

ELECTION



Newsroom lessons in engagement and trust-building from the 2020 elections

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Engaged Elections: The Citizens Agenda	2
Trustworthy Elections	4
Goals	6
Challenges	10
Successes	13
Looking Forward	22
Appendix	31
About the Interviews	31
Exercise: Setting the Vision	33
Exercise: Stakeholder Mapping	35
How to Get Engagement Buy-In	36



Candidate Mark Ronchetti, left, and moderator Gene Grant on the stage of the October 2020 U.S. Senate Debate hosted by New Mexico PBS. (Courtesy of New Mexico PBS)

Introduction

Building Better Coverage for an Unprecedented Election

What if newsrooms could do election coverage better?

That question was the foundation of Election SOS. The initiative brought together collaborators from the journalism industry and funders to provide training, resources and financial support to newsrooms covering elections in 2020. We defined doing election coverage “better” specifically as surfacing critical community information needs by using engagement and trust-building best practices.

We could never have known just how many challenges 2020 would hold.

As the rolling lockdowns of the pandemic made our initial proposal to hold regional in-person training workshops impossible, we adapted by creating month-long

online training cohorts in Engaged and Trustworthy election coverage, run by engagement consultancy Hearken and the Trusting News project. Between May and September, 148 journalists from 89 newsrooms participated in the training programs.

In February 2021, we conducted diagnostic listening interviews with 21 of those cohort participants about their goals for election coverage, the challenges they faced and what they learned from the experience. Their responses are the basis for this report. The journalists quoted in these pages come from a wide variety of newsrooms — hyperlocal sites to national publications, print, broadcast and digital. To offer the most useful insights, we are keeping the interviews anonymous, though more information about those involved is available in the [appendix](#).

This report is for anyone seeking to improve how well their coverage addresses the critical information needs of those they serve. The lessons from these newsrooms' experiments can be put toward all types of coverage, not just elections.

We invite you to build on the foundation these newsrooms created in your own work. You don't need to create the perfect engagement project or the most comprehensive ethics policy to begin. All it takes is the essential ingredients of reporting — curiosity, determination and an openness to trying something new.

Engaged Elections: The Citizens Agenda

What is The Citizens Agenda? Simply put, it is a model for election coverage that centers the issues people care about, as opposed to horse race coverage driven by candidates' talking points and poll results. New York University Professor Jay Rosen [has promoted this approach widely](#), and he collaborated with Election SOS to describe the model to Engaged Elections participants.

The Citizens Agenda (or whatever name you want to give it) is based on asking this key question of your audience:

“ What do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes? ”

AT A GLANCE

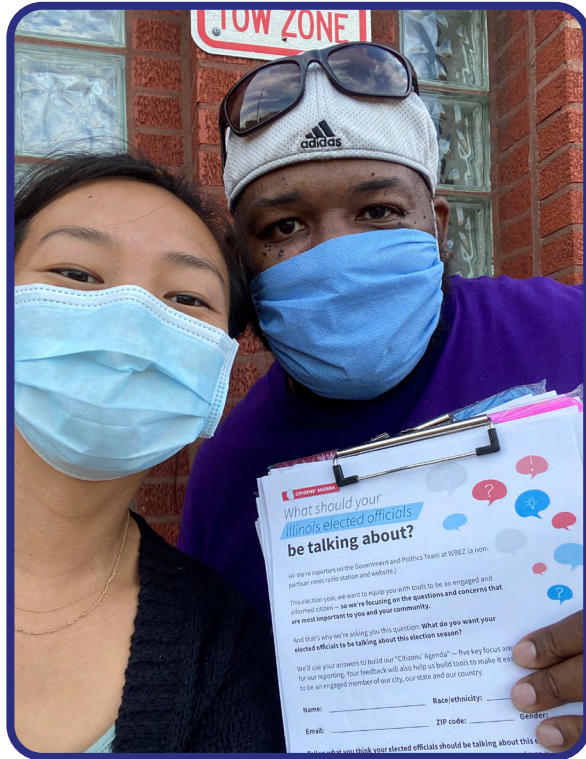
In addition to the cohort trainings explored in this report, in 2020 Election SOS offered:

- ✓ [Fellowships](#)
- ✓ [Grants](#)
- ✓ [Expert](#) and [story](#) databases
- ✓ [Journalism resources](#)
- ✓ [Election Protection sessions](#)

Election SOS is managed by the consultancy [Hearken](#) with the support of [Trusting News](#), is fiscally sponsored by the [American Press Institute](#), and is principally funded by [Democracy Fund](#) and the Trusted Elections Fund Project.

Learn more at electionsos.org.

Participants in the Engaged Elections training went through this five-step process, available in [The Citizens Agenda Guide](#), to develop their strategies to engage with audiences and inform their coverage.



Courtesy of Katherine Nagasawa, WBEZ

1. Setting the Vision

Draft your overall goal for your election coverage, without getting into specific metrics. For now, focus on what you hope to accomplish and who you will serve in the big picture. (See worksheet in the [appendix](#).)

2. Map Your Network

Draw out a map of the stakeholders for the topic you are covering. You can identify these groups any way you choose, and also put groups you're not currently reaching that you would like to reach. This will give you a roadmap, one you can continue to build as you learn from your outreach efforts. (See worksheet in the [appendix](#).)

3. Outreach Strategy

Pick some groups in your network map to start reaching out to, and identify which platforms (which can be digital or not, owned by your news organization or external) you will use to reach them. Set metrics, either quantitative or qualitative, you will use to evaluate how well your outreach strategy is working.

4. Ask

Put the key Citizens Agenda question, "What do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes?", to the groups using your outreach strategy.

5. Use It

Incorporate their responses into your reporting, crediting the audience in the published stories or events. Revisit your metrics to adjust your strategy as needed.

