Community Engagement in Newsrooms

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**Abstract**

This impact of communication in journalism goes beyond the publication of stories and information. Communication also includes the act of engaging to develop understanding and build relationships. The same can be said for communication between journalists and their audience. This study focused on identifying and defining community engagement tools within a newsroom and their potential impact on the relationship between a publication and its audience. The study was centered on the Devil Strip, a magazine publication based in Akron, Ohio. The publication adopted a cooperative structure where readers can become partial owners. The findings of the case study revealed several categories identified to be community engagement tools, including time, networking, and shareholder involvement. Those tools, while still in their early stages of development, were found to have been developed to elicit positive attitudes from readers and staff members to create a support structure within the newsroom and local community. The publication’s founder, staff members and readers were interviewed to examine attitudes and investigate its impact on the publication’s growth and public response. The findings appear to show that community engagement tools, as defined by the Devil Strip, are creating positive views between a local publication and its audience. While the study shows that the publication appears to be growing in its reach online and in print-distribution, the study’s limitations include correlating the growth with the use of the community engagement tools. The findings of this study was presented in a visual format online to show, in detail and through direct responses, the interviews and data collected from staff members and readers: <http://www.amaniabraham.com/community-engagement-in-news.html>. The online format allows for the potential to update the information based on new data collected in the future to better identify the impact and use of community engagement in newsrooms. Further research would be needed to present an in-depth look into the direct impact of the engagement tools and increased readership within news organizations.

**The Role of Community Engagement in Newsrooms**

The developing role of community engagement in newsrooms has created a new way of approaching journalism in a digital world. The questions line up with the thought that face-to-face interaction and ground-level discovery of neighborhoods, businesses and individuals can create a bond within a community that can potentially strengthen a newsroom’s reach, increase viewership/readership and trust. More Americans are getting their news online, particularly social media outlets, with just about a quarter of the online news readership population actively engaging with the information online (Matsa & Lu, 2016). While the definition of engagement may vary, the potential it carries has been highlighted by organizations like the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which has put forth millions of dollars in funding to support programs that are focused on community engagement and innovation within journalism (Knight Foundation, 2017). This includes, but is not limited to, creating public forums and developing story-sharing programs in the community where a local news organization is based. The idea leads to the proposal of a research study into how community engagement is identified and implemented in a newsroom and whether its developed role can impact the relationship between the audience and the news organization. Community engagement can be interpreted differently depending on its various views and individual response, but its roots are based on developing a relationship with citizens on the ground level.

To complete this research study, a qualitative approach was taken to understand and identify the impact and ecosystem of community engagement within a single newsroom. The research relied heavily on in-depth interviews and written responses to determine how engagement is viewed, implemented and reciprocated through the eyes of journalists and community members.

**Literature Review**

Understanding the importance of community engagement requires a deeper look into how the relationship is affected between journalists and the audience it serves. Several studies have investigated the potential impact of engagement related to specific actions taken to address engagement in journalism. One case study revealed that a sports media center operated by public volunteers involved in community journalism, felt a sense of “altruism” and “community” (Bressers & Smethers). The respondents cited “growth” in the community and participated in civic activities “typically associated with high levels of community engagement” (Bressers & Smethers, p. 440-441). The feeling associated with community engagement can be seen as an element reciprocated between both parties, developing a deeper connection while promoting civic activities. The idea presents a look into the potential impact of community engagement in a newsroom and the benefits between two parties.

