News Tools Workshop Report

Compiled by Natalie (Talia) Jomini Stroud, Alexis Alizor, Alex Curry, Emily Van Duyn, Shannon McGregor, Joshua Scacco and Katie Steiner

INTRODUCTION

In February 2016, the Engaging News Project hosted its third news engagement workshop, the first to focus on news tools. The 12 digital news leaders who participated represented a variety of newsrooms: *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Daily Beast*, WNYC/New York Public Radio, *Houston Chronicle*, KXAN (Austin NBC affiliate), Media General, GateHouse Media, NOLA.com, *The Texas Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and the Knight Lab at Northwestern University. During the two-day workshop, participants shared their ideas and experiences with using tools to improve engagement.

Workshop participants share ideas at the Engaging News Project's News Tools Workshop.

When discussing how to define a "news tool," workshop participants came up with a short list:
- Tools must be re-usable
- Tools must meet a need of the news organization or the audience
- Tools must allow for interactivity
- Engagement tools target a news audience; production tools are used within the newsroom

With that definition of "tools" in mind, participants shared experiences and new ideas for using existing tools, as well as brainstormed an array of tools that could be used to address pressing social issues. In this report, we outline the topics that were discussed during the workshop, including:
- What makes a tool successful? What makes a tool unsuccessful?
- What issues are ripe for tool creation?
- What tools could be created to combat political polarization?
- How could news organizations get Millennials more involved in the news?

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUCCESSFUL TOOLS

We kicked off the workshop by having participants discuss instances in which tools – developed in-house or by third party vendors – worked or didn't work. The result was a series of best practices for tool development and adoption. We include the lessons and related quotations from the participants below.

Tools need to be simple and easy for audiences to use

- In the past, we've asked users to tell us where they saw bikes that were on the streets and needed to be removed by the police. All they had to do was take a picture and send an email through their phones. Here, the barrier of entry was very low because you didn't need to go to a website. We always try to think of easier ways to work with users. (Boudeau)

- I have a friend who says, "Smells like computer science," meaning that a tool looks like something a developer did rather than something a user would want to use. When you get a developer to come up with an idea, I think that it is really important to have people outside of the organization try it first. That way, it doesn't smell like computer science. (Silverman)

- We had a tool and thought it was great -- it looked good and worked well, but all of the feedback we received said no, it does not work as well as you think it does. (Miles)

Tools must be designed to meet a need

- From the tech perspective, a huge pitfall is to start with this idea that, "we are building a tool now." In some ways, that's the worst way to start because you don't see the need first, you just decide that you are building a tool. Whereas when you build to a situation you are addressing what you need to address. (Krauss)

- We thought we should build an app for the South by Southwest festival that would target Austinites who wanted to see what was going on around the city. The concept in our minds was great, and the app worked well. However, when we launched, it didn't work out. Our issue was that we didn't ask the right people. We didn't put together a focus group and ask, "Would you use this as a tool?" Technically, it looked good and it worked fine, but we were trying to create a need where there was no need or solve a problem that didn't exist. (Walker)

- We invested a huge amount of energy to create a database to help people find nursing homes. The issues were that, first, it wasn't all that connected to the stories, and second, it would really only be useful if the newsroom was committed to keeping the data accurate over time… So it was a case of building something that nobody really asked for and hoping that, because it was fundamentally useful, it would actually get used. (Germuska)

- I think that readers want more curated database information now. The databases that have flopped are databases that journalists care about, but readers might not necessarily want. (Riordan)

- If there's already something that exists that does what you want it to do, and you know it works, you should just use it [such as using YouTube instead of a third party vendor] (Krishnakumar)

Tools must be useable by newsrooms

- We developed a survey that was designed for patients who thought that their surgery may have been doubled booked. The problem was on the back-end. We had hundreds of responses and tons of data to inform our news story, but for some reason the designers did not want to use a Google form. So afterward, when the data were transferred into a database, it was a mess. As a reporter, it was really frustrating to go through the back-end. Sometimes the simplest solution works best. (Abelson)

