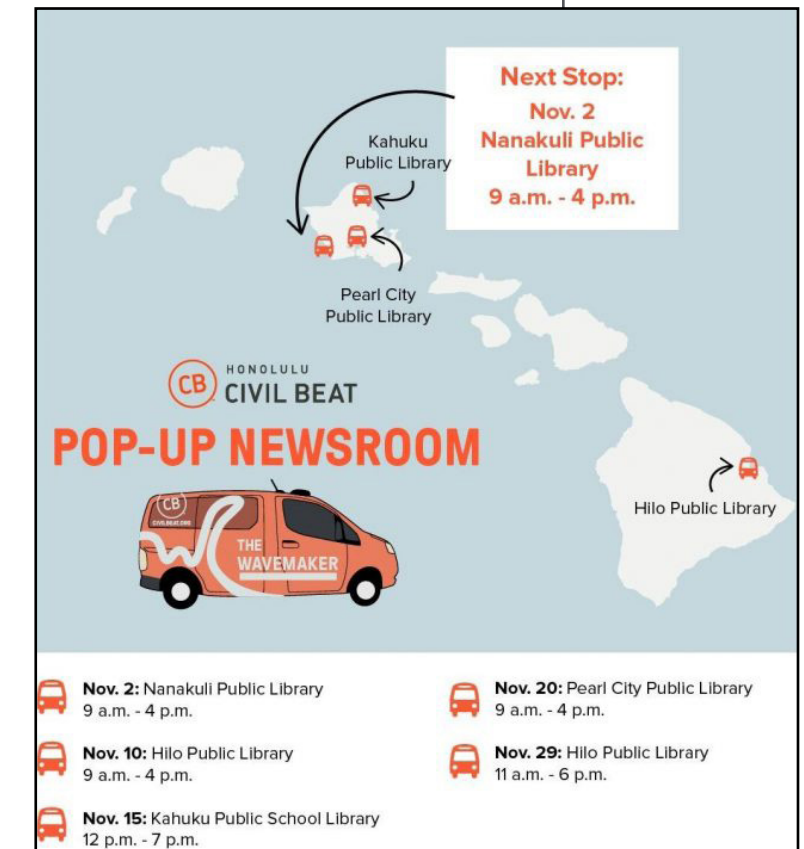


Image via Honolulu Civil Beat

periences and information needs. However, making Community-Centered Journalism more equitable requires several practical considerations. Some of the key themes to emerge from our conversations included: opening up the process of how journalism is created and who creates it, as well as the importance of partnerships, fresh formats and increased visibility on the ground.



Tweet by Ariel Zirulnick via Twitter

For those wanting to embrace these thematic areas, a good starting point is to consider whose stories get told. As Sarah Stonbely, formerly research director at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University and now Research Fellow, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, reminds us, a greater focus is required to support communities that have been overlooked, and underserved, by mainstream media.

“The communities that have been centered in the legacy era were the people in power: white, wealthy, right?,” Stonbely says. “Urban... East Coast-West Coast, those communities have been centered for a long time. So, a community-centered movement largely means... let’s look at communities that have not been centered before.”

In doing this, we need to do more than just shift our gaze. Production and story-gathering processes also need to be changed. The principle of “nothing about us without us” advocated⁴¹ by Journalism That Matters, underscores the importance of involving community

members in the storytelling process. As Jacob Nelson, at the time an Assistant Professor at University of Utah (subsequently promoted to Associate Professor), explains, communities must “have real agency in the storytelling that is about them.”

Advisory groups and community-led boards offer one way that some outlets have sought to ensure that communities have a

“A community-centered movement largely means... let’s look at communities that have not been centered before.”

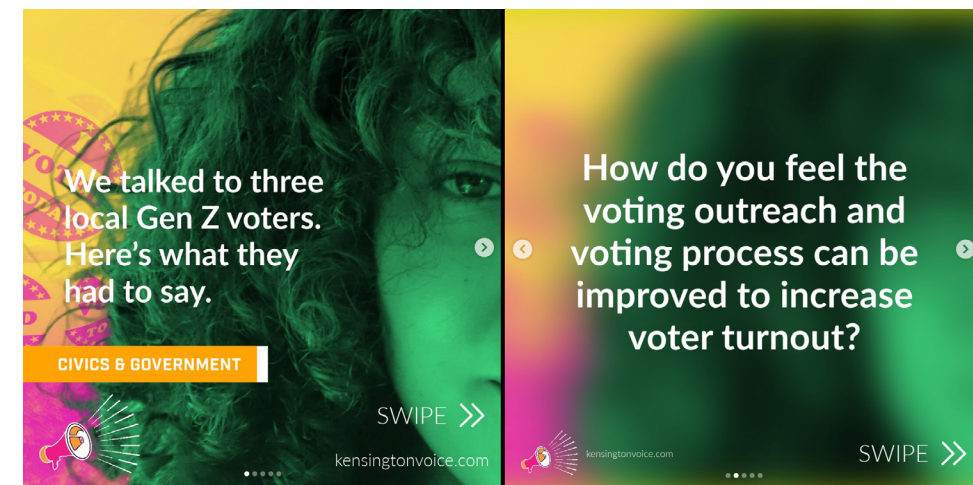
— SARAH STONBELY,
Research Fellow,
Tow Center for Digital Journalism

41 <https://journalismthatmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Journalism-for-Democracy-and-Communities-6.20.17.pdf>

say in the news that concerns them.

In 2021, McClatchy created 12 community advisory boards⁴² to help inform opinion writing across their properties, guided⁴³ by the five principles including advocating for social justice, examining the rural-urban divide, and improving policing.

Kensington Voice, a community hub and newsroom in North Philadelphia, has taken this concept even further, Andrea Wenzel told us. “They have a community-led board,” she says. “They’re not their advisory board... the board has governing powers.” The board does more than just provide feedback on stories. “They have input on budgeting and leadership,” Wenzel notes, “and so they act as a check and balance to this news organization.”



Images: Kensington Voice’s online engagement, via Instagram

These approaches are significant because for too long,⁴⁴ many newsrooms have not looked⁴⁵ like the communities they are covering. “You know, I’ve lived in a few different cities,” Madeleine Bair, the Founding Director, El Tímpano told us. “And [I] have always been struck by the fact that the local media did not never really reflect the diversity of those places: racial diversity, socio-economic diversity, linguistic diversity.” Some journalists at local newspapers and across the industry⁴⁶ are begin-

42 <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/03/doubling-down-on-local-opinion-journalism-mcclatchy-will-create-community-advisory-boards-for-every-opinion-team/>

43 <https://mcclatchyco.medium.com/at-mcclatchy-opinion-is-local-thoughtful-and-moving-at-the-speed-of-news-15a99845ee21>

44 <https://www.poynter.org/tech-tools/2018/lessons-learned-seven-ways-news-outlets-can-rebuild-trust-and-sustainability/>

45 <https://apnews.com/article/business-race-and-ethnicity-journalism-arts-and-entertainment-885ce3486382d7c3080519c50407aa18>

46 <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/06/14/journalists-give-industry-mixed-reviews-on-newsroom-diversi->

ning to acknowledge⁴⁷ this, but a lot of work remains to be done.

There is a hope that by adopting the approaches inherent in Community-Centered Journalism it may help to rebuild trust in the media. Integral to this are ideas of moving away from journalism’s traditional top-down gatekeeping role,⁴⁸ as well as practices of parachute⁴⁹ and air-conditioned journalism (whereby journalists seldom get out of their offices and into the field). Listening, providing opportunities for input and feedback (seen in some of the examples above), and delivering on promises are all crucial components in rebuilding trust and addressing inequities.

“Prioritizing efforts that can help to rebuild trust include commitments to transparency, visibility, relevance, and fairness - whereby communities feel their issues and lives are represented fairly.”

The need to improve trust in journalism is well documented. According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer,⁵⁰ nearly half of their respondents (46%) across 28 nations, saw the media as a divisive force. Meanwhile, the latest Digital News Report⁵¹ found “just 40% of our respondents across all 47 markets say they trust most news.” This score remains unchanged from 2023, with the 2024 report⁵² observing that “low trust scores in some other countries such as the US (32%), Argentina (30%), and France (31%) can be partly linked to high levels of polarization and divisive debates over politics and culture.”

Addressing this problem means prioritizing efforts that can help to rebuild trust. Potential remedies outlined in this report include commitments to transparency, visibility, relevance, and fairness - whereby communities feel their issues and lives are represented fairly.

The launch of El Tímpano in Oakland, California, in 2018, offers some further pointers. Over a nine-month period⁵³ they used multiple methods - including surveys, listening sessions, and conversations with community connectors - to deeply engage with the local community and understand their needs. And in line with our calls for transparency,

ty-lowest-marks-in-racial-and-ethnic-diversity/

47 https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/life-at-local-newspapers-in-a-turbulent-era-findings-from-a-survey-of-more-than-300-newsroom-employees-in-the-united-states.php

48 <https://medium.com/@gabriellutheridge/what-is-the-role-of-gatekeeping-journalists-in-today-s-media-environment-2034a30ba850>

49 <https://ijh.rodrigozamith.com/global-journalism/parachute-journalism/>

50 <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

51 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/public-perspectives-trust-news>

52 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/dnr-executive-summary>

53 <https://medium.com/el-t%C3%ADmpano/deep-listening-to-map-a-communitys-information-needs-17da9daffc8a>

the findings were published.⁵⁴

“One thing I’ve learned from this experience is just how foundational trust is as a value and an asset for any news organization,” Madeleine Bair, the site’s founder told us. “You can have all of the fact-checking that you want. [But] If community members don’t trust your organization, then there’s really no point in that, it doesn’t do any good. So, I would say that time spent in developing relationships and listening is time well spent.”

“Once you invest upfront in building relationships of trust, and in listening to the audience that you’re seeking to serve, it pays back in dividends.”

— MADELEINE BAIR,
Founder, El Tímpano

“Once you invest upfront in building relationships of trust, and in listening to the audience that you’re seeking to serve, it pays back in dividends,” Bair adds.



Image: Women in Oakland sharing where they go for news and information, and how frequently of use, via Madeleine Bair on Medium

54 https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2018-07/INA_Oakland%20California_7.11.18_for-web.pdf

5. A commitment to telling stories differently

Our belief is that a community-centered approach to journalism can lead to richer, more impactful stories and better-informed citizens. However, central to this effort is a commitment to telling stories differently, ensuring diverse perspectives are reflected and fresh voices are heard.