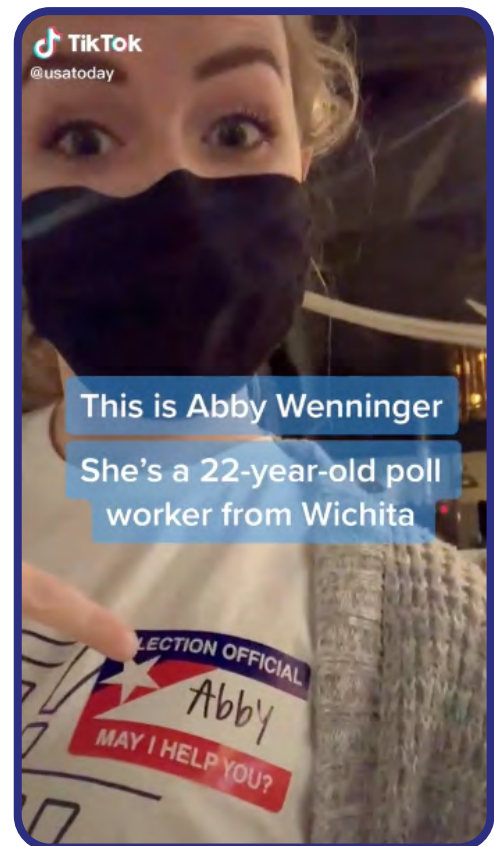
Trustworthy Elections

Many news organizations get accused of having a liberal bias — of publishing more “negative” content about conservative politicians and reporting more favorably on progressive ideas and candidates.

This was true for the 2020 election too. In addition to those accusations though, journalists and news organizations also had to navigate a growing distrust in “the media,” accusations of “fake news,” an increasing interest in conspiracy theories and heavy dissemination of misinformation and disinformation.

Through Election SOS, Trusting News was able to incorporate the primary ideas of our training philosophy (the importance of transparency, engagement and audience feedback) while focusing specifically on the unique landscape and issues related to an election happening during a global pandemic. This included:

- ✓ Examining the relationship journalists have (and the one they want) with the people they aim to serve. **We encourage journalists to have some empathy for the user experience of consuming political news.** Asking them to remember, that it’s reasonable for news consumers to be frustrated by partisan information, overwhelmed with choices and confused about what news to trust.
- ✓ Encourage news organizations and journalists to tell their audience how they work hard to be fair. When journalists work hard to get the facts right and provide context fairly, they should not be afraid to stand behind that coverage. They also should be willing **to share how they put the story together and why they chose to cover the story in the first place.** Journalists are also encouraged to ask their audience for feedback related to their coverage, including if any of the coverage could have been improved.
- ✓ Providing guidance on a journalist’s and news organization’s role in fighting misinformation and disinformation. Journalism exists in an information landscape full of landmines. A lot of the time, journalists aren’t sure if they should get involved in media literacy. Trusting News walked journalists through how they can respond to and cover misinformation and disinformation, including when to draw attention to it. Journalists were also encouraged to **explain how news works and more importantly, how elections, voting and the political system work.**



Courtesy of USA TODAY

- ✓ Organizational culture and creating change in a newsroom. At Trusting News we know implementing new ideas and creating change in a newsroom can be hard. So, we spent time helping journalists navigate culture change and think through how to execute their ideas and plans so they can be successful and get buy-in from their colleagues.

At Trusting News, [we know](#) if we do not explain to our community that we check facts, vet sources and work to be fair, our audiences are not going to automatically give us credit for doing so. Journalists who participated in the trust cohorts of Election SOS were encouraged to think through how they could better explain their election coverage to their users.

MAKING YOUR PLAN

For their final assignment, trustworthy cohort participants were asked to create a plan that would focus on one of three areas:

- ✓ **Brand-level transparency.**
Explainers and conversations around your newsroom's goals, ethics and standards.
- ✓ **Story-level transparency.**
Transparency within stories (including political/election) that helps users be more educated consumers of the information in front of them.
- ✓ **Strategic engagement with users.**
Creating an easier way to obtain feedback or comments from the community, creating a better social engagement strategy, or focusing on the human side of their journalism and their people.

The journalists who participated seemed to quickly grasp and implement explainers. They understood and produced explanations about the 2020 election, specifically how this election would be different. The explainers focused on the widespread changes in who could submit ballots by mail and how that would impact knowing who won the election. There was also a lot of focus on encouraging journalists to explain why counting ballots could take days or weeks.

In addition to explaining how counting the vote works, journalists explained how polling works, including their own polling. Journalists often write about polls, but rarely explain them. By providing explanations to the polls and how they were conducted, journalists were able to build trust with their audience through transparency.

Those participating in the Election SOS trust cohort also worked to combat misinformation and disinformation surrounding the election. Several participants created election guides/FAQs to help people get the right information to their community. While this information often exists inside stories, when it is presented by itself on a page, it can be easier to find and easier to understand. Providing this information in one place also allowed journalists to send individuals links to the correct information and facts when incorrect information was being shared.



Courtesy of KXLY

Goals

What Does It Mean To ‘Do Something Different?’

Naturally, the journalists participating in the training programs were interested in engaging with audiences and building trust through their coverage. However, within that framework the individual newsrooms identified a wide-ranging group of goals for their election reporting, informed by both their specific editorial missions and by their business objectives.

Many journalists expressed a desire to “do something different” than their previous coverage:

“I really wanted to do journalism of a little bit more substance.”

“Traditionally, our politics coverage followed the same model that a lot of large news organizations did, where they had an army of reporters go out and were able to produce so many stories per day. ... There really was a missing audience component of listening to your readers, the people who subscribe and keep our whole newsroom alive.”

When asked what their goals were for their election coverage, responses tended to fall into one of the following groups:

- ✓ Reaching audiences
- ✓ Driving impact
- ✓ Meeting key business goals

Reach and Represent New Audiences

Participants in the Engaged Elections cohort designed strategies to reach out to audiences and ask what questions they would have for candidates to inform their reporting. These journalists wanted to engage with audiences in a meaningful way that allowed them to better focus their reporting on the election issues audience members most cared about.

For many participants, this objective represented a shift from how they had approached elections in the past.

I went from initially thinking, 'OK, I need to quickly understand who these politicians are, and what they're talking about, and why that might or might not be important,' to thinking about the processes, and then thinking, 'OK, maybe I should ask people what they're concerned about, what they're focused on, what issues they want politicians to talk about.'

Several of the journalists discussed their desire to better address the concerns of specific groups. The people they wanted to reach varied, but generally had been underserved by newsrooms in the past. This included young voters, people speaking languages other than English and BIPOC communities.

There's too much focus on what white voters think when it's the Black and brown voters that are really going to have an impact on the Democratic primary and the election. It was like what are we doing? Whose stories are we telling? So tell the truth, and make sure we're telling the truth of all voters, not just white voters, those were my two main goals.

One huge goal was for us to civically engage the 18 to 40 community. Our paper tends to serve a slightly older population. And so we wanted to make sure that we were identifying what younger people cared about.

