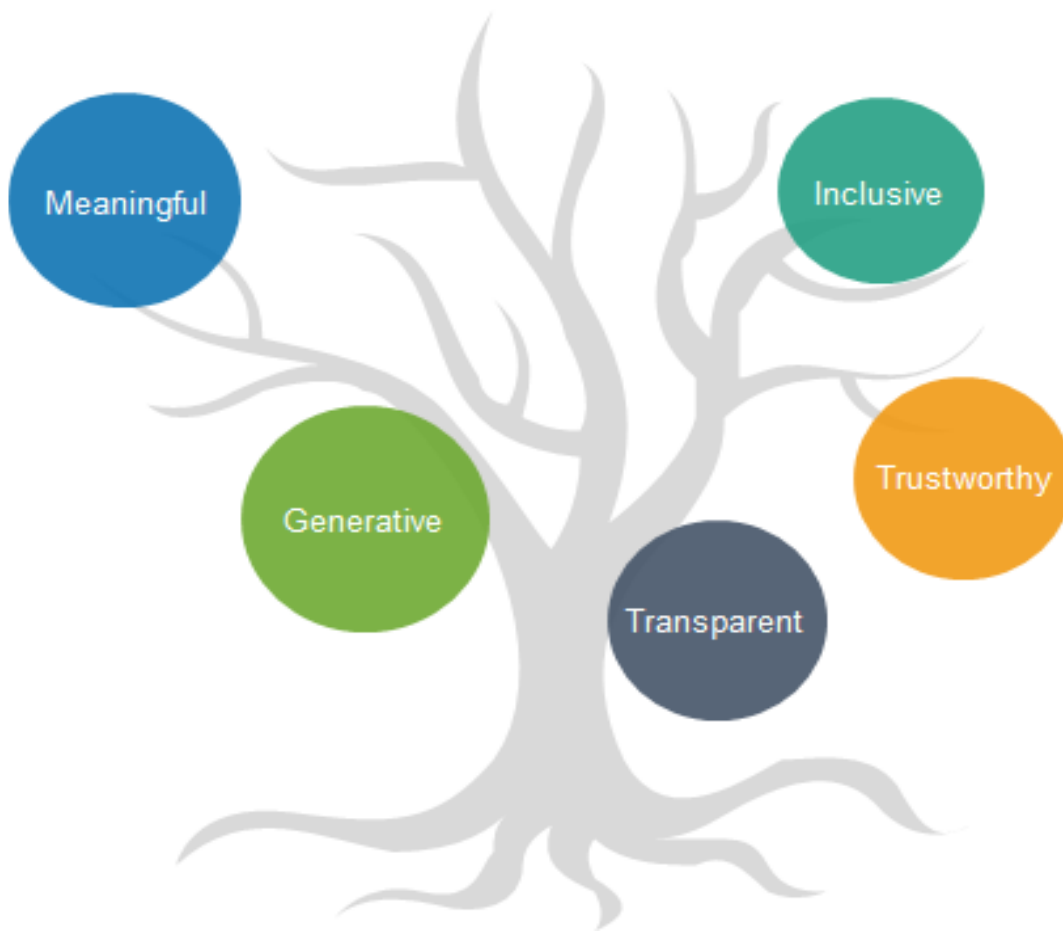# Journalism for Democracy and Communities: A New Framework

Engagement Framework 2.0 | Journalism That Matters

What is possible when civic communication is of by and for the people and is designed from authentic dialogue, deep listening and invention?

JOURNALISM FOR DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITIES: A NEW FRAMEWORK

Executive Summary

Since its October 2015 conference, Experience Engagement, cohosted with the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, Journalism That Matters (JTM) has been using a research and evaluation practice designed for learning from complexity – Developmental Evaluation – to understand the relationship between community engagement and journalism, grounded in the belief that engagement offers a pathway toward improved trust in media.

Out of the 2015 conference, we developed a framework based on three principles:
- Nothing about us without us
- Speak truth to empower
- Listening is our superpower

Additionally, the framework pointed to an emerging "third way":

To be a thriving, resilient ecosystem, communication needs to go beyond "reporting" what is happening in the ecosystem to providing robust information and inclusive dialogue, fostering collaborative action that achieves community goals.

In this last year and a half, we set out to learn more about that "third way," asking:

What would journalism look like if it were generated from within community rather than FOR community?

That question led us to consider, what if it's not about journalism per se, but more broadly about all kinds of communication, with a mission to support communities and democracy to thrive?

This report focuses on what we have learned using Developmental Evaluation with several community engagement projects, two of them in partnership with journalism organizations. In brief, we found that when journalism is at or near the center of focus, it gets in the way of reinventing thriving local communications ecosystems. Innovations are more likely to come not by looking narrowly through the lens of journalism but by imagining this emerging ecosystem

through a broader perspective, one that considers digital, cultural, demographic, and technological shifts while also drawing from traditional elements of journalism. In fact, journalism can benefit from observing the emerging ways many disciplines – including open government, participatory democratic practices, and regional sustainability – are becoming transparent and collaborative with residents in designing thriving communities.

We see our task as not reimagining and reinventing journalism but rather imagining and inventing inclusive, generative communications ecosystems that foster thriving, resilient communities – what we call "*civic communications.*" With community at its heart, it makes room for all voices to be heard, all peoples to be seen, and residents to be informed and in action on issues of importance to themselves and their communities.

