



The Connecticut Mirror 2022 Community Editorial Board

# Building Community Power

A newsroom's guide to equitable engagement

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

**American  
Journalism  
Project**



## About Free Press

Free Press is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan organization fighting for your rights to connect and communicate. Our News Voices program organizes with communities, journalists and newsrooms to build power and advocate for the news, information and narratives that people need to thrive. We do this by collectively dreaming up new media futures, addressing media harms, designing equitable engagement strategies, training newsrooms, and advocating for journalism repair and transformation. Visit [www.newsvoices.org](http://www.newsvoices.org) to learn more.

This report was created in partnership with [the American Journalism Project](#), whose grantees are featured in the case studies.

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# Introduction

Whether a community thrives or disintegrates is dependent on the reciprocal relationship between its people and its institutions and infrastructures. We have to cultivate powerful communities to sustain powerful local infrastructures like schools, food ecosystems and health-care services.

The same is true for journalism. Any future where journalism thrives and best serves the public depends on fostering engaged, organized and powerful communities. And that starts with creating a local-news infrastructure that centers community needs.

For those tasked with the immense responsibility of building a new future for journalism, sharing and building power within communities is key.

This resource, produced by Free Press with support from the American Journalism Project, is meant to help guide newsrooms on practicing equitable engagement and building community leadership. You may be familiar with some of the concepts and tactics shared here, and you may already be engaging with some of them. Great! We hope this guide will give you some new ways to think about that work.

Some of these ideas may be new or even uncomfortable. If there are things in here you want to try, great! If there are things you think won't work for you, that's OK too. This resource is meant to help you plan for growth and sustainability. We hope you come away feeling inspired, intrigued and challenged. And Free Press is here to guide you: Reach out to us at [newsvoices@freepress.net](mailto:newsvoices@freepress.net) for any support you need.

Note: We use the word “community” a lot here.

Newsrooms define community in a variety of ways. Communities can be place-based. They can be identity-based. It can be a community you build or an existing one. It can be online or offline. What's important is that there's a shared understanding of “community” among your staff.

**“Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice ... There is nothing essentially wrong with power. The problem is that in America power is unequally distributed.”**

// Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?”

# Building Power

To equitably engage with your community, it's critical to understand how power operates in relationship with the people you're aiming to serve.

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## Types of Power

There are at least four types of power:<sup>1</sup>

### POWER **over**

is a coercive, controlling power, oftentimes based in fear or scarcity, that presumes there are finite resources that only a select few people or institutions can access. This kind of power lies at the core of injustice and oppression.

### POWER **with**

is a horizontal power, one built on relationships, collaboration and solidarity. This is the power that creates equity, justice, freedom and liberation.

### POWER **to**

is a generative power that allows people or institutions to create, change or transform something or some system. This can be used for good and harm.

### POWER **within**

is the self-worth, knowledge and ability that we each uniquely hold. "But all people have power" is sometimes used to conflate individual power with systemic power.

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1. "4 Types of Power: What Are Power Over; Power With; Power to and Power Within?" Sustaining Community, Feb. 1, 2019: <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/4-types-of-power/>.

Even if it doesn't always feel like it, journalists and news organizations have tremendous power. Some examples of this power include:

- **ACCESS AND RELATIONSHIPS TO INFORMATION:** Journalists and news organizations have processes for regularly accessing civic information that impacts all residents of a place. This happens in a variety of ways: by participating in city meetings, by having relationships with people in positions of power or access to it, by doing ride-alongs with police departments, and by knowing how to navigate open-records systems available via the Freedom of Information Act. Journalists also have access to information shared in news releases and at conferences from corporations, nonprofit organizations and governmental bodies. There are laws that give journalists greater access to information and protect them during the course of newsgathering.
- **CULTURE SHAPING:** Journalists and newsrooms make decisions about what stories to tell and what questions to answer. Those stories and questions create a community narrative. Community narratives inform both culture and policy, which in turn impacts all residents.