There are different levels to possible benefits of community journalism, including its potential to directly impact the lives of community members by helping to solve issues or difficulty within communities (Mellado & van Dalen, 2017). In order to understand the impact of community engagement in journalism, it’s important to identify how the audience views the news and/or what they would like to receive when reading or viewing news coverage. One study related to what the public expects in local news showed most of the respondents had an interest in whether the coverage showed an “understanding” and “care” of a community and also offered solutions to problems presented in communities, (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, p. 958). An analysis of the survey in that same case study also found that there were “four dimensions of journalism as perceived by the public,” which included the qualities of good neighbor, watchdog, unbiased and accurate/fast. The “good neighbor” factor leads to additional questions as to how journalism is digested by community members. It relates back to the relationship between journalists and the public they serve. If there’s little to no trust or connection from a ground level of support, can the relationship thrive in a digital age and can community engagement in newsrooms improve information sharing and trust between journalists and the public? In a 2018 qualitative study, six focus groups were conducted to develop an understanding related to how solutions journalism (stories that are focused on reporting an issue and presenting solutions) could impact community engagement and response to local media (Wenzel, Gerso, Moreno, Son, & Morrison, 2018). The results showed that participants pointed to an increase in personal impact if solutions journalism included more opportunities for community input. The results indicated that participants would like to be given an opportunity to connect with the media beyond online comments. This feedback relates to the need or interest in community engagement between an audience and media to help facilitate active understanding and coverage in areas that may feel underrepresented in their neighborhoods. The results led to a need for additional understanding as it relates to the internal connection between journalists and citizens.

Community engagement can be a factor in the attitudes shared towards local media and possibly influence a media’s longevity, depending on the strength of its relationship through engagement (Smethers & Bressers, 2017). In-depth interviews conducted between an editor and production staff members at a volunteer Kansas newspaper allowed for contextual analysis that provided understanding related to the newspaper’s connection with the community. It revealed that volunteers were encouraged to continue efforts at the newspaper as they held the belief that “ceasing their efforts would have a disastrous effect on the fabric of social life” (Smethers & Bressers, 2017, p. 387).

Since the rise of social media sites, newsrooms have incorporated audience engagement leaders to help facilitate activity online and within communities. Editors at nearly two dozen local newspapers across the country noted that their newsrooms’ focus was to build a larger audience, while also being able to facilitate discussions with the audience and journalists (Assmann & Diakopoulos, 2017). While audience engagement may be used for marketing and physical growth, it was shown that editors believed the role also included a “listening approach” to understand the deep-rooted needs of the community. Two studies published between a four-year timeframe show how journalists respond to a deeper level of community engagement when gathering news, and the struggles they may encounter due to lack of resources. In a study that looked at online engagement on social media and online sites, journalists cited time constraints and a hesitation to interact online when it comes to opinion or harsh comments (Neilson, 2018). This helps to provide transparency as it relates to the role engagement plays in newsrooms, even in a “virtual” context. The findings can be related to how community engagement can physically operate in newsrooms. While newsrooms have added digital content and engagement editors, it’s clear to see the potential flaws in the system if time constraints, resources and policy are not in place to help support such efforts. Furthermore, a study conducted just four years earlier followed the relationship between journalists and the “ground-level” interaction with members of underrepresented communities (Hermans & Bardoel, 2014). Journalists would listen to citizens directly, taking a “bottoms-up” approach to identifying and reporting on issues important to the members voicing their concerns. It led to the creation of “news that would normally have remained unnoticed” (Hermans & Bardoel, p. 647). This points to the benefit of community engagement through face-to-face interaction, potentially giving a voice to the voiceless and building trust between journalists and community members. The issue that arose during the study was the lack of initial response from citizens to open discussions with the journalist, partly due to logistical reasons since the journalists were in a fixed location as they were operating out of a newsroom. While the advantage is serving underrepresented communities, the issues stand on how this could be a practical approach in newsrooms and how technology may be able to help address these issues.

News values of journalists were dissected within a small group in a study, which revealed the heightened connection to one’s area and willingness to cover positive stories depending on the individual’s heritage or connection to their community (Hatcher & Haavik, 2014). In this case, the journalists surveyed described a strong connection to the community they were serving through journalism. Hatcher and Haavik’s 2014 study found the following:

Journalists who call the community where they work their ancestral home feel a great sense of pride in both their work and in their community. Often, this prompted them to favor a journalistic role that reinforced the positive aspects of community life. (p. 160-161)

The findings relate back to how community engagement can benefit a relationship between a journalist and community members. The positive connection can allow for a community to be driven by connection and trust, thus creating a stronger foundation for local news. If journalists can feel a sense of pride through their own connection and work within the communities they serve, can the feeling be reciprocated on a community level?

