

# FOR THE PUBLIC

*The Role of Engagement in a New Media Landscape*

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## **Abstract**

In order to survive, journalism in the 21st century has to re-imagine its relationship with the public. While trends towards a focus on public engagement are promising, the only way to re-secure journalism's importance in the American political system is to reestablish trust. The only way to reestablish trust is for journalists to partner with the communities they cover, embarking on audience collaboration rather than simply listening to that audience. By illustrating a relationship between engagement and trust by presenting the strategies, experience and rationale of working engagement professionals, we'll be able to establish engagement journalism as one viable strategy for newsrooms of all sizes to pursue.

## **Introduction**

For much of the 21st century, the news media has been staring at a crisis. Historically, the focus of media survival has been limited to the creation of revenue (McDowell 2011), while reconsiderations of the news media's role in our information ecosystem have been rare. But even as a limited number of media fortunes have stabilized in recent years for some of the industry's most successful legacy brands, the overall trends continue to be worrisome: revenue industry-wide continued to fall in 2016 (Barthel 2017), and trust has continued its already steady decline in both national and local news sources. According to Pew Research, only 20 percent of Americans in 2017 trusted national news organizations "a lot," while 25 percent said they trusted their local news organization (Barthel & Mitchell 2017). This is a stark difference from 1979, where Gallup (2018) reported that over 51 percent of the country supported the press "a great deal" or "quite a lot." One longtime assumption by American journalists has been that the quality

of their work would be sufficient for them to build trust with their audience (de Aguiar 2018). And although plenty of journalists and their organizations continue to do important and well-regarded work, the gap in trust between the public and media has persisted — and worsened — for decades (Barthel & Michell 2017). This raises the question of influence — that is, the extent to which a news organization or story can create change in a society.

Beyond revenue, the notion of trust is widely considered to be a critical mechanism linking the public to the media. When the media is trusted to bring relevant information to the public, it becomes an influential actor in American democracy through the powers of agenda setting and framing (Siapera & Papadopoulou 2016). However, the scholarship studying how exactly the nature of trust connects journalists and their audiences is limited (Hanitzsch 2013). We know implicitly that consumer trust is important in any commercial venture, but the assumption that trust necessarily follows good journalism is unfounded. Therefore, while considerations of revenue and operational effectiveness are important to the future of journalism, publishers cannot limit themselves to focusing on those factors. Rather, media companies big and small must be welcomed back into the fold of civic life by presenting a distinct and competitive social value. As noted by Flanagin and Metzger (2007), “without trust and credibility, people will turn away from traditional media and, consequently, seek information from other suppliers.” As a result, this paper focuses on connecting the notion of social engagement with a media organization’s overall success, whether in terms financial success, social success, credibility or potential impact on its audience.

## **I. Journalism as a business**

Journalism operates in a similar fashion as other industries in key ways. Because most American media is for-profit, it relies on consumers to generate revenue, generally through advertising or direct consumer payment, typically in the form of subscription or retail sales. Like other industries, journalism is vulnerable to technological disruption, broad economic downturns, and other external factors.

But journalism diverges from average commercial industry in crucial respects. Few industries could be so upended by the internet as news media, given its once-singular role in the public dissemination of information. For much of modern American history, newspapers and broadcast stations were the only methods available for the spread of information on a massive scale, making them powerful public institutions (Davies 1997). Through agenda setting and media frames, the news plays a vital role in a society's construction of reality (Wilkes & Ricard 2007). The nuanced decision-making that goes into presentation of events — the angle of the story, the people asked to comment, the research included, words used to describe anything — can radically affect how the public perceives an event. Because that perception is integral to our understanding of public life, the news has traditionally had immense influence, making it an inherent instrument of politics. In this era of journalistic weakness, the media is susceptible to attacks on its integrity and credibility, and those attacks in turn threaten the foundation of democracy. Given the inherent political complexity of journalism, coupled with its pseudo-government role as a private, deregulated actor with a publically-oriented mission in democracy, it's possible that "viewing it as any other kind of commodity may not be appropriate" (Siapera & Papadopoulou 2016).

Journalism's role in our society has experienced huge shifts since our country's founding. Prior to the 19th century — dating back to the days of the American Revolution — newsgathering as we know it today was nonexistent. Newspapers were partisan rags, financed by local and national political parties and little more than a means of propaganda. If they contained news, it was likely regurgitated from London papers shipped from across the Atlantic (Downie & Schudson 2009). It wasn't until the 1820s that newspapers began to hire local reporters, and not until the late 19th century that some city papers became “more prosperous, ambitious and powerful,” beginning “to proclaim their political independence” (Downie & Schudson 2009). And it wasn't until the 1920s that newspapers began to exist as a proper political force in the United States — the “Fourth Estate,” as it was known, dedicated to checking the excesses of government and business.

And for a time, the news business was easy: the revenue provided by classified advertising in the days before the internet was so lucrative, it used to be said that owning a newspaper was tantamount to printing money. From the 1920s through the early 1950s, newspapers were not only the country's leading sources of public information — they were effectively the only source until the introduction of robust network television news in the 1960s and '70s. Even then, broadcast news outlets, including radio, tended to regurgitate the material produced by print outlets rather than contribute their own reporting (Pew Research 2010, Davies 1997). The commercial success of newspapers was in large part due to the relationship they had with advertisements (Crichton et al 2011). Because the cost of including advertisements in the production of a print publication did not dramatically add to the cost of production, newspapers had little reason to *not* include them (“Reinventing the newspaper” 2011). Given the fact that newspapers had become a critical medium of information dispersal by the early 20th century,

their pages offered immense value to advertisers as a centralized way to connect with potential customers.

Until the 1950s, newspapers across the country benefited from a model that was “extremely profitable when [they] were the only medium to receive news, but extremely vulnerable in the face of competition” (Crichton et al 2011). Prior to any meaningful competition (save what nearby papers could create between themselves), journalism enjoyed a monopolistic hold over the country’s flow of information. The relatively easy nature of business, coupled with the cultural decision to become public-oriented as a “watchdog” in American politics, created the impression that journalism was “somehow sacrosanct and not a true business venture”(McDowell 2011). In truth, many journalism outlets across the country became public-oriented political institutions precisely because business was so good: “when newspapers were cash cows, their owners could afford to pursue public-service journalism” (Starr 2009).

The reality, however, was that journalism was equal parts institution and business; it was as essential to American democratic society as it was beholden to the commercial support of the public. The latter of those two truths became clear during the Great Recession in 2008, as newspaper revenues already in decline began to fall precipitously, weakening the industry at the same time that the internet disrupted the news business irrevocably (Barthel 2017). But 2008 was hardly the first time that legacy journalism outlets were challenged by shifting fortunes and technological change. The threat of TV news began to loom in earnest starting in the 1950s: the number of television news stations operating in the US more than quintupled between 1952 and 1955, and by 1957, 78 percent of American homes owned a television (Davies 1997). Advertisers followed audiences: in the span of little over a decade between 1949 and 1962, televised ad revenue grew from less than \$58 million to well over \$1.7 billion (Davies 1997). In

the same time, the yearly circulation of U.S. newspapers declined for the first time in decades between 1952 and 1958 (Davies 1997).

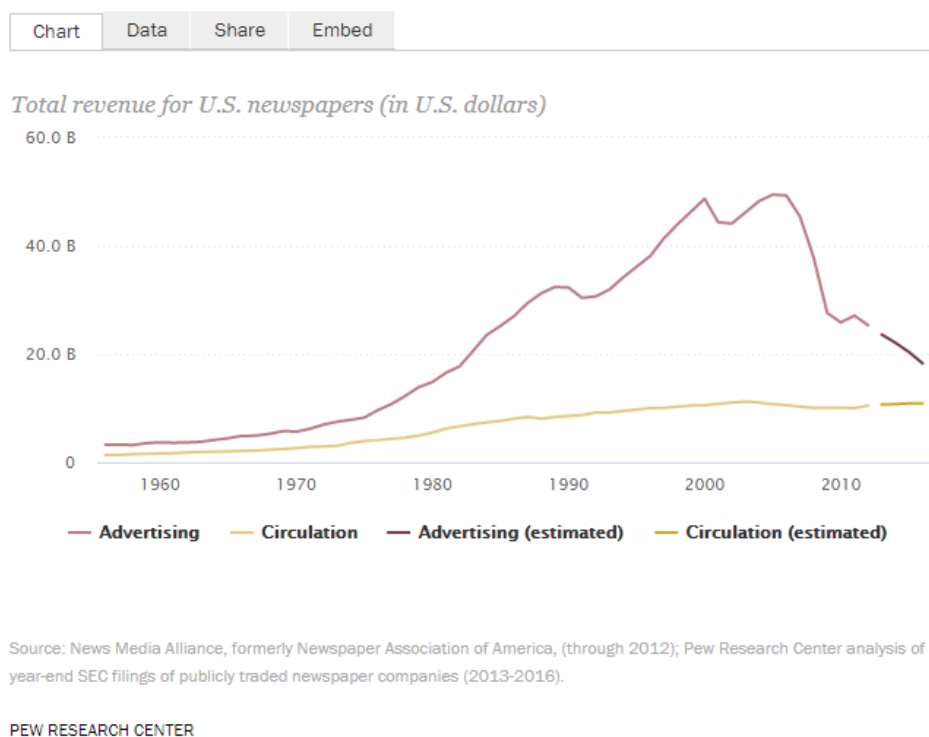
What makes the rise of television integral to our understanding of the news business today — and by extension, its current state of crisis and disruption — is the role played by a technological revolution. The introduction of an infrastructure that could support news in a visual and eventual color format altered and expanded America's conception of what news could be. But the rise of an insurgent technology also shook print journalism's once-monopolistic grasp on the flow of information. The "gatekeepers" of information no longer sat exclusively behind typewriters, but behind cameras and microphones as well.

## **II. Technological revolution**

Outside the realm of journalism, technology almost always plays a direct role in enabling revolutionary change. The Bolshevik revolution was facilitated by telegraphs and railroads, while the printing press allowed Martin Luther's Protestantism to break the control the Catholic Church had on Christianity in the Western world (Mims 2018). This change can be understood as a rupture of information networks. Once technology provides an alternate route to information that circumvents the old gatekeepers, the gatekeepers will find themselves scrambling to reestablish power or fade into irrelevance. At the same time, established powers often have the easiest time adapting to new technologies and business models (Ferguson 2018), and over time the same names have emerged as leading sources of news: the New York Times (founded in 1851) or NBC News (founded in 1926), for instance.

With that framework in mind, the introduction of the internet can also be understood as a modification to our existing information networks. The internet's effect on the news media has been extraordinary in scope and intensity.

### Newspaper industry estimated advertising and circulation revenue

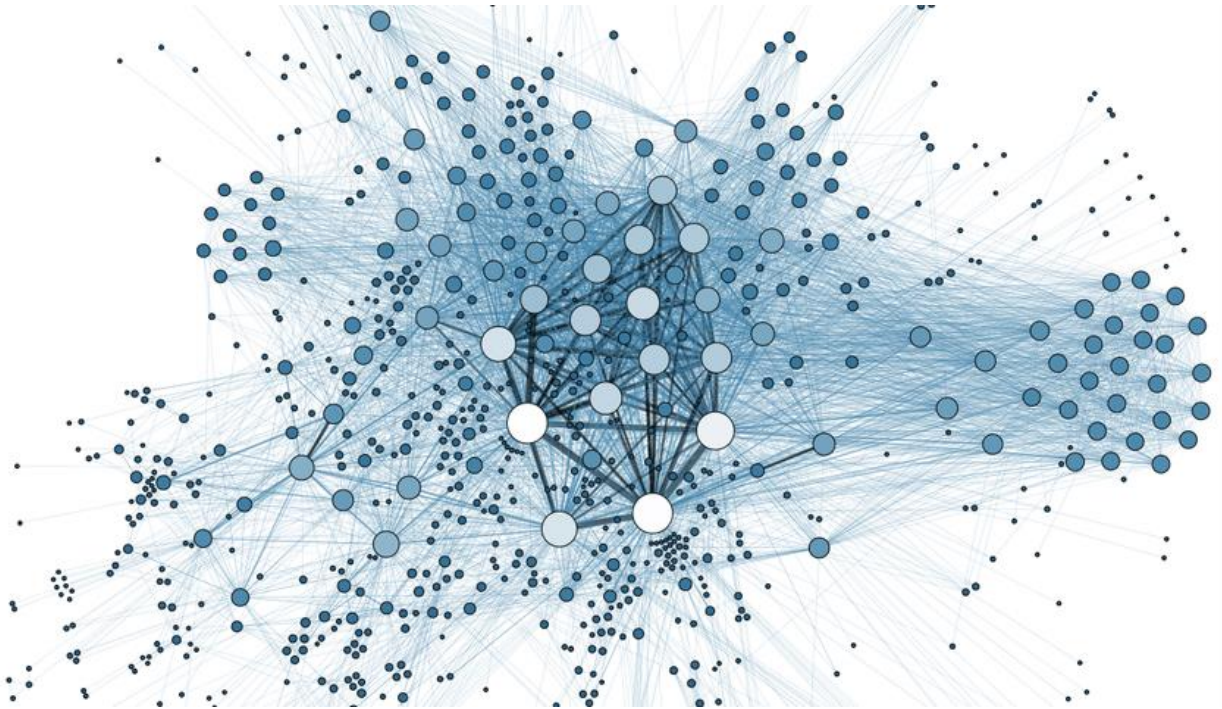


While circulation has generally held steady since the early 2000s, advertising revenue has imploded. The biggest drop occurred between 2006 and 2010, from \$49.2 billion to \$25.28 billion (Barthel 2017). Although this may appear to be indicative of public apathy towards news in general, this immediate drop can also be understood as a consequence of the Great Recession. Studies found that public interest in daily life and news had not decreased in any meaningful way (Couldry et al., 2007).

But over time, the underlying factors behind this change can be best understood in terms of networks. To quote Jay Rosen (2018) of PressThink, this seismic shift had everything to do with a “*shift in power.*” Information, like power, has historically flowed from the top of a



hierarchy. The introduction of Web 2.0 — characterized by the ability of users to publish their own content on the World Wide Web for the first time — put unprecedented power in the hands of anyone with an internet connection. While in the past news originated from a handful of elite sources, including the government (Pew Research 2010), news today can explode from any corner of the internet. When Web 2.0 would take hold in the mid 2000s, the effect on journalism would be “profound” (Pisani 2006).



*A visual representation of information networks in the Internet age — information can be seen radiating heavily from a handful of central nodes, but the information can also travel between sources far outside those normal pathways. Source: Motherboard (VICE)*

And while the ability to create and demand to consume information have never been higher, this flattened, decentralized news ecosystem has proven harder for news outlets to master.

**a. 19<sup>th</sup>-century solutions to 21<sup>st</sup>-century problems**

With a handful of notable exceptions, it has become abundantly clear that digital advertising will not replace print advertising as a viable long-term revenue strategy for most media companies — simply too large of a share has gone to Facebook and Google (Willens 2018). While companies such as The Financial Times and New York Times have increased their digital revenue substantially in the last decade, most newspapers have still needed to cut costs, often in terms of workforce cuts (Willens 2018). Moreover, the journalism business suffers from the flaw of repeatability. Not only is information, the primary commodity of news, infinitely replicable once it has been released into the public sphere (Crichton et al 2011), but simple business or communication strategies are similarly imitable (McDowell 2011). If a particular form of advertising proves to be effective, for example, competitors have and will rush to repeat it until its initial utility becomes worn from overuse.

For journalism, the institutional problems go deeper than financial woe. Rather, the shortcomings in revenue that have persisted since the Great Recession are symptoms of broader encroaching irrelevance, brought by the technological revolution of social media. Ricard (2010) argues that

The biggest problem of media business models today is not that the revenue model is diminishing in effectiveness, but that most media companies are still trying to sell nineteenth and twentieth century products in the twenty-first century. And they are trying to do so without changing the value they provide and the relationships within which they are provided. . . . In order to evolve and prosper media companies must *revisit the foundations of their businesses, ensure they are providing the central value that customers want*, and provide their products/services in a unique or different way from other media firms.