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## What Journalists Do With Their Power

*What journalists do with their power — and how they prioritize and hold relationships with others who have varying degrees of power — affects their coverage and how they are perceived by the public. For example, journalism can express power in problematic ways:*

- **“OBJECTIVITY”:** The notion of objectivity is firmly rooted within journalism. Objectivity in this context usually describes a “referee” role that journalists are supposed to play. Report on an issue, show varying viewpoints and let the public decide. But what defines “objective” journalism has historically been determined by white men within specific newsrooms or the journalism industry at large. Upholding an “objective” perspective can translate into upholding oppressive systems. For more on the notion of objectivity, check out Lewis Raven Wallace’s book and podcast *A View from Somewhere*.
- **“GIVE VOICE TO THE VOICELESS”:** The belief that journalism should “give voice to the voiceless” is part of the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics. It’s a trope echoed in journalism schools, and even by reporters advocating for their communities. The problem, though, is that people already have voices. It’s that those voices have been ignored, systemically marginalized, or actively silenced. In many cases, those voices are heard by community members, but not by newsrooms, other institutions or people in power. When journalists view their work as giving “voice to the voiceless,” they’re overlooking their role in determining who gets heard and end up further marginalizing people. Instead, think about your work as *amplifying* ignored or marginalized community voices and centering the perspectives of people your reporting impacts.
- **“EMPOWERING”:** You may hear about this a lot — the notion of “empowering people” through information and reporting. The idea is that providing news and information promotes and strengthens civic engagement. That’s true. But “empowerment” is a problematic term to

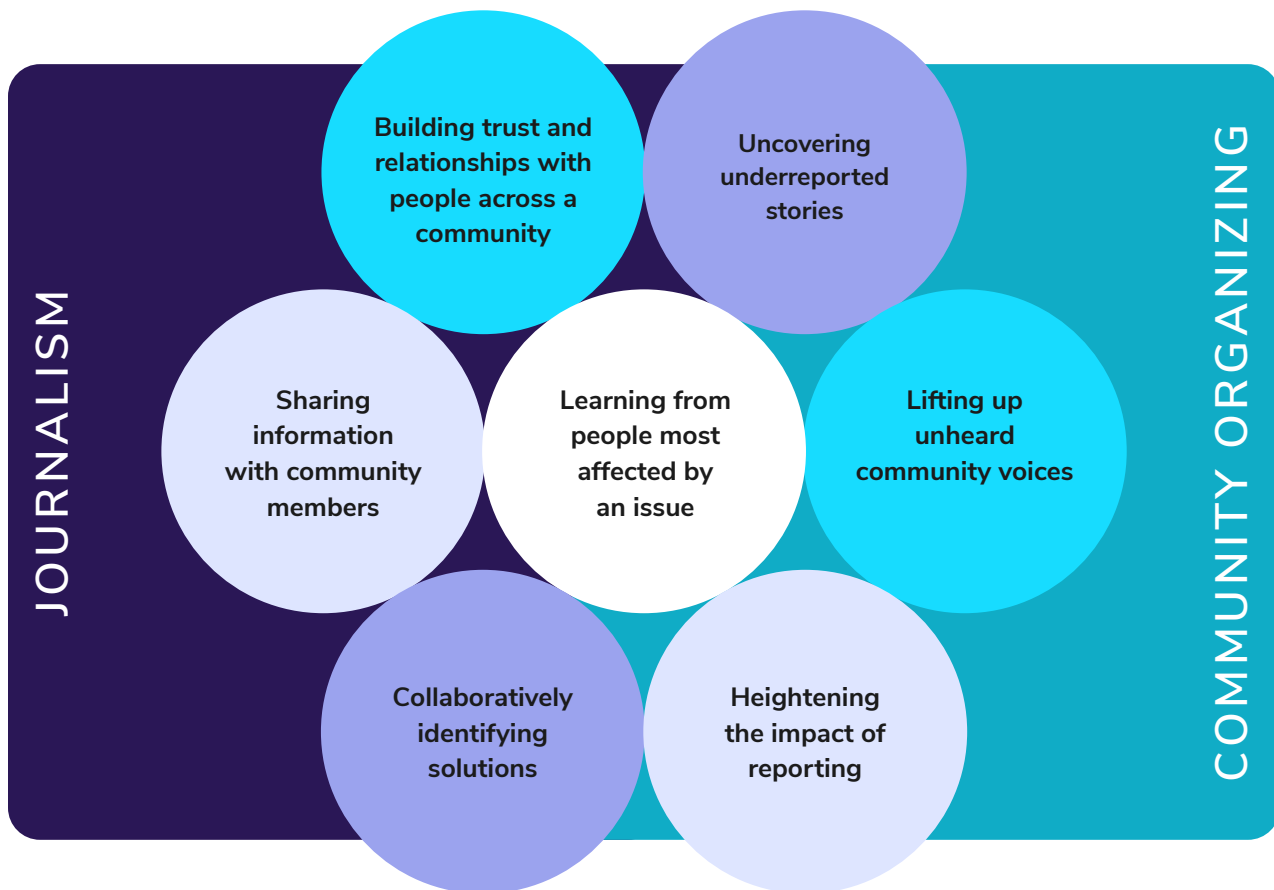
use when describing people. It assumes that those who are being “empowered” do not already have power. It also further reinforces a hierarchy of power (those being “empowered” are inferior to those engaged in “empowering”). To empower is to “authorize” or “grant permission” for the empowered to act. When discussing power, we favor the phrases “sharing” or “building” power. Organizations like City Bureau use phrases like “equipping” people. Whatever phrase you use, think about your terminology and ensure that your approach creates a partnership with the people centered in your coverage. When power is shared or built this way, it’s collective and durable.

