



UNIVERSITY OF
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School of Journalism and Communication
Agora Journalism Center

Engaging News about Congress: Report from a News Engagement Workshop

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INTRODUCTION

On February 23-24, 2017, the Engaging News Project at the University of Texas at Austin and the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon partnered to host a regional news engagement workshop focused on engagement and political coverage. The 11 digital news leaders and reporters who participated represented a variety of newsrooms based in the Pacific Northwest: *Alaska Dispatch News*, *Hillsboro Tribune*, KGW, KUOW, Montana Television Network, *The Olympian*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, *The Oregonian*, Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, *Statesman Journal*, and *Willamette Week*. During the two-day workshop, participants shared their experiences and ideas for making news coverage of Congress and the issues covered by Congress more engaging.



Workshop participants share ideas at the Engaging News Project and Agora Journalism Center's News Engagement Workshop.

WHAT IS “ENGAGEMENT”?

We kicked off the workshop by having participants discuss what the term “engagement” means to them and their news organizations. Several themes became clear throughout the conversation.

What counts as engagement and how much it is emphasized varies by newsroom

- I’d say engagement is a conversation with substance, a conversation that brings meaning. It’s a conversation that’s mutually beneficial for the audience and the organization, so it enhances the content, the comments, or the flow of back-and-forth. (Retsinas)
- The way engagement manifests itself in my daily work is usually people calling or emailing me questions. People don’t always know what their government does, or who the government is. So I try to point people in the right direction. And, for better or for worse, it’s about reading the comments and responding to legitimate questions. (Friedman)
- If we’re doing our job well, we’re engaging the community on every level. It’s a never-ending process of tending to the community or the audience, whatever you’d like to call it. (Hulen)
- For me, I’m a little skeptical of the term “engagement,” because it borders on marketing to readers, figuring out what they want and giving them what they want. (Mesh)
- Engagement is not a term I’ve heard a lot in my newsroom. (Dennison)
- It’s our job to find a way to make people care, and to present the content in a way that people can understand. If we have a story that has 500 unique visitors, but a minute and a half of engagement time, we probably have a marketing issue. But if we have 5,000 visitors spending 15 seconds and it’s a 40-inch story, we know we have a writing issue. We can look at these numbers and ask if it’s a marketing issue, if it’s a writing issue, or if it’s a topic issue. (Miller)

Agora Journalism Center

During the workshop, the Agora Journalism Center shared their latest project with participants: the platform Gather. The goal for Gather is to support and connect engagement practitioners – from varying perspectives and experience levels – so that together they can spread innovation and best practices across the journalism profession. Gather will be publicly launched this spring. (For more information, [read here](#))

An important component of engagement is ensuring that the audience’s interests are represented in the news

- So many people are engaging now, whether it’s watching Facebook Live or commenting or getting a copy of the newspaper or turning on the TV. But I think part of what we as news organizations need to ask ourselves is who we have in the stories, why we have those people in the stories, and how that affects who not only reads the story, but also how they share and interact with it. I think the average reader wants to stay up to date and know what this really has to do with people’s daily lives. (Friedman)

- For us, it's underlining and enhancing editorial products. For a series we did on a homeless camp in Seattle, we brought three homeless people to the Seattle Public Library to connect with a large audience of about 400 people. Engagement is about taking the editorial product and bringing it to the public in a different way. (Reynolds)
- We have to find what's driving our reporting and what's missing. Is there something we didn't see because we're in our own echo chamber? (Retsinas)
- When we profile a different town for each episode of our program "Our Town," we'll have ideas of people to talk to in the town, but we let the community tell us what the story is going to be. We host a big community meeting that we record and we get stories out of that meeting. And we let the community members lead the discussion as opposed to us going in with preconceived notions. (Rothenfluch)
- The engagement that tends to interest me the most and what I think is most productive happens in the story-finding process. To some degree, the only reason why we have a comment section at all is that sometimes it leads to new story ideas. What we want is to have engagement in a way that has people telling you about the homeless camp in their neighborhood that they've decided to help. (Mesh)