By continuing to offer a product that provides a 19th-century service in a 21st century environment, mainstream media opened itself up to the threat of replacement by individuals who were able to publish their own material on the internet for free in the era of Web 2.0. The media

continues to exude significant control over day-to-day affairs and bigger-picture public narratives — the New York Times’ and New Yorker’s exposes on Harvey Weinstein and their subsequent amplification of the #MeToo moment are evidence enough of that. But for all its successes and continued public service, journalism at all levels has suffered in terms of its impact, or ability to affect change. Across the country, discussions around the measurement of impact and success “have long generated some discomfort and a fair amount of confusion” and, according to a report on “impact” from leading news nonprofit ProPublica, “there is no one reliable measure of journalism’s impact” (Tofel 2015). As a result, the remainder of this paper will be dedicated to articulating potential relationship between impact and engagement, as well as some of the solutions suggested by leading practitioners in the field.

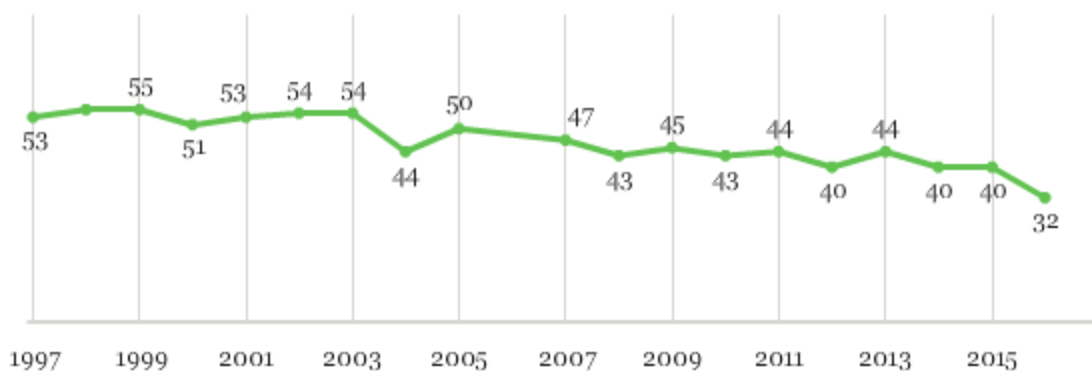
### **III. The Trust Gap**

The decline of public trust in institutions across the country has been well-documented, and the news media has not been spared (Barthel & Mitchell 2017, Swift 2016). Recently, Gallup reported that a meager 32 percent of Americans trusted the news media “a great deal” or “a fair amount” (Swift 2016). In 2017, Pew Research found that only 25 percent of U.S. adults trusted local news companies “a lot” (Barthel, Mitchell 2017).

### *Americans' Trust in the Mass Media*

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

■ % Great deal/Fair amount



GALLUP®

It is difficult to ascribe a single cause to the decline. However, on a broader level, this fall from grace may also be attributable to the news media's relative decline in immediate necessity and, by extension, authority. Because the introduction of the internet caused legacy media companies' monopoly on information to effectively bottom out and allowed a massive influx of other sources to flood the public sphere, the relevance of the news media has come into question (Peters & Broersma 2013).

Professional journalism has always offered the public the promise credible information from trained news gatherers. Zelizer (2017) has argued "journalism's presumed legitimacy depends on its declared ability to provide an indexical and referential presentation of the world at hand." Put more simply, journalism as an institution only works when an audience finds the information it presents about society useful in the public construction of reality. Traditionally, journalism's professionalism has buoyed it through each technological revolution by continuing to provide expertise and guidance even in times of upheaval (de Aguiar 2018). Before the widespread infusion of social media into the public sphere in the early 2000s, trust and revenue

were still relatively high for news organizations, even if it fell short of its peak in 1979 (Gallup 2018). “Blogger” released its first free blogging platform in 2006, and Twitter launched its “micro-blogging” website in the same year: 2006 into 2007 was also, coincidentally or not, the first year on record that newspaper’s advertising and circulation dollars both shrunk (Barthel 2017). But it would be simplistic to suggest a direct or causal relationship between blogging’s rise and journalism’s decline. The financial crisis of 2007-2008 undoubtedly played a role in the workforce cuts that struck newsrooms at the same time, and it’s possible that amateur blogging platforms only filled the gaps media companies were leaving behind. And while “citizen journalism” emerged as a brief, buzzy phenomenon in this period, most of the sites launched between 2005 and 2008 had gone dark or inactive by 2010 (Lindner & Larson 2017).

Regardless, it has become clear that simply providing expertise is no longer an adequate means of gaining trust from an audience. Fact-checking services, for instance, are one of the most literal applications of journalism to the news of the day. They remain a fixture of coverage as a means of dismantling misinformation in a news system. PolitiFact, a Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking operation, has bureaus in 18 states plus Washington, D.C (PolitiFact 2018). However, research has shown the service may not be as successful in disproving falsehoods as many journalists would expect — particularly when audience trust in media is already low. As Brandtzaeg and Følstad (2017) point out: “fact checking in general may be unsuccessful at reducing misperceptions, especially among the people most prone to believe them.”

While some may continue to argue that the professional execution of fact-checking is as important as it has ever been with so much “noise” — defined as poor information, misinformation, lies etc. — on the internet today, the existing literature shows that we cannot take the authority of a journalist’s byline for granted. To some extent, that professionalism is

exactly what distances the average news consumer from the process. The last decade has seen a resurgence of populism in the United States, arguably starting with the conservative “Tea Party” movement and culminating with the election of President Donald Trump. At the core of populism is anti-elitism, and research has shown that a “major link between media trust and political trust is the growing presence of anti-elitism in political discourse” (Hanitzsch et al 2017). In other words, even as the media is ostensibly reporting on and even serving as a check to the political establishment, its reputation can be roped into the government’s by mere association as well as relative distance from the public.

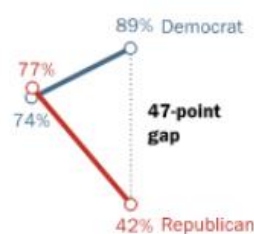
This is also in part a partisan phenomenon, likely stemming a politically polarized environment and a US president fond of lobbing charges of “fake news” towards any news company that reports something he doesn’t approve of. Since the 2016 presidential election, the percentage point gap between Democrats and Republicans who believe that information from

## Parties show more disagreement on attitudes about news media

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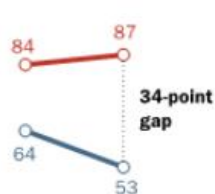
% of U.S. adults who say ...

Media criticism of political leaders keeps them from doing things they shouldn't



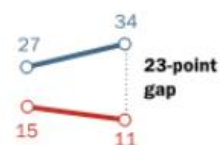
2016 2017

News organizations tend to favor one side



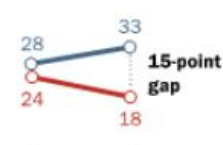
2016 2017

Information from national news organizations is very trustworthy



2016 2017

National news media do very well at keeping them informed



2016 2017

Note: Independents not shown.

Source: Surveys conducted March 13-27, 2017, and Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016.

"Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines"

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national news organizations is “very trustworthy” has expanded from 8 percentage points in 2016 to 23 points in 2017 as Republican trust in the so-called “mainstream media” has plummeted. However, even though Democrats support the news media more than their Republican counterparts, the support is still abysmal: over 53 percent of Democrats believe news organizations “tend to favor one side,” and only 33 percent say the news media is doing well at keeping the public informed (Barthel & Mitchell 2017).

As a result, closing this gap in trust has been the subject of serious inquiry in recent decades. However, the nature and mechanics of trust are difficult to rigorously quantify. While the question of trust often boils down to a yes-or-no answer, the reasons and rationale behind trust on an individual level are highly specific, deeply nuanced and almost impossible to generalize. Some may mistrust the media out of partisan rancor, but other communities may have long cultural histories of being mistreated by media, such as Black communities on the South Side be treated as a so-called “war zone” (Johnson 2018). Peters and Broersma (2013) have gone as far as to suggest that “the troubled nature of the relationship between news media performance and trust in journalism might well have to do with our quite limited knowledge about the nature of trust and what it essentially means to have trust in an institution.” Despite this, two leading solution-oriented philosophies have emerged with the promise of salvaging journalism, often (but not always) intersecting: the ideals of engagement and transparency. The two should be understood as a means and end, separately: authentic and well-integrated engagement is the what newsrooms must strive to achieve, while transparency is one means of achieve it. Subsequently, remainder of this paper will examine those notions in theory and practice.

#### **IV. Engagement: emerging philosophy or catchy buzzword?**

Engagement professionals (Jaffe 2018, Fields 2018, Sabella 2018) have argued that, for many media organizations, commitments made to transparency and engagement have been buzzword-driven lip service. Engagement is much easier said than done, and misunderstandings around the term abound. Neither engagement nor transparency are particularly new ideas. More than a decade ago, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) considered the impact of the burgeoning internet and argued that “the willingness of the journalist to be transparent about what he or she has done is at the heart of establishing that the journalist is concerned with the truth.” And the ability for journalists to use social media in order to “engage” their readers has been studied to mixed review (Hermida 2012). We’ll define “engagement” as a newsroom’s ways of interacting with their readership and the public in a meaningful, substantial or impactful way — “impactful” in this case meaning the extent to which the engagement process can change an audience’s perception of a newsroom, and in turn allow that newsroom’s reporting to impact its broader society more efficiently. The challenge for us is to articulate what exactly engagement is and how it can be achieved.

In traditional journalistic models, reporters who intended to write impartially or critically would have been expected to distance themselves from their subject. Ananny (2014) refers to this as the notion of “press autonomy.” Some news reporters will take the additional step to actively distance themselves from the appearance of choice or opinion, opting out of voting and discussing little of their private lives in the public sphere. However, the fact remains: much of journalism must happen by working with members of the public (Ananny 2014).

As a result, most media outlets have had limited but institutionalized means of incorporating reader feedback outside of work-related interviews since the 20th century. Decades before the introduction of social media, the “letter to the editor” was one of the most visible



manifestations of engagement, where citizens writing to the newspaper — often discussing coverage or making suggestions — would be published alongside other editorial work. Editors would communicate with their readership that they were listening to their concerns or at least amplifying them. There are obvious limitations to this model: editors will likely receive more letters than they can publish, meaning that they are still selectively choosing what information they choose to send to their readership. This imbalance of power left most of the control in the hands of journalists and editors, giving the public little chance to comment on journalism until after it had been published (Ananny 2014).

The 20th-century press also eventually made use of the “ombudsman” — a Swedish word that roughly means “champion of the people against bureaucracy.” As early as the 1960s, many newsrooms had a position dedicated to investigating and cultivating reader-provided tips and stories. Ananny (2014) describes the position broadly as one who “maintains sufficient distance from his own organizations' journalists, editors and owners in order to critique his colleagues, publicly sanction behavior, represent audience concerns and, most broadly, conscientiously reflect journalism's ideals.” By assigning a representative to straddle the line between the journalist and the public, media companies took a conscientious step towards allowing real audience feedback to impact the newsroom. However, this role was necessarily limited: a single role dedicated to representing thousands or millions of readers can only be so effective (Grove 2017).

Which brings us to the present — a radically different media landscape than the one we knew in the middle of the last century. How do the engagement methods of the past pair with the methods of the present? Social media flattened the information ecosystem, allowing just about anyone to say just about anything to audiences of unfathomable size to previous generations. In

theory, media companies would be able to engage with their readership in ways previously unimaginable. The reality has been messier. Social media, for all its size and potential, has foundational problems as a sample population. According to literature compiled by Ananny (2014), engagements on these platforms tend to

“... lack socioeconomic diversity (Hargittai, 2007; Schradie, 2012, 2013); privilege those with pre-existing relationships to news organizations (Weeks & Holbert, 2013); are fleeting and difficult to reconstruct (Lehmann, Castillo, Lalmas, & Zuckerman, 2013); and tend to favor the circulation of crime, public affairs, and lifestyle stories over other types of content (Armstrong & Gao, 2010; Horan, 2012).”

In other words, while achieving incredible numbers of “impressions” may make it feel as though a newsroom has had a wide impact on its readers, these infrastructure-level shortcomings will limit the true give-and-take of engagement on social media. Twitter, for example, has features built-in to shield its most popular users from the huge amount of interactions they may receive, filtering them on the basis of an algorithm. And while it’s true that the way social media platforms prioritize and present information can change rapidly and without warning, there are professional journalists who have been on Twitter for nearly a decade and Facebook for longer. The limitations presented above aren’t the result of naïveté or a lack of expertise with social media — they are built into the nature of massive-scale public interaction.

Realizing this, parts of the literature surrounding trust and engagement in journalism have shifted to the question of everyday relevance in the lives of its consumers. Swart et al (2017) recommends a change in focus: “Rather than consider why people *should* engage in public life and the necessity of ‘good’ journalism in this regard, our principal interest is in *how* news becomes meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile.” This can be boiled down to the idea of “public connection,” or the stake that news consumers perceive they have in the process of reporting (Couldry et al. 2007). This shift in literature is in part a result of the recognition of imbalance

between audience capability and actual impact on the news process. While social media users have an unprecedented ability to create their own content, that potential interaction has traditionally not been institutionalized into media organizations in a meaningful way (Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012; Swart et al., 2016, Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira 2012). But because forms of engagement have become increasingly diverse, the potential to incorporate public interaction into journalism has become the subject of intense interest.

But first, we must establish that this newly rigorous engagement can actually affect the newsroom-public relationship. In order to do that, we have to shift our understanding of engagement from something relatively passive — scrolling through one’s Twitter mentions, reading the comment section, or even responding to reader complaints — to active engagement and collaboration with the audience. Swart et al. (2017) recommend that the strength of engagement be considered by the following matrix: on the basis of inclusiveness, or the measure of how easy it is for individuals to connect with the media process; pathways of engagement, or the various avenues of connection available to news consumers; relevance, or “the way news functions within people’s everyday lives and why connecting through news is embedded in their daily customs”; and constructiveness, or the potential outcomes from the interaction between journalists and their audience.

Research suggests that a more active partnership between media and their audience may do more to foster trust over time. First and foremost, the differences in the consequence of face-to-face interaction and online interaction are substantial. Even in communities with intensely aligned priorities, such as in scientific organizations, successful communication and trust-building is much more difficult through digital mediums than in-person (Murthy et al. 2014). Online work relationships are often perceived as being less close and supportive than in-person

work relationships (Mesch & Talmud, 2006). However, Murthy et al. (2014) has argued there is a demonstrable difference in the trust that could be established in online relationships when supplemented at least once by “non-social media-based communication.” In the course of their study, they discovered that Twitter was able to maintain emotional trust between individuals “outside of face-to-face events by maintaining continued contact *after* an initial face-to-face meeting.”

In other industries, “collaboration” has become a well-documented means of fostering trust between parties (Felipe Luna-Reyes 2013). This has to do with the nature of co-dependence in a work setting — successful collaboration is often only possible via “the continuous process of nurturing,” which in a partnership forms “expectations about the future outcomes of the collaboration” (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). In other words, collaboration fosters relationships over time, which is precisely the kind of connection that proponents of engagement in news media are ostensibly pursuing. However, there are obvious limitations to this comparison of these separate literatures. Most research on the benefits of collaboration comes from studying intra-organizational cooperation, while media and public interaction has traditionally been characterized by loosely organized outside actors interacting with a tighter-knit group of insiders. However, should media organizations take steps to close this gap between their newsrooms and the public, they may find themselves able to reap the same benefits as intra-organizational collaboration.

Consider what some researchers have coined “cooperative journalism.” Rather than settling for media ventures isolated from the public, cooperative ventures may do more to re-establish trust with audiences by facilitating actual collaboration in a variety of ways that will be explored in the following section (labeled “Testimonials”). In Siapera and Papadopoulou’s

(2016) view, cooperative journalism can build relationships with audiences on the “basis of establishing trust and through being part of the society itself rather than a separate class or professional caste looking from above or outside.” This, in turn, allows organizations to be “financially resilient, invest in the community, and offer accountability and trust.” Admittedly, this approach butts up against some of the historic trends in journalism, including the notion that in order for it to be objective, it must be separate from the interests and experiences of the public. In truth, however, “the press exists in no single place, neither does its autonomy” (Ananny 2014).