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## Building Power via Community Organizing

A systematic way to build power is via community organizing. 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.

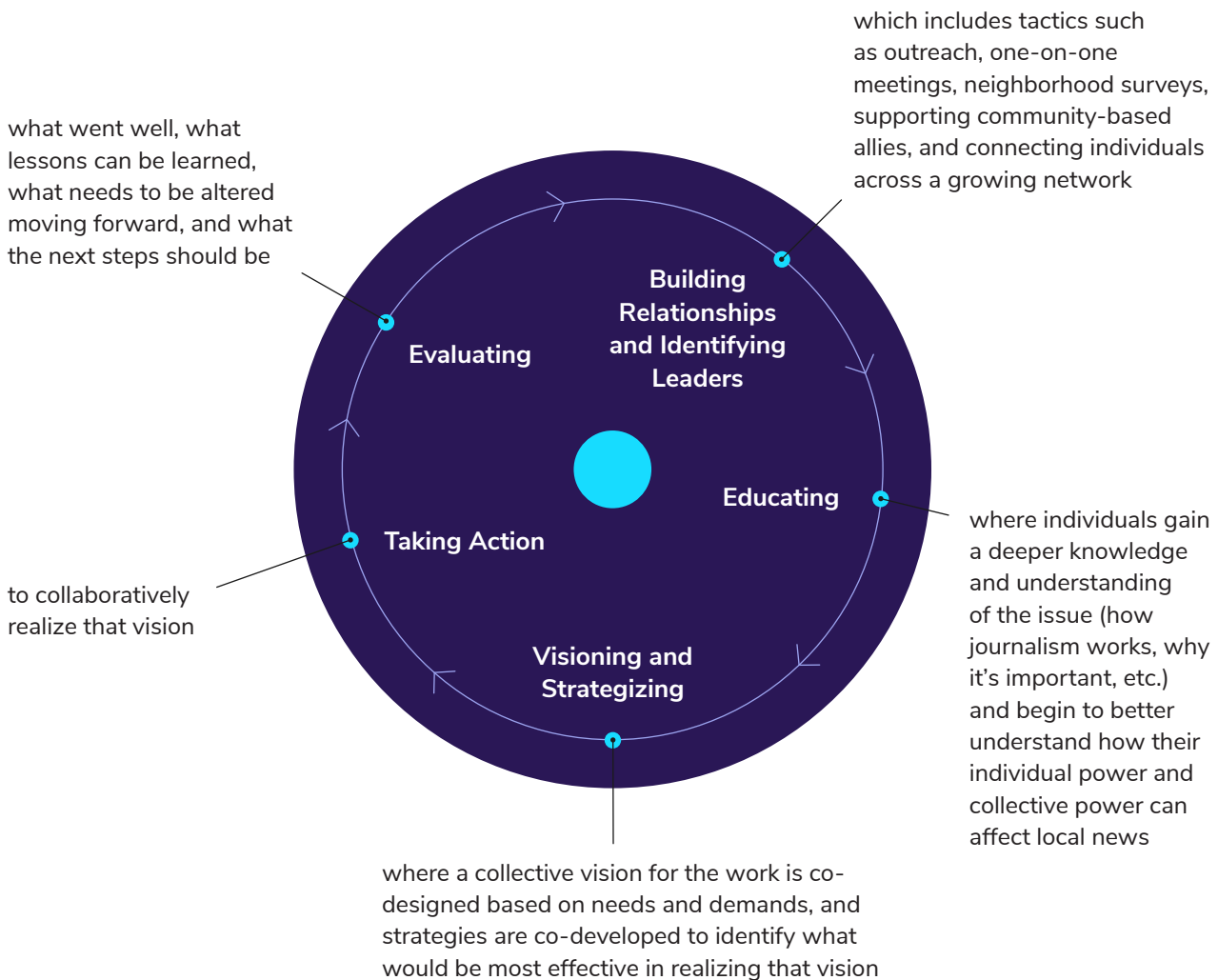
**Natural overlaps between journalism and community organizing include:**



