

Gathering Toward Solutions

A Community Event Playbook
for Journalism Collaboratives



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Introduction to This Guidebook

Journalists have traditionally understood their role as a three-step endeavor consisting of gathering facts, organizing them into a coherent story and releasing that finished article or broadcast segment into the universe without thought to any further action.

Sure, it is certainly gratifying to hear from readers or viewers or listeners offering testimonials on how a particular story made a positive impact in their lives, or watch some official jailed because of improper conduct uncovered in the course of a dogged investigation. These are just causes for celebration.

These rewards, however, were and often continue to be virtually always serendipitous, and never the result of an intentional strategy designed to establish a two-way, ongoing dialogue with those groups served by the news outlet. Any interaction of this type was typically handled by the community relations department and ranged the gamut from giveaways of ceramic mugs and tote bags to support of educational activities and local festivals.

Now, faced with a trust crisis and growing demographic cohorts, including younger generations, that are disengaging from the news, journalism must rebuild its connections to the communities it serves in a meaningful way that goes beyond and complements the creation of content. As the great journalist and editor Cole Campbell put it, “we need to reinvigorate journalism’s conversation-keeping tradition.”

News professionals must reorient themselves to think of readers, listeners and viewers as more than just sources or “the public” in the abstract. Instead, journalists must embrace a view that sees the members of the public as active participants in an ongoing and meaningful knowledge exchange; in short, journalists must engage in continuous deliberation and conversation with audiences.

Solutions Journalism Network has always recognized the potential of leveraging solutions journalism storytelling to establish a deeper, stronger connection with a community.

For the past three years, we have been working actively at the intersection of solutions journalism and collaboratives. When a group of news organizations works jointly to report on a particular challenge, it increases its potential to change the entrenched narrative around this topic. If, in addition, the collaborative couples its newsgathering work with an effective audience engagement strategy, the capacity for examining an entrenched narrative with fresh perspectives and finding constructive answers significantly expands.

Reimagining and strengthening connections with the audience is the path to continued relevance and increased credibility and impact.

This handbook provides essential and practical information on how collaboratives can think about an audience engagement event and pull it off successfully. While this guide is geared specifically to collaboratives, individual news organizations can certainly learn from its insights.

This guide is made possible by the generous support of the Knight Foundation. Special acknowledgment must go to Delaney Butler, program coordinator for the SJN Local Media Project, for stewarding the logistics, and to the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, whose members have provided valuable examples of how to engage with citizens meaningfully not only by providing trustworthy information but also by listening carefully.

And, of course, our deepest gratitude to Alicia Bell, author of this work and truly a community organizer extraordinaire.

Liza Gross
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Community as Collaborator

The future of journalism is happening inside and outside of newsrooms. It's happening in hollers in the South where there have been no trustworthy local newsrooms for years. It's happening in alleyways and in restaurants. It's happening in person, and it's also happening online.

The future of journalism includes journalists, and it includes so many other people who have never once considered themselves bearers of the news. Community organizers will play a role in the future of news. Baristas will play a role in the future of news. There will be gardeners and retired people and students and actors. All of us will be there. And all of us will need information, stories and community.

This means that as we build collaboratives to explore and practice solutions journalism as a key component of the transformation, expansion and contraction that journalism is experiencing, we cannot collaborate only in the places we're familiar with. Collaboration cannot happen only within the traditional confines of a newsroom — whether it exists remotely or in a brick-and-mortar location somewhere. And we cannot collaborate only with those we feel more safe collaborating with — other journalists.

While our journalism collaboratives may initially include other newsrooms and established community institutions, our collaborative work must also incorporate our communities because they sustain and carry us in the present and into the future.

This is a guide about how we strengthen the muscles we will need for the collaborative present and future we are building, focusing specifically on one activity: community events.

There are many ways we engage with and build relationships with our communities. Events exist as touchstones in that process. This is a guide about how to do them well.

You Can Use These for Any Event:

6 Questions

1

Who are the members of your community?

2

**What are your relationships with them currently?
If no relationships exist, what is your relational history?**

3

Why do you want to engage with them?

4

**How deeply are you willing to bring them into collaboration with
your newsroom or newsroom collaborative?**

5

Is there anything you're afraid of or nervous about? What can you do to overcome that?