## **VI. Testimonials**

### *Introduction*

This report culminates with the testimony from six experts working in Chicago media with an occupational focus on audience engagement. Interviews were conducted between February 27, 2018, and March 1, 2018. Four of the interviews were conducted by the author. One panel discussion — hosted by 14 East magazine and featuring three guests — was moderated by Carina Smith, with questions provided by the author, Marissa Nelson and Madeline Happold. The transcripts of all of the interviews and panel discussion can be found in Figures 1-5., presented in the order in which they were conducted.

**Summer Fields** is an engagement consultant for Hearken: a for-profit engagement service that provides its customers — 90+ media companies — with engagement tools and strategy. The most popular of these tools is Hearken’s “Curious” voting system. “Curious” is a reference to Curious City, a radio program hosted by WBEZ launched in 2011 with an engagement model that Hearken grew out of and now allows other companies to emulate.

Simply put, “Curious” stories provide a three-step process to cement audience engagement in a story through Hearken-developed tools: first, users submit questions to a media organization. Second, after sifting through the questions, journalists will present a handful of options back to the public. Last, after the audience has selected a story by vote, a newsroom will pursue that story, occasionally going so far as to bring along the original question-asker to explore the topic together.

**Logan Jaffe** is an engagement reporter for ProPublica Illinois — the first spin-off of the national branch of ProPublica located in New York. ProPublica Illinois is a non-profit that collaborates with news organizations across the state, while Jaffe has billed her own job as “building relationships with communities” while doing everything she can to “power” the journalism ProPublica does.

**Andrea Faye Hart** is the Community Engagement Director of City Bureau — a Chicago-based non-profit initiative for civic journalism best known for its “Public Newsroom” series, where it hosts free weekly workshops for community members and journalists to interact and talk about “Media, Media-adjacent Topics and Civic Issues, Plus Coworking Space for Independent Media-makers” (City Bureau 2018).

**Morgan Johnson** is the co-founder of The TRiiBE: an online publication directed at Black millennials and dedicated to “changing the narrative” of Black Chicago. She’s a documentarian by training, which she said was crucial in developing her approach to engagement.

**Jen Sabella** is the co-founder of the upcoming media start-up Block Club Chicago and previously served as Deputy Editor and Director of Social Media at DNAinfo Chicago — a

hyperlocal journalism initiative that had reporters with neighborhood beats until it was abruptly shut down by its owners after employees voted to unionize.

**Julian Hayden** is a producer for the WBEZ podcast *Worldview*, a show covering international issues and the local communities in Chicago affected by them.

### *Understanding engagement*

Among engagement professionals, “engagement” as a term is widely accepted as being confusing. It is rhetorically opaque, difficult to articulate but easy to verbally strive towards as a journalistic ideal. It is a “buzzword” gaining popularity in newsrooms but frequently misunderstood as a superficial modification of existing social media strategy (Fields 2018, Jaffe 2018). Social media is an important means of engagement — specifically the promotion of engagement campaigns within an existing user base — but it can’t amount to a full-blown or effective strategy on its own. Murky notions of engagement can cause newsrooms to mistake promotion or consumption metrics such as clicks or views as being synonymous with engagement (Fields 2018). Poorly understood definitions of engagement can be worse than ineffective, however: Faye Hart (2018) argues that when engagement amounts to simplistic attempts to “humanize issues” — touching photographs, an evocative quote — “the engagement is [more] to placate white folks than it is to engage an issue.”

Rather, engagement professionals interviewed here believe their occupational focus should be understood as philosophy: it is an active subversion of traditional attitudes, models of and approaches to journalism. Fundamentally, engagement journalism seeks to use the public to power journalism. When it comes to a successful engagement model, Jaffe (2018) argues that

reporters should think about their stories in terms of “trying to make connections and create ways of communication and input from communities,” while Fields (2018) believes that a newsroom must allow the public to “shape editorial decisions” by inviting public feedback with concrete means of implementing it.

The approach isn’t separate from “normal” or “mainstream” journalism — it’s another means of pursuing the truth. Fields (2018) argues that engagement as a philosophy is both an “evolution” from traditional, editor-centric ways of thinking about news gathering, but, at the same time, “not really an evolution — it’s a return to the core of what journalism is supposed to be.” This evolution manifests in the potential change in journalism’s relationship with the public, which reflects the nature of shifting power dynamics from the news media as monolithic gatekeepers of information. In interviews, Sabella (2018), Jaffe (2018), Fields (2018) and Faye Hart (2018) repeatedly argued that the goal of serving an audience must be at the center of newsgathering. “If you write a story, and no one reads it, did you even write a story? There’s no point in doing journalism if your journalism isn’t impacting people,” Sabella (2018) said.

### *Executing engagement*

On a day-to-day level, engagement can manifest in several ways: frequent and meticulous emailing, mailing printed stories via postal service to relevant audiences (Jaffe 2018), knocking on community center doors (Hayden 2018), holding events such as panels, workshops and live theatre (Jaffe 2018, Hayden 2018, Sabella 2018, Johnson 2018), and public voting on story ideas for a newsroom to pursue (Fields 2018) are all just a handful of the many ways in which engagement journalists have tried to connect with their audiences. But through interviews, two common components of engagement emerged to varying degrees between professionals: **face-to-**



**face interaction**, which we can define as direct in-person communication between journalists and the public, and **collaboration**, defined as extent to which a newsroom incorporates the feedback of its audience into its reporting process. At the same time, those two factors have historically been limited by the relative inaccessibility of newsrooms by the public. As Hayden (2018) put it:

The Chicago Tribune is leaving Tribune Tower, but it's a tall building with gargoyles and looks like a castle. You can't walk in and be like, "I have this story!" WBEZ is [located on Navy Pier] in the middle of Lake Michigan. It's awful. And, people don't — these are literal manifestations of how people feel. We are out of reach. People don't know who to email or who to call, and when they do they just run into operators.

As a result, face-to-face interaction and collaboration have been used by engagement reporters as a means of crossing the gap of accessibility between mainstream news media and the public that has existed for as long as media has been around.

As established in the literature review, face-to-face interaction is a known and credible means of establishing trust between parties. Engagement professionals know this well. Fields (2018) argues that face-to-face interaction is not just "indispensable" because it allows for a meaningful interaction to take between one citizen and a journalist, but in fact because that relationship extends from that original individual to "the rest of their network. Once they see themselves in that story, or you engage and actually get in touch with them, they're going to spread that to their networks" of friends, family and co-workers. Before it closed, DNAinfo Chicago's editors encouraged its decentralized local reporters to post when and where they'd be working on a given day so that readers could find them "pitch stories, just say hi, or — just giving people a chance to interact with a reporter face to face" (Sabella 2018). Jaffe (2018) pointed to ProPublica Illinois' decision to partner with a local theatre company to produce renditions of reported stories to audiences as plays, saying that when "you're in a face-to-face environment,

you're not necessarily going in to have a formal discussion about something intellectual, or even a specific piece of reporting," creating "a space in which people are comfortable and encouraged" to engage in substantive and natural discussion.

Beyond the simple establishment of a tangible relationship, engagement journalism's paramount mechanic is the extent to which it allows for some degree of collaboration between a newsroom and the public. Historically, public's direct involvement in the professional media sphere has been met with a mixture of derision and fear by information gatekeepers, in part because "there is a skill to being a journalist" (Sabella 2018). As a result, engagement professionals must be capable of striking a balance between audience involvement and the strictures of journalism. While all the engagement professionals interviewed agreed that collaboration is a critical component of engagement strategy, they also all admitted there was a necessary limit to that interaction as well. Jaffe (2018) said that no matter the means of information gathering, "the same journalistic scrutiny and ethics" still applies. Chicago's City Bureau "actually trains" members of the public, because "you need to be able to trust that the person covering the story has some knowledge of how this works and the ethics involved" (Sabella 2018).

On a fundamental level, the balance between public collaboration and professionalism is a debate about the nature of power and where it should reside between news media and its audience. Fields (2018) argues the approach taken by her company — Hearken — offers clarity in that debate with "a very clear exchange with the audience" in the form of questions. Because the Hearken voting system typically only allows questioners to use 140 characters, and because it's ultimately up to a newsroom to decide what questions make it to the voting stage, journalists and citizens "both have power in that situation" (Fields 2018). While this structure may come as

a relief for some more wary editors, Faye Hart (2018) says that engagement journalism is supposed to challenge those longstanding power dynamics: “journalists are supposed to give up some of their power... because if you can give up some to the mystique of journalism and allow folks to produce it with you... they feel connected to it.” Within that connection, there’s power.

### *Benefiting from engagement*

As several professionals point out, engagement is an effort-, time- and resource-intensive strategy when done effectively (Fields 2018, Faye Hart 2018, Sabella 2018). As a result, the value of engagement strategy must often be clear for newsrooms to participate willingly. In theory, engagement done well will result in the cultivation of trust (Jaffe 2018, Faye Hart 2018, Johnson 2018, Sabella 2018) and even business revenue (Fields 2018). And although trust is a difficult phenomenon to measure quantitatively — in particular, gauging whether certain actions will result in trust building — the work experience of these professionals can speak volumes for engagement’s potential role in trust. For most professionals working in engagement, trust is the paramount goal, but the means by which it is pursued and evaluated tends to vary.

For all their healthy skepticism of social media, Sabella (2018) and Fields (2018) argue that monitoring Facebook and Twitter metrics can be an important (if limited) way of determining how a story effects or interests an audience. “We can tell when a story was resonating with people by its Facebook numbers,” which, in turn, should drive some degree of coverage: “That shows people care about that story. It shows reporters what they should keep writing about” (Sabella 2018). On the other hand, Jaffe (2018) said she asks her newsroom to remember that “social media is social media users. Even though it’s tied into our lives for so

many users in so many different ways, it's not the end-all be-all." This echoes the limitations articulated by Ananny (2014) of social media user populations.

With limited qualitative metrics at their disposal, engagement professionals have had to devise other ways to measure their success. According to Jaffe (2018):

In my mind, it's **relationships**. It's fickle to measure trust, but when you can develop relationships with people who may or may not be who you reached out to, or come to you based on a piece of reporting or not, you just meet them and are interested in having their thoughts trickle up into your organization somehow, if you can keep talking to that person, if something transcends beyond a single piece of work, I'd consider a success in trust. **People don't trust the media, but they trust people.**

For Johnson (2018) and Sabella (2018), success would be driven in part by their relatively new media organizations' financial sustainability. Both The TRiiBE and Block Club Chicago use or will use a revenue model that is largely subsidized by reader subscriptions. As a result, becoming self-sustained in the next few years would be an indication that their organization has found a place in the lives of the communities they plan to write about.

But for media organizations more generally, Hearken — as a platform operating across dozens of media organizations — has data with good news: engagement can have concrete, positive effects on a media company's bottom line. On average, "Curious" stories receive between 11 and 15 times higher page views than less-engaged content (Fields 2018). However, because page views are a credible but not holistic indicator of a media company's success, the real question revolves around whether or not engagement increases the chance that a customer will support a media company financially. The answer, according to Hearken, is yes again.

After using Hearken for one year, Bitch Media — publisher of Bitch magazine — commissioned an independent case study to analyze how the engagement service impacted the media platform as whole. The study found that readers who engaged with the publication via

Hearken were between 2 to 5 times more likely to become paying members of Bitch Media (Fields 2018). Only 1.35 percent of readers on Bitch Media's email list became paying members over the course of the year-long study, but 7.17 percent of those who engaged via Hearken did (Lesniak 2017). This one case study suggests a solid link between the ability for a readership to engage with a platform and their willingness to invest in it, but it by no means the only one. According to Hearken (2018), Charlottesville Tomorrow was able to charge six times more for advertising displayed next to their Hearken-powered "Curious" series than normal stories, and WBEZ in Chicago found that over 56 percent of its newfound paying members came directly from the original Curious City in a given year.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The business challenge ahead for the news media is massive. While the immediate danger has passed for many of the strongest newsrooms across the country, a deeper and more existential risk persists for all news media as the American public's trust continues to drift away from journalists. It is the conclusion of this research that engagement journalism offers a philosophy and state of mind that can revitalize the role that news can play in a community of any size, economic means or geography. It promises a return to relevance for journalists in exchange for power returned to the public. Through decades of turmoil, the lofty goals of journalism have not changed: journalists strive to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. By returning to its roots at the heart of the community, it can complete that mission better than ever.

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## Transcriptions

*Figure 1. 14 East Engagement panel — February 27th, 2018, DePaul University. Moderated by Carina Smith.*

**Carina Smith: So how about we start by going down the row and talking about your day-to-day experience in the workplace.**

Summer: Sure! I started at Hearken actually as an intern a couple of years ago, and I since became full-time. That was right out of college I got into it, and it was awesome. So basically, Hearken is a small Chicago-founded and based start up where we work with newsrooms on audience engagement, so we help them actually implement people power and public-powered processes of reporting, and it started at WBEZ with a show called Curious City. Our founder **Jen Brandel** started that. Basically the premise is, let's say that the audience asked you questions about what they want to know about the city, letting them vote on their favorites and coming along for the reporting process. So basically, when she got that up off the ground, a lot of other public radio newsrooms started asking her, "how do I do the same thing?" And so she founded Hearken to make that possible. So I've been doing that for a couple of years, and I work with a couple dozen newsrooms directly.

Andrea: Before I explain what engagement looks like from the City Bureau perspective, I wanted to just clarify what engagement is to us, how we define it. It's very much a consistent thing. It's not a one-off, project-based thing. I think a lot of times, when you look at newsrooms, they think about engagement specific to a project and they don't necessarily have it baked into all of their programming. But City Bureau does. So I serve as the director of community engagement, but it is something that everybody is thinking about. And for me in particular, a lot of it is around looking at **community organizations** that we can be partnering with for our documenter's program, which is where we train and pay folks to cover public meetings, but they can go — level up into other opportunities. With that, I'm also always vetting community partners where we can do bootcamps. There are a lot of people really interested in engaging in the journalism process, reimagining civics and bettering their neighborhoods, and so part of engagement in that is identifying partners that want to collaborate on that project. And then the Public Newsroom, which we host every week, Thursday night from 6 to 8, that is — we both get journalists and non-journalists to present. For us, it's a two-way street: both like the presenter is learning something and then the audience is as well. That, to us, is the most easy example of what the engagement process looks like. But it's really designed around learning, folks can take things with them — it's not just a straight lecture. I'm always thinking about how what does engagement look like in that way, when it's a two-way learning street, it's not just telling

someone what to do or telling someone where to go. Those are some of the things we do on a daily basis, but, again, it's not just me thinking about it. We have a fellowship three times a year where they're thinking about it in their story process, and then each of the co-founders is thinking about it in the respective work that we do.

Julian: So I think I'm the only person on the panel who doesn't have engagement in my title. But I do what could be considered the oldest form of engagement in modern media, and that is work on a daily talk show. And what is really interesting about working with a daily talk show is, unlike print media, where the journalist mediates and selects quotes, or in commercial broadcast television, where a correspondent or editor chooses soundbytes into a three-minute package, talk radio, particularly talk shows, are unique in that a journalist is present, but is just forced to shut up and listen, which is the root of engagement. There's a lot of debate as to whether or not the medium in its own right is relevant, whether or not it's interesting, but I think it provides a lot of inspiration for people who for example follow an issue very closely, or care about an issue and feel that journalists sometimes get in the way of what people are trying to say, that they have preconceived notions of what an issue might be that a journalist has that, when they repackage something in a story or TV spot, gets lost. We do things like calling shows which are imperfect, but it's a very old-fashioned way of including an audience. My background, too — I didn't come to radio very intentionally, while I was covering the revolution in Ukraine, there's something about being a non-profit media, kind of not having to worry about the bottom line of an organization. There's a lot of gray area between non-profit media and commercial media, but when you're able to cover a mass social movement like a revolution, that requires a certain level of engagement that is grassroots. So if we think of engagement journalism as being grassroots in nature — I learned a lot about finding a story, finding people who wouldn't traditionally be featured in commercial media. At the time in Ukraine, commercial media was state-owned. There was no way in hell that anyone was going to end up on state-owned media, so to see dozens of grassroots media organizations that by definition were engagement journalism — they brought people on who didn't have formal journalism training to really dig into why a social movement was happening, I think is very exciting. And I think the U.S. has a lot of social movements that are happening, and engagement journalism in the formal sense (that I'm not involved in) has the potential to uncover a lot of where Americans are. But you wouldn't be able to tell in legacy media, especially in the kind of sound bite format that is so pervasive.