- The usability conversation goes both ways. We have 71 television stations and 46 markets. We can design a tool that KXAN [in Austin] can use and that Tampa can use, but it might not work so well in Terre Haute, Indiana, because they are a smaller station. What we've discovered is that you can build a tool, but it doesn't always work for everyone. So, we have learned to scale the usability on the front-end and the back-end. (Walker)

- Our biggest mistake was that we were trying to do everything inside our CMS, and eventually the site started crashing. The site took six months to build. So we started to build outside of the CMS. (Judy)

- One issue we have is newsroom education. We've got some cool tools and can do some great things with them, but when everyone in the newsroom is busy, they don't always think about using the tools. We try to do an internal marketing campaign in the hopes that we can get our staff to remember to use the tools. (Tolbert)

Newsrooms crave useable analytics associated with tools

- Measuring the success of any tool, third party or not, is really challenging. I think that with a third party tool that you didn't build, you can't deeply monitor how people are interacting with it. If you really are trying to quantify things based on actions and not just raw traffic, it becomes a lot more difficult with a third party tool. With a tool that we build, we can bake measurement in at the beginning. (Chavez)

- The differences between one vender's metrics and another's can be challenging. Often, it's difficult to get apples to apples comparisons. Plus, I think newsrooms are still figuring out metrics as well, so we don't have a good idea of what metrics should be used. We just kind of make them up and that's not always good either. (Riordan)

ISSUES RIPE FOR TOOL BUILDING & ADOPTION

In the second session, workshop participants were asked to think about how to match newsroom and policy issues with particular types of tools. The tools mentioned included ones that assist newsrooms, focus on policy issues, or assist with navigating campaigns and elections.

Newsroom Assisting Tools

Workshop participants saw a need for tools that helped within the newsroom.

Gauging Audience Sentiment. To better understand audience sentiment, workshop participants envisioned prospective tools to measure positive and negative feedback on news articles, to allow

readers to rate stories much like Yelp, and to give readers the ability to annotate news stories with their comments. Some participants saw these types of feedback tools as data-driven approaches to better understand audiences. Others noted some resistance among journalists to having their stories rated.

Connecting Data. With many news organizations using multiple digital platforms to engage audiences, it becomes difficult to track and coordinate incoming data. For example, a newsroom may use a variety of social media and vendor-produced products. The result is unconnected data. Workshop participants saw a need for newsroom tools that can act as spokes on a wheel to connect data from multiple platforms.

Policy Issue-Based Tools

From a public engagement perspective, workshop participants saw local, niche policy issues as ripe for unique news tools. The tools and issues participants mentioned included a concrete tie to local affairs and a description of why the tool was necessary.

- *Combatting Policy Ignorance and Misinformation*. Focusing on an issue where there is lack of information, or a great amount of misinformation, may spark interest in a news tool. For instance, Jenn Abelson noted that the debate around medical marijuana in Massachusetts could have benefitted from news tools designed to highlight the major facts and issues surrounding the topic. Participants noted the Engaging News Project quiz tool as a means for stoking issue knowledge.
- *News Diagnostics*. News outlets often wonder whether stories, particularly related to reoccurring local issues, break through the noise. Devin Walker saw a need for tools that serve as a diagnostic for gauging whether individuals are learning about local public affairs, such as the contentious debate in Austin, Texas regarding Uber and Lyft ride services.
- *Tracking Reader Reaction and Community Impact*. Valeya Miles related how an issue like crime in New Orleans was an opportunity to create tools to measure how neighborhoods react. Specifically, tools that encourage audience involvement in solutions could prove useful.