The diagram below captures the key elements of our evolving civic communications framework.

Framework 2.0

Background

Journalism That Matters (JTM) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that for 16 years has convened local, regional, and national gatherings that bring together diverse stakeholders including journalists, technologists, city planners, artists, community activists, and others to explore the emerging news and information ecosystem. During 2008, a period of massive disruptions in traditional advertiser-driven media models, devastating cuts to news staff exacerbated by an economic recession and the emergence of social media and digital engagement platforms, Journalism That Matters brought together journalists and technologists. For the conference, JTM described the emerging news ecosystem with new actors at the table, as noted in this graphic from the NewsTools gathering of journalists and technologists in Silicon Valley.

From this work, as well as through media innovation gatherings in Detroit and Greensboro, North Carolina, called Create or Die, JTM began to focus on local invention as a way to enhance democracy at the local level. Our work with the Engagement Hub, a website of case studies and resources for community engagement, illuminated media innovation experiments happening across the United States.
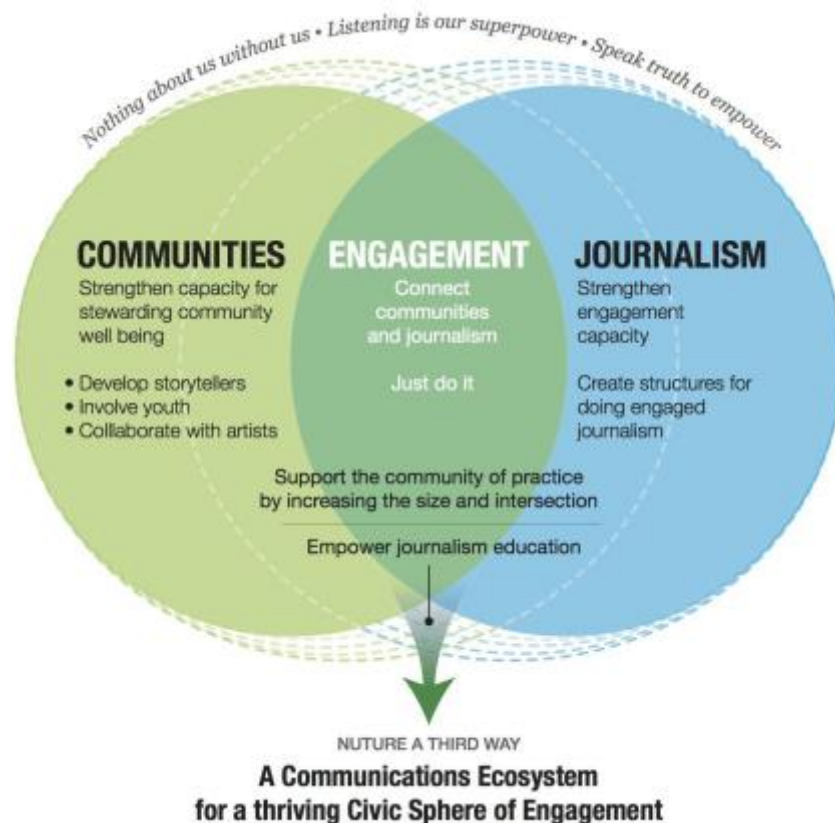
In October 2015, with "engagement" entering journalism's lexicon, Journalism That Matters and the Agora Journalism Center cohosted "Experience Engagement" (EE2015), a participatory event in Portland, Oregon, during which 105 journalists, educators, researchers, policy makers, students, and other engaged citizens worked together to imagine and design a model of community-focused civic journalism for the digital age.

We started from the assumption that journalism and community are inseparable:
- Information health is vital to community well-being.
- Journalism is vital to community information health.
- Community support is vital to journalism.

Our operating assumption was that engagement is a promising intersection that may generate trust and actions that support journalism and communities to thrive. The assumption was explored in dozens of discussions that were captured in session notes.

In the first phase of the Developmental Evaluation, a small team from JTM examined materials from the conference to synthesize what had transpired at the convening. The work resulted in the report "A civic communications ecosystem that supports communities to thrive: Journalism of, by and for all."

Framework 1.0

The report articulated the notion that journalism of, by, and for all means:
- Strengthening the communications capacity within communities, including creating a culture in which people tell their own stories in their own voices (the left-hand circle);

- Strengthening the engagement capacity within journalism, expanding the traditional role of journalism to be more participatory (the right-hand circle);
- Fostering a new symbiotic relationship between communities and journalism; developing a community of practice (the overlapping center).

The report called out three Guiding Principles (listed in the arc above the circles) for fostering an emerging symbiotic relationship between communities and journalism, noted here and described in more depth further in the report:
- Nothing about us without us
- Speak truth to empower
- Listening is our superpower

The Developmental Evaluation report further observed that discussions among EE2015 participants pointed to the possibility of a "Third Way," a communications ecosystem that cultivates a thriving, civic sphere of engagement. The report said:

Today's communication ecosystems need to inform, but also to inspire, engage and activate the public. We need structures for engagement and storytelling that help us learn about ourselves, each other, our world, and to name and act on shared aspirations. To be a sustainable, thriving ecosystem, communication needs to go beyond "reporting" what is happening in the ecosystem to providing robust information, inclusive dialogue, and collaborative action that achieves community goals.