**So let's take it back and talk about what you were doing before you worked in engagement journalism — how did you wind up in engagement work professionally?**

Andrea: My background is a hybrid of journalism and education, so most immediately, previously to City Bureau, I was working in youth media organizations in the city, and I think it's really fascinating to see how a lot of formal journalism is taking a lot from that space, and getting respected in a way that it doesn't get respected in the media space, which I find

fascinating. I worked at Free Spirit Media, which was one of the best, greatest youth media organizations I think in the country, but was managed by its parent organization, the Museum of Mexican Art. But a lot of what I was doing — I transitioned back into teaching and into that space because I thought I could be a lot more experimental and actually work with people in the communities to tell their own stories and talk through narratives that weren't getting covered, and also just this idea of, what does it look like to share information that matters to you, instead of getting told what should matter to you. That was a lot of what I was doing and incubating. Also, this conversation of civics — if your media is really exclusive, your processes are probably also, or just not as accessible. So that's where Real Shot U really came out of, conversations around: how can you also be disruptive in civic spaces through this kind of journalism? But again you can train young folks to do this kind of work. But if people aren't taking them quite as seriously, it's still limiting — they're only going to be relegated to these cute, little non-profits, but not necessarily taken seriously. But I think now there's a lot that I've pulled from that experience and pulled into the City Bureau experience, which is also why we have and encourage our fellows to encourage young people, because they're often the most affected and most immediately affected by things happening in the city, but also the most talked to, like they're talked about, but they're not often engaged in that process.

Summer: Back at UChicago, in undergrad in sociology, at the time I was trying to percolate on what do I want to do when I graduate. So I founded a podcast at UChicago — a podcasting organization, not unlike you guys getting together in this room — to teach other students how to produce audio stories with a focus on the community we were in, and the people that were doing cool organizing work or creating things or professors studying fun things, like Bob Dylan from a musicology lens or bugs having sex. Just, everything. And that was fun, and really I was just thinking, okay, podcast, maybe I'll just audio produce full-time, sure, but I was passionate about that, about audio art and podcasts. Also at the time, I was hearing a lot of discourse about public radio, being something I was just getting into tangentially, about how public radio was not representative of the public, which is supposed to be the very mission of public radio stations. And about how there's this idiom, or voice in a literal and metaphorical sense of like, you know, you picture Ira Glass or 99 percent invisible, it's this very sort of white, middle class coastal voice. And it's fun, but it's not the mission if everything sounds like that. So I heard a lot of people talking about that, talking about how we need to diversify newsrooms, hearing the word diversity invoked in those spaces. And I was like, I think I want to study this, actually, for my thesis. And I used that as an opportunity to talk to dozens of fellow people of color working within public radio industry, and some white folks that were in it to, as a way of asking, you know, "What do you think about all these people talking about diversity in these big sentences? How does that make you feel as the diversity?"

And so that thesis somehow got me into the world that I wanted to be a part of after college, so at that time I met Ellen Mayer, who's a good friend of mine now, and she said she'd heard about

my thesis, said that she was doing podcast stuff and about to work at Hearken, and a few months later, she said, “I don’t know if you’re into this, but there’s an internship at Hearken!” So I hopped on that, basically working on the community team, managing the newsrooms that wanted to be doing public-focused work. So that’s how I ended up there — it was all because I decided to think about how the structure of journalism is starting to all level. Not necessarily being a foot soldier, just day in and day out doing journalism. I didn’t have a ton of experience in newsrooms before I got to Hearken. And I definitely defer to wisdom, and people who have years and years of it. But I decided I just wanted to get started. Summer before that I worked at a really boring think tank, worked at ABC politics during the summer when every Republican was announcing their run for office — which was hell also, but good experience — and I decided I wanted to do a different kind of thing.

Julian: I kind of alluded to it before, but didn’t finish the story. So while our non-profit was working in Ukraine, I became the go-to voice of the people on the ground who happened to speak English and be from Chicago.

Summer: Can you explain what the revolution was about? Sorry to interrupt, but —

Julian: Right, so, the thumbnail version. A little over four years ago, fall of 2013, there was — started as a political movement where Ukrainian young people wanted Ukraine to integrate with the European Union — maybe a couple hundred people from two universities, which are rare in Ukraine. And they, over the course of a couple of days, really got the government really mad at them. And the government had worked very hard to pretend that they had basic human rights, civil rights, and after a couple of days — and after a summer of silence about instances of police brutality — about 300 university students from all over Ukraine of several ethnic and racial groups were beaten and arrested and carted off. The next day, there were a half a million people in the streets saying, well the government shouldn’t really do that. They set up an encampment in the main city square of Kiev, Ukraine’s capital, and they demanded to know who ordered these arrests. It turns out, it went all the way to the top, and it ended after three months of peaceful protests of resistance with the president on a helicopter to Russia and the entire national reserve with about \$30,000 — so imagine running a country with socialized medicine and having that to pay for 45 million people — police were liquidated, all the cops were fired and the president for all intents and purposes was impeached and fled. I was there during most of that as a senior DePaul journalism student, and I happen to have gone to events where — and I think my colleagues would agree — events are like the best way to do engagement. One of the best ways, because it’s one thing to sit on Facebook and look for questions and things like that. It’s another to meet people face to face.

I had been to several events that this talk show — Worldview — it’s the only thing of its kind, a global media organization, if you can call it that, based in Chicago. I mean, the Chicago Tribune,

the Sun-Times, they all used to have foreign correspondents. There's one guy at the Trib whose job is to curate AP stories. Outside New York, Boston, D.C. and LA, nobody does international journalism. So I was participating in these events, and when they found out that I was from Ukraine, they said "we just can't figure out what's going on there." We have these Americans in D.C. telling their version of the story, we have the government pushing their version of the story, we don't know who to trust. How about you just tell us what happens? So I was regularly, almost weekly, telling them, well this is what's happened, barricades are being built, and we built a rapport between our non-profit and this kind of big-time legacy radio station. And that is I think the asset of our show.

There is a network of people in Chicago who cover state politics, and it's very important to cover that or city politics, and often times what happens in non-engagement circles, it's a lot of inside baseball. It's a lot of wonks talking to wonks. So-and-so political reporter talks to the same source he's had for 20 years in the mayor's office, they know the lingo, and people don't click the stories because they're boring and they don't know the lingo, even though they're not boring and they do care. Our show is unique in that there is no network of international foreign policy think tanks in Chicago. Even schools in Chicago are tightening their belts with international studies programs. So Worldview depends on events, in the city, things like the Global Activism Expo, a globally-oriented meeting in the UIC forum to just talk about what they do. Or ethnic groups here in Chicago — just today we did a segment with the creator of Radio Islam. And he a couple of months ago created something called the Burma Task Force, which is something that — a group of Muslims who are driving to D.C. today to pressure people to pay attention to what's going on with the Rohingya. Chicago has one of the biggest Rohingya populations in America, and if you are one of the coastal, international journalists or some think tank person, you'd be calling someone in Bangladesh or Myanmar and you'd be talking to some kind of official or bureaucrat instead of Imam Mujadid, whose cousin is in a refugee camp and lives next door to us in Chicago. So I think that's the value of things like involving non-government and non-academic groups to interact with. We still have the opportunity to curate that engagement, but we also have the ability to step back with things like the Global Activism [Expo] and roundtable discussions or there's a million ways. I like events. That's how I met these people, that's how I got this job: building that relationship.

### **Why is engagement important?**

Summer: I'll take it back to how we'd define engagement, because that's important to know. At Hearken, what we have found and really stand by after working in 100 plus newsrooms is that engagement is not just metrics of extraction, like clicks, shares, comments on Facebook. It's not just extraction from the audience either, not consumption not extraction, user-generated polling, stuff like that. If there's no pathway for your audience to have some kind of input on the content and editorial decisions, that is not engagement. So we define engagement basically as — first

you as a news organization is inviting feedback from your public, then you're using that feedback as a newsroom, or the public engages, then you use it. You have to take the input and have that shape the editorial content that you're doing. We're trying to fundamentally reshape the way we think about the way we interact with these people.

It's not just viewers, it's not just people that are supposed to consume our content, and bringing in money through ad dollars, because that's not really working for newsrooms anymore. A lot of them are closing and dying because they're not going back to the basics of figuring out what people actually need to know, because audiences are the ones that are actually deciding what's relevant and popular. We cannot afford to *not* change our relationship with our audience, you know, because there's a thousand ways we can all get our information, but what we're looking to newsrooms for is — I want to trust you that we can get to the truth in some way. But I can get information from any avenue. So I'm not just looking for information to be delivered to me as an audience member, I want to build trust. That's why it's important that newsrooms evolve in that way, but it's not really an evolution — it's a return to the core of what journalism is supposed to be.

Andrea: I think it's an accountability thing. City Bureau Public Newsrooms always happen face-to-face, and I think all of us, the co-founders don't really care about national stuff or not space-related work, because of that accountability perspective. If you are effectively engaging your audience, they can hold you accountable, a lot of transparency. But also, for us, it means, and it's important because journalists are supposed to give up some of their power. That's also why it's important to do in the way that we do it, because if you can give up some to the mystique of journalism and allow folks to produce it with you — not necessarily a full-fledged story, but attend a public meeting and document it and submit those notes, you then your work is more enriched and people are going to use it, because they feel connected to it. That's how we further the definition of engagement journalism. Part of it is that there's been a lot of problematic power dynamics in traditional journalism — that hasn't been engaged. So the importance of engagement is that it shifts those power dynamics and also opens up the accountability process more, both to hold you accountable but also hold officials accountable where they live. It helps people [be] better citizens — not just citizen journalists, but better citizens.

Julian: To build off that, I think there's a constant tension between arrogance and humility. I think arrogance often wins, the arrogance to say I know what the audience wants, I know what the audience needs, I read about this thing and because of that it's interesting to me, therefore we need to talk about it. And that works sometimes, especially if your audience is like you, but I think it takes a lot of humility and a lot of, to step back and say, I don't know what's important to some people. And I have the skillset as a journalist to go after something, perhaps a skillset that a member of the public doesn't have, or even the time and resources to do that, but I don't always know what is the story that the community needs as opposed to the story that I want. And it's



really difficult to do that. There's the old adage, crap what's the phrase ... [comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable]? It's easy to become comfortable as a journalist. And if we're supposed to speak truth to power, well power isn't supposed to, isn't necessarily elected positions. It's not necessarily government. It can be your public radio station's underwriters. It can be people who say that engagement journalism doesn't work. We do know what's best because we pay for it. There's a lot of power.

Summer: And newsrooms aren't necessarily buying into what we do. It takes a culture change.

Julian: I mean, racial dynamics — I mean, I have a talk show. And I say this fully knowing that I'm a white man that works in public radio, but it's really easy to find a white man willing to talk because they have the power to do so. And often the time and resources. And to find someone willing to talk about something [that] maybe is equally or more important to someone else is hard. And it's our mission to do that. When we have powerful people, whether it's because their social standing talking about social issues, that's not holding power accountable. And so we try to go out of their way to have people speak for themselves. Journalism isn't there yet culturally. It is at City Bureau, it is a Hearken newsrooms, sometimes, but it is always a struggle.

### **What does engagement do for a newsroom?**

Summer: It depends on how much you put into it, your commitment, and it depends on how much you put into, whether it's a single project where we let our audience have input, ask questions, and it doesn't really permeate how to do the rest of our coverage. but the ideal could be: every time you think of a new project or beat, could you think about where does the audience come into this in the process, and what are the editorial strategies we can use to bring this to our audience. So I think if people are doing engagement to that extent, it means they're fulfilling a public mission. Not every newsroom has to have that mission, but they should. And the audience responds well to knowing they're represented in the work you do. More traditional metrics can go up for a newsroom too, like, people do want to read this more often, more newsletter subscribers that become public radio members more often. So you can get bang for your buck with this, but it's not the only thing you're going after in the newsroom. It's a lot.

Andrea: Yeah, as I was saying before it gives that, makes the newsroom give up some of its power and control, and I think that's a lot of what it means. With our fellowship, we tell the fellows straight up, some of what they may produce may become a story, other terms it may never become a story. They give that up based on the engagement they're doing. They let the process dictate what they write or don't write, they trust the process. So I think that in that way, the question — I think in that way it is definitely a giving up of control and power, it can make the newsroom feel chaotic but not necessarily in a bad way.

Summer: It destabilizes initially, because you really have to think about how you're going to change your editorial process, and it's hard. And often there isn't staff available to think full-time about how to make engagement long-term possible. You have to commit to it.

Andrea: Totally. And I think it allows ideally and hopefully your newsroom to take more of an asset-lens approach to the places its reporting on, rather than a deficit lens. It allows you to see there are already these amazing community groups that are highly organized in this neighborhood that's often only covered around when a murder happens and things like that. So I think it allows you to think more asset lens. And the other side of that, and this is a theory we talk about a lot at City Bureau, we operate in a space of abundance rather than a space of scarcity, so you sort of realize that there's a lot that we can work with rather than instead getting weirdly competitive and be secretive. If you do it well and consistently, I think those are some of the benefits, but it's a process. A painful process.

Summer: Can I speak to that point, on scarcity and hard news bias? So a lot of what we're animated by with the projects we work on at Hearken. It started by Curious City, and the premise of that was that people have questions about the place they live, often, or about a topic even, but usually the place they live, they walk down the street, they see things. They observe things about the place they're in that are not just trauma, or just exceptional thing. In news, sometimes you'll see that whole thing, "If it bleeds it leads?" Something horrible happened in this community, we're going to parachute in for this terrible thing that just happened, and sometimes you'll see, for whole communities, that's the only way they make it into the news. And communities come to resent that. Like, if you talk about this from a certain lens or side, in these broad strokes, and you don't really serve them, just talk about them, there's no reason they should trust you. Or, you could go into this community, say, "Oh you have this 7-year-old who just broke this world record," and then you also just leave. The idea is that there's this whole idea in the middle gulf of the mundane, and curiosity, and often just I need practical information about where I am. So the idea is that a newsroom, you want to open it up to that gulf — a curiosity series where people can just ask questions, and newsrooms will do stories. It just lets you be more open-ended and have the humility of, I'm not necessarily going to set the agenda for my audience. Let them say, "This is a curiosity I had!" This is where it starts. You have to be humble, and the audience has to be humble in that exchange, so whether or not it's a specific topic they're asking about or if it's just what you want to know about Chicago, they're not asserting some things for you to cover. They're just saying, "I would like to know something in collaboration with you," instead of the constant lack of humility on the side of journalists in newsrooms — there's this space where we could all be humble.

Julian: To talk about how sometimes journalists just parachute into a place and not focus on the mundanity on the place, as a funny example — not out of an engagement project, necessarily, but I think it does destabilize your audience and what your audience is expecting, particularly

that audiences have come to accept news as sort of a passive act, where they just sort of let it wash over them. Dave Eggers, famous writer, he wrote a book based on the doorman in his condo building who was traveling to Yemen to work on revitalizing Yemen's ancient coffee industry. They say mocha was invented in Yemen, and coffee in general, coffee has its roots in Yemen. So he would go to Yemen as a young man, and he met this author, and so we have this guy — doorman turned coffee importer — from Yemen, which is as most people begin to describe as a war-torn country. And he was just a guy, a U.S. citizen, his parents were from Yemen and he's from San Francisco, and he just wanted to talk about the coffee. And of course you have to talk about the war, but oftentimes people talk about the war and feel like the coffee isn't worth mentioning. There's a template: this is a war-torn country, — or in Chicago, a "war-torn neighborhood" — there's nothing unique about it. But when you talk about the coffee, you talk about the people and the place like it's important. When we published that story, we got angry tweets! Like, how dare you talk about something as cute as coffee in a country where tens of thousands of people have cholera. We mentioned the cholera, but in *addition* to the cholera there is joy and coffee, and people live there, and I think that it humanizes people — which is vital. Engagement for a newsroom, it helps people draw connections.

