

Don't Just Engage. Organize!

Build deep relationships to enhance community trust in newsrooms

Organizing is a powerful approach to building relationships and deepening trust, but it's an approach most journalists aren't familiar with. The principles and practices organizers use can be powerful tools when adapted to the newsroom, and can be incorporated into a reporter's everyday work to:

- build trust and relationships with people across a community,
- uncover underreported stories,
- better share information with community members,
- learn from the people an issue most affects,
- lift up unheard community voices,
- collaboratively identify solutions, and
- heighten the impact of reporting.

News Voices has always taken an organizing approach to supporting quality local news by working directly with communities.

When we say organizing, we don't mean "activism." Organizing is fundamentally about listening to people tell you what they need and what kind of world they want, and working collaboratively to make it happen.

This work requires us to build relationships based on shared values, and out of those relationships cultivate an organized constituency that's ready, willing and able to demand change and hold the powerful accountable.

This is called building power.

Since journalists and newsrooms have access to information in communities, have relationships with people in power, and have a platform, organizing in the context of journalism **requires sharing power**. And sharing power starts with shifting away from a traditional newsroom culture of transactional relationships to a culture that prioritizes deep listening and collaboration to build relationships that are rooted in community.



Building strong relationships

Take a moment. Who are your closest friends, coworkers, family members? What are their names? Do you have their phone numbers, email addresses, or some other way to get in touch with them? What are they experiencing in their lives? What are their needs? Their desires? How can you support them?

Now pause. Are you able to answer those same questions about people in the community your news organization serves?

Your answer may range from “not at all” to “yes, definitely.” For many, it’s a solid “somewhat.”

As journalists and news organizations seek to contribute to strong, informed, powerful communities, relationship building is key.

Journalists generally have strong, established relationships with local police departments, local government officials and spokespeople for well-funded corporations or nonprofit organizations, and they constantly tend to those relationships. However, reporters’ relationships with grocery-store cashiers, emergent artists and grassroots organizations tend to be weaker.

Cultivating people in the community as experts, on equal footing, and working collaboratively on newsgathering diversifies and grows the base of people whose voices help inform the public. This is the first step to building trust.

That trust will translate not only into attention for your work, but to investment from the community that will make that work more sustainable.



Mapping your community

First, identify people you should begin building relationships with. Make a list or spreadsheet of all those individuals and groups, their contact information, where they're located, what role they play in the community, and whether their work or members are represented in local news.



It's not uncommon for reporters to frequently quote and lift up as community spokespeople the same "grasstop" leaders. But such leaders can, intentionally or unintentionally, hoard power and focus on their own experiences rather than the experiences of an entire community.

You can correct for this problem by continually reaching out to new people and using relationships with leaders to connect with people who are less high-profile. For instance, once you build a relationship with faith leaders or nonprofit directors, ask them to connect you to members of their congregation or the constituencies they serve. Think about who isn't being quoted, and how you can reach them.

Questions to consider:

- Which communities have been historically underserved or underrepresented in local news?
- How are you prioritizing outreach to historically marginalized communities, such as communities of color, queer and trans communities, unhoused people and formerly incarcerated communities?
- With which communities could your relationships be stronger?
- In which neighborhoods do you need to build relationships to have a fuller understanding of your community?
- Who could you connect with — not as a source but as someone you could learn from and converse with?
- Who are the less obvious stakeholders?
- If there are community members who are affected but not often heard from, how could you include their voices in the story?

Reaching out and showing up

Too often, we hear community members say that the only time they meet or hear from a journalist is when the reporter wants something from them, like a quote for a story or a reaction to a tragic event. **Community members tell us all the time that this transactional approach and extractive way of forging a relationship is one of the biggest barriers to trusting a journalist.**



When you reach out and introduce yourself, think about how you can form a reciprocal relationship with people instead of treating them as a potential quote for your story. Show up to community meetings when there isn't a story to cover so you can meet people on their terms.

Questions to consider:

- What have people's experiences been like with local news? How could this shape their interactions with you?
- What is the best way to reach out to people? Do they use email or social media, or would in-person conversations be most effective?
- How can you find places to talk to people face to face?
- Are there neighborhood meetings you could attend?
- Do your digital conversations take place outside your own newsroom's channels? Are there digital spaces you haven't previously explored (like Facebook groups, chat rooms or message boards)?
- Is there a civic organization or someone you have an existing relationship with that could help you connect?
- How can you work this type of outreach into your work plan or timeline?

Meet face to face

While you can use digital tools, the phone or social media to make introductions, set up meetings, or connect with a large number of people, the best way to build a relationship is to meet in person. If you want to create a relationship based on trust, you've got to sit down with community members.



