

Community engagement for independent news publishers

This curated set of materials is derived from conversations and sessions that took place at PINF's Independent News Forum in 2022. It aims to delve deeper into some of the questions and points raised by participants, and to guide future conversations between members of the network that will take place in working groups and at the next Forum later in 2023.

This resource will help users to:

- Explore the spectrum of community engagement, and understand where their organisation's current approaches fits on this spectrum;
- Reflect, individually and together with their team members or colleagues, on how they might like to evolve or expand the depth and type of engagement practised with their communities;
- Dive deeper into examples and case studies for engagement initiatives that can be adapted for their own newsroom.

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Part 1: Why should I care about community engagement?

At its core, community engagement contributes towards a better understanding of, and participation in, society. It helps inform, connect and equip citizens with the knowledge and tools they need to be active members of the community and the world. This is a fundamental part of the mission of journalists and news organisations.

Engaging with and understanding the people you are serving and their needs also leads to stronger and more representative journalism. Communities have the power to sustain journalism, directly and indirectly, financially and by contributing their time and expertise. Without the people it serves, what would be the role of journalism?

An example of the value of community engagement comes from Civio, an independent non-profit organisation based in Spain, which monitors public authorities and helps citizens understand decisions that affect them through investigations, stories and

special projects. During the COVID-19 crisis, Civio focused its efforts (as many other newsrooms did) on helping people: they created a ‘service desk’ and answered more than 2,500 questions from readers about the pandemic, developed a 1-to-1 online advisory service and launched a tool to help citizens find out which government subsidies they were eligible for. Civio’s public service journalism, stretching from investigations to web tools and applications, not only led to a significant increase in reach, engagement and conversation (up to 3 million unique readers on its website) but also grew its recurring paying members from 610 to 950¹. In April 2021, Civio had 1,250 paying members, and as of July 2023, more than 1,544 people financially support the organisation’s work, according to the website.

Part 2: What is community engagement?

Community engagement is the practice of an outlet interacting and collaborating with the people it informs and serves through its journalism.

An organisation can serve one or multiple communities. A **community** can be, for example:

- geographical (people living in a specific place);
- topical (people who care about a given topic, such as education or climate change);
- or a community of interest (a group of people that have a shared identity or experience).

The terms ‘audience engagement’ and ‘community engagement’ have often been used interchangeably, but they are not the same and they perform different and important functions. As Ariel Zirulnick, senior editor for community engagement at Southern California Public Radio, [puts it](#): “Audience engagement is focused on building habit, loyalty, and audience revenue. Community engagement is about understanding voids in the local ecosystem and positioning the newsroom to help fill those.”

“When you speak on a panel, audience engagement means getting the email address of all registrants so you can add them to your newsletter list. Community engagement means making time for 1:1 conversations with people who can tell you what your work is missing”, she adds.

Zirulnick also points out that whether in a smaller team or a bigger organisation, being clear about which of these distinct functions you are focusing on at any given time means that you will know to apply the relevant one when the situation requires it.



Reflection prompt: *Take 3-5 minutes to write down the community or communities that your organisation serves.*

¹ Source: the European Journalism Centre’s [report on funding journalism in a time of crisis](#).

- If you can, ask one or more colleagues to do the same, and compare notes at the end. Are your answers similar? Did any of you identify different or more communities, or did you use different terms to describe them?
- It's important for people in an organisation to have a shared understanding of who their work is for. Try to set aside a few minutes aside every few months to regularly reflect on this together, because your community and work will likely evolve, expand or change over time.

Additional reading and resources

If you have 5-10 minutes, check out...

- Food for thought: [What journalism can learn from mutual aid](#) solidarity networks (Columbia Journalism Review)

If you have 15+ minutes to delve deeper, check out...

- These two reports ([1](#),[2](#)) from the Engaged Journalism Accelerator feature examples and case studies of journalism generated from within communities, and explores how journalists can share their power with the people they serve (European Journalism Centre)

Part 3: Types and levels of community engagement

Community engagement takes many forms, and there are myriad approaches for meeting, interacting and collaborating with people.



One way to help visualise engagement is to think of it as an **iceberg**, like in the following model from [Journalism that Matters](#).

The tip or the surface-level part of the iceberg is closer to audience engagement elements, while community engagement goes deeper and is characterised through approaches such as two-way conversations, reporting driven by communities, participatory events and beyond.

Reflection prompt: Using the examples in the iceberg to guide you, spend 5-7 minutes reflecting on the depth of community engagement your organisation practises. Then answer the following questions:

- Which of these techniques are reflected in your current work?
- How has the depth of engagement changed or fluctuated (if at all) since your organisation started out?
- Are you interested in or curious about creating even deeper opportunities for engagement? If the answer is 'yes', what is your main motivation? If the answer is 'no', or 'not sure', what are your main concerns, barriers or hesitations? Be as specific as you can and answer individually, then discuss in groups or with your team members.