Our Native populations, a lot of them can't get our broadcast over the air or through DirecTV or Dish...but we know they watch a lot on their cell phones and tablets and devices...so it's just something we're always thinking about and trying to get into different communities and get that feedback loop going.

Some, but not all, newsrooms established metrics related to their engagement work, informed by the size of their audiences and their capacity for responding to audience-submitted questions. These included the following:

- ✓ Get 500 responses to the question on what you want the candidates to be talking about
- ✓ Get at least 50 different voices to include in our coverage
- ✓ Get at least 75% of responses from people who aren't within our current circles

Drive Impact Through Service Journalism

A smaller number of participants discussed impacts for their election coverage outside of audience engagement. A number of newsrooms were focused on getting out information related to voting safely due to the pandemic, and fighting misinformation about the election.

The usefulness of the reporting being produced, and the particular ways in which audiences would use this information, was top-of-mind for both reporters and editors.



Courtesy of Katherine Nagasawa, WBEZ

“One of things we talked about doing was **not getting in these meandering profiles where candidates could just go on and on and on**, you wouldn't really nail them down. So we actually tried to do them more by topic. So, here are the five things that the candidate believes in about taxes, or immigration. That was actually a really effective way, I thought, of doing profiles and actually was a lot more useful for the reader.

“We wanted (our stories) to **reflect elections as choices between two sets of policies, focusing on what might actually change, as opposed to stories that cover elections as a race between two teams.**

We wanted the videos to be informative for American voters so they could feel empowered to make choices that were informed. But we also knew that a large part of our audience was going to be coming from outside the U.S. And so we wanted them to come away from the videos with a sense of why this election in the U.S. was consequential across the world and also give them a sense of how U.S. government and history works if they don't have that kind of background.

Key Business Goals: Competing and Converting

For TV newsrooms in particular, staying ahead of the competition and gaining exclusives with candidates was a major objective. For instance, some newsrooms had corporate-level goals to win the markets on specific ratings.

“ I just didn’t want to get beat. It was purely competitive. I hate to say that, it sounds bad, but that’s really what I was thinking.

Developing coverage that specifically sought to engage with audiences and built trust was seen by these newsrooms as a way to differentiate themselves from the competition and to convert audience members.

“ Engagement in general, we’re somewhat analytic about it. We are trying to move a bit large, kind of anonymous TV audiences into known stats. Take somebody who watches a newscast or visits our website, and move them to subscribe to our newsletter, to register on our site, use some different engagement tools that we have. ... We’re very clearly trying to make the funnel, move people through the funnel, have a deeper relationship, for a lot of business reasons, but also, we just think it leads to better journalism.

Overall, newsrooms often had several goals for their coverage, often spanning more than one of the categories above.

And then, of course, they had to deal with 2020.



Courtesy of Taproot Edmonton

Pivoting During a Relentless News Cycle

Even the best of intentions can be set to the side with an election news cycle that featured countless lawsuits and an insurrection.

Our cohort participants shared one, singular challenge: Time.

*I think **time** is one of the greatest obstacles.*

It was just a lot of new aspects to try and incorporate in a short amount of time.

*I think it was all really based on **timing**, and the amount of layers of approval that we would need to go through to really do the **Citizens Agenda** some real justice.*

*Because I think if we had taken **more time** to like, step back and be like, 'OK, wait,' we maybe could have like, seen some of the things that we reacted to...we ended up reacting to later on.*

Despite their desire to follow through on plans post-training, participants were not able to fully implement recommendations or practices in their respective newsrooms, especially as the pandemic worsened over the summer.

In addition, some were not successful in getting others in the newsroom to buy in to this approach (See [appendix](#) for “How to Get Engagement Buy-In From Your Newsroom.”)

The “traditional” November election was anything but traditional, so the news cycle — and news decisions made — reflected that.

Also, admittedly, the lack of a feedback loop (we’re working on that) meant participants couldn’t really keep tabs on what their newfound fellow industry professionals were doing, either.

“*I think there was good engagement going on and good tip sharing, and maybe emphasizing that you can still do that after the Election SOS cohort trainings are over, that that’s still an available resource for folks, would be good.*”



Courtesy of KXLY

COVID-19 and Outreach

COVID-19. This invisible, proverbial elephant in the room (or on the Zoom screen) meant a forceful shift for our cohort participants into virtual and digital offerings. Suddenly, basic in-person reporting became frustratingly difficult.

One newsroom manager pivoted to virtual town halls with candidates ahead of their respective races. Another did Facebook Live.

Other participants we interviewed found it, well, peculiar.

“It’s very different with virtual stuff... we’d get a little frustrated that nobody was responding. But I think everybody was kind of awkwardly not knowing how, or the parameters for responding in a virtual environment.

The transition to virtual outreach came with mixed results. That meant DEI efforts and targeting coverage to underserved communities suffered to some degree.

Two separate participants in California’s Central Valley translated a survey gleaned from the Citizens Agenda cohort into Spanish. It didn’t work.

“The Central Valley is home to a lot of different native speakers, for whom English is not their first language. And so I did translate it into Spanish, which doesn’t even begin to cover all the communities obviously, not all of them...but we didn’t get a single Spanish response.

One participant in the Northwest had the same experience.

“If I were to do it again, I would probably give some more deliberate time to get buy-in from those programmers (for Spanish shows). They were on board for it, but there wasn’t necessarily that connection to make it useful to everyone.

Overall, these challenges are hard to fix. Journalists are accustomed to doing more with less, but, less is not more, less is less.

That means time crunches, lack of resources, the ongoing pandemic and community outreach challenges will linger. And, that’s not exclusive to election coverage or any particular newsroom.

But, while there were challenges, newsrooms also reported many benefits to trying something new with their coverage.



Courtesy of Katherine Nagasawa, WBEZ

Successes

Despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic and the political climate to covering the election and reaching audiences, the journalists with whom we spoke encountered successes they had not had in previous election cycles. The successes were unique to the goals of each newsroom, but they all shared a few elements:

- ✓ Service journalism did in fact serve audiences...and drove up engagement
- ✓ Engaging audiences led to stronger reporting and furthered reach
- ✓ Reaching underserved communities required making that a priority
- ✓ Listening to audiences built trust and in turn drove impact

Service Journalism is Popular

In an election year during which voting practices were changed by the pandemic throughout much of the country, audiences needed practical information about how to vote. Journalists met that need by producing guides and informational stories packaged in myriad formats.