The "third way" for engagement that participants articulated moves beyond journalism as the principal agent of information to ask the broader question:

What would journalism look like if it were generated from within community rather than FOR community?

This question was the foundation of the second phase of the Developmental Evaluation project, where the team spent about nine months collaborating with two journalism-related community engagement projects and followed the work of a few others to learn how the EE2015 principles articulated in the [report](#) operate at the local level and how they can inform and support new, emerging engagement efforts. Specifically, we worked with:

- **The Macon Listening Post,** implemented in Macon, Georgia, used the GroundSource platform developed by Andrew Haeg. The project sought "to use text messaging and community outreach tactics to inform and engage a substantial number of Maconites in a

weekly conversation about emerging stories and issues, creating a civil, experience-based conversation about issues facing the city."

- **One Issue, Many Perspectives/<u>Open:Housing</u>**, led by the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon, is a community-wide collaboration aimed at creating inclusive, informed, cross-sector public conversations and journalism leading to real housing solutions in the Portland, Oregon, area. It aspires to connect people and organizations involved in housing issues with journalists who are covering it.

- As a team and as individual team members, we followed and learned from a number of other engagement projects, including: *A Vision for Education* in Washington State, where people involved in a divisive battle to amply fund education held generative conversations to imagine a shared vision; *[What's Next West Virginia](#)*, a statewide effort supporting conversations to imagine a vibrant future; and *[Flip It! Disruptive Ways to Engage Untapped Audiences](#)*, a project with the American Society of News Editors and newspapers in Dallas, St. Louis, and Minneapolis.

The Deepening Framework: What We Are Learning

In late 2016, the JTM Developmental Evaluation team held a "writing workshop" to explore how our understanding of the principles identified at EE2015 had deepened, as well as what we'd learned about the roles, activities, values, assumptions, and challenges of the emerging local communications systems.

Attributes of Civic Communications

No one knows what forms civic communications will ultimately take. Local conditions – demographics, geography, assets, stakeholders, etc. – drive the development and success of locally grown solutions. Thus, "best practices" won't be recipes each community can follow, but "promising principles" could help communities design communication tools, strategies, and practices that serve their unique conditions.

The table that follows summarizes the Framework. Some parts of it are more clearly in focus than others. The "[Going Deeper with the Data](#)" section below delves further into each of the Framework's attributes.

CIVIC COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Nothing About Us Without Us

- Consciously and continuously reexamine who is engaged
- Be clear and honest about whom the work serves
- Confirm community members are engaged and contributing to the civic communication system

Speak Truth to Empower

- Recognize the multiple ways that information empowers
- Inquire into and understand the power dynamics and the opportunities to increase self-determination, autonomy, and social justice

Listening is our Superpower

- Be relational, not transactional
- Support authentic truth-telling
- Support learning and discovery

Attributes and Values

- Encourages authentic expression and empathy
- Generates new ideas
- Deepens understanding and shared meaning, while also contextualizing
- Interdependent, reciprocal, and transparent
- Inclusive and connecting across differences
- Emphasizes inquiry, deliberation and dialogue
- Inspires accountability
- Shifts power
- Nurtures action and voice

Activities

- Meaningful conversation
- Community arts and storytelling
- Abundant, trustworthy journalism
- Accessing information, participating in civic life and open government
- Growing media, storytelling and communications talent
- Orienteering to stay in harmony with agreed-upon principles

Roles

- Community weaver
- Guardian(s)/Steward(s)
- Coach
- Allies/Partners
- Other skills: dialogic practices, appreciative practices, investigative and storytelling

INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- Fosters trustworthy relationships
- Encourages learning
- Develops the capacity for holistic thinking
- Inspires organizational responsibility and accountability

Why Civic Communications?

The primary breakthrough from reviewing JTM's work over this past year came in recognizing that our task is not to reimagine and reinvent journalism but rather **to reimagine journalism in context of a system of communication that fosters *trustworthy relationships*, encourages *learning*, develops the capacity for *holistic thinking,* and inspires *organizational responsibility and accountability***. From our observations of the projects, we discovered these indicators are most successful when directly linked to community well-being. They are described more fully below.

We further believe communities achieve these outcomes only by including those who have been most invisible and disenfranchised by the current system. Those outside the dominant culture are central to the reinvention, not only of journalism but of the system of freedoms enshrined in the First Amendment.

Finally, we came to see **the purpose of civic communications as supporting communities and democracy to thrive**. Because civic communications *is* a system, composed of aspects like abundant, trustworthy journalism, meaningful conversation, community arts and storytelling, and information access and open government, it is most effectively addressed as a loose-knit whole. Just as the press has company in the First Amendment – freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition – journalism serves best when it is part of a *system* of *civic communication*.

> *"Maybe it's not a 'journalism' project, it's a community engagement with journalists at the table."*
>
> *—Burgess Brown, Macon Listening Post*

Interestingly, the system of freedoms the nation's Founders defined as the foundation of a free society in the First Amendment parallels the elements we identified in a civic communications system:

- To respect differences – including diversity beyond religious differences;
- To express what we hold dear – including voices that have been silent or silenced;
- To share stories – including journalism and community arts and storytelling;
- To convene around what matters – including meaningful interactions among people with a diversity of perspectives informed through access to quality information; and
- To act together – including but by no means limited to letting government know what we need and expect from it.

