

A 2023 AGORA JOURNALISM CENTER REPORT

Redefining News: A Manifesto for Community- Centered Journalism

From Audience to Partners:
Community-Centric Journalism
and the principles that
underpin it

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Foreword

When founded nearly a decade ago, the Agora Journalism Center became a leading voice in the growing collaborative movement toward “engaged journalism.” Rather than approaching their work in transactional and extractive ways, we believed journalists could produce better journalism through deep listening, collaboration, and relationship building.

Guided by insights from Andrea Wenzel (Temple University), Ashley Alvarado (LAist), and Darryl Holliday (City Bureau), we began to talk about “community centered journalism.”

Journalists could produce better journalism through deep listening, collaboration, and relationship building.

In part, we shifted toward the broader mission of community-centered journalism because the term “engagement” had developed different meanings in the news industry, only some of which reflected relational rather transactional principles. “Engagement” also seemed to focus more on technique than principles. At a time of growing crisis for local journalism, civic health, and democracy, a sharper, wider call to action seems needed.

As our colleague Damian Radcliffe describes in this report, many people and organizations are building this new approach to journalism—an approach that is premised on engaged journalism practices, with a focus on serving communities in partnership with them. As one of many journalists Damian interviewed for this report put it, in community-centered journalism, “You’re approaching it as someone who is of the community and trying to do this journalism for that community.” Importantly, as this observation suggests, the mission of community-centered journalism isn’t to “save” journalism or to restore local journalism as it used to exist but rather to strive to better serve the information needs of our communities.

The broader acceptance of community-centered journalism in newsrooms was also the reason why the Agora Journalism Center recently co-hosted a pre-conference with Journalism That Matters at this year’s Online News Association conference in Philadelphia, where 120 community-driven journalists assembled at Temple University. We partnered with organizations such as Solutions Journalism Network and the Center for Cooperative Media to discover new synergies in our shared work and uncover knowledge and process gaps. We called the gathering [Engaging Emergence](#), aspiring to the belief that when diverse practitioners come together, meaningful ideas and equitable solutions

emerge.



One of the graphic recordings of our Engaging Emergence pre-conference drawn by Breakthrough Visuals.

We hope this report will offer an accessible but provocative resource for journalists new to the community-centered approach and those already practicing it—and as a manifesto to a profession whose work is more desperately needed than ever.

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

Introduction

Journalism is at a crossroads. Trust in the news media is at, or near, [record lows](#);¹ and [news avoidance](#)² is a growing cause for concern. Many news media outlets are sitting on [shaky](#)³ financial foundations. Unless we do some things differently, the trajectory for the industry is clear.

Alongside these challenges, there's a growing recognition that for too long journalism has also failed to effectively serve large parts of the population. Newsrooms are [seldom representative](#)⁴ of the communities they are serving. Subsequently, is it any surprise that stories often fail to speak to communities, resonate with their experiences, or meet their information needs? We must do better. [We can do better](#).⁵

Research shows that audiences don't just want local news outlets to be watchdogs. They want them to be a "good neighbor" too.

Community-Centered Journalism is not a panacea for these issues, but it can be part of the solution, particularly at a local level. It proposes taking a different approach to journalistic practice, rooting it in demonstrable community needs and delivering news and information in formats that prioritize impact for communities over more conventional newsroom practices, metrics and routines.

Community-Centered Journalism thus takes a bottom-up approach, with beats, stories and products ascertained as a result of deep listening and engagement. This work is often done with communities that don't consume your product and who may have been overlooked, [stereotyped](#)⁶ or underserved by the mainstream media. It's time to address these historic imbalances.

[Research shows](#)⁷ that audiences don't just want local news outlets to be watchdogs. They want them to be a "good neighbor" too. This principle

1 <https://www.semafor.com/article/02/15/2023/americans-trust-in-news-media-hits-record-low-gallup-survey-finds>

2 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-avoidance-resistance-and-related-audience-practices-definitions-predictors-and-consequences>

3 See: <https://www.axios.com/2023/01/24/media-layoffs-2023-vox-nbc-wapo> and <https://groundreport.in/how-many-employees-media-channels-laid-off-in-the-year-2023/>

4 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/25/enduring-whiteness-of-american-journalism> and <https://hb-compass.medium.com/talking-about-journalisms-class-problem-c962659cee37>

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

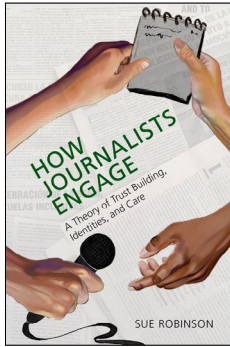
6 <https://journalistsresource.org/economics/covering-poverty-avoid-get-right/>

7 <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1081180X05283795>

can be reflected in both the [types of stories](#)⁸ that are covered and how they are produced. As Andrea Wenzel, a leading scholar [in this space](#)⁹ told us, this is about “journalism produced with - and for - communities.” Put another way, this is “journalism for communities, not just about them.”

One way to help deliver on these promises involves journalists ceding elements of their traditional gatekeeping, agenda-setting role. Jennifer Brandel and Mónica Guzmán have [suggested](#)¹⁰ this means “what we cover will be shaped directly by our communities.” Editorial meetings “won’t start with our ideas,” they add, “we’ll start with the information gaps the public demonstrates they have, and focus our efforts squarely on filling those gaps.”

This fresh approach needs to be complemented with a suite of [new skills](#)¹¹ including those related to [listening](#),¹² facilitation, partnership working, building trust and [measuring](#)



[impact](#).¹³ In her new book, [How journalists engage: a theory of trust building, identities, & care](#), Dr. Susan Robinson argues that embracing these types of values and practices represents a significant shift in the fundamental principles that have historically underpinned journalistic work over much of the past century. As Jonathan Kealing, Chief Network Officer at the [Institute for Nonprofit News](#) (INN), told us, “You’re not approaching journalism or your community as sort of an anthropological exploration.” “You’re approaching it as someone who is of the community and trying to do this journalism for that community.”

