

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN JOURNALISM:  
TRANSFERABLE TECHNIQUES FOR MID-SIZED CITIES

by

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Journalists are becoming increasingly aware that they need to build relationships with the communities they serve. This paper explores the current discourses around community engagement, addresses challenges to this topic, argues for the importance of these practices and proposes techniques for carrying out community engagement within the context of Eugene as a representation of mid-sized cities. The proposed techniques emerged from interviews with six working journalists from Eugene, Ore., Los Angeles, Calif., Salt Lake City, Utah, and Boise, Idaho. This paper finds that engagement techniques can be promoted to create a formal infrastructure at an outlet or can be utilized by journalists individually.

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## **Introduction: Defining Community Engagement**

Journalists are increasingly aware that they need to interact with their audiences (Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt, 1220). Gone are the days of journalists having one-sided relationships with the communities they serve. The Internet spurred a “transition to a world in which vast numbers of strangers contribute directly to something that ... journalists alone once controlled” (Singer et al., 1). The advent of the Internet created more opportunities for journalists to build relationships with their audiences. As a byproduct of this changing landscape, more and more newsrooms are hiring journalists for engagement-oriented positions, such as “engagement editors” (Powers).

I became familiar with the topic of community engagement primarily through the journalism courses Engaged Journalism and Reporting 1 and 2. However, I did not have exposure to how journalists are actually carrying out engagement work until I attended a guest lecture at the University of Oregon with one of my reporting classes. I knew that this presentation, a part of the Demystifying Media series, was oriented around engagement, but I still thought of this subject in abstract terms.

I took a seat in a small lecture room in the Erb Memorial Union and prepared for a presentation as a bleary-eyed college student sitting through an early morning class. I thought I would have to fight the temptation to doze off. However, once KPCC Community Engagement Director Ashley Alvarado began speaking about engagement and the projects the Southern California public radio station has carried out, I was suddenly wide awake and hooked. I left that talk with more questions than answers, excited about this topic I had known so little about. I could not remember the last time I

left a class so eager to keep exploring a subject and knew that in that lecture room, Alvarado had ignited my passion for community engagement.

Even after gaining enough understanding about this topic to know that I wanted to select it as the focus for my thesis, I experienced difficulty in articulating what community engagement really means to journalists and the public when introducing my research to family, friends and peers. In this section, I will define community engagement as it can seem an abstract or subjective term even among journalists who have experienced this type of work first-hand. While the definition for community engagement may fluctuate depending on a specific outlet's particular objectives and initiatives, I will propose the definition that informed my interviews and research process. This definition is based on my literature review as well as the conversations I had with six journalists.

Community engagement describes the relationship between journalists and the communities they serve. This relationship can be built from direct interaction with community members, including visiting the community, observing the spaces where people share information and listening to personal experiences. Through this process, reporters can determine which mediums will best reach the given community and what types of stories people in this community need. Community engagement is not only a journalistic practice, but also a reciprocal, two-way relationship through which trust can be built.

Gather is a platform run by UO and the Agora Journalism Center. It supports community-minded journalists and describes engaged journalism as “journalism that responds to community needs and is created with community participation. What this

looks like depends on each organization and journalist, but one way to think about engaged journalism is doing journalism in relationship with communities rather than for or about them.” (Laperle). Through building relationships with communities, journalists ensure that the field is inclusive, transparent and accurate. Additionally, this practice allows journalists to learn about and reflect on a particular community’s information needs and wants instead of assuming the information that will best serve the community. Engaged journalism is inclusive of people who have not had the historic privilege of having their perspectives prioritized in the media, whether this privilege be based on factors such as race, gender or socioeconomic status.

The Listening Post Collective is a community media initiative that offers resources for journalists, newsroom leaders and community groups seeking to bolster their local news and information systems. It outlines four key elements for engagement work:

1. Listen to community members.
2. Ask the public what they need to know and then report based on this information.
3. Invite the community to participate and collaborate.
4. Equip the public with skills.

While these steps can help guide journalists in the engagement process, they do not address specific techniques for reporting. My research for this project aims to establish how journalists can incorporate engagement in their everyday work. Publications, especially those in mid-sized cities similar to Eugene, face limitations to their community engagement initiatives which I will discuss in later sections. This

research specifically focuses on the techniques journalists can implement to close the gap in engagement between themselves and their audiences.

Journalistic practices are constantly evolving due to the digital age in which we live. The Internet changed how people consume information, and by extension, how they interact with journalists and the news that they deliver. Finding and understanding the methods to reach audiences will in turn lead to effective writing and reporting. As a super-journalism major, I have taken classes in the School of Journalism and Communication that have prepared me for this thesis project. A super-journalism major follows a traditional journalism route, in contrast with an advertising or public relations major. Courses in this major include writing and reporting for different mediums like print and audio. My reporting courses have taught me interview skills as well as effective writing techniques. I carried such experience to my thesis in the interviews I conducted as well as to the actual writing process.

The journalism courses I have taken have also highlighted the intersections in journalism, whether these intersections be race and class, or gender and sexual orientation, for example. The SOJC has provided a curriculum that acknowledges the evolution of journalism and has reinforced practices that journalists can implement in response to this changing landscape. I believe that journalists who have yet to practice engagement are at a crossroads. They can either change the ways they interact with their audiences through carrying out engagement techniques, or they can resist the need for relationship-building and further the public's distrust in journalism.

## **Objective of Research**

After defining community engagement, I will now propose the research question this project addresses. The objective of this thesis on community engagement is to help answer the emerging question regarding community engagement in the journalism industry: How do we do engagement and what does it look like? From my research, I will propose best community engagement practices for Eugene, and by extension, for outlets at other comparable locations that face similar gaps in or limitations to engagement. My research will offer techniques journalists can implement that can best engage local audiences. Through this increased engagement, I hope these methods can help rebuild trust between local outlets and the community they serve.

The obstacles that face community engagement will not be removed single handedly by this research project. However, by contributing to the growing discourse around community engagement, I hope to be part of the solution to such challenges. I am confident that these journalistic practices will continue to take shape and be more routinely utilized by outlets in the United States.

### **The Emerging Question for Engagement**

In my interview with KPCC Community Engagement Director Ashley Alvarado, she referred to the current conversations around community engagement. She said, “Your focus seems to be what I think is like the emerging question for engagement. It used to be why did we do engagement? Now it’s how and that is going

to be answered in different ways.” This question Alvarado posed early on in my interview stage became the central question for my research.

Initial discourses surrounding community engagement addressed what it was and why it was important to the journalism industry. Journalists who believed this topic to be the future of journalism worked to demonstrate this value to other journalists and the public. Now that community engagement has been accepted into the current lexicon, journalists need to critically think about and research how to implement these practices into their work as well as find ways to foster explicit discussions and initiate projects oriented toward engagement.

### **Engagement Gaps in Eugene: A Focus Toward Mid-Sized Cities**

Local Eugene outlets have room for improving their engagement with demographics outside their typical reach as well as with their existing audiences. I refer to several specific demographics in Eugene in this paper, but the techniques I propose are not only applicable to outlets serving Eugene; they can also be localized to other locations that face similar gaps in engagement. My focus shifted from a particular group’s engagement needs to the techniques journalists and outlets can implement in Eugene as well as other mid-sized cities. A mid-sized city has a population greater than 100,000 and less than 250,000 (National Center for Education Statistics).

