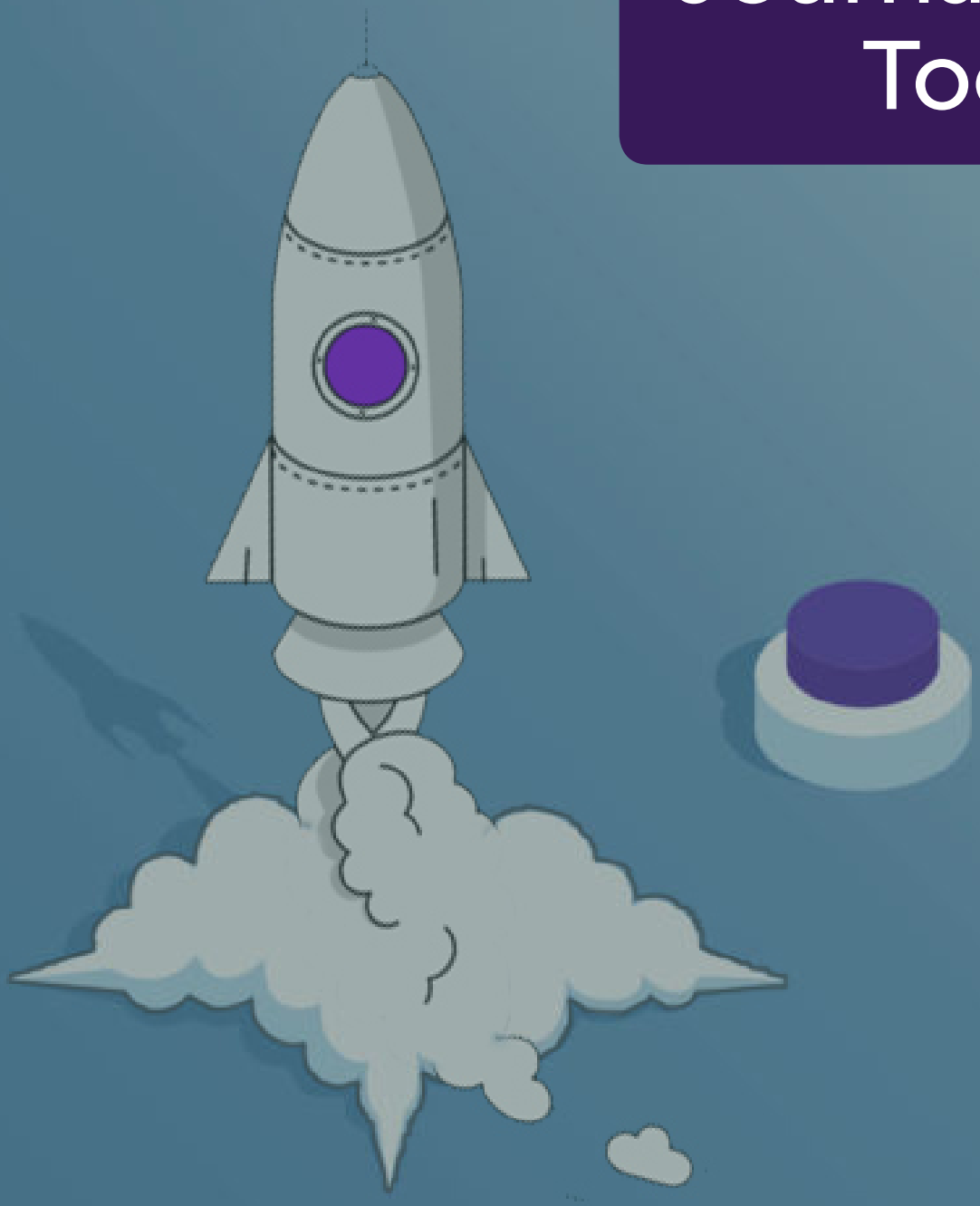
SPACESHIP MEDIA

Dialogue Journalism Toolkit



Special thanks to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for making this toolkit possible.

Written & edited by the Spaceship Team:
Adriana García, Cailley LaPara and Eve Pearlman

Design by Adriana García

Welcome to Spaceship Media's Dialogue Journalism Toolkit! We built it to give journalists and interested others a chance to explore in detail how we do our work. We have mapped our process in a way that we hope is useful and accessible. Let this toolkit help you launch your Dialogue Journalism project!

Thanks!
The Spaceship Media Team

Please feel free to reach out with questions
to spaceshipmedia@spaceshipmedia.org

Table of Contents

Spaceship Media launched in 2016 with a mission to reduce polarization, build communities and restore trust in journalism.

1.0 INTRODUCTION TO DIALOGUE JOURNALISM

What is Dialogue Journalism?

Dialogue Journalism is a method for convening and supporting fact-based conversations between people on opposite sides of polarizing social and political fractures. It is a process for engaging divided communities deeply and connecting them with the newsrooms and journalists who serve them. Dialogue Journalism creates a ***new*** news cycle, one that starts from the questions and issues that divided communities are discussing. Dialogue Journalism puts community at the heart of journalistic practice.

EVE PEARLMAN, SPACESHIP MEDIA CEO & COFOUNDER, TINY SPARK PODCAST

> *Going to the heart of divides, bringing communities together in dialogue across difference, supporting those conversations with fact, telling stories about those conversations and about the issues and topics that arise from them — this is the work of Dialogue Journalism.*

MICHELLE HOLMES, VP CONTENT,
ALABAMA MEDIA GROUP

Spaceship Media offers a potent balm for alienation, cynicism, distrust and fear. Their model has shown how divided people can come together to grapple with tough questions and emerge with new insight.

Dialogue Journalism was created with the intention of going to the heart of social and political divides. By going to places of friction in society, as journalists always have, but once there doing something different: building respectful, fact-based conversations between regular people about the issues that matter deeply to all of us as a society. We put the core tools of our journalistic craft directly in service to the divided communities we help build.