Working in concert with communities and trusted local players (such as NGOs, libraries, faith groups and other community influencers) will often mean stepping away from the 24/7 news cycle. A more longitudinal, consultative and collaborative process is required if journalists are to tackle the issues that matter most to specific communities. It’s worth noting that these topics may not be the ones that you would choose to

“What we cover will be shaped directly by our communities... we’ll start with the information gaps the public demonstrates they have, and focus our efforts squarely on filling those gaps.”

— Jennifer Brandel
and Mónica Guzmán

8 <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2023/high-school-sports-coverage-can-save-democracy/>

9 <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=p085222>

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

11 <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/how-journalists-engage-9780197667118?cc=pt&lang=en&>

12 <https://listenerspodcast.uoregon.edu/about/>

13 <https://agorajournalism.center/research/building-engagement-supporting-the-practice-of-relational-journalism/>

cover, but a more service-oriented model of journalism actively embraces this power-sharing reality.

Community-Centered Journalism is an approach that won't work for every beat or story, but it's a model that can allow outlets to go deeper on stories that communities have told us matter to them—and that can have a measurable impact on the longer-term sustainability of newsrooms.¹⁴ As [Emily Goligoski](#) the former research director for the Membership Puzzle Project [found through her own work](#),¹⁵ “Over and over, loyalists to publications including De Correspondent and The Texas Tribune say they seek out organizations that are [inclusive, participatory, transparent and human](#).” Incorporating these principles

into Community-Centered Journalism requires journalists and newsrooms to be more visible, embracing opportunities for in-person engagement and consciously [diversifying the range of people they interview](#).¹⁶

Audiences want to see stories that demonstrate “caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups in the community, understanding the local community, and offering solutions to community problems.”

— Don Heider,
Maxwell McCombs
and Paula Poindexter

We've known for some time that this more inclusive and holistic approach is one that communities want journalism to embrace. A 2006 study by journalism professors Don Heider, Maxwell McCombs and Paula Poindexter highlighted that alongside traditional investigative and watchdog reporting, audiences want to see stories that [demonstrate](#)¹⁷ “caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups in the community, understanding the local community, and offering solutions to community problems.” As we outline in this report, both the processes journalists use, as well as the content they produce, are integral to fulfilling these aspirations.

We believe that Community-Centered Journalism in both method and approach can help address many of the biggest philosophical and structural challenges facing journalism today. It can contribute to making journalism more inclusive, equitable, impactful and relevant. And it can do so in a way that still enables journalism to do what it has always sought to do: [acting as a check on those in power](#)¹⁸ and creating an

14 <https://academic.oup.com/joc/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/joc/jqad018/7226248>

15 <https://gijn.org/more-than-eyeballs-how-journalism-can-benefit-from-audience-engagement/>

16 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/11/whites-more-likely-than-nonwhites-to-have-spoken-to-a-local-journalist/>

17 <https://casestudies496d.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/heider1.pdf>

18 <https://www.poynter.org/news/tiny-family-run-newspaper-wins-pulitzer-prize-taking-big-business>

informed citizenry¹⁹ while at the same time also more actively fostering a sense of community²⁰ and building communities²¹

As Candice Fortman, the Executive Director of Outlier Media reminded us, “the future of journalism is now.” We hope that this report - the first of a three part series on this topic - will be a valuable resource for those working to embrace this future, and the role that the emerging practice of Community-Centered Journalism can play within it.

Damian Radcliffe
Oregon, September 2023

19 http://www.oregonlive.com/environment/index.ssf/page/draining_oregon_day_1.html

20 <https://www.amazon.com/Local-Journalism-Decline-Newspapers-Digital/dp/1784533211>

21 <https://niemanreports.org/articles/journalism-must-be-an-act-of-community-building/>

What is Community-Centered Journalism? And why does it matter?

Traditionally journalism has been a top-down business. Journalists, usually white college-educated men, determined what constituted “the news” and reported on it. This agenda-setting role meant that journalists often acted as the gatekeepers to the stories and narratives that were told at a national, regional and local level.

Communities of color and less affluent communities – have not always been well served by traditional models of journalism.

To an extent, that remains the case. However, that dynamic has finally begun to shift, along with a recognition that it needs to change.

Underpinning this shift is a growing, overdue, recognition that some – not least communities of color and less affluent communities – have not always been well served by traditional models of journalism. At the same time, there is also a growing sense that if journalism is to be more inclusive, valuable and impactful – especially in an era of misinformation and high levels of mistrust in the media - then it needs to be produced differently.

Community-Centered Journalism can play a role in this reinvention and reinvigoration. In doing so, the ideas and principles that it embodies can also help to tackle some of these longstanding structural issues that have plagued journalism for too long.

What is Community-Centered Journalism?

In contrast to the top-down approach newsrooms have traditionally deployed, Community-Centered Journalism offers a more people-centered approach focused on meeting the demonstrable needs and priorities of communities.

Instead of newsrooms assuming they know what information people need, they gather this knowledge through a comprehensive process incorporating deep listening and collaboration, as well as ongoing engagement and feedback. [Andrea Wenzel](#) of Temple University, a

[leading proponent](#)²² of Community-Centered Journalism, describes²³ this as “journalism produced with and for communities.”

Through these efforts, journalists seek to actively build trust and credibility by producing news and information that is relevant and beneficial to the daily lives of the communities they are working with.

Although the methods used to deliver these goals may be different, this activity is in line with what the American Press Institute [notes](#)²⁴ is a core purpose of journalism: “To provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments.”

Establishing and meeting community information needs takes time. But an inclusive process is fundamental to understanding the stories and issues that matter to communities, and in determining how to best tackle them. That might include building relationships with communities and local partners (such as non-profits, government agencies, businesses and libraries). It also means meeting people where they are (e.g., language, delivery format, etc.) to maximize impact.