Journalism in mid-sized cities such as Eugene faces gaps in community engagement due to a lack of priority and/or resources. For example, despite serving a college town, The Register-Guard did not place a strong priority on education until

fairly recently. Additionally, the local radio station KLCC only just began to use techniques that increased engagement among younger community members. However, increasing engagement with this particular audience was not planned, but simply noticed after seeing an increase in engagement across the station's social media platforms. I considered factors, such as budget, in my research and included questions in my interviews that addressed these limitations that can fall outside the direct control of media outlets.

Under an opinion section entitled "What are our priorities?" Register-Guard reader Janetta Overholser from Cottage Grove posted a comment in March 2020 addressing the absence of a clear priority toward education at the paper. She wrote, "All the news outlets have a sports section. When will we start having an education section — and educating the public — as well as praising the students who are studying and accomplishing beneficial research? That is so much more important than chasing a ball around a court. What are our priorities?" This reader acknowledged a gap in engagement in the Eugene community. Although The Register-Guard has an education section, it did not always prioritize the perspectives of community members directly affected by issues such as those around education. Thus, there still remains a need for improved engagement at local Eugene outlets.

Education Reporter Jordyn Brown began writing for the education beat at The Register-Guard in 2019. I spoke with Brown to understand the past gaps in education coverage as well as determine current priorities for the section. She discussed the ways the paper has shifted its focus and initiative toward practices such as those for community engagement. She said, "We've been having some very serious and honest

discussions about where we have left people out in the past.” Brown acknowledged that while progress has been made in regard to whose voices are elevated and listened to, the paper, as well as others, have a long way to go; these engagement initiatives are long overdue.

Small to mid-sized cities are especially vulnerable to such fractures in coverage and engagement due to limitations such as funding and reach. Establishing best engagement practices for outlet Register-Guard can duly function as ways to better engage the community while also preventing coverage from falling through the cracks, even given existing budget constraints.

## **Literature Review**

In the previous sections, I introduced the purpose of my research and defined community engagement. This section will cover the existing literature on the subject and discuss what journalists know about engagement and why it matters. While my self-conducted interviews provided the primary base for research, existing literature deepened my understanding of this topic and contextualizes this project. I will establish the gaps in these discourses that necessitate this project.

### **What We Know About Engagement**

Much of the literature on community engagement can be accessed online. Case studies offer valuable resources for community engagement work. For example, the platform Gather archives case studies on community engagement projects from across the United States. Similarly, the Agora Journalism Center was founded through the University of Oregon and strives “to create and support transformational advancements in journalism and communication.” Additionally, the software Hearken is a consulting technology used to fulfill engagement initiatives. The company partners with outlets to accomplish effective engagement practices.

This literature review will cover non-peer-reviewed sources because I believe that the majority of the current discourses taking shape around this topic is happening on websites that feature journalists’ first-hand experiences with engagement. One of the goals of this research is to communicate that engagement literature authored by

academics and accessed through scholarly databanks should not be perceived as the only sources of merit for people interested in engagement. Everyday reporters and journalists who have experienced engagement projects offer valuable perspectives. However, the first part of this review will discuss current peer-reviewed sources as their claims are rooted in specific data from studies on engagement. These findings can help guide the engagement practices that are taking shape in the industry.

What journalists have come to understand as engagement emerged from notions of “reciprocal” journalism. This concept provided a foundation for the current discussions taking shape around engagement in the industry. The article “Reciprocal Journalism” introduces this concept in relation to community-centered journalism and discusses its relevance to journalism more broadly. The authors articulate how the characteristics of reciprocal journalism benefit both communities and journalists’ roles in serving those communities: “Applying these direct, indirect, and sustained forms of reciprocity to journalism, we have argued that reciprocity in journalism can contribute to accomplishing the normative goals of both community and community journalism: a deeper sense of connectedness (Lewis, Holton and Coddington).” The framework of reciprocal journalism promotes connectedness and situates journalists and communities in mutually beneficial relationships.

Although I have defined community engagement as a relationship between journalists and the communities they serve at the beginning of this paper, I want to reiterate that there is no universal definition for engagement. In the 2017 paper “Pathways to Engagement: Understanding How Newsrooms Are Working with Communities” Angelica Das proposes a spectrum of approaches to engagement under

the consideration that these practices are still evolving: “We undertook this study of engagement to clarify our own thinking, not to enforce a uniformity on others. We hope our taxonomy will be of use to the field, but we also see the value in continuing to push and pull on the meanings behind the words we use” (Das, 2). Similar to Das’ view, I acknowledge that my research is part of this emerging discourse around engagement and look forward to future progression on the subject.

In “The Elusive Engagement Metric” Arizona State Assistant Professor of Journalism Jacob L. Nelson investigates an ethnographic case study of Hearken. This study redefines how audience engagement is measured and offers another interpretation of how it can be conducted to increase trust and loyalty between journalists and audience members. In contrast to quantifying audience engagement as a measurement, Nelson addresses this platform’s different approach. Hearken’s services highlight how intuition and thinking about engagement as a process can be powerful ways to connect with audiences. He states, “Hearken conceptualizes audience engagement as an ongoing process by which journalists actively listen to and communicate with audiences in order to earn their trust and loyalty” (Nelson, 529). Nelson expresses that there is not a concrete formula for carrying out engagement. Building relationships and persuading fellow journalists about the value of these techniques may deviate from traditional journalistic practices, but the impact of this process demonstrates the need for a wide use of these methods.

The article “Practicing Engagement” from the journal *Journalism Practice* examines participatory journalism and news engagement. It begins with a discussion of engagement, what the authors deem as a “media industry buzzword” (Lawrence,

Radcliffe, and Schmidt, 1220). Similar to my research focus, “Practicing Engagement” examines approaches to engagement based on in-depth interviews, in this case, from the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Switzerland and Austria: “We theorize that engagement practices are being shaped by pressures identified in earlier studies of similar journalistic innovations, and therefore that various engagement practices can be mapped according to whether the public is conceptualized as potential active participants in news-making or merely recipients and reactors to news; whether the public is invited to participate in the front-end of the news-making process or merely empowered to react at the end of the process; and by how optimistically or skeptically journalists and editors view the public’s capacity for positive contributions to news. Engagement practices therefore differ in their ability to empower the public to participate not just in news, but in civic life itself” (Lawrence, Radcliffe, Schmidt, 1221). The authors establish this shift in journalism that views audiences as groups that can help shape the news journalists produce. These practices not only can empower the public to participate in the news that journalists produce, but also encourage community members to participate in the civic sphere.

While peer-reviewed articles and studies contribute to the literature on community engagement, valuable resources also exist on platforms, such as Gather, that connect journalists around the world who share the same vision for engagement; it is not only a journalistic priority, but also a human one. Speaking with other journalists and reading about their experiences have offered an effective way for those interested in pursuing engagement to understand the current discourses around the subject.

Medium, an online publishing platform, is a wealth of journalists' personal stories and experiences with engagement. KPCC Early Childhood Education Reporter Marina Dale wrote a Medium article in February 2020 entitled "5 ways I'm incorporating engagement into everyday reporting." This piece solidified my goals for this particular avenue of research. Any journalist interested in expanding their audience reach and bettering relationships with communities can access immediately applicable tips, like those that Dale outlines in this piece. She proposes that talking to policy experts and other community leaders will inform reporting. Creating a spreadsheet for sources can help locate them in the future with ease.