Engagement can involve news organizations bringing people together to talk to each other, and getting communities to communicate with themselves

- We're experimenting with a different kind of community engagement, and it's getting the community to talk to itself. There are so many different sub-communities, and a lot of them don't talk to each other at all. Last year, I thought, "How many of us know Muslims who we are comfortable talking to about religion and politics?" So, we arranged an "Ask a Muslim" session in February and it was so successful that we did another one in July. It was a discussion based on the concept of speed-dating, where you talked to a Muslim for 6 minutes and then another Muslim for 6 minutes. You talked to about 12 Muslims by the end. Maybe you found out something about Muslims you didn't realize before. (Reynolds)
- I've seen a lot of "burst your bubble" types of initiatives in different newsrooms now that try to connect people. We are that trusted source. We can be that neutral platform to bring people together and have a conversation. To me, that's what engagement is all about. (Goins)

Engaging News Project

The team from the Engaging News Project shared some of the work they have done to make news more commercially viable and democratically beneficial. Participants were especially interested in ENP research on comment sections, homepage design and mobile news notifications. To learn more about the Engaging News Project, visit engagingnewsproject.org

Although all the participants wanted to do more with engagement, they also admitted that there are challenges

- As I'm a solo reporter, if I'm going to do anything, I have to do it myself. It's difficult to find the time. (Dennison)
- Sometimes the louder voices tend to drown out other ones, whether it's on social media or the newsroom, and you tend to get distracted a little by all the noise. There is a need in our newsroom to have the resources to filter out the better things in the conversations we want to have, but we don't have the resources to do that. (Retsinas)
- You have to make engagement a priority to do it well. We have to commit the resources, whether it's time or people, and by doing that, we're not going to do these five other things that our audience may be expecting us to do. Then you have to explain, we're not doing this because we're working on something that's bigger that will pay off down the line. (Miller)
- There is a street protest in the city of Portland every single day of the week. We choose not to cover every single one of those protests. In fact, we choose to cover very few of them and our readership lets us know every time we don't cover those protests. We get asked, "Why don't you care about the future of our democracy?" and the answer to that question is because we're working on a very different, larger scale story that might impact what you choose to protest next. (Mesh)

MEASURING SUCCESS

Participants also discussed how their newsrooms measure success when thinking about engagement.

Newsroom metrics are useful – to a point

- We know that not everybody reads everything because we have the numbers to prove it. We know they're not reading every word of the things they are reading. If we're wasting resources on things that people aren't consuming then we're not engaging because the numbers tell us they're not. Then we're not serving our audience and we're not giving to them what's important to them. (Miller)
- I don't believe in the idea that if something isn't popular, if there is just no way to make someone want to eat this particular vegetable, that we should take it off the menu. Some things you do because it's your duty to do them. It's our duty to write about things that matter to the future of our city, our state, and our nation, regardless of how many clicks they get. (Mesh)
- Analysis metrics are a useful tool, but they don't capture everything. Maybe one person read that story and was deeply affected by it and they went out and did something about it. How do you measure that? There are ways stories impact people that we have no way of calculating. (Reynolds)
- We are the record of what's happening. It may not be read today, but I feel that we have a value in being that record as a collective industry. Even if my organization doesn't do everything, another one will. Metrics matter and I'm very much driven by metrics in my role, but I also think about our institutional role and that's part of the, 'So what?' value. (Retsinas)

- Everyone likes the high numbers, because you want those clicks. But I think we try to create something of value. If a reader engages you and is willing, after reading what you wrote, to write you a letter about what they thought, even if they hated everything you wrote, the fact that you're able to get them to engage you on a story, that has a ripple effect and value. That builds relationships and gets clicks for everything else you do. (Hobbs)

COVERING CONGRESS

We asked participants to share how they and their news organizations cover Congress. Our hope was to learn more about their experiences and challenges of covering Congress before brainstorming ways to improve coverage. We included coverage of Congress as an institution, coverage of individual Congressional representatives, and coverage of issues relevant to Congress as part of the discussion.