In developing this paper, we have built on the earlier work and thinking of scholars and practitioners such as [Andrea Wenzel](#) (Temple University), [Sue Robinson](#) (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and [Andrew DeVigal](#) (University of Oregon and the Agora Journalism Center). [Regina Lawrence](#) helpfully synthesized this work into a succinct framework for thinking about Community-Centered Journalism and its core components. Initiatives that fall into this area are focused on:

1. Centering Community Information Needs
2. Listening & Facilitating Dialogue to Improve Understanding & Empathy
3. Building Relationships for Trust & Equity
4. Adopting a “Belonging & Service” Mindset
5. Creating Journalism that is Collaborative & Reciprocal, not Extractive

If journalism is to be more inclusive, valuable and impactful - especially in an era of misinformation and high levels of mistrust in the media - then it needs to be produced differently.

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

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

24 <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/purpose-journalism/>

These approaches can be seen in the best-in-class work highlighted each year by the [Gather Award in Community-Centered Journalism](#).²⁵ In 2022, for example, this included initiatives produced by [Grist](#), [The Trace](#), [Southern California Public Radio \(KPCC\)](#) and [Catchlight/ProPublica](#). The 2023 winners include a collaborative project working with indigenous communities produced by [NBC News](#), [Oregon Public Broadcasting and ProPublica](#), along with a project by [Borderless](#) magazine focussed on how to better understand and serve their Spanish-language audiences.

What does Community-Centered Journalism look like?

Community-centered efforts may identify different issues from the ones that newsrooms traditionally want to cover, or think should be covered, and these stories may not garner huge traffic or awards (although we've highlighted some award-winning examples above and below). However, these stories are likely to be impactful, valuable and useful to the communities covered by them. That's an important measure of their success.

Community-centered journalists are the opposite of parachute journalists. They are invested in a community and its success.

[Sarah Stonbely](#) at the [Center for Co-operative Media](#), describes this approach as the antithesis of “journalist-centered journalism,” due to newsrooms ceding an element of control – be that around the choice of story or the format it is delivered in – to the communities they are working with.

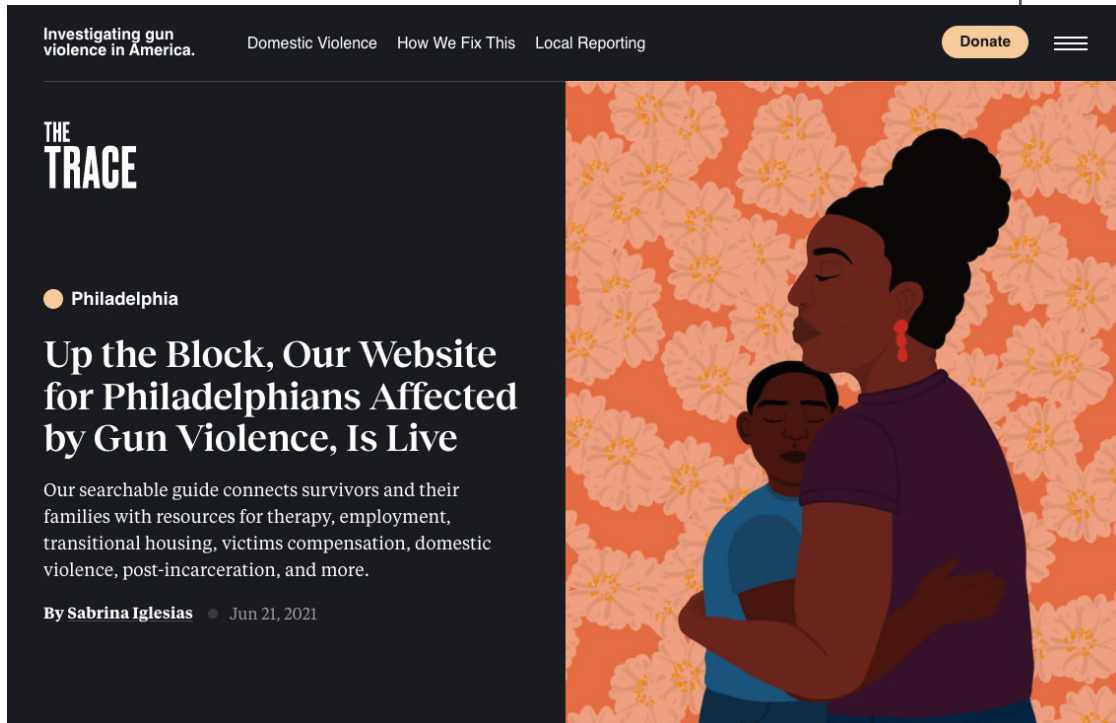
This shift is needed because newsrooms often have “some prescribed notion of how to approach doing Community-Centered Journalism,” says [Antoine Haywood](#) from the University of Pennsylvania. On digging deeper, however, they often find a disconnect with community needs. “What they thought was needed in a community did not align,” he adds.

[Up the Block](#), an information hub for Philadelphians about gun violence, embodies this fresh approach. Produced by [The Trace](#) in English and Spanish, it emerged from conversations with local communities about the resources they needed to navigate gun violence in their communities.

Typically, media coverage of gun violence is focused on investigations, profiles, and policy stories. These types of stories matter, but The

²⁵ <https://awards.journalists.org/awards/engaged-journalism/>

Trace’s discussions with residents revealed additional needs, including resources for survivors of gun violence, as well as materials related to safety and mental health. Having heard this, The Trace team created an information hub – which includes links for organizations at a specific neighborhood level – that directly met these expressed community needs.



Screenshot via *The Trace*

Doing work like this requires investment, and community-centered journalists recognize this. Their work is often conducted outside of the day-to-day news cycle, and it is collaborative rather than *extractive*.²⁶ Community-centered journalists are the opposite of parachute journalists. They don’t just show up when they want something. They are invested in a community and its success. And not just on deadline.