[Jennifer Brandel](#), Co-Founder and CEO at [Hearken](#), notes that Community-Centered Journalism has the ability to broaden the “limited menu of news” that most people are exposed to. “The relational approach [of Community-Centered Journalism] enables more people to influence and shape what questions get answered, what direction reporting goes in, and what narratives are available to their communities,” she says.

A community-centered approach to journalism can lead to richer, more impactful stories and better-informed citizens. However, central to this effort is a commitment to telling stories differently, ensuring diverse perspectives are reflected and fresh voices are heard.

To realize this potential, [Eve Pearlman](#), the CEO and Co-Founder of [Spaceship Media](#), says journalists must constantly ask themselves: “Is what I am reporting on and learning about important to this community? Am I telling it in a way that respects/honors this community? And am I reporting it as deeply and with much complexity [and] understanding of the community needs as possible?”

Alongside this, Antoine Haywood, then a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania and now an Assistant Professor at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, also advocates the notion of journalism “as an act of care.” It’s an idea Sue Robinson a Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has also shared in her latest [book](#)⁵⁵ which calls on journalists to prioritize listening and to move away from

“tick-box-journalism.”

Other insights from our interviews highlighted the need for a shift in the tone of a lot of reporting.

Ideas to emerge from our conversations included journalism’s potential to foster a sense of pride in communities, being constructive and looking for solutions - rather than just focusing on their challenges and problems - as well as pushing back on common (often stereotyped) media narratives.

“There’s an opportunity for people to experience a sense of pride in their

⁵⁵ <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/how-journalists-engage-9780197667125?cc=us&lang=en#>

area, a sense of placeness [sic],” says Antoine Haywood. “And with that, there’s also an opportunity to build trust despite differences,” he says, “and that’s huge.” One way to achieve this, as Sioux Falls Simplified’s Megan Raposa [puts it](#),⁵⁶ “is to make it easy for people to feel smart about where they live.”

Peggy Holman, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Journalism That Matters, and a proponent of [constructive journalism](#),⁵⁷ argues that “deeper listening tends to change the perspective of stories so that they are constructive.” Constructive stories, in turn, encourage dialogue, Holman says. This enables people who don’t usually interact with each other to have meaningful conversations that can lead to innovative collaborations and systemic change.

Through these different approaches, journalism can also be used to change the master narrative of a community. Stefanie Murray, Director of Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, points to [Stories of Atlantic City](#) as a collaborative project which has had just such an impact by showcasing “the resiliency, creativity and spirit of the people who live there.” The site used a [restorative narrative lens](#),⁵⁸ which Images & Voices of Hope (ivoh), a media-related nonprofit, [explains](#)⁵⁹ centers “stories that show how people and communities are making [a] meaningful progression from despair to resilience.”

A commitment to telling stories differently also goes beyond tone to consider whose voices are heard and what stories are told. A community-centered approach addresses this by ensuring, as Jonathan Kealing at INN describes it, that journalism is no longer an “anthropological

⁵⁶ <https://605magazine.com/2021/10/29/hang-out-with-megan-raposa/>

⁵⁷ <https://corporate.dw.com/en/constructive-journalism-why-and-how-journalists-want-to-change-the-rules/a-55885594>

⁵⁸ <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2015/whats-restorative-narrative-a-qa-with-a-journalism-professor-whos-studying-it/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/the-case-for-restorative-narratives/>



Image via the 2019 Stories of Atlantic City report

exploration" of a community but rather an effort to produce news and information for a community.

Subsequently, this produces stories that are more nuanced, leading to a richer appreciation of communities and issues. "By lifting up many voices, including those of ordinary people, we all become grounded in a more holistic understanding of what's happening," [says](#)⁶⁰ Peggy Holman.

Moreover, as Jacob Nelson at the University of Utah explains "...if you are including voices that typically get left out, and those voices feel like they have enough agency and enough trust, that they can be honest, then those stories will be better."

⁶⁰ <https://bit.ly/EmergingJournalism>

Chapter 2: Five core challenges (and how to overcome them)

Community-Centered Journalism offers significant benefits for both communities and newsrooms, but its implementation is not without challenges. This chapter explores five common obstacles and suggests ways to address them. We'll also discuss broader strategies for expanding the practice of Community-Centered Journalism in Chapter 3.

In our interviews, we asked experts about the biggest opportunities and challenges facing Community-Centered Journalism. In this section we turn to the key impediments that practitioners often face and offer recommendations to help address them.

1. Organizational Culture

One of the most significant obstacles to implementing Community-Centered Journalism can be the existing culture within news organizations. As Candice Fortman, Executive Director of Outlier Media, observes, many newsrooms express a desire to focus on community, but it's not necessarily prioritized.

"There are a lot of reporters who go into this work wanting to be of service," she said, "but often [they] cannot do that work, because the goal of their newsroom is first, to capture revenue, or to capture awards, or to capture power, as opposed to being of service."

To address this imbalance, Fortman advocates for a triangulation between the business model, newsroom goals and work being produced, as well as the community's information needs. All these aspects must be in lockstep to successfully implement Community-Centered Journalism.

Ensuring that all parts of an operation are pulling in the same direction is not always easy. And, of course, aspirations can often be challenged



Screenshot [via Kalyani Saxena](#), an associate producer for *Here & Now*, 27 January 2023

by financial and other operational realities, especially at start-ups and smaller outlets.

“When you have an audience team, or product team, it’s very easy to make best practices and things like that. But when it’s one or two people who are doing absolutely everything... all of a sudden, those barriers start to stack up.”

— LISA HEYAMOTO,
Vice President of Portfolio Learning,
American Journalism Project

“When you have an audience team, or product team, it’s very easy to make best practices and things like that,” Lisa Heyamoto says. “But when it’s one or two people who are doing absolutely everything... all of a sudden, those barriers start to stack up. And it becomes very difficult to imagine how to actually make this work.”

Fortunately, imagining how to make this work is potentially made easier due to the growing number of resources - including case studies, templates and models - that smaller newsrooms can learn from and adapt.

Michelle Ferrier points to [Journalism That Matters’](#) work on [civic communications](#)⁶¹ as one such example, and its emphasis on creating mechanisms for sustained feedback loops.

Ferrier also advocates for “making sure that the community is part and parcel of the development process, as well as [the] finish[ed product].” For this to happen, “some attitude and behavioral change on the part of owners is going to be required,” she suggests. This includes hiring more diverse reporters, where possible, as well as bringing diverse stories to the forefront of an outlet’s work.

To help overcome internal resistance to adopting Community-Centered Journalism practices, having a “champion” in the newsroom is crucial, says Andrea Wenzel.

Ideally this person will already have foundation in this type of work, so this role isn’t a huge leap for them, Wenzel suggests, adding that it’s also important to ensure that this work doesn’t get siloed. “If the only people doing the work have ‘engagement’⁶² in their title, it’s not enough,” she says, “and it’s usually going to end up not working very well.”

61 See: <https://medium.com/journalismthatmatters/journalism-for-democracy-and-communities-a-new-framework-b537e28fb32b> and <http://journalismthatmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Journalism-for-Democracy-and-Communities-6.20.17.pdf>

62 Some newsrooms, and our interviewees, use the terms engagement journalism and community-centered journalism interchangeably. We see this differently and encourage you to dive deeper into the definitions and explanations offered in our first paper: <https://agorajournalism.center/research/redefining-news-a-manifesto-for-community-centered-journalism/> > In summary, Engaged Journalism often involves the audience at various stages of the reporting process, whereas Community-Centered Journalism (CCJ) deeply embeds the community in the entire process, ideally from the very conception of a story so that it is a reflection of the community’s needs and is often co-created with them. Alongside this, while Engaged Journalism seeks to build a relationship with audiences (many of whom are your existing consumers), CCJ places a stronger emphasis on marginalized communities and ensuring that their voices and needs are central to the journalism and information that is being produced.

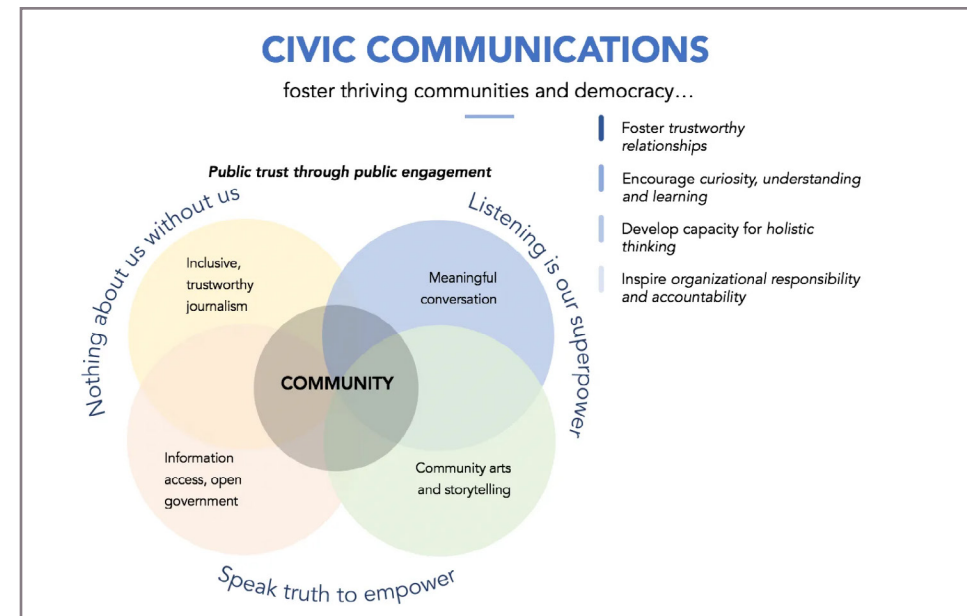


Image: Civic Communications Framework by Journalism That Matters, [via Medium](#)

2. Time to implement (and who does it)

Resource constraints are a major consideration for most newsrooms, and those interested in Community-Centered Journalism must contend with the fact that this work requires time and effort. Engagement, collaboration, and partnerships lie at the heart of community-centered work. However, these efforts can be underappreciated in newsrooms because they lack the visibility of traditional journalistic output, and aren't the kind of work (e.g. pageviews, likes, time on site, etc.) that typically “counts” in mainstream newsrooms.