We created a special collection of the day with questions we thought people would ask like: Where can I vote? What's the deadline? We created it like a special page and pushed it out over and over.

Often seen as unsexy meat and potatoes journalism better left to interns and entry-level reporters, voting guides were wildly popular in newsrooms big and small across the country.

“ Our most popular guide across the country came out on the Friday before the election. Called the procrastinator’s guide to the election, it was perfect. And the reason it works is because it was everything you need to know boiled down, and the name of it works really well. And it just got so much sharing over the weekend before the election.

A journalist from a national newsroom shared a similar story about the popularity of reporting that served the audience’s civic needs.

“ You would be surprised how helpful it was to remind people ‘If you don’t vote today, if you don’t register to vote today, you’re not voting on Election Day.’ You’d be surprised how popular that content is.

NEWSROOM BUY-IN IMPROVES COVERAGE

While some journalists faced challenges getting buy-in from their colleagues in their newsroom to cover elections by engaging with the communities they serve, others received strong backing from their newsrooms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, journalists who had a manager or colleague who had also participated in an Election SOS training received more support in their newsroom, which made it easier to take on ambitious reporting goals.

“ I never felt like I was alone in my newsroom because my news director knew what was going on on the digital team. So we would go through the topics together sometimes like, ‘OK, what should we ask over here?’ What we really needed to flesh out from these candidates from this reporting, to really appeal to as many communities as we could.

Reaching Underserved Communities

Across the board, the journalists we spoke with knew that in 2020, they needed to do a better job covering and serving communities of color than they had in past elections. While all emphasized the need to do more of this work in all future elections, some journalists already found moderate success in reaching and engaging underserved communities. One strategy that led to success was to partner with organizations that serve those groups.

“ We ended up with about 50 responses, in all, most of that coming from the Black Voters Collaborative. ... We really thought it was a big success and looking forward to try and do it more and better.

Being intentional and deliberate about reaching people beyond the white audiences that have historically been served by mainstream media also improved the diversity of perspectives represented in the coverage of the newsrooms we spoke with.

“ Because (marginalized communities) were considered from the beginning, it wasn't a haphazard 'So we're out doing man on the street interviews and let me find somebody who's Black and get their thoughts about it.' It wasn't that sloppy. It was very intentional in the way we approached some of that and I'm happy about it. My boss did Trusting News, so he made that a priority. We had almost like advisory groups formed, there were managers involved. And we talked about how we're including everyone in our community. And I've never been in a spot where it's been that intentional.

Part of that intentionality meant thinking through the existing barriers to delivering journalism to underserved communities and putting out stories in a format that could be accessed by the target audience. Sometimes, the solution was as simple as translating guides into other languages so more people could access them.

“ All of our voting or voter education videos had been in English, and when I went through the class I thought, ‘Oh, actually we should translate these. Some of these videos need to be in Spanish and Arabic.’ ... So we created these videos and shared them with whoever wanted them.



WBEZ AGENDA CIUDADANA

Ayuntamiento: Edición La Villita

El 16 de Noviembre, 2020, 7-8:15 p.m.



Concejal
Michael Rodriguez



Senadora Estatal
Celina Villanueva



Congresista
Jesus “Chuy” García



LATINOS
PROGRESANDO
Family. Community. Progress.



THE SOUTHWEST ORGANIZED PROJECT
SWOP
EL PROYECTO ORGANIZADO DEL SURESTE



WBEZ CITIZENS' AGENDA

Little Village Town Hall

Monday, November 16th from 7-8:15 p.m.



Alderman
Michael Rodriguez



State Senator
Celina Villanueva



Congressman
Jesus “Chuy” García



LATINOS
PROGRESANDO
Family. Community. Progress.



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Building Trust With the Community

Some of the journalists we spoke with found that trust and engagement create a mutually reinforcing feedback loop. The more their audience trusts them, the more the audience is willing to engage. The more the newsroom engages with the audience, the more trust that builds with audiences. This feedback loop improved both the quality of reporting as well as its impact, by enabling it to reach and serve more people.

“Viewing the viewer as partner here sort of changed (my) thought (about engagement), because **I’m not looking to tell them what I think they need to hear. I’m actually listening to them to find out what they want, and what they feel they need to hear, which is a different approach to reporting. ... We don’t know everything. And so we kind of need to check ourselves.**”

One of the more successful approaches to engaging the viewer as a collaborator was to partner with community organizations.

“We used the Citizens Agenda model where we had two partners. One was the African-American or the Black Voters Collaborative, which is a new organization, and the other was the Native American Voter Alliance or Native America Votes.

And so we followed the Citizens Agenda process, created a survey, relied on our sources there to get that circulated, got the feedback and created the Citizens Agenda and then got the feedback on that. And then we used that to craft our questions in the debates.

The day after it aired, we actually did a Facebook Live with about 20 people who came on to a Zoom call. And we just asked them, ‘What did they hear? How did we do? How did it go? How did it help them?’ And it was super enlightening.



Courtesy of New Mexico PBS

Being accessible and responsive to the public's questions led journalists to produce stories that then drove more community engagement.

“ We had somebody with a type of disability. And this person was like, ‘Hey, I have a disability in which it caused my signature to kind of be janky. What’s going to happen? Do I fill in the form?’ You know, they were very confused on, ‘will my vote count.’

And so we went to the auditor and ... every time I would see her, I’d knock out like three or four questions at a time, and sometimes gain new ones. ... We’re just likable and open, and hence why we were able to hit some smaller communities dealing with these problems.

Transparency about the journalistic practices we take for granted in newsrooms were quite popular with audiences who felt like they understood why the publication was covering the election the way it was.

“ I got (the politics editor) to write this really amazing column in her newsletter where she was just like ‘This is how we’re going to cover the election, and this is what you need to know about what we’re doing.’ We put that out and turned it into videos, we sent it to subscribers. ... It was really phenomenal.

Small modifications in how journalists solicited engagement went a long way to build trust. For example, one local newsroom which sent out surveys to its audience asking what questions they had about a government initiative added clear information at the top of the survey that the responses were to guide the direction of coverage and were not an interview and allowed readers to complete the survey anonymously. A box at the top of the survey allowed readers who wished to be identified and interviewed to opt in.

“ That was a really new thing, a new idea for (our newsroom). And that’s worked well. And now in my surveys, like my surveys around the vaccine, for example, I’ve restructured my survey a little bit to just be clear.