Our Determination: Pursue a Third Way

Reviewing these two projects, coupled with our work around community engagement over the past several years, provided a critical insight: **When journalism is at or near the center of focus, it can get in the way of reinvention.** The experiments we followed demonstrated the most success when journalism was at the table, along with others who care about civic life.

Our conclusion: Journalism won't be "fixed" from the inside. Since incumbents are rarely the harbingers of novel solutions, it's no surprise that whatever form journalism next takes, it will likely come from innovations outside the existing system. Further, those innovations will come not by looking through the lens of journalism but rather at the intersection of multiple disciplines that involve storytelling and participatory community practices that activate a more engaged citizenry.

> *"The quantum leap...is not the platform, not the technology, but what you do with [what people say]...The point is to do stories that rise from the community and engage the community in ongoing conversation that goes somewhere."*
>
> —*Conversation with Andrew Haeg and Burgess Brown, Macon Listening Post*

When old systems of thought – the assumptions of how things work – cease to function, the structures they generate fall to pieces. Legacy journalists often point to simpler times when everyone knew what was important because they saw or read the same stories on network TV or the newspaper front page. Yet those stories often rendered people who were not of the dominant culture invisible or cast communities of color as the problem. Today, social media has eroded legacy media's gatekeeping functions so that no one person or organization sets the agenda for what matters. The resulting cacophony of voices yields misinformation, confused residents, and a paralyzed public unable to act on important national and local issues. As trust erodes, residents become disenfranchised from a media system intended to inform citizens in a democratic society.

Our work seeks to transform this situation.

The many communication experiments under way in technology, content, and process draw from a mix of old and new values and ideas. For example, the Macon Listening Post introduced a technology that asks questions of the audience to create ongoing feedback loops that inform an existing approach to journalism. Some aspects worked, some didn't. While Macon's Listening Post

did not continue, new iterations are building on those lessons until something coalesces that conserves what is still of value and embraces that which wasn't possible before. Other experiments that have emerged to serve specific communities include content innovations like Syria Deeply that provide deep context to topical issues; process changes like Hearken that combine technology with authentic, face-to-face community engagement; hyperlocal online news structures like Seattle Globalist that constrain geography to create intimacy and a sense of place while also making a unique, in this case, immigrant community visible to its neighbors; and business model innovations like the Banyan Project that is experimenting with a local, cooperative model for funding journalism.

> *"We pivoted to focus on the face-to-face gatherings that people want, and other ways to build the community, and then later to build the technology to support that community and the conversation that people want to be having in it."*
>
> *— Conversation with Camela Raymond and Andrew DeVigal, One Issue, Many Perspectives*

How can we look at community in a way that allows us to surface the unique knowledge and needs of the people of the community and engages residents in dialogue toward localized solutions? Community engagement in the projects we evaluated moved beyond the current social media measurements of clicks, page-views, and time-on-page. They attempted to engage local stakeholders in fostering a collaborative, generative space to design new communication systems cocreated by listening to community needs. In them, where people produce, create, share, use, understand, and take action with information (not just consume it). They also connect to larger contexts where information can make a difference (e.g., in policy-making arenas).

These culture shifts from consumers to cocreators of news and information engage local residents as actors in the civic realm, where residents are telling their own stories, generating solutions, hosting conversations to understand the history and complexity of issues, exchanging information for collective purposes, and being in action around the issues in other forms of civic engagement.

> *"There has got to be someone in the newsroom that is of and committed to the new audience."*
>
> *—Andrew Haeg, Macon Listening Post*

Indeed, we also have observed over many years that meaningful conversations, generative storytelling (including but not limited to journalism), and the arts are effective ways to cultivate and repair relationships, and enhance inclusivity. We discovered that trust results when civil

dialogue occurs.

A goal of civic communications is building trust through authentic, reciprocal relationships among diverse stakeholders. We believe it can cultivate new and repair old relationships within and around communities, notably those traditionally underserved and underrepresented.

Some of the projects we examined put significant effort into bringing together people from different classes and spheres of influence, including higher education, government, labor, the nonprofit sector, activists, independent change agents, journalists, and interested community members.

While one outcome of this more authentic relational posture is richer, deeper, more diverse sourcing and content for journalism organizations, it also can grow trusted agents within the local system for ongoing dialogue and action around community issues and vision. Journalism is an essential part of civic communications, but without attention to the other relationships and activities in the civic communications sphere, the journalism will fall far short of its potential.

> *"Trust will be built by showing up and staying, not just parachuting in when tragedy happens. Being there before, during and after."*
>
> *—Burgess Brown, Macon Listening Post*

Given how critical journalism is to civic health, Journalism That Matters has turned its attention to what we can contribute to "midwifing" innovations in that broader communications sphere – cultivating novel, vibrant approaches to *civic communications* that support new and more diverse actors and communities to thrive.

What's Next

The framework that we are using to describe, learn about and understand civic communications continues to evolve. Many questions still need to be explored, such as:
- How do civic communications principles and indicators of success relate to each other?
- Are the principles, characteristics, activities, and roles we've observed observable in other examples? What's missing?
- Are there precursors or readiness factors for civic communications to successfully emerge?
- What results when people are successful in creating civic communications systems?