Understanding the impact of engagement can also be viewed through the lens of how people respond through community events and programs. A survey involving more than 2,000 boys and girls was analyzed to determine a correlation between media interest and their community activity level showed a positive correlation between the two, with an added emphasis to the relationship when interpersonal media discussion between the adolescent and their parent(s) or friend(s) occurred (Erentaitė, Žukauskienė, Beyers & Pilkauskaitė, 2012). The discussion sheds light into engagement and its impact on an audience. If added conversations between family and friends can promote civic engagement in adolescents, can this translate to post-coverage Facebook live discussions or face-to-face public forums with community member to encourage engagement and develop trust within a news organization?

It quickly becomes clear that there are still unanswered questions as it relates to the impact community engagement can have inside newsrooms and the community it serves. A content analysis study examined social media strategies of local TV news and newspaper organizations’ Twitter accounts (Meyer, Tang, 2015). The study found that much of a newsroom’s strategy online was focused more on sharing stories, specifically links to their stories, rather than to engage an audience that in turn generates curiosity as to how, if at all, community engagement is used in newsrooms and the impact, or lack thereof, when it comes to engaging our audience on the ground and on the web.

The following research questions proposed focus on (1) how community engagement is understood and implemented, (2) whether trust is strengthened between journalists and citizens, and (3) whether media ratings and public engagement on social media platforms increase through the implementation of community engagement in newsrooms.

* RQ 1: How is community understood as perceived by key stakeholders (reporters, editors, managers, sales, and audience) within a newsroom and a community?
* RQ 2: How can the role of community engagement in newsrooms strengthen trust within the relationship between journalists and the public (audience)?
  + NOTE: Based on what we learned as a result of RQ 1, the research will move forward with RQ 3 to identify impact.
* RQ 3: How does the implementation of community engagement in newsrooms impact the ratings and/or engagement on social media sites for news organizations?

**Methodology**

The study used a qualitative approach, specifically in a case study design, to examine the definition of community engagement within a single newsroom. The arts and culture magazine, the Devil Strip, was the focus of the study, to allow for a direct view into how community engagement is defined, which can vary from ground level engagement to online social media engagement. The study included in-depth interviews with the publication’s founder, a reporter, and a shareholder of the magazine, and questions answered by three additional staff members and 26 readers of the Devil Strip. The interviews allowed for contextual analysis based on direct experience and discussions. Since the relationship between community engagement (at times defined by journalists differently) and audience response is not readily available, the approach allowed for open discovery in a real-world application. This allowed for the use of direct quotes to highlight the relationship and roles based on personal experience. The interviews were gathered between Jan. 30, 2020 and June 22, 2020. The research collection took several months due to scheduling conflicts during the COVID-19 pandemic, which included in-person interviews, video and phone calls, and emailed responses.

The founder and publisher of the Devil Strip, Chris Horne, launched the monthly publication in 2014, beginning with a print distribution of 5,000 copies in 2015. In 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the magazine’s print distribution stood at 14,000 copies. The magazine reduced its print distribution during the final months of the research study because a portion of their distribution locations were forced to close due to the pandemic. The publication, which also includes an online format, has grown to 11 staff members with additional reporters expected to join in the near future.

In this particular research study, the interviews were conducted in-person, on the phone and online using video calls and emails. Each interview was conducted separately and without a specific prompt to encourage a variety of responses and perspectives. The publication’s staff and shareholders were asked about what community engagement “looks like” in their newsroom, how it’s implemented and the potential advantages. Five of the 11 staff members, including the magazine’s founder, about 45 percent, were interviewed and/or shared their experience in a written response during this study. The interviews allowed for respondents to share personal experiences, allowing for an immersive look into identifying the community engagement model and how its implementation impacts the relationship between the newsroom’s journalists and their audience.