By participating in the work, people become invested in your success and are willing to collaborate to bring more community members into the process. Free Press uses an organizing model to foster power in local communities and forge relationships between communities and newsrooms. This approach enables newsrooms to co-design solutions and outcomes with the very people who stand to benefit. We also determine the specific nature of the activities by consulting and collaborating with the people we build with. (Note: We discuss ways to cultivate leadership among community members in a later section.)

**By participating in the work, people become invested in your success and are willing to collaborate to bring more community members into the process.**

**This model uses discrete steps that are cyclical and ongoing:**



This process and each step **build capacity and leadership** for community members to work together on transforming local news and narratives around any given issue.





## Further questions to consider:

- Where are journalism and newsroom practices rooted in fear and scarcity?
- Where do journalistic practices exclude community? Why?
- How can you partner with community members? What feels scary about that? What feels exciting?
- How do your practices contribute to strong community building? How might your practices destabilize communities?
- How do you generally share the information you have access to?
- What is the culture you're trying to build or sustain? Do you name that clearly in your work?
- How could you intentionally practice power building with your community?
- What organizing opportunities do you have in your work and in your community?



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT BUILDING POWER

### [Measuring People Power in 2020](#)

MobLab

### [The Problem with Inclusion](#)

Laurenellen McCann

### [A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: Power & Empowerment](#)

Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller

### [Reporting with People, Not on Them: How the Bureau Local Took a Story Full Circle](#)

Rachel Hamada

# Building Equitable Engagement

When journalism doesn't align with community experiences, residents often turn off the television, tune out the nightly radio broadcast and stop reading the paper. This is called divestment. Generally, if you leave a house alone long enough, it will disintegrate and fall apart.

One of the ways we build up a home for journalism is through community engagement or community building. Engagement often looks like a riff on the following process: Journalists invite people in, perhaps through an event, a newsroom tour or a community conversation. Once community members are invited in, journalists ask questions and facilitate conversations with prompts like:

- What questions do you have?
- What stories are untold?
- How do you feel about us?
- How do you see yourself represented or excluded from our processes?