Choosing what to experiment with or which approach to implement and invest in should be guided by the **mission** of your organisation and the **impact** you want to achieve, as well as by the **resources** available and the **needs** of your community members.

Exercise: To help you explore the possibilities of participation and working with your community, fill out this Participatory Strategy Map, created by the strategy and innovation consultancy New Citizenship Project.

- Dedicate at least 15-20 minutes to completing it. Ideally, it should be done in pairs but it can also be completed individually.
- Begin at the top with the 'how might we' question, and follow the order of the arrows.



Credit: [New Citizenship Project](#), used with permission. [Download a copy of the map](#) to edit in Google Docs, or draw it out on a large piece of paper and write your answers to the prompts on post-its, sticking them in the relevant box.

New Citizenship created this map based on the premise that “what a single organisation is trying to do in the world is so big and complex that it requires more -

and more diverse - people to help them do it. So it's important to be able to articulate what you are trying to do in a way that invites other people in, to take part and contribute to it."

The map is made up of 5 sections, including a 'Purposeful Question', framed as 'How might we work together with X, to achieve Y?'. X represents who your organisation needs to work with, beyond your paid staff (e.g 'our members', 'the people of Bristol', 'climate activists' etc), and Y is the direct impact your organisation wants to have.

To craft a purposeful question, the team advises to be **specific** (and choose something tangible); **strategic** (actively putting people at the heart of your mission), and **sustained** (ideally think of something long-term and ongoing, rather than one-off or project-specific).

Their examples include the question of a museum in San Francisco ("How can we spread a spirit of scientific inquiry across San Francisco and beyond, by working with our visitors?") or from the National Trust in the UK ("How can we provoke deeper understanding of our own and others' cultural identities by working with our visitors, staff and volunteers?")

Additional guidance and examples can be found in [New Citizenship's Purposeful participation: A field guide and toolkit for cultural intrapreneurs](#). Explore the short case studies included to get inspiration about the purposeful questions of others before getting started on this exercise.



Once you've completed the participation strategy map, consider a follow up exercise and fill out an advocate canvas – [this one](#) was created by [Zahra Davidson](#), chief executive of learning platform Huddlecraft, for an Engaged Journalism Accelerator workshop held in 2019.

It's similar in scope to the participation strategy canvas above, but includes a few additional sections you could complete in pairs or teams with your colleagues: a column on **motivations** (what moves people to take action and participate), **incentives** (how do you incentivise people to be involved), and **sustaining engagement** (if you're devising an engagement strategy for a project, for example, what resources do you need and how will you be able to maintain them over time?).

Part 4: Listening is the backbone of community engagement

The foundation of engaging with people is listening – it makes interactions genuine, builds mutually beneficial relationships and ultimately, improves journalism, by reflecting the people it is for and about.

Active listening requires being **intentional** about learning from and about the experience of others, **open** to the direction that a conversation could take, and **curious** about the person sitting across from you, about their perspectives, needs, concerns and ambitions.

Listening, like engagement itself, is an ongoing process. People may be sceptical about journalists' motives, afraid of being judged or unsure about how exactly their stories and contributions may be used. It takes time to gain their trust and to show your commitment to creating and maintaining a safe space for dialogue, participation and collaboration. It's equally important to be **transparent** about your goals and honest about what you don't know.

“Listening involves a more public service mindset. It can lead to source cultivation and stories — the things many journalists want — but the larger goal is understanding what a community wants and needs, knowing that will lead to better journalism later,” [writes](#) Cole Goins, managing director of Journalism + Design at The New School.

And even though community engagement ultimately leads to better and more representative content and stories (which, in turn, can lead to financial support), practising it with a **public service mindset** also means that the goal is, first and foremost, to be useful to people. And being useful doesn't necessarily have to look like stories being published. Sometimes, it looks like facilitating access or a space to meet and talk, or connecting people with help and resources (or with each other) in times of crisis.



Reflection prompt: *In 5 minutes, list all the ways in which your organisation is currently listening to its community members. What are the spaces (online or offline) or methods in which you are inviting people to talk and share?*

If your organisation has a **practice of listening** and is committed to it, describe it in your mission statement and on your website's 'about' page (see examples in the exercise section). Better yet, you can create a set of **community engagement guidelines** – it can be a few paragraphs or bullet points that explain who your journalism is for, how you do it and what are the principles that guide your work and interactions with people.

These guidelines should be reflected in all the activities of your organisation, and can be a way for yourself and others to hold you **accountable**.