One way of demonstrating this commitment involves incorporating feedback loops throughout the journalistic process. There are a plethora of ways to take the temperature of a community. This includes formal information needs assessments, events, office hours, surveys, and other mechanisms such as SMS outreach. These techniques can be used to comprehend communities by capturing feedback, experiences, and questions in a variety of different ways. In the process, there are multiple means to reduce the risk of a disconnect between what a journalist

26 <https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/why-should-i-tell-you-a-guide-to-less-extractive-reporting/>

thinks the audience wants/needs to know and what the audience actually wants to know.

A continuing dialogue is fundamental to ensuring that having identified community information needs, they are then effectively met.

From inception and development to story production and post-publication, there are opportunities for touchpoints with a community. These matter. A continuing dialogue is fundamental to ensuring that having identified community information needs, they are then effectively met. This is accompanied by ongoing communication about how input from a community is, or is not, being used.

KPCC/LAist's [Child Care, Unfiltered](#) initiative, for example, demonstrated this relational approach by developing daily reporting practices that centered community voices. These contributions were factored into their workflow for a multi-media project focused on childcare during the coronavirus

pandemic.

Their approach included a bi-weekly stakeholder email where they shared their work and asked for input on stories, as well as sending thank-you notes to sources and community members.

As part of the series, they gave cameras to 12 early learning and care providers and asked them to document their lives. The images they took, and which were hosted online and at photography installations across five LA locations, helped to prompt discussions across multiple platforms. Some of the topics that were explored in the series included [who early educators are](#)²⁷ [how they adapted to the pandemic](#)²⁸ and [stayed motivated](#)²⁹ as well as COVID's [impact on children's lives](#)³⁰

"When you provide a space to deeply listen and a platform for people to tell their own stories, it opens a world of possibilities," [says](#)³¹ [Stefanie Ritoper](#), KPCC/LAist's early childhood engagement producer.

"When you provide a space to deeply listen and a platform for people to tell their own stories, it opens a world of possibilities."

— Stefanie Ritoper

27 <https://laist.com/news/education/californias-early-childhood-caregivers-we-are-not-babysitters-we-are-educators>

28 <https://laist.com/news/education/child-care-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-nobody-taught-us>

29 <https://laist.com/news/education/were-human-too-how-people-caring-for-socals-youngest-kids-care-for-themselves>

30 <https://laist.com/news/education/early-childhood-educators-are-a-critical-source-of-stability-in-kids-lives>

31 <https://medium.com/engagement-at-laist/engagement-in-focus-5-takeaways-from-seeing-the-world-through-child-care-providers-eyes-5b76c2cae4f2>

KPCC/LAist

I don't have time for that ...



Use photos (or art!) to spark conversation

It doesn't have to be a project that lasts a year. It can also be short interventions like people sending in their photos around a particular topic for a one-off piece or incorporating a drawing activity in an event or listening session.



Create opportunities for people to tell their own stories

There are lots of ways to do this. Some ideas: an Instagram takeover, opinion pieces, a series of personal essays.



Convene meetings with decision makers.

Convening people is a journalism superpower! It is possible to create opportunities to have people share their stories directly with decision makers.



Break down barriers.

Find ways to go outside of your organization's typical networks, set up conversations without agendas to get to know more about people, be persistent with changing policies that make it hard for people to participate.

Image [via](#)³² Stefanie Ritoper showing how KPCC/LAist put Community-Centered Journalism into practice.

How is this a different form of journalism?

Community-Centered Journalism can often be differentiated from more conventional forms of journalism by a mixture of process, tone and end goals.

At its heart, Community-Centered Journalism recognizes that journalism is not just a product but an approach with a strong emphasis on dialogue, feedback and ongoing interaction. As [Eve Pearlman](#) at [Spaceship Media](#) explains, Community-Centered Journalism "starts by listening" and "emerges from community information needs."

Through this model, journalists actively seek to build trust and credibility by listening to community concerns, directly addressing their known questions, and providing accurate and reliable information that is useful and actionable. As such, Community-Centered Journalism places a value on listening, visibility, co-design and accountability.

32 <https://twitter.com/sritoper/status/1574817491305451520/photo/1>

Producing this type of work often goes beyond traditional reporting skills. That's a theme that [Sue Robinson](#) at UW-Madison has explored in her [new book](#)³³, *How Journalists Engage: A Theory of Trust Building, Identities, and Care*. In it, Robinson outlines how journalists need to move beyond their traditional watchdog and storytelling functions to embrace roles such as *Relationship Builder*, *Community Collaborator*, *Community Conversation Facilitator*, and *Professional Network Builder*.

This move requires “eight new or enhanced skillsets to learn: transparency, media literacy, community offline work, solutions-based journalism, power dynamic appreciation, collaborative production, mediation, and reciprocity and feedback loops,” she advocates.

Journalists actively seek to build trust and credibility by listening to community concerns, directly addressing their known questions, and providing accurate and reliable information that is useful and actionable.

Is this approach to journalism really that different? For some newsrooms, it will be, both in terms of the daily work performed and journalistic philosophy. For others, the transition will be less extreme.

Nevertheless, a community-centered model places less emphasis on tools and behaviors that are ingrained in many newsrooms. Online analytics, for example, provide considerable data about your audience, but that data is very different from the kind derived from this five-page [survey template](#)³⁴ created by [The Listening Post Collective](#), which helps identify where community members are getting their news, what news sources they trust, and what stories are going uncovered.