**“E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G is connected. The soil needs rain, organic matter, air, worms and life in order to do what it needs to do to give and receive life. Each element is an essential component ... Nature teaches us that our work has to be nuanced and steadfast. And more than anything, that we need each other — at our highest natural glory — in order to get free.”**

// writer and activist adrienne maree brown

Then that information is incorporated into newsrooms and newsgathering processes and the cycle continues, because relationship building and community building aren't one-time occurrences. **Engagement is a process, not a project.**

It's important to ensure that community engagement doesn't perpetuate transactional or extractive relationships with the public.

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## First, understand the difference between “audience” and “community.”

“**Audience**” refers to people who already engage with your work, while “**community**” includes everyone within your coverage area — even if they aren't subscribing, following or tuning in.

When engagement focuses only on an audience and not the community, there's a risk that your coverage will uphold systems of power and oppression — and that your journalism won't create conditions that will allow people to thrive. All of this threatens your vision and mission. It also means that you're hampering your ability to engage with and serve diverse communities.

Consider: Are you reaching out only to people you already connect with or who pay for your journalism? Or are you seeking to build with and better serve *all* community members? If so, are you meeting people where they are instead of expecting them to come to you?

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## Second, understand the difference between equitable and extractive engagement.

Equitable engagement centers a community's needs and focuses on co-design. Extractive engagement centers a newsroom's needs and focuses solely on listening to people without offering any opportunities for collaboration on coverage.

Consider these two scenarios:



### **extractive** ENGAGEMENT

A newsroom chooses a story idea or topic area without community input, then asks the public for help on covering that story. You get people's perspectives and then report on what you've learned. Afterward, you don't engage with people until you once again need their perspectives for a predetermined story idea.



### **equitable** ENGAGEMENT

This starts with identifying information needs or questions, co-designing or co-creating stories or coverage to meet those needs or answer those questions, and incorporating touch points throughout the newsgathering process for continual input and collaboration.

Both qualify as "engagement" as many newsrooms define it, but whose needs are centered looks different, and will lead to very different results and relationships.

Equitable engagement may start with listening to your community. But you also build with community members, invest in their success, share and exchange knowledge, routinely find ways to have people participate in the newsgathering process, and show up for them just as you're asking them to show up for your work.

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## To design your engagement in the most equitable way possible, start by asking yourself these questions:<sup>2</sup>

1. Who are the racial/ethnic/marginalized groups affected by the issue you're covering and are they at the table? If not, how can you bring them into the process? Better still, how can you embed yourself into their ongoing work?
2. How will the issue you're covering, and the coverage itself, affect each group?
3. How will each group perceive your coverage? (Thinking about this might feel uncomfortable, but this process will help you better understand other people's perspectives.)
4. Does your coverage ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences? Does your coverage provide solutions or information to alleviate inequities instead of just shining a spotlight on them?
5. Based on the above responses, what revisions are needed for the coverage or engagement you're planning?



### Further questions to consider:

- What is your current engagement strategy?
- Does your strategy center community needs or just your newsroom's? If your strategy focuses on newsroom needs, what revisions can you make?
- How can you modify your strategy to focus on equity?
- Does your strategy make equitable engagement a one-off project or a fundamental part of your ongoing newsgathering process and infrastructure?
- Is there a clear feedback loop you can show community members to illustrate how their input helps shape your work?

For examples of engagement tactics, see our resources section below.

