

MAKING STRANGERS LESS STRANGE

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SUMMARY

The story of divides is an easy one to tell. In the aftermath of the 2018 midterm elections, red and blue communities seem sharply at odds. Divisions extend beyond politics, however. Religious, racial, and economic cleavages, for instance, lead people to divide into groups of “us,” ingroup members, versus “them,” outgroup members.

It is possible to overcome these divides. Much effort has gone into devising and evaluating strategies for bringing people together and there are many signs of success. It is possible to reduce prejudice and increase tolerance for outgroup members. But not all projects are successful and these initiatives take time and require resources.

The purpose of this review is to describe what we know about “making strangers less strange.” One reason that ingroups develop animosity toward outgroups is that they are unfamiliar with members of the outgroup. If you’ve never met anyone from an outgroup, dehumanizing mischaracterizations of the outgroup are not checked by actual experience. And if most of your interactions with members of the outgroup are negative, it’s unsurprising that you might hold intolerant views. Creating circumstances where people have positive interactions with outgroup members is key.

This report provides examples of projects that aim to build tolerance and discusses best practices for doing this work. This project was funded by the News Integrity Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York.

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For this report, we used a two-part strategy. First, we analyzed how newsrooms are attempting to bring diverse groups together. News organizations represent one institution where people with diverse backgrounds can find common ground. Even though people have many attributes that divide them, living in the same community and relying on the same local news media can bring people together. And although media catering to specific subgroups exist, many people still follow similar local and national news brands.¹ Therefore, news organizations have the ability to gather people across lines of difference. Indeed, many newsrooms have undertaken especially creative efforts to do this work. We review 25 of these projects.

Second, we analyzed recent research to cull best practices for bringing diverse groups together. For decades, scholars have been analyzing what happens when people from different backgrounds come into contact. Under some conditions, divides can be crossed and people can find common ground. Under other conditions, however, group members become less tolerant and even more divided. By combing through recent scholarship, we provide insight into how diverse groups can be brought together productively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEWSROOMS

Divides seem to characterize our day-to-day lives. Republican versus Democrat. Religious versus atheist. Minority versus majority. News organizations have an opportunity to help people understand diverse views. The engagement initiatives reviewed in this report aim to bring people together across lines of difference. When seen through the eyes of academic research, these initiatives are doing many things right. But there's more to be done, both by scholars and by newsrooms to figure out best practices and to see these efforts adopted and refined more broadly. Hopefully this report can provide inspiration for both groups.

THE STUDY

After conducting both forms of research, we then put the two into conversation, identifying paths that have – and have not yet – been tried by newsrooms and paths that have – and have not yet – been evaluated by academics. It is our hope that this report can generate new efforts at crossing lines of difference, both by newsrooms and academics.

In brief, after reviewing [25 inspiring newsroom programs](#), we discuss the following [lessons from the academic literature](#):

- Building successful moments of intergroup contact is difficult.
 - Those most in need of outgroup contact may be least likely to hear about it or seek it out.
 - Mere contact between in- and outgroup members is not enough. The contact has to be substantive and positive.
- Yet quality intergroup contact is possible.
 - Although more contact is better, even short intergroup contact efforts can reduce prejudice.
 - Effective outgroup contact can be face-to-face, mediated, or imagined.
 - Contact does not always have to be with people from the outgroup. For example, ingroup members speaking sympathetically about outgroup members can promote tolerance.

We then discuss [insights gained from examining both](#) the academic and newsroom efforts.

- There are several academic insights that newsrooms should consider:
 - Identify strategies to encourage a receptive frame of mind among participants.
 - Make sure outgroup members are seen as typical so that effects from a particular project translate outside of the project.
 - Use mediated and imagined contact creatively.
- There are several newsroom insights that academics should consider:
 - Evaluate contexts and activities that promote greater tolerance.
 - Examine whether the novelty and uniqueness of the experience matters.
 - Test effective moderation strategies for newsrooms hosting these projects .

For ease of navigation, we have included internal hyperlinks to the three sections of this report.

- [Newsroom projects](#): a review of 25 newsroom projects involving intergroup contact
- [Academic research](#): a review of recent research on intergroup contact
- [Putting them together](#): a look at what newsrooms and academics can learn from each other

A casual reader can look at the sub-headings in the various sections to gain the main take-aways.

What We Can Learn From Newsrooms

A host of news organizations have embarked upon creative efforts to bring diverse communities together. Many of the newsrooms see these efforts as critical components of their mission to help people understand the world beyond their lived experience. Below, we outline projects that brought people who disagree together and facilitated interactions among them.

The Center for Media Engagement began to surface news media driven projects that aim to foster understanding across lines of difference in early 2018. More details about our methodology can be found at the end of this report.

A summary of 25 of the efforts we uncovered, in alphabetical order, is included below.

Advance Local, Alabama Media Group, Essential Partners, Newseum, Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting, Spaceship Media and TIME: Guns, an American Conversation

Guns, an American Conversation was a partnership among multiple news organizations, including Advance Local, Alabama Media Group, Essential Partners, the Newseum, Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting, Spaceship Media, and TIME. The project began during the March for Our Lives protests, during which 21 citizens from across the country joined in D.C. for a weekend workshop on gun violence and gun rights. The participants included survivors from school shootings, police officers, teachers, and those who felt like they were often left out of the national conversation on guns. The moderators of the discussion first taught participants how to have a civil dialogue and then asked them to share personal stories that explained their beliefs about guns.

The participants reported that after the workshop, they were more hopeful about the country's ability to reach a middle ground on this issue. They also appreciated the conversation techniques they had learned over the weekend and voiced a desire for more civil discussions on difficult issues in the future. After D.C., the 21 participants joined 130 other people in a closed Facebook group for a month-long continued discussion. The participants were selected from over 900 applicants and had diverse views on gun control. The group was moderated by reporters and other partners who continued to provide advice to participants about how to approach a question or comment respectfully and productively.

After a month, the original 21 participants opened their own Facebook group, where they continued to discuss gun-related issues.

AL.com and Spaceship Media: Alabama/California Conversation Project

The Alabama/California Conversation Project, a collaboration between AL.com and Spaceship Media, brought together 25 Alabama women who voted for Donald Trump and 25 Bay Area women who voted for Hillary Clinton. AL.com and Spaceship Media reporters first interviewed the women to ask about how they perceived the other side, how they thought the other side viewed them and what they wanted the other community to understand about them. A chief goal of the project and other Spaceship Media initiatives is to dispel the negative assumptions people normally have about the “other side.” From December 14, 2016, to January 15, 2017, the women engaged each other in a closed Facebook group. They talked in detail about all sorts of critical issues—healthcare, gun control, parenting, abortion, immigration, sexism, welfare, drugs, etc.—and how those topics influenced their voting choices. The conversations did sometimes become contentious, but all of the women continued to attempt to find common ground. Reporters helped guide these conversations by acting as moderators and providing relevant data and facts. Few women radically changed their minds on an issue, but all of them felt it was productive to learn unexpected things about a side they had not considered before. After the discussion, AL.com reporters created a story series based on the women’s diverse debates, which included personal essays from the women themselves.