Additionally, Dale discusses her personal success in writing follow-up stories to answer audience questions. Her second to last method is closing the loop between journalists and the public by using audience feedback to inform stories. Finally, Dale advises to find a friend in the field to collaborate with and brainstorm future project ideas. All of these methods underscore an overarching theme in my research that will be discussed later; journalists hold the ability to immediately incorporate engagement techniques in their everyday reporting and writing.

Alvarado's Medium piece from March 2021 "The unglamorous reality of community engagement and why it's totally worth it" acknowledges the hardships that engagement work is bound to face. Juggling spreadsheets, flyers and questions, not to mention tabling events that can lead to dehydration and exhaustion, challenge the ease to which engagement projects are carried out. However, Alvarado makes a convincing case for why these potential obstacles are worth navigating. Community engagement helps people and that provides enough justification to prioritize this process.

As my research considers engagement techniques that can be applied to news media outlets in Eugene as a springboard for other mid-sized cities, I wanted to research existing literature that specifically addresses this locale. However, research on community engagement in the Eugene area is lacking. The existing literature to date has covered practices for other geographic areas, such as Community Engagement Director Ashley Alvarado's groundbreaking work in Los Angeles at KPCC. Alvarado's engagement initiatives fueled my interest for this subject, and I believe the station's projects are on the forefront of engagement. The articles she and other journalists have written about KPCC's engagement are sources for understanding how engagement work can look and how prioritizing engagement can build connections within a community as well as between journalists and community members.

I could discuss any number of engagement projects KPCC has carried out to demonstrate how outlets are currently engaging communities, in this case, in the large city of Los Angeles. However, I will focus on a project Alvarado emphasized in her talk at the University of Oregon. In "Lunch and learn: Inside KPCC's Feeding the Conversation engagement series" Joseph Lichterman speaks about how the Los Angeles station brands KPCC and LAist brought together community members and journalists through gatherings to learn how coverage could better reflect the community and its needs. By utilizing the concept that food brings people together, KPCC and LAist initiated conversations to inform what stories would best serve the community. Engagement projects can take on any number of formats. This practice requires a mindset and priority toward engagement.

Although KPCC's projects are helpful in understanding the possibilities for engagement and demonstrate how engagement initiatives can take shape, the radio station serves a much wider audience than outlets in Eugene and other similarly sized cities. According to Southern California Public Radio's website, 89.3 KPCC-FM serves all of Los Angeles and Orange County, reaching 600,000 listeners each week. The station's listeners alone are almost triple Eugene's population of about 176,000 (World Population Review). Thus, the existing literature has a gap in relation to engagement techniques for mid-sized cities like Eugene.

My thesis will contribute to this preexisting literature and discourse by proposing community engagement techniques for mid-sized cities like Eugene. I have used this previous research to inform my own process and hopefully, in turn, my finished product can inform journalists about applying engagement practices to other comparable locations. Additionally, many of the sources I have considered provide a general overview of community engagement and establish why it is important. These sources do not go very far in connecting this information to specific outlets and communities, but I will apply my research findings to the Eugene community and argue that the engagement techniques I propose can be utilized across different outlets.

### **Why Engagement Matters: The Timeliness of this Topic**

In addition to reviewing the existing literature to understand what we already know about engagement I want to provide my reasoning for choosing community engagement and why I believe it needed to be the culminating research project of my

college career. After this discussion, I will utilize sources to demonstrate why engagement is a timely issue in the context of the United States' political climate.

As I discussed at in the beginning of this paper, during the term I spent in the Reporting 1 course, I went to a guest lecture with my class as part of the Demystifying Media series at the University of Oregon. Community Engagement Director Ashley Alvarado spoke about her own work establishing effective engagement practices in Los Angeles, specifically those used to reach marginalized communities. Her contributions to these areas solidified in my mind the human nature of journalism and why this aspect is so important to the industry as a whole. This presentation sparked my passion for researching community engagement practices and highlighted its importance in informing audiences, audiences who may have been historically underserved in the media landscape.

In my last term of college, while working on this thesis, I have participated in the SOJC course Engaged Journalism, with Professor Andrew DeVigal, which has continued to strengthen my understanding of this area of journalism and has equipped me with tools and values to utilize while researching and carrying out my own engagement techniques. Through this instruction, I only became more encouraged to pursue this avenue of research and journalistic practice. In addition to the current media landscape, community engagement is relevant to today's political climate.

*Distrust in Journalism: Why Journalists Need to Shift from Transactional to Relational Models*

This section will build upon my rationale for selecting this topic by demonstrating the timeliness of this issue, why engagement needs to be recognized as a compelling journalism practice and why specific engagement techniques need to be established. Transitioning from a transactional to relational approach with communities will allow journalists to rebuild the public's trust in journalism. This shift will not only better serve the public, but also benefit the publication for which the journalist works.

The advent of the Internet was the initial catalyst that changed the relationship between journalists and the public. Readers and viewers began to gain more control in their consumption. They could start to serve as reporters themselves and exercise their own judgement about news (Francher). As journalism continued to undergo this shift, the public lost confidence in how journalists do journalism. The administration that came into office in 2016 further fueled this decline in the public's trust in journalism.

Distrust in the media has been especially apparent since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency. It doesn't take much Googling to find a plethora of news stories that have addressed Trump's anti-media rhetoric, such as one from the Associated Press: "Grappling with a wave of election-season violence, President Donald Trump escalated his rhetoric against the news media on Monday even as he made plans for a somber visit to Pennsylvania to mourn a synagogue massacre that left 11 dead" (Lucey). Such news leads are no longer as surprising as they might have been before Trump's inauguration. The public has since been inundated with stories that focus on Trump or his insensitive rhetoric toward the communities that are affected by such tragedies instead of the community's actual needs. Thus, attention needs to be rerouted back to communities.

In this climate marked with distrust toward the media, it is imperative to the integrity of journalism for writers and reporters to elevate the perspectives of those who have been ignored by political institutions and the mainstream media. In the Berkeley News article “How did Trump change American journalism?” University of California, Berkeley writer Ivan Natividad states, “Donald Trump is no longer president. But his administration’s combative nature with the media over the past four years — of which the terms “fake news” and “alternative facts” were used to describe factual reporting — has exacerbated the public’s distrust of American journalists” (Natividad). These words have not only been eagerly consumed by his base, but also have been internalized by the public, even if inadvertently.

Natividad goes on to state, “But the media is also to blame for that distrust, said UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism Dean Geeta Anand. More particularly, the failure of the local news model, and the lack of diversity in the industry, has allowed important reporting and coverage to fall through the cracks.” Although the Trump administration has lessened the degree of trust that the public holds in journalism, the industry also needs to take responsibility and demonstrate initiative in improving news coverage and inclusion. Journalists now need to not only share their personal experiences in relation to their stories, but also seek diverse experiences, especially of those who live in marginalized communities.