6

How will you show them that spending time with you will be worthwhile?

Before Any Event



Before any event, it is important to establish a few expectations:

What is your purpose and what are your intended outcomes?

Your responses to Question 3, “Why do you want to engage with [your community]?” can help establish your purpose and outcomes. Purpose and outcomes can be easily conflated. One way to think about their differences is:

PURPOSE: What is your desired result?

SAMPLE PURPOSES:

- Seed timely journalism that’s steeped in community information and storytelling needs
- Uplift the voices and stories of disabled communities of color

OUTCOMES: What do you hope will be different in the world as a result of your event? How will you measure your desired result?

SAMPLE OUTCOMES:

- Community members have a better understanding of how to partner with journalists and newsrooms.
- Both journalists and non-journalists feel comfortable reaching out to each other for insight, story ideas, support and collaboration opportunities.

NOTE: After you determine your outcomes, consider what roles various collaborative members will need to play in order to ensure that the outcomes are possible.

Who is going to help make these things possible?

This is where you identify your partners. If you're part of a newsroom collaborative, partners are already built in, and the task here is to distribute the workload, ensuring instructions are clear and there is a firm commitment to deliverables. One collaborative participant that fails to live up to a promise could seriously compromise the effort of the group.

Even if you are not in a collaborative, or especially if you are not in a collaborative, there are probably more people or organizations to consider as possible partners:

Are there additional newsroom partners that can help this event reach more people in your community?

Who are the non-newsroom partners that can help with the event content and outreach strategy?

Here it is important to consider people or organizations you may not have partnered with before. Think outside the box. Who has influence? Who is already building community? This can include: churches, restaurants, community organizations, barbershops and hair salons, and other places to engage with people who you wouldn't usually engage with.

To help plan your event, here are two resources:

[A Fill-in-the-Blanks Event Planning Template](#)

[A Fill-in-the-Blanks Run of Show](#)

NOTE: Consider what assets your partners bring to the project. For example, a broadcast partner may be able to create an outreach video; an organization with strong graphic designers can create digital outreach images; a library partner can provide facilitation support.

A Survey of Community Events

There are many types of community events you could organize. The shape of your event should be informed by your goals, purpose and outcomes. Oftentimes, the amount of support from your partners in the planning and execution process depends on how many opportunities you've created for them to be engaged. If you want deeper collaboration on the event, start from the beginning as you decide on the event shape. If you've already decided on the event shape, partners will look to you for more gatekeeping in direction, leadership and guidance. Both of these planning models can be successful at different times.

It's really important here to consider the purpose of your event. Are you trying to raise organization awareness, cultivate relationships, crowdsource information, generate revenue or something else? An event that succeeds at cultivating relationships and crowdsourcing information may not be the same event that generates revenue, but it can be.

As you are considering purpose, analyze whom you would like to participate. Is this an intergenerational event? An event aimed at a specific age range? Do you want parents or families to attend? If so, what is your plan for youth engagement?

Many of us are familiar with panels, speaker series and "meet the reporter" type events. These serve as important sources of journalism, especially for people who learn and process information better via verbal storytelling, questioning, conversation, etc. To make these events more interactive, build in opportunities to garner participant feedback and engagement. Consider how this participant engagement can be carried into your newsroom or newsgathering process.

In addition to the more traditional event formats mentioned above, the following is a sampling of event shapes with a spicier flavor for which people have created guides:

ARTIST COLLABORATION

Because art is vast, artist collaborations can take a variety of forms. One type of artist collaboration could be hosting an artist residency where the resident creates art derived from reporting that you or your newsroom are creating. The subsequent events could include show openings or closing, artist talks, etc. WDET, Detroit's public radio station, collaborated with artists to produce "[Framed by WDET](#)," an audiovisual series "integrating photography and storytelling to tell the story of ethnic and cultural communities throughout metro Detroit." The best way to develop events based on artist collaboration is to identify artists you'd like to partner with and co-create the collaboration. This ensures that the project is mutually beneficial for everyone involved.



COMMUNITY EDITS

Community edits are a form of [crowdsourcing reporting](#) and involve the audience early and often in the newsgathering process. The edit can be of an important piece of print or broadcast journalism, but is most engaging when it includes video and/or audio. Instead of waiting until the story's been published or broadcast to talk about it, bring in community members close to the topic to give you feedback and ask questions ahead of time. Create parameters, clarity and transparency about how feedback will be included.