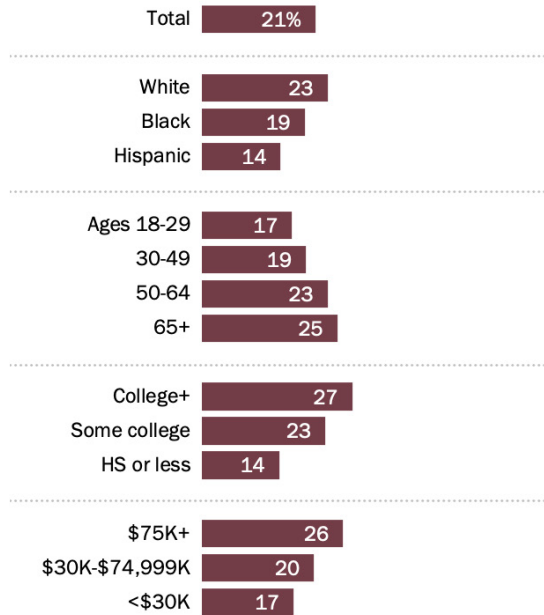
Similarly, social media has provided great opportunities for engagement and for journalists to break their own fourth wall by moving beyond the by-line. However, moving away from your DMs and the comments section to embrace face-to-face engagement unlocks a different dynamic with your audience.

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

34 http://s3.amazonaws.com/lpcollective/tools/pdfs/000/000/005/original/LP_Resources_InformationNeedsAssessment-Survey.pdf?1497639548

Demographic differences in who has ever spoken with a local journalist

% of U.S. adults who have ever spoken with or been interviewed by a local journalist



Note: Whites and blacks include those who report being only one race and are non-Hispanic.
Source: Survey conducted Oct. 15-Nov. 8, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Image [via](#) the Pew Research Center

That matters when [only two-in-ten Americans](#)³⁵ (21%) have ever spoken with or been interviewed by a local journalist. (National figures will be lower still.) That likelihood drops further for people of color, and for people who are younger, less affluent and those who don't have a college education. Community-centered journalists are committed to addressing this by broadening who gets to speak and what they speak about.

Making this shift typically means stepping away from the production “[hamster wheel](#)”³⁶ and the daily news cycle. That's essential for the production of Community-Centered Journalism, which may take longer to develop and gestate.

35 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/05/10/its-more-common-for-white-older-more-educated-americans-to-have-spoken-with-local-journalists/>

36 https://archives.cjr.org/cover_story/the_hamster_wheel.php

It's also a counterpoint to "air-conditioned journalism." Too many stories are produced from the office with journalists often failing to set foot outside of the newsroom. Furthermore, traditional reporting too often relies on a limited handful of sources, corresponding via email and seldom picking up the phone. Yet being visible in a community matters in terms of understanding the nuances of stories and building relationships.

That principle of visibility and relationship building applies not just to individual community members, but also local organizations. A hallmark of many Community-Centered Journalism efforts is the way that they often work in partnership with a range of different community groups and associations. That can include government agencies, as well as grassroots organizations. These partnerships can be a conduit into communities as well as vital delivery partners.

This shift typically means stepping away from the production "hamster wheel" and the daily news cycle. That's essential for the production of Community-Centered Journalism.

"We already know that community-centered journalism works and is worth it. What's often missing is a culture shift and a person or a team that is in charge with driving the change."

— Kim Bode

It takes "time to invest in relationships of trust with other trusted institutions," [Madeleine Bair](#) at [El Tímpano](#) advises. However, these partnerships can help with learning, information gathering, distribution and (although not a primary motive for this behavior) revenue strategies.

Aside from a longer production cycle, greater in-person engagement and the skills necessary to identify – and disseminate – content that meets community information needs, delivering this work may also require some mental agility. "A change of attitude is most important to get the ball rolling," [suggests](#)³⁷ [Kim Bode](#), an audience and news product strategist. "We already know that community-centered journalism works and is worth it," she told the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in 2019. "We have a growing variety of tools and processes that don't cost very much or nothing at all. What's often missing is a culture shift and a person or a team that is in charge with driving the change."

As Bode explains, some newsrooms have already embraced communi-

37 <https://wan-ifra.org/2019/01/engaged-journalism-why-newsrooms-should-put-the-needs-of-their-communities-first/>

ty-centered journalism, gauging the success of their work against their own predefined benchmarks. Typically, these blend a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. As noted in a [previous Agora report](#),³⁸ more newsrooms need to be thinking about and developing these types of fresh metrics. After all, measuring the success of Community-Centered Journalism goes beyond clicks or generating subscriptions to consider the impact of journalistic work on communities.

Because of this, Eve Pearlman at Spaceship Media emphasizes that when developing community-centered efforts, it is essential to always ask questions like: "Who am I doing this for? Why? What good does this serve? How can I help?"

Adding to this, [Peggy Holman](#) at [Journalism That Matters](#) calls for Community-Centered Journalism to be constructive as well as reciprocal. "If all it does is focus on problems, it just reminds people of being helpless. When it speaks to aspirations, dreams, possibilities, it draws people in to create together," she told us.

This focus on helping and being constructive may make some newsrooms uncomfortable. Yet, if we are to equip communities with the skills and knowledge they need to flourish – which is the key to the future sustainability in journalism – we may have to do some things differently.



"Any future where journalism thrives and best serves the public depends on fostering engaged, organized and powerful communities," argues [Free Press](#) in their recent [Building Community Power Guide](#).³⁹

Moreover—and this is a challenging point to acknowledge—not every community member will become a consumer of your product. In fact, many of them never will be. And that's okay. Again, that might seem alien to many newsrooms where there is such a strong emphasis on attracting and retaining audiences, especially paying consumers. But Community-Centered Journalism isn't transactional, and arguably journalism writ large shouldn't be either.

"If all it [journalism] does is focus on problems, it just reminds people of being helpless. When it speaks to aspirations, dreams, possibilities, it draws people in to create together."