Campaign & Election Tools

Workshop participants saw a need for news outlets to embark on, what Walker termed "engagement as a service," particularly during political campaigns and elections. Andrew Chavez saw a need for tools that provide basic political information, including where to vote, how to register to vote, information on political candidates, and relevant rules and regulations for voting. Yet, participants also were careful to note that the labor devoted to election tools does not always translate into a direct payoff. Public engagement with election tools often occurs during a limited period shortly before an election.
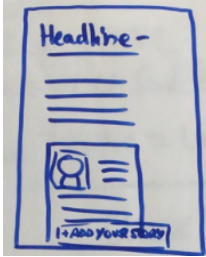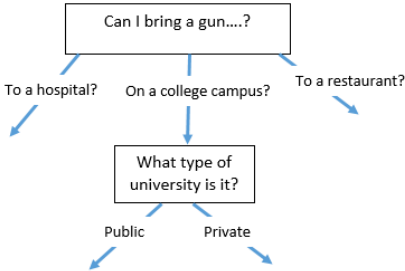
The discussion of election tools identified several possible prototypes for future tool development. Participants mentioned past tools used by the Obama campaign to mobilize and call voters, ballot builder products employed by news outlets like the *Chicago Tribune*, e.thePeople, and tax calculator products that provide information about how local issues can affect people monetarily.

IDEAS TO ADDRESS POLITICAL POLARIZATION

At the workshop, we introduced the idea of political polarization by sharing data on increasing levels of animosity between Democrats and Republicans, on partisan reactions to the news media, and on ways in which the news media exacerbate polarization such as by giving different viewpoints equal coverage regardless of merit and by allowing incivility in comment sections.

We then broke into groups to brainstorm on ways that news organizations could better inform the public about political polarization and diverse political viewpoints. Four thought-provoking ideas emerged, as summarized below.

HOW NEWSROOMS COULD ADDRESS POLITICAL POLARIZATION

IDEA #1: STORY DATABASE Marine Boudeau, WNYC Amanda Krauss, TX Tribune Dwight Silverman, Houston Chronicle Josh Scacco, Engaging News Project		• Create a database of stories from everyday people • Carefully curate stories from those espousing different views on important issues • Make the stories embeddable into story pages
IDEA #2: INTERACTIVE ONLINE POLL Ken Judy, Daily Beast Patrick Tolbert, KXAN Valeya Miles, NOLA.com Talia Stroud, Engaging News Project		• Ask people to rate values related to an issue, such as free speech when discussing a controversial protest • Display data about how people with various views rate different values • Provide vignettes of people discussing controversial issues
IDEA #3: DIGITAL DINNER PARTIES Devin Walker, Media General Jenn Abelson, Boston Globe Joe Germuska, Knight Lab Shannon McGregor, Engaging News Project		• Have individuals upload selfies or videos featuring their viewpoints on issues • Select most up-voted viewpoints to join town hall-style dinner • Record and produce segments based on the dinner discussion
IDEA #4: DECISION TREE / CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE Penny Riordan, Gatehouse Andrew Chavez, DMN Priya Krishnakumar, LA Times Emily Van Duyn, Engaging News Project		• Package complex information into a decision tree • Allow users to learn about multiple viewpoints related to an issue by going through the decision tree in different ways • Provide links to relevant articles

Our next objective was to brainstorm new tools that could engage Millennials with the news and politics. To gain background, 25 students from the University of Texas at Austin and the 12 workshop participants were divided into four groups. The students responded to questions posed by the workshop participants about their news habits. We summarize the questions and responses across groups below.
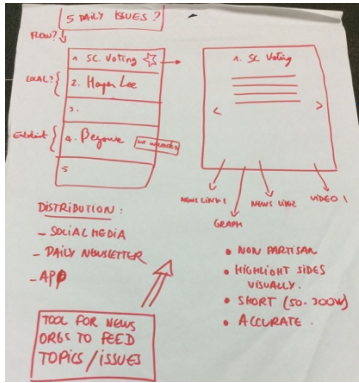
Workshop Participant Questions	*Student Responses*
Where do you get your news?	• Social media • News alerts (push notifications) • Unbiased sources • From outlets that send news, like theSkimm
What do you think about getting news from social media?	• Twitter and Facebook are fast ways to get news, but they can be too noisy and the sources are not always credible • I see the headlines on Facebook, but then go to a news site, like *The New York Times*, to read the articles
What do you think about political coverage?	• Touchy subject • Too much reporting about personality and not enough reporting about the issues • Some of the issues are too big to jump into without having some background; I would like to have an outline of the issue that I'm reading about
Do you watch news video?	• Not generally, as it is faster to read an article than it is to watch a video • Not if the video starts with an advertisement (but a short ad in the middle of a longer video may be acceptable)
Do you follow local news?	• I follow the local news from my hometown, but not the town where I'm going to college • When moving to a new town, the local news lacks context; I want a cheat sheet that tells me who's who and other pertinent background information
When do you consume news?	• Sporadically • Every day • At lunch • When there's nothing else going on
What annoys you about news and politics?	• Advertisements and interruptions, especially pop-up ads • How mean the public is in the comments • When the reporting feels biased

Millennials' Perspectives on the News (cont.)