**Findings**

The interviews and response collected in this study highlighted and defined what community engagement looks like inside a five-year-old news publication. It shed light into how community engagement tools are identified and used to build relationships between a news publication and its audience.

The study pointed to three community engagement tools that were utilized within the newsroom to foster relationships in the community and create loyal readership, which were identified as time, networking, and shareholder involvement. Staff members cited time as a community engagement tool which relates to how a reporter gathers and publishes a story. Time, when defined as a community engagement tool, was identified by the length of time a reporter has to gather interviews, research and other elements when piecing together a story. The more time a reporter would have to work on a story could allow for more thoughtful, comprehensive and in-depth features that may not otherwise be found in various other news outlets. Networking was defined as a tool used to bring community members together to foster relationships in and out of the newsrooms. Staff members could attend events and hold meetings or gatherings to encourage discussions that could potentially connect them to community members and allow for story sharing. Shareholder involvement was defined as the process of community members being given an opportunity to own a piece of the publication, while also getting a chance to be involved in editorial discussions. While the involvement may be limited, it allows for reader engagement to promote transparency and trust while also building relationships.

**Community Engagement Tools Used in the Newsroom**

**Time, frequency and longevity:**

The Devil Strip’s monthly publication allows for reporters and staff members to spend more time in the news gathering process. The launch of the Devil Strip began with Chris Horne’s in-depth coverage into controversy surrounding the presidency of Scott Scarborough at the University of Akron in 2015. While the publication’s launch did not include full-time staff members, Horne explained that he did not view it as a weakness but rather a strength to build a solid foundation:

We’re not going to be able to produce 25, 30 stories a day like some outlets do. Some of them far more than that. And we’re not going to be able to broadcast everything so we try to turn those weaknesses, or seeming weaknesses, into strengths. Time, frequency and longevity were the first three real community engagement tools we insisted on.

The frequency of publication and longevity of stories (evergreen) was also identified as a branch of time as Horne explained that it allowed for more engagement over a period of time. Horne went on to explain the importance of distinguishing the bi-weekly print publication from other news outlets to focus on community engagement through the use of its time.

The work of gathering, vetting and sharing information doesn't need to be practiced inside the same old formats to be useful. In fact, that's the gift of real community engagement. We're getting better at knowing where people are and what they need so we know how to reach them.

When addressing time as a community engagement tool, reporter Noor Hindi stressed the importance of creating a welcoming environment for interviews. Time gave the subjects of a story room to schedule interviews at their convenience to create a comfortable atmosphere, especially at times when it includes trauma or loss, according to Hindi.

Something we're trying to enter, implement newly is trauma-informed recording and in interviewing. Which for me, I define that as just opening space for people to discuss the things they want to talk about in a space that they can control. So it's really simple things that I think like any reporter picks up. But in terms of like. Like, where do you want to do this interview? How much time do you have for this interview? What do you want to talk about instead of going in with the 15 questions? And I think it's really important that we build structures around that because for journalists and reporters who have very strict deadlines that are a bit unrealistic, I think that they are unable to create the space and the time that is needed for people to really open up. So if I'm interviewing you and I only have 20 minutes moving between interviews and then I try to transcribe this, I'm trying to move it really quickly. Perhaps you need 40 minutes to warm up to me. Perhaps you need an hour to tell your story. So I think it's really, really important to just set that space for people to open up. I think those are the two things that I would think about when I think about community engagement.

About two dozen readers of the magazine responded to a pair of interview questions shared via email. When readers were asked why they choose to read the Devil Strip, four out of the 26 respondents cited the publication’s in-depth reporting as one of the reasons for supporting the magazine. Horne and Hindi agreed that time allowed for opportunities to publish detailed, in-depth stories that could bring more than one voice to the picture, adding more community representation and involvement.