Covering Congress is challenging due to distance and access

- We have bureau reporters in D.C., but they're also correspondents for four or five other states. How much can they know about Oregon, and Salem, and what is important to our residents? They've never lived in Salem and haven't spent a ton of time in Salem. For congressional material to be meaningful, and then actionable locally, it's got to be written in a voice that our audience can understand, and that's a big disconnect. (Miller)
- Most of the information we get comes from our Congressional members. For us to cover them, we have to rely on them to tell us what's going on. We don't really have any independent way of evaluating that, and that's made even more difficult when they're thousands of miles away. (Dennison)
- We do have a full-time reporter in D.C., and that has its advantages. But one of the challenges is just the general disconnect and gridlock in Washington. (Hulen)
- Another barrier is access to information. We file multiple FOIA requests every single week. More and more, we are being forced into an adversarial role to obtain basic information – facts to support something, documentation, correspondence, the things that years ago, when I was a government reporter in another life, it wasn't that hard to get. Now even just getting things that aren't even confrontational require requests and time, which then slows the process, making the story often less relevant. (Retsinas)

Workshop participants were asked to share best examples of engaging political coverage:

- [KPCB follow a single voter \(#MakeAICare\)](#)
- [Alec MacGillis' work at ProPublica](#)
- [The Center for Public Integrity's funding coverage](#)
- [Military Times' defense spending coverage](#)
- [WNYC's "Dear President" series](#)
- [Stephen Colbert's Super PAC series](#)
- [Montana Television Network's Congressional "Key Votes"](#)
- [The Oregonian's coverage of Oregon senators](#)
- [Willamette Week's cover story on Ron Wyden](#)
- [Budget Hero game](#)
- [WTOP's "Ask A..." series](#)
- [Purple States](#)

- As a watchdog newsroom, you're trying to figure out how the votes of your representatives affect day-to-day life in the city and state that you're covering. That's fairly easy to do with local officials at City Hall or state officials in the legislature, but it becomes harder to do on a Congressional level. (Mesh)
- I think a self-imposed barrier for us is that we think, "NPR is in Washington, they have full-time Congressional correspondents, this stuff is super complicated." We can have a Congressman on for a call, but I don't know if we feel as though having someone take the time to understand the processes going on in Washington is a good investment versus covering the state legislature or going down to city hall. (Reynolds)
- User interfaces on the federal and congressional websites are so clunky that half the time I can't figure out how a vote went down, or what the legislation was. It's difficult. (Friedman)

It's important to keep the material about Congress interesting and applicable to readers

- I think what people want is: How does it impact them? They hear all of these national stories, and you hear all of the decisions that are being made, but what's the on the ground? How does it affect my life? (Rothenfluch)
- I would say that giving people a basic understanding of the responsibilities of your Congressman versus your governor versus your legislator versus your mayor versus the courts versus your city councilor or your county council is important. 99% of people don't understand. (Friedman)
- We have access to all the wire stories on Congress, but if we don't cover the Alaska delegation, and the overall impact for Alaska, with everything from climate change to the military, indigenous people and public land, it isn't as meaningful. For us, there's really no substitute for us doing it ourselves. (Hulen)
- People are really interested in characters and conflict, and so I think you can't tell the story of process unless you tell the story of process through people. Whether it's the constituents at home or it's the Congressional representatives themselves, unless you have strong, vivid characters, people don't read stories. Nobody reads books about processes, they read books about characters. (Mesh)

IDEAS TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT WITH CONGRESSIONAL COVERAGE

At the workshop, we encouraged each participant to brainstorm ways to make reporting on Congress more engaging. Each participant was then given time, both individually and in breakout groups, to workshop their idea. The nine thought-provoking ideas that emerged are summarized below.