— Peggy Holman

38 <https://agorajournalism.center/research/building-engagement-supporting-the-practice-of-relational-journalism/>

39 <https://www.freepress.net/building-community-power-newsrooms-guide-equitable-engagement>

It's an argument my colleague Andrew DeVigal has been [making for some time](#).⁴⁰ As he noted back in late-2015, "If journalism didn't exist today, it wouldn't be created in the top-down distributed model it has used in the past. Journalism must adapt to this new interconnected reality if it is to be relevant and trustworthy to the public." Key to this, he advocated - in an argument that resonates even more today - is the fact that "journalism is inextricably linked to the health of our democracy." "We need to collaborate with and learn from each other and to hone our craft to do better engagement and better journalism," he adds.

Although it is different from the mindset of many traditional newsrooms, this community-first model is not without precedent. For example, [Impact Architects](#) has [highlighted](#)⁴¹ how much of ProPublica's work personifies this approach. Many of the communities that get involved in ProPublica's award-winning crowdsourced investigative work "aren't necessarily ProPublica's audience (or target audience)." Yet, they still take care to engage with these communities in a manner that generates deep relationships and trust. It's because of this that they are able to work with people who will often share highly personal, confidential and sensitive information with them.

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Reinforcing a central tenet of Community-Centered Journalism, Impact Architects also note that [ProPublica](#) "is also consistent in reporting back to its audience how it put the information to use and what came of it." Put another way, the best Community-Centered Journalism is part of a genuine two-way relationship between news producers and communities.

"By listening and fostering listening among the public, deeper relationships [can] bolster understanding, connection, and trust, [meaning that] journalism can move beyond amplifying the views of top-down gatekeepers or highlighting battles between sides," [contends](#)⁴² Peggy Holman, outlining why at its heart Community-Centered Journalism is different from much of what has gone before.

40 <https://mediashift.org/2015/11/engagement-is-relational-not-transactional/>

41 <https://search.issuelab.org/resource/engaged-journalism-practices-for-building-trust-generating-revenue-and-fostering-civic-engagement.html>

42 <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-can-we-emerge-from-the-pandemic-with-the-journalism-we-need/>

Why does Community-Centered Journalism matter?

Journalism faces a number of major structural and existential challenges. These include low levels of trust in the news media, growing news avoidance and an uncertain financial model—particularly for local newsrooms.

Alongside these challenges, there’s a growing realization that journalism needs to be more diverse: not just in terms of who tells stories, but also the stories they tell and the voices, experiences and perspectives that are featured within them.

"Readers are no longer audiences, but partners in the work."

— Lauren Harris

As CJR’s [Lauren Harris](#) has [observed](#),⁴³ “The exacerbation of the local news crisis, propelled by the pandemic, demands new financial models, but it also underlines the need for better media structures—in which readers are no longer audiences, but partners in the work.”

Community-Centered Journalism is not a panacea, but it may help to address some of these challenges. It can play a role in diversifying news coverage (including the stories that are told and the voices and experiences featured within them), encouraging the media to go deeper on topics and with communities they have often overlooked, as well as encouraging journalists to be more visible in the communities they are covering and working with.

The need to tackle declining public engagement with and trust in the news is [well-documented](#),⁴⁴ with new data continually showing why a fresh approach is required. As Wilner et al [observe](#),⁴⁵ “media trust is at near-record lows, arguably lowering news consumption, threatening the viability of journalism, and increasing citizen polarization.”

A direct consequence of this crisis is an information ecosystem rife with misinformation and an increasingly polarized,

"A direct consequence of this crisis is an information ecosystem rife with misinformation and an increasingly polarized, fractured, society."

43 https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/community-engaged-journalism-is-both-an-end-and-a-means-to-survival.php

44 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-news-project>

45 Wilner, T., Wallace, R., Lacasa-Mas, I., & Goldstein, E. (2022). The tragedy of errors: Political ideology, perceived journalistic quality, and media trust. *Journalism Practice*, 16(8), 1673-1694.

fractured, society. To counter these problems, we need fresh models of journalism, as the old ones are not working.

Most Americans believe the news media put their business needs ahead of serving the public.

A recent⁴⁶ Gallup and Knight Foundation survey⁴⁷ of 5,600 Americans revealed that “Americans are not solely skeptical of news today — they feel distrust on an emotional level, believing news organizations intend to mislead them and are indifferent to the social and political impact of their reporting.” This followed a study⁴⁸ from late-2022 which highlighted that most Americans believe the news media put their business needs ahead of serving the public.



Image via Knight Foundation

These findings reinforce conclusions from other studies including the 2022 Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute, which found⁴⁹ that only 26% of American news consumers trust the news, the lowest number of the 46 markets surveyed. In fact, less than half (41%) say they trust the news they themselves use.

The same study also identified that 42% of news consumers in the US actively avoid the news at times, due to factors such as the repetitiveness of the news agenda, feeling “worn out” by the news and its impact on their mood, as well as a sense that they cannot make use of the

46 <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2023-part-2/>

47 <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/American-Views-2022-Pt-2-Trust-Media-and-Democracy.pdf>

48 <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/news-in-america-public-good-or-private-enterprise/>

49 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/united-states>

information provided.

Moreover, as Madeleine Bair reminds us, “the business model of journalism has not traditionally worked for immigrant communities and for many other communities of color and low-income communities.” These are constituencies who as the [Democracy Fund comments](#),⁵⁰ “have factored far too little into what is covered, how it’s covered, and from whose perspective.”

It’s not surprising that so few people pay for journalism when levels of trust and relevance in journalism are so low. For the sake of our society, and the journalism industry, we must address these issues of trust and inequity, and Community-Centered Journalism offers a potential means to help do that. We cannot continue as we are. We need to change the paradigm.

"The business model of journalism has not traditionally worked for immigrant communities and for many other communities of color and low-income communities."

— Madeleine Bair

Why is Community-Centered Journalism part of the future of journalism?

Journalism has never stood still. Driven by changes in audience habits and preferences, technology and business needs, journalistic practice – like the journalism industry itself – is perpetually in a state of flux.