Alaska Public Media: Community in Unity

Community in Unity is a community dialogue series created by Alaska Public Media that brings together Alaskans to address contentious topics like immigration, race, LGBTQ issues, and incarceration. The events attract representatives from community organizations, government officials, activists, academics, as well as ordinary citizens. Some of the events have been public forums featuring a group of panelists who discuss these big issues as they relate to Alaska. Attendees share their own related experiences and ask questions of the panelists. Other events, such as the events on immigrants in Unalaska/ Dutch Harbor and on power and privilege, have been group discussions in a circle where everyone is free to share their ideas. Participants enter the events agreeing that they will communicate respectfully and accept the discomfort that comes with discussing difficult issues. Some of the discussions begin with the struggle to find a definition for complex topics, such as race, power, and identity. Participants bounce ideas off of each other and ideally come away with a more nuanced understanding of an issue in their community than they had before.

The Bay Area News Group, Southern California News Group, Spaceship Media and Univision: Talking Across Borders

Talking Across Borders was a collaboration among the Bay Area News Group, Southern California News Group, Spaceship Media, and Univision. It aimed to create a forum for California residents to talk openly about immigration issues. The partners felt that discussions about immigration, particularly online, often generated toxic comments and arguments instead of productive conversation. They wanted to form a more structured environment where real dialogue could occur, so they created a closed Facebook group with 60 members who held diverse views on immigration. In the month-long experiment, the participants engaged in 150 discussion threads. Participants posted relevant articles, shared personal stories, and debated immigration policies while journalists provided reporting and fact-checking to fuel the conversation.

After a month, Tom Bray, the managing editor for content with the Southern California News Group, told the California Newspaper Publishers Association that although consensus was not reached, he felt the project resulted in “a passionate, compelling but respectful collection of conversations, coming at a time when chats that end in ‘thank you’ are rare.” The participants were likewise impressed with the civility and respect demonstrated in the Facebook group, even if no one radically changed their views.

Capital Public Radio: Story Circles

Capital Public Radio in Sacramento, California partnered with 12 community organizations to co-host six “Story Circles,” or small gatherings of residents, to talk about the area’s housing crisis. The radio station purposefully designed each circle to include diverse residents with different backgrounds. Participants were affluent homeowners, developers, affordable housing advocates, or even homeless themselves. To start, the participants sat for a meal together and each person shared a personal story about their experiences with housing. The participants broke off into smaller groups for more in-depth discussion, but also interacted with the group as a whole. Capital Public Radio moderated the discussion and encouraged deep listening from all participants. In a post-meeting survey, more than 80 percent of residents said that they felt the event had enhanced their awareness of the issue, increased their empathy for others and inspired them to act on the issue. Additionally, the events helped Capital Public Radio build a stronger relationship with their audience — despite some participants having never heard of Capital Public Radio before, many said they were now much more likely to listen to the station.

CBS News: Michigan Roundtable

In the fall of 2016, Oprah Winfrey hosted a panel of 14 Michigan voters on CBS News' 60 Minutes. Seven of the participants voted for Donald Trump and seven did not. The roundtable participants agreed on very little during their first discussion, but when CBS reached out to reconvene the panel after Donald Trump's first year in office, they discovered that members of the panel had actually kept in touch and had become friends. They had organized group trips to a shooting ranges, football games, and fitness classes, and created a Facebook chat where they talked almost every day. They came together for a second discussion on 60 Minutes. Once again, the group voiced very different opinions and worldviews. They said that when they had discussed the Me Too movement in their Facebook group, the group became particularly tense, but in the end they were able to stay together and continue their conversations.

Colorado Public Radio: Breaking Bread

Colorado Public Radio (CPR) brought together six Coloradans from across the political spectrum to see if they could find common ground on contentious topics like healthcare, religion, and race-related issues. The six participants included three Trump voters, two Clinton supporters and one Green Party voter. They all expressed concern for the state of political dialogue after the 2016 election and many said they had lost or damaged friendships and family relationships over politics.

The participants, along with CPR reporters, sat down to dinner to have their discussion. They showcased complex political views that defied stereotypes, such as a liberal's distaste for Obamacare and a Clinton voter's support for gun rights. Two participants even exchanged numbers when one of them invited the other to visit his mosque, since he was the first Muslim she had ever met. Everyone agreed that they should meet and talk again, despite some deep divisions that were shown in the conversation, particularly around climate change.

The Breaking Bread series is continuing with additional conversations and stories. CPR reporters have followed the two participants from the original conversation on their visit to the mosque, started a series on how to overcome political divisions at work and documented conversations between new pairs.

Dallas Morning News and This American Life: The Enemy of the People

During the 2016 presidential election, The Dallas Morning News broke with its tradition. For the first time since the Roosevelt administration, the editorial board endorsed the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton. Conservative readers were angered by the decision and began protesting outside of the newspaper's headquarters. Mike Wilson, editor of The Dallas Morning News, began to worry that the newspaper's politically diverse readership was losing trust in the paper. Wilson walked out to the protesters and introduced himself, but little came of the appearance besides a few selfies and continued protests. The situation escalated when President Trump called the press the "enemy of the people," and Wilson wrote a critical column responding to the statement. Hate mail began pouring into the newsroom from conservatives and Trump supporters, who not only were angry about the Clinton endorsement, but who thought that the newspaper was showing a liberal bias. Wilson initially wrote back to these readers trying to start a dialogue, but found the responses less productive than he hoped.

He then invited two readers to come into the newsroom to talk over their differences with him face-to-face. Both were conservative, long-time readers of the paper, but were recently considering giving up their subscriptions. The two readers sat in on an editorial meeting with the paper's senior staff and although they still worried about how a few pending stories would ultimately be portrayed in the paper, overall they found the meeting surprisingly ordinary and professional. They then talked to Wilson about the main issues they saw with the paper, liked skewed messaging in headlines and lack of diverse story selection. In the end, Wilson was able to agree with a few things the readers said could be improved, but also noted that journalism is an odd business, as its product is rooted in the truth, and therefore can't always be geared toward pleasing their customers.

Although no one's mind changed drastically, all three participants felt good about having the conversation. Wilson said that even if he didn't completely convince them of his viewpoint, he hoped that the readers would now read the paper and recognize his attempts to be fair in the stories.