There’s a box that says, if we want to use your story to help introduce this topic, are you OK? If we identify you? Yes or no. And that’s just been so clear that people that it’s made people feel safe, they can just clearly say no, if they don’t want to. ... I’m proud of the way that we’ve navigated that.



Courtesy of KXLY

The importance of creating a safe space for people to ask their questions free of judgment and for audiences to be taken seriously was echoed by another newsroom, which has built in engagement into its reporting.

“ So at this point, we have established ourselves as the station in town in which you send us questions, engage with us, it’s OK. We’re not going to make you look like a fool or make you feel stupid about it. This is why people keep hitting us up. We are getting quite a lot of people. ... It gives us a better idea of which communities care about which issues.



Courtesy of Vin Reed, WBEZ

Finding Better, Fresher Stories

Including audiences in the reporting process through efforts like the Citizens Agenda didn't only allow newsrooms to reach more people, it also helped them tell more stories. By pursuing ideas suggested by their audiences, journalists were able to find stories that they would not have found otherwise, or that they would not have considered newsworthy had the community not expressed a desire for it.

“There’s no way our newsroom would have produced the coverage that we did without including the people that we serve. And it made the product look entirely different.... We did a great job of getting stories and substance that we could not reach just in and of ourselves.”

“I think I’ve been most satisfied with the way that people have rallied to it, like people have really responded well ... I’m not surprised that they were excited and got involved, but just this sense of the number of people who took time to really write in and to add their voices, and the way that shaped our coverage. Like we deliberately did not have a story plan going in and I think that was good.”

Audience responses shaped the direction of coverage, thereby ensuring that the coverage itself was useful. For example, in response to one of the surveys put out by a local newsroom, readers wrote back with a lot of questions about one government action affecting health care coverage.

“ So we ended up pivoting and writing about that. And I think it was really meaningful. And we were able to get to the bottom of what the government was unclear about cutting, they kept saying they were not cutting, but they actually were drastic cuts. So we were finally able to explain the small print of why this actually made a difference. **And that was only because we cast this big net, and people came forward to us in this safe space to tell us what happened.**

Collaborating to Drive Impact

As journalists, we are often competitive by nature and relish being the first to cover a news event or the one to get an exclusive on a story. And while that competitive drive thrived among many of the journalists we spoke with, we also heard about the success of collaborations around specific projects.

“ And this idea of working in partnership, and the value of that is a really good one that came from the workshops, this idea that **it's better to connect with somebody and support the project that they're also working on, than to try and do your own.** Because why would you do your own, they can reach more of a different audience, and working together creates a stronger community, right?



Looking Forward: Lessons Learned

Civic Education

One of the top needs revealed by journalists was the necessity to provide basic and contextualized civic education to the public. The Citizens Agenda framework and the Election SOS cohort trainings allowed participants to examine their current approach, which heavily favored horse-race reporting of the general elections, and incentivized them to instead ask and listen to their community needs. **During our interviews, 80% of journalists shared that members of the public need journalism that can help them better participate in democratic processes.**

Our interviews revealed three areas of reporting needed:

- ✓ Answering questions and solutions-oriented reporting
- ✓ Additional focus on local elections
- ✓ Explainers on democratic processes

Answering Questions and Solutions-Oriented Reporting

Journalists identified the need for more stories directly addressing how to vote, including creating voter guides, demystifying mail-in-voting, answering questions on how someone can get a free ride to the polls, or providing information on best timing or accessibility for people with disabilities.

It's just stuff that we don't think about. But it's definitely something we need to build on for the community.

I think that people wanted really basic (coverage on) how to choose, how to vote...



Courtesy of USA TODAY

One of the goals of the training was to emphasize the importance of a public-centered framework to the newsrooms, and luckily the newsrooms that implemented this approach want to continue building on the successes they've had.

***“ We definitely want to continue the Citizens Agenda model where we asked the audience what they want to hear the candidates talking about, because I think that really hit home for a lot more people than we expected to hear specific questions that are relevant to them ... which was a lot more organic. ... It helped us engage with our readers more, which is great for our long-term sustainability, but also helps them become a better-informed audience for voting.*”**

***“ I think it really instilled in me the importance of answering readers' questions, whether that be directly on social media... As well as anticipating their questions... being proactive in that sense. And writing a story that answers that question directly.*”**

One newsroom shared with us that their most popular piece, the guide for procrastinators that came out right before the elections, worked because it was boiled down to essential information a person needs to know.

***“ As a national news organization, we're going to need to figure out how to replicate the same model of empowering people to participate in our process and in the larger democratic process.*”**

Other newsrooms saw it as a missed opportunity for this election season that they are hoping to improve on in the future.

“ I know that some stations have folks literally **answering listener questions all the time**. And I felt that it could have been worth it for us to do that.

“ Along with trying to **do a simple Q&A related to an election in the future**, I think that would be great to do more related to the actual people who are asking these questions, what their lives are like, how their lives could be impacted by the election, and why they decided to reach out in the first place. I think it shows a level of trust that people are willing to write to us from the start.

Additional Focus on Local Elections

The tumultuous presidential elections challenged newsrooms with an avalanche of stories and breaking news to report on, leaving little bandwidth to focus on local coverage. Our interviewees discussed how communities were left needing contextualized coverage of smaller and local races to help them make informed decisions down the ballot.

“ ...there are **dozens and dozens of local races that are decided with little to no voter information available to anybody**.

One local journalist noted the need to discuss political groups outside of two major parties that have a large presence within the community:

“ These different political groups that aren't necessarily the ones that are winning office, but **that are still impacting people locally**. And having a better understanding as a newsroom how those different groups come into play, and how we can fairly cover everyone.

Local coverage can be “hard for broadcasters,” another interviewee said, adding they could be more imaginative on their approach, particularly with digital tools.

Explainers on Democratic Processes

In addition to answering questions and focusing on local races, our interviewees shared that their audience needs explainers to help them further understand the extent of their political power and support political participation beyond Election Day.