At its most basic, Dialogue Journalism is a seven-step method for identifying divides and then creating sustained, nurtured and moderated conversations between groups of people who have not been communicating or who have not been communicating effectively.

EVE PEARLMAN, SPACESHIP MEDIA COFOUNDER,
RESISTANCE DASHBOARD PODCAST

We were watching the increasing polarization and dysfunction in our public spaces, in and around journalism and on social media. We knew we wanted to go right to where there was trouble and difficulty, but we wanted to go there to support those situations with information and with opportunities for communication... This comes from our core impulses to listen first and to engage and to support. That was the beginning of Spaceship Media.

SPACESHIP MEDIA
JOURNALISM TO BRIDGE DIVIDES

The Voices of One Project

KELLY GAUTHIER, PARTICIPANT, THE MANY

I joined this group to try to understand why the women who passionately disagree with me feel the way they do. My end goal is simply to try to understand where they are coming from, not to change their minds. I think that if we listen humbly and with an open mind we occasionally realize that other people have ideas that are worth considering.

JANE GRETNA, PARTICIPANT, THE MANY

Through The Many, I have come to greatly respect ladies across the political spectrum. Reading the rationale behind differing views has led me to realize that there are intelligent, caring, thoughtful ladies holding them.

ALYXAUNDRIA SANFORD, MODERATOR, THE MANY

As the group grew and time went on, I saw members change their approach, take time before reacting to comments, and openly admitting they had never thought of things they way someone may have presented them.

JESSICA SIMONS, PARTICIPANT, THE MANY

In my time here, I've come to an understanding that conservatives and liberals do prioritize different (meaningful!) values. The Many, where dialogue and respect were a given, helped me reach behind the soundbites to something much deeper.

TERRY RAINEY, PARTICIPANT, THE MANY

So many times we forget to listen, and this exercise was helpful in training us to do that ... listen with our hearts, and minds, in an effort to better understand our neighbors. After all, we are all in this together, whether we like it or not.

Sustained, Nourished, Moderated

Sustained

At a time when trust in journalism is low, simply saying, "Trust me, I'm a journalist" doesn't work. Trust is earned over time, through relationships. Dialogue Journalism allows for deeper understanding and connection, giving members of the public time with reporters and reporters time with communities.

Nourished

Reporters gather information in the form of FactStacks (a term coined by Spaceship Media), which is a carefully sourced, transparently reported compendium of facts and figures. FactStacks are delivered to participants in the conversation. Our goal is to make our reporting trustable and useful to the communities we serve. Sometimes we partner with librarians to provide FactStacks.

Moderated

Whether conversations are in-person or online, the work of moderators is essential. Moderators model and encourage civil discourse, support people in getting to know one another, and help people in the work of engaging respectfully with those whose opinions differ from their own..

Transparency and inclusiveness are essential to creating a trusting bond between moderators, reporters, and participants, and are the building blocks of productive, respectful, civil discourse.

EVE PEARLMAN, SPACESHIP CEO & COFOUNDER, CRITICAL THINKING INITIATIVE PODCAST

We have something that's rare in journalism, which is a month with people (that's been our standard length of a group). And so, over that time, participants begin to get to know each other, to get to know the journalists, and begin to have relationships.

JANE GRETNA, PARTICIPANT, THE MANY

Moderation in The Many has been a necessity. It is not easy to engage in such conversations. I have typed and deleted many, many times prior to sending responses. The group has been kept civil when the moderators have kindly stepped in, gently corrected transgressions, and offered more positive communication strategies.

BRITTANY WALKER PETTIGREW, PARTICIPANT, TALKING POLITICS

Whenever we would become entrenched in something, the reporters would be like, "Hold on a minute, let's do some reporting." And they would go back and do some research and would come back with some facts.

Where are the divides?

There are many issues that divide and separate us, locally, regionally and nationally. Below are some divisions that Spaceship Media and its newsroom partners have built projects around.

Feeding the Future

Minnesota Public Radio environment and agriculture reporter Elizabeth Dunbar sought a way to bridge the cultural divides that became apparent in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. "So rather than pursue some of the ideas I had developed related to agriculture solutions to climate change, this spring I set out to hear from people with whom I don't usually interact. I listened to their hopes and fears about the future of agriculture in a changing climate in a variety of ways," she wrote in a piece outlining how she developed the Feeding the Future project.

Crossing the Line

Fresno, California has long been a city divided racially and economically. The legacy of division and disparity lives on, impacting Fresno residents in this moment. Together with The McClatchy Company and the NEWSCo/Lab at Arizona State University, Spaceship Media convened a conversation. "The Fresno Bee is starting a conversation about this and wants you to be a part of it," wrote Bee reporter Briana Calix. "As the city hall reporter and a San Joaquin Valley native, I'm taking on this challenge because I care about my home and the people who live here... My goal through this project is to help people from different parts of the city understand each other better. I hope this dialogue also builds trust in the journalistic process."

Read project outlines about Feeding the Future and Crossing the Line, page 26

Talking Politics

After the 2016 presidential election, Spaceship Media brought Alabama Trump supporters and California Clinton supporters together in conversation. The 50 women talked for a month about everything from race relations to family planning. "The election happened, and that was a strange moment for everyone. We had been playing with this concept low-key, like, hey, maybe we'll do this sometime. But then Trump was elected and we thought, there's so much room for good, intentional work here. Let's do something now." (Eve Pearlman, Spaceship Media cofounder from Plural of You podcast)

Guns: An American Conversation

This national conversation brought people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and beliefs together. Together with Advance Local, TIME, the Newseum, and Essential Partners, we gathered participants in D.C. for a weekend-long gathering conversation, which was followed by a monthlong moderated Facebook group about guns and gun safety. Journalists from across the country reported on the group for local and national publications.