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2. The list of questions was adapted from: [“Advancing the Mission: Tools for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion” by JustPartners, Inc., The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#). It also appears to be an adaptation of [Race Forward's “Racial Equity Impact Assessment”](#) tool.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT BUILDING EQUITABLE ENGAGEMENT

### [Don't Just Engage. Organize!](#)

Free Press

### [Creating an Engaged Newsroom](#)

Free Press

### [Embodying Key Principles and Ethics of Deep Listening](#)

Cole Goins

### [Listening Is a Revolutionary Act](#)

(Parts [1](#) & [2](#))

Jesse Hardman

### [Gather](#)

Agora Journalism Center

### [Spaceship Media Dialogue Journalism Toolkit](#)

Spaceship Media

### [Engaged Journalism: Practices for Building Trust, Generating Revenue, and Fostering Civic Engagement](#)

Impact Architects

### [Why Should I Tell You: A Guide to Less-Extractive Reporting](#)

Natalie Yahr

### [Advancing the Mission: Tools for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#)

JustPartners, Inc.,

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

### [5 Tips for Getting Your Reporting to the Audiences Who Need It Most](#)

Michelle Faust Raghavan

# Building Community Leaders

If you want to equitably engage with your community, you will need to cultivate leaders.

Why? Communities are too large and diverse for any one person, or even one newsroom, to effectively engage and build with. But individual leaders help foster community power, offer important insights, become champions of your work, increase your work's impact and strengthen the local news-and-information ecosystem.

And let's be real: You can't do it all. Cultivating leaders helps you avoid burnout, manage your individual and newsroom capacity, and prevent you from becoming a gatekeeper.

First, there have to be opportunities for participation. You must first practice and execute equitable engagement before you seek to build community leadership. You cannot have one without the other.

**“We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community. Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”**

// Cesar Chavez

Some principles of leadership development:<sup>3</sup>



## Look for leadership potential in everyone you encounter.

Anyone who supports your work might want to get more involved. Anyone who gets involved might want to do more.



## People become leaders because someone invested time in them.

Once a person does something on the leadership ladder, don't just assign them another task. Talk about their experience and co-create what comes next.



## People stay involved for the long term because they're part of a community

Develop and include opportunities for community leaders to forge relationships with each other.

3. “The Activist Toolkit: A Crash Course in Effective Citizenship,” NJPIRG Student Chapters: <https://njpirgstudents.org/assets/uploads/sites/7/2019/03/NJPIRG-Activist-Toolkit.pdf>.

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## Moving people from participants to leaders looks like this:



Community organizers are good at identifying and cultivating leaders, aware that we cannot realize our vision of a just and equitable world if it relies on only a few people holding power. Journalists hold a tremendous amount of power (even if it doesn't always feel like it). Finding ways to build with the community and create leaders will strengthen your engagement strategy and shape your reporting around the needs of people outside your newsroom.

Your community-engagement strategy, and the tactics you use, will look different when you are cultivating leaders as opposed to just "listening" to people. Doing this effectively requires building different kinds of relationships.

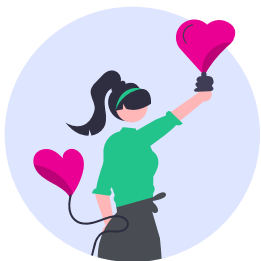
Here are a few ways to start:



**MAP YOUR COMMUNITY:** Identify people you should build relationships with. Make a list, spreadsheet or visual map of all those individuals and groups, their contact information, where they're located, what roles they play in the community, whether their work or members are represented in local news, and who may be able to connect you with them.

**REACH OUT TO AND SHOW UP FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS:**

Community members often meet or hear from a journalist only when the reporter wants something from them, like a quote for a story or a reaction to a tragic event. This transactional approach and extractive way of forging a relationship is one of the biggest barriers to trusting individual reporters and journalism as a whole. Journalists should cultivate relationships with everyday community members just as they cultivate relationships with people who hold power or have access to it.



**ACKNOWLEDGE THAT PEOPLE LIVE WHOLE LIVES:** Positive and constructive relationships between journalists and communities cannot exist without both sides attempting trust. Treat community members 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, they will respond accordingly.

**FOLLOW UP:** 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. When the time is right, invite people to participate in a community event or help plan it. Ask people to help shape the agenda and invite participants to say a few words. The more you bring people into the process as collaborators, the more they begin to feel their own power and develop their leadership skills.