The Evergrey: Melting Mountains, an Urban-Rural Gathering

Following the 2016 presidential election, about 20 residents of Seattle made the 10-hour drive to meet the people of nearby Sherman County. Seattle is part of a largely urban county that voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton during the election, in contrast to rural Sherman County, where the majority of residents voted for Donald Trump. The Evergrey, a local digital news publication in Seattle, organized a meeting between residents of both counties to talk about their political outlooks and what they hoped to see for the future of the country. The

participants sat down for lunch and discussed their political concerns in rotating one-on-one conversations for nearly four hours. All residents agreed that the conversation had turned ugly in the U.S., even among family and friends. One participant said sitting down with residents of Sherman County allowed her to make sense out of the 2016 election in ways that reading news articles and analyses did not. Several participants exchanged contact information so that they could continue their conversations. The Evergrey also posted a series of reflections after the event examining the takeaways from this exploration beyond the political divide, which included op-eds from participants as well as The Evergrey's staff.

Jubilee Media: Middle Ground

Jubilee Media's Middle Ground series began in 2017 and now has three seasons and 21 episodes. In each video, three people from each side of a debate in American society come together to have a productive dialogue. Jubilee Media has them stand, and then the participants are read a statement, such as, "Sometimes I question my beliefs," "I am proud to be an American," and "I was surprised by someone's response today." If a participant agrees with the statement, they are invited to sit down in a nearby circle of seats and voice their thoughts about the statement. If they disagree, they remain standing and quiet, but can still observe the conversation taking place. After a bit of discussion, those who disagree sit down as well for a lengthier discussion. Some statements seemed designed to draw both sides to the table to encourage connection, and others to give a space for a specific group to share their own experiences with each other and for the other side to listen and empathize. Since the participants' views are diverse even within their own group, the three people from each side don't always move in unison, so the conversation partners vary throughout the videos. Most of the episodes are about 10 minutes long and have been viewed more than 1 million times.

KPCC: Across the Divide

As a part of KPCC's live event segment, reporters brought together four Hillary Clinton voters and four Donald Trump voters after the election to discuss their hopes and fears for the future. KPCC said they were inspired to put on the event when they heard that some of their listeners didn't have a single friend that voted for a different candidate than them. During the more than hour-long conversation, the Trump voters expressed frustration about the slow-moving, inefficient public sector, overcrowding in inner-city schools and the media attention placed on Trump's rhetoric. Clinton voters had different concerns: the increased deportation of immigrants, the anger they saw in Trump's campaign spilling over into their daily lives and how Trump would perform on an international, diplomatic stage. KPCC journalists also participated in the conversation by asking questions to specific participants and providing detailed insights into certain topics.

Seven months into Trump's presidency, KPCC reconvened the same eight participants for another conversation. Although the Trump supporters acknowledged some missteps along the way, they said they ultimately still believed in the president's agenda. Clinton supporters, on the other hand, shared their discomfort and even devastation about certain policies like the travel ban.

KQED: Start the Conversation

For their Start the Conversation series, KQED paired up Californians with contrasting outlooks on political or cultural issues to see if they could find common ground. The first segment featured a Trump delegate from L.A. and a gay man who went to D.C. to protest Donald Trump's inauguration. Another segment included a civil conversation between an anti-abortion protester and an abortion rights advocate who crossed the picket line in front of a Planned Parenthood. KQED also facilitated conversations between people who already knew each other, such as two teachers in the same high school and a granddaughter and grandfather who disagreed about her job as a journalist. All pairs agreed it was important to be civically active no matter your position on certain issues and expressed gratitude about being able to start a dialogue with one another.

KUOW: 'Ask A...' Series

In order to combat the effects of echo chambers and extreme polarization in American society, NPR member station KUOW hosts events called the 'Ask A...' series. The Seattle-based radio station selects people who are members of a group in the news and pairs them with other people who don't typically interact with that group and wish to learn about them. In speed-dating style, each pair has a few minutes to talk, then everyone switches partners. KUOW's 'Ask A...' series has featured Trump voters, Muslims, immigrants, transgender persons, cops, and other groups. All groups were chosen because members feel as if they have been designated at times as an unsavory 'other' in American society, whether it be by politicians, the news media, or other actors.

In July of 2018, KUOW also released a research piece that presented the results from the first six 'Ask A...' events. The newsroom, working in collaboration with Valerie Manusov, a University of Washington communication professor and her graduate student Danny Stofleth, surveyed participants before the event, immediately after the event and three months after the event. They found that there were statistically significant increases in participants' knowledge about and empathy toward the group, even three months after the workshop.

NPR: Divided States

Divided States was a Morning Edition series during and after the presidential election season of 2016. The show brought together voters from four hotly contested swing states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia and Ohio. Their conversations were closely moderated by Morning Edition hosts David Greene and Steve Inskeep.

The series featured stories in several formats, including roundtables after the televised presidential debates where participants shared their reactions to candidate's rhetoric and policy positions. Although some of the roundtables became heated, participants from each state reacted positively to being able to talk to one another. NPR also created detailed individual profiles of the participants and facilitated group discussions on specific topics, such as the candidates' religious views. A few months after Donald Trump's inauguration, NPR checked back in with some participants to see how they were feeling about the future. While Democratic supporters were more likely to feel anxious, they also talked about their increased political activism. One Trump voter also said that after sharing his worries about his farm's finances on the air, a non-Trump supporter he had never met reached out to help him raise money for it.

Ohio News Media and the Jefferson Center: Your Vote Ohio

Forty-two news organizations across Ohio partnered with the Jefferson Center, a nonpartisan organization focused on democratic solutions and civic engagement, to analyze how they could better serve the communities they cover during the 2016 presidential election. They hosted a series of three events to discuss the candidates' positions and what Ohioans considered robust and fair election coverage. Each of the discussions had 18 participants, all residents of Akron, Ohio, but diverse in their race, income level, age and political beliefs. Your Vote Ohio produced in-depth reports after each event that included quotations from participants, key takeaways to encourage a healthier relationship between journalists and their audience, and best practice recommendations for political journalists and politically active citizens. Among the reports' conclusions and recommendations were statements such as, "Organizing in-person events provides another way to demonstrate the media's commitment to the community" and "Listen to understand, don't listen to respond."

After the election, the initiative shifted its focus to the opioid crisis and renamed itself Your Voice Ohio to reuse the discussion model for issues other than elections.

Philadelphia Magazine: Can These People Agree on Anything?

After the 2016 presidential election, the staff of Philadelphia Magazine brought together two Hillary Clinton voters and one Donald Trump voter to see if they could find middle ground on an issue. Participants expressed anxiety when entering the meeting due to the strong political polarization they said they had seen during the election season. Ultimately, however, they were able to agree on several points. The Clinton voters shared their fears about Donald Trump's divisive rhetoric during the campaign, but said they didn't want Trump to fail. The Trump voter said in the end she felt she couldn't trust Clinton, but expressed sadness at not being able to vote for a potential female president.