Idea	Details
<p>COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENTS</p> <p>Sarah Rothenfluch, Oregon Public Broadcasting Cole Goins, Reveal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get 8-12 people representative of a community; come up with methodology to select representative group (e.g. reflect state demographics) and interview people to select the right correspondents • Treat them as community correspondents / ambassadors to the tell human effects of policy and challenges of civic engagement through their lens • These correspondents would check in with the newsroom regularly about what they're feeling about what's happening in Congress • "Make them the faces of the real impact ... tell their stories" • An engagement producer would help manage the group, spark conversations, and check in
<p>FEDERAL FEUD</p> <p>Aaron Mesh, Willamette Week</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would be an event set up like an actual game show, held at theater or bar • Invite representatives to guess what their constituents most want • Before the event, news organization would conduct a poll to ask constituents about their priorities & political views (health care, immigration, etc.) • Held during election cycle; incumbent vs. challenger • "Survey Says ..." ... "Are you Smarter than a Congressman"

Idea	Details
<p>ASK CONGRESSMAN TO PARTICIPATE IN TOWNHALL</p> <p>Andy Hobbs, The Olympian</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The newspaper would host a town hall event with their Congressional representative • Host watch parties outside of the main cities to get more diverse voices • The newspaper would do a call for questions ahead of the event to ensure that it isn't about bashing • Would be an opportunity for reporters and editors to meet more readers, get stories out of it, establish credibility, and build a relationship • Could partner with sister paper to make it happen
<p>ROAD ACROSS WILDLIFE REFUGE</p> <p>David Hulen, Alaska Dispatch News</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The question posed to workshop participants: How to tell this specific story of a road being built in a wildlife refuge in a way that engages readers? • In addition to telling the story conventionally and reporting basic facts, add drone/360 video • Identify stakeholders, have them submit video or text to explain their side in their own words • Do a live (video) event afterward allowing readers to ask questions ... could then make a video about this and broadcast it on the newspaper's website or local public television
<p>HEALTH CARE REFORM GAME</p> <p>Ross Reynolds, KUOW</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video game about how aspects of health care reform will affect various outcomes (level of government responsibility → amount of taxes, who is covered → number uninsured) • Play the game depending on what you want as the outcome (e.g. health care for all, choice of health care, etc.) • Incorporate stories into the game (someone talking or a written account of how it affects them personally) • Get members of Congress to play the game, create content based on their results • Allow people to play & share their results on social media • Goal: Show how factors work together on a complicated issue

Idea	Details
<p>THE WALL</p> <p>Dann Miller, Statesman Journal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask people to write issues or topics important to their daily lives on a public wall • Put into database to look at topics that are consistent across geographic area, then give these to Congressional representative • See the words that people use (e.g. my drive to work vs. transportation); use this language in reporting • Report on how Congress has voted on issue and amendments (dive deeper than just what happened with the final bill) • Digital vs. in person (in person has benefits)
<p>EXPLAIN WHY SOLUTIONS AREN'T HAPPENING</p> <p>Mike Dennison, Montana Television Network</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify a problem and potential solutions, and then report on why solutions are not happening and what it would take to make them happen • Could increase reader engagement by telling people: here's what you need to do to make a solution happen • Could solicit ideas from viewers about what problem to tackle (but this would depend on newsroom)
<p>YOUR Q'S? THE A'S</p> <p>Greg Retsinas, KGW</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People ask questions about Congress and newsroom provides actual data as answers • Decide what questions to respond to based on what users say (curated responses) • Stay non-partisan and focus on local issues • Social media conversation leads to more Q&A
<p>IMPROVED TRANSPARENCY</p> <p>Gordon Friedman, The Oregonian</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a story, have a side bar with phone numbers and email addresses of elected officials referenced (which can be difficult for readers to find all in one place) • Include footnotes to sources • Label the story as news / analysis / opinion / etc.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this workshop was to convene news innovators involved in audience engagement and political reporting to share experiences about engagement and reporting on Congress. The result of the convening was, in our mind, a very productive series of sessions and some provocative new ideas about making Congressional coverage engaging. Over the course of 24 hours, workshop participants provided unique insight into how they think about audience engagement and political coverage, and came up with promising and creative ideas for how they can improve the relationship between the two. We are eager to see these ideas come into being and encourage you to reach out to the Engaging News Project if you are inspired to put any of these ideas into action.