Resources

Guns Factsheet

Essential Partners, one of Spaceship Media's partners in Guns: An American Conversation gives an indepth report on the project

The New Yorker

Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds

Neiman Lab

25 Trump voters from Alabama + 25 Clinton voters from San Francisco = 1 surprisingly good Facebook group

Center for Media Engagement

Making Strangers Less Strange

Journalism Educators Network

Deepening Engagement: Reciprocity Could be Key for Journalists

Solutions Journalism Network

Complicating the Narratives

Tiny Spark podcast

Hey America, Let's Talk About What Divides Us

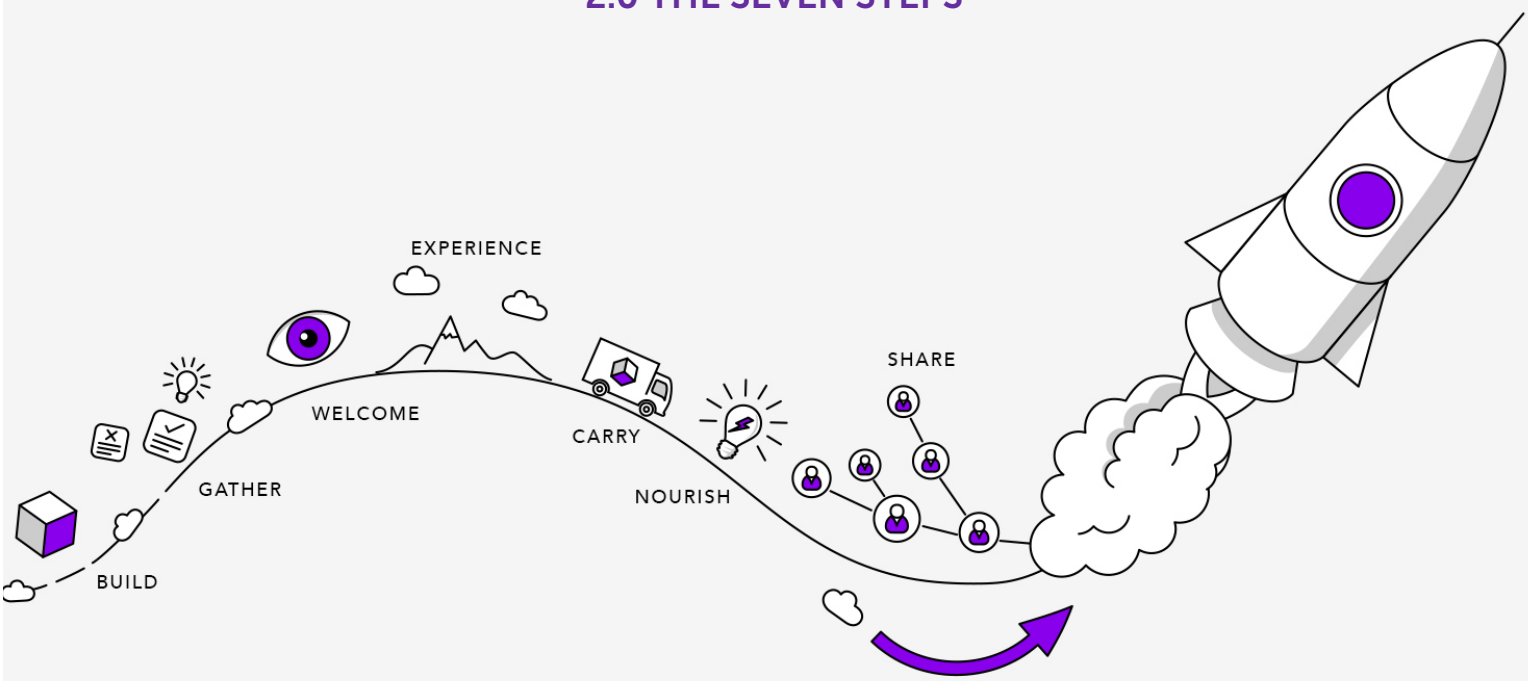
Journalism.co.uk

Spaceship Media is using 'dialogue journalism' to enable productive conversations between communities at odds

Key Takeaways

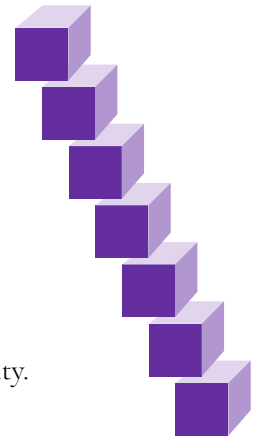
- Dialogue journalism is a method developed by Spaceship Media that can be utilized by newsrooms to bridge divides.
- Dialogue journalism projects start by identifying divided communities, places where people are not communicating or not communicating productively, and then brings them into dialogue for respectful, fact-supported conversations.
- Dialogue Journalism reconfigures the reporting process, with reporters providing information directly to the divided communities they serve.
- Dialogue Journalism projects are supported by original reporting, what we call FactStacks: non-narrative compendiums of facts and figures created directly in response to the issues and topics that people are discussing.

2.0 THE SEVEN STEPS



What is Spaceship Media's Methodology?

At Spaceship Media we go right to the heart of conflicts, as journalists always have. Once there, we use the tools of our craft to support meaningful, respectful, fact-based conversations about the social and political issues that divide us. By convening conversations between communities that are not talking (or not talking productively) and supporting those conversations with moderation and reporting, we work to build a triangle of trust between divided communities and journalism organizations that serve them. Here, briefly, are the steps of Dialogue Journalism:



The Build: We identify communities that aren't talking or are in conflict.

Page 17

The Gather: We ask members of those communities a series of questions that get to the heart of how they want to be known and what they want to know about members of the other community.