All participants agreed that they did not like the way the news media seemed to be driving them apart and that there was always partisan content out there to confirm what its readers already believe. They didn't want to end up confined to their own echo chambers and miss other people's opinions, since they thought hearing from others was essential for an intelligent and comprehensive worldview. One of the participants remarked that "Whenever you have an individual interaction, a lot of the bluster, a lot of the generalizations, a lot of the group identifications fall away."

The Run-Up by The New York Times: Let's Talk

In The New York Times' political podcast The Run-Up, three pairs of ideologically opposed voters sat down together to talk about their differences. All three pairs were guided by a set of questions designed by The Village Square, a civic organization that works with social psychologists to encourage open and civil conversations. The list included questions like "How do you think our views came to be so different?", "Do you feel ignored or misunderstood as a voter?", and "What do you think we agree on?" The pairs were already close, but had felt distant or even divided during the election: one pair was a father and his son, another pair were coworkers and neighbors and the third were high school teammates. The pairs explained their voting choices and how issues like race, disability advocacy, job growth, and LGBTQ rights affected their voting choices.

theSkimm: No Excuses - Immigration

In September of 2016, right before the presidential election, theSkimm launched a program called No Excuses that seeks to break down complex issues into an easily understandable format. No Excuses: Immigration featured blog posts, timelines, FAQs, and cheat sheets on key players and politics. theSkimm also designed a "citizenship test" that resembles the one immigrants must take to become U.S. citizens. The goal of the program was to encourage its readers to get informed, take action and break out of their bubbles. theSkimm later expanded the program to host dinner parties for strangers to discuss immigration. They

brought together 14 women from different cities across the nation, some of whom were undocumented immigrants themselves. In a short video that showed highlights from the dinner, participants said they felt like their views had broadened after the discussion.

Spaceship Media: The Many

The Many was a project led by Spaceship Media that brought together 5,000 women across the country with diverse political convictions in a closed Facebook group to share personal stories, political thoughts, and policy ideas. The group was moderated by Spaceship Media journalists in order to provide relevant facts and to ensure that the dialogue remained productive and civil. Spaceship Media ran the project up until the November 2018 midterm elections. Each week, the participants focused on a specific topic, such as race or immigration. They also discussed relevant topics in the news, such as Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination. Through the conversations, Spaceship Media hoped to help participants break out of self-confirming news silos and to foster understanding between communities that may not have otherwise had the opportunity to interact with each other.

StoryCorps: One Small Step

Recognizing the deep divisions in the U.S., StoryCorps expanded its mission and recorded conversations between people with different political viewpoints. The interviews for their One Small Step project bring together people with opposing ideologies with the goal of creating or enhancing respect and understanding. The interview structure is designed not to be political and to steer away from current events and specific policies. Instead, the interviews are meant to be personal and highlight the experiences and people that have shaped the other person's worldview. StoryCorps provides guiding questions such as, "How did your childhood shape your view of the world today?" and "Can you talk about a time you experienced doubt over your beliefs?"

Some of the recorded conversations that StoryCorps has released are between family members who felt like politics had been interfering with their relationship. One conversation was between a former prisoner who had robbed a bank when his family was struggling financially and a man who had been in the bank on that day.

Anyone can record a One Small Step conversation with someone in their life who they want to understand better using the StoryCorps app, which has the guiding questions built into it. Participants can also apply to participate in one of StoryCorps' tour stops, where they may be paired with a stranger to talk about their opposing beliefs.

Talking Eyes Media: Bring It to the Table

Bring It to the Table originally started as a documentary project by Julie Winokur. Winokur traveled around the country with a table and set it up in shared spaces, such as barbershops and bookstores. She tried to engage in deep conversation with people who held different political views than her. The interviews were filmed with a wide lens, giving the impression that the viewer is in fact sitting across the table, listening to the perspective being shared.

After the documentary, Winokur expanded the Bring It to the Table concept and began creating workshops and hosting live events as a part of the Talking Eyes Media team, which includes journalists, producers and other media professionals. Talking Eyes Media asks participants about hot-button issues, but people are encouraged to share the root of their beliefs to promote understanding instead of debate. The interviews often reveal a complexity of political thought that extends beyond the labels of “Republican” or “Democrat.”

TEGNA: An Imperfect Union

A weekly series, An Imperfect Union, brings two people with opposing views together to talk and participate in a community service project, such as cleaning up a park or volunteering at a food bank. The first video aired on August 22, 2018, and featured a veteran police officer and a repeat offender in Charlotte, NC. The two volunteered for RunningWorks, a nonprofit that works to alleviate poverty and homelessness. During the video, the officer asked his partner to share his worst experiences with the police and explained his thought process while he was on the street. Other episodes have paired people that disagree on abortion, the death penalty, gun control, and other topics. New episodes of An Imperfect Union air every Wednesday on Facebook Watch.

The Tennessean: Civility Tennessee

On the day of President Trump’s State of the Union speech, The Tennessean launched a year-long campaign designed to encourage civic dialogue around challenging and divisive issues. The mission of the series is not only to strengthen trust in local news media, but to satisfy a hunger for these civil discussions. Each month, Civility Tennessee focuses on a different theme. David Plazas, engagement editor for The Tennessean, said that while typical columns posted on The Tennessean’s website gain about 1,000 page views, columns posted as a part of Civility Tennessee have garnered more than 5,000.

The events have also been popular. The Tennessean has hosted discussions on sexual assault, gun control, race, and other subjects. The events brought in at least one community expert to help shed some light on the difficult topics. They have taken place over Facebook

Live, where users have generally remained respectful in their commentary, and also in-person, where the audience is invited to ask questions and engage in dialogue. Other Civility Tennessee projects include a closed Facebook group for extended conversations and a book club on *The Soul of America* by Jon Meacham, which addresses modern political divisions in the U.S.

Tonika Johnson and City Bureau Journalism Lab: Folded Map

As a part of her multimedia exhibit, “Folded Map,” photojournalist Tonika Johnson took photos of residences on the North and South Sides of Chicago. The series was originally designed to showcase the economic disparity between homes on the two sides of the city, but Johnson realized it could also be a great tool for starting conversations. She began connecting people from opposite sides of the city so that they could share what living in their two communities was like and have a conversation about the divide, one that is predominantly defined by race. Johnson also had her pairs visit each other’s houses and photographed them standing in front of the opposite residence. For several residents from the North Side, it was their first time ever visiting the South Side. By crossing the North/South divide and visiting each other’s neighborhoods, North Siders in particular were surprised to see how much they hadn’t known about the South Side before, such as the limited grocery store options, the near absence of well-maintained public spaces like parks, and the general lack of investment in neighborhood properties.

Johnson later brought 12 residents from the North and South sides together to discuss how their neighborhoods differed. She said she saw a lot of empathy come from the conversation and hoped her project could be a starting point for more dialogue about improving neighborhoods and reducing segregation.