Digital outreach also limits you to the people who have internet access, and among those folks, to people in your social networks or people who are actively paying attention to your outlet's accounts or the hashtags you use.

Picking the right spot to meet is important. Think about spaces that are comfortable and welcoming to the person you want to meet, accessible through various forms of transportation, and either free or inexpensive to park near. If it makes sense, consider inviting them to the newsroom so they can get a sense of what you do and how a newsroom operates.

Questions to consider:

- How can I choose a meeting place that works for this person's work, family or childcare needs?
- Has this person ever met with a journalist before?
- Is the meeting place welcoming to this person and conducive to one-on-one conversation?
- If some sort of financial transaction is involved (coffee, food, alcohol), is it affordable for them?
- Is it close to free parking or public transportation?
- If I invite them to a newsroom, how can I be aware of the power dynamics in play so they feel welcome?





Photo: Fiona Morgan

Listen and acknowledge the whole person

Developing stronger relationships with everyday people allows reporters to tap into a community's collective knowledge. This informs not only how a journalist approaches individual stories but also how the reporter covers the community as a whole.



People can tell whether you care about them. Community members should be treated with dignity and respect, even if you remain skeptical about their motives. Residents' interactions with reporters shape how willing they are to connect. If you approach people with a spirit of openness and engage in active listening, the community will be more likely to trust you.

When you listen as an organizer, you aren't listening for quotes. You're taking in a range of concerns and intersecting perspectives.

Ask people what they think of news coverage of their neighborhoods. Ask them what the news has gotten right and what it's gotten wrong. Ask people what they think of your media outlet and listen to the answer, no matter what it is. You can use this feedback to build trust and correct the record.

Questions to consider:

- Consider how members of the media may have misused their power against the community you're reporting on. Do residents have good reasons to be wary?
- When you ask people to speak to you, what potential risks are you asking them to take?
- Are you sure the people you're talking to share your understanding of what terms like "on the record" and "on background" mean?
- What questions could you ask to get to know a community member as a whole person rather than as a potential source for a quote?
- Are there ways you can check in regularly?
- How can you share some of who you are so the people you're connecting with will begin to share stories about themselves? Consider bringing work you've produced with you so people know what kind of reporting you do.

QUESTIONS TO ALWAYS ASK YOUR COMMUNITY

What types of information do people need?

Asking about their needs helps you better understand how your reporting can contribute to the community rather than how people can help you. Asking these kinds of questions leads to news coverage that's more responsive and has greater impact.

Questions to ask:

- How do people in this community get information?
- Do all people get news from the same place, or are there multiple outlets to choose from?
- Besides conventional news sources, where do people find out what's going on? Do those sources differ by neighborhood, language spoken or other factors?
- How can you seek out the questions community members have on a topic before you start asking your own questions?
- How will people see or hear your story? Are there ways you can make it more accessible?
- Does your coverage include critical analysis of the situation? Are you getting beyond documenting incidents to exploring why something is happening and why the current system is or isn't working?
- What facts and context does your coverage provide that will help people become more engaged in civic affair and pursue democratic solutions?
- How do you know, beyond measuring clicks and shares, that your coverage is useful to people?



Who else should I talk to?

Journalists are used to picking up the phone or knocking on the door when they want to reach out to someone and get information. But when you're organizing, it's important to work through existing community networks.

As you meet with people, ask who else you should speak with. As you ask that question of each person you meet with, you'll get better connected with people who more fully represent a community.

Nurturing these connections helps you build a constituency. When people help you out, they become invested in your success.

Follow-up questions to ask people:

- Who else should I talk to about this? Could you help introduce me? If not, who could?
- Whose voice isn't being heard on this issue but should be?
- Which meetings or places should I go to to meet people who aren't being heard?
- Which online spaces should I check out to learn what's happening and who the best people to speak with are?

What stories are we missing? What needs to be reframed?

People are experts on their communities, and they may surprise you with information they have that isn't already on your radar.

Even if a story is already being reported, there are always opportunities to dig deeper. This allows you to engage with people the story affects, as it may broaden your perspective and help you learn what's missing from the coverage.

Most of all, listen to how the story lands with people. Journalists want to believe they're reporting the truth, not spinning it. But intentionally or not, reporters often create or reinforce narratives about people or places that can obscure the deeper truths that people in the community are living.