JTM's Developmental Evaluation team is preparing for the third phase of its work, during which we will focus on understanding the outcomes of civic communications – what results manifest for communities, for social change and social justice, for the changing communication landscape, for the field of journalism and for journalists and other storytellers and communications practitioners.

Want to get involved?

Here are some links to ongoing conversations that JTM and our allies are having where we continue to explore the evolution of civic communications for thriving communities:

Elevate Engagement: Communities and Journalism taking listening, connection and trust to the next level – May 18–21, 2017 at Agora Journalism Center, Portland, Oregon – a follow-up to the 2015 conference, with emphasis on: *How can the public engage, not as an audience, consumers or marketplace, but as participants, with journalists, in creating and sharing local news and information?*

Gather: Check out the evolving "Community of Practice" growing out of the engagement network.

Facebook: Connect with Journalism That Matters at our main Facebook page.

Our toolkit: Available on our website, through which you can consult with us for conference organizing, innovation generation, engagement training, and coaching.

Engagement Hub: JTM's site showcases media innovations and offers case studies and resources for community engagement.

Going Deeper With the Data

In the sections below, we start by summarizing the characteristics, values, activities, and roles that we observed in the experiments we've been part of and those we've seen from a distance. We then present what we learned about the nuances and details of the three principles that emerged in EE2015.

Characteristics

Qualities we've observed in civic communications:

- **Generative** – focused on interactions that help generate new ideas and discover possibilities.

- **Interdependence and reciprocity** between those who practice the communications arts and all other parts of communities.

- **Inclusive**, with community at its heart, it makes room for all voices to be heard, all peoples to be seen, with compassion, curiosity, and respect.

- **Increases understanding**, conveying meaning while making use of facts.

- Emphasizes **inquiry, deliberation, and dialogue** over debate and advocacy.

- **Connects people** across differences – *e pluribus unum* – out of many, one.

- Helps people understand issues and each other in **context**, how we fit together as a community and society.

- Encourages **authentic expression**, in which difference becomes useful, creative tension.

- **Moves communities toward actions** in which everyone can see some aspect of his or her contributions.

- **Inspires accountability** on behalf of ourselves, others, and the whole.

- **Shifts power** so that decisions are made by those most affected – with the context and information, including facts and feelings, for making choices.

- Is **transparent** about actions and motivations.

Values

Participants at Experience Engagement 2015 observed that many traditional norms of journalism are changing or expanding. New values are emerging:

Traditional norms   *AND*   **Emerging Values**

    Speaking truth to power   Speaking truth to empower

    Objectivity, neutrality   Engagement, empathy, inclusion

    Independence   Interdependence, connection

    Revealing what is wrong   Appreciating what is possible

    Giving voice to voiceless   Helping people find/use their voice

    Journalism for people   Journalism *with* people

In the ongoing developmental evaluation work with the projects, we saw some other values emerging as we observed the projects. Additional values words and phrases that we often heard included:

- **Sustainability**
- **Thriving**
- **Trust**
- **Shared vision**
- **Collaboration and cocreation**
- **Commitment** – being there **for the long haul**
- **Being in and of the community** – participants and others engaged in dialogue have "**skin in the game**"
- Engagement work is **additive and enhancing**, not extractive for another purpose

Activities

Some of the key activities common among the projects included:

- **Meaningful conversation, especially face-to-face,** that deepens understanding and connection.
- **Community arts and storytelling** that help imagine previously unimaginable possibilities and discover our shared humanity in each other's stories.
- **Abundant, trustworthy journalism** where people not only access accurate information, but create and share it in a way that helps them understand context, themselves, each

other, and the world by seeking understanding and meaning even in challenging situations.

- **Accessing information, participating in civic life and open government** to inform and help community members engage in the decisions that affect their lives and communities.
- **Growing media, storytelling and communications talent** among local residents**.**
- **Orienteering** – a process that can involve a **coaching** role, to keeps a community "on the same page" and in harmony with agreed-upon principles. We played this coaching role with Macon Listening Post and One Issue Many Perspectives in Portland.

These activities parallel a pattern of change that we have seen in other contexts, including community-based and participatory research and dialogic whole systems change work. The patterns involves:

- Listening, reflecting, and synthesizing/learning
- Dreaming together of possibilities
- Discerning the path(s) to pursue among alternatives
- Focusing on generative images that move us to act on shared aspirations.

We have seen that this pattern enables people to discover, connect, dream, and act on behalf of ourselves, our communities, and our society. (LeGreco, Ferrier and Leonard, 2015; Holman, 2010). We suspect that similar patterns would result in the civic communications sphere.

Roles

We see several new functions or roles that may be required for civic communications to function. As we observed the projects, themes emerged related either to the functions that some of the leaders were engaged in, or roles that, in hindsight we think would have been helpful. The functions in the following list are not mutually exclusive (one person might serve more than one function and a group of people might take one on):

> *"It's analogous to going back to being a beat reporter, but your beat is the people's conversations, go into neighborhoods see what people are talking about, giving people a place to talk, generate the conversation."*
>
> *—Burgess Brown, Macon Listening Post*

- **Community weaver:** This is a function that connects people to each other and to information. Weavers broker and strengthen relationships, catalyze community conversation and storytelling, mirror so that people feel heard, and bring partners together where there are fractures.