ZEIT Online: Germany Talks

German newspaper ZEIT Online created a Tinder-like platform called Germany Talks in 2017 that matched people of opposing political beliefs and encouraged them to start a discussion. Over a thousand people were matched with their ideological opposite after answering a series of yes or no questions that addressed contentious topics in Germany, such as the refugee crisis. ZEIT Online provided the pairs with guidelines for how to have a productive and civil conversation and then let them organize their face-to-face meetings independently. ZEIT Online reporters were present for a few of the meetings and asked other pairs to send selfies and their feedback after their conversations. Participants said they were surprised at the number of topics on which they were able to find common ground with their partner.

The project garnered the attention of news organizations across Europe who wanted to do something similar in their own countries. More than 20 newsrooms partnered with ZEIT Online to expand the project into My Country Talks, now an international platform on which any news organization can register.

What We Can Learn From Academics

One of the most helpful frameworks for working with people across lines of difference comes from **intergroup contact theory**. This theory, developed by Gordon Allport in his 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice*, is all about putting people from different groups in contact with each other.² The idea is that people from ingroups should meet those from outgroups under circumstances that build tolerance and mutual respect.

Research building on intergroup contact theory provides extensive evidence that putting people in touch with outgroups can be helpful. Contact can contribute to building empathy, reducing prejudice and intolerance, and humanizing others.³

In the sections that follow, we summarize key insights from research related to intergroup contact theory.

Building Successful Moments of Intergroup Contact is Difficult

Although there are many admirable intentions in bringing groups together, not all efforts are successful. Understanding why these efforts are difficult can help in setting realistic expectations and trying to avoid potential pitfalls.

Those most in need of outgroup contact may be least likely to hear about it or seek it out

Individuals with greater outgroup biases are more likely to select information with which they agree. Therefore, those who might benefit most from contact with outgroups also may be the least likely to be exposed.⁴

Mere contact between in- and outgroup members is not enough

Just knowing someone from another group does not affect attitudes. One study found that having contact with known or suspected undocumented immigrants in one's daily life was unrelated to Americans' attitudes about illegal immigration.⁵ Living in areas with an increase in the Hispanic population over time, in fact, resulted in *more* polarized views between Democrats and Republicans with respect to support for undocumented immigrants staying in the United States. Scholars have documented similar relationships in other contexts.⁶

Although positive contact with outgroup members can promote tolerance and respect, negative experiences can have the opposite effect

When media coverage of a group is negative, people using media have more negative impressions of the group. For example, relying on the media to form impressions about Muslims increased *negative* attitudes toward Muslim Americans.⁷

Some research has found asymmetry between negative and positive intergroup contact, where negative contact was more damaging to perceptions of outgroups than positive contact was beneficial.⁸ This makes it particularly important for newsroom initiatives to create positive intergroup contact experiences.

Negative outgroup experiences also are consequential because they can inform policy preferences. In the UK, for example, individuals with negative intergroup contact experiences had higher levels of anti-immigrant prejudice and were more likely to support the Brexit decision.⁹

Negative experiences with outgroups also can spark activism. For LGBT students, negative contact with heterosexuals predicted their collective action behaviors. For heterosexual students, however, positive contact with LGBT people was associated with more activism.¹⁰

Interacting with outgroup members doesn't have the same positive effects for everyone

Partisanship and ideology can influence whether intergroup contact has effects. Across two different populations in the U.S. and Germany, intergroup contact operated differently across different parties. Contact with non-natives reduced concerns about the effects of immigration for those on the left, but either had no effect or increased concern among those on the right.¹¹ In another study, having a family member or close friend who was Latino increased the probability that a Democrat would strongly support a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, but reduced the probability for Republicans.¹²

Political sophistication also can moderate the effects of intergroup contact. Among politically sophisticated Danish people, having non-Western immigrants living nearby was unrelated to their opinions about immigration. Among those with less political sophistication, however, having non-Western immigrants living nearby was related to more positive opinions about immigration.¹³

Social media can inflame divisions between groups

On Facebook, we have more contact with people from different partisan outgroups – Democrats encounter more Republicans than they might offline and vice versa. Yet because those most likely to speak about politics are also those most likely to have extreme views, people can develop distorted and more polarized and intolerant views of the political opposition.¹⁴ This is the case in general, without respect to specific projects that have used social media to facilitate intergroup contact.

Good Intergroup Contact is Possible

Just because creating quality intergroup contact is difficult does not mean it is impossible. We review suggestions based on what scholars have examined.

Although more outgroup contact is better, even short intergroup contact efforts can reduce prejudice

The mere frequency with which an outgroup is mentioned in media coverage can positively affect outgroup attitudes.¹⁵ In a more specific context, more frequent contact predicts greater tendencies to welcome others and feel welcomed by others among U.S.-born and immigrant groups.¹⁶

Yet even short efforts can be successful. Several studies last less than an hour, but still document meaningful changes in attitudes toward outgroups.¹⁷ And brief exposure can have long-term effects. One study documented meaningful change in outgroup attitudes three months after a 10-minute conversation.¹⁸

Effective outgroup contact can be face-to-face, mediated, or imagined

Classic efforts at putting members of in- and outgroups in contact with each other focused on interpersonal contact, or having people meet face-to-face.¹⁹ Yet intergroup contact can also happen via the media. In the digital media age, people can interact with outgroup members virtually. It also is possible to have contact with outgroup members by watching programs about them – in this case, no actual contact is required.²⁰ Researchers have also investigated a third type of outgroup contact: imagined contact. Rather than actually meeting or experiencing interactions with outgroup members, people can imagine interacting with them. Research shows that this form of contact also can reduce prejudice.²¹

Across all three forms of contact, positive interactions with outgroup members can affect levels of prejudice. We review the related research on interpersonal, mediated, and imagined interactions with outgroup members in turn.

Face-to-face

Meeting outgroup members face-to-face can reduce prejudice. In these contexts, both the both the quantity (e.g., the frequency of interactions) and the quality (e.g., whether the experience is positive) of contact matter. For a sample of youth in Northern Ireland, greater quantity and quality of contact was associated with more support for peacebuilding, which was subsequently related to greater civic engagement (volunteerism, political participation).²²

When personal contact is meaningful, it is particularly likely to affect attitudes. Having friends who are part of the outgroup can reduce prejudice.²³ For example, having a close friend or family member who is transgender is positively associated with tolerant attitudes and support for transgender-inclusive policies.²⁴

Superficial intergroup contact, such as meeting people on buses, in the streets, or in shops can affect attitudes, but how it does so depends on the nature of the experience. Superficial contact was correlated with anti-foreigner sentiment among in-group members who had *negative* contact experiences, whereas superficial contact was correlated with less anti-foreigner sentiment among in-group members who had *positive* contact experiences.²⁵