Exercise: *Spend 5-7 minutes drafting three to five bullet points to function as community engagement guidelines for your organisation. Use the following questions as a starting point: Who are the people you serve and how do you do it? What is the function of engagement in your journalism and editorial process? What qualities and values guide your work?*

- *In need of inspiration? Have a look at City Bureau's [guidelines](#), Greater Govanhill's [values](#) and West Leeds Dispatch's [values](#).*
- *If you already have a set of broader editorial values, can you draft and incorporate a few guidelines that specifically address and reflect on listening to and engaging with communities?*

Additional reading and resources

If you have 5-10 minutes, check out...

- [Five insights about listening and co-creation](#) to strengthen your engaged journalism (*Engaged Journalism Accelerator*)
- How do you go beyond what people say to understand their deeper motivations? Here are [22 questions that complicate the narrative](#) to 'revive complexity' (*Solutions Journalism Network*)
- How one Oakland newsroom [listened to its community](#) and applied what it learned to guide its work and processes from the start (*The Oaklandside*)
- Your 'about' page should start a conversation with people. So [is your 'about' page even about you?](#) (*Splice Media*)

If you have 15+ minutes to delve deeper, check out...

- Get inspired about '[purposeful participation](#)' with [this guide and toolkit for cultural intrapreneurs](#) (*New Citizenship Project*)
- Explore principles for deep listening in [this guide](#), including how to find or create spaces for listening, and how to develop a listening-focused workflow (*American Press Institute*)

Part 5: Practising community engagement – 10 case studies and ideas

On the spectrum of engagement (or in the iceberg previously shown), there is **no single approach** that can fit everyone, no step-by-step instructions manual. Some organisations put community engagement at the core of their ownership, reporting, distribution, impact and revenue. They may also dedicate significant time to listening and interacting with the community before deciding on and designing their offering.

For others, a decision of **investing** in community engagement may come when the organisation finds itself at a crossroads, in a moment of change (be it planned or unplanned). Or it may start with an experiment born out of curiosity: 'what would happen if we did X differently this time', or 'can we create a product to help people do Y'?

Starting small by **experimenting** is a good way to test your assumptions. If the goal is clear and the process is well structured, with ways to measure and capture success/impact/lessons ([this News Product Alliance post](#) includes a SMARTIE goals template for guidance), an experiment can help you to start building a better understanding of what the community needs and what may be worth investing resources in. These insights can then be shared with others in order to make decisions and also explain to readers why you are pursuing certain activities or stories.

According to the Engaged Journalism's Accelerator [definition](#) of experiments, an experiment "is a test or trial that has a clear **aim**, measures of success (such as Key

Performance Indicators) and an end date to evaluate what has been learnt. An experiment doesn't always mean launching something shiny and new; it could also mean **improving** something that your organisation is already doing or **stopping** something that is rarely used or has little impact and seeing if users miss it. Success isn't a defining characteristic either: some of the best experiments are ones which have **failed** and still yielded lots of insight."

With that in mind, here are 10 case studies and resources that can support your community engagement efforts, inspire you or prompt you to reflect on possibilities.

For listening ideas:

- Dublin Inquirer [crowdsourced election issues from locals](#), and worked with them to gather candidates' responses to the 'citizens' agenda' (*European Journalism Centre*)
- [It's Criminal](#), a recent collaboration from Contemporary Narratives Lab, The Ferret and Greater Govanhill, used theatre and storytelling to start a conversation about how crime is reported and the impact it has on people and communities (*Greater Govanhill*)
- Check out [this podcast episode](#) from Splice Media's School of Splice, in which an editor explains how she used audience surveys to ask people what they wanted from the publication (*Splice Media*)
- Democracy Fund's [guide to assessing your local news ecosystem](#) includes a chapter on researching the community, including their needs and existing infrastructure, as well as suggested research methods for "listening early and often" (*Democracy Fund*)

For collaboration and community participation ideas:

- Maldita.es [sent its community a 10-question survey](#) asking them how they could be involved with its fact-checking activities, and got more than 2,000 responses (*European Journalism Centre*)
- A 'participation ladder' used by The Bristol Cable and centred around its annual general meeting made it more accessible for [members to have their say](#) (*Membership Puzzle Project*)
- To guide its reporting, The Oaklandside [recruited community advisors](#) to help them understand if the stories published were in line with their mission and values (*The Oaklandside*)

For ways to start experimenting and ideas of what to try out:

- User research sounds complex and daunting but it doesn't have to be – [this primer](#) includes some top-level advice for getting started next time you may be wondering "what to make or why" (*News Product Alliance*)
- Through a [member survey](#), New Naratif found that the current pitch to members did not create exclusivity, and set about reframing its offering (*Splice Media*)
- When the Daily Maverick's membership launch experienced a delay, they turned it into an [opportunity for testing](#) what would convince members to pay and what benefits they expected in return (*Membership Puzzle Project*)