Workshop Participant Questions	Student Responses
What about longer stories – do you read those?	• Maybe once in a while, but I really just want my news short and sweet • Some issues need the depth, but if the story is long, a summary would be helpful
Are there ideas you have about improving news presentation, specifically to Millennials?	• Give the people and places in the story context • Use engaging language and make the site more user friendly • Give it a Buzzfeed feel with lists and layouts • Make it fun to read • Provide short lists of facts that pertain to the topic of the article • Add more pictures • Add quizzes • A site/app that would show articles on the same topic from right-leaning news outlets and left-leaning news outlets – show both sides • But don't talk down to us just because we're Millennials
What draws you to consuming news?	• How relatable the news is to me – that's more important than the news brand • Convenience – how quickly can I find the news and find out what's important about a particular story • I don't want to pay for news – if I have to pay, then I look for the same information on a site that can give it to me for free • The content format and structure (humor, balance, forthrightness, simplification) • When its easy to digest • When I can get the main points quickly • I read what is trending • When its sent to me and I don't have to go looking for it

After meeting with the students, workshop participants were given 30 minutes to brainstorm a tool for Millennials. They then presented their idea to a new group of students to get feedback. We summarize the four tools on the next page.

HOW NEWSROOMS COULD ENGAGE MILLENIALS		
IDEA #1: RATING STORIES Andrew Chavez, Dallas Morning News Ken Judy, Daily Beast Penny Riordan, GateHouse Media Josh Scacco, Engaging News Project		• Create a tool for Facebook users to rate news articles on a political spectrum ("Is this article left-leaning or right-leaning") • Rating would be visible to all Facebook users. • Provide rating information to publishers to inform them of how their content is perceived.
IDEA #2: DISTRIBUTION PLATFORM Jenn Abelson, Boston Globe Patrick Tolbert, KXAN Marine Boudeau, WNYC Katie Steiner, Engaging News Project		• Display 5 daily issues, feature short summaries of each • Allow the tool to be embedded on any news website • Provide a simple, easy guide to the background info for each issue • Shorten articles (50-200 words) • Allow users to receive notifications on issues of interest
IDEA #3: NEWCOMER'S GUIDE Priya Krishnakumar, LA Times Dwight Silverman, Houston Chronicle Devin Walker, Media General Alex Curry, Engaging News Project		• Target those who have recently moved • Updated digest of important stories in the area (e.g. information on major road construction projects) • List of key local services (e.g. the nearest DMV) • Serves as a vehicle to the news organization's core product
IDEA #4: META STORIES Joe Germuska, Knight Lab Amanda Krauss, Texas Tribune Valeya Miles, NOLA.com Talia Stroud, Engaging News Project		• Present articles with diverse perspectives on that issue in different columns • Content comes from credible sources • Short and to the point

CONCLUSION

Over the course of 24 hours, workshop participants provided incredible insight into how tools are used in newsrooms – and how they could be better. They brainstormed on new tools to address political polarization and engage Millennials. We are grateful for their insights and believe that their views shed light on the importance of tools used within newsrooms. Our next step is to test several of the tool ideas and to identify those that have both democratic and business benefits.