Interpersonal contact must take place in a context that can translate into everyday life. If people are tolerant across lines of difference in a particular setting, but behave differently in another setting, then change will not occur. For example, prior to Civil Rights movement in 1960s, black and white coal miners in West Virginia worked together underground, but went their separate ways to segregated housing once above ground. Their intergroup contact and decreased prejudice in the mines did not translate into effects outside of work.²⁶

Mediated

Mediated intergroup contact can take place in several ways. First, people can meet each other virtually instead of face-to-face. Research shows that direct online contact with an outgroup member can reduce negative attitudes toward the outgroup.²⁷ Social media contact between groups also can have an effect. Intergroup contact on Facebook was correlated with reduced affective prejudice between Iranian and Israeli participants in one study.²⁸

Second, people can learn about an outgroup via the media without any actual contact. News portrayals of outgroup members can influence attitudes. One study showed that both the quantity (e.g., the frequency with which the group is mentioned) and the quality (e.g., positive portrayals) of media coverage can affect outgroup attitudes.²⁹

Outgroup imagery can affect attitudes as well. Images of people along with information about being transgender can decrease discomfort with transgender people, although it does not affect attitudes toward transgender rights.³⁰ Another study showed that watching members of one's own group play music with members of an outgroup can increase positive attitudes toward the outgroup.³¹

Contact with outgroup members needn't occur in a news context, however. Entertainment media also can affect outgroup attitudes. Exposure to the sitcom *Will & Grace* correlated with more tolerant attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.³² Exposure to *Six Feet Under*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Eddie Izzard* reduced levels of prejudice.³³

Imagined

"Imagined" contact, a technique that "encourages people to mentally simulate positive interactions with outgroup members with the aim of reducing prejudice" can reduce prejudice.³⁴ For instance, researchers found that in a workplace setting, having people imagine a positive interaction with a disabled person decreased their prejudice toward disabled workers and increased support for workers' rights for disabled workers.³⁵ Similarly, others have found that imagined intergroup contact can help to reduce prejudices on the basis of weight and gender identity biases.³⁶

Asking participants to imagine being the toucher after seeing an image of inter-group physical contact also can reduce intergroup bias. Simply looking at an image of inter-group physical contact without imagining being the toucher was not effective in reducing prejudice.³⁷

Imagined contact also may alleviate political polarization. Imagined intergroup contact with a partisan stranger decreased negative affect toward the political outgroup when compared to imagined contact with a generic stranger. Further, the effect of imagined contact was stronger when the conversation was directly about controversial political issues when compared to imagined contact without a specified topic of a conversation.³⁸

Combinations of types of content also can be effective. For instance, one study asked British people to imagine contact with a member of a Pakistani immigrant outgroup and then asked them to read a story about a Pakistani immigrant who emphasizes his British identity. Participants showed improved outgroup attitudes, even and especially among the most strongly prejudiced.³⁹

People need to approach outgroup contact situations in the right frame of mind

When coming to an intergroup contact situation, people must be in the right frame-of-mind to appreciate the experience.

Perspective-taking approaches, whereby people are encouraged to think about what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes can be helpful. One study, for instance, used "analogic perspective-taking" where "canvassers first asked each voter to talk about a time when they themselves were judged negatively for being different. The canvassers then encouraged voters to see how their own experience offered a window into transgender people's experiences...The intervention ended with another attempt to encourage active processing by asking voters to describe if and how the exercise changed their mind."⁴⁰

When people were in an empathetic frame of mind, trying to imagine how another person felt, they were more likely to say that they understood where someone with a different point of view was coming from when reading a narrative about someone with a divergent viewpoint.⁴¹

Encouraging people to think about "the open marketplace of ideas" reduced anxiety about interacting and discussing with a mixed group of partisans.⁴²

Contact does not always have to be with people from the outgroup

One study found that transgender and non-transgender canvassers were equally effective at reducing anti-transgender prejudice.⁴³

Seeing an ingroup member talk about an outgroup position online also can affect attitudes. For instance, seeing someone talk about a friend who is an undocumented immigrant led people to have more positive attitudes toward undocumented immigrants.⁴⁴ Yet this same effect does not always occur. Seeing someone talk about a friend who identified as gay or lesbian did not affect attitudes towards gays and lesbians.⁴⁵

Outgroup members must be seen as typical

If people perceive the outgroup members as atypical, re-fencing can occur whereby people believe: "Yes I liked those people, but they are certainly different from the rest of their group."⁴⁶ Thus, interventions must make sure that people see the outgroup members as representative of the outgroup.

Emphasizing shared background can bring people together

Pointing out what people have in common can be an effective way to increase tolerance across divides. Studies show, for instance, that people are more tolerant toward outgroups when primed to think about a shared, national identity.⁴⁷

Putting Academic and Newsroom Insights into Conversation

The benefit of examining newsroom projects and empirical studies in the same report is the opportunities revealed. From this work, we found that both newsroom projects and academic research agree that several elements are key in moving forward with building tolerance across lines of difference. We also discovered that journalists and scholars can gain unique insights by looking at what the other knows. We review these lessons below.

Journalists and academics agree that several elements are critical

We identified several aspirations shared by journalists and academics for what intergroup contact can do to increase tolerance.

Diversify who is reached

The academic literature suggests that it is difficult to get people with deeply held prejudices to have meaningful and positive intergroup contact.⁴⁸ The newsroom efforts were admirable in their attempts to get people involved, but brainstorming even more strategies for increasing diverse attendance would be helpful.

Here are some of the strategies that newsrooms used to recruit participants:

- In the 'Ask A...' series by KUOW, participants were all volunteers collected through an online Google Form. By applying to attend the in-person event, participants demonstrated a preexisting interest in hearing from "the other side."
- Alaska Public Media's Community in Unity events were open to the public. Different topics of conversation drew different groups into the conversation. Diverse attendance demonstrated mutual concern among different groups about a community issue.
- Spaceship Media recruited participants for their initiatives by asking them "are you interested in X?" instead of "we're looking for people who X." This put the emphasis on the people and not the journalism organization.
- Folded Map employed a random selection process for conversation participants: Journalist Tonika Johnson brought together residents with corresponding addresses on the North/South Sides of Chicago. However, the participants had to consent to participate and attend the meetings with one another.
- Story Circles by Capital Public Radio worked with various community organizations to attract participants from diverse groups.
- Dallas Morning News editor Mike Wilson reached out to readers who had sent hate mail to the newspaper.

Thinking outside of the box on how to attract diverse participants to these efforts should be encouraged.

Explore both mediated and face-to-face efforts

The research showed that both mediated and face-to-face encounters with outgroup members can be effective at promoting tolerance.⁴⁹

Several newsroom projects also used both strategies. Sharing information about face-to-face events after they occurred provided an opportunity for those not attending to experience it in a mediated form. For example:

- AL.com reported on their project with Spaceship Media where they brought women voting for Clinton and Trump together in a closed Facebook group.
- The Evergrey posted reflections about their event, which brought together urban and rural residents in Washington.
- StoryCorps shared the conversations they recorded between those with different political viewpoints.