COMMUNITY FORUMS

Community forums are live events that allow journalists to interact with residents in two-way conversations about specific topics. The topic might relate to a recently published investigative series or to reporting that's underway or emergent. The best forums explore solutions-oriented journalism, inviting people within the community to share their perspectives on what's needed and what works. An example of a community forum series is "[Your Voice Ohio](#)," hosted by the Center for New Democratic Processes. Through these forums, a news collaborative of over 50 newsrooms traveled Ohio asking the question: "How can local news media shift their coverage to help voters better evaluate candidates and make more informed electoral decisions during the 2016 election?"





COMMUNITY MEALS, POTLUCKS AND HOUSE PARTIES

“Hosting an informal gathering like a potluck or a house party provides an opportunity to get to know the people in your community and figure out what they care about. Hosting this kind of gathering provides you with time to bond about the specific news and media issues that matter in your community.”

—[Tactics for Transforming Local News](#), Free Press

Both [Wyoming Public Radio](#) and [SAGE](#) (an LGBT elders group) have produced reports and guides about their community meals.



DIALOGUE JOURNALISM

“[Dialogue Journalism](#) is a method for convening and supporting fact-based conversations between people on opposite sides of polarizing social and political fractures. It is a process for engaging divided communities deeply and connecting them with the newsrooms and journalists who serve them. Dialogue Journalism creates a new news cycle, one that starts from the questions and issues that divided communities are discussing.”

—Spaceship Media



NEWSROOM VISIT

“One of the best ways to understand how something works is to experience it in person. Scheduling in-person visits to newsrooms helps community members see the news-production process, increases transparency and signals to people in the newsroom that community members want to learn more about the local-news ecosystem.”

—[Tactics for Transforming Local News](#), Free Press



POP-UP NEWSROOMS

“Pop-up newsrooms are a simple way to get out into the community and invite the public to be part of the work of journalism. Some pop-up newsrooms turn news events into public events, such as an Election Night event where people watch returns with reporters filing stories. But pop-up newsrooms can also be as simple as setting up a table, chairs and sign at a public park, or a booth at a community festival.”

—[Creating an Engaged Newsroom: A Toolkit](#), Free Press

READING, FILM AND DISCUSSION GROUPS

Reading, film and discussion groups provide “space to build relationships with community members while learning together and connecting to new material. These discussion groups can help [community members and journalists alike] further understand [the] media landscape while figuring out what actions to take to shift it.”

—[Tactics for Transforming Local News](#), Free Press



STORY CIRCLES

“A Story Circle is a small group of individuals sitting in a circle, sharing stories from their own experience focused on a common theme. As each tells a personal story, a larger and more complex narrative unfolds. By listening deeply to each other, individuals can see both real differences and commonalities in their experiences.”

—[Place and Privilege Story Circle Guide](#), Capital Public Radio



The possibilities are endless, but creativity and a bold spirit are key. A standard panel may be a very appropriate option, but before you decide on the shape, consider something you have never seen a collaborative (or an individual newsroom) attempt before and brainstorm with the other collaborative participants.

For example, challenge the collaborative members to think about the best event they have ever attended and figure out how to adapt it to your needs and purpose. Could this be a drive-in movie? A block party? A chili cookoff? Could you take your favorite event and make it digital? Plan to shape the event as a hackathon, a “speed dating” event between journalists and community members, a treasure hunt, a chef/restaurant collaboration, a community fair or something else entirely.

After Any Event



Imagine you met someone incredible, someone you wanted to be in a relationship with — friendship, professional relationship, etc. Imagine you went out for coffee and it was incredible. You left wanting more, maybe a little skeptical, but still curious and imagining all kinds of possibilities.

And then ... you never heard from the other person again.

That is not how human beings sustain relationships. And that is certainly not how news organizations or journalists sustain relationships with their constituencies. Sadly, there is abundant evidence that news professionals have often behaved like the date in the coffee shop. First, when in reporting mode, they go to the scene, talk to the sources, write up the story, take pictures, publish or broadcast the piece and leave it there. If they go as far as creating a space for interaction and conversation, like a town hall, they never reach back to the attendees with feedback or to establish a continuous connection. Often they don't even compile a list of attendees.