Page 18

The Welcome: We work with news organizations to convene the communities in conversation on platform/s that work for them; we create and share content from the initial interviews as a way to launch the engagement.

Page 19

The Experience: We support an experience that revolves around the participants; we work to create an opportunity for participants to engage deeply with others.

Page 21

The Carry: We pay careful and kind attention to moderation. We focus on the personal and information needs of the participants and we have many tools to help people engage respectfully.

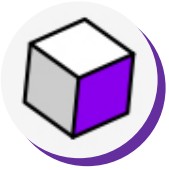
Page 22

The Nourish: As conversations grow, we support them with a particular kind of reporting we call FactStacks, which allows us to establish a common ground of agreed-upon facts for communication.

Page 24

The Share: We help newsrooms plan, develop and coordinate the production of content that originates from the dialogue, amplifying impact. We tell stories about the conversation and issues that arise during the discussion.

Page 25



The Build

Dialogue Journalism relies, from start to finish, on a deep, collaborative relationship with our partner news organizations. In this first step of Dialogue Journalism we work to think through what conversation will have the most value for the communities we would like to engage. Together, we take a look at the news and political landscape in which our partners are operating, where the charged conflicts or divisions lie, and what fault line/s it makes the most sense to organize around. We ask a lot of questions:

- What are the political and social issues dividing people in your communities?
- What groups or communities are at odds or not talking?
- What question should we frame a discussion around?
- How long should the conversation go on?
- Where should the conversation take place?
- What platform/s will we use for this conversation?
- How many people will it include, ideally?
- How will the reporters gather and discover stories, and how will they work with moderators?
- How and when will we release content from the project?

Together we build a road map for how our work together will unfold. That said, flexibility and responsiveness is fundamental to our work. If we discover what we are doing isn't working, we shift.

The Gather

The Gather begins with a a call out or invitation to community members through our media partners, website or social channels. A call out is typically worded something like this: Are you interested in and open to a respectful conversation with people on the opposite side of issue X?

The call out links potential participants to an intake form that allows us to collect information about potential participants, including why they want to be a part of the conversation, what their views and thoughts are about the issues at hand, and basic demographic information.

In nearly all our projects, we ask some version of our four basic guiding questions:

- What do you think of people on the other side?
- What do you think they think about you?
- What do you want to know about them?
- What do you want them to know about you?

Additional questions might include:

- Why do you want to be a part of this conversation?
- What are you worried most about right now in your community?
- What are the biggest challenges your family faces?
- What in your personal experience informs your views about issue X?

BRIANNA CALIX, REPORTER, CROSSING THE LINE FOR THE FRESNO BEE

Dialogue journalism is asking two opposite groups the most basic questions about perception.

At all stages of the process, we are transparent about our motivations and we work hard to explain the point, purpose and value of our work. Though our conversations are off the record, participants can expect that reporters may ask to quote or interview them.

Very often, after the initial series of call outs we follow up with targeted recruiting through individual reporters or community organizations. We are committed to creating groups that represent the diversity of the communities we are serving — most importantly, it is crucial that both "sides," and all views, are represented so that a healthy conversation can develop and no one feels outnumbered.

After we finish recruitment and build a balanced membership list for the group, we reach out to each potential participant by phone or video call to give them an opportunity to ask questions about the project. We have the chance to explain our goals and motivations, give them a sense of what to expect over the life of the project, and make sure they understand the rules for participating.

These one-on-one contacts are very important for preparing people to be open and enthusiastic participants in the conversation. They are also important for screening out those who are perhaps unprepared to be in this sort of this sort of community. Red flags include those who, in these initial interviews, are angry, skeptical, belligerent or inflammatory.

The Welcome

Once you have recruited participants, vetted them for participation, and explained the purpose and guidelines for the group, you are ready to welcome everyone in!

It is important to make sure that people receive the guidelines for participation through multiple means (initial interviews, email newsletter, and posted within the community itself). We always emphasize to participants that they are joining a conversation, not a debate, that the conversation is an opportunity to listen, learn and talk with those they might not typically connect with.

We welcome people into the community by introducing ourselves as journalists and moderators and by inviting them to introduce themselves. For instance, in projects that take place on Facebook, we ask for a picture and a brief introductory post about who they are, their lives and their views.

We also reflect back to them some of their answers to our introductory questions. This can be done through videos, graphics or both. This is where people start to understand, connect with and humanize one another.

Sometimes, if there are issues and questions that emerge through the introductory questions, we open with a few already-reported FactStacks, so that people can begin to have a shared set of facts to converse around. Other times, we wait until questions and topics begin to arise organically from the communities we serve.

Another guiding principle of Dialogue Journalism is giving people space to talk about a variety of subjects, from the serious to the mundane. We encourage open and wide-ranging discussion because our communities are about what the people in them want to discuss. There are no right topics and no mandates.

The Experience

The Experience reminds us that each project is, most importantly, about the communities we serve; that our work is about creating meaningful, valuable — sometimes even transformative — experiences for those on opposing sides of difficult issues.

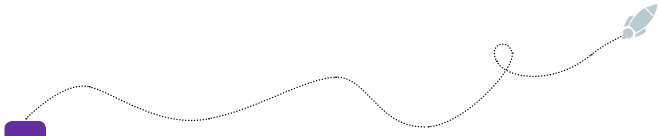
There are a variety of ways to create spaces where people can talk and learn from one another. Ultimately, the more nuanced the discussions, the richer the content produced by our partner newsrooms will be.

The last four steps of Dialogue Journalism — Experience, Carry, Nourish, Share — all happen concurrently. Each element is fundamental creating a successful project.

The Carry

We use the term "carry" for moderation because we want to highlight that we are supporting people in having respectful dialogue across difference. Our approach calls for paying close attention to participants' social and information needs so that they are comfortable talking about the issues that are important to them.