- **Guardian(s)/Steward(s):** This role especially may require a group or council. The function

is to foster commitment to its principles, values and to the people most impacted by the issues the project addresses. This role facilitates ongoing participatory regeneration of and orientation toward a shared vision, ensures inclusiveness, has a clear view of the changing community, constantly reviews conditions to ensure continuous learning and accountability, and pays attention to outcomes (e.g., measuring the impact of an engagement project on people's empowerment actions).

- **Coach:** In each of the projects we looked at most closely, we found that we often functioned in a coaching capacity, supporting and advising the projects' leadership around the meaning of engagement and helping to reflect on ways to strengthen congruence with engagement principles. As coaches, we also facilitated sense-making activities.

- **Allies/Partners:** We observed that the partnerships that make these projects successful were different from the kind of "missionary"-like involvement that have historically frustrated and often done more harm than good in disenfranchised communities. This function is not really a separate role, but a way of describing all partners in successful engagement work. Allies:

  > *"The key purpose of the project is not to strengthen journalism but to strengthen the information health of the housing ecosystem."*
  >
  > *—Andrew DeVigal, One Issue, Many Perspectives*

  - o **Are there for the long haul**
  - o **Have listening built into their values**
  - o Have a **social change / justice orientation** and organizational culture
  - o Have **skin in the game** *(e.g., resources committed)*
  - o Have real human **connection to people in the target community** *(connections to others who are interested in and experiencing the problem)*
  - o **Are connected to grassroots efforts but free from control by large non-grassroots institutions** (able to be more **committed** to the community),
  - o Demonstrate **commitment to underrepresented communities** by **supporting their leadership** and not making decisions for them *(e.g., instead of doing the work of "processing the feed" and figuring out what to do with it each week, train community members to analyze the feed and ask good questions that link to where the decision-making is happening)*

- **Other skills:** We observed the following additional skill sets in play:
  - o Dialogic practices
  - o Generative storytelling
  - o The investigative, verification, and storytelling skills often held by professional journalists, which are critical to deepening public understanding
  - o Community asset mapping to amplify existing people, projects and resources
  - o Ethnography and other means of making a community's daily life more visible to itself

Deepening Understanding of the Principles

The three principles that emerged from EE2015, as described in the Developmental Evaluation [report,](#) seemed to be operating in the projects that we observed, and we were able to learn more about them.

Nothing About Us Without Us

This principle of inclusion is a reminder that all community stakeholders should be represented in all aspects of the storytelling, not just as subjects. Based on our work with Macon and Agora, 'Nothing about us without us' means:

Consciously and continuously reexamining who is engaged. For example, ask:
- Who is in and who is out?
- What power dynamics are involved?
- Whose story needs to be told and why?
- Who decides what story is worthy of being told, and on what grounds (i.e., what is newsworthy)?
- Who tells the story?
- Is the work being done with and by the community (as opposed to "to" or "for" them)?

> *"We need to have the community drive the answer to the question of what information is needed, and invite journalists to help."*
>
> —*Andrew DeVigal, One Issue, Many Perspectives*

Being clear and honest about who the work is for. This entails, for example:
- Again, asking what power dynamics are involved and consciously deciding what it would mean to commit or not to commit to those who have less power.
- Examining why are we telling this story – for what/whose purposes? Whose well-being is enhanced by the storytelling (or is the work extracting from some group to enhance another group?).
- Ensuring that the people whose story is being told have input (if not full authority) in decisions about their own engagement.
- Considering and being transparent about commitments not only to people, but also to values, principles and impacts (and set up systems to track fidelity to those commitments).
- Creating strategic partnerships with people and organizations already engaged with community residents.

Based on our work in other engagement contexts, we suggest these as examples of some **activities** that are congruent with the "Nothing about us without us" principle:
- **Be Seen:** Make the community visible to itself. Use communication audits and network mapping as well as other demographic analyses to understand who is in the community

and who needs to be represented at the table. Understand the local "soil" into which we are seeding experiments. Where are conversations already happening? How can we connect and amplify them? What are the motivations of those who are initiating the community actions?

- **Be Heard:** Bring together community diversity to imagine opportunities/issues for the community to address.
- **Map community assets** to leverage existing assets, discover possibilities, and identify actions. Find opinion leaders and others to create bridges to underserved and underrepresented communities.

We recognize that this principle can raise serious problems for traditional journalists, and that more exploration around the changing view of the ethics of engagement is needed.

Speak Truth to Empower

The principle **"speak truth to empower"** originated at an earlier conference called "What Is Journalism?" at the University of Oregon George S. Turnbull Center in October 2014. A traditional motto of journalism has been to "speak truth to power." Participants in the earlier conference expressed that idea that, in an interactive world, journalists must also speak truth to empower people to act in their own self interest. They also postulated that the principle is mutual in that it is through the public's willingness to engage with journalists that journalists are empowered to be a voice on behalf of people.

Based on our work with Macon and Agora, we learned that "Speaking truth to empower" does not only rely on journalists being the ones to speak that empowering truth; empowerment comes when people use the tools of communication to tell their own stories in order to build their own power and act toward self-determination. This finding is consistent with our earlier research on empowerment and participatory change processes (Susskind, 2010; Ferrier, 2007).