We often hear from our bosses as international talk show, with topics like race, class, gender, corruption, environmental issues, there are global issues — they don't have borders. But when we talk to someone, when we engage with ethnic global organizations in Chicago and we meet someone who's Congolese, well, a lot of Congolese people and a lot of Ethiopians living on the North Side live this hybrid life. They're not white Americans, but they're Ethiopian and Congolese, so they care about the conflicts in those countries, but they also participate in the day-to-day life of their neighborhoods. It may seem like two different stories, but when it comes to an international story in the New York Times or in the Chicago Tribune — they're separate stories. For a lot of people, those stories are the same story. Police brutality in Chicago, police brutality in Ethiopia — what we can do is say both these things are happening in Ethiopia and happening in America. Let's open up a dialogue. What's going on here? And that better represents people's lived experience as opposed to partitioning those things [as] being global news, national news, local news. Because oftentimes people are international, national and local. And I think realizing that is something that's missing in media that is hyperlocal.

Summer: So there's a tension here on the panel, because you [Andrea] said you're unapologetically rooted here, and you [Julian] are thinking about how we c0-suffer as a global community —

Julian: We're also local though.

Summer: Yeah.

Julian: Like, we're a local talk show about global issues.

Summer: And a lot of public radio stations are cutting their local coverage.

Julian: That's a rabbit hole. You can draw connections, people will find solidarity and engagement.

Summer: Yes. And that's the secret mission of Worldview to help people struggle and fight, but they're not allowed to say that because they're objective journalists, which brings us to the question you had.

**Right, so my next question is, when it comes to incorporating the community into your reporting, is there a point — hypothetical or not — at which public engagement crosses a line? Can your audience ever be too involved?**

Summer: I thought you were going to ask us about objectivity.

Andrea: The question is, where's the line?

Julian: Where's the line in any journalism?

Andrea: I mean, we don't necessarily have community people doing full-fledged reporting. We have this even with our fellows, we discuss this, where fellows have lived experience in Chicago and we use that as an asset. We've had activists come into our fellowships, but they get when they have the fellowship that their goal is not necessarily to be an advocate, but be more of an organizer and let folks make decisions for themselves — but using the lens of the problematic stuff you've seen as an activist. The line for us depends on which program you're engaging. If you're a fellow, there are certain expectations. If you're a documenter, there are different expectations. If you're a participant in the Public Newsroom we want you to bring in your lived experience even more explicitly. The line, it fluctuates depending on which way you're engaging us. But as long as we're abiding by truth and being factual, being accurate, that's the line that shouldn't be crossed.

Summer: With Hearken, the vast majority of it is a public-powered process. And often that helps codify the process between the newsroom and audience. Like in the pitch phase, you have your audience ask you questions, in the assignment phase they get to vote on what they most want to see and sometimes in the reporting phase they come along for the reporting process. So it is a very formulaic process way to go about it, and it helps for both members of the exchange to be productive, so it comes from a place of questions because the audience knows how to ask questions — it's the atomic unit of all journalism, because we ask questions as the starting point

of telling stories. But I would say sometimes it only goes as far as who your audience [is] for your newsroom to begin with. And you have to do outreach and try to really be critical to reach beyond who we're already reaching. I'd say that's been a really productive relationship between audience and newsroom, and a lot of newsrooms have gone out of their way to realize.

The reason I want to use Hearken to inform my education reporting, for instance, is saying, "Well I'm sick of engaging just the policy-focused education folks in Milwaukee and I want to talk to parents and kids." So what outreach strategy can we develop so that they ask me questions and stuff like that, so they can find me? It usually doesn't go too far when you can say, "Hey audience, this is the process." But you know, reporting is a skill, and people can learn it, get the skill, reporting can be democratized — every day folks and community — but reporters have a lot of priorities put on them. So I get when it comes to be too much not from a vague moral journalism standpoint but just like not everyone — journalists just have way too many expectations put on them in day-to-day life in newsrooms. Just have way too many competing priorities, and that's not fair while their budgets are being cut left and right, so hopefully we can get to a place where fundamentally where you're engaging the community as part of the work you do, and it's not siloed and extraneous. But not all newsrooms are set up for that.

Andrea: Right, and the other thing you're making me think about too, is that I think some of it is — well part of what City Bureau is addressing so directly — the issue of diversity in newsrooms is the problem that, when people think of objectivity and when people use that in the face to not do certain kinds of engagement, really objectivity has meant like, a white male perspective, and that's what has been objective. So I think it's hard to answer that question a bit, because we kind of don't know if you can ever obtain objectivity. For us the biggest thing is, as long as we're not centering that, were doing a good job. And it's sort of a case-by-case basis on what's the line in engagement.

Julian: Has anyone had Jason Martin for a class here? Anybody? Talk to him sometime, because he teaches a class — not always — about law, ethics and journalism, has anybody? It's very good, he has some great takes. I think there's this myth that objectivity means like, non-ideological, to be fair and balanced, and we all know where that phrase is most popularly used and it's pretty funny. But like, of course there's ideology in journalism.

Summer: And even the people that you could look at and be the arbiter of issues without being invested in it —

Julian: And what I mean by that, and what Jason's take is — I'm going to take this, borrow it, fully attribute it as is good journalistic practice — we couldn't do our jobs if it wasn't for the right to a free press. We couldn't do our job if there were no right to assembly, no right to free speech, and there was a time in this country where, to be for free speech was a political stance.

And there are parts of the world where, to be a free press is a political stance. It is an opinion. And there are many people who still don't believe in a free press. It is a political stance to not have a free press. The kind of gaslighting around the term "fake news" is an example of that. It's an erosion of the free press before our very eyes. So objectivity is a whole other issue. But to bring it back to engagement, to recognize that people are human and there are certain things that allow, principles that allow or restrict their movement within the world, and to let someone speak for themselves is among the most true-to-journalism things you can do.

Summer: Don't use the phrase "give voice to the voiceless" ever, because that's not what it is. You're amplifying conversations that are already happening, because there's a world outside our newsrooms. There are community pathways we can really refer to.

Julian: And then basic human rights are journalistic values. We choose our stories because people are being killed. We can choose to not care, but that's — is that objectivity? If a white man cares about a place, does that make it — there's a global map of journalism tragedies, and it happens like — if a civil war happens in Africa, what's the meter of people caring? High or low? If there's a bombing in Paris, everyone's familiar with the tri-color, the Facebook avatar. When do they care? Who decides to care? A lot of that has to do with journalists who don't care about objectivity deciding what is important. Whereas when there is a church bombing in Egypt, and Chicago's massive coptic community comes to us and tells us that 300 churchgoers have been killed before it's even on BBC, you know there are people that care about this that can't even turn to local media to learn about what's happening to their loved ones. And I think that channel of communication needs to be maintained and respected. This is a political stance: that every person's joy and suffering matters. And I hate to say that radical equality has to be argued for, and that's somehow not objective when you show a church bombing in Egypt versus a concert bombing in Paris.

**Journalism has historically removed itself from the world in order to judge it objectively — how would you respond to the idea that becoming enmeshed in a community causes you to sacrifice that judgement?**

Summer: That's just so ridiculous. It's a racist and f—d up — it's funny. I'm a Black woman, and I care a lot about Black people being killed disproportionately in the street. Is the fact that I want to cover that a fair and equal amount somehow biased? A lot of newsrooms would say yeah, there's a limit on how much you can talk about this very obvious issue. Like, if you're a part of any ethnic or you know — you can't talk about an identity issue too much. But then if you're somehow a blank receptacle and you can look at the world with this objective gaze and choose anything you want to pitch — so it's ridiculous, like do you want your newsroom to be an equitable place where everyone can bring their selfhood to bear on? Do you really care about diversifying your audience, about whose voices make it on to your airwaves or publication? You

have to let people show up. Be fair, be truthful, be factual, but bring your whole selves, and don't act like okay, I'm a Black woman but I'm not going to talk about anything that relates to the thing that I suffer and care about because I don't want to seem unobjective. We have to change our standard for what that would look like.

Julian: You can be invested, but objective.

Summer: And everybody is in their community.

Julian: If your personal mission is to serve or help a community, you know, a lie of omission won't help anybody. So I can say, yeah I know what's going on, based on my research, using this toolbox that I picked up in J-school, I've discovered that these are some of the faults with our community, or the people who interact with our community, and where journalism stops and activism begins is when you say, "Well with this information, this is what we're going to do." The best that you can do is provide the most accurate information, and you can be invested to do that. But I think a lot of people, particularly the gatekeepers, are afraid of that — very, very, very afraid of that because they just don't trust you to be thorough with self-criticism.

Andrea: I don't think you can ask questions of objectivity when internally you're not an equitable workspace. Like if you've already thrown equity out the window, I don't trust you to be objective. Those conversations need to happen first, because you're never going to be objective if you're not equitable. You've already made a choice to prioritize something, or someone over someone else.

### **What are some examples of engagement done well?**

Andrea: I mean I really love [ProPublica's recent investigation](#) into Black mothers, the pregnancies and how the mortality rate is so high. And their real thoughtfulness in approaching women of color having babies and how they were so transparent about it is really invaluable — it shows that they're really invested, and it also allowed people to engage with it in different ways. I didn't have to have read the story in order to get the data, and I think that's really interesting. I think that appeals to different kinds of readers, someone interested in the investigation versus someone just interested in the issue.

Julian: I think as I mentioned earlier, by nature, places where there is conflict do engagement very well. They don't call it engagement. When people are untrained in journalism, I think it comes to them a lot more naturally. And as I mentioned in my personal experience, when I was on the ground of a revolution — a literal revolution — it changed the course of a country forever, you know it was the people who walked, who built a reputation of objectivity and criticism in a way that was relatable. You know, when you read something and you can say that

makes sense — that builds trust. A system is shattered and has to get rebuilt out of nothing, and so I've seen engagement journalism well, really well despite itself — it doesn't call itself engagement journalism — journalism that doesn't interrogate, of half-heartedly question bureaucrats. In places like, there's a newspaper created by Rohingya refugees over 150 years ago with no journalism experience, they live in Thailand — they have a pulse on what's happening. Because they don't really follow the same formula.

I know there's been — there's been a couple years where the idea of you can't just be a journalism major. You have to have something, anything else. I think finding expertise in something else is invaluable, just because it will make — the Chicago Tribune has an international editor, and sometimes when they have an in-your-face local angle on something, they'll send a general assignment reporter abroad, someone whose best-case scenario has a couple of days to read up about the subject they're about to cover. It's really easy to do that, because it makes you very marketable as a journalist. It's easy to hire people who have journalism experience, covering a beat or subject area. I think a lot of media organizations are moving away from that. But when you have expertise in an area in your own right, I think you're willing to talk to more people than if you're a general assignment reporter, and you just go to the expert and/or government official who's listed on the website and ask them what they have to do. You can network better, I can just go on and on and on — engagement journalism despite itself, it's a dying —

Summer: And how did we get to that?

Julian: I'll tell you later.

[laughter]

### **What about engagement done poorly? Or not being able to capture readers?**

Summer: When people use the word “engagement” wrong — when they're talking about social media. If you're a person who retweets stuff, that's not engagement. But that's unfortunately what people think of.

Andrea: I think the Sun-Times has provided a lot of good examples of not good engagement lately. I think even when you have folks who are like, we're going to *humanize* the issue where you have some danger, where the engagement is [more] to placate white folks than it is to engage an issue. I think any time you're saying “engagement” to be a sensational thing, or when it's this exotifying thing, that's where we see it not working.



Summer: And sometimes it's wrong in how it's addressing the way in which a newsroom covers stuff. And even with curiosity-based theories, it's frustrating that — well I don't want to go that far — isn't just for transplants, like, what's this quirky neighborhood or people that live in the area.

Andrea: And actually in that regard, I kind of wish that people were a little bit more explicit like about what this is for. When I think engagement is bad is when people are lying to themselves about who they think the piece is for. I think about, I had some issues with the hour-long radio piece from Linda Lutton about [The View From 205](#), because like it felt like the story had been told before and a lot of people are involved, so then my question is, who is this for? And I think for her, she thinks it's for everybody, but it's not. And I wish more people would be explicit about who this stuff is for. If your thing is really for people who are out there trying to understand what's happening, and then also in particular people who might be able to leverage their power to be able to do something about it, be more explicit about it. Whereas I think that people lie to themselves when they think it's for everyone. I'm not for everyone, and that's fine — I don't want to be.

Julian: It's really really funny you mention that, because I was at a presentation — can't say too much here — but it was about the expansion of the education desk at WBEZ. And one of the first rhetorical questions on the slide show was “Who is this for?” And they were like, “Well it's for parents of children in CPS, it's for voters in Chicago, and it's for general interest, because it's for those who have a general interest in education.” And so it's for everybody. And when we as a show, Worldview, have to defend our existence, we have to say, it's for everybody? They say, no it isn't, why would anybody care about that — *you* don't care about it, you're all excited about this soap opera that is Chicago Public Schools, you think it's [this] sort of exciting, exotic thing you're into from your suburban lifestyle... sorry I've revealed too much.

Summer: You're not allowed to be critical about your publication's decision?

Julian: It's a broken system when the people in power think they're doing a good job. When the management of a system thinks, we know what's best for our audience. Covering CPS is important, but our radio station reaches three states and 9 million people, a third of whom live in Chicago. There's a lot to cover, and when most of your audience lives in the north suburbs, it becomes a suffering forum. “Look at this poor school district with all this corruption — aren't you glad in Evanston that your schools are better? Why don't you abandon Chicago because it's so horrible.” I'm done.

## Questions?

*[At this point the audience questions will be indicated in italics]*

*I'm curious how you do engagement when your audience isn't city-based — like when it's mostly virtual or, with Worldview, how it's all over the world. How do you engage with all those different levels of reporting and pitching and everything when they're not there physically?*

Summer: It depends on what your project is, scope is, like a lot of what we advise newsrooms on is a digital-first strategy as a core of it. You have this place where, you say you know, this is where you can ask us a question and see what comes out of the question that you asked, but we also come up with what the outreach strategy is for, how do you even reach beyond the normal listeners in your normal listening area, and go to people in the community that you want to engage but don't already, etc. And I mean if it's national, it's a similar strategy of how you meet people where they are — that's what we ask people: do you have a newsletter, are you talking to people in that way or social media, or are you actually hitting the streets and talking to folks, or partnering with your local library? But that's local. So if it's national, it's having a really good digital strategy where you're transparent, you tell people — here's how the process works.

Julian: Our audience, we know where they live because our radio antennas only reach so far, even though we [are] often surprised where people download our podcasts from, which is everywhere. But in some cases we are unapologetically local in the sense that our audience is those who live between Indiana and Wisconsin and everywhere in between. It's often difficult to figure out who's listening. I think that particularly with the kind of ethnic communities that we engage with, there is a lot of — we often have to lead by example, where a local community group — for example, a couple of weeks ago, I drove by on the far North Side, there's a Kyrgyz Cultural Community Center, and I was like, "No kidding." It's a country we don't often talk about on the show, which in a lot of cases can be a good thing because you're in the news for an unpleasant reason, but I started digging, and it turns out that Chicago has one of the biggest Kyrgyz populations in America. Curious stop! It's a country that most people don't even know how to pronounce. I emailed them, and they said they all listen to the show. They just said they didn't know how to approach us. And I was afraid — there's a lot of truth to this — the Chicago Tribune is leaving Tribune Tower, but it's a tall building with gargoyles, looks like a castle. You can't walk in and be like, "I have this story!" WBEZ is in the middle of Lake Michigan. It's awful. And, people don't — these are literal manifestations of how people feel. We are out of reach. People don't know who to email or who to call, and when they do they just run into operators. And so, it's funny they were so meek and didn't know how to get to us. But we just have to keep doing that — inviting community organizations on — to make people feel empowered to approach us.

Summer: You have to be meta about it too, which is a huge process — no matter how broad the audience is, you have to tell them, by the way, this is what we're doing. We let you into the process, you'll see it, and you'll see how we potentially answer your question. Or we invite

community groups onto our show — you can be one of those. You just have to be really transparent, which gets lost sometimes.

Julian: But now we know that we can make curious stops and people will be listening! Your audience can be anywhere, even if you aren't engagement journalism. It's always a challenge. You can really work hard to find who your audience is, but I think engagement journalism as a category within journalism is still young in the sense that people are still used to consuming media in a passive ways.

*[inaudible — Andrea asked the questioner what her podcast is about]*

Andrea: I mean, maybe, it depends what your podcast is about, but I think just having it be known how people engage with you. That can be done pretty easily. But depending on what you do with it, maybe.