Listening first requires moderators to remain attuned to the dynamics of the conversation, listening for when individuals might need support to stand in the crowd — when they feel ganged up on or overwhelmed. The Spaceship approach relies on appealing to people's better natures, trusting them to participate in respectful, thoughtful conversation. Moderators establish conversational norms through their facilitation.



ASHLEY EDWARDS, PARTICIPANT,
THE MANY: A CONVERSATION ACROSS DIVIDES

This is an opportunity to challenge myself to sit in discomfort, to sit in moments where I don't have the answers and other people don't have the answers but we're both willing to talk about it.

We have approached rules to moderation in two primary ways. The first has been to let rules and guidelines emerge from the community. More often, we begin with a clearly articulated set of community guidelines. We discuss them in our one-on-one conversations with participants, and distribute them by email and within the community itself.

ADRIANA GARCIA, SPACESHIP MEDIA
DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION

It is my opinion that our work creates a level of intimacy (because what else would you call it) that is the only thing that can put an end to the viciousness in our public spaces. When we know the human behind the vote or the view, it's harder to hate and it's easier for us to come to a consensus about, not solutions, but problems that must be solved.

Basic guidelines often include no name calling, no memes or GIFs (if conversations are online) and more nuanced suggestions: ask questions out of genuine curiosity rather than to trap an opponent, take a break for 20 minutes if you start to feel yourself get angry or heated.

Using a variety of intentional moderation strategies, our goal is always to help people remain part of the group, but if people are destructive, we remove without fanfare. Personal attacks, insults, vulgarity, racist and sexist comments are all destructive.

Moderation is hard work. It requires stepping out of our own firmly held beliefs and views to listen carefully to the community. It also involves a firm and complete commitment to always taking the high road, to not taking comments or rebuffs personally, to being a leader in creating, holding and maintaining respectful conversation across difference.

Our job together is to build a good community conversation. We prompt discussion in many ways — posting articles, posing questions, sharing personal details, inviting others to post stories or questions, etc. We know from experience that supporting a mix of serious and light discussions, factual and opinion-based, the personal and the overtly political, make for a successful conversation.

The Nourish

The Nourish features a key element of Dialogue Journalism, the use of FactStacks, information reported in direct response to questions and issues that arise from the conversations we convene. FactStacks give participants a shared set of facts on which to base a conversation. We report as transparently as we can, respond respectfully to the challenges and questions of our communities, and acknowledge error or bias should it arise.

One of our core motivations is to is restore trust in journalists and journalism. Transparency matters for this. Accordingly, we encourage questions about the reporting process, both into the group and out of it. We very often also make an effort to engage the communities about how and where they get their news, what media outlets they trust and why, and other issues related to news literacy.

ADRIANA GARCIA, DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION, SPACESHIP MEDIA

By putting our reporting directly in service of the divided communities we bring together, we are building a relationship of trust based on meeting the community's needs. This is the reason Spaceship Media creates FactStacks for the communities we convene.

The Share

The Share is where we start to think collaboratively about stories and content that will emerge from the group. Throughout the life of the project we continue to develop this content plan. FactStacks are one type of content that arises from our groups — they are shared within the group but can also be shared to the larger public. Reporters have very often built traditional narrative stories around FactStacks.

Stories also emerge about the conversation itself. What is it like? What was learned? How did it impact participants? What opportunities for connection arose in the group? What outcomes were there? Did people connect outside of the group? Did they join together to talk about a shared problem? There are many types of stories that emerge from our communities and we work in collaboration with our partners to help plan and craft this content. Some publications issue regular dispatches, while others produce a package at the end of the group. Participants have contributed by writing commentaries about the value and impact of their experiences. We are always eager to explore new ways of creating meaningful content from these communities.

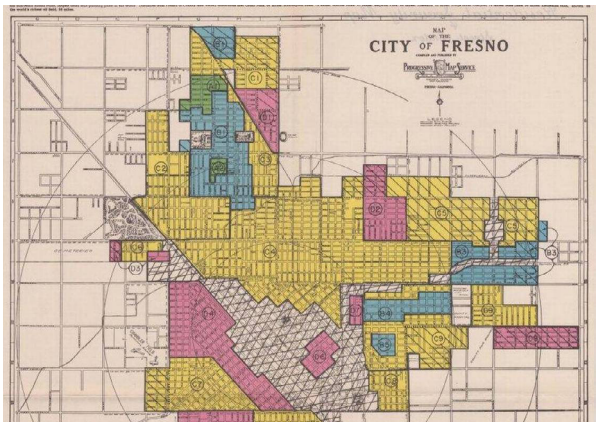
ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS, REPORTER,
ALABAMA MEDIA GROUP

“It’s important to focus on readers themselves, and to ask yourself whose voices aren’t being represented in media coverage, and how you might reach those people.

2.1 THE SEVEN STEPS IN ACTION

Project Outlines

Want to see a real-world instance of putting the 7 steps into action? What follows is a step-by-step summary of 2 projects: Crossing the Line and Feeding the Future.



Crossing the Line

Step 1: The Build

Fresno, California is a city marked by stark socioeconomic divides that have deep historical roots. It is also home to the Fresno Bee, a longstanding local newspaper whose newsroom leaders have begun to focus their efforts and resources on how to better serve the Fresno community through journalism.

In July 2018, Spaceship Media partnered up with the Fresno Bee and NEWSCo/Lab to discuss how dialogue journalism could benefit Fresno. The Bee reporter assigned to this project, Brianna Calix, was interested in finding some way to create dialogue across the major socioeconomic divide between North and South Fresno. With this in mind, we worked together to brainstorm a signature dialogue journalism approach that would accomplish this.