While distrust in the media is arguably more prevalent than ever, journalists and publications are working to rebuild this trust. Gather offers journalists around the world the opportunity to share their experience engaging communities and audiences. A Gather case study entitled “How CALmatters Used Open Reporting to Collaborate With

Community Members on Education Reporting” by freelance journalist Ben Mitchell demonstrates open reporting’s positive impact on a story’s development and depth. Being transparent can not only help generate feedback from readers in real time, but also can lead to an increase in readership.

Additionally, the Gather article “Start Here: Engaging Your Communities for Better Journalism” discusses the collective shift in outlook on journalism’s role in society. Reporter for Spaceship Media Maia Laperle states, “Media organizations have been pushed to reconsider old financial models (advertising), old power dynamics (hierarchical, extractive, and unequal), and old practices (transactional relationships and an insistence on “objectivity”) in order to be more useful to the public” (Laperle). Journalists must shift from a transactional approach to a relationship-building one in order to serve the public in ways that will in turn benefit them as well as the journalist’s publication. These Gather articles only provide a sliver of the full picture of the conversations around community engagement that are currently being fostered by journalists across the globe.

I would like to conclude this discussion about the promise of community engagement in rebuilding trust among communities with a statement from former Executive Editor at The Seattle Times Michael R. Francher in the article “The Ethics of Engaged Journalism.” After defining engaged journalism and discussing its role in establishing trust he states, “Public confidence in journalism and democracy are linked, and I believe we are at a point where both journalism and democracy are at risk. Their survival will require action, imagination and courage on the part of journalists and the public to promote the shared pursuit of truth and the common good.” The current

polarized political climate necessitates community engagement in journalism. In order for democracy and journalism to endure, both journalists and the public need to reimagine how journalistic practices are conducted.

My research directly addresses these problems incurred by widespread distrust in the media. Where the journalism industry was once an extension of the capitalist philosophy that everything, including news, is a commodity that is produced and sold, it is now heading toward inclusivity and collaboration. Effective community engagement can not only help restore the lost trust between communities and the media, but also lead to a new understanding of what it looks like for community members to trust journalists and the information they deliver.

This topic matters not only because community engagement can rebuild trust in the journalism industry, but also because all groups of people should be able to engage with media outlets and journalists that disseminate important information, information that could affect their livelihoods. This is a large topic and a challenging one, so I hope to contribute to the growing discourse around community engagement.

## **Research Methods**

As the Emerging Question for Engagement section presented the central research question for this topic, this section will address my methodology for answering the question and discuss limitations to my research.

Researchers in journalism conduct research predominantly through interviews. Interviews can take place with the “average joe” or an expert on a particular subject. Research can also be conducted through data gathering; journalists often compile data to produce an infographic or other visual information delivery method. Journalists can also use preexisting interview transcripts and stories from different mediums as methods for their topics of research. For the information-collecting stage of my research process, I interviewed six journalists in the industry at a variety of news outlets. I discuss the questions that guided my interviews as well as disclose my methodology for selecting interview subjects in the following subsections.

### **Guiding Questions for Interviewees**

As discussed in a previous section, I aimed to answer one primary research question: How do we do engagement and what does it look like? I also wanted to apply my findings to local Eugene outlets, or outlets facing similar limitations to engagement. This section outlines the questions I asked my sources in order to gain a holistic, detailed understanding of what current engagement looks like and how it can be improved given limited resources. While the questions I posed to each source slightly

varied depending on each journalist's role, I intentionally kept my questions fairly consistent. These questions offered a framework for my research and allowed me to draw concrete conclusions. I also wanted to approach these interviews as conversations rather than extractive interviews, incorporating the values associated with engagement, such as relationship-building, throughout my research process.

The following list provides a sample of the questions I asked my interviewees about community engagement. I flushed out these questions as the interviews progressed, but the topics they addressed remained the same.

Q1: What has been your experience with engagement at your current publication (projects, conversations, etc.)?

Q2: How has your publication/outlet approached engagement in the past? Are there any upcoming initiatives or plans? If so, what are they?

Q3: What are your hopes for engagement at your publication/outlet or elsewhere?

Q4: What do you think are the current gaps in engagement at your publication/outlet or in the industry as a whole?

Q5: What, if any, are ways you are incorporating engagement in your reporting or what techniques you have implemented in the past?

## **The Interviews**

Similar to the shift in initial focus and trajectory for this project, selecting interview subjects depended on the evolution of my research. I first interviewed KLCC

News Director Rachael McDonald because I knew I wanted to speak with a journalist at the local Eugene NPR radio station. My primary thesis advisor, Damian Radcliffe, recommended I interview SOJC graduate and KSL Executive Producer Kira Hoffelmeyer. My second reader, Dan Morrison, put me in contact with SOJC graduate and Register-Guard Multimedia Reporter Dana Sparks as I aimed to interview at least two local journalists, one preferably from The Register-Guard. Radcliffe also recommended Idaho Education Reporter Sami Edge as she also graduated from the SOJC and had specific experience conducting engagement as well as Register-Guard Education Reporter Jordyn Brown because she could attest to the current state of the education section. Finally, I interviewed KPCC Community Engagement Director Ashley Alvarado as her work largely inspired this project and she continues to work on the forefront of engagement.

The six working journalists with whom I conducted interviews are all women. I had not intentionally spoken solely with female journalists but realized this pattern when Edge asked me if I had interviewed any male journalists. I do not believe this characteristic of my research affects any findings, but I wanted to address this commonality across my interviewees with an explanation of my process. The table below presents the interviewees, their role and where they work.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Location</b>
Ashley Alvarado	Director of Community Engagement	KPCC, Los Angeles
Dana Sparks	Multimedia Reporter	The Register-Guard, Eugene
Kira Hoffelmeyer	Executive Reporter for afternoon news	KSL, Salt Lake City
Rachael McDonald	News Director	KLCC, Eugene
Sami Edge	Reporter	Idaho Education News, Boise
Jordyn Brown	Reporter	The Register-Guard, Eugene

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated video conferencing as a replacement for in-person interviews. The pandemic posed challenges to my access to interviews, but it allowed me to seek perspectives outside the Eugene area. Although three of the journalists are currently working in other cities, they all had previously lived in the Eugene area. This commonality across the interviews became a valuable aspect of my research as their backgrounds in education regarding engagement resembled one another but each person has since worked in a different location and consequently has had different experiences with engagement practices. With each source, I received their

consent to be recorded and I let them know how I might be using our conversation in my project. The interviews generally ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half.

Although I interviewed journalists in three states outside of Oregon, I argue that these outlets resemble those in Eugene enough to forge connections between engagement practices. The findings from this research can be used to inform Eugene as well as comparable locations. Since my research shifted to focusing on journalists' agency in engaging audiences and establishing the techniques that they can implement to increase their engagement with target audiences, interviewing specific community members did not fit with the new, narrowed research trajectory. The outlets for which my interview subjects work vary in the type of mediums they produce. This variety allowed me to gain insights into engagement techniques across different locations and mediums.

After transcribing the interviews, I analyzed them as a whole in order to establish connections as well as differences. I marked any similarities and considered them to be themes. The following discussion addresses each of these emerging themes. From considering the interviews holistically, I could draw definitive conclusions and concrete techniques to implement to further engagement.

## **Limitations**

My ability to speak with community members of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds was hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the direction of my research shifted to focus on mid-sized cities like Eugene that pose a risk to

outlets' engagement, in addition to engagement techniques journalists can implement. As mentioned earlier, community engagement practices have fallen through the cracks in Eugene which can happen in other mid-sized U.S. cities. I hope my research can propose ways to maintain effective community engagement in order to keep such gaps from widening.