This is “not necessarily the flashiest thing,” observes Carrie Brown, then the Director of Engagement Journalism and an Associate Professor at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and now Associate Professor of Journalism, Montclair State University. “A lot of this kind of stuff is being in the trenches, and having people have time to learn to build relationships.”

For local outlets, many of whom are facing ongoing financial pressures and often [doing more with less](#),⁶³ engaging in community-centered work can be particularly challenging. Madeleine Bair spent nearly a year engaging with the community before launching El Tímpano. “When I

63 <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/11/doing-more-with-less-seven-practical-tips-for-local-newsrooms-to-strrrrrretch-their-resources/> > see also Brey, J. (2018). As newsrooms do more with less, can reporters keep up?. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 12.

did that, other journalists and newsrooms kind of looked at me like I was crazy,” she told us. “They could never imagine their newsroom investing that time in just listening and just building relationships, and not trying to produce reporting out of that time.”

Fortunately, the landscape is changing. There are now training programs and grants available to encourage community listening and engagement, while a growing number of journalism schools are incorporating these practices into their curricula.

Yet, despite these positive developments, there are still significant barriers to overcome in funding this type of work and having the runway to execute it. As a result, communicating the dividends of Community-Centered Journalism is crucial to fostering culture change among funders and newsrooms alike.

Lisa Heyamoto points out that members of LION (Local Independent Online News Publishers) are often “small, scrappy, and time-strapped.” However, she emphasizes that understanding what the community actually wants allows newsrooms to more effectively prioritize. “When you know what people want, you can focus your time and energy on meeting their needs, rather than wasting a bunch of time doing things that you think are what they need, but aren't,” she says.

Alongside this, in newsrooms that tend to still be driven by clicks and other traditional metrics, the question of sustainable funding for community-centered work is also critical.

As Antoine Haywood and others reminded us, securing funding can be challenging because Community-Centered Journalism takes time and doesn't always yield immediate results.

As Antoine Haywood and others reminded us, securing funding can be challenging because Community-Centered Journalism takes time and doesn't always yield immediate results. This can make it difficult to secure long-term commitments from newsroom leaders and funders.

Moreover, because success is not guaranteed, newsrooms need to be given a license to experiment by media leaders and funders. “You might try three different things, and three of them might fail,” Sue Robinson says.

“But in the course of doing this, you will learn and the next time you do an experiment, it may work.”

Having sufficient time to carry out all aspects of community-centered work, from listening to implementation, is essential. It's a factor that both newsroom leaders and funders must fully support if we want these

efforts to succeed.

As Madeleine Bair reflects, “All of our strategies have really been shaped out of that process of listening.” “We didn't make our own assumptions, and then test them and then have to go to the drawing board,” she told us. “Our editorial process, [and] editorial priorities [right] down to our distribution and engagement tactics, it has all been shaped directly from and informed by our process of listening to hundreds of community members. And they've been very effective strategies because of that.”

3. Demonstrating return on investment/measuring impact

Some funders and traditional media outlets may be skeptical of the value of Community-Centered Journalism, especially if the concept is new to them. This lack of familiarity can make it difficult to get buy-in and support for a community-centered approach, especially given the resource and cultural constraints outlined above.

“And honestly, many [outlets] don't have the systems and structures in place to even know when they're seeing that return.” Lisa Heyamoto contends. “So, this is intertwined with measuring impact, which is something that a lot of organizations struggle with, especially the small independent ones that I work with.”

Moreover, Community-Centered Journalism also challenges many traditional conceptions of “success.” Many traditional media outlets are understandably focused on core elements related to their bottom line. That means generating clicks, serving ads, and gaining subscribers. However, these types of metrics don't necessarily lend themselves to the slower, more relational work of Community-Centered Journalism.

This mismatch can be a real issue, especially in the current fiscal climate. “At a moment when there's so much uncertainty and instability on the revenue side of things, there's not a lot of patience to test when it comes to this kind of stuff,” Jacob Nelson says. “It's so hard to capture causal relationships in journalism,” he adds.⁶⁴ “I think that that doesn't diminish the need for it, but I think that it makes it a tougher sell.”

⁶⁴ This issue is not unique to journalism. See, for example, Yu, B., Wang, J., Guo, L., & Li, Y. (2020, December). Measuring correlation-to-causation exaggeration in press releases. In Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Computational Linguistics (pp. 4860-4872).

Addressing this measurement challenge is crucial if funders, advertisers, subscribers, and policy makers are to more fully support Community-Centered Journalism.

Addressing this measurement challenge is crucial if funders, advertisers, subscribers, and policy makers are to more fully support Community-Centered Journalism. In turn newsrooms must be able to provide these stakeholders with measurable, quantifiable, outcomes.

Rather than simply focusing on clicks or ad impressions, the impact of Community-Centered Journalism can be measured through deeper community engagement, increased trust, and tangible improvements in the lives of those served by the journalism.

These ideas were explored in a previous Agora report which examined [how to support the practice of relational journalism](#).⁶⁵ In the study, the authors presented a Reflective Practice Guide (RPG) designed to help journal-

ists and their organizations document and reflect on their community engagement efforts. The RPG offers a framework for evaluating impact so that journalists can better articulate the significance and value of their engagement work. “In short,” the study notes, “the RPG provides a way to measure work that is often novel to news organizations and difficult to quantify.”

Our interviewees also highlighted other areas that practitioners of Community-Centered Journalism can learn from. Jonathan Kealing at INN pointed to the long-standing contributions of community and ethnic media, a view shared by Steven Wang, an Assistant Professor at Lawrence Technological University, but at the time a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the University of Kansas. Wang noted via email that “non-mainstream community journalism by ethnic media, queer media, and feminist media... have long been holding community engagement close to their core.”

Meanwhile, Carrie Brown cites a [decision](#)⁶⁶ by [The Markup](#) to make its impact-tracking process freely available as another resource practitioners can learn from. The site, a nonprofit newsroom focused on data-driven tech investigations, identified four audiences for their stories, underpinned by a desire to equip these groups “with the tools, knowledge, and agency to create change.” “It's not the neat, perfect kind of ‘here's your direct ROI,’” Brown says, “but it does show some of the important impacts that they're able to have. And I think that's a little

⁶⁵ Lawrence, R.G., Gordon, E., DeVigal, A., Mellor, C., & Elbaz, J. (April 2019). Building engagement: Supporting the practice of relational journalism. Agora Journalism Center.

⁶⁶ <https://themarkup.org/levelup/2022/12/01/how-the-markup-tracks-impact-and-how-your-newsroom-can-too>

bit more persuasive than just sort of making big promises that we can't back up.”

At present, there's no universal standard for measuring the impact of Community-Centered Journalism. And perhaps there never will be. Andrea Wenzel reminds us⁶⁷ that “as scholars, practitioners, and community members look to reimagine what trusted and relevant local journalism might look like for their communities... a community-centered process model is not one-size-fits-all.” Instead, organizations may need to define their own metrics for success. However, what's crucial is that newsrooms actively consider and communicate these metrics, both internally and externally, so that the value of this work can be clearly recognized.

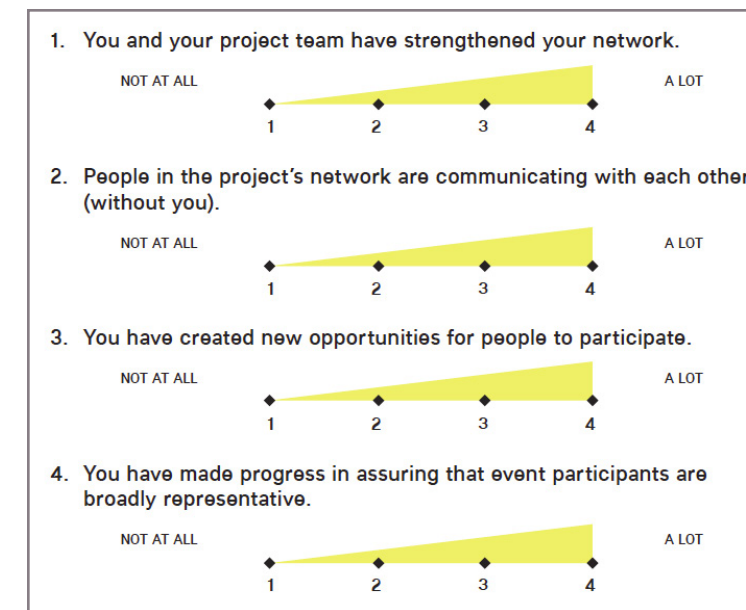


Image: Examples of questions from a practitioner survey in Agora's Building Engagement report (p36).

4. Having the right skills

Journalists practicing Community-Centered Journalism must possess a diverse range of skills. This includes strong listening and communication abilities, cultural competency and sensitivity, a deep understanding of the community or communities being covered, and relationship-building skills, all coupled with a journalist's ability to tell compelling stories.

⁶⁷ Wenzel, A. D., & Crittenden, L. (2021). Reimagining local journalism: a community-centered intervention. *Journalism Studies*, 22(15), 2023-2041. See also: Radcliffe, D. (2012). Here and now: UK hyperlocal media today, and Radcliffe, D., & Ali, C. (2017). *Local news in a digital world: Small-market newspapers in the digital age*.

Some of these requirements might be unfamiliar, or entirely new, to many journalists. Nevertheless, although some of these elements may fall outside the traditional journalistic toolkit, they are critical for producing news that is both effective and empowering for the communities served.

Because Community-Centered Journalism is not a one-way street, newsrooms must learn how to give voice and agency to communities, making them active participants in the storytelling process. To deliver on this promise, journalists might be asked to facilitate conversations, map community assets and undertake surveys capturing information needs.

In order to succeed in this type of work, Michelle Ferrier says that journalists need a suite of abilities, including ideation, design, listening and delivery skills. She further emphasizes the need for “power sharing” and advocates that efforts should be “collaborative in design, approach, and implementation.”

Because Community-Centered Journalism is not a one-way street, newsrooms must learn how to give voice and agency to communities, making them active participants in the storytelling process.