Traditionally, these evolving supply and demand dynamics were underpinned by [core values](#)⁵¹ about the role and purpose of journalism. Yet, many of these principles – such as objectivity - are now [being challenged](#),⁵² as newsrooms [grapple](#)⁵³ with historically low levels of trust, and recognition of the [harm and inequities](#)⁵⁴ that have been a by-product of traditional forms of journalism. Tackling these issues head-on is important for the health of our communities, democracy and the future of journalism.

50 <https://democracyfund.org/what-we-do/public-square/equitable-journalism/>

51 <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/>

52 <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/objectivity-isnt-a-magic-wand.php>

53 <https://www.poynter.org/tech-tools/2018/lessons-learned-seven-ways-news-outlets-can-rebuild-trust-and-sustainability/> Radcliffe, D. Lessons Learned: Seven Ways News Outlets Can Rebuild Trust and Sustainability.

54 <https://mediareparations.org/essay/>

To do this, we will not shift the needle by continuing to operate the way we always have. Implementing Community-Centered Journalism may mean contending with a number of potential barriers, as well as new ways of doing things. Yet, when effectively put into practice, Community-Centered Journalism can have a number of clear benefits.

Some potential by-products that might be unlocked by this model include helping to rebuild trust in journalism, tackling issues of news avoidance, boosting news and media literacy, as well as ensuring that our media and information landscape is more equitable and accessible.

This includes the need to rebuild trust in journalism and for journalism to be more equitable regarding the communities it serves and how it serves them.

More widely, Community-Centered Journalism can contribute to the well-being of communities by informing them about important issues, empowering them to act, and holding those in power accountable. It can also help to build a sense of civic engagement and community pride, as residents see themselves and their concerns reflected in the news and information they receive.

This matters, because for too long – and for too many people – journalism has been viewed as untrustworthy, biased, and divisive, produced for an elite and containing coverage that doesn't accurately reflect many Americans' own lives and concerns.

That's a point of view that some will take issue with. Yet, as The New York Times' [James G. Robinson reminds us](#):⁵⁵ "A central irony of the newsroom is that while many journalists' decisions are made with readers in mind, the audiences for their work often remain unfocused, imagined abstractions, built on long-held assumptions, newsroom folklore, and imperfect inference."

Community-Centered Journalism posits that it doesn't have to be this way.

With its emphasis on evidencing community information needs, Community-Centered Journalism takes a different, more empirical and less

55 https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/how-journalists-imagine-their-readers.php

intuitive or journalistic-centric/journalist-led, approach.

In turn, this may help to build stronger relationships and foster greater understanding between journalists and the communities they cover (which may not overlap perfectly with their audience). It also allows for a more inclusive and representative approach to reporting that reflects the diversity of voices and perspectives within a community.

As we have outlined in this paper, this approach can help to address a number of core strategic issues facing the journalism industry. This includes the need to rebuild trust in journalism and for journalism to be more equitable regarding the communities it serves and how it serves them. Many of the core principles that underpin Community-Centered Journalism are ideals that newsrooms will already subscribe to. However, the methods that lie at its heart may require changes in the mentality, skills and approach that some journalists bring to their work.

Recognizing this, in our next two reports in this series, we will showcase how the ideals and principles of Community-Centered Journalism can produce impactful journalism and storytelling, as well as examine how this journalistic practice can grow. Building on the rationale for Community-Centered Journalism, and the philosophy behind it, that we have outlined here, these forthcoming papers will demonstrate how to turn ideals into practice, as well as the opportunities and challenges that need to be overcome.

“What's so radical and promising about Community-Centered Journalism is that it generates power and possibility,” explains [Jennifer Brandel](#), the co-founder and CEO of [Hearken](#). “Community-Centered Journalism inherently opens up the democratic imagination, enables more people to be involved and allows for not just repeating reality but creating a new one,” she adds.

By focusing on the demonstrable needs and interests of a community, Community-Centered Journalism can help to deliver impact across a number of indices (such as civic, storytelling and information-based benefits), and can also [benefit the economic sustainability](#)⁵⁶ of newsrooms. The future of journalism cannot — and will not — look like the

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56 <https://academic.oup.com/joc/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/joc/jqad018/7226248>

past. It requires a recalibration of approach if we are to rebuild trust and create a more equitable future. Community-Centered Journalism can play an integral role in that new and revitalized information landscape.

**The future of journalism cannot –
and will not – look like the past.**

To help illustrate what this might look like, in our next report we will outline ten examples of Community-Centered Journalism in practice. Taking the principles embodied in this paper, they will demonstrate how the philosophy of Community-Centered Journalism can be turned into compelling and impactful content. This will be followed by the third, and final, part of this study which will examine how we can grow - and successfully embed - Community-Centered Journalism in newsrooms and Journalism Schools around the world.

10 steps to practicing Community-Centered Journalism

If you're interested in implementing a community-centered approach to your work, this process can help guide you through the main components.

- 1. Listen to the community:** Start by listening to the concerns and perspectives of the local community. Attend community meetings, talk to local leaders and residents, and get a sense of the issues that matter to them.
- 2. Identify information needs:** Undertake more formal exercises, such as an information ecosystem assessment, to capture the needs and interests of a local community.
- 3. Understand information flows:** Ascertain how news and information are shared and the community assets (people/organizations) that are essential to how news and information travel in your community. These resources should become your allies and partners.
- 4. Build genuine relationships:** Avoid being extractive by taking the time to meet people, attend events, and engage with your community. Work hard to create trust and credibility with the community.
- 5. Collaborate:** Involve the community in the reporting process by asking for their input, feedback and ideas – not just about story topics, but about how your stories will be told and shared. Harness this input to produce relevant news and information that is useful to their lives.
- 6. Be inclusive:** Reflect the diversity of voices and perspectives within a community in your reporting. Actively seek out underrepresented voices and experiences to make sure that the stories you tell are inclusive and representative.
- 7. Be constructive and solutions-oriented:** Go beyond traditional journalistic tropes and narratives that emphasize conflict and focus only on problems. While maintaining journalistic rigor, highlight solutions and opportunities for change, as well as people and organizations who are making a difference.
- 8. Use a variety of media:** Community-Centered Journalism can take many forms, including print, digital, audio, video and SMS, as well as events and other real-world activities. Use a range of methods to tell stories and share information in ways that are engaging and accessible.
- 9. Stay connected:** Factor in feedback loops to better serve the community. Be responsive to feedback and incorporate this in your reporting.
- 10. Don't just show up on deadline:** Building trust and understanding community information needs requires an on-going commitment outside of the daily news cycle.