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Jenn Abelson

Investigative Reporter
The Boston Globe

Jenn Abelson is an investigative reporter for the Boston Globe's Spotlight Team and recently wrote about doctors operating on two patients at the same time in Clash in the name of care. She helped create online surveys that generated hundreds of responses from patients and medical care providers. Her 2014 project, Shadow Campus, was nominated as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Public Service. The three-part series exposed how a collision of greed, neglect, and mismanagement is endangering young people in America's college capital. Abelson designed an interactive survey on iPads to question hundreds of students in the Boston area. Her two-year investigation into the seafood industry used DNA testing and other technology to expose widespread fish mislabeling at restaurants. The series, Fishy Business, received awards from the National Press Club, the National Headliner Competition, and the Society of Business Editors and Writers. In the Spring of 2010, Abelson served as a Jefferson Fellow with the East-West Center and traveled to Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Jakarta to examine the new realities in Asia in light of the economic crisis and environmental challenges. She joined the Boston Globe in 2001 and graduated magna cum laude from Cornell University.

Marine Boudeau

Director of Design & User Experience
WNYC/New York Public Radio

Marine Boudeau is the Director of Design and User Experience at WNYC / New York Public Radio. She's been working there for close to 5 years. She leads the design and user research efforts to create delightful, engaging, and easy for all experiences. In 2014, her team received the Society for News Design award for the WNYC Discover feature. The team also got nominated for a Webby Award. Before New York Public Radio, Marine was doing design and product management at NBC Universal. She's also worked at two mobile tech startups prior to that. Marine graduated from Northeastern University with a Business degree in 2005. Her passion for building things brought her to product design. That's what she's been up to for the past 10+ years. She runs several projects aside from her full time position at New York Public Radio. She's the founder of Feelio, the daily email that tells you what to wear. She's also the founder of Plum.ai, a new intelligent and friendly project management tool (coming soon). Marine is from France and lives in Brooklyn.

Andrew Chavez

Computational Journalist
The Dallas Morning News

Andrew Chavez is a journalist and Web developer at The Dallas Morning News. Before joining The News in January 2016, Andrew was a news applications developer at the Austin American-Statesman. At the Statesman, he built interactive and special presentations for stories, assisted reporters with data-heavy reporting projects and was the developer for the Statesman's Longhorns sports website, Hook'Em.com. Prior to joining the Statesman in September 2014, Andrew was the director of digital media at the TCU School of Journalism.

Joe Germuska
Executive Director
Knight Lab – Northwestern University

Joe Germuska is the Executive Director at Northwestern University Knight Lab, a community of designers, developers, students, and educators working on experiments designed to push journalism into new spaces. He is also the project lead on Census Reporter, a Knight News Challenge project to make U.S. Census data easy for journalists to use. Before joining the Knight Lab, Joe was a founding member of the news application team at the Chicago Tribune and a project board member for the PANDA project, another Knight News Challenge winner. Joe also co-founded the Open Government Chicago meetup. For fun, every Tuesday Joe gets up well before dawn to host "Conference of the Birds," an eclectic music radio program on WNUR-FM.

Ken Judy
Chief Technology Officer
The Daily Beast

Ken Judy is a software developer, product owner and executive with fifteen years experience in media. He is currently Chief Technology Officer for The Daily Beast with responsibility for devops, product, user experience and design. Ken is an advocate for iterative, collaborative design and development practices and with his team is currently rebuilding the website and supporting publishing tools. Ken has had senior roles at Oxygen Cable (NBC-Universal), NYSE Advanced Technologies, and Simon & Schuster (CBS Corporation). Before focusing on technology, Ken was a company member and Artistic Associate for the workshop series at Annex Theater in Seattle. Ken lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Kathie, a writer and performer, and their daughter, Miya.

Amanda Krauss
Director of Technology and Platform
The Texas Tribune

Amanda Krauss received a Ph.D. in Classical Studies from the University of Texas at Austin in 2004, and spent 5 years as an Assistant Professor of Classics at Vanderbilt University. Though she enjoyed her teaching and research, she was intrigued by technology and wanted to be involved in media that reached a broader audience. In 2008 she started retraining as a web developer, and in 2010 she left her academic job to move back to Austin. After freelancing for two years, she was hired as an interactive designer at the Texas Tribune in 2012. She was promoted to Producer in mid-2013, and then to Director of Technology and Platform at the beginning of 2014. In the past two years she has enjoyed improving the quality of the Tribune's codebase, building an inclusive and friendly tech culture in the newsroom, and working with like-minded people who value collaboration.