Another limitation to this project and to this area of research relates to financial constraints of the journalism industry, specifically in reference to local media outlets. Journalism is a business and the techniques for engagement should take budgetary factors into account. Although engagement clearly leads to better journalism, the practice will not become a priority if it does not financially benefit outlets.

In my interview with KLCC News Director Rachael McDonald, she acknowledged limitations to the success of engagement at the radio station: "But one thing that we've definitely talked about is just putting out more calls to our audience. What stories do you want us to do? And it's just been a matter of personnel. How do we make sure we have somebody who can be sifting through that?" The techniques discussed in this paper offer possible ways to navigate these circumstances and begin to answer how engagement can be carried out in spite of them.

## **Transferable Engagement Techniques for Mid-Sized Cities**

The following sections discuss my research outcomes. Each section is dedicated to an engagement technique. Some of these techniques are intended to be utilized by journalists on an individual level, some are targeted to outlets as a whole and some can be implemented by both entities. The first part discusses how outlets can create an infrastructure for engagement. Building an infrastructure may be considered more than a technique, but I believe it still fits in with the other proposals. The section establishes how creating an infrastructure is the most desirable goal to increase the longevity of engagement at an outlet. Additionally, each section ends with a brief discussion of a case study whereby the technique was successfully implemented at an outlet or by a journalist.

### **How and Why to Create an Infrastructure for Engagement**

While the existing literature makes the case for engagement as a journalistic priority, this section discusses the need for explicit infrastructure at outlets. Based on my interviews, I am defining engagement infrastructure as a formal framework from which journalists at an outlet can carry out engagement practices. Conversations about engagement are not enough. Only through implementing an infrastructure for community engagement can this process be ensured to last and become a priority among staff. Allocating resources to this structure may be a luxury for some outlets. For

example, KLCC is a public radio station with limited funding. The following sections address this challenge and propose techniques to navigate it.

The first conversations I held with journalists who work in Eugene revealed the absence of a formal infrastructure at their respective outlets. Register-Guard Multimedia Reporter Dana Sparks underscored this gap: “And I think it’s interesting to bring up engagement because I know that it’s been a conversation with every sort of publication that I’ve been involved with.” While this statement implies that community engagement is on the radar of publications, mere conversations limit the tangible progress that can be made in engagement work. Outlets can only reap the benefits of engagement if they establish a form of infrastructure.

Based on the interviews, I believe outlets create infrastructure when they prioritize engagement and communicate its elements to staff. For example, when an outlet hires staff, the existing desks can send memos to new staff members describing the outlet’s engagement initiatives and reinforce that this process is a priority in the newsroom. Additionally, outlets can build an engagement infrastructure by hiring people to fill specific engagement positions, like editors or directors.

Even with structural limitations, journalists can carry out engagement techniques on an individual level. These two concepts are not necessarily in conflict with each other but can be viewed as two hierarchical goals. Ideally, an outlet implements an infrastructure, but if this process is not feasible, the onus should be placed on reporters individually to carry out engagement techniques. I argue that engagement does not have to be all or nothing, but instead can be thought of as a continuum where being somewhere is better than being nowhere.

I wanted to address a question early on in the interview process: How can an outlet establish an infrastructure for engagement, especially with consideration toward budget constraints? KPCC Community Director Ashley Alvarado offered insights into this piece of the community engagement puzzle and shared how she has succeeded in implementing engagement practices at the station:

I think you have to be, you have to bring a business mindset to engagement in order to create the infrastructure for it within an organization, because it was one of those things where if it's a should do, it's going to drop to the bottom of your list every time, you know, like we're dealing with so many budget cuts, we're dealing with such a shortage of staff, but if becomes a must do, then it's a business imperative.

Engagement work can appear to be in tension with tangible financial returns as it is a relationship-building approach versus a transactional one. As the sources above demonstrate, business language does not often appear in much of the literature and discourse regarding this subject. However, my conversation with Alvarado explicitly outlined the importance of shifting one's mindset about engagement from an optional process to a business imperative. Although the existing literature communicates the value of engagement work in rebuilding trust with the public, it arguably does not address the financial incentive for implementing an infrastructure for community engagement into a current outlet.

Now, how can this framework be introduced and how can funders and staff fully grasp the promise of engagement? Alvarado shared what in her experience can solidify the need for an engagement infrastructure: "And so how do you demonstrate that as a

business imperative? What are funders interested in? And one thing we realized was that funders want a defined engagement.” Not only does engagement benefit journalists’ relationships with communities, but it also serves a financial interest in that it might lead to funding opportunities, as demonstrated through KPCC’s success in communicating a clear picture of engagement to funders.

In my interview with KLCC News Director Rachael McDonald, she indicated the absence of an existing infrastructure for engagement at the radio station:

But we haven’t actually embarked on something specific. You know, one of the things we’ve talked about doing is, and sometimes we do call-outs on social media or on-air asking for people to contribute to maybe a story that we’re working on as a news department. So, it’s kind of a conversation that we haven’t quite gotten to the action part of that, but yeah, that’s really interesting to know. Like how important context is in all of this, you know, with the Black Lives Matter movement. And the fact that more people are really engaged online and everything.

Because of this gap in infrastructure, KLCC has only increased its engagement through social media and on-air interactions. While some of these techniques have been effective, as the following section addresses, I argue that implementing a formal infrastructure for engagement would serve KLCC’s audience as well as account for its limited resources as a non-profit.

There are a variety of case studies I could discuss in this section to demonstrate how implementing an infrastructure for engagement positively impacts news outlets. However, I argue that the engagement work at KPCC sets the best example of an engagement infrastructure. The station has a Medium webpage dedicated to all of its engagement projects. These stories include the headlines “How KPCC designed a new

education beat in the middle of a pandemic” (Lee) and “My New Job Is Reporting About You (So Here’s A Little About Me)” (Javier).

## **Social Media**

While the last section argued for the implementation of an infrastructure at outlets, the following sections delve into the range of techniques journalists and outlets can utilize if existing resources cannot be delegated to create a formal infrastructure. The role of social media in increasing engagement became an over-arching theme that emerged from my literature review and interviews. My interview with McDonald demonstrated social media’s effect on listener engagement at KLCC, specifically among younger audience members:

I think that we’ve stepped up a lot in terms of expanding who we’re reaching. And I think that that happened because a lot of, because of just the nature of news and that we were covering more news. And we’re out in the community more. And so, there were more people maybe checking us out on social media. So, I definitely observed the summer when the social justice protests were happening, that we had a huge boost in followers on Twitter, for example, and I think also Instagram and Facebook, but that was where I feel like I saw people kind of jumping, you know, starting to follow us more and more. Because we had a reporter who was out, some of those live tweeting protests and that seems to really engage people. But again, I mean, like that’s one audience, you know, people who use Twitter, not everyone does. But I do think our just engagement on our website has increased just with the fact that there’s so much news and it’s changing so fast.

While public outcry about systemic injustices offers an immediate springboard for increasing engagement among community members, specifically those of a younger demographic, social media proves to be an accessible, cost effective technique for garnering community engagement. In addition to increasing its engagement on social media platforms, the radio station was also able to reach a different part of the community than its typical listeners through the use of platforms like Twitter.