Summer: There is the danger of when you say, “We want your questions, we invite you,” but if there isn't a way to bring that into the editorial process to make it a priority, there is a danger in acting like it's true. So you have to make good on it.

*How can student media incorporate engagement into their processes, not just for one piece, but at a foundation of different outlets at universities?*

Summer: Don't be afraid to talk to people. It's your job as journalists to get the hell over being afraid to talk to strangers — I heard about some Hearken students who were like afraid of that — we do work with them, with some colleges and journalism programs that are doing like, man-on-the-street gathering questions, doing their reporting. Some of them were afraid of going out gathering questions, so, get over that. You need to realize that your job is about, you know, who are we trying to reach with this, who are we actually serving with the work we do? So your friends can be that community, or, depending on the coverage you're doing, it could be people across Chicago. How do we plug into community spaces where people are convening? Your local library is great for that — go to Harold Washington and approach them, ask if you can do a community engagement series. That's a very efficient model of doing audience engagement. So yeah, make yourself available, make it a part of your job. You have to be able to talk to people.

Andrea: Some of it is like being realistic about the relationship your institution has with the students you're trying to cover. I think having everyone on the same page about that is super important. But then outside of that, I think you guys can take more risks because you're not businesses, and that's the opportunity to do it. But be really honest about that relationship with your institution. I went to Northwestern's Medill, and that relationship is very real — or, the lack of relationship I should say, between the city and the university. And so yeah, I think that's the

first step, then take risks. I think you guys do a good job of emulating the things you see being done well, which is great.

Julian: As a DePaul grad, I remember conversation — before 14 East — about the DePaulia, and who that serves. And also about who makes the journalism program, versus what the demographics are of the student body. I mean, DePaul is one of the biggest — between DePaul and UIC, some of the biggest commuter schools of four year colleges in the city. DePaul teaches a lot of non-traditional age students. But oftentimes the people you have volunteering to write and practice are dorm-living Lincoln Parkers. So I think the first step in doing effective journalism is getting to know who your audience is. And there's a lot — I remember reading about the demographics of the journalism program. A lot are from out of state. So you have the Chicagoans coming to DePaul for computer science or whatever, and then you have out-of-state students who are just discovering the city, but then are also writing about it. So I think engagement is an opportunity for people to get to know who their fellow students are. Not just within their program, but also the university at large. Did you know that DePaul had seven campuses? Those have all closed, or are about to close. I wonder if a lot of it has to do with institutional neglect. And students there, the faculty there, not really being included in university culture. So much so, the university gave up on it. And I think that's a terrible loss for the university. I remember being in a journalism class talking about — it's funny. DePaul O'Hare campus, if anyone is familiar with Des Plaines, Illinois, where Rivers Casino is, that's where the old O'Hare campus used to be. They demolished DePaul's campus — a beautiful campus, like four buildings, fountain and quad — and they demolished it. Nobody talked about it. There were like 4,000 students. They moved into a new campus, but at one point I mentioned, "Oh my mom works at the O'Hare campus," and they were all like, "What?" We're talking about the struggle between humility and arrogance — you don't know everything about university your first year, or your second.

Get to know the place that you're writing about. Get to know who your classmates are. If you're not — you shouldn't be writing for yourself. If your mission is to serve the university and the student body — DePaul has military veterans. You never hear about that. A commuter student that participates in the military, it's a different life than most people who think about college life. This triangle of best case scenario — Loop, Lincoln Park and my buddy's house in Wrigleyville. That's me being transparent about my lack of objectivity.

*I work at the Sun-Times — what is it like when you go to newsrooms with this, this kind of [framework]?*

Summer: It depends, there's such a spectrum. With Hearken, we used to operate a lot, and still do, within this cheerleader model of — there's like one really excited producer or supervisor who says, "We need to be doing Hearken because these are the folks that can help us engage our

audiences in a certain way. They don't always have the institutional capacity to make it happen. Sometimes they do and they make it happen, sometimes it's uphill, sometimes they're like, "Alright let's see what happens." In a better case scenario when like a newsroom gets Hearken folks, and they become a streamlined system for doing engagement on the management level and just like the footsoldier level of producers and reporters, and there's this buy-in. We haven't, until the last year or so, been like, how do we go out to newsrooms who don't know they need us? It's a lot of inbound interest with a pretty easy value proposition with places like public radio. Then there's some newsrooms that are basically like, "That's our mission, we want to be doing these things where we're serving curiosity, it'll help you survive and things like that." And they realize that it's critical to their mission. And then for some newsrooms, it's a tougher sell. And a lot of them don't feel that they need it. It's a spectrum, definitely a challenge. But there's a challenge on our end — how do we keep supporting tiny newsrooms? Two people, who are the only reporters for hundreds of miles around, and make sure they have the resources to do it? There is this gulf of people who want it and know the mission but can't afford to do it, versus the people who can afford us. Do we want to focus everything on them? I don't know.

Andrea: Yeah I agree. For us, we're super collaborative, it's just what we're known for but a lot of times it is the champion of the newsroom — it is a journalist, not always the newsroom itself. But I mean, yeah, you pick and choose your battles. It wasn't like Twitter beef, but I was critiquing Report for America, and then the dude who runs it was like, "Can we talk?" So I made the choice to have the conversation with him, because, at the end of the day, he says his long game is the same as mine — sort of. So like, how can I advocate — and you just got all this money and a platform — and so how can I have this conversation with you to basically tell you that you're f—g up, and you know you are? How do you admit it and show that you're listening to people? People receive it very differently. We have newsrooms who will approach us and ask, figure out how to be more diverse, can you help us? A lot of that is, well here's how you can pay us, one, but two... I don't know. Part of it is, are they actually receptive, and in those instances, it's like: is anyone receptive? Because if everyone is, great. But in those instances, it's not good if you just have a cheerleader. It really depends on the issue and what's being asked. There are some newsrooms that are great and pretty self aware. We're partnering with WTTE in Detroit, and they know they're not great with community engagement, and the general manager sets that tone — she's aware and really open about it. You have traditional newsrooms like that — somebody in charge who gets it — but then you'll have someone like the Sun-Times who gets upset and has Daryl come in to talk to them and critique them but isn't really listening to us. They're just trying to get us to see them as not as much of a bad guy. It's a funny and weird position to be in.

Julian: My show has been trying to up our engagement game lately outside the traditional talk show and column format, which has its faults. So for about a year we've been trying to sign on

with Hearken, which is a saga. Our station already has a saga with Hearken, per *Curious City*, but to get the shows to use it is a separate issue.

Summer: It's one of those issues where at WBEZ, even though we started it, they have historically thought about it as, we have one show that does this, and Worldview doesn't need to engage their audience in that way — why would anyone else need to? But then secretly pushing it from a lot of angles.

Julian: It's an attitude of, if it ain't broke don't fix it. They said, well, Worldview has an audience, Worldview has a staff, Worldview can do call-ins, but I'm like, we want to do email engagement. And they're like, well you know we have a proprietary email list, you can't do that because you're just one asset in the station. It's internal stuff.

Andrea: You're the cheerleader, there.

Summer: He's a real rabble-rouser. He's also my boyfriend.

Julian: Speaking of transparency.

Summer: It's taught me a lot about WBEZ, but —

Julian: It's a great place to work.

Andrea: I think it's a great place to —

Summer: No newsroom is a good place to work.

Julian: I love my job.

Summer: City Bureau isn't a traditional newsroom, though. Media organizations are tough. There's a lot of energy — interpersonal energy. That's a big part of it.

Julian: Resistance to change.

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*Figure 2. Interview with Jen Sabella by phone. March 1, 2018. Conducted by Brendan Pedersen.*

**How would you define engagement?**

My whole thing is – you write a story, and no one reads it, did you even write a story? There's no point in doing journalism if your journalism isn't impacting people – reach! People sharing and commenting and

honestly just taking information and learning from what you're doing. I know when I was at Huffington Post, it was like an engagement bootcamp. And I took what I learned there – a lot of aggregation, not necessarily something I wanted to do in my career, so I took those skills to DNAinfo. And I was convinced that people would care more about local issues if they were made more palatable. If you write a boring headline, don't post things on Facebook, you're not fast, you don't find people where they are, there's really no point in doing what you're doing. At the Sun-Times, you could see that we were failing epically at the internet. I think that's why DNAinfo was able to build such a strong audience—we had such a strong commitment through social and through other campaigns, we sent letters to readers – 40,000 people all over Chicago – with business cards of our reporters: their names, emails, phone numbers to have a chance to call or email your reporter. We were in your mailbox being like, “hey!” That's true engagement and engaging with your community, not just putting stuff out there and expecting people to find it.

**How has face-to-face interaction affected how you and your reporters have traditionally reached out to these publications?**

For DNA, face-to-face is everything. We did an event with City Bureau a few weeks ago, and there was a study done by the Center for Media Engagement, and they polled 900 Chicagoans, and they asked them if they ever had contact with a reporter. The majority had not, and that was something that DNAinfo was changing. We would have our reporters tweet out what café they were working out of that day, or – and we plan to do this with Block Club too – where we'd host events where our readers could pitch stories, just say hi, or – just giving people a chance to interact with a reporter face to face, with is an old-timey thing. Back in the day when neighborhood newspapers thrived, you used to know who was covering your area. That has fallen by the wayside since advertising was gutted. That is something that we value more than anything – that face to face, our reporters show up to meetings. They talk to people, they don't just live tweet meetings. They go up to people and ask them what they think. They engage with people face-to-face, and that's why we were able to build such a devoted audience to quickly.

**Do you expect your strategy with Block Club Chicago to be different in any meaningful way compared to DNAinfo?**

Our stories are going to be the same, our value of, boots on the ground neighborhood-based reporting is going to be the same, but we're a non-profit, and we rely on our readers. That in itself, having to depend on our readers, it makes people feel a lot more important. It makes them feel more heard. We plan on having a lot more events, in-person come meet the editors, giving people a chance to sound off on what things they want to hear, hosting forums for community leaders. We plan on getting even more involved on a community level now that we're a nonprofit, and now that we are going to be reader funded. That's the main difference, but in terms of the reporting, we'll still be at meetings, we'll have a reporter in the neighborhood, we're not going to report from a downtown desk.

**How do you plan on having readers fund the organization? What are the mechanics?**

We have a subscription model a \$5 dollars a month, \$60 dollars a year, and right now we have a Kickstarter, where you get a one-year subscription for a \$50 dollar donation. But once we're live, we'll have different tiers of membership -- \$5 dollar level, \$10 dollar level, which includes free access to events and special newsletters, -- but the math we did was: if have 3% -- so, the industry standard in the newspaper world is that, people who subscribe are 3% of your readers. And if we have 3% of DNAinfo's

readers subscribing, we would be completely sustainable, based on the editorial side. We would have been able to sustain all our reporters and editors if we had allowed our readers to give us money. When we learned that, that's why we even decided to do this in the first place. It's going to take us a while to get us back to the audience we had at DNA – we have a much smaller team – but we're going to get there. If we can get to about 10,000 subscribers by the end of 2019, we'll be pretty close to sustainable. We have a 16 month runway from a company called Civil, start up funding. And we're going to take sponsorships, grants, foundation money as well. But the majority of our funding we want to come from readers.

**What is the value that engagement brings to a newsroom? What are some of the concrete ways it can?**

The biggest thing is when you see impact from your reporting. If you do a story and nobody sees it, it's not going to lead to policy change. It's not going to lead to any lasting change or impact. Stories at DNA went viral – not BuzzFeed level, but they were shared by a lot of people for being for being small neighborhood stories. We valued being first. If there was something breaking, we were writing it at the desk, and a reporter was on the phone. So there weren't 10 people who needed to sign off on what we were going to post, we were very nimble.

Engagement is a number as far as – we can tell when a story was resonating with people by its Facebook numbers, and if other media outlets were chasing a story and local stations pick it up. That shows people care about that story. It shows reporters what they should keep writing about. When I worked at the Sun-Times, and I think a lot of the time in these newsrooms with an old way of doing things, with these editors who say, "I've been in the business for 40 years and I know what's best," I think that's worthless. I think you need to listen to your audience to see what's best. A lot of times you have old dudes coming in from the suburbs who are dictating what story gets written, and I think that is just a terrible idea. Our whole set-up is – we look to our reporters. Every morning, they would send us 3-5 story ideas. We'd say yes, and they'd go – boots on the ground, living in those neighborhoods – they'd know what people cared about. That's the kind of engagement that we value, and that's what papers need to be doing. I think people hear the word engagement and they think about their 14 social media specialists, and that's not it. You need to make stories, you need to have someone on the desk who knows how to write and make headlines, be nimble with reporters and work with the directly and not act like they're king or queen of the universe. But I think it's dismantling the traditional ideas of reporting power structure. We're all in this together, we all want the same thing, and that is for people to read these stories.

**How does trust play into the community-based, on the ground reporting? How does living in the communities you're writing about build trust over time?**

Ever since DNAinfo shut down, I've had meetings with people all over the city, and people have come to me and said they don't know what to do; they have a story idea but they don't know who to give it to, I don't really feel comfortable talking about it with anyone other than this person. Here's one example: We were out in Chatam, working with one of our video guys, and he was talking about one of the kids he works with, talking about his housing development. And apparently, they built a fence – a security fence – around the development but, after a certain hour, it requires residents to go way out of the way in a really dangerous neighborhood at night to get into their own building. He said that normally he would just text us to say this is happening, but we haven't been able to develop that contact. There's people who just don't know what to do when this kind of thing happens. They might call their alderman, but we – before, we'd be there. That leads to trust. We're not just showing up when there's a shooting in a neighborhood



with a crime scene backdrop. We're telling the stories of the businesses, and the schools and the businesses and the good. People mistrust the media when they're not painting a fair portrait of the place they live in. When you demonize neighborhoods for decades like a place like Englewood has been demonized, is it any wonder they don't trust the media. When we had someone there for DNA, everyone loved her. She wrote, she was writing about the items of local businesses from the Whole Foods in Englewood. She cared about the good things that happened there, and I think that does a great deal for trust in media in general.

**What is the relationship between engagement and collaboration?**

There's a lot of overlap. We would use our readers all the time – sending us pictures all the time, breaking news at events. But I'm also thinking of Google's citizen journalism initiative – you need to have professional journalists somewhere along the way – covering public policy or meetings. There are rules, here, and I think you need to be able to trust that the person covering the story has some knowledge of how this works, and the ethics. One thing that City Bureau does that's really great as far as citizen journalism – they're actually training them, giving them the tools they need. I hate the idea that just anyone can be a journalist. It's offensive to me [laughs]. But also, yes, anyone can go document a proceeding, but there is a skill to being a journalist. You do have to be able to ask questions, and you do have to be able to do research, fact-check. The thing about City Bureau teaching those skills, I think that's awesome. I'm all for the education public to take part in creating the news, and by education I mean people who know the rules, or like, someone covering a debate isn't working for a campaign. As long as its ethical, I'm all for it.

**What are the essential components of an engagement strategy?**

You have to know: who are you serving? I think that's the number one thing. What is your news organization's mission? Do you want to be the voice of Chicago? Do you want to be the voice of the North Side, or the South Side? Do you want to be a one stop shop for all your news? I think the problem that news stations and places like the Sun-Times have is that – why is the Chicago Sun-Times covering national news stories? I don't understand, especially after DNAinfo shut down. You have the opportunity to be the local, local paper! You can hire some of these neighborhood reporters, you can really double down on your local coverage. Stop with the aggregation and the stories about Trump. I think we live in a time when, I'm going to get my political news from the Washington Post, and I'm going to get my local news from a local publication. Newspapers aren't what they used to be, where you got all your news – it's just not that way anymore. The number one thing to ask yourself is – who am I trying to serve? And am I giving the people I'm trying to serve stories they want? And, if they're not reacting to them, if they're not sharing them, if they're not opening your newsletter, then why are you writing your stories? What did I get wrong? Put a new headline on it. Can we take another angle? What can we do, as journalists, to make this important? I think that there's too much of, oh, well, it's just a boring topic. No one wants to talk about TIFs, they're boring. No! You have to put it in English! Then people will engage with it. Your job as a journalist is to make them care. Make them understand it. If you're not understanding, you're not doing your job.