**Networking**:

Networking as a community engagement tool is looked at as creating a space for people to gather, share stories and develop relationships within the community. The Devil Strip has held numerous events, meetings and even launched the Signal Tree Festival to promote active conversations and engagement with artists, business owners and others within the city of Akron.

In one case, Horne shared a story of two Akron residents meeting at the publication’s launch party, which led to the development of a new business. Cristina González Alcalá confirmed the meeting at the launch party. Alcalá stated that the connection she made at the party led to additional opportunities to help her create a business selling her father’s hot sauce recipe from Mexico. Alcalá said the support from the community and the Devil Strip led to her reciprocating the support by becoming a shareholder in the magazine. In an interview on June 22, 2020, Alcalá said she supported the magazine’s attention to bringing people together and fostering growth in the community.

Especially when they threw their support back at us by, you know, writing the first story of our company ever. They just became this synergy, synergistic relationship where we both began supporting each other and we were doing something that nobody else was doing.

Horne explained that, while the magazine may have had little direct involvement with the growth of the business, it shed some light into how the publication’s engagement model could build trust and develop relationships in the community.

If this is how you met your best friend, if this is how you get the encouragement to start your new business…and this is how you get to connect to those things and it was because of us, you’re not going to be be loyal to that? You’re not got to turn to us? You’re not going to trust us when we have something serious to tell you about? When we tell you Akron's infant mortality rate around African-American communities needs to be fixed and this is some of the problems feeding into it, or we talk about red lining and food deserts or the impact in our belt destroying neighborhoods, are you’re not going to pay attention to that when we have helped you have a little bit of a better life? Of course you are.

Hindi said networking has given her an opportunity to engage with community members, unlock new story ideas, and create a sense of familiarity with residents and city leaders: “It goes back to just being at events and stuff in the community and finding those leaders. And then when you do need to interview them, it feels more genuine. They know you. They've seen your face.”

The three additional staff members interviewed cited connections with community members as a sign of growth and relationship building. A team member in business development briefly stated the potential impact that comes with being “accessible” to readers:

When people see someone they know covered in our magazine, it becomes real to them. They realize we are accessible, and open to talk with anyone. I think that side of us and our reach in the community has great potential to make people comfortable so we can grow and be heard in every neighborhood.

**Shareholder Involvement:**

In November of 2019, the Devil Strip officially launched its co-op model, allowing community members to own a portion of the publication. For as little as one dollar a month, someone could become a partial owner of the magazine. Shareholders, who would be required to have an Ohio address, would be involved in the “strategic future” of the magazine. Horne explained that he wanted to step away from the “attention model” in news and did not want to build a publication that was strictly invested in monitoring “page clicks” or website visits for financial gain.

There would need to be another structure financially in order to sustain this long term. So that's why very recently we became a co-op. So we're worker-owned, community-owned and this, I think, is at least a business structure that allows us to align all of our incentives internally with the community's best interest. It means we have to be engaged. It means we have to be in conversation. And it means that we have to allow the community to participate in what the product ultimately is.

Horne chose to adopt a model structure that would focus on encouraging community involvement, engagement, support, and growth in local journalism:

I want to foster a community of people who care about Akron. And so, you know, our first phase has been centered around that. When I think about the 30,000 people who read us [on average every month], I think that 30,000 people who care about Akron, you know, because that's the kind of work we put out there.

Among readers of the Devil Strip, 11 out of 26 people interviewed noted local coverage as their reason for reading the Devil Strip. A couple of the readers cited the magazine as “pro-Akron” and “fresh.” Two of the three additional staff members interviewed had nearly identical responses to identifying community engagement as being “for the people and by the people.”

One example of engagement within the newly formed model was directed at the first official shareholders meeting that gave members an opportunity to vote on future stories. While shareholders wouldn’t be able to dictate coverage, Horne said they would get opportunities to vote on which stories they feel may be of higher importance within the community. In the most recent case, shareholders were each given five stickers to place on list of stories related to economic development. Shareholders could place one sticker or all five on a single story idea, or they could spread out their stickers throughout the list. Staff members would then prioritize the stories based on the interest following the vote. Horne explained that the team is planning to create a digital way to create a similar voting process in the future.