Step 2: The Gather

With the project topic decided, the hard work began. 'Fresno's socioeconomic divide' isn't exactly a problem that can be solved in a few weeks, so we had to specify our scope and expectations. The overall strategy was to engage The Bee's audience in concentric circles:

the most removed engagement would involve general audience members who read the articles about the project and were given regular opportunities to take polls related to the topics under discussion;

the second ring of engagement was those residents who took our 10-question survey but were not selected for the more intimate convening discussions that would be held. They were kept informed via email about the details of those meetings and the insights gathered, and were later invited to join the Crossing the Line Facebook group;

the closest ring of engagement was the about 20 people who would take part in two in-person convenings, be provided with feedback from those events, and were the first to join the Crossing the Line Facebook discussion group.

With a layout established, we were ready to bring our project to the public.

Step 3: The Welcome

To start, we sent out a 10-question survey to the Bee's audience. The survey asked several basic demographic questions and included questions like this:

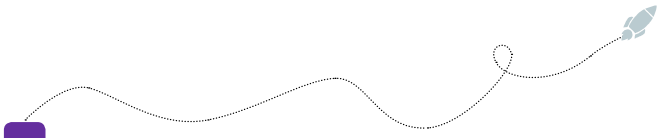
- What's the dividing line between north and south and why?
- What do you think of people on the other side of the dividing line?
- What do you think they think about you?
- What do you want to know about them and their neighborhood?
- What do you want them to know about you and your neighborhood?
- Where do you get your news about your community (friends, family, online, Bee)?
- What do you want The Bee to know about you and your neighborhood?
- What do you want to know about the The Bee?
- How do you feel about how the Bee portrays/reflects your community/neighborhood?

From the survey responses, we were able to select about 25 folks to represent Fresno's population who were the first to engage in discussion with one another. This took us to step 4, the actual conversation experience.

Step 4: The Experience

Not all dialogue journalism projects involve in-person discussions, but Crossing the Line did. We held two meetings with those 25 people selected from the survey responses, and one final meeting, open to the public, when the project came to an end. Hailing from every corner of Fresno, these participants represented the diversity of experience that the city contains.

Those meetings were one part of the conversation experience; our Facebook group was the second. The 25 people who attended the first two meetings were the first members of the Facebook group. Using the in-person conversations as a launchpad, they continued to discuss various topics relating to Fresno's divide online. Midway through the project, the people who had taken our original survey but who did not participate in the in-person meetings were invited to join the Facebook group.



JAMES SPONSLER, PARTICIPANTS, CROSSING THE LINE

"The one thing, I will say, that I got out of this conversation, is that we are all in the same boat. We all had similar ideas. We had similar solutions and ways that we see the avenues of going and moving forward together. It is key that we find what unites us. Right now, we have a street that divides us, but we need to find what unites us."

Steps 5: The Carry

The moderation for this project included an online component as well as an in-person conversation structure where all 25 participants' voices were heard, encouraging those participants to speak out and then engage with one another.

At the in-person meetings, Brianna Calix proposed questions to the entire group, then participants divided into smaller groups to discuss their answers. They wrote their responses on index cards, which were then read and shared aloud and discussed with the whole group.

Step 6: The Nourish

Calix asked questions about the Fresno school system, housing, community health, and more, always asking participants to offer their personal experiences. While these stories acted as productive jumping-off points for rich discussion, Calix did not hesitate to provide more context and facts, mostly in the form of local history, to bolster these discussions.

At the final in-person meeting, which was open to the public, two experts in Fresno's divide addressed the audience to discuss redlining and community health. Although no formal discussions followed this event, the Fresnans in the audience were still able to take part in this crucial step of dialogue journalism.

Step 7: The Share

For those who were not directly involved in the project, there was plenty of opportunity to learn about the Fresno divide. For the duration of the project, Bee reporter Brianna Calix wrote news stories and editor Joe Keita published a column about Crossing the Line. To see what kind of content came out of Crossing the Line, click on any of these stories:

- Let's talk about Fresno's divide

  This was the first story published, announcing the project to the Bee's audience
- Residents want to talk about Fresno's divide and they want everyone to have a voice
- Poll: Fresno's north-south divide is real and rooted in racism, income inequality
- For these residents, Fresno's north-south divide was learned in school
- Reporting "Fresno's Divide" Wraps Up With Open Community Conversations

Feeding the Future

Step 1: The Build

As in many places across the country, the 2016 election results surprised journalists in Minnesota, where rural voters nearly turned the tide in the historically blue state. The takeaway from the election for Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) environmental and agriculture reporter Elizabeth Dunbar was a sense of being out of touch with large portions of the state's population. To begin to remedy this, MPR connected with Spaceship Media to devise a dialogue journalism project to address the rural-urban divide in Minnesota.

ELIZABETH DUNBAR, REPORTER MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO, FEEDING THE FUTURE

My whole reason for becoming a journalist was to provide people with information they could use to improve their lives and make their communities better. I wasn't convinced my reporting on the environment was having any impact.

Step 2: The Gather

The target group for this discussion fell easily into place, given Dunbar's expertise as an environmental and agricultural reporter. Farmers, foodies, and anyone else involved or interested in the food supply chain and how it interacts with the environment were called upon to join this discussion.

The MPR team got creative with who they wanted to reach and how. They advertised the project in person, manning tables at county fairs, reaching out to the MPR audience on Facebook and Twitter, getting the word out via the communications teams at the Farmers Union and Farmers Bureau, and posting signs at gardening stores, supermarkets, and restaurants — just to name a few of their outreach methods. Throughout this process, ensuring a diverse group of participants was a top priority for project leaders.

The callout message looked something like this: You may have heard I've launched a project on the future of agriculture — I'm experimenting with something new. Rather than me come up with all the stories, I want to hear from you. Part of the way I'm doing that is by starting a closed Facebook group to explore some of the disagreements over who bears more responsibility for taking care of the environment and protecting the food supply for the future. Is it the socially conscious consumer who is willing to pay more for food grown more sustainably? Or is it farmers who make the decisions about what they grow and how they grow it?