“ ***I think what our audience really needs from us is basic civic education.*** ”

For some journalists, a big lesson was that newsrooms often assume too much about what audiences know or don't know. Things said in passing are often assumed to be common knowledge, when they may not be. Providing more accessible coverage to serve a wider community, considering that people might not be following the beat in the same way a reporter might, is still a work in progress:

“ ***One thing that is in the process of being changed is just making our voice more approachable, framing things in a way that interests everyday people who aren't political junkies. ... Where it really starts from an issue as opposed to officials to get people invested.*** ”

GOVERNMENT 101 PITCHES

Eight journalists highlighted the need for content that is not only focused on how the elections work, but on government processes in general. For example:

✓ Explainers on the judiciary system:

Having process related stories all year round on the judiciary for example... We can talk about how judges are elected, what they do, what their role is, ... how the system works....”

✓ Breaking down amendments:

I think that our community would be served by some more topical explainers about different political topics, like we have a lot of constitutional amendments that are coming up in the primary election as one example.

✓ Reminding the public about the roles of their representatives:

We need to refresh on what each of these chambers control, and how our representatives fit into that role.

One local journalist described an anecdote where a reader reached out to the newsroom concerned about slow internet at home. They weren't sure if it was something that falls under the jurisdiction of the local government. In turn, the reporter was able to find out that local officials can in fact invest city funds into increasing broadband.

Finally, another interviewee echoed the need for keeping sworn-in politicians accountable:

“ Many people don’t know who our congresspeople are. They don’t know what role they have... But they know that when the elections come around, these officials come out begging for their votes. And then this is a market in which you come out, beg for your votes, and then you’re elected and you just disappear. I’m not going to let you get away with that.

*So whenever we run a national story involving Congress, whether it passes or does not pass, if we run it, I make sure we have bullet points of like, here’s how our local elected officials voted. And I put their names down... I do it on social media too. **You can’t just beg for votes and then disappear into you know, obscurity... I don’t think it’s very good for the public.** This is something I will continue to do.*

Notes for Next Time

Election coverage extends well beyond Election Day. As newsrooms took first steps towards engaging the public specifically during elections, they realized that this is an ongoing process that they need to continue building on now until the next election, and the one after that. Instead of seeing engagement as a sidetrack to reporting, it needs to be closely tied to everyday coverage to sustain trust with the audience, to expand the community served, and show that the community's participation is valued.

Start earlier and don't lose momentum!

Most journalists we talked to wished they started their engagement work sooner, but there is an upside! The next local and general elections are always around the corner, so it's time to plan how you can improve on your work. **Remember:** Protect democracy today, not a few months before Election Day.



We're already talking about doing something similar next year, probably starting a lot earlier, maybe in August, rather than in late September.

It was a little bit too late in a cycle to take the full-circle approach that we wanted to take.

...this project maybe could have started a little sooner, but we didn't realize how quickly things would catch up to us.

I wish we had started planning sooner.



*I'd hope that by the time we get to another election ... **people are willing to see the steps that we took before and give us a little bit more freedom to improve on what we've done.***

Needs

Sustaining feedback loops and providing civic education to the public are hefty goals. Journalists need some help to get it done.

MORE PEOPLE!

I wish we had more reporters, straight up.

It's just finding the manpower to do all this in a short window of time, which is, I know it's a cop-out answer, everybody in broadcast, maybe all journalism, will say the same thing. But we, I feel like we just had so much engagement, that I just wish we had more bodies.

*More of ([the Election SOS fellowships](#)) would be really cool or **coordination with major journalism schools** that could coordinate with us, our markets, that would be really cool, or even at a national level that can sort of help understand data that might apply locally.*

ENGAGING THE NEWSROOM

*For the next election, I want **it to be more inclusive of the staff**. I want everybody to have some sort of training that I know will fall upon either (coworker) or myself. ... I wish I would have incorporated our reporters a little bit more into that coverage.*

*I plan to at least for midterms, I would like to do many presentations, just for the entire staff room to **give a better explanation on what we're trying to do and also get input**.*

CONNECTING TO OTHER JOURNALISTS FOR SUPPORT, INSPIRATION, AND FEEDBACK

*Talking to people from different newsrooms, I think being able to **share your experience and have somebody do bounce ideas off of that is also working on similar projects was really cool.***

*That community and just being more in touch with everybody, I think really **helps just get our creative juices flowing.***

Democracy is an ongoing beat!

It's important to see your engagement work as an ongoing process rather than a one-off project. Why start from scratch in four years, when you can build on the trust that you've established with your community. Think stories that focus on keeping the politicians accountable or infusing the new-found approach into your vaccine coverage.

“ It definitely formalized a process for engagement journalism that we’ve been able to use to advocate for other projects, like the COVID vaccine one. It also has created a new template ... where from the start you’re identifying community partners, and those partners are with you throughout the whole journey, and they’re helping you build an audience.

DON'T DISAPPEAR AFTER ELECTION DAY

*It was the mindset... I have covered election cycles with other stations and it's like, 'Election's come! Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am. OK, move on.' We just cover the biggest candidates, they have a victory party or a concession speech. That's it. **And then we just shut this down for the next two to four years.***

*But it really helped give us a better profile of our audiences and how to serve them. And it just continues this stream of engagement with our communities, I think that's really important. I don't want there to be this division... **We're part of your community and having a constant mode of communication keeps that up.***

THE KEY TO TRUST IS TO APPRECIATE YOUR AUDIENCE

*When you do an engagement, you need to have a very clear plan of what you're going to do with that information so that **you really value people's participation.***

IT'S ESSENTIAL TO CREATE FEEDBACK LOOPS

*Especially around elections you need to have (engagement) be continuous... **it's important that once you have that base of people that are engaging with you, just continuing to engage with them and grow on that. ... I think we want to continue checking in regularly instead of waiting until the next election cycle.***

Appendix

About the interviews

Members of the Election SOS team conducted 21 interviews with cohort participants in February 2021. We invited every cohort participant from the trainings to sign up for interviews, and provided \$50 gift cards to interviewees. The interviews took about 45 minutes and were run from a standard script of questions about their election coverage and experience in the training program.