Acknowledgments

This report began as part of a series of email conversations back in the summer of 2021, when the Agora team ([Regina Lawrence](#) and [Andrew DeVigal](#)) developed a draft framework and definition of Community-Centered Journalism, as part of the renewed vision for the [Agora Journalism Center](#).

This was built on in December 2022 and January 2023 with a series of in-depth Zoom interviews - conducted by [Damian Radcliffe](#) - with leading academics and practitioners working in this arena. Early findings from those conversations were [presented](#)⁵⁷ at a conference in February 2023 hosted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

These expert insights will feature more prominently in the remaining reports in this series. In the meantime, we are grateful to everyone whose insights have shaped this paper, including:

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- **Peggy Holman**, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Journalism That Matters
- **Michelle Ferrier**, President, IAWRT-International; Founder, Troll-Busters.com; Executive Director at Media Innovation Collaboratory; Principal Investigator and Project Creator, The Media Deserts Project
- **Candice Fortman**, Executive Director, Outlier Media

57 DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31642.31682

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**Job roles and titles correct at the time when these interviews were conducted.*

Appendix 1: About the Authors

Project Team

Damian Radcliffe authored this report, which was overseen by Regina Lawrence, Research Director for the Agora Journalism Center and the Associate Dean of the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) in Portland with further support and input from Andrew DeVigal the Director of the Agora Journalism Center and Endowed Chair in Journalism Innovation and Civic Engagement.

Bios



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

Damian is also a three-time [Knight News Innovation Fellow](#) at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an [Honorary Research Fellow](#) at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies (JOMEC), and a Life Fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

In Spring and Summer 2023, he was a Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and a Visiting Academic Associate at Green Templeton College, both at the University of Oxford, his alma mater.

With over 25 years of experience in the media industry, Damian has worked in editorial, strategic, research, policy and teaching roles in the USA, Middle East and UK. He continues to be an [active journalist](#), writing regular features for [Digital Content Next](#), the [International Journalists' Network](#) (IJNet), [What's New in Publishing](#), [journalism.co.uk](#) and [other](#)

[outlets](#). His work focuses on digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution - and practice - of journalism.

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

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



Regina Lawrence is a Professor, Associate Dean of SOJC Portland and Research Director of the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon. She is the Editor of *Political Communication*, a leading peer-reviewed international academic journal.

She is an internationally recognized authority on political communication, journalistic norms and routines, gender and politics, and the role of media in public discourse about politics and policy. Her two latest books are [Hillary Clinton's Race for the White House: Gender Politics and the Media on the Campaign Trail](#) and [When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina](#), winner of the Doris A. Graber Outstanding Book Award from the Political Communication section of the American Political Science Association.

From 2011 to 2015, Lawrence directed the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas-Austin. She has served as chair of the political communication section of the American Political Science Association and as a research fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Her first book, [The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality](#), was re-issued by Oxford University Press in 2022, twenty years after it was first published.



Andrew DeVigal holds the endowed chair in journalism innovation and civic engagement and is the director of the [Agora Journalism Center](#), the forum for the future of local news and civic health at the University of Oregon's [School of Journalism & Communication](#).

A constant connector and bridge builder, DeVigal's leadership at the school has led to industry-recognized initiatives such as [Gather](#), a platform to support community-minded journalists, and the [Doers Gathering](#), a toolkit to drive community-driven solutions addressing pressing local issues.

Prior to joining the UofO, DeVigal was the multimedia editor at [The New York Times](#) where he directed the multimedia team and conceived and produced ground-breaking story forms and processes that continue to shape the industry today.

Appendix 2: About the Agora Journalism Center

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

The center was formed in 2014 with the foundational belief that the health of democracy and journalism are inextricably linked. Since then, the center has been a critical champion for the idea that professional journalism must become more participatory and collaborative with the public if journalism is to meaningfully improve communities' information health and earn the public's trust in local news media.

Its renewed vision is to be the forum for the future of local news and civic health in Oregon and beyond.

With that vision in mind, our commitment to engaged journalism has broadened to a focus on community-centered journalism: information and storytelling that centers the voices and experiences of all community members; journalism that intentionally works alongside other civic organizations to improve local civic health; communities rebuilding and strengthening local information sources and storytelling networks to create a new infrastructure of understanding, collaboration, and civic action.

This work is centred on four key activities:

- Building a collaborative, sustained laboratory for improving the local information ecosystem in Portland and Oregon.
- Creating and sharing research, case studies, tool kits and insights to disseminate across the news industry and throughout the nation.
- Pioneering a rigorous, ongoing assessment of the health of information ecosystems in Oregon.
- Developing curriculum focused on how media can innovate to regain relevance and purpose through community-centered journalism.

We believe it has never been more important for journalism to be inclusive of all voices and to be centered in community. As we have always

believed at the [Agora Journalism Center](#), the future of journalism and the future of democracy are intertwined.

You can find out more about Community-Centered Journalism - including case studies, recordings of lightning chats and opportunities to connect with practitioners - via [Gather](#), the platform that supports the community of practice.

Find out more at: <https://agora.uoregon.edu/>