In-person events also can inspire mediated contact afterward. Organizers reported that the original 21 participants from the Guns, An American Conversation project who had met in person were more connected to each other than they were to other participants in the initiative's closed Facebook group. Meeting in-person could have played a role in their decision to continue their conversations post-project in their own independent Facebook group.

Several projects mixed the two approaches. Civility Tennessee, for example, holds in-person events that are open to the public, uses Facebook Live broadcasts and hosts a closed Facebook group for community conversation.

There may be unique benefits to relying on social media, which can blend elements of mediated and face-to-face contact. Eve Pearlman and Jeremy Hay of Spaceship Media pointed to the value of using social media for these kinds of conversations. People can leave, cool down and come back in a more respectful headspace when using social media in a way that they cannot with face-to-face. Social media also allows the conversation to continue for prolonged periods of time, over weeks or months.

Create positive intergroup interaction

The newsrooms engaged in a host of efforts to create a *positive* experience, which is particularly important given the academic literature showing that positive intergroup interactions can reduce prejudice, while negative interactions can increase it.⁵⁰

Many newsroom projects attempted to create a context that would lead to positive interactions. Spaceship Media's projects had a particularly extensive process to prepare their participants to engage in civil discussion. In all of its projects, Spaceship Media first interviewed their chosen participants about their stereotypes about the "other side." Spaceship Media founders say this practice has two purposes: it primes people to examine the roots of their own beliefs and it lets the participants know that Spaceship Media is interested in them as a whole person, not just as representative of a specific perspective or group. Before entering the Facebook chatroom, participants in each Spaceship Media project were taught civil conversation techniques, such as how to handle conflict when it arises and how to respectfully disagree with others. This was sometimes done in collaboration with Essential Partners, an organization that works to create constructive dialogue. During this process, they acquired the skills to be able to start to understand one another. Discussions were also moderated throughout the project and participants were reminded of these lessons as they interacted in the Facebook groups.

Other examples include:

- Alaska Public Radio's event series, where participants were required to accept a series of statements that related to communicating respectfully and accepting the discomfort that comes with discussing difficult issues.
- The Run Up by The New York Times, which partnered with The Village Square, a civic organization that works with social psychologists to encourage open and civil conversations, to develop a set of questions for their conversation pairs. The list included questions such as, "How do you think our views came to be so different?"
- My Country Talks, a project of ZEIT online, a Tinder-like platform that pairs people of opposing political outlooks. ZEIT Online provides the pairs with guidelines for how to have a productive and civil conversation and then lets them organize their face-to-face meetings independently.
- Civility Tennessee's Facebook group, where participants were required to accept a certain set of principles before joining the forum. The Tennessean mentioned working with the USA Today Network on a framework for civil dialogue that could be used to inspire projects similar to Civility Tennessee across the country.

Compared to less structured projects, participants who were given guidelines on civil discussion before launching their conversations seemed less likely to veer into “talking at” one another and more likely to truly engage in meaningful discussion. Future efforts can use this list as inspiration to study best practices for producing positive intergroup interactions.

Analyze the effects

Just as the academic literature shows that intergroup contact can influence attitudes toward outgroups,⁵¹ the newsrooms initiating these efforts also sometimes saw evidence of attitude change. Most of this evidence is anecdotal, however. There is little systematic evidence about whether the events had a lasting effect.

A few projects conducted follow-ups with the participants from their projects, but there is not enough quantitative feedback from which to draw definitive conclusions. Overall, we need more research to understand the effects of these initiatives.

Newsrooms reported the following positive impacts from their projects:

- The ‘Ask A...’ series by KUOW conducted post-event research with the help of University of Washington communication professor Valerie Manusov and her graduate student Danny Stofleth. They discovered that those who attended their event demonstrated increased knowledge of “the other side” several weeks after the encounter. They also saw a lasting increase in empathy toward the other group.
- The 21 participants from the Guns, An American Conversation project, some participants from the Alabama/California Conversation project and the participants from the 60 Minutes roundtable all created independent Facebook groups after the project’s duration and continued to discuss their differences.
- Some of the women from the Alabama/California Conversation project flew across the country to visit each other.
- While typical columns posted on The Tennessean’s website gain about 1,000 page views, columns posted as a part of their civic dialogue project, Civility Tennessee, garnered more than 5,000.
- Even one-shot conversations seem to have an effect in some cases. Participants from Colorado Public Radio’s Breaking Bread project met again after their conversation to attend each other’s religious services with their families: first at a church in Pueblo and then at a mosque in Aurora, Colorado.

Academic insights that newsrooms should consider

As newsrooms refine their intergroup projects and create new ones, there are a few important takeaways to consider from academia. Several projects touch on these ideas, but more could be done.

Encourage a receptive frame of mind

Based on the academic literature, it may be beneficial for journalists to place even more emphasis on this “pre-conversation” stage of their projects in order to generate the best results.

Several newsrooms provided civil conversation techniques to their participants before they engaged in discussion. However, few newsrooms also focused on what participants already had in common *before* the conversation. Future projects should continue to examine differences and stereotypes, but also take care to emphasize shared background before beginning their conversations. Acknowledging a shared national identity, for example, has been shown to increase tolerance toward outgroups.⁵²

It is possible to take advantage of an existing bond if a member of the ingroup presents on behalf of someone in the outgroup. There is some evidence that decreased prejudice can result from seeing an ingroup member talk sympathetically about an outgroup position.⁵³ This suggests that another way of creating change would be to find ingroup members that have personal, positive experiences with the outgroup who could talk passionately with ingroup members.

Journalists could also encourage participants to consider what it might be like to live and think like someone from the other group. Although some project participants were asked to examine the roots of their own beliefs, fewer were asked to imagine standing in the other person’s shoes. Creating this empathetic frame of mind allows hearing narratives from others to become more powerful in fostering understandings of a different point of view.⁵⁴

Make sure outgroup members are seen as typical

Research has shown that while people can certainly grow to like a member of an outgroup, this attitude does not extend past the outgroup member if the person isn’t seen as representative of the outgroup as a whole.⁵⁵ A way newsrooms could encourage this might be to include multiple representatives from each group in the conversations, as well as to seek out diverse perspectives even within each group itself. Newsrooms also could encourage participants to discuss whether other members of their group hold similar views.

Use mediated and imagined contact

Face-to-face meetings are not the only way newsrooms can help bridge divides. Journalists can also incorporate more diverse forms of mediated contact and imagined contact.

Many of the newsroom efforts had some form of mediated contact, whether participants interacted via social media (e.g., the Spaceship Media and The Tennessean projects) or shared results of the project via the media (e.g., The Evergrey and StoryCorps). But other forms of mediated content may be possible.