The interviewees came from 18 newsrooms. Representatives of the following newsrooms gave permission for their organization names to be shared here:

- ✓ 6AM City, TN
- ✓ Graham Media Group, several locations
- ✓ KBOO Radio, OR
- ✓ KXLY, WA
- ✓ LancasterOnline, PA
- ✓ New Mexico PBS, NM
- ✓ O'Rourke Media Group, several locations
- ✓ Record-Journal, CT
- ✓ Taproot Edmonton, AB
- ✓ The Beacon, MO
- ✓ The Fulcrum, national
- ✓ USA TODAY, national
- ✓ Valley Public Radio, CA
- ✓ WBEZ, IL
- ✓ WCPO, OH

We requested participants to complete a survey to give a picture of who is represented in this report. Below is the breakdown:

Geographic reach of the organization:

Local	9
State/Regional	5
National/ International	4

Newsroom type:

Digital	5
TV	4
Radio	6
Print	3

Newsroom size:

Less than 10 employees	7
10-99 employees	6
100+ employees	5

About those interviewed for this report:

Election SOS training participation:

Participants in Engaged Elections cohort only	9
Participants in Trustworthy Elections cohort only	5
Participants in both Engaged and Trustworthy cohorts	7

Do you identify as a journalist of color?

Yes	8
No	13

Level in organization:

Frontline employee	12
Manager	5
Executive	4

Tenure at current news organization:

Less than 1 year	4
1-5 years	13
5-10 years	1
More than 10 years	3

Engaged Elections Exercise: Setting the Vision

Write down the overall goal for your elections coverage this year. We'll add the metrics you'll use to measure success later - for now, keep it focused on what you hope to accomplish and who you will serve in the big picture.

To help inform your vision statement, alone or with your colleagues, address the questions below that are relevant to you to identify where you are now and where you want to be:

	Identify what has been missing or lacking previously.	How would you like to change that?
Who has your political coverage typically served?		
How did you know / could you tell that it served them?		
How has your newsroom decided which stories to cover in an election?		
How has the public been involved in determining the coverage they get?		
Who has decided the topics and questions to ask politicians?		
How have you measured the success of your elections coverage in the past?		
How do you think your community would describe the goals of your election coverage?		
Free space: write any other things you have done before that you'd like to change.		

Example from [The Tyee](#): “Our agenda achieves a few things: It helps keep our editors and journalists focused during the whirlwind of election season. It helps us deliver on our mission to do in-depth reporting on issues that matter to our readers that goes beyond the daily news cycle. And it gives us a better chance of creating stories that will be well read.”

Qualities of a good vision statement:

- ✓ **Actionable:** Can be used to inform editorial decisions during the campaign season.
- ✓ **Specific:** Clear objectives will inform how you measure success later.
- ✓ **Internal and external outcomes:** Think not only about what this means for your newsroom and your stories, but what it will mean for your audience and the public as a whole.

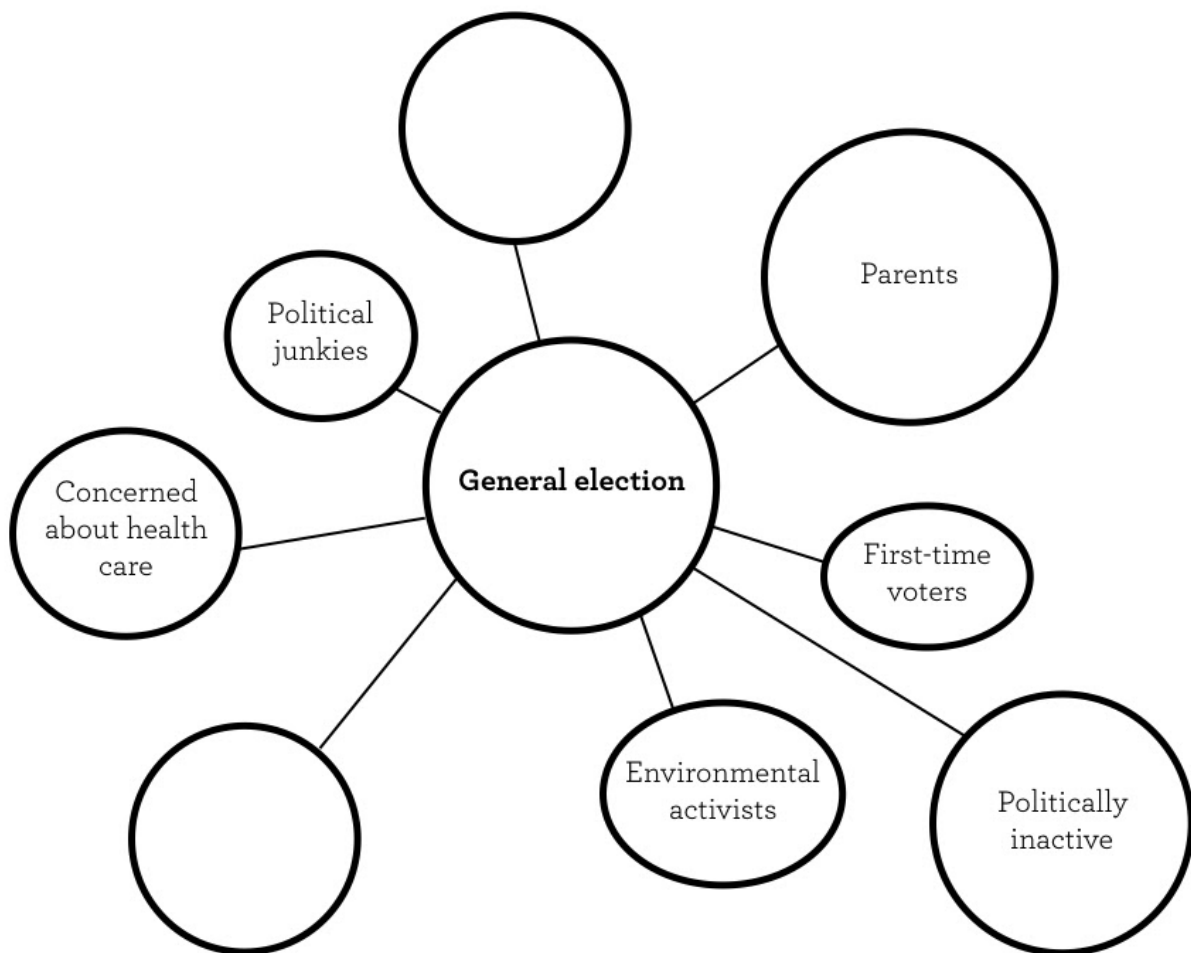
Our Vision

Engaged Elections Exercise: Stakeholder Mapping

At a whiteboard or posterboard, build out a stakeholder wheel. Put what you're covering in the center, and then draw different groups that are impacted by the event in some way around it. Those groups who are likely to be more closely following the news of the event, who are impacted by it most significantly, should be close to the center. Those who are less likely to closely follow the news and will be less impacted go further out. How you choose to define these groups is up to you. You can make the circles larger or smaller based on the estimated group size.