## Further questions to consider:

- Which community members are possible leaders? How can you find these amazing collaborators in your community?
- How can you cultivate the leadership capacity of people in your community?
- What motivates people to be involved in your work?
- What will people do together?
- What are community members getting out of this process? How is everyone benefiting?
- How are you ensuring that this work isn't extractive or exploitative?



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT BUILDING COMMUNITY LEADERS

### [How to Have a Voice in Local News](#)

Free Press

### [Tactics for Transforming Local News](#)

Free Press

### [How Participatory Journalism Turns Consumers into Collaborators](#)

Olivia Koski

### [Listening Post Collective Playbook](#)

Listening Post Collective

# Case Studies

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# Outlier Media

## Sustainability Is a Promise to Your Community

Outlier Media was founded in 2016 to serve low-wealth, low-income Detroiters with the high-value critical information that people need to effect change in their lives. To accomplish this mission, Outlier’s reporting approach was rooted in engagement from the start. “We build our reporting centered on community information needs and gaps as identified by residents,” says Executive Director Candice Fortman.

This approach has led to impactful wins — helping community members avoid tax foreclosure or eviction, sparking local policy changes around rental inspections — and brought some stark challenges. “I say this a lot about organizations, especially organizations that are committed to serving low-wealth, low-income communities, or organizations led by people of color: We often

**“We build our reporting centered on community information needs and gaps as identified by residents.”**

// Candice Fortman, executive director

are not starting with investment,” says Fortman. “We are starting because of need.” The needs became especially critical in 2020 when staff took on the “extra burden” of reporting around the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, with the American Journalism Project’s investment, Outlier is focused on building up staff capacity so that the organization can root in Detroit for the long term. “When we talk about sustainability, part of that is just a promise to your community,” says Fortman. “When you talk about building trust

with your audience, it can’t just be about whether or not they can trust your editorial work. Can they trust that you care enough to [...] still be the resource they came to depend on?”



# NOISE Omaha



## Smart Strategy Begins With Your Core Community

NOISE Omaha grew out of a community information-needs assessment conducted by the Listening Post Collective in 2017 and has been deeply rooted in the historically Black community of North Omaha ever since. As part of its mission to address local information and storytelling needs, NOISE Omaha has trained community members in reporting methods and created platforms for residents to be heard.

The organization's recent exponential growth coincided with the sheer urgency of 2020, especially responding to the social-justice protests in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We were working with this sense of urgency and adrenaline, and in lockdown," says Emily Chen-Newton, vice president and former interim managing editor. "Now, as we are moving out of that information triage [...], we are coming back to the core of NOISE and asking, 'What does the community want? What does the community need now?'"

Part of this refocusing has involved returning to NOISE Omaha's foundation of reclaiming the narrative of North Omaha and creating the conditions to support its staff.

**"Now, as we are moving out of that information triage [...], we are coming back to the core of NOISE and asking, 'What does the community want? What does the community need now?'"**

// Emily Chen-Newton, vice president and former interim managing editor

"One major decision that we made was to no longer do breaking news. What our community seems to be really engaged with, and what there seems to be a lack of [...] in the media, is more in-depth and nuanced coverage," says Chen-Newton. "We also said that we weren't going to do weekend coverage unless it was something we would discuss beforehand. If it really fits our mission, then we will be there. But nine times out of 10 we are going to have Saturday and Sunday for our team to relax."

These decisions are supporting NOISE Omaha's sustainability over the long term. As Chen-Newton reminds us, "You can't grow if you fizzle out."

# The Connecticut Mirror



Justice Reporter Kelan Lyons

## Equip Communities to Inform Your Editorial Agenda

The nonpartisan journalism nonprofit CT Mirror “informs Connecticut residents about the impact of public policy, holds government accountable, and amplifies diverse voices and perspectives.” Engaging communities wasn’t part of the CT Mirror’s original approach to producing journalism. But this has been changing in the last few years. Resources and connections provided by the American Journalism Project enabled the newsroom to deepen their community engagement work.