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Regina Lawrence is the executive director of the George S. Turnbull Portland Center and Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon.

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WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Mike Dennison, Chief Political Reporter, *Montana Television Network*

Mike Dennison joined MTN News as its chief political reporter in August 2015, after a 23-year career as a newspaper reporter covering Montana politics and state government, focusing on campaigns, the Legislature, health care, energy, the environment, and many other issues important to Montanans.

Mike grew up in Seattle but came to Montana at age 20, to attend the University of Montana, not far from where his mom's family has operated a ranch for more than 120 years, in the Potomac Valley. He graduated from UM with degrees in journalism and English in 1981 and joined the reporting staff of the Great Falls Tribune later that year.

After leaving the Tribune in 1982, he worked the next decade as a wire-service reporter in Helena, Seattle and Grand Junction, Colo., before returning to the Tribune as its Capitol Bureau chief in Helena in 1992. He joined the Lee Newspapers State Bureau in Helena in 2005, covering politics for Lee's newspapers in Billings, Missoula, Helena, Butte and Hamilton.

Gordon Friedman, Reporter, *The Oregonian*

Gordon R. Friedman is a reporter covering state politics for The Oregonian. He was previously a state government reporter at the Statesman Journal in Salem, Oregon.

Gordon grew up in Washington and California, and studied journalism at the University of Oregon. While in college, he was a reporter at the Daily Emerald and editor in chief of Ethos, the student magazine. After graduating, he interned with the Statesman Journal through the Charles Snowden Program for Excellence in Journalism.

He was named the 2015 Rookie of the Year by the Oregon Territory Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, and elected the group's vice president the next year. In July 2016, he was a finalist for Gannett's quarterly public service/watchdog reporting award for his work on officer misconduct in Oregon prisons.

Cole Goins, Director of Community Engagement, *Reveal*

Cole Goins is the director of community engagement at Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, where he cultivates partnerships that blend in-depth journalism and innovative public engagement. At CIR, he has built and supported distribution networks, spearheaded arts-based initiatives such as the Off/Page Project, led social media and audience strategy and facilitated statewide media collaborations. In 2015, he helped launch Eyes on Oakland, an interactive art exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California that explored insights on police surveillance. He was a senior fellow in the 2015 USC Annenberg Health Journalism Fellowships, mentoring five journalists on approaches to community engagement. Previously, Cole was the engagement editor at the Center for Public Integrity, where he led audience development initiatives and multimedia features for award-winning investigative projects. He earned a degree in journalism and mass communications from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he worked as music director for WXYC, the student-run radio station. He currently lives in Oakland, California.

Andy Hobbs, Reporter, *The Olympian*

Andy Hobbs is a journalist with 16-plus years in the newspaper industry. He covers city government, crime and the environment for The Olympian. He previously worked as a reporter and editor for Sound Publishing Inc., Puyallup Herald and East Valley Tribune in Arizona. He graduated from Franklin College with a degree in Journalism in 2000.

David Hulen, Editor, *Alaska Dispatch News*

David Hulen is editor of Alaska Dispatch News. He's a longtime Alaskan journalist, first for the Anchorage Daily News then Alaska Dispatch News. As a reporter, he traveled extensively throughout Alaska. He was one of the first reporters on scene of the Exxon Valdez oil spill and was a writer for the Pulitzer Prize winning "People In Peril" series.

Aaron Mesh, News Editor, *Willamette Week*

Aaron Mesh has been the news editor for the Willamette Week since 2015. He first joined the paper as a movie critic in 2006 before becoming a news reporter in 2012. He graduated from Covenant College in 2004.