For many journalists, this may feel daunting, representing a significant departure from a lot of traditional reporting work, while others might view these skills as being in line with their expectations for a modern journalist.

Either way, it helps to consider Eve Pearlman’s advice that “Community-Centered Journalism has to do with mindset as much (or more) than structure; it’s the heart of the thing that matters not so much the thing itself.”

Because of this emphasis on mindset, we may see more people entering newsrooms and media companies who don’t necessarily come from a traditional journalism background. This includes community organizers, business professionals, and those with expertise in membership engagement and other skills relevant to the delivery of Community-Centered Journalism.

For Pearlman, mentality and humility are perhaps as important, if not more important, than traditional reporting skills. “Humility [and] awareness goes a long way toward doing good work in Community-Centered Journalism,” she says. “Bring genuine curiosity about what you don’t know, don’t see etc. your way of seeing / your values, [your] ideas are not the only way, the right way, etc.” she advises.



Image via [City Bureau](#)

5. Sustainability and expansion

Finally, one of the most significant challenges in delivering Community-Centered Journalism concerns resources and funding. Of course, this is widespread issue across the media landscape, but it can feel particularly acute for local media outlets, many of whom are the most likely to engage in the types of community-centered initiatives outlined in this report series.

As Jacob Nelson points out, there are “structural challenges journalists will face as they attempt to pursue Community-Centered Journalism projects.” Obstacles highlighted by Nelson include “limited funding, reluctant community members who are distrustful of or uninterested in local news (or both), a revenue model that is incompatible with this type of work.”

Expanding community-centered journalism initiatives also brings with it a number of key considerations. Delivering impact on a larger scale often requires significant resources, and there’s a risk that the relevance and impact of community-centered work may diminish when scaled up, losing the deep, personal 1-1 connection that smaller-scale efforts can often achieve.

That said, operating Community-Centered Journalism on a smaller scale (be that geographic, or in terms of smaller communities of interest) is not without its issues. These outlets are often serving lower-in-

come communities with limited revenues and resources, notes Stefanie Murray.

Acquiring the resources to expand their operations is not easy. Looking at subscriptions and advertising, two of the biggest revenue sources for many outlets, these communities do not have the means to pay for a lot of media, and they may be less appealing to certain advertisers. Yet, these constituencies stand to benefit the most from Community-Centered Journalism, not least because these are communities that have typically been ignored, marginalized, or underrepresented by general interest media. Because of this, philanthropic and public funding, as we explore in the next chapter, may be key.

Exploring one such community in an assessment of Newark's Information Gaps & Needs⁶⁸ by Outlier Media the authors found that: "there are often many information gaps in low-income communities like Newark, in part because of news organizations' disproportionate interest in issues faced by more affluent communities." This historic gap in interest and investment represents a hurdle for practitioners to overcome with both funders and communities alike.

Madeleine Bair's experience with El Tímpano further illustrates this often stark reality. "It's very hard for me to say this, and to sleep at night knowing this," she told us, "but it took a pandemic for El Tímpano to raise ongoing funding and to have any ongoing staff."

COVID brought attention to the critical need for journalism created with, and for, immigrant communities, particularly during a period of widespread misinformation and the need for effective public health communication. For El Tímpano the pandemic served as an initial catalyst for growth and revenue diversification, and the team has subsequently managed to sustain this momentum.

"Overall, it is easier now, during a crisis, during a pandemic, that's disproportionately impacting Latino immigrants... for funders to see the value of journalism created with and for immigrant communities," Bair says. "Not that it's necessarily easy, but it's easier [now] that people are more aware of the importance of a trusted source of journalism, particularly during a public health crisis, when we've seen the impact of so much misinformation and disinformation affecting the communities that we're serving," she adds.

⁶⁸ <https://collaborativejournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Newark-info-needs.docx.pdf>

The type of work produced by the likes of Outlier Media and El Tímpano, thrives in small, close-knit communities. Scaling up to reach larger audiences may risk losing the "secret sauce" that makes these efforts successful. As Jacob Nelson highlights, a lot of Community-Centered Journalism "lends itself to small communities, small newsrooms, structures where the distance between the person that you are trying to write the story with is not far from you."

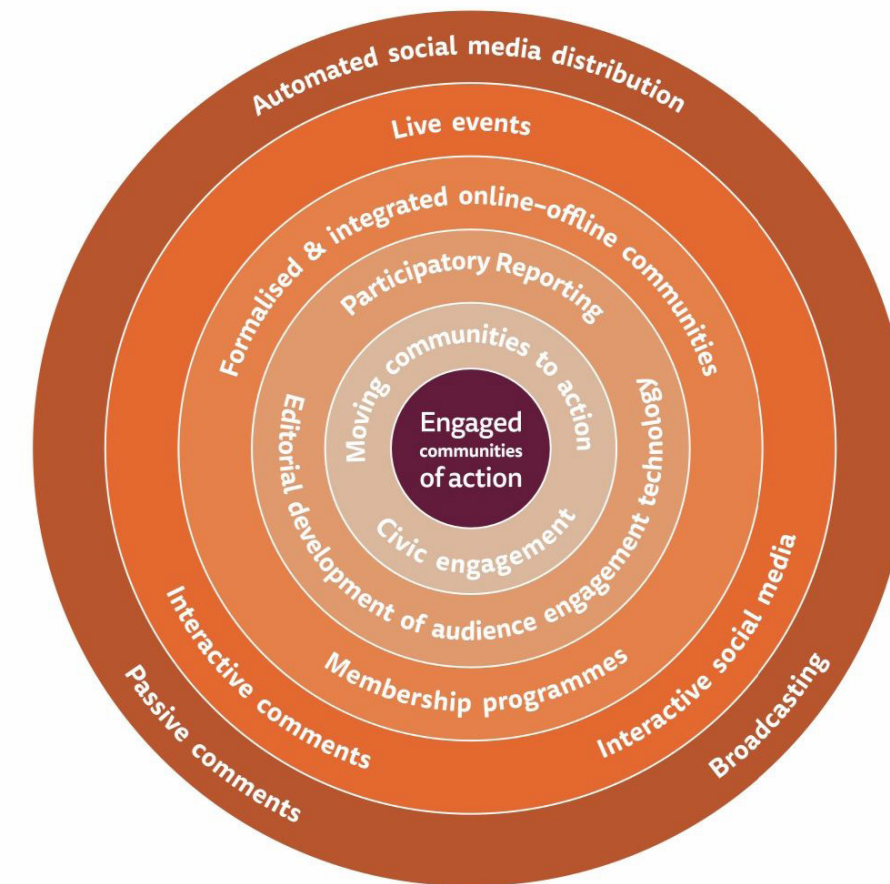


Image via the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Research from the Reuters Institute would seem to support this. "Scale can break communities, especially when combined with various forms of 'platform capture', including the 'weaponization' of online communities, and frequent changes to platforms' products and policies," notes⁶⁹ Posetti, Simon and Shabbir in a 2019 report.

"Once weaponised at-scale, audiences can't be recalibrated through direct engagement at scale," they caution. "Instead, deeper, narrower,

⁶⁹ Posetti, J., Simon, F., & Shabbir, N. (2019). *What if scale breaks community? Rebooting audience engagement when journalism is under fire*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

and stronger is key: smaller audiences properly engaged can still play a significant role through collaboration, distribution, and impact.”

To overcome the challenges of sustainability and expansion in Community-Centered Journalism, we must rethink traditional models of success and the desire of media companies to grow. Smaller, community-focused efforts are where this type of journalism typically thrives, but scaling up without losing the essence of these initiatives is a difficult balancing act.

We must rethink traditional models of success and the desire of media companies to grow. Smaller, community-focused efforts are where this type of journalism typically thrives, but scaling up without losing the essence of these initiatives is a difficult balancing act.

However, given the impact that Community-Centered Journalism can potentially deliver, we do want more people to benefit from it. Cracking this nut is a question that policy makers, funders, scholars and practitioners should seek to resolve. As Sue Robinson asks, “How do we do this at scale, so we can start speeding up the practice rather than, newsroom by newsroom?”

Collaboration might offer a path forward Carrie Brown suggests. “I think it would make a meaningful difference,” she says, “and we can include a lot more communities that are being exposed to this kind of work.”

Alongside this, Andrea Wenzel recommends “more emphasis on thinking about infrastructure and institutions, as opposed to projects.” Building trust is a core outcome of Community-Centered Journalism, but trust is fragile

and can be difficult to maintain as organizations grow, Wenzel warns.

To counter this, she encourages stakeholders to ensure that trust and engagement are sustained over time. “There’s this fragility, if it’s not built into the institutional fabric and approached at the level of infrastructure,” she adds.

Chapter 3: Where We Go From Here / Moving Forward

In this penultimate section, we explore how to grow Community-Centered Journalism so that its practice becomes stronger and more prominent.

Although Community-Centered Journalism is not a new practice, with many characteristics deeply rooted in ethnic and community media, it remains a nascent - albeit growing - area of journalistic endeavor.

Nonetheless, despite this growth, as Andrea Wenzel has [outlined](#),⁷⁰ Community-Centered Journalism may encounter resistance due to potential (or perceived) clashes with a number of journalistic norms. This includes perceptions of objectivity, journalism’s traditional gatekeeper role, and the need to build accountability mechanisms with the communities you are working with.

We do not take these concerns lightly. However, as Wenzel has shown, these challenges are not insurmountable. With the right mindset, training, and commitment, newsrooms can successfully integrate Community-Centered Journalism into their operations, creating a more inclusive and responsive media landscape in the process. This matters, if you share our view that mainstream journalism does not work for everyone, and that it needs to be [done differently](#).⁷¹ Our hope is that the behaviors engrained in delivering Community-Centered Journalism will become part of a new journalistic normal.

Reflecting on her earlier career, Madeleine Bair expressed sentiments - shared by us and our interviewees - which explain why this shift is needed. “I saw a lot of innovation in journalism, that was really exciting,” she says, “and yet, it was serving the same audiences and telling the same stories. And I thought, ‘what a missed opportunity to really reinvent

With the right mindset, training, and commitment, newsrooms can successfully integrate Community-Centered Journalism into their operations, creating a more inclusive and responsive media landscape in the process.

⁷⁰ Wenzel, A. D., & Crittenden, L. (2021). Reimagining local journalism: a community-centered intervention. *Journalism Studies*, 22(15), 2023-2041.