We're a community owned, worker owned. And this, I think, is at least a business structure that allows us to align all of our incentives internally with the community's best interest. It means we have to be engaged. It means we have to be in conversation. And it means that we have to allow the community to participate in what the product ultimately is. There's no there's no way for them to dictate coverage, but in that conversation and our accountability to our members, we will learn about stories that otherwise we wouldn’t have access to.

Hindi agreed, noting the opportunity for shareholders to vote on stories is a way to “engage community members with the editorial leadership.”

**Discussion**

The analysis of this study helped to provide context and to the following research questions:

* RQ1: How is community engagement understood as perceived by key stakeholders (reporters, editors, managers, sales, and audience) within a newsroom and a community?
* RQ2: How can the role of community engagement in newsrooms strengthen trust within the relationship between journalists and the public (audience)?
* RQ3: How does the implementation of community engagement in newsrooms impact the ratings and/or engagement on social media sites for news organizations?

When analyzing how community engagement is perceived by the magazine’s publisher and staff members, it appears time, networking, and shareholder involvement are identified as the leading tools. The publication appears to focus heavily on allowing writers and contributors to use an unspecified time to complete and publish stories to increase quality, develop in-depth features and create a welcoming environment for interviewees/subjects. Networking was identified as a community engagement tool to build relationships and trust within the community, creating a cycle of support. Shareholder involvement as a community engagement tool was identified as a way to connect community members directly to the magazine and giving readers an opportunity to get involved with editorial decisions.

While it’s difficult to determine the direct correlation as to whether community engagement tools used by the Devil Strip do, in fact, strengthen trust in between the magazine and community members, anecdotes and first-hand accounts point to the tools helping to build relationships. It appears readers appreciate and value the Akron-centered focus and in-depth coverage, built in part by the Devil Strip’s attention to time and connections with the community.

Previous research pointed to what an audience would like to see in their news, particularly having an interest in whether the coverage showed an “understanding” and “care” of a community, (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, p. 958). While it’s difficult to relate the qualitative study to the findings of previous research, one could compare the audience satisfaction based on the “good neighbor” analysis, in that readers value in-depth coverage in their community, but also want to see a publication or news source “care” about their neighborhoods. In turn, it can have the ability to increase trust between journalists and members in the community.

In relation to whether the community engagement model has had an affect on the publication’s audience size, it appears there is positive impact as readers and the print distribution numbers have steadily increased over the past five years. Data provided by Horne showed a steady increase of readers since the publication’s launch. In 2015, print distribution stood at around 5,000 copies and increased to 14,000 copies in early 2020, according to Horne. Website data was also shared, showing website visitors more than doubled from 2015 to 2019 which stood at 151,826 per year, or about 12,652 per month. In the first six months of 2020, that number stood at 102,344, or 20,057 visitors per month.

**Conclusion**

While still in its early stages of development and due to the small qualitative study, the community engagement model shown at the Devil Strip provides context into how community engagement tools are identified, used and valued within a news organization. It provides a look into how the publication values community engagement tools to build relationships in the community, and to ultimately create a successful news outlet. There can be varying definitions of community engagement in the journalism field, but the study helped to identify what those engagement tools “look like” and the potential impact on a news organization’s success.

The findings of the study revealed a varied approach to local journalism, with an emphasis on using community engagement tools to better develop relationships with residents. Since the publication has only been active for five years, additional research is needed to survey and examine the long-term impact of the co-op model and its use of community engagement tools. A visual and interactive representation of the data collected in this study was published online at <http://www.amaniabraham.com/community-engagement-in-news.html>. The online format allows for comparisons and updates to be made to the data in the future as additional information is needed. Further research, in particular both qualitative and quantitative research studies, is needed to look at how the Devil Strip and other news organizations are using community engagement and whether its implementation over an extended period of time helps to build a stronger relationship with an audience or the public it serves.

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