Dann Miller, Consumer Experience Director, *Statesman Journal*

Dann Miller is an experienced online manager, specializing in content, operations and technology. As the Consumer Experience Director at the Statesman Journal, he spearheads content operations for the Statesman-Journal's products including digital and print. He has previously worked at the Yakima Herald-Republic, CyberInk, the Journal Register Company and the Tallahassee Democrat.

Geoff Pursinger, Associate Editor, *Hillsboro Tribune*

Geoff Pursinger is an associate editor for the Hillsboro Tribune. As associate editor, he covers education, as well as breaking news and features while still working with the Pamplin Media Group. A Pacific University alum, Geoff came to the position after seven years as a reporter and editor for the Tribune's sister paper, the Tigard-Tualatin Times.

Greg Retsinas, Director of Digital Media, *KGW*

Greg Retsinas joined KGW News in December 2014 and is the station's Director of Digital Media.

Prior to moving to Portland, Greg worked in the San Francisco Bay Area for six years for a media group that owned several newspapers and affiliated websites. He was the digital director for that group as well, which received several state and national awards during his tenure for its digital innovation and products.

Previous stops include news reporting and editing roles in Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Florida, North Carolina, Alabama, New York and South Carolina. Most of those assignments came as an employee of The New York Times Company. Greg has also been active in many journalism education and career-development programs over the years, serving as a mentor to many new journalists.

Ross Reynolds, Executive Producer of Community Engagement, *KUOW*

Ross is responsible for connecting with the community to find out ways that KUOW can help. He was co-host of KUOW's daily news magazine *The Record* from September 2013 to November 2015. Before that he hosted *The Conversation*, KUOW's award-winning daily news-talk program from 2000 to 2013. Ross came to KUOW in 1987 as news director and in 1992 became program director. As program director, he changed the station's format from classical/news to news. In 1998, Ross became program director and news director. KUOW's coverage of the World Trade Organization protests in 1999 won a National Headliner First Place Award for Coverage of a Live Event.

Along the way, Ross hosted the daily magazine program *Seattle Afternoon*; the award-winning regional newsmagazine *Northwest Journal* that aired in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska; and a weekly public television interview program on KCTS Seattle called *Upon Reflection*. He is a frequent moderator for political debates and discussions in the Seattle community.

Ross has participated in journalism fellowships which have taken him to Germany, the Kingdom of Tonga, Tokyo, South Korea and Malaysia. In 2011, Ross graduated from the University of Washington with a master's degree in digital media from the School of Communication.

His pre-KUOW career included seven years as news director at community radio station KBOO in Portland, five years as news and public affairs director at WCUW in Worcester, Massachusetts, two years as music editor of *Worcester Magazine*, and short stints as fill-in news director at KMXT Kodiak, Alaska, and the Pacifica National News Service, Washington, DC, bureau. Ross has a cameo role in the documentary film "*Manufacturing Consent*," an intellectual biography of Noam Chomsky.

Sarah Jane Rothenfluch, Executive Editor of News, *Oregon Public Broadcasting*

Sarah Jane Rothenfluch is the executive editor of news for Oregon Public Broadcasting and the executive producer of OPB's weekly arts radio show, *State of Wonder*.

Sarah was a part of OPB's daily talk show, *Think Out Loud*, including many years as executive producer, from when the show launched in 2008 until early 2015. She moved to Portland from San Diego where she worked for the NPR and PBS affiliate, KPBS. During her three years there, she worked as the station's special projects producer and as the senior producer of the daily show, *These Days*.

Originally from Canada, Sarah spent a number of years at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a producer for numerous national shows, including *This Morning*, *Sunday Morning* and *Richler on Radio*. She also spent five years as a television field producer for TVOntario.

Additional Participants

We are grateful for additional workshop participants Kelly Born (Program Officer, Hewlett Foundation) and Andrew DeVigal (Chair in Journalism Innovation & Civic Engagement at the University of Oregon's Agora Journalism Center).