But in any kind of relationship or partnership, follow-up is key. The same is true when we host events.

After events, there are at least **four kinds of follow-up:**

- 1 PARTICIPANT:** How are you following up and maintaining relationships with participants? What ways do they have to get in touch with you? Will you reach out to them? If so, how? Can they reach out to you? Do they know how? What kinds of actions or encounters will you have together? How will you continue engagement? Some ways to practice participant follow-up include:

 - Sharing your contact information and responding if someone reaches out.
 - Sending a thank-you note within 24 to 48 hours of the event.
 - Sending a follow-up note further out, within two to three weeks, to let people know how you've incorporated the event into your newsroom or newsgathering process.
 - Planning follow-up engagement. This can happen via text/question. Organizations like [Outlier Media](#) and [Hearken](#) have developed wonderful mechanisms and systems for this kind of sustained relationship.
 - Develop spaces for participants to stay in touch with each other. This can be a social media group, a Slack channel, a phone tree or something else.
 - Ask participants — as they are leaving the event and after the event — if they have any ideas. Figure out ways to support, offer insight or add capacity to those ideas.

- 2 PARTNER:** How will you follow up with your partners? If these are partners you're in a collaborative with already, follow-up is much easier and can happen at either event-specific follow-up meetings or a collaborative meeting. With partners, it's especially important to debrief them on the event, asking what went well and what they would change in the future, and then learning from their answers. During these debriefing conversations, you can also decide if and how you'd like to continue working together. If you've partnered with organizations that you're not in an existing collaborative with, consider whether you'd like to be.

- 3 PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T THERE:** How will you tell the story of this event? Is it a part of something wider? Are there lessons that others can learn from this? Some ways to follow up with people who weren't there include:

 - **For your newsroom:** Facilitating a report back talk with the rest of your newsroom. Not everyone can attend everything, but everyone can learn from one another. During a stand-up or full staff meeting, share what you experienced or learned at the event.

- **For the journalism industry:** Write about your lessons learned and experiences in one of several publications like [Medium](#) or [Columbia Journalism Review](#). You can also share your experiences on social media. Perhaps if you've tried something new or experimental, you can even create a template for others to play with.
- **For your local community:** Is there a way you can tell this story in your reporting? Can you let people know when stories are influenced by events? Maybe you can record a video about your experiences afterwards and post it to share on social media.

4

YOURSELF: How will you check in with yourself after the event? Event planning takes a lot of time and effort. How are you processing what you experienced, figuring out ways to incorporate it into your work, and taking time to rest? Some ways to follow up with yourself include:

- Journaling about your experience immediately. Write or record your takeaways and things you'd like to integrate into your ongoing practices so that you can remember them later.
- Reward yourself. Eat or drink something nice, something that you enjoy. Do something that feels good for you.
- Take time off. If you can, take a break so that you have time to integrate your experience and recharge instead of simply moving to the next task.

Case
Studies



Case Study No. 1

COLLABORATIVE: [Charlotte, North Carolina](#)

EVENT NAME: [Charlotte Connects: Coronavirus Town Hall Series](#)

KEY ORGANIZERS: Alicia Bell, Chris Rudisill

Charlotte Connects was a digital conversation series designed to strengthen relationships between community members and local journalists for news and information we need to stay healthy and safe.

The Charlotte Journalism Collaborative (CJC), a nine-member partnership of local media companies and other local institutions, launched in 2019. Community engagement has been an important component of the collaborative's work since it launched. What began as reporters spending time in communities and inviting community members into collaborative meetings eventually became accented by periodic community events.

However, when coronavirus quarantines began in Charlotte, the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, which had previously been reporting on the housing crisis in Charlotte, had a potential pivot to make. In response to the question, "Should we collaboratively report on COVID-19?" collaborative member Jim Yarbrough responded: "We have to ask our community."

And so the collaborative did — online. In late March, the CJC began hosting digital forums and conversations focused on the questions:

- In what ways are you, your family or your community hurting?
- How are people in your community creating solutions, resistance and resilience right now?
- Where do you see creativity?
- What questions do you have for Charlotte and for the decision-makers in our city, county and state?