Social media poses a potential accessibility issue as not everyone in the community uses the same platforms, but the growth KLCC saw on its social media accounts during the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates the viability of this engagement technique. The longer that outlets carry out such techniques, the more information they can gather about listener habits, including which platforms community members utilize the most. Through this data, outlets can continue to shape their engagement practices while also learning the types of stories and content the community needs. Similar to McDonald's experience at the station, Executive Producer Kira Hoffelmeyer at KSL News Radio in Salt Lake City implements social media techniques to further engagement:

We also do what every other news outlet in the world does, which is push notifications. I know many other places do this, but we are the only ones in the Salt Lake market to do text messages. We engage with people digitally. We have our stream that happens on our website. We also have an app, so we engage people there through push notifications, and also, we have stories and podcasts and all of that jazz on our app. But additionally, a second way that we get people to tune in is we are able to, via our app, we're basically able to split the app from the live broadcast that's happening on our radio station and put a different broadcast on the app.

I had not come across the technique of utilizing an app in my other interviews or in my literature review. I propose that creating an app can be an additional accessible way for outlets to extend their engagement. The more ways audiences can engage with content not only leads to more eyes on stories, but also better informs outlets about audience habits and needs.

My interview with Register-Guard Multimedia Reporter Dana Sparks added to the conversation regarding social media as a simple yet effective engagement technique: “There’s a lot of people that I recognize in the community and that are now following me. And they look to how I use social media as you know, a new source. I think that I tend to see a younger audience on my social media platforms versus when I get direct messages on my phone or in my email.” Again, younger community members tend to flock to social media platforms the most. This trend can be of use to outlets, such as KLCC, that are looking to expand their reach in the community and include community members who may not be in the outlet’s typical demographic.

Similar to McDonald’s commentary about social media’s role in increasing engagement with younger listeners at KLCC, Sparks understands social media’s effect on engaging younger readers at The Register-Guard. Due to this commonality, I propose that outlets that tend to target an older audience can expand their reach by increasing their social media presence. While this concept might not seem groundbreaking, not all outlets take advantage of social media. Catering to a specific target audience can be valuable. However, budget constraints and other limitations do not give outlets the luxury of neglecting an online presence and resisting the current technology-saturated climate. Online engagement techniques are more than just a no-

brainer. They might very well become a business imperative for outlets who have remained stagnant in their reach.

The Salt Lake Tribune's collaborative community Facebook page demonstrates how outlets can utilize social media to engage audiences. This project connected reporters with the communities they cover. The Facebook page uses the Why Utah? group to foster open dialogues with readers. The outlet measured this engagement through comments and posting views. Other outlets can use such data to establish the impact of such projects. Again, social media offers an accessible way to further engage existing readers while connecting reporters with community members.

### **Call-ins for Radio Stations**

By interviewing journalists at a variety of outlets, I was able to establish engagement techniques for radio specifically. This section discusses an engagement technique that is unique to the audio medium. While call-in as a technique have room for improvement, which I will discuss, it holds potential in increasing audience participation.

Radio call-ins marked a point of connection between McDonald and KSL Executive Producer Kira Hoffelmeyer. Hoffelmeyer discussed KSL's approach to this technique: "In terms of engaging audiences literally on the radio, we still do like call in stuff. So, call this number to ask your question on the radio." This technique requires a simple framework which speaks to its accessibility as a method. While this form of engagement might seem dated, it has proved to be a successful method for engaging

audiences and building trust. Radio stations can use this relatively simple framework to understand the immediate needs and concerns of the community. Facilitating a space for open dialogue leads to informed reporting. McDonald shared KLCC's approach to call-ins:

One thing we just recently started up as a weekly show that I host with the Lane County public health doctor, and it's focused on COVID-19 of course, and it's a way to get listener questions. And that's actually been great because we have gotten quite a few emails and phone calls and that feels like a really direct way to engage with the community. And like, what do you want to know? We'll put your questions to this doctor.

Despite the audience participation garnered by these call-ins, McDonald also acknowledged that this technique might not be as effective as it could be. She said, "But I don't know that it's completely taken off and that I feel like we don't necessarily get as many questions as we could. And there's kind of people that come back and have the same question over and over again, or they want to just like give their commentary." I believe these limitations do not warrant an upheaval of this technique. Call-ins orient stations in the right direction. They are ways to engage community members in real time and establish trust as community figures are the ones on the other end of the line answering the community's questions. Troubleshooting these radio spaces for facilitating conversations between community officials and the public is a worthwhile form of honing engagement.

To demonstrate how this Q&A approach can take shape, I will briefly discuss an initiative from a radio station in Seattle. KUOW radio station, a nonprofit based in Seattle, started the "Ask A..." project, a series of in-person events to host Q&A

sessions. The goals of these sessions were to “promote empathy and understanding,” said Executive Producer Ross Reynolds via a Gather case study. These events provided people the opportunity to learn about communities they know nothing about, such as the Muslim community. While this example does not showcase a call-in project, it demonstrates how Q&A-style initiatives can not only engage audiences, but also elevate current questions and concerns while also generating empathy and trust.

### **“Little” Engagement**

The previous sections have proposed specific engagement techniques. Although this section does propose techniques as well, its main purpose is to argue that journalists can carry out engagement if they do not yet have the formal backing of the outlet where they work. During the first few interviews I conducted, it became clear how budget constraints and lack of existing infrastructure for community engagement limit its potential at news outlets.

I spoke with University of Oregon SOJC graduate Sami Edge who currently works at Idaho Education News as a reporter. She contributed to a project that engaged Latino students and their families, which is covered in Stephanie Castellano’s American Press Institute article “How Collaborating Helped Two Idaho Publishers Engage Latino Audiences.” My conversation with Edge addressed how journalists who work at outlets facing limitations can still incorporate engagement into their reporting and writing by utilizing what Edge referred to as “little” engagement. She explicitly put a name to an idea that had been indirectly discussed across most of my interviews:

Four years into my professional career now, and at the first newspaper where I started, the capacity to do these kinds of projects was pretty limited. You know, newspapers have a lot on their plate day to day, and a lot of editors don't necessarily think in terms of engagement. They think in terms of some of the more innovative practices, like solutions journalism, and I, and a lot of SOJC grads, are going to end up with those kinds of newspapers.

And it can, it can feel kind of demoralizing to bang your head against the wall at a place that feels like it's running like it did 70 years ago. So, I would say, if you can kind of slip those things into your work, like embed a survey in one of your stories and see what happens like the more you can kind of quietly build up the proof that, 'Hey, this is cool people kind of like it,' and the more leeway you might get.

After this conversation with Edge, I grappled with the bigger picture idea of how to implement an infrastructure for engagement at a new or existing outlet and the notion that engagement work can happen on an individual level. While a business approach is important to ensure the longevity of engagement at a publication, individual reporters can carry out engagement with minimal shifts in reporting habits. I argue that these smaller forms of engagement can be effective even without the financial and ideological backing of an outlet. Edge shared her perspective toward engagement work which was grounded in her experience at publications that faced such limitations as those discussed earlier. I believe her insight offers a valuable, practical take on engagement:

And even at this outlet where I work for a nonprofit online newsroom, we don't have tech barriers. We don't have to put out a paper every day. A lot of the scheduling challenges of a daily are not here. But even still, I don't feel like newsroom management really understood where I was going with engagement and I think part of that is cause it's a different way of thinking about journalism, right? Like this wasn't just for me to get sources. This was so I was telling stories that genuinely mattered and

reflected the community instead of assuming as a journalist that I understood what their issues were.