Priya Krishnakumar
Graphics and Data Journalist
Los Angeles Times

Priya Krishnakumar is a graphics and data journalist at the Los Angeles Times. Previously, she has worked at the Washington Post, Patch Media and Northwestern University's Knight Lab. She's a Northern California native and graduated from Northwestern University in 2014 with a degree in journalism and Integrated Marketing Communications. After escaping Chicago's frigid winters, she

began at the Times, where she works with reporters across the newsroom to create engaging, informative digital projects on a wide range of subjects. She is most interested in user-centric design and engaging readers through reporting and well-designed digital presentation. When she's not in the newsroom you can find her hiking or scouring Trader Joe's (arguably the best place in the world.)

Valeya Miles
Community Engagement Manager
NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune

Valeya Miles is the Community Engagement Manager for NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune where she manages the organization's engagement and social media team. A Dallas native, Valeya previously worked in the tech sector specializing in online community management, fostering game fanbases and mobile app communities for Google, Quickoffice and Zynga. As part of her transition into journalism, she now works one-on-one with reporters and editors on finding new ways to engage with their readers in competitive online spaces. Through their active engagement with the community, they work together to tell the stories most important to New Orleanians. Valeya also leads of team of specialists that are continuing to grow the largest total social media following for all news organizations in the New Orleans metro area. In her free time, Valeya enjoys being a member of a Mardi Gras krewe, finding the best BBQ joints in New Orleans (harder than you'd think!) and attending music festivals.

Penny Riordan
Director of Digital Content Partnerships
GateHouse Media

A native of Maryland, Penny has worked at both print and digital news outlets for more than a decade. She currently is the director of digital content partnerships for GateHouse Media and works at the Center for News and Design in Austin. In her current role, Penny leads the company's social media strategy and manages all editorial vendor relationships (including video, analytics, commenting, live blogging, and the online calendar). She also works closely with editors in all of GateHouse's newsrooms on digital best practices. Prior to joining GateHouse, Penny worked at Patch.com for four years, first as a local editor in Maryland and then on the company's corporate staff. She also worked at daily newspapers in Maryland and Connecticut and is a graduate of the University of Maryland at College Park.

Dwight Silverman
Senior Producer for Premium Products
Houston Chronicle

Dwight Silverman is the senior producer for premium products for the Houston Chronicle and chron.com. He has been with the Houston Chronicle since 1990, and has worked as an assistant state editor, business reporter, technology columnist and interactive journalism editor. He moved to the website staff in 2000 and was responsible for helping bring blogging and social media to chron.com. He's also worked at the San Antonio Current, the San Antonio Light and the Beaumont Enterprise. Silverman is a former co-host of Technology Bytes, a weekly computer call-in show on KPFT-FM. He's also a regular panelist on This Week in Tech, the popular tech news podcast at twit.tv. He also is the author of three computer books, including "Running Windows on Your Mac" (Peachpit) and "Switching to a Mac: No Problem" (Wiley & Sons). Silverman has taught journalism classes at the University of Houston, including

a course on social media and news. He holds a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Texas.

Patrick Tolbert
Digital Director
KXAN, KNVA and KBVO

Patrick Tolbert is the Digital Director for Media General's Austin stations: KXAN, KNVA and KBVO. His work focuses on audience engagement, multi-screen storytelling and teaching other journalists to use new skills and technologies in their reporting.

Devin Walker
Director of Audience Development and Engagement
Media General

Devin currently leads the audience development and engagement efforts for the Media General broadcast markets. Over the past five years his primary responsibility is as a digital strategist working with teams in the Media General TV markets -- translating their needs to products, consulting on digital best practices and newsroom workflow and helping them set and reach strategic goals. Devin began working with the digital side of broadcasting in 2000 by transcribing anchor and reporter scripts into readable web copy. Along the way he has led local teams, driven mobile development projects, sold a few million display ads and covered everything from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina. He would say great digital content boils down to a simple concept – both content creators and consumers need to be cultivated. Devin has a degree in cultural anthropology, is an SEO nerd and is more comfortable on a boat than on land.