After the town halls, the collaborative would organize questions and story ideas into a spreadsheet so that different newsrooms and individual journalists could claim a question or story and commit to reporting on it.

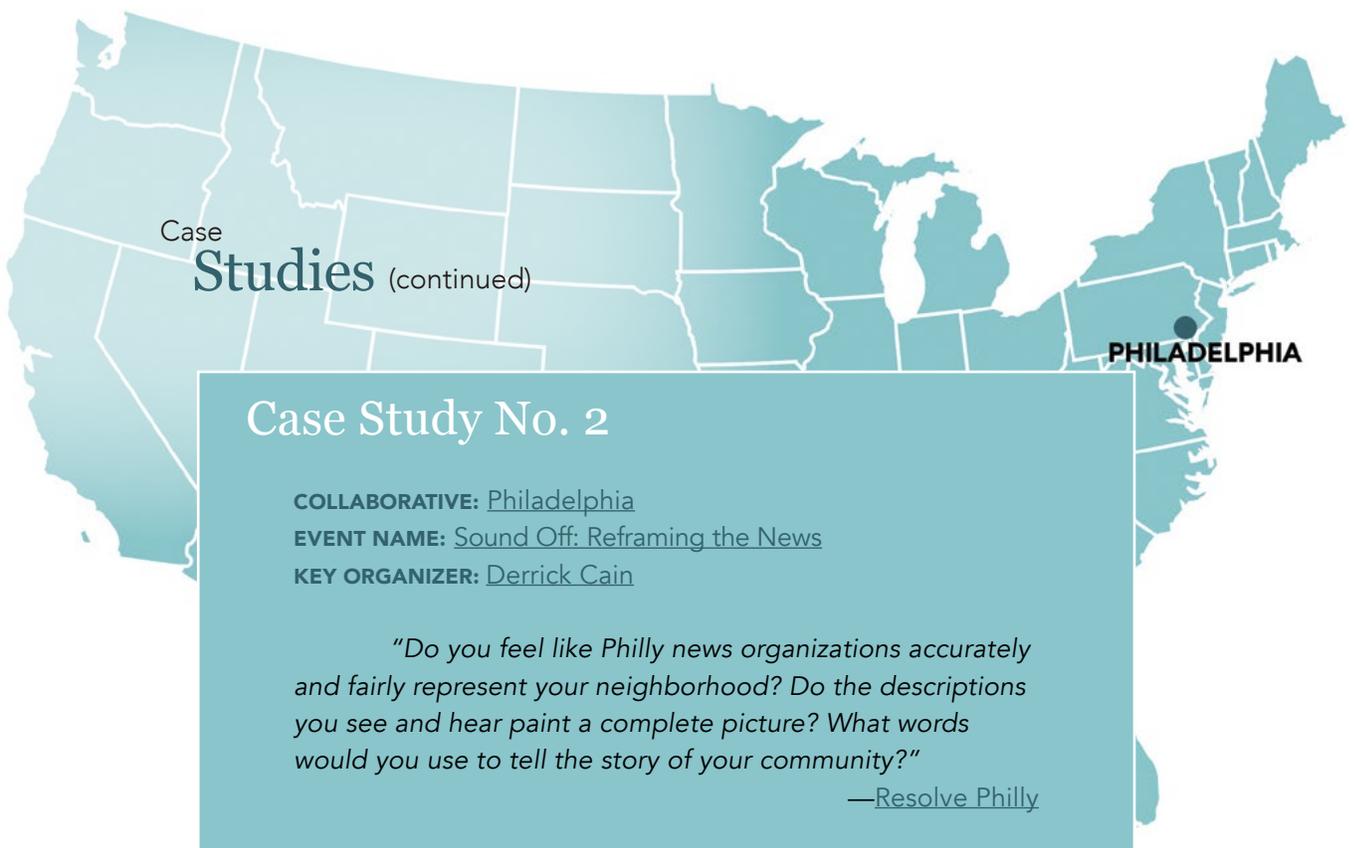
Alicia Bell, a collaborative member and community organizer,

said that while attendees at the digital town halls represented a range of identities and local geographies, participants were almost entirely different from those who attended in person. Asked how that will inform future event strategy, Bell said, “the Collaborative will probably need to strategize around how to balance in-person events and engagement opportunities alongside digital engagement to ensure that they’re able to reach the widest range of community members possible.”