Scholars identified that encountering people in contexts that weren't specifically about meeting people with different views – such as watching popular television programs that depicted outgroup members – also affected outgroup attitudes.⁵⁶ This same technique could be used by newsrooms. Instead of having a special event or coverage dedicated to crossing lines of difference, any part of the newsroom's journalism could have a similar effect. For instance, in reporting a sports story, a journalist could mention that a person is part of an outgroup as a way to try to build common ground. This would have to be done carefully, to be sure, but experimenting with strategies could be innovative.

Imagined interaction also can inspire newsroom activities.⁵⁷ This kind of journalism should truly make audience members feel like they are the person in the outgroup, experiencing life as they experience it. Ideas include filming perspective videos of children in contrasting neighborhoods making their way to school or gathering accounts of the threats different groups think they encounter throughout a day. One project in this study, *Folded Maps*, is an example. By facilitating visits to different people's homes, the project gave a personal and visual edge to a larger story about housing disparities in Chicago. Sharing these experiences from a first-person perspective could allow people to imagine what it was like to participate.

Newsroom insights that academics should consider

The efforts that newsrooms are undertaking also could provide starting points for new academic research. Although some academic work does tackle these ideas, there is opportunity for additional research.

Evaluate successful contexts and activities

The environment and location of the event as well as its structure played a role in how newsrooms explained the success of their initiatives. Scholars could examine which contexts and activities are most successful at building bridges.

Examples include:

- Many had participants sit for a meal together first, including KUOW's 'Ask A...' series, Capital Public Radio's Story Circles, and Breaking Bread by Colorado Public Radio. Several interviewees suggested that having a communal activity before a difficult conversation helped participants relax and become better prepared to take on tough political topics.
- Capital Public Radio's Story Circles project also placed a particular emphasis on the beauty of the space where they were holding conversations. Elements like flowers and other decorations were added to give the room a certain aesthetic that may have helped participants discuss more freely.
- The Middle Ground series by Jubilee Media required "tuning in" to the issue and the experience more actively than some other projects. Instead of a normal roundtable or Facebook group, where individuals could ignore parts of the conversation if they desired, the Middle Ground series required participants to be engaged fully, as they had to physically move in response to different statements.

Examine the novelty and uniqueness of the experience

The uniqueness of the experience in the lives of the participants could affect whether the initiative inspires lasting results.

Examples include:

- Meeting Oprah at CBS's 60 Minutes roundtable was almost certainly a once in a lifetime experience that could have helped to prompt the group's continued interest in carrying on their conversation via Facebook.
- For some participants in the 'Ask A...' series and the Breaking Bread project, it was their first time ever meeting and interacting with a Muslim.
- Participants in the Alabama/California Conversation project and The Many could have been impressed by the ingenuity as well as the sheer size of the projects. Few other projects were able to take on a national scope.

However, measuring the influence of a project's novelty should be done with care. Although it might increase the memorability of the experience, past research has also shown that interpersonal contact must take place in a context that can translate into everyday life for attitude change to occur.⁵⁸

Test effective moderation strategies

What the role of a moderator should be and how heavily moderators should be involved would be a fruitful topic of future research. The results could have implications for not just for the success of these initiatives, but public attitudes toward the newsrooms conducting these projects as well.

Newsrooms approached their role as moderators differently.

- Spaceship Media journalists were light moderators in order to not make themselves the story. They said that their primary role was to enforce the rules of civil conversation discussed at the beginning of the project, not to insert their thoughts or opinions.
- NPR's Divided States project was heavily moderated. While the radio hosts were able to steer the conversations in interesting directions, the approach yielded less direct interaction among the participants. At points, the forum felt less like a conversation and more like participants stating their points of view, rather than deeply listening to one another. However, this is based only on casual observation and not on surveys of the participants or listeners of the program.

METHODOLOGY

We used several strategies for this report. We detail our methodology below.

Surfacing Newsroom Examples

We had several criteria for determining which newsroom projects were within the scope of this report and used several strategies to identify the 25 examples we included.

Criteria

In order to be listed, the project had to bring people who disagreed together and facilitate a discussion among them. This could be over social media, at an in-person event, or a mix of the two. The goal of the project must explicitly be to foster understanding across lines of difference, with a focus on contentious political topics such as race, immigration, or LGBTQ rights.

A media organization or journalist had to play a prominent role in the design and implementation of the project. Projects created exclusively by private citizens or by nonprofit organizations were not included in the list, as the goal was to understand how the news media in particular work to bridge divides.

We also tailored the list to include only projects conducted in the United States, with the exception of ZEIT Online’s My Country Talks. We made this exception based on the ambition of the project, its international nature and because the majority of the experts with whom we talked cited it as an exciting example of this type of work.

Searches and Interviews

Initial Google searches for phrases like “newsrooms bridging political divides” uncovered a few projects as well as engagement articles from sources like Nieman Lab and Journalism.co.uk that led us to other projects and people. We also found examples through joining the Gather platform, where journalists congregate to share engagement/audience strategies and stories of the successes and shortcomings of their newsrooms’ initiatives.

We accumulated more examples by interviewing a diverse group of experts over the phone. The experts we contacted for the first round of phone calls had either led a conversation project themselves or had written or been quoted in articles on the value of engagement projects for easing divisiveness in a community.

Participants included journalists who were designing these kinds of projects, those in the industry that supported or studied engagement, and other journalism professionals. We also tried to talk to people from different areas of the country. Interviewees worked in Tennessee, Alaska, Alabama, Rhode Island, California, Illinois, and the Pacific Northwest.

Some individuals, such as Jeremy Hay and Eve Pearlman of Spaceship Media, were instrumental in discussing the process for designing effective conversations across lines of divide. Others, such as Christine Schmidt from Nieman Lab and Peggy Holman from Journalism That Matters, were able to point to several other project examples, particularly lesser-known ones. Many interviewees also provided the names of other experts we could contact.

The journalists we contacted provided detailed insight into the work that they were conducting, including their measures for success. Several mentioned continued conversations unfacilitated by the journalists as an indicator of the level of interest people have in conversing with those that disagree with them. For example, some of the “Guns, An American Conversation” participants created their own private Facebook group to continue their conversations after the project ended. We also discussed the value of face-to-face conversations in bridging divides versus those had over social media, as well as more general engagement practices, such as the importance of community “fixers” in reaching out to underrepresented communities.

After speaking to 15 experts, many of the same projects were named consistently, such as the Alabama/California Conversation Project by Spaceship Media and AL.com, Melting Mountains by The Evergrey, and the projects funded by the Finding Common Ground initiative. Having reached a saturation point, we developed the list included in the document with 25 of the most frequently mentioned projects.

Reviewing Academic Literature

We reviewed literature published in the last few years related to intergroup contact theory and pulled insights that seemed most related to newsroom efforts to make strangers less strange. In a few cases, we also went back to widely-cited literature that seemed fundamental to understanding the larger context of intergroup contact.

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