### **How would you define engagement?**

We define engagement in specific way – engagement is not traditional metrics of just clicks, Facebook, social shares, number of eyeballs. That’s just promotion and consumption metrics, rather. It’s not just a matter of getting our work out in front of people or page views, and it’s not just extraction – crowd-sourcing, user generated content. You may think you’re interfacing with the audience, but what are they getting out of the exchange? We define it kind of by a ring – we have some graphics for it – we call it an audience engagement ring where, basically: in the first step, the newsroom is inviting feedback from the public, public gives that feedback, and finally the newsroom has to do something with that. It’s a feedback loop. So unless there’s a way for the audience to shape editorial decisions, that’s not engagement. What is engagement is – newsrooms invite feedback, public gives feedback, and the newsroom is in turn responsive to them. It’s a feedback loop that’s made more and more possible that builds trust, as users can see you doing more and more with your input. We found that engagement increases over time for a particular newsroom after they kick off an initiative when their audience is like, oh! They’re really transparent about the process and how this work. So our model is like a public powered model of engagement that we pioneered at Curious City, and the premise is: your audience asks questions at the starting point at what would typically be the pitch phase, at the assignment phase they get to vote on their favorite questions, and then finally they get to come along for the reporting process. It’s an exchange that both parties can get something out of. And the more you do that and the more you show your audience that this is how the process works, remember, you can ask questions, you can be a part of this, and then you actually show but not tell, “Oh this person Josh came with me to local pubs to ask questions.” If you show people you’re doing this, they’ll be more responsive because they know what they’ll get out of the exchange.

When it comes to “coming along,” that’s the ideal: they can interview sources with you, dig through archival material with you, they can actually be a part of finding the answers they want. Not every newsroom has the bandwidth or resources to do that all the time, and it doesn’t always suit the question. But what’s most important is that you signal to your audience that this story is different, because it came from an audience question, an audience member, this was their question and here’s how we decided to pursue it. You have to be really transparent about that. And you can contact that person and ask them, why were you curious about this question? And then you include that in the story, making them a relatable hook in the story. They might be physically able to go with you, but you can signal they’re a part of it.

### **What would you broadly characterize that Hearken actually brings the newsrooms it partners with?**

We’re a for-profit company. We exist through subscriptions with newsrooms, a year long or more relationship they sign onto with us. So we’re a mixture of a tool set, platform that Jen started to develop at WBEZ with some folks at Thoughtworks, -- the platform of centralized engagement, a lot of newsrooms don’t have the bandwidth to create something like that – so we created a content management system. What you have there are embeddable tools, and I could show you, that you can customize on your website and own the relationships that you’re having with your audience. That goes into a backend – that’s just one part of it. We also help teams plan for engagement. We have a pretty heavy on-boarding part of it, where we do that initial shaping of editorial planning, we come up with an engagement strategy where we

say, who are you going to reach, how are you going to reach them? Then we do ongoing support throughout the year. And, ideally, the metric for success on that would be whether they expand over time, and how they're using it – not a siloed thing. Siloed series can be very successful – they're the bread and butter of how people start and maintain, but if you start to think about the opportunities of, “oh there's a breaking news situation, should we ask the audience for their questions,” or a live event that they can incorporate people into that. The more it kind of permeates through the newsroom, the more proof of success it is, that you're making good.

Our embeds collect name, email address, zip code and then, a really important revenue note – at least in member-funded publications – you can opt into communications with that newsroom or even that isolated series, some weekly thing. That goes into your backend, and you get the emails. That's lead generation. People who weren't familiar or a part of your organization before will come into ask a question and opt-in, and a lot of times they end up giving money. We found that WBEZ got 56 percent new leads exclusively through Curious City – people who weren't already considered leads in the system who asked a question or engaged somehow. We don't hold onto any of that data. We own it, but we're not downloading it or keeping it for ourselves. We don't sell it. Sometimes we'll have a relationship with a newsroom where, contractually they'll owe us, if we subsidize them – Ok, what is the data as a result of your engagement? We goal-set very intentionally at the beginning for metrics of success to have with your engagement effort, and then, is that actually happening for you? We do care about page views, how is that Hearken story looking relative to others. We use that to kind of – it's helpful for consulting, sales, so it's really important to reflect on how it's going.

**What role does Hearken have in deciding to what extent the public should be involved in an editorial processes for each of its clients? Or, more broadly, how do you distinguish the duties of a professional journalist from the input and experiences of an audience?**

The benefit of this process is, it can be a very clear exchange with the audience. What we're doing is, you just get to ask a question. It's very targeted. We recommend, if you're gathering submissions, give them literally 140 characters. What they have to do is come up with a precise question. Questions are a really powerful starting point. We tell people its most powerful if you start at the point of asking questions – not topics – it's very natural for someone to ask a question. Not everyone knows how to put a good pitch together. That is a journalist skill, it's something you have to learn. It just takes more doing. Then – we tell them how to do this, but we don't prescribe anything – but the journalists pick out what's newsworthy or worth pursuing. Where do we think there's a story? Then they try to validate that the audience is interested in by taking a few questions and putting it up to a vote. They're cultivating the worthiness of it by putting it up to a vote. That's also a limited interaction where thousands of people can choose what they want to see. Then, once something wins, you do have the obligation to answer that. Just so that your audience can trust in this process. And then, you get to invite them along. But really it's a controlled process. In terms of curating voting rounds or coming up with a prompt, or what kinds of questions you're looking for. That's really up to the editorial decision-making of newsrooms, and they don't have to answer anything they don't want to answer. That's the difference I think between a lot of different forms of audience interaction and this – you both have power in that situation, what the story will be. But once you're sticking with that and building on it, it really doesn't go too far. But it is transformative to how you do all of your journalism. You do have to be humble and give up some of the power you'd normally have like decisions about what the story will be, but you still have the final judgement.

**I was going to ask you to picture a Venn diagram in your mind between engagement and collaboration, but it sounds like there's a very amount of overlap at Hearken.**

When would they be separate?

**I think collaboration has this focus of action – not just the opportunity but the responsibility to act – whereas engagement can just be listening. You can listen to a large pool of questions and make a decision based on that, but with voting you're being assigned something by an audience. There's some distinction between considering and voting.**

But you have to go back to the original definition of engagement. It's not engagement if you're just gathering questions and not doing anything with it. You don't have to collaborate with an audience member to get to an answer, but it is these windows of – I don't know if would distinguish them as separate actions.

**What are the elements of engagement that every engagement strategy needs to have? Is there a checklist?**

We have best practices that you'd want to have in every digital story. Process is really important to whether or not it succeeds. You can craft a series and have calls to action, but you need to make sure that there are people that can look at what's coming through this backend and bring that into editorial meetings. And then there's reporting resources to actually be able to do it. It's a different kind of reporting, it might take more coordination and time. So if you're not going to prioritize it, it's not going to succeed. The repetition and redundancy of, we're here! You have to be able to invest in that.

**What are the mechanics of building trust of engagement?**

It is a hard thing to measure, but I think what we provide is a way to be transparent to your audience, and they're trusting you because they're understanding more of how the sausage is made. If there's at least this contained series of initiatives that you're doing where you explain, this is how this is going to go down: we're going to go with stories that come out of your questions. When you really drive that home, they know how it works. And then to actually cultivate the trust, you have to follow through on what you promise I think basically, you're providing your audience with a vital service of giving them their information needs. Newsrooms are hanging up this sign that says, "This is where you can find us," and to know they're actually doing something with what you give them, that's a change. It's traditionally been a closed system, zero change for input until post-publication, when there's no chance to weigh in, which is ridiculous, because the audience decides what's relevant and popular. And they're the ones who actually tell you what they need. It's providing that opening and not just being transparent, but keeping on driving home that you're doing this for them, we're not going to do anything weird with your information, this is how it works: and then you show it as you tell the story.

**Why doesn't social media work as well as a platform for engagement?**

Most of our newsrooms need to use social media to promote awareness for this project. But it's not a replacement for engagement. And often, I mean, newsrooms just use social media as a means of delivery, and that's not engagement. It's a push model. The important thing here is owning your relationships, having your own system where you're engaging with the audience. You need channels to get that out there. Your own website is a starting point but you need to make sure you're actually putting it in front of people, like here's our place to ask and whatever. But with Facebook having newsfeed changes that are

opaque to everyone until after they happen, algorithms shifting everything you can see, you know that's not a replacement for doing the work of showing your audience that you're listening to them. If you do that work, you're not as much given up to the whims of these 3<sup>rd</sup> parties. Their missions are not the same as a newsroom. They're for their own profit, so if they realize it's not profitable for them to get you the news you need and that matters to you, they're not going to do it. It's not their job, and they're not opting to do that. Social media can be a great place to cultivate some of the engagement you're already doing, but it's just a tool. It's not a replacement for it, but you can use it to drive home the message of, we're listening.

### **What role does face-to-face interaction have in building trust?**

It's not an infinitely scalable thing. It's not like you can do it with thousands of people. But first all, it's this indispensable face-to—face interaction you develop with one person and then the rest of their network. Because once they see themselves in that story, or you engage and actually get in touch with them, they're going to spread that to their networks. They're going to be much more loyal to your organization forever after that. People stay in touch, and they can just put a face to a name at your organization. But it's not just the person who's a part of the story. When you showcase how the question askers are involved in getting to their own answer, the rest of the audience believes you. They see, that person went along with that reporter who I know to the archives in that library, I want to do that. **It's a relatable hook, an anchor.** It's like, "oh I'm just like this dude who got his question answered." It's a level playing field where they're answering my question, and at least I have a chance to be a part of it. If they see you following through with what you said you would do, they'll trust you.

### **You're the third person I've talked to who's mentioned scalability with a tone of derision. Why is that?**

You can always scale the problem to some extent, just the basics of it. Or, California Public Radio has a governor's race, an KPCC invited a bunch of people to a gubernatorial forum, and they said, ask us your questions for these candidates. They got 1,100 questions, and some of them made it into the event. Which is great: they're holding public officials accountable with their power and access in a way that everyday people don't normally have. You're like a conduit and a vital connection for your community. But now that newsroom is taking those questions beyond that events, where hundreds of thousands of people showed up in partnership with their local TV station – they're taking those questions and asking how many were about education, maybe a hundred? And taking their beat reporters and saying hey, clearly these things matter to the people you're reporting. They got a huge volume of questions that could really multiple depending on the newsroom, and then they're using it to transform how they do their coverage. That's the hope.

### **Anything else you'd like to add?**

I think engagement has become a buzzword. People call any kind of social media stuff engagement. That's not true.

### **I think transparency and engagement are similar terms in that, they're good in theory but can be difficult to execute or articulate in practice.**

And you can say that you value it without there being a chance.

**What are some other places doing engagement well that don't often get recognized for their work?**

We work with 90+ newsrooms at this point. Milwaukee Public Radio we voted as our best Hearken newsroom last year, and they're a very small newsroom. But what they did was take the model and really permeate it into so many projects. They started with a general assignment Curious series where they just had their audience ask questions about Milwaukee, but through that fun series – a lot of food, culture, history questions – there's also the opportunity to ask anything about the city, and they got a ton of questions about segregation, because Milwaukee just has a huge reputation for this. They decided they got enough questions about that, they were going to make it the focus of their Project Milwaukee, a biannual special series about the city. They did wall to wall coverage on that for weeks, and they continued to solicit questions. But they listened to themes that kept coming up and decided what needed more attention. It was cool and ended with a live event, where they brought the sources to talk about it. Then, they launched a project called beats me – basically beat reporters just get together to talk about what they might be missing with their coverages, but eventually it came out that, there was enough support from management, from editors and producers, that reporters were, whether they wanted to or not, they made engagement a priority – it's just baked into the culture of the newsroom. There's a lot of small newsrooms like that you wouldn't necessarily know, you know.

**Have your clients noticed an uptick in revenue based on the work they've done in conjunction with Hearken?**

Yes. We've done a lot of case studies at different angles. We've seen people – depending on their original digital, but KQED was one of our original, oldest Curious cities newsrooms, they've been expanding and doing more. They have like a podcast-first kind of project. What they found with just normal Curious stories, you know like why are people allowed to double park on this street on the weekends – 11-15 times higher page views than normal. That matters to newsrooms. We saw stuff like that. Bitch media had an independent case study done where they realized that people who were engaging them through Hearken – they're nonprofit and very dependent on reader donations – people who engaged through that series were 2-5 times more likely to give or becoming paying donors. A lot of is redefining what success is outside these traditional metrics, but people do still care about them and need to make sure they're connected to those things and goals. We often just see those stories being a lot more popular. We see membership leads, which is crucial.

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*Figure 4. Interview with Morgan Johnson. March 1, 2018. Conducted by Brendan Pedersen*

Morgan Johnson.

**Could you define engagement?**

It's important to note that my background is documentary filmmaking, and with most documentary films we're always thinking about engagement while we're making the film – we're thinking about who the audience is, how we can get in contact with them – how can we update them with progress about the film and get support before we even put it out? My partner, who went to Medill – they don't think about this kind of stuff, working directly with the community, directly with an audience in the same way we do for film. So that's something we think about on a regular basis, the kind of thing that I bring to the team, as a

documentarian: what is the impact of our story? How are we engaging with the audience – for so much of journalism, you’re up in your ivory tower until it’s time to tell a story. We’re fundamentally against that. We need to be out there, out in the community as media makers being active community members. The ways we do that: we have a regular panel series, every first Tuesday of the month, we call them Triibe Tuesdays, where we discuss our stories, we discuss community issues, and it’s a way for our audience to keep us accountable, and for them to put a face to a name, where they can pitch stories and ask us questions, face to face. I think more of that – City Bureau has their public newsroom, where they bring issues to the community to talk in open forum, and I think that’s a very healthy way for media to engage with community.

**What’s the value of engagement when applied to the work you’re doing? What’s the immediate or long-term effect?**

You want your work to have an impact, and if you want it to have an impact, you have to bring it to people, so – I’m not sure – for me, it kind of answers its own question.

**How does the difference in approach between Triibe and something like the Tribune make your work valuable?**

The way that newsrooms are set up in general – and mind you, I don’t have any experience with being in a newsroom, but from what Tiffany tells me, she’s done breaking news reporting for the Orlando Sentential – and newsrooms literally don’t have windows. That’s how you’re separated from the community, and you can get bogged down from your cubicle. I feel like in a way that desensitizes people who are content creating – you *can* focus on the headline that’s going to get us the most clicks when you don’t have a community when you’re writing it, when you’re not looking at the person you’re depicting in a story. And when they can’t hold you accountable – because you have never seen them before. Being so visible and making a conscious decision to include impact and engagement in our stories is a way that it keeps us down on earth – to give communities a chance to tell us when we’ve done something right and when we’ve done something wrong, and for them to feel like we’re approachable. Right now in Chicago, people don’t feel connected to the media. They don’t feel the media speaks for them. I would even say there’s a fear of the media. I’ve gone out to report stories for the Chicago Reader – one story on Riot Fest last year – and I went to Douglas Park, and I was interviewing Black people in that area about how they felt about riot fest. As soon as I pointed a camera at them, they were like, “Hold on, you’re not going to use my name right? That’s not going to be on TV, is it?” There’s a certain fear of the media, in how they’re going to be betrayed. I think that’s after years and years of media constantly depicting media in a negative light. Especially in Chicago, plus, the majority of media’s interactions with the black community have been on the worst day of their lives. We all know that’s the black Chicago – gun violence. So the media rushes to the scene on the worst day of their life, put’s a camera in their face while they’re crying, grieving, they just found out they’ve lost a loved one, and then ask for a comment. Then they go back to the ivory tower. So that creates a very strange relationship and the media. What we’re trying to do is remedy that by being active community members and giving members a voice in trying to listen their concerns with their own stories.

**Are there any ways for members / subscribers of the Triibe to affect decision-making? Coverage?**

We’re a submissions-based platform, so anyone who’s interested in our mission can write for us. We do stress we’re a publication by and for millennials, and we are reshaping the narrative of black Chicago, so

people have to fall within than purview. We do curate and edit content that they bring to us and help develop writers who are interested in writing. Through our platform, The People, that's a direct way for people to get involved with the Triibe, writing an op-ed on an issue that pertains to Chicago. A lot of columns are reserved for seasoned journalists, and we're saying: hey Chicago, you can sound off about any issue you want. We'll edit it, fact-check it, we'll help you – that's one way we give people a direct outlet. The number of submissions tends to vary, and a lot of time the number on our capability to call for stories. It's not that much. We also have a platform called The Work, which is all about showcasing art and written work by Black Chicagoans. Poetry, prose, photo series, people can submit stuff to that as well.