“Our interest in engaging in communities is to make sure we report on the impact of public policy on all residents of Connecticut,” says Bruce Putterman, publisher and CEO. The CT Mirror has several engagement goals — from better understanding community needs and increasing readership to soliciting story ideas from communities and diversifying sourcing — and they have chosen a unique way to begin implementing these equitable-engagement approaches.

**“Our interest in engaging in communities is to make sure we report on the impact of public policy on all residents of Connecticut.”**

// Bruce Putterman, publisher and CEO

“We created a community-editorial board to engage more deeply in communities around the state,” says Putterman. The CT Mirror community-editorial board will exercise some of the power held by a traditional editorial board, such as advising on content-coverage priorities and producing regular opinion pieces. The Mirror launched the inaugural board in January 2022.

# City Bureau

## Building Civic Ecosystems Begins With Open-Ended Conversations

City Bureau is a Chicago-based nonprofit journalism lab that reimagines the way journalism is produced by putting community first. The organization focuses on reaching ZIP codes with 90% or more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) residents. It has developed three public programs that center community, equity and justice in information gathering: the Civic Reporting Fellowship, the Documenters network, and the Public Newsroom.

Now, six years in and with an investment from the American Journalism Project, City Bureau is in a new phase of growth — this time focused on better aligning and integrating all of its public programs. “The programs were conducting community engagement independently from one another,” says Bettina Chang, co-founder and co-executive director. “This siloing was limiting our ability to make a deep impact. It was an inefficient use of [staff] and it ran the risk of confusing our community partners who already have limited time and resources.”

**“We have seen that our greatest impact is not just in training people in Chicago, but our ability to connect program participants with other groups and individuals.”**

// Bettina Chang, co-founder and co-executive director

While City Bureau has taken major steps to address this siloing, equally critical has been the shift in how the organization fosters relationships with others. “We started conducting introductory one-on-one conversations with organizations that are aligned with [our] mission and target service area,” says Chang.

“It may seem like a small change and a limited impact at first,” says former staffer Ellie Mejía. “But we know that high connectivity between organizations like ours are a crucial component of a healthy, robust information system. Having open-ended conversations is a better starting point for building lasting relationships.”

These changes will help City Bureau amplify what its communities value most about its work. “We have seen that our greatest impact is not just in training people, but our ability to connect participants with other groups and individuals who can grow collaborative projects together,” says Chang. “Therefore we are putting more emphasis on building capacity in community organizations and partners within our target audience.”



## CASE STUDY

# WFAE

## Strategic Alignment Transforms Engagement from a Project into a Culture

By the time Charlotte, North Carolina's WFAE secured a philanthropic investment from the American Journalism Project in April 2021, the independent public-media organization had already spent four years making its internal newsroom culture more community-centered and digital-first.

Ju-Don Marshall, the chief content officer and executive vice president, has previously shared that once WFAE decided its core priority was to understand the communities it served, this opened the door to experimenting with new ways to listen (newsroom visits, community-advisory boards and digital-engagement tools such as Harken) and new ways to amplify diverse voices (such as piloting a collaborative reporting platform). WFAE has also experimented with different ways to cover topics important to the community and amplify diverse voices by embedding reporters in the

**“We believe equitable engagement is critical to fulfilling our mission and better serving our community.”**

*// Ju-Don Marshall, chief content officer and executive vice president*

engagement is critical to fulfilling our mission and better serving our community,” says Marshall. “We are undergoing a strategic plan now to cement the organization’s and board’s commitment to this.”

library, sharing reporters with ethnic media news organizations and training the community to tell stories alongside it through podcasting.

After four years of growth and transformation, Marshall says it’s time to “focus on hiring and strategic alignment across departments” so that WFAE can steward its resources to fulfill its fundamental service goals. “We believe equitable