Once you've gotten to the end of your ideas, keep going. The most creative ideas come when you push yourself a little further than you're comfortable.

By the end of this exercise, you'll have a visual framework for the groups you are trying to serve. This can be flexible and adjusted over time. The important thing is now you have identified some people who can start helping you build the Citizens Agenda.



How To Get Engagement Buy-In From Your Newsroom

You've seen this editor.

Leaning back, arms crossed, chin tucked down as you make your case to try engagement journalism for your next story or project. The frown. The head shake. And you can almost see the editor queuing up various ways to say “no” — “there's no time,” “we don't have enough people,” “I just don't see why,” or “maybe another time.”

This is going to be a tough sell.

But it doesn't have to be.

This was a recurring theme with the 134 journalists from 63 newsrooms who participated in the Election SOS training last year on building engagement into elections coverage — even when staff is willing, engagement work can be difficult to pursue without the support of the larger newsroom.

“ We could have done a lot more if we had some more buy-in from people higher up.

“ I think I almost need more buy-in from my editors. I told them I was doing the training, but I don't really think they were engaged in what I was doing so they weren't invested in it.

Here is what these journalists learned about the first step for any engagement work you want to pursue — how to make the case to get support in your newsroom.

“ My goal with my journalism career broadly has been to provide serviceable content, so that's what I wanted to do for (my newsroom) with this election coverage. I think some of that was a success, because the training did help me think of different ways to do that, and give me a little push to push it in meetings as well with my editors and my colleagues to adjust it more and to try new things.

What our cohort participants found was the secret to getting buy-in is the same approach you use when reporting a story:

1. Get curious
2. Make your pitch
3. Build your beat

Here's how you can get that editor to open up to trying something new.

Get curious

There's a reason you want to pursue engagement work — but why should your colleagues or managers get involved? Chances are, you already have a pretty good sense of what might motivate them. Perhaps this reporter is looking to develop some new sources, or that editor wants to grow your audience in an area that your newsroom has traditionally struggled to serve.

If you don't know why they might want to try out engagement, it's time to simply ask. Uncovering people's motivators is one of those skills journalists have honed their entire careers — there's no reason you can't put those skills to use in your own newsroom. Get curious about what people are working on, what they need and what they're struggling with.

“*Reporters were so used to finding stories by themselves, but I think that the thing that really helped spur our team's own growth was when we started working from home and COVID hit and there were so many questions about how the disease works, what daily life is supposed to be like. Because our reporters were stuck at home, we helped provide that extra leg to find the people on the ground, not the experts that they might be tapped into already.*”

Once you have a good sense of what might get people on board, it's time to make your pitch.

Make your pitch

You wouldn't go to your editor with a story pitch without being ready to say why it needs to be reported, so put the same prep into your proposal for engagement work. Be ready to answer questions by understanding what you want to accomplish and why it matters.

Our cohort participants designed a brief presentation — we're talking just 5 slides — to explain:

- ✓ Why they are proposing this engagement plan
- ✓ Who they are trying to reach
- ✓ Where they will go to reach them
- ✓ What success will look like
- ✓ When and how project tasks will be completed

“ It gave us a real opportunity to build a true roadmap where I could go to my business partner who wasn’t part of the training and say, ‘This is what I think we should do.’ And he could understand that and say, ‘Let’s do it.’ (The plan helped me) imagine a real way to do this, instead of just sort of gesturing at it, because those are our values, or whatever. And then part of it enabled me to get buy-in from the team ... because it was so clear that this was not a notion, there’s this whole plan.

“ We gave that presentation to so many different people. They had us present to the (organization) board, to the new (organization) board, to ... our community panel, to the newsroom. We reused that in many iterations based on our audience, and I also gave the presentation to some of the community organizations that we’re partnering with just to give them a sense of what we’re about and this is what we’re trying to do with the project. So I have like 10 different versions of the PowerPoint.

Do you have to give a full slideshow to get an initial yes? Absolutely not. But craft your pitch — find your angle — based on the needs you identified when you got curious in step 1.

You can also start with a small ask. Go to a reporter with deep sources and ask what groups they’d recommend you reach out to for this story. Then update them with the results. Once people have contributed even slightly to something you’re working on, they’re invested. You can build that investment over time into deeper support if you’ve found what works for them.

Lastly, turn to the experts. Resources on newsrooms that have tried engagement journalism and what they’ve accomplished make a compelling case for why you should try it at your newsroom.

“ One thing for me personally that helped a lot was having this kind of institutional backing of [Hearken](#) and of a scholar like [Jay Rosen](#), when I would go to the newsroom. Because I complained about horse race coverage all the time. I’ve been here for five years and I always complain about it, it’s what I’m known for is being a Debbie Downer about those types of stories.

“*I felt like now, it wasn’t just me complaining, it was me proposing an alternative and an alternative that was backed and vetted by an institution. Everyone in our newsroom knows Hearken and respects them, and knows Jay Rosen and respects his ideas. And so it was really great to feel like I had that kind of institutional backing.*”

Build your beat

Engagement is not a product or a project, but a process. Just like a beat is not built in a day, building a meaningful relationship with your audience takes time.

I’ve been told more than once by a newsroom that they had tried engagement and failed, so they weren’t going to “do” engagement anymore. And I always ask, “What did you learn?” Because it’s not a failure if you’ve learned something that you can apply to future engagement efforts.

I call it the “pizza stone of engagement” — every time you make something, you add a little more flavor and, over time, create more unique and delicious offerings.

So when it comes to engagement, treat it like a beat. Develop your sources, learn what works and what doesn’t, and give it time. Be open with the public about what you’re trying and why, and provide feedback loops so you can continue to inform your work with your audience’s input.

“*One more thing we learned about engagement is that especially around elections, you need to have it be continuous. With the previous two projects, we had put a time limit: ‘OK, we’re done with those stories.’ But especially with elections, they’re so often that it’s important that once you have that base of people that are engaging with you, just continuing to engage with them and grow on that.*”

I’m pretty proud of the work that we did to try and reflect our audiences, but there is definitely more work to be done. And I think that that takes time just to continue to show people the success of this model in and outside of politics.

You don’t need to convince that editor — the one with arms crossed, ready to bat down any idea that takes precious resources — to completely redesign the entire story workflow to include engagement. All you need is one small yes to get started, to try something new and to learn.