> *"There has to be someone bringing people together…But that's also not the end. The end is not the production. The end is something happening even beyond the story being told of what's going on. The community growing and under-represented groups having more of a role in democracy at a local level."*
>
> *—Burgess Brown, Macon Listening Post*

"Speaking truth to empower" involves recognizing the multiple ways that information empowers:

- The power of information to support people to be free and self-governing is not only found in providing people the news and information they need (especially if those people are left out of the process of deciding what information is needed). Power also resides in the role of information to support people to discover, create, share and utilize

information.
- Empowerment entails having a fully informed say in what story and information one chooses to share with journalists and other storytellers.
- Empowerment is an outcome not just a process; it must lead to real change in the influence people have in society and equality in social well-being.

Inquiring into and understanding the power dynamics and the opportunities to increase self-determination, autonomy and social justice (both within the community and between the community and the rest of society), requires asking:
- Who has power over others here? Who has relationship power through ties to others? Who lacks power, in what contexts and why?
- On what issues are these power dynamics most relevant/what power dynamics are relevant in the stories and issues that we are focusing on (related to questions above, such as who decides what is newsworthy, which stories are told)?
- Whose empowerment are we working towards and what does this mean about other people's power?
- What different expressions of social power are involved, considering that power *to*, power *with* and power *within* do not diminish other people's power; only power *over* does that.
- Even among the supportive partners, what power dynamics are at play? For example, if the project is initiated, implemented and substantially led by an ally who is not in and of the community, what is the project doing to build opportunities and capacities for community members to govern the project themselves? Also, allies who come from outside the community must inquire into their own motivations, values, assumptions, prejudices and privileges.

Examples of some **activities** that would be in harmony with the principle to Speak Truth to Empower are to:
- **Enhance opportunities for people to use the stories that are told,** content that is produced, information that is shared, and engagement that occurs **to take action** to influence issues and decisions. Beyond following the news more closely and talking about it with others, support people doing something with the information, such as advocating on policy, taking direct action, creating new solutions, attending public meetings.
- **Connect the stories and their storytellers to where decision-making is happening**. Ask whether this project is increasing the target community's access to and influence in the rooms where decisions are made.

Listening is our Superpower

Operating in all three spheres, "listening is our superpower" is most notably in the emergent community of practice sphere. It is the common space between community and journalism.

Based on our work with Macon and Agora, "Listening is our Superpower" means:

Being relational, not transactional because:

- It's part of a multidirectional conversation that takes place within relationship(s).
- It's an activity of ALL stakeholders.
- It's not happening if people are not feeling heard (communities feel journalists often listen for purposes of their story frame, not to understand whether the frame reflects their lived experience).
- If we listen well, we can hear that certain conversations need to happen, want to happen and are about to happen, and we can bring those conversations together.

Supporting authentic truth-telling by:
- Using practices that help people connect to their own truths and supporting and protecting them to be truthful out loud;
- Listening to individuals, not organizational proxies for them;
- Appreciating that different individuals or groups may have differing "truths."

> *"We have to monitor whether we are listening toward community action… Conversations are happening below the surface but not bubbling up to the surface where decisions are being made."*
>
> *—Burgess Brown, Macon Listening Post*

Learning and discovery happen when:
- It is two stage; first individual learning, then place for shared meaning and collective learning;
- People really hear each other across differences and are open and curious about why others feel the way they do, and, how their backgrounds and experiences influence their perspectives;
- What is being heard is allowed to influence what happens next;
- It is used to uncover and amplify the quiet and underrepresented voices.

Examples of **activities** that align with "Listening is our Superpower" include:
- **Appreciative inquiry** "is the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the relevant world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to an organization or community when it is most effective, and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms." (Holman, Devane, Cady, 2007).
- Other dialogic practices, including [Circle Dialogue](#), [World Cafe](#), [Open Space Technology](#) that engage people in conversations that lead to self-organization and action around shared meaning. (Holman, Devane, Cady, 2007).
- Creating both physical space and online spaces that encourage community members to engage when and how they are able (LeGreco, Ferrier and Leonard, 2015).

Indicators of Success

As we worked with what we learned from Macon, Agora, and other efforts, we noticed the following outcomes emerging. We see them as indicators that civic communications is happening.

Civic communications…

- foster *trustworthy relationships,*
- encourage *learning,*
- develop the capacity for *holistic thinking;*
- inspire *organizational responsibility and accountability,*

 so that communities and democracy thrive.

Foster trustworthy relationships

When authentic interactions happen, they encourage reciprocity, which sparks a virtuous cycle that cultivates trust. We noticed that working with the principles encouraged these qualities. Interactions became relational, as opposed to a extractional or transactional. Being relational describes a way of engaging that turns passive audience into active, engaged and powerful community agents. Increasingly trustworthy relationships improve the capacity to see and engage power dynamics, a theme that arose throughout the principles. Local stakeholders, including journalists, politicians, residents, nonprofit organizations and other community agents with different roles and areas of expertise, work together to answer questions. Solutions emerge from a conversation where maintaining trust, transparency and accountability are paramount.