### **What are The Triibe's main sources of revenue?**

We're running a month long fundraising campaign on IndieGogo where we're trying to raise XXX dollars. Otherwise, entrepreneurship is definitely new for everyone on our team, so we started off with literally no capital. We just started putting together stories by ourselves – added a web developer, and we got a grant through the Chicago Digital Media Production Fund for our documentary series, Another Life. A lot of our funding is specific to projects. For our event series – panel series – we don't charge tickets, but we do take income from that from drink sales at a local bar. We're also having a fundraising party on March 10, but it's mostly grant funding so far.

### **What's Triibe's general conception of success, and how do engagement and / or collaboration help you towards those goals?**

Success for us is impact, sustainability. We want to make an impact on the way – in the Chicago media landscape – and then hopefully eventually the national media landscape – to do stories on Black Chicago and, in a bigger way, Black America. One of the reasons we think we can do that is, Chicago has become a code name or a buzz word for Black America. Whenever someone wants to say something bad about black people, they just say, "What about what's going on in Chicago?" We feel like, if we can reshape the narrative of Chicago, if people start to think more deeply about how they consider black America. That would be incredibly successful. Anytime we're able to take a story or something going on in the mainstream media, and say, this is how Black Chicago actually feels about that, and to create an outlet to give Black America the opportunity to talk about stuff that's already going on, that's a win for us. It's also giving black writers a platform. There aren't many newsrooms or platforms that are listening to our pitches. A lot of the stories that are being written for the Tribune, the Reader or whatever, we have to fight to get our stories greenlit because there's such a disconnect between editors and the community, they just wouldn't know what you're talking about. You would only care about certain stories like, if you're black and listen to the radio at night, but it was a story that totally went viral. The editors we pitched to so often have no idea what we're talking about when we pitch stuff like this. Sustainability – we just want to be around. For us to really make an impact, we need to be able to sustain ourselves, and to be the only Chicago-owned black publication. With as much respect to the Defender and Ebony, we want to be here. Right now, the Defender is owned by a Detroit based company. We really would be the only Chicago-owned publication. To make that a viable longstanding thing would be a success.

### **Do you think that Triibe's success could send a message to other predominantly white publications about the viability of black American stories for mainstream audiences?**



I mean it's a lot like what's happening with Black Panther in Hollywood right now. Networks have assumed there's a certain formula to making a blockbuster film – you have to have a certain A list white actor, or it's gonna fail. And I think Black people are realizing we have purchasing power. I think Black Millennials are coming into our purchasing power, and media outlets that don't include us are going to miss out. Triibe prides itself on recognizing that power and hopefully because of that it will grow.

**Anything else you'd like to add?**

I want to talk about Another Life! The documentary series. Because the dominant narrative of Chicago is the gun violence, we wanted to address that narrative, but do it in a deeper, more thoughtful way that doesn't deal with the sensation of it. Another Life follows the lives of black Chicagoans after the cameras have gone away, after that initial sting of losing someone. It's really looking deeply at, how are we grieving, how are we feeling, how are we dealing with the constant trauma of losing a friend, a lover, a sister, a cousin, because that's not being talked about enough. It's really our generation that is gonna have this voice, and the youth that are coming up from under us. I hope the series ends up doing that, really transforming how crime reporting is done here, because I feel like the reporting itself in the old way that it's been done has been traumatic for the black community. When you open a newspaper, you're literally hoping its someone you don't know. We have to think about whether its healthy for our community to turn on the nightly news and have our kids watching the first couple of minutes, which will clearly be about murder and violence, if it's healthy for our community to see images of black death constantly. What does that do to our psyche? That's what we wanted to address out of the gate, and I think we've made a dent in that area.

*Figure 5. Interview with Logan Jaffe. March 1, 2018. Conducted by Brendan Pedersen.*

**As someone who refers to themselves as an engagement reporter, what does engagement mean to you?**

The way that I define — and the way that ProPublica defines it — engagement reporters is — we're reporters. We do journalism and everything that we do we do to fuel the reporting. So, unlike — I saw the New York Times posted a job listing for engagement editor, because I'm always curious as to how other institutions are defining it. So I have to answer this question in a way that's very specific to what I do. I guess more abstractly, I like the way that our engagement **Terry Paris??** looks at this, is that, stories exist around us all the time. There is the kind of old-school way of thinking about this is, you go and find a story and you let it out into the world and you don't really follow up. But engagement reporters would think about that in terms of stories are around us: you're trying to make connections and create ways of communication and input from communities, places and people you're particularly reporting on, basically to fill a gap that a reporter — that is best filled by literal people. It's not necessarily always getting a quote, or if you're always publishing human-centered stories. It's about, how do we make ways for people's input to really shape the reporting that we do. The other end of that is then making sure that those people are able to get that reporting in a way that is natural to how they would like that information and in a way that makes sense.

**On a more concrete level, how does that manifest? What does your day-to-day job look like?**

It's interesting because I'm still trying to figure that out in the ProPublica Illinois way. There's not a set way to do this, but in New York, the two engagement reporters there work very closely with a small group of reporters, maybe 1 to 3 at any given time, really focused on a body of work. They're considered co-reporters for a story, and what they do is craft strategies — I don't want to say campaigns, but — I'll give you an example. Ariana Toobin in New York has been working with a reporter on a whole body of work on machine learning, algorithms and bias, they basically were looking to do, people wrote in on age discrimination on Facebook, something about ads that were for companies looking to hire people, but on Facebook you can target who is going to see your ads. But with job postings, it can be illegal — it's illegal to do that. So what they came up with was a crowd-sourcing tool through Facebook — a Facebook chat bot — that people can submit on Facebook right when they encounter these types of ads, and the bot can follow the link and ask the person questions. So the goal was to engage with people where they were, where people could basically be reached in an environment where they were actually doing the reporting. So that's pretty cool. So to your question about the day-to-day, it would be working with reporters really closely to come up with, keep tweaking and picking away, working on an engagement plan to keep getting that input and tweaking it all the time. And I mean, frankly, a lot of engagement reporting can just be emails and sorting through people's responses.

**And when you're talking about reporters, are you talking about in or outside of ProPublica?**

Oh in-house.

**Do you think of yourself as more of a reporter or a communications strategist? Is it worth our time to distinguish between the two?**

It is worth our time. I consider myself a journalist, and I think engagement is just a way of doing journalism like a data reporter uses numbers to get stories. An engagement reporter — the way I see my work — it's being able to make work informed by a specific community.

**What is the value of engagement work between an audience member and a newsroom? What are the ways that manifests?**

In my mind, it's relationships. It's fickle to measure trust, but when you can develop relationships with people who may or may not be who you reached out to, or come to you based on a piece of reporting or not, you just meet them and are interested in having their thoughts trickle up into your organization somehow, if you can keep talking to that person, if something transcends beyond a single piece of work, I'd consider that, when it comes to success and trust — to bring it back to fake news, people don't trust the media, but they trust people. And you have to earn that through relationships, and you have to live up to those reasons why they should trust you; A lot of that takes time. I think of it as how you would build a trust-filled relationship with anybody. Why do I trust my neighbor? Do I trust my neighbor? They've watched my cat once or twice for nothing and my cat's still alive! So, I think it's just making relationships.

**What are some of the ways in which you find yourself establishing face-to-face trust?**

One thing that we're working on but haven't started yet is — we're partnering up with a community theatre company, and I'm really excited to see how that works. But I think the reason why that was appealing, why it was a worthwhile mechanism is because, one, you're in a face to face environment, and you're not necessarily going in to have a formal discussion about something intellectual, or even a

specific piece of reporting. I think the goal of this sort of thing is to be able to create a space in which people are comfortable and encouraged — well, comfortably uncomfortable, I guess? To be able to talk about problems they see in their communities, or if they're frustrated with media, to be able to express that. And I think what's great about that for us is that, we can come in in a very kind of honest way and say, "we're in Chicago, we don't know a whole lot about you, we're not going to pretend to but we're here because we want to learn, meet you." I think admitting and not being intimidated by the fact that, a large part of the state that's not Chicago — there is some animosity there.

**Right, because you're not ProPublica Chicago, you're ProPublica Illinois.**

Right, and I see that as our number one challenge as an organization. It's really important to cover stories that aren't just about Chicago, but are *of* Chicago. You have to diversify the way you even think about approaching a story, and the way you're writing. It's bridging that understanding of our reporters minds how they can even write certain things. But just saying and communicating that to people is really important.

**There is still this intellectual thread that journalism can't be done by just anybody. It needs a degree of rigor to navigate the ethics, etc. etc. How do you seek a balance between the strictures and expectations of professional journalism versus the need, the real need to bring people into that process?**

That's a great question. I like thinking about journalism as the pursuit of facts which can *lead* to truth. And by inviting more people into the way you report can help you get a sense of individual truths — of the way people see themselves in relation to whatever story — a meta story — there is. We just put out a story about parking tickets and debt in Chicago, and how poor residents that live in mostly African American neighborhoods are disproportionately affected by parking ticket debt. But we've also been hearing from people since the story came out who are wealthier, whiter, who also have found themselves in debt in some way. Both versions are true! Both experiences are true. but the fact is that one community is getting more screwed over than another. So I think being able to — I'm thinking about this way too abstractly.

**We can take a step back. There are a lot of people who reject citizen journalism out of fear that it will compromise a journalist's objectivity somehow, when you bring communities in and put yourself, when you go in on their behalf, you're not just telling sides of a story, you're having people craft your story with you. In your mind, is there a line where that goes too far, or is that something that you're not really worried about?**

In my mind, if you have these reservations about engaging with people in that way, you're missing out on opportunities on stories that you might not even know about, stories that you never thought of that you haven't invited into your understanding of what could be a story, what people actually care about, how you can serve a community. Is there a line? Yeah, and that's where the reporting and journalism comes in. You're trying to make buckets, where you craft a narrative based on how you organize people reactions, responses and participation in something, and then you have to apply the same journalistic scrutiny and ethics, and all of that to this narrative that has emerged to reaching out to people.

**Does ProPublica Illinois have concrete mechanisms in place for an audience to have a direct role in the decision process?**

I mean, because we're so new, we're always encouraging people to send us story ideas. We don't have a fancy Harken system in place, but it's pretty basic. And what we're trying to do is communicate with people that our entire newsroom is open to what they have to say. So as far as having a direct line, I mean, people can call us! We're doing this thing right now called Ask ProPublica Illinois, where people can just email us questions about how journalism works. It's not, you know, voting on questions or things we should report on. What I would actually like to see more of us this engagement-based approach to journalism baked more into our reporters, so, if they have an idea, they can keep in mind: "what do I not understand? What am I missing?" Being more perceptive or intuitive as far as it goes with their own brain with how they report things. One of the ways to do that is to use input from people.

### **Why isn't social media enough to constitute real engagement, and what do you as a reporter do to cross that gap?**

This isn't entirely true, but in my head I usually think: People on Twitter aren't real! And I try to say that to the newsroom too. Social media is social media users. Even though it's tied into our lives for so many users in so many different ways, it's not the end all be all of — it's not — in my head I'm basically just getting at, well, there's more to life than that, basically. I think by using the same channels over and over again, it can get blended into the same habits of social media, which in turn depends on the habits of social media users, being able to directly reach people. With our property tax story, Sandija, data reporter here, did an analysis and got all these properties that had not been properly reassessed. We did printouts of our story, wrote up a cover letter, and mailed them over to these properties, because we really want to make sure that people who are property owners can at least see the kind of work we're doing on property taxes. We invited people to this event in the cover letter that we just hosted with City Bureau.

### **Did people come?**

Nope. [laughter] In fact, right when you got here, I saw there were six returned envelopes on my desk from it. But! But that's not to say — it's hard to measure the success of that kind of strategy, but it's important to still do. Even if we just get a few calls. It's a huge thing to ask someone to call in, even respond to us, come to events... that's a big ask.

### **What are elements of a good engagement strategy that are always going to be there, versus what will probably have to be different for everyone?**

The most important thing if you're really going to commit to engagement is having it not be an afterthought. Engagement for engagement sake to appear to be engaging with your audience or even just — what does the audience think? We want to include them! In my mind, it's: What do they have to say about what you've done so far, and how can we respond.

### **Have you run into issues with "scalability?" Where a solution you've come up with just doesn't apply widely enough?**

I've encountered that as less of an issue because we approach this on a story to story basis. We're not really after — I'm lucky, because I haven't had to hear the word "scalability" in a while. I'm very happy about that, because in my mind, if the goal is to do journalism, that's a problem. There's something to be said for however other people are defining engagement, or BIG engagement, but we're not after getting a ton of page views. It's about making the best work on a story by story basis.

**How does engagement at ProPublica Illinois translate to some of the revenue strategies that the organization is pursuing — memberships, subscriptions, donation? How or why would engagement translate to revenue?**

I'm not the best person to be talking about this, but at ProPublica we're always talking about the moral impact of stories, the potential for change in the world. Our organization values — and that's why we're engagement reporters and not engagement strategists. Because, I think by having a type of reporter who can engage with these communities over and over again over time, and keep track of certain communities, you, ideally would see those players in stories begin to change things, slowly. And if they're really involved with your news organization or story, it increases the opportunities to have actual, meaningful impact. I think impact is the selling point in terms of money and funding and all that, but if we can point to things like that, that makes a clear case to hire people like engagement reporters.

**Does trust follow impact?**

I think it depends on the audience. I don't like to think of ProPublica's audience as one particular thing. A lot of my work is concerned with building the trust on a lower level and, I'm not thinking about, "How do I report in a way, have a relationship in a certain way to *achieve* this outcome?" that's not what I'm thinking about. But over time, what I'm thinking about as a story would evolve — how do we make people's voices to help them make their voices heard in a way that can effect change. But when it comes to the Twitter people in my head who I don't think of as real, it helps to be able to point to a thing you've done. I think that builds trust too. That's a secondary or third happiness point for me.

**Between trust, transparency and collaboration — how do these three match up?**

I'm going to be a little speculative here, but ProPublica in New York is working on this incredible maternal mortality series of women who die in childbirth or due to complications. One piece that was a really interesting — in terms of transparency in journalism — and unexpected piece, and this was a kind of piece that was created as a result of the kinds of responses they were getting — is this one about advice from mothers, if this has happened to you. It's advice about what to do from really small things, to resources, to "if you hemorrhage, don't clean up." And it's heartbreaking and horrible, but it could be so helpful for somebody. That whole story was framed as, "we've been asking people for their stories, experiences, and one thing that's been coming up are these tidbits on advice or what they wish they would have known, and so we're going to take this and make it into a piece." So at the top, you're transparent about the process, and it's also building trust with a future audience. Let's say if someone is affected by this issue, there's no other piece like that out there. And it's hardly even talked about before this. So if you come across ProPublica through this article, and it really speaks to your situation, that's trust. Collaboration too, you're taking their words to create this journalism.

**Who does good engagement work in Illinois that may not be as well recognized?**

[long self-reflective pause] I mean, I'll say: I don't even know if *we're* doing a good job. It's hard to gauge, and we're new. I think that, what I see overall is that there's more itching to do this. Hopefully, I think a good outcome would be that organizations over time realize they have less and less of a choice. I'm really excited to see what Block Club Chicago will do. Any situation in which you're out reporting with somebody who asked the question and, I mean, that's a success, when you can get someone out in the public reporting with you. That's the Curious City model, and to me when that happens it's very successful.

**This is really hard to talk about concretely because trust is so abstract.**

I will say that, ever since Trump said “fake news,” and everybody else started saying “fake news,” it just became this *thing*. And because there are so many lies, it’s harder to get at truth.

**Media basically found out that they have something to prove.**

Right, and you have to earn it. I think media organizations spend too much time talking about trust rather than trying to figure out how to earn it.

**You mentioned engagement becoming more talked about in newsrooms — is that just lip service? Is the change in mentality meaningful?**

I don’t know. I think it’s all those things: popular, necessary, a buzzword, also really confusing to people, the term is confusing. The reasons an organization would do it are all different, and I wouldn’t expect it to just be one thing. But it should be driven by mission. It’s a way to serve and build and grow and do journalism. That’s also kind of a luxury.