And it's a power shift. It's a paradigm shift and a lot of editors, I think old school editors don't necessarily feel comfortable with that. And the reason that I was really able to dedicate all this time to it was because I got that API [American Press Institute] fellowship, which is like pretty prestigious. And it looks good that we're getting some national attention. So now I have time to do this the way I need to do it. So sometimes you're going to have to create those opportunities for yourself if you're not going into a newsroom where this is really already an established priority.

Although, ideally, outlets would implement a formal infrastructure for engagement, Edge acknowledged the reality that if engagement work is not an established priority at an outlet, reporters can create opportunities for engaging with the community themselves, whether those opportunities be as simple as providing a link to a Google form, survey in a story or going to public spaces where community members share information.

Dana Sparks, a multimedia reporter at The Register-Guard, additionally referenced the individual work she conducts with a mindset toward fostering engagement with her readers: "So I would say that on any given assignment, before really anything happens, we evaluate, or we either me and my editor, or I do it by myself and evaluate what is the best way to create that story so that it's most accessible." Sparks considers what medium would best engage a certain demographic and how she can make it easy for readers to engage with her content. For example, in her experience, photography has been well-received by readers across different age groups.

This section is not complete in discussing all of the “little” engagement techniques that are at the disposal of reporters as these methods are unfolding in real-time. However, to reiterate, this section aims to establish that journalists can initiate engagement practices on an individual level if they do not yet have the backing of the publication for which they work. Implementing smaller forms of engagement is better than none at all, and the techniques covered above exemplify types of “little” engagement that are available to journalists.

### **Facilitated Dialogues**

The following section did not directly emerge as one of the themes from my interviews; I learned more about this technique in the Engaged Journalism course at the SOJC. However, I believe facilitated dialogues are a promising engagement technique. Research on this method is still evolving, but existing studies indicate the potential for its success.

Fostering spaces for open communication with the public is a characteristic of engagement that deviates from traditional journalism. While the SOJC curriculum contextualizes its courses based on the current climate and industry, courses I have taken never introduced facilitated dialogues, the only exception being Engaged Journalism. The evolving engagement landscape has shifted the industry’s perspective of journalists’ roles. Facilitating dialogues with community members is another component of this transformation that deserves attention. I have touched upon this

research theme previously, but this section delves into this engagement technique for building trust between journalists and the public.

*What are facilitated dialogues and why are they important?*

One can think of facilitated dialogues in journalism as spaces that journalists create to hold conversations with community members. Spaceship Media works on the frontier of facilitated dialogues, which they have named “Dialogue Journalism.” According to its website, this outlet aims to “reduce polarization, build communities, and restore trust in journalism.” Spaceship Media argues that Dialogue Journalism is a way to keep the pace of modern journalistic practices while building trust between journalists and the communities they serve.

*How can these dialogues take shape?*

The process for facilitating dialogues can take various shapes and can be modified to accommodate an outlet’s time and resources. One of the case studies in the Gather database provides an example of a facilitated conversation between a journalist and her audience and how such a process can be easily obtainable and lead to more thorough reporting.

As referenced in the Distrust in Journalism section, the Gather case study “How CALmatters Used Open Reporting to Collaborate With Community Members on Education Reporting” covered how a journalist created space to collaborate with her

readers. Reporter Jessica Calefati received several dozen email responses to the open reporting story she published that addressed the stonewalling she faced when researching California school funding. Calefati's experience affirms the importance of transparency between journalists and the public. If journalists are open about their process, the more likely readers can help with any challenges and offer suggestions. While Calefati did not host an in-person conversation, she created a space for dialogue between herself and her readers. This collaboration informed the final iteration of Calefati's story and demonstrates that facilitated dialogues can take on different forms to accommodate a journalist's resources.

In my interview with Edge, she shared her experience fostering a forum for families about the education system as part of the Latino Listening Project. She worked on this project that invited students to share their current experience with the school system in Idaho in hopes to get lawmakers and state leaders to acknowledge inequities between Latino and white students. Edge discussed the process for hosting an in-person dialogue and acknowledged what worked in order to circumvent challenges. The following quote is relatively long, but I believe it is necessary to honor its original length as Edge articulated the process that went into facilitating this dialogue space in a clear, yet conversational way:

So, we really thought that in-person meetings were the way we would start out to meet people, get their numbers, ask them the best way to communicate. Wow. That was really hit or miss. Really what we discovered quickly was if we were partnering with a trusted community group that already had a lot of people coming to their meetings, a lot of families engaged.

We had good success when they would invite us to partner with them on the meeting. You know, make sure that any of the meeting was happening when families weren't working, because a lot of Latino families in particular are working not just the eight to five hours. So, you got to kind of be flexible.

And also, providing dinner or childcare, if they have kids that are coming to a meeting with them. So, when we partnered with other groups, things went well, we got a lot of feedback. Often if parents were feeling shy about sharing with us, you know, the people who knew them from these other groups would prompt them to speak up and, and we have a good community dialogue.

It was far more difficult for us to host our own events and expect people to show up. I think part of that is because we're both new at event hosting and planning, and we could have done a better job with doing outreach beforehand for a longer time. But I also think part of it is we're not insiders and all of these communities that we were going to, like, why would people show up to our meeting? So, we definitely found partnering was beneficial on the in-person side of things.

The environment Edge and her team created exceeded her expectations for the project. However, the success of this initiative did not come without its obstacles. Edge shared the value of partnering with an organization to bring this engagement technique to fruition. This promising outcome affirms the important role of facilitating dialogues with the community. Once established, such projects can be replicated in an accessible, cost effective manner. From this forum, Edge was able to gain insight into community members' experiences and needs. Therefore, facilitated dialogues contribute to better, informed journalism.

Through the Engaged Journalism course at the SOJC, I learned about Assistant Professor of Journalism Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou's research and work on generative dialogue spaces. In a handout she wrote for this class, she defined these facilitated dialogues as "a design thinking approach to reimagining storytelling." These generative dialogues are safe spaces in which community members can share personal experiences

without judgement. Through various exercises like drawing and brainstorming, participants have the opportunity to share and learn about their own and others' experiences regarding issues such as COVID-19 vaccination. The facilitator of these conversations can then transfer the meeting's transcripts and recordings to platforms for other journalists and community members to access. While this process is still in an experimental phase, it holds promise as another engagement technique that can build trust and close gaps between journalists and the communities they serve.

Spaceship Media is bridging divides in the U.S. through dialogue journalism. The Neiman Reports feature "Can Dialogue Journalism Engage Audiences, Foster Civil Discourse, and Increase Trust in the Media?" discusses Spaceship Media's dialogue journalism and how the startup is trademarking the process to bridge the partisan divide, rebuild trust in news organizations and engage readers (Morell).

The trust and relationships that can be forged out of facilitated dialogues with communities simply leads to better journalism. I argue that these dialogue spaces do not have to be in person, especially given the context of the current global pandemic. Facilitated dialogues can take shape in a variety of ways and hold the potential to not only produce more informed stories, but also increase trust with the public.