"Unlike what we originally envisioned, there are [fewer media partners, but several] freelance journalists. The story packages will reach broad audiences, high-level editorial staff at major news organizations will participate in the editorial process, and the stories will address public information needs identified as priorities by…our cross-sector community advisory council. There will be editors, journalists and community advocates in the room together planning the story packages. Open: Housing will take the lead on assigning and editing stories, will help to connect journalists to sources, and will work to assure the reporting meets the standards of being inclusive, informed, solutions-oriented, and responsive to community information needs."

— Camela Raymond, One Issue, Many Perspectives

Encourage learning

The idea of "continuous learning" helped make sense of some of what we saw in the Guiding Principles. Projects were most successful when they cultivated, openness, curiosity, and a willingness to return iteratively to challenge assumptions.

In a social context, we saw that learning is about curiosity, deep listening and compassion, getting out of oneself and truly seeking to hear and understand another person's perspective. This is

learning in service to relationship building.

Develop the capacity for holistic thinking

Holistic thinking, or "systems thinking" entails the elements of interrelationships, perspectives and boundaries. *Interrelationships* refers to the way things are connected, the cause-effect relationships among component parts. The idea of *boundaries* helps make systems thinking useful and manageable by differentiating between what is in and what is out, what's relevant and what's irrelevant, based on intentions. The concept of *perspectives* comes into play when we make decisions about where the boundaries lie. What's important and what's relevant depends on your perspective and your purpose (Williams and Hummelbrunner, 2011).

How do we help a community become visible to itself? As it develops a more inclusive sense of "us", differences become a source of creative tension leading to breakthrough solutions rather than conflict. Community asset mapping and other means of identifying who makes up the whole system – geographically, demographically, psychographically – helps us to understand who to involve. Discovering that helps when navigating questions such as who the "us" is in Nothing About Us Without Us. How pluralistic is that "us" and what do we do when interests and perspectives are in conflict? How do we decide who the project is committed to when choosing a boundary that leaves some people out?

Thinking about power requires considering multiple perspectives. Often, increasing someone's autonomy and self-determination means decreasing another person or institution's power over them. As community members from different parts of the system engage, they begin to discover that, like the metaphorical blind men and the elephant, they need each other to understand the dynamics, challenges, aspirations, and tradeoffs for making choices in which the whole community has a stake.

Inspire organizational responsibility and accountability

One hard lesson from the projects we worked with is to be clear about your purpose, intentions and who you wish to serve so that you know what to look for when seeking compatible partners. Understanding what draws them to the project – their intentions, who they see themselves serving (community members? funders? donors?) – matters. In a sense, fostering trustworthy relationships among partner organizations is as critical as the relationships created with community members once the effort is underway. Establishing clear expectations with partners reinforces responsible behavior towards the community because once under way, expectations of participating community members are raised.

Being accountable requires attending to those expectations. To miss expectations is a sure way to put trust at risk. The idea of accountability came up as we considered that engagement improves

the health of civil society, but that society contains many different and often conflicting interests. We recognize that all stories are important, but there are often power differentials between the storytellers and the people whose stories are told. We saw that often we needed to think about which interests a project was serving, and that ignoring this question more often than not meant inadvertently committing to an existing power structure that exploits and misrepresents disenfranchised communities.

Author Bios

Peggy Holman is executive director of Journalism That Matters, a nonprofit she cofounded with three journalists to reconceive news and information to support communities and democracy to thrive. As an author and consultant, Holman has helped explore a nascent field of social technologies that enable diverse groups to face complex issues turning presentation into conversation and passivity into participation. In **The Change Handbook**, she and her coauthors profile 61 practices that involve people in creating their desired future. Her award-winning **Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity** provides a roadmap for tackling complex challenges through stories, principles, and practices.

Yve Susskind, PhD, is owner-principal of an independent research and evaluation consulting company, Praxis Associates LLC. She is the lead developmental evaluator for a number of projects with Journalism That Matters and the University of Oregon's Agora Center. Susskind served as one of the developmental evaluation coaches with Macon Listening Post and One Issue Many Perspectives and conducted the qualitative analysis on which many of the findings reported here are based.

Michelle Ferrier, PhD, is president of Journalism That Matters and a pioneer in developing online communities, digital ethnography, and community engagement for media organizations. She is a journalist and former columnist and has developed engagement technologies and hyperlocal news platforms throughout her career such as MyTopiaCafe.com, LocallyGrownNews.com, and Troll-Busters.com. Ferrier is an associate professor at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, where she conducts research on online communities, digital identity, and community engagement technologies. She is a 2016 fellow with the Reynolds Journalism Institute, where she is developing an online community for media innovation and entrepreneurship. Since 2009, she has been exploring the intersection of communities and journalism through articles on Poynter.org.

Mike Fancher retired from The Seattle Times in 2008, after 20 years as executive editor and almost 40 years as a professional journalist. Since retirement he has been involved in several

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Stephen Silha is a freelance writer, filmmaker, facilitator, and futurist. A cofounder of Journalism That Matters, he earlier convened the first symposium on The Media and Philanthropy (1987) and coauthored Good News/Good Deeds: Citizen Effectiveness in the Age of Electronic Democracy (1999). His award-winning documentary *BIG JOY: The Adventures of James Broughton* screened at 50 film festivals*.*

Acknowledgements

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