⁷¹ <https://www.poynter.org/tech-tools/2018/lessons-learned-seven-ways-news-outlets-can-rebuild-trust-and-sustainability/>.

journalism to work for more people, and work for more communities.”

For Community-Centered Journalism to move more into the mainstream, it will require effort from a number of stakeholders. This includes funders, audiences, educators and practitioners. In this chapter, we have identified four primary areas where these groups can make a difference.

1. Raising Awareness

It all starts with visibility and understanding. More people need to know what Community-Centered Journalism is and what it isn't. We hope this report can support that goal, and recognize it's an issue that other emerging practices, like solutions journalism, have also had to contend with.⁷²

Explaining the practice of Community-Centered Journalism and why it matters, is particularly important for attracting talent and funding.

“I was joking with a friend the other day,” Candice Fortman told us, “I said, I feel like I've been on the campaign trail for four years. You know, like, just perpetually running for office.” Part of the reason for this, she says, is the need to “attract talent.” “Whether it be kids, folks coming straight out of J-School, or people who are many years into their career,” Fortman wants “organizations like Outlier and MLK 50 and City Bureau [to] seem like places they should work.”

This communication is important if you want to get more people in industry to practice this approach, agrees Antoine Haywood. “Newsrooms are still learning about this and how to do it,” he says. “A lot of people are questioning, where to start? How do we sustain this?”

Sarah Stonbely also emphasizes the value of communicating the benefits and relevance of Community-Centered Journalism to your audience and the neighborhoods you are covering. This is especially important for start-ups, she contends. “There's an awareness issue that you have to overcome at the beginning,” she explains. “You have to make people aware that you're producing news for them that might be of interest.”

As part of this process, outlets also need to continuously demonstrate

⁷² <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/solutions-journalism-what-is-it-and-why-should-i-care-e5acd0ab5332>

and emphasize the work they have done. El Tímpano's [annual impact report](#)⁷³ demonstrates one way to do this. It outlines their efforts to inform, amplify and connect with the community, explains their priorities and funding structure, and outlines their goals for the year ahead. It's a model others can replicate.

For communities that have traditionally been disenfranchised and disconnected from the news, it is even more important to reiterate the work you are doing, its impact and how/why you are doing it.

As Michelle Ferrier reminds us, some people do not see the value in news subscriptions and therefore don't (or are unable to) budget for it. To change this, outlets must consistently demonstrate value to the community and remind people of the difference that they are making.

For communities that have traditionally been disenfranchised and disconnected from the news, it is even more important to reiterate the work you are doing, its impact and how/why you are doing it.

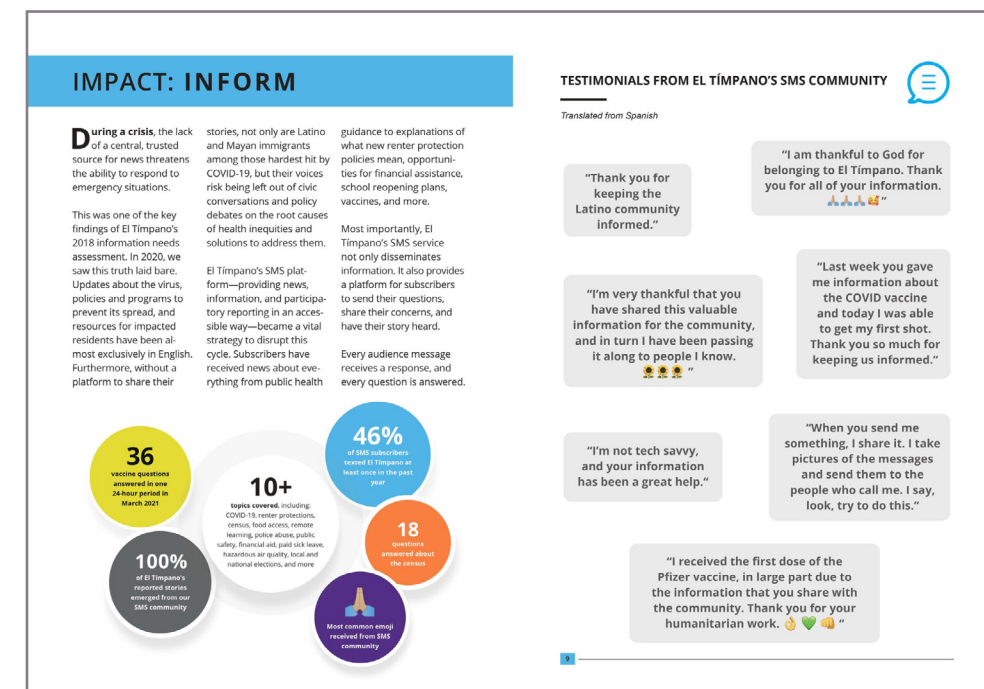


Image: Screenshot from El Tímpano's [first impact report](#)⁷⁴ covering March 2020-March 2021

⁷³ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a577957bff200d963b549df/t/606a9c55fb09410062464a14/1617599607273/ELTi%CC%81mpanoImpactReport2020-2021.pdf>

⁷⁴ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a577957bff200d963b549df/t/606a9c55fb09410062464a14/1617599607273/ELTi%CC%81mpanoImpactReport2020-2021.pdf>

2. Building A Community Of Practice

Another recurring theme to emerge from our conversations was the importance of expanding networks to support practitioners, educators and researchers of Community-Centered Journalism. These networks - like others dedicated to areas such as [solutions journalism](#) or [investigative reporting](#) - can play an important role in fostering collaboration, innovation, and resilience among those dedicated to this practice. Support for practitioners can take a myriad of different forms, including sharing ideas and case studies, as well as exploring opportunities for partnerships and training.

One key example of such a network is [Gather](#), a platform and project to support community-minded journalists and other engagement professionals. It is [led by the Agora Journalism Center](#) at the University of Oregon. (Disclosure: Agora has published and funded this report.) Gather exemplifies how a well-structured, active and managed community can bring together professionals from diverse backgrounds to exchange knowledge, offer support, and work towards common goals.

And although we have seen the emergence, and growth, of organizations such as the [Institute for Nonprofit News \(INN\)](#) and [LION Publishers](#) (bodies featured in our panel of expert interviewees), we also heard in our conversations about the need for further groups and associations. These larger organizations provide valuable resources and advocacy on behalf of their members, there's still a gap for more localized or specialized networks. Several interviewees noted that smaller informal networks (e.g. at a city, regional or demographic level) are springing up, underscoring the grassroots nature of this movement and the need to nurture it at a hyperlocal level.

Being part of a wider community of practice can help exponents of Community-Centered Journalism to navigate an often challenging landscape by providing valuable emotional and professional support.

This type of support matters, because for practitioners and “solopreneurs,” it can be incredibly lonely, Lisa Heyamoto at LION told us. “We found that the community piece is really huge,” she says, stressing the “emotional aspect” and “feeling like you're not alone.” Being part of a wider community of practice can help exponents of Community-Centered Journalism to navigate an often challenging landscape by providing valuable emotional and professional support.

There's also a practical side to building these networks too. As Heyamoto points out, there's a value in tapping into your peers for “tips and tricks and hacks and examples and templates.” “All of the[se] things are going to look very different for a small,

scrappy organization,” she adds. For instance, smaller outlets might benefit from shared resources on low-cost tech solutions, or strategies for community engagement on a tight budget. Heyamoto also advocates for the impact that “personalized support” and “individual coaching” can have, a key focus of her work at LION.

Moreover, these networks can further serve as incubators for new ideas and practices. Based on collective insights, they can foster innovation by allowing members to share their work, experiment with different strategies, and refine their approaches. These types of activities need to encompass the business side too, Heyamoto and Candice Fortman at Outlier Media told us. That is especially important given the challenge of how to scale - and pay for - this type of journalism. By working together, these professional networks can help their members to more easily navigate the complexities of funding, sustainability, and growth.

There is no cookie-cutter model for Community-Centered Journalism. Although there are overarching principles and characteristics, ideas that work in one community do not necessarily work (and may not be as relevant) in another. Nevertheless, for those who are interested in Community-Centered Journalism, there is a value in being able to share ideas, success stories and challenges. This can be especially useful for those who are starting out, be they start-ups, smaller operations, or those dipping their toe into these waters for the first time. Building a strong community of practice can help ensure that everyone interested in Community-Centered Journalism has access to the knowledge and resources they need to succeed.

There is no cookie-cutter model for Community-Centered Journalism. Although there are overarching principles and characteristics, ideas that work in one community do not necessarily work (and may not be as relevant) in another.

“We don't necessarily have research that this is absolutely gonna, you know, fix all your problems,” Carrie Brown says. “But we have a lot of examples of things that are like, ‘this is some cool shit.’ And it's working!”

3. Preparing the next generation

Recognizing the growing practice of Community-Centered Journalism, and the need for more people with the skills to deliver it, journalism schools can play a key role in helping to support this demand. As Candice Fortman reminds us, “there is this incredible opportunity to build a new future.”

J-Schools should integrate Community-Centered Journalism practices into their core reporting and ethics classes, so it is seen as integral to all reporting, rather than a niche or specialist approach. Alongside this, they can further explore opportunities for students to deeply engage with communities, and support Community-Centered Journalism initiatives, as partners and researchers.

In addition to offering specific courses for students, journalism schools can also play a vital role in the continued professional development of current journalism professionals. By providing training, facilitating conversations, and sharing best practice, J-Schools can help to further embed essential Community-Centered Journalism skills within the industry.

More needs to be done to elevate and embed the practice of Community-Centered Journalism within J-Schools.

Among our interviewees, there was a consensus that more needs to be done to elevate and embed the practice of Community-Centered Journalism within J-Schools. At the same time, there was also a recognition that this is also hard to do. One key obstacle is the time constraints of the academic calendar. Nurturing relationships with communities can also be hard to do due to student turnover.

Nevertheless, young journalists, or those moving into journalism after other careers, can be great advocates for Community-Centered Journalism. For them to play this role, it's essential that they are exposed to it as part of the curriculum.

"We're training these new skill sets, a really new mindset, [a] new and different way of approaching what journalism is," Sue Robinson reflects. "We just kind of have to do it every year," she says. "Student by student, just like these journalists have to do it community member by community member."