Step 3: The Welcome

Once the word about the project had been spread, MPR sent out a survey to people interested in participating. The survey asked people to answer the project's organizing question:

- What do the rest of us most misunderstand about agriculture and our food system?

It also asked for demographic information, to ensure a diversity of voices throughout the project. MPR reporters then spoke with each of the the selected participants on the phone. "We explained that the conversation was off the record, that my role was to moderate and serve the group by adding reporting and research to the conversations," said Dunbar. "And we answered any questions they had."

Once they joined the Facebook group, participants were greeted with a video of Dunbar and MPR Digital Editor Michael Olson explaining the project. They encouraged participants to introduce themselves to the group. Dunbar also provided some details about the group, like a map of where all the group members were from and an article she had written framing the project.

Step 4: The Experience

For the month that Feeding the Future ran, the participants themselves mainly steered the discussion, though MPR staff found that engagement increased when a moderator was present, asking questions or providing additional information for participants.

The group proved to be a productive source of information for participants and reporters alike. The group's collective knowledge of agriculture and food systems is deep and specific — Feeding the Future created a space for such niche knowledge to be shared and flourish among a community that had not previously gathered together.

Although the project wrapped up in October 2017, the Facebook group is still an active home to conversation among Minnesotans.

Step 5: The Carry

Moderation in this group needed only a mild hand — as mentioned above, moderators typically served to encourage the conversation, not necessarily tamp down tensions or aggression.

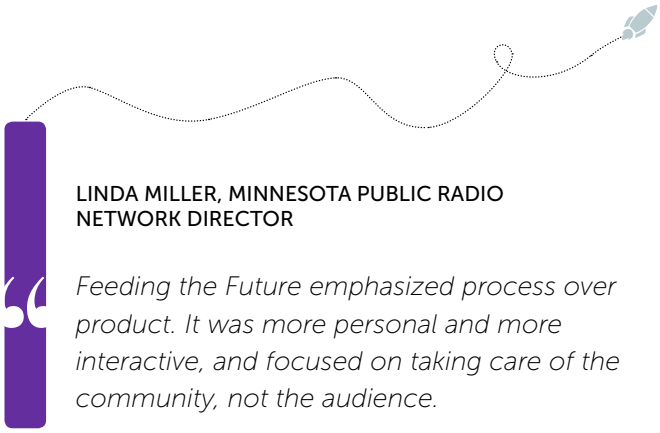
"During Feeding the Future, my interviews became less about extracting information and more about enjoying the conversation, and allowing interviewees to self-reflect. I slowed things down, and I often felt that the process was as impactful as the resulting story, if not more so. It was one of the most satisfying things I've done as a journalist," Dunbar wrote in an essay after the project ended.

Step 6: The Nourish

Throughout the life of the project, reporter/moderators offered information about current events in agriculture policy, especially in Minnesota, as a jumping-off point for discussions. Who better to discuss Minnesota farming policy than Minnesota farmers? All the moderators had to do was provide a forum.

Step 7: The Share

With this project, Dunbar was able to do innovative reporting on the beat she'd had for years. Although MPR's broader audience may not have had as deep a knowledge of food systems and soil health as the project participants, Dunbar was able to translate that knowledge into stories that were relevant to the majority of readers. "Stories about challenges new farmers face and agriculture education came about from some of these public engagement efforts, and there's more to come," Dunbar wrote.



LINDA MILLER, MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO NETWORK DIRECTOR

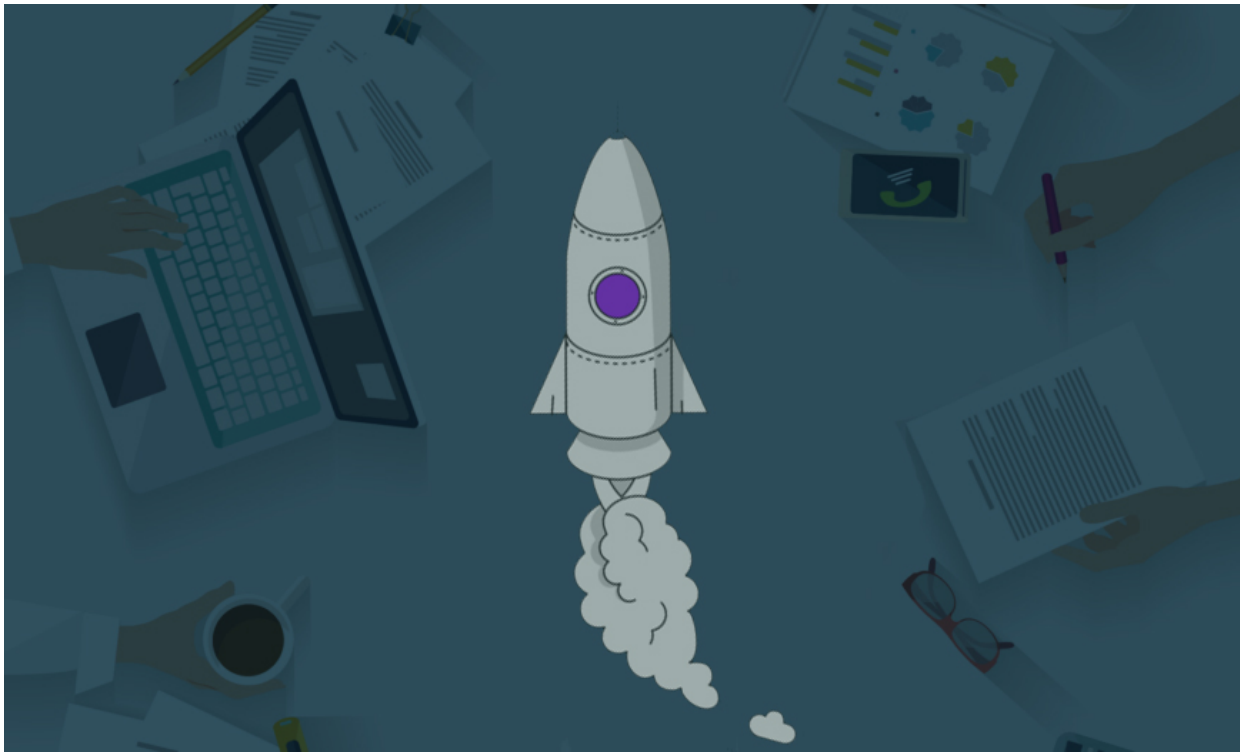
Feeding the Future emphasized process over product. It was more personal and more interactive, and focused on taking care of the community, not the audience.