Questions to ask yourself or others:

- What are the issues people are talking about that aren't getting coverage?
- What narratives are emerging from issues that are being covered? How does your coverage contribute to or challenge that narrative?
- Who does that narrative serve? Who does it harm?
- Does that narrative reflect the lived reality of the people this issue affects? How do you know?
- What opportunities are you creating to allow stakeholders to weigh in on the narrative?

Reporting with — not for — your community

Journalists play invaluable roles when they provide information that holds the powerful accountable and promotes civic engagement.



However, giving “voice to the voiceless” is the wrong mindset to use when thinking about your role as a reporter in a community. That mindset can be patronizing — and in marginalized communities (communities of color, queer and trans communities, formerly incarcerated communities, etc.), it can reinforce structures that promote White supremacy and other forms of oppression.

People have voices, but instead of being amplified, they are sometimes ignored, misrepresented or silenced.

Think about how your work elevates unheard voices in the community, especially those of people of color and other communities the media have misrepresented or maligned. Draw on residents’ knowledge to create useful stories that respond to community needs and promote community-driven solutions.

Questions to consider:

- Are you embracing the community or keeping yourself removed from their knowledge, perspectives and experiences?
- How can you share your platform and power to make community members equal partners in creating journalism?
- How can you make your reporting more transparent to give people a clearer understanding of how you do your job?
- How can you invite people into the newsgathering process using either digital tools or in-person engagement?
- What spaces are you creating to allow stakeholders to weigh in on ongoing community issues or the journalism you’re producing?
- Are you seeking out the questions community members have on a topic before you start asking your own questions?
- If you’re holding a community event, how can you promote inclusive and equitable conversation rather than top-down presentations or panel discussions?



Following up

One meeting is not enough. Relationship building is not a one-time thing. It's a process, and it takes time and sustained effort, especially in communities where challenges are entrenched and trust in institutions is low.



Keep showing up for your community allies and in public spaces. Cultivate community relationships just like you would cultivate good sources: by checking in, asking how they're doing, meeting them just to say hi and learn more about them.

You may progress to a place where you're maintaining relationships, rather than building new ones, and that's a great place to be. But it never really ends.

Questions to consider:

- What opportunities are there for you to show up in the community your organization serves?
- How can you cultivate community relationships as part of your everyday work?
- Who haven't you checked in with in some time, and how can you change that?
- How are you setting expectations with people you meet so they know what to expect of you, how often you'll be in touch, and which stories you can (or can't) deliver on?
- How are you asking people what their expectations are or how you can do better?
- What type of gathering could you host to keep people interested and engaged?
- How will you keep the community informed about the progress of reporting you're doing based on information they've given you?
- How will you show people you've made good use of their time and effort?

And remember...

As you nurture these relationships, stories will emerge and trust will build. And when you tell those stories, you deepen that trust by reporting with accuracy, honesty, transparency and the consent of those you've worked with.

Building trust will mean working through misunderstandings and miscommunication. Working through those misunderstandings is just as important as the more pleasant aspects of relationship building.

You may also find yourself having to answer for your newsroom's past coverage of a community — or for that matter, any newsroom's coverage. Negative feedback on media coverage offers you an opportunity to listen without defensiveness. Working through these tough conversations helps you forge deeper, trusted relationships and build the strong, informed communities we all want to be part of.

This guide is based on our organizing approach to journalism that centers community. We've worked with thousands of people across New Jersey and North Carolina on developing ways to strengthen relationships between newsrooms and the public, and finding new models to engage people in reviving, strengthening and transforming local media.





Photo: Timothy Karr

About Free Press

News Voices is a project of Free Press, a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan organization fighting for your rights to connect and communicate. We seek to change the media to transform democracy to realize a just society.

Free Press was created to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape our media. We believe that positive social change, racial justice and meaningful engagement in public life require equitable access to technology, diverse and independent ownership of media platforms, and journalism that holds leaders accountable and tells people what's actually happening in their communities.

News Voices was launched in 2015 to build power with communities so residents have a stronger voice in how local journalism can be revived, strengthened and transformed. We've held dozens of public forums that brought together community members and journalists, launched creative community-led journalism collaborations, partnered with newsrooms to work more closely with their audiences, run workshops to train reporters on how to use organizing strategies in their newsgathering, developed resources for the public to amplify news coverage of untold stories, and campaigned for legislation to invest in innovative news and information projects.

We're building a network of participants, allies and volunteers, and we'd like you to be part of it. Contact us at newsvoices@freepress.net for more information, or follow us online at FreePress.net, on Facebook at [facebook.com/freepress](https://www.facebook.com/freepress) or on Twitter [@freepress](https://twitter.com/freepress) with the hashtag [#NewsVoices](https://twitter.com/NewsVoices).

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