As part of this, Michelle Ferrier argues that journalism school should equip students with "hosting skills, deliberative dialogue and deliberation skills, appreciative inquiry skills, hosting skills, all of the kind of 'how do you manage people and relationship skills' that we don't teach in journalism school." Meanwhile, Robinson spoke of working with other universities to "blow up their syllabus" to focus on community conversation facilitating, building trust and encouraging students to report from within their own communities.

It's important to acknowledge that some journalism schools may not currently have the skills or knowledge to teach these practices effective-

ly. So, there's a need to train educators, as well as students. The [Solutions Journalism Educators Academy](#) offers one model demonstrating how efforts are being made to upskill journalism faculty members in an emerging practice. Carrie Brown also asked how we can bring in other people, potentially from different fields, to help pass on some of the skills that Robinson and Ferrier had outlined. "It's easier to teach basic reporting stuff," she said. "This shit [i.e. CCJ], is hard to teach," she adds.

Journalism schools also have to be cognizant of industry realities. Brown reminds us, "some students are going to enter newsrooms that [don't] understand all of these things very well. How do I prepare them for that, too?" "That's also a really tough piece of the education part about this kind of work," she adds.

And, of course, the next wave of Community-Centered Journalism practitioners are not - and should not - just come from J-Schools. Jonathan Kealing and others pointed to City Bureau's work in "equipping the community to cover themselves." Alongside this, "you see a lot of community-oriented individuals moving into this space," he adds. "That's part of why INN is here," Kealing said, "to help people who may not have the same journalistic background still understand the principles and best practices that are really necessary to be successful in this ecosystem."

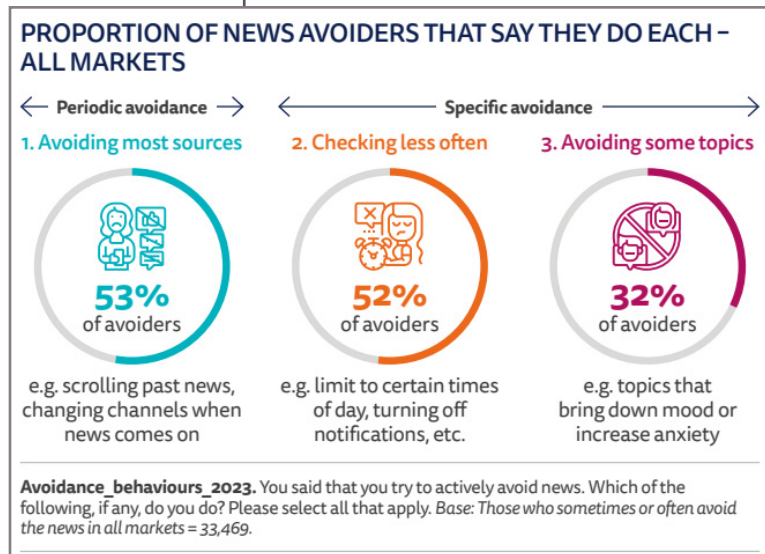
Recognizing this trend, we need to ensure that practitioners - whatever their background or experience - are given the support and skills they need to deliver Community-Centered Journalism.

As we have discussed, this goes beyond traditional reporting work to facilitate conversations, build trust, and engage deeply with communities through community engagement, cultural competency, and relationship-building skills.

That support can, and should, take place in a myriad of diverse places including online and physical communities, as well as journalism schools, industry conferences and other targeted workshops. Collectively, this will ensure that practitioners—regardless of their background—are well-equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of this evolving field.

4. Grounding discussions in questions of equity

Addressing issues of equity is already a key touchstone for many Community-Centered Journalism practitioners. As Madeleine Bair told us, reflecting on the work of El Tímpano, “we really strive to put equity into practice through how we build our team, the community relationships that we build with, how we partner and support other organizations... [as well as] how our work and journalism can be more accessible and really fill in equity gaps.” For Bair, that also means tackling “linguistic or technological barriers, or just a lack of trust.”



In doing this, successful proponents of Community-Centered Journalism like El Tímpano are actively addressing gaps in news and information coverage, transforming newsroom cultures, and challenging long-established norms around whose stories get told and how they are communicated. We hope to see these community-centered efforts continue to grow and flourish, and for them to be weaved into wider conversations about the nature - and future - of this industry.

“When those conversations are done in a holistic way, the outcome is going to be stronger,” Andrea Wenzel argues. That’s particularly important when we consider issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), areas where Community-Centered Journalism can help address long-term inequities.

As noted earlier in this report, Community-Centered Journalism can also play a role in helping to shift journalistic tone too. This matters, because research⁷⁵ shows news avoidance can be dictated by the negative emotions that some news content generates in consumers.⁷⁶

One way to address this, as advocated by Peggy Holman, is for Com-

⁷⁵ <https://www.twipemobile.com/is-news-avoidance-really-the-crisis-we-think-it-is/>

⁷⁶ This is a complex topic that we don’t have space to dive into here. For more on this subject see: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2024/03/avoiding-the-news-isnt-the-same-as-not-consuming-it/> and Palmer, R., Toff, B., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). Examining assumptions around how news avoidance gets defined: The importance of overall news consumption, intention, and structural inequalities. *Journalism Studies*, 24(6), 697-714. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2183058>

Image via the Reuters Digital News Report 2023

munity-Centered Journalism to be constructive as well as reciprocal. “An early insight from the beginnings of Appreciative Inquiry was the recognition that visionless voice keeps people trapped,” she wrote in an email to us. “So even if it is reciprocal, if all it does is focus on problems, it just reminds people of being helpless. When it speaks to aspirations, dreams, possibilities, it draws people in to create together.”

However, these types of moves may trigger the old-age debate about whether this makes journalists *advocates*.⁷⁷ In a 2014 article,⁷⁸ Stephen Ward suggested such debates are redundant, arguing that “The plain truth is that journalists and news organizations are always advocating, interpreting and educating, not just reporting in some narrow sense.”

Nevertheless, the *debate persists*.⁷⁹ Some practitioners and researchers, like Steven Wang, embrace this advocacy role. Wang suggested to us that a key function for Community-Centered Journalism includes “advocating for a political cause necessary for the survival of the community (e.g., social inclusion).”

This approach may make some newsrooms uncomfortable, as it challenges traditional journalistic views of objectivity and distance. However, it's important for these considerations to be discussed openly. We argue that local newsrooms have long advocated for the communities they serve⁸⁰ and - as the work of the Solutions Journalism Network has demonstrated - exploration of potential solutions to issues is not incompatible with journalistic rigor.

These discussions are part of a broader conversation about the future of journalism. Efforts such as *MLK50*, and ideas such as *community information districts*,⁸¹ and *funding journalism as a public good*,⁸² encourage us to rethink what journalism looks like, how it is funded and what it should be. The contribution of Community-Centered Journalism should also be part of these discussions, given its potential

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⁷⁷ <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0281.xml>

⁷⁸ <https://mediashift.org/2014/12/we-need-to-change-the-culture-of-journalism-not-just-what-it-produces/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/news-reporting-and-advocacy-can-both-be-objective-by-jan-werner-mueller-2023-04> see also <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/advocates-journalism.php> which asks: “Advocates are becoming journalists. Is that a good thing?”

⁸⁰ See for example Culver, K. B. (2016). Advocacy and infrastructure: Community newspapers, ethics and information needs. In *Community journalism midst media revolution* (pp. 25-36). Routledge and Wallack, L. (1994). Media advocacy: A strategy for empowering people and communities. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 15, 420-436.

⁸¹ Galperin, S. (2017). Journalism Is a Public Service. Why Don't We Fund It Like One?. *Columbia Journalism Review*.

⁸² https://www.cjr.org/special_report/journalism-power-public-good-community-infrastructure.php

to meet the information needs of communities often overlooked by traditional media providers.

That said, the ideas in this paper also open up further challenging, yet important, conversations. For instance, Eric Gordon, Professor of Civic Media and the Director of the Engagement Lab at Emerson College, asked how does a community-centered approach reconcile with “diversity of ideology?” Ideas of co-production and ceding power to determine the news agenda may become particularly challenging when people in the newsroom disagree with the standpoint of the communities they are working with.

“Does this framework go beyond progressive politics?” Gordon asked. “Does a small rural newsroom in Texas, attempting to be responsive to community fears about immigration from the mostly white population of the community, fit within the mold of CCJ? Why or why not?” Echoing this, Wang also expressed concern about situations such as “What does CCJ do dealing with an alt-right community aiming to spread hatred and bigotry?”

Co-production doesn't mean giving away control to the community; it's about shared decision-making with clear boundaries.

In such scenarios, journalists must navigate a delicate balance between upholding journalistic values (such as accuracy) and respecting the community's voice. Co-production doesn't mean giving away control to the community; it's about shared decision-making with clear boundaries. And community-centered journalists continue to bring critical thinking to their work, they are not simply providing a platform for a community to say whatever they want. Ceding power does not extend to promoting harm, exclusion, or disinformation. In these cases, the newsroom has a duty to push back, reporting on these views critically and providing necessary context or opposing viewpoints.

Sarah Stonbely posited a different scenario. What happens if you try to engage with communities that “don't want to be served?” Stonbely highlighted a conservative, rural, community in New Jersey that did not want to do an information needs assessment. In that situation, do outlets and funders just move on? Or should it be every community's inalienable right to have access to a certain level of news and information?

How do newsrooms and community-centered journalists navigate these situations? We do not pretend to have all the answers, and we do not have the space here to explore them. However, as Community-Centered Journalism grows, there must be a willingness to engage with these

types of complex issues. These hypothetical questions also emphasize the need for diversity within newsrooms to better navigate these ideological and practical journalistic tensions.

Ultimately, while Community-Centered Journalism offers a pathway to more inclusive storytelling, and the ability to create a more equitable news and information landscape, it also requires careful and nuanced approaches to address the cultural diversity seen across the United States, and the ethical complexities that newsrooms must navigate when reporting on, and with, different communities.

5. Making It Pay

Finally, we cannot look at the future of Community-Centered Journalism without asking how it will be funded. After all, this form of journalism can take considerable time and resources to produce. Moreover, it does not necessarily lend itself to conventional engagement metrics (page views, time on site, unique users, etc.).