In addition to the application of this technique discussed above, KMUW Public Radio in Kansas uses interactive forums to deliver community information and provide resources for taking action or learning more about the issues that face the community. These forums began as live broadcasts before an in-person audience but moved to an online format due to COVID-19. The forums succeeded with over 23,000 downloads of videos on the Engage ICT webpage. This case study further demonstrates the potential

of facilitated dialogues in reaching and engaging audiences while also spurring action among community members. Additionally, the shift in format these forums underwent exemplifies the adaptability of this engagement technique.

### **Subscriber Models to Retain Engagement**

Once an outlet or journalist implements engagement techniques, how can they extend the duration of the community relationships that they have established? This section begins to answer this question. Outlets can implement techniques to retain audience participation and readership while also accounting for limited resources. Conversations around subscriber models surfaced during my interviews with Sparks and Alvarado. The Register-Guard is changing its subscriber model which aims to not only retain subscribers, but also attract new ones. Sparks said, “But the goal it is to thank our subscribers for being our subscribers and actively compensating us for the journalism that we produce. But also, the new model is meant to recruit subscribers.” Adapting such models furthers the potential for engagement at an outlet.

Similar to Sparks, Alvarado discussed the necessity of subscriber or membership models: “And if you are, whether you’re a nonprofit and you’re thinking of a membership model, if you’re a for-profit and thinking about the subscriber funnel, email acquisition is absolutely essential. And so, say well, you know, engagement allows us to engage more people.” In addition to subscriber or membership models, generating a database of audience member emails is integral to the engagement process.

Although this section only touches the surface of this aspect of engagement, it supports the argument that engagement initiatives can be sustained and serve financial interests as well as journalistic ones.

## **Conclusion**

### **Summary of Findings**

The existing literature, along with the interviews I conducted, indicate the clear need for newsrooms to prioritize community engagement. The fragmented political and social climate in the United States has decreased the public's trust in journalism. Former President Trump's rhetoric only exacerbated this distrust in the media. In order to bridge these gaps, journalists need to rethink the ways that journalism is conducted. Community engagement holds the potential to not only rebuild the public's trust in journalism, but also establish enduring relationships with community members and improve journalistic quality in general.

The central question I wanted to answer through my research was what KPCC Community Engagement Director Ashley Alvarado described as the emerging question for engagement: How do we do engagement and what does it look like? Through interviews with six journalists, I was able to establish techniques that outlets can implement as well as ones that journalists can utilize on an individual level.

While all of the journalists I interviewed could share with me some forms of engagement that their outlets have carried out or are currently carrying out, I recognized a gap in infrastructure. Implementing formal infrastructure for community engagement requires an allocation of resources in order for this work to be consistently recognized as a priority that will benefit the outlet as well as the community it serves. Given

limitations like funding, I have thus proposed techniques that allow journalists to immediately begin engagement work individually.

Through a holistic analysis of the interviews, I was able to establish techniques one outlet successfully utilizes and then apply those initiatives to fill in gaps in engagement that may exist elsewhere. While an outlet might not garner engagement from one technique, that does not mean another outlet might not fulfill its engagement goals by implementing that practice.

In summary, the following techniques help answer the emerging question for engagement: infrastructure, social media, call-ins for radio stations, “little” engagement and facilitated dialogues. However, these findings do not complete the picture of how engagement practices can take shape. Through this project, I aimed to accomplish four main goals: define community engagement, discuss the current discourses around it, provide evidence and argue for the importance of these practices and propose the techniques that emerged from interviews with journalists.

### **Application of Findings**

In the introduction of this paper, I listed the four elements of engagement work as proposed by the Listening Post Collective: Listen to community members, ask the public what they need to know and then report based on this information, invite the community to participate and equip the public with skills. As part of the conclusion of this project, I will connect each technique I proposed to these elements of engagement.

By applying these techniques to reporting habits, journalists can effectively carry out engagement with the communities they serve.

I propose that these techniques be applied to outlets in the Eugene community as well as outlets in other mid-sized cities that face similar gaps in engagement. Because these techniques take into account the limitations experienced by outlets like KLCC and The Register-Guard, they can be localized to the Eugene community and beyond. Local journalists can immediately implement the techniques discussed in this paper, especially the “little” engagement strategies.

Call-ins for radio stations and facilitated dialogues are techniques that journalists can use to listen to community members as well as ask the public what they need to know and then report based on this information. As KLCC News Director Rachael McDonald expressed, KLCC’s call-ins have provided an accessible way for the station to understand the community’s current questions and concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic. KSL Executive Producer Kira Hoffelmeyer shared a similar experience working with call-ins. Additionally, facilitated dialogues offers a method to listen to community members. In these safe spaces, community members have the opportunity to share their current experiences with a public issue. The information shared in these spaces can then inform the news stories that will best serve the given community. Call-ins and facilitated dialogues are techniques that cover the first two elements of engagement work.

Most of the techniques proposed in this paper relate to more than one element of engagement. The promising characteristic of many of these techniques is that they can adapt to fit an outlet’s particular gaps in engagement. Implementing a formal

infrastructure for engagement and establishing it as a priority is the only way to really ensure that all the elements of engagement will be carried out by journalists at the outlet. However, like the techniques discussed above, social media also has the potential to carry out several elements of engagement. Outlets can utilize social media platforms to expand their reach, invite the community to participate and equip them with skills. As McDonald said, KLCC reporters live tweeted the BLM protests in Eugene. Such ways of using social media can accomplish the goal of live reporting as well as disseminate information to the public that may empower them to get involved.

Before I conclude this paper, I wanted to share my personal reflections on this research and how it has shaped the ways I want to do journalism in the future. After attending Alvarado's talk in the fall of 2019, I knew that I would never think about journalism in the traditional sense that I had previously. I feel very fortunate to have been exposed to this type of work before graduating and that I had the opportunity to pursue my own research on the topic. I strongly believe in community engagement and its role in rebuilding trust, creating long-lasting relationships between journalists and communities and emphasizing empathetic and relational approaches above transactional ones.

During my time in the Engaged Journalism course, I co-facilitated a generative dialogue with six participants from several different states. This experience affirmed my passion for putting this work into practice and seeing its impacts first-hand. I could see the respect six strangers could hold for one another despite some of the differing views they held. Through this experience alone I can confidently say that engagement techniques will bridge divides and garner empathy and trust in the process. Although

interacting with participants in various locations stemmed from the necessity of meeting virtually, I can imagine how such platforms will only increase engagement possibilities after we can all meet in person post-pandemic. I am excited to see how these techniques continue to take shape and how journalists and outlets will carry out community engagement on a larger scale.

This subject on engagement deserves further research and holds the potential to transform the journalism landscape into to one that is representative of all demographics and operates out of unwavering trust with the public. If the emerging question for engagement continues to be answered through research and projects initiated by journalists and outlets, we will be able to truly envision a transparent, reliable industry. The public will gain trust in journalists and their authenticity in serving communities. Engaged journalism is a new-improved journalism, a journalism founded on collaboration, trust and elevating voices. In order to accomplish these goals, outlets need to consider community engagement as a priority and journalists need to explore and implement the techniques proposed in this paper.

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