A challenge to this kind of event organizing? The digital divide. In Charlotte, as in many other cities and towns across the United States, there are many people living without broadband internet access. As a Band-Aid for this structural issue, the CJC “deputized” participants, reminding them that they were in conversation on a regular basis with people who might not have internet access or might not utilize the internet for things like Zoom calls. Participants were encouraged after each digital forum to ask people they knew what questions they had and what stories they knew of so that the participants could bring those insights into future conversations.

Chris Rudisill, CJC project director, shares the following tips and tricks for planning successful community forums like Charlotte Connects:

- Create a goal for the engagement event. What information are we seeking to gather? Who is the audience for that dialogue?
- Start with a speaker or short program to ground and center the conversation.
- Provide three questions for breakout groups.
- Place reporters in each group to help with facilitation and recording of information.
- Provide the opportunity for community members to take leadership roles in the conversation (e.g., note takers, communicators, etc.).
- In the larger group, allow members of each breakout to share their ideas.
- Follow up with additional information and ways for the public to stay engaged around the topic.



Since 2019, Derrick Cain, Resolve Philly’s community engagement editor, has been hosting a series of community conversations. At these events, members of the public gather to talk about local news: What’s working? What’s not? Journalists are welcome to attend, but are not the target audience. Instead, Cain gathers people who normally exist outside of newsrooms but care deeply about the stories told about their community and how their community’s framed, and have questions. Cain facilitates these meetings, but partners with an intern to take notes during the discussion. If you ask Cain, he’ll tell you what’s worked about these events is:

- **Partnering with people who are already organizing in a city or more specific community.** This deepens your understanding of the community ecosystem.
- **Having smaller numbers of people.** This allows for deeper and more vulnerable conversation.
- **Recognition on the ground.** It helps if people see you outside of times you want them to show up for something.
- **The events aren’t extractive.** Some of what’s discussed in these conversations doesn’t “produce” anything, but it does warm people up to the idea of collaborating with newsrooms and begins opening the doors to relationship-building.

And Derrick’s words of wisdom?

- Don’t expect any relationship to happen overnight.
- Make everything more interactive.
- Give back to communities.
- Go out to other people’s events.
- Consider the other side of media literacy: As a journalist, who can you follow or apprentice with to learn community?

Additional Resources

[The Impact Pack](#)

[JMR's Participatory Journalism Playbook](#)

[12 Tips for Doing Journalism With Communities](#)

[Recipes for Transforming Journalism](#)

Sample Event Outreach Material

- [City Bureau](#)
- [KPCC](#)
- [Scalawag Magazine](#)

[Sample Event Timeline \(Short Turnaround Time\)](#)

[Sample Event Timeline \(Longer Turnaround Time\)](#)

For more case studies, visit Agora Journalism Center's [Gather](#).



About the Authors



Alicia Bell (*pronouns: they/she*) was born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, and still lives there today. They work at the intersections of Afrofuturist imagination, journalism, land, food and all the spaces in between. At Free Press, they work to transform the future of journalism via News Voices, a project organizing communities around information equity and community-centered journalism, and Media 2070, a project working toward making media reparations real. Through that work, they're also a partner with the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative.

They've arrived where they are via a path that includes electoral organizing in North Carolina; parent, student and youth organizing in New York; and housing, health and police-accountability organizing in Oakland, California. Bell holds a bachelor's degree in social work and a master's degree in educational leadership, politics and advocacy from New York University.

Alicia is also a parent, a member of a local gardening collective called Angelou House and a lover of big bodies of nature.



Liza Gross (*pronouns: she/her*) is a journalist and media leader with over three decades of experience working in executive positions at news organizations and nonprofits. She has specialized in the transition of traditional news outlets to multimedia platforms, as well as in the exploration of new and transformational models for media organizations, including collaborative arrangements and innovative techniques of audience engagement.

She was managing editor of the Miami Herald, executive editor of El Nuevo Día in Puerto Rico, and publisher of Exito!, the Spanish language publication of the Chicago Tribune. As executive director and past board member of the International Women's Media Foundation, she worked to support female journalists operating in conflict zones.

She is a past board member of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and has conducted seminars and trainings for journalists in the United States, Latin America and Europe.



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