“This type of journalism - journalism that gets people who don't usually have their voices heard... is not necessarily going to save journalism financially,” Jacob Nelson says. “But it will make journalism better. And it's okay for that to be a goal all by itself,” he suggests.

That does not mean that Community-Centered Journalism initiatives shouldn't strive to be self-sustaining, but it may mean more help is needed to get operations off the ground or to maintain them. Both Candice Fortman and Madeleine Bair talked about the challenge of getting started, especially if you don't come from wealth, have social circles linked to successful start-ups, or existing relationships with funders and large-scale donors. “I've talked to so many founders who didn't pay themselves for their first several years,” Bair says, “and you know, not every founder can afford to do that.”

Andrea Wenzel also notes the challenge of successful outlets getting their voice heard.⁸³ “Funders only know about certain projects in certain areas,” she says. “Not everybody has the social capital to kind of get on their map. So that's the big challenge.”

Audience demographics can further contribute to funding challenges.

⁸³ See also: 15 ways funders, J-Schools and researchers can better support local journalism, <https://medium.com/tow-center/15-ways-funders-j-schools-and-researchers-can-better-support-local-journalism-6643bdc736?sk=b-06de4a28d4195ab0d971126dad8c5e2>.

“The whole reader revenue and sponsorship model of nonprofit news really rests on having an affluent base of readers,” Bair says. “So if your core model centers on serving low-income audiences, then those models simply don't work for you in the same way.” There are also [lots of funding ideas on the table](#),⁸⁴ but revenue models will inevitably vary, tailored to the unique circumstances of each outlet.

Sites like El Tímpano have developed innovative funding models to address their reality. Bair explains that between a quarter and a third of their revenues last year (2022) came from civic partnerships. This included grants from the local public health department or sub-grants from community clinics. “Government agencies, sometimes other nonprofit service providers, see El Tímpano as a trusted messenger to reach communities that they want to reach with information or resources,” she explains. These partnerships are “both a source of revenue” Bair adds, and “really aligned with our mission of connecting Latino immigrants with the information and resources that they seek and oftentimes aren't accessing.”

There is a fear that the approach required to deliver Community-Centered Journalism makes it financially vulnerable. As multiple interviewees stressed, it is a “long game.”

That said, there is a fear that the approach required to deliver Community-Centered Journalism makes it financially vulnerable. As multiple interviewees stressed, it is a “long game”. Success, or the returns on investment, cannot necessarily be measured in a short period. Even in the long term, demonstrating results can be challenging. Therefore, part of the wider financial equation for this sector must involve demonstrating outcomes through hard data. “Measuring impact becomes something that is really important,” Lisa Heyamoto concurs, so that CCJ providers can “make a case to funders or to your audience.”

Heyamoto suggests three key components - audience research, measuring impact, and analytics - that “all have to work in concert.” “But I would say the measuring impact is the one that is in the earliest stages of an industry-wide understanding of a) the importance of it, and b), how to do it, and c), how to use it,” she adds.

At the same time, Jacob Nelson argues we need to “separate the conversation about how to make journalism better from how to make journalism profitable.” That might mean changing the funding paradigm, he suggests, with public funding potentially playing an integral role.

⁸⁴ Radcliffe, D. (2021). 50 Ways to Make Media Pay (2021 Edition). Available at SSRN 4075441. See also <https://whatsnew.inpublishing.com/231-ways-publishers-can-make-media-pay/>.

Removing some of these financial constraints (i.e. the need for profitability) may make it easier to deliver Community-Centered Journalism. After all, Nelson points out, just because an organization is failing financially, does not mean “it's failing at producing high-quality journalism.” In many cases, “we know that's not true,” he adds.

The likelihood that public funding will be necessary - not just for Community-Centered Journalism, but journalism writ large - is echoed by Antoine Haywood and [others](#).⁸⁵ “There needs to be some kind of public funding structure,” Haywood told us. That's essential, he contends, if we are to continue to see support for experimentation and innovation in journalism.

Many interviewees also called for a reevaluation of other funding mechanisms. “The bulk of institutional philanthropy for journalism in this country still goes to the largest national and international news organizations,” Jonathan Kealing says. “How do we adjust? Or how do we help reshape the way institutional philanthropy thinks about journalism so that more local news organizations get more money?”

“I don't think the answer is just, you know, re-slicing the pie,” he told us. “The pie isn't big enough for journalism as it is. But I think it's making sure that the pie grows for everyone, but more intentionally grows for the local [outlets] that have a disproportionately small slice of the institutional philanthropy pie.”

Until we do this, Candice Fortman suggests, “we still have a deep imbalance,” around “how we are funding the future of information.” Talking about journalism students, but expressing sentiments equally applicable to media funders and policymakers, Fortman observes how “I really hope that they feel really invigorated by the idea that they are in this perfect position to build the future of journalism in our country and across the world.” “And while that burden is big,” she adds, “it is also a gift... You don't often get to rebuild an industry.”

⁸⁵ See, for example: Pickard, V. (2021). From the Ashes: Imagining a Post-Commercial Future for Media. *The Political Economy of Communication*, 9(1), and Radcliffe, D., & Mathews, N. (2023). Building a Stronger Local Media Ecosystem: The Role of Media Policy. *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

As we have seen, effectively implementing Community-Centered Journalism requires news organizations to prioritize building trust with communities, actively involving community members in the production of news, and ensuring representation and diversity in their staff and stories. News organizations also need to be transparent and accountable in their practices.

Without an infusion of these elements, the core goals and potential positive impacts of Community-Centered Journalism - namely to create journalism and information that is produced with and for communities, explicitly responding to their needs - are likely to go unmet. More widely, if we fail to adopt and further embed these journalistic practices, journalism will - all too often - continue to fall short of what it should do and what it must do.

Newsrooms should provide a platform for communities to help shape and create a more inclusive and diverse news ecosystem, in terms of the stories told, who tells them, and who consumes them. In turn, this can help build greater credibility and trustworthiness in journalism.

Fortunately, as this paper demonstrates, we have an increasingly rich body of case studies and practitioners to observe and learn from. As the field of Community-Centered Journalism continues to evolve, we hope that this momentum will continue.

The trajectory for a lot of journalism, if it doesn't change, is clear.

The trajectory for a lot of journalism, if it doesn't change, is clear. As Sue Robinson told us, "it's failing because it hasn't been... really building on the ground relationships with a host of different, a wide array, of different kinds of people."

Carrie Brown notes that "there is a strong intentionality around underserved audiences," due to journalism's financial crisis. Although reaching these demographics will not change journalism's financial woes, it may help us to reassert its relevance, enabling us to rethink who journalism is for, and the economic models that underpin it.

With the decline of traditional media outlets, and the rise of more partisan news and misinformation, there is a growing need for reliable and trustworthy news sources. This creates an opportunity for Community-Centered Journalism initiatives, increasing visibility in the field at

a time of reduced boots on the ground and a prevalence of "air-conditioned journalism," as well as providing communities with the information and stories that matter most to them.

As I have argued [previously](#), when the journalist you meet at back-to-school night, your child's football practice, or the local coffee shop is not only your neighbor - but also covering stories that resonate with you, help meet your information needs, and you know to be true - it becomes harder to dismiss everything as "fake news."⁸⁶

We know that there is no cookie-cutter model for Community-Centered Journalism. What works in one community will not necessarily work in another. Nevertheless, we can learn from existing practices and research, and we encourage readers to dig deeper into the links and materials provided in the appendix for inspiration.

Looking ahead, there remains a need for ongoing research and experimentation to better understand the best ways to effectively engage with communities and produce journalism that meets their needs. Funders, policymakers, trade associations, universities, and journalism schools, all have an important role to play in helping to take Community-Centered Journalism to the next level.

Together these different stakeholders can grow and embed the adoption of Community-Centered Journalism, through research and training, fostering communities of practice, demonstrating impact, as well as making the financial case for supporting this model of journalism and its practitioners.

We look forward to being part of those efforts and the ongoing development of this important form of journalism and communication.

There is no cookie-cutter model for Community-Centered Journalism. What works in one community will not necessarily work in another. Nevertheless, we can learn from existing practices and research.

⁸⁶ Radcliffe, D. (2018). How Local Journalism Can Upend the 'Fake News' Narrative. *The Conversation*, 27.

Appendix 1: Methodology

This report, like the concept that it explores, has had a long gestation. Back in the summer of 2021, the Agora team ([Regina Lawrence](#) and [Andrew DeVigal](#)) developed a draft framework and definition of Community-Centered Journalism building on the work of Andrea Wenzel and others.

At the same time, we tested our draft framework for defining Community-Centered Journalism with key thinkers in this space via a group email thread. Six leading practitioners and academics - [Peggy Holman](#), Eve Pearlman, Eric Gordon, Jacob Nelson, Steven Wang and Jennifer Brandel - all kindly responded to this call and provided valuable insights and suggestions.

This led to our 2023 report *Redefining News: A Manifesto for Community-Centered Journalism*.⁸⁷

Building on this work from summer 2021, between December 2022 and January 2023, we undertook Zoom interviews with 13 practitioners and researchers focused on work in the area of local news and community engagement. Their details can be found in Appendix 2.

Each of these semi-structured conversations lasted for between 30-60 minutes. This approach allowed for a natural flow of discussion and enabled us to ask follow-ups, or probe in more detail, about specific areas related to an interviewee's expertise and interests.

Interviews were then initially transcribed using Otter.AI, before being cleaned up and corrected. After this, we applied Grounded Theory⁸⁸ to identify key themes and quotes. These findings further informed the structure and content of this report.

Our selection of respondents was based on existing contacts and a deep knowledge of the field, ensuring a range of expertise was represented. Diversity was also a key factor, in terms of our sample, the audiences they work with, and their experience. For example, several of our University-based interviewees have previously worked as local journalists, and are in roles that bridge research and teaching. Participants were given a broad interview protocol ahead of these discussions.

⁸⁷ Radcliffe, D., Lawrence, R., & DeVigal, A. (2023). *Redefining news: a manifesto for community-centered journalism*. Available at SSRN 4585889.

⁸⁸ <https://www.groundedtheoryonline.com/what-is-grounded-theory/>

We solicited interviews until such a point as we reached the point of knowledge saturation (i.e. no new knowledge) and achieved a reasonable geographic spread among our interviewees. In total, we engaged with 18 experts in this arena, including those working full-time in the industry (n=9) and those based at academic institutions (n=9).

Appendix 2: List of interviewees

We are grateful to the practitioners and researchers whose insights and experiences shaped this report. Interviews took place in December 2022 and January 2023. Roles outlined below reflect those occupied by our interviewees at that time. Where roles have changed since then, we have attempted to indicate this below.

Interviewee: Role at time of interview (*changes marked below in italics*)

- **Madeleine Bair:** Founding Director, El Tímpano
- **Carrie Brown:** Director of Engagement Journalism; Associate Professor, Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, City University of New York; *Now: Associate Professor of Journalism, Montclair State University*
- **Michelle Ferrier:** President, IAWRT-International; Founder, Troll-Busters.com; Executive Director at Media Innovation Collaboratory; Principal Investigator and Project Creator, The Media Deserts Project
- **Candice Fortman:** Executive Director, Outlier Media; *Now: JSK Journalism Fellow, Stanford University, Class of 2025*
- **Antoine Haywood:** Doctoral Candidate, University of Pennsylvania; *Now: Assistant Professor, University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications (and in possession of their PhD!)*
- **Lisa Heyamoto:** Director of Programming, Member Education, LION (Local Independent Online News Publishers); *Now: Vice President of Portfolio Learning, American Journalism Project*
- **Jonathan Kealing:** Chief Network Officer, Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)
- **Stefanie Murray:** Director, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University
- **Jacob Nelson:** Assistant Professor, University of Utah; Fellow, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University; Co-Founder,

Editor, Engaged Journalism Exchange; *Now: Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Utah*

- **Sue Robinson:** Helen Firstbrook Franklin Professor of Journalism, University of Wisconsin - Madison
- **Alana Rocha:** Rural News Network and Special Projects Editor, Institute for Nonprofit News (INN); *Now: Director of Collaborative and Rural Initiatives, Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)*
- **Sarah Stonbely:** Research Director, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University; *Now: Research Fellow, Tow Center for Digital Journalism*
- **Andrea Wenzel:** Assistant Professor, Temple University; Knight News Innovation Fellow, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University; *Now: Associate Professor, Temple University*

In Summer 2021, we were also fortunate to get input, via email, on some of our earlier thinking from Jacob Nelson, as well as:

- **Peggy Holman:** Co-Founder and Executive Director, Journalism That Matters
- **Eve Pearlman:** CEO and Co-Founder, Spaceship Media
- **Eric Gordon:** Professor of Civic Media and the Director of the Engagement Lab, Emerson College
- **Steven Wang:** Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Kansas, then Graduate Research Fellow, Citizens Agenda, University of Wisconsin - Madison; *Now: Assistant Professor, Lawrence Technological University (and in possession of their PhD!)*
- **Jennifer Brandel:** Co-Founder and CEO, Hearken; Co-Founder and board member, Zebras Unite; Co-Founder, Civic Exchange Chicago; *Now: In addition to the above roles, also Board Member at Love Now Media*

Appendix 3: About the Authors

Damian Radcliffe is a journalist, researcher, and professor [based at the University of Oregon](#), where he is the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, a Professor of Practice, an affiliate faculty member of the Department for Middle East and North Africa Studies (MENA) and the Agora Journalism Center, and a Research Associate of the Center for Science Communication Research (SCR).

Damian is also a three-time [Knight News Innovation Fellow](#) at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an [Honorary Research Fellow](#) at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies (JOMEC), and a life fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA). In Spring and Summer 2023, he was a [Visiting Fellow](#) at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, his alma mater.

With nearly 30 years of experience in the media industry, Damian has worked in editorial, strategic, research, policy and teaching roles in the USA, Middle East and UK. He continues to be an [active journalist](#), writing regular features for [Digital Content Next](#), the [International Journalists' Network \(IJNet\)](#), [journalism.co.uk](#) and [other outlets](#). His work focuses on digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution - and practice - of journalism.

As an analyst, researcher and trainer, he has worked with a wide range of additional industry and academic organizations including the BBC World Service, Facebook, FIPP, INMA, Media Makers Meet (formerly What's New in Publishing), Thomson Reuters Foundation, World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the United Nations. He has been quoted on issues relating to digital media and journalism by major outlets such as AFP, BBC News, Business Insider, NPR, The New York Times, Snapchat, Wired and Voice of America.

As a freelance journalist, his work has also been published by leading publications and trade outlets such as the BBC, Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), Harvard's Nieman Lab, HuffPost, PBS MediaShift, Poynter, TheMediaBriefing and ZDNet.

Emilee Jackson was the Research Assistant for this project during Winter 2023 when the bulk of the fieldwork for this report was conducted.

[Emilee Jackson, Ph.D.](#), earned her doctorate in Media and Communication Studies from the University of Oregon. She holds a bachelor's degree in Journalism from the University of Central Florida and a master's degree in Media and Global Communication from the University of Helsinki.

During her time in Helsinki, Emilee worked as a Digital Media Specialist and freelanced for Finland Today. Before pursuing higher education, she gained experience as a freelance writer and photographer for various publications in Orlando, Florida, including the Orlando Sentinel and West Orange Times & Observer.

Her research primarily focuses on visual communication and political photojournalism. She has presented her work at several prominent academic conferences, including the International Communication Association (ICA) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

In 2024, she defended her dissertation, *Who's Behind the Lens? An Exploration of Access, Relationships, and Storytelling in the Production of Presidential Photography*, which investigated the lived experiences of photographers covering the president and the dynamics of access and storytelling in political imagery.

Currently, Emilee volunteers at the Maude Kerns Art Center and is training to become an Exhibit Interpreter at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. She is actively seeking new professional opportunities where she can apply her expertise in media, communication, and visual storytelling.

Appendix 4: Selected Resources and Further Reading

Original Agora Research Reports

Heyamoto, L., Milbourn, T. (October 2018). [The 32 Percent Project: How Citizens Define Trust and How Journalists Can Earn It](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Lawrence, R.G., Tabor, C., Nicolosi, M., and DeVigal, A. (October 2022). [Assessing Oregon's Local News & Information Ecosystem Connecting news, information, and civic health](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Lawrence, R.G., Gordon, E., DeVigal, A., Mellor, C., & Elbaz, J. (April 2019). [Building engagement: Supporting the practice of relational journalism](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Lawrence, R.G., Schmidt, T. (November 2018). [Putting Engagement to Work: How News Organizations are Pursuing "Public-Powered Journalism"](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Radcliffe, D. (September 2017). [Local Journalism in the Pacific Northwest: Why It Matters, How It's Evolving and Who Pays For It](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Radcliffe, D. Alvarez, D. (November 2019). [Shifting Practices for a Stronger Tomorrow: Local Journalism in the Pacific Northwest](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Radcliffe, D. Lawrence, R. DeVigal, A. (September 2023). [Redefining News: A Manifesto for Community-Centered Journalism](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Robinson, S. (November 2023). [Engaging Emergence Advancing the Future of Journalism for All](#). Agora Journalism Center.

Other Research Reports and Reading

Brown, C., & Groves, J. (2020). [Transforming newsrooms: connecting organizational culture, strategy, and innovation](#). Routledge.

Ferrier, M., Sinha, G., & Outrich, M. (2016). [Media deserts: Monitoring the changing media ecosystem](#). In *The communication crisis in America, and how to fix it* (pp. 215-232). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Holman, P., Susskind, Y., Ferrier, M., Fancher, M., & Silha, S. (2017). [Journalism for democracy and communities: A new framework](#). Journalism That Matters.

Mensing, D. (2013). [Rethinking \[again\] the future of journalism education](#). In *The Future of Journalism* (pp. 94-106). Routledge.

Nelson, J. L. (2021). [The next media regime: The pursuit of 'audience engagement' in journalism](#). *Journalism*, 22(9), 2350-2367.

Nelson, J. L. (2021). [Imagined audiences: How journalists perceive and pursue the public](#). *Journalism and Pol Communication Unbound*.

Posetti, J., Simon, F., & Shabbir, N. (2019). [What if scale breaks community? Rebooting audience engagement when journalism is under fire](#). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Robinson, S. (2023). [How journalists engage: A theory of trust building, identities, and care](#). Oxford University Press.

Wenzel, A. (2020). *Community-Centered Journalism: Engaging people, exploring solutions, and building trust*. University of Illinois Press.

Wenzel, A. D., & Crittenden, L. (2021). *Reimagining Local Journalism: A Community-centered Intervention*. *Journalism Studies*, 22(15), 2023-2041.

15 Recommended Additional Resources

Many of these sites are featured in this report. They include case studies, playbooks, and other tools to help journalism practitioners and educators in their work.

1. [Toolkit](#) from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, DePaul University.
2. [Better News](#) website.
3. [Community Toolbox](#), Center for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas.
4. [Digital First Responders report](#), Center for Community Media.
5. Center for Cooperative Media on [Medium](#).
6. El Tímpano on [Medium](#), and their [2020-21 Impact Report](#).
7. [Gather](#) website.
8. Hearken on [Medium](#).
9. Jersey Shore Hurricane News, [Information Needs Assessment](#).
10. [The Defender Handbook](#), Kansas City Defender.
11. KPCC/LAist Engagement Team on [Medium](#).
12. [Playbook](#), Listening Post Collective.
13. [Information Needs Assessment of Latino Immigrants in Oakland California](#), Listening Post Collective.
14. [Newark's Information Gaps & Needs](#), Outlier Media.
15. [Trusting News](#) website.

About the Agora Journalism Center

The Agora Journalism Center at the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) is the University of Oregon's forum for the future of local news and civic health in Oregon and beyond.

The center has been a critical champion for the idea that professional journalism must become more participatory and collaborative with the public to meaningfully improve communities' information health and earn the public's trust in local news media. Our name, "Agora," reflects this notion of a modern-day forum for dialogue and deliberation and an inclusive space for all citizens to participate in civic life.

Our unwavering commitment to engaged journalism extends to a dedicated focus on community-centered journalism:

- Information and storytelling that centers the voices and experiences of all community members.
- Journalism that intentionally works alongside other civic organizations to improve local civic health.
- Communities' efforts to rebuild and strengthen local information sources and storytelling networks, creating a new infrastructure of communication, collaboration, and civic action.