Here are some of Dunbar's stories that came out of Feeding the Future:

- State Fair reflects trends in food and farming
- New co-op brings groceries, hope to north Minneapolis
- Clueless consumers motivate agriculture educators to reach more students
- Notes from the field: Good reporting starts with listening
- Know your pork: Comparing 2 very different pig farms

3.0 THE MOVING PARTS

Detailing the Process



This section explores the components you should think about when embarking on a Dialogue Journalism project. It outlines the ways that the seven steps of our method are implemented in practice.

The Organizing Question

Each project starts with an organizing question. The question should go to the heart of the divisive issue you are convening the conversation about, while also leaving room for multiple viewpoints within a conversation.

Conversations will of course veer from the central question — this is expected and welcomed — but the core driver for involvement is interest in and concern about the issue at the heart of the organizing question.

Examples of framing questions:

- Do you support or oppose increased enforcement of immigration laws?
- In a world where the climate is changing, what type of food system do you think will best improve and safeguard the future of food and protect the environment?
- Do guns, gun violence and gun-related policy in America matter deeply to you?

The Platform

After you settle on an organizing question, you should think about location. Where will you host your project? In person? Online? Both? Your aim: host your project in a space or on a platform where people are already gathering or where it is easy for them to gather. We explore platform specifics on page 40.

The Survey

Typically we post call outs asking for conversation participants on our partner news publications and on their social channels (we sometimes use our channels as well). We always ask something like, "Are you interested in being a part of a thoughtful, respectful conversation with people on opposite sides of issue X?" Then we explain the basics of the project and what people can expect. Call outs also include a link to an online form that captures demographic data, contact information, topic-specific questions, and the four core questions that we ask every participant in our of our projects.

Four Key Questions

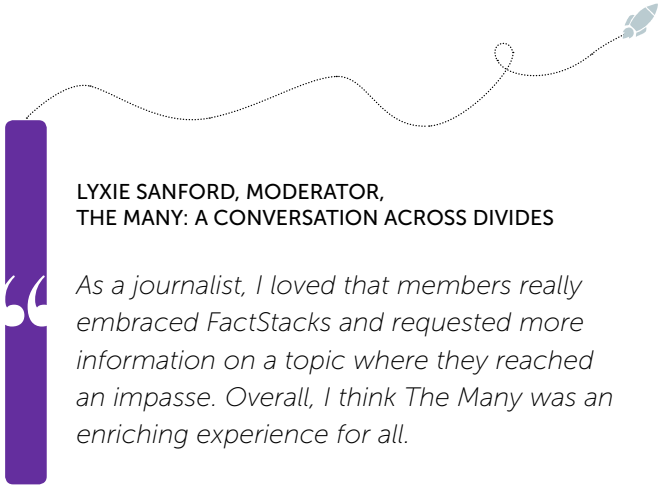
- **What do you think of people on the other side of this issue?**
- **What do you think they think about you?**
- **What do you want to know about them?**
- **What do you want them to know about you?**

More about The Gather process on page 18.

The FactStacks

FactStacks are central to Dialogue Journalism. They are non-narrative compendiums of facts and figures reported directly in response to the questions and issues that arise in conversations we host. FactStacks begin with a participant's question, a conversational impasse, or a desire for more information. FactStacks are bulleted lists of facts and figures about the topics people are discussing in the conversation — from the legislative history of Confederate statues to the basics of bump stocks to a comparative look at health care costs in different communities.

After they are reported, FactStacks are posted back into the conversation where they serve to undergird the dialogue. While participants don't necessarily agree with the meaning of the facts, our intention is that they are able to receive and trust the information we provide for them. More about FactStacks (and sample FactStacks) on page 65.

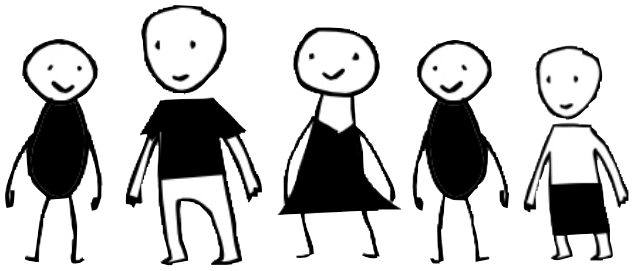


LYXIE SANFORD, MODERATOR,
THE MANY: A CONVERSATION ACROSS DIVIDES

As a journalist, I loved that members really embraced FactStacks and requested more information on a topic where they reached an impasse. Overall, I think The Many was an enriching experience for all.

The Team

Although every dialogue journalism project unfolds differently, collaboration and cooperation among team members is central to the process. Roles might shift throughout the project, and every leadership team has different priorities, capabilities and needs. Like everything else in life, being invested in and committed to the project is the only way to have meaningful results.



Project manager(s)

Each project needs a leader or set of leaders who help develop and guide the project. The leaders make sure the project is accomplishing goals, maintaining a good mix of members and posts, and that meaningful content is being identified and produced.

Moderators

Moderation is central to Dialogue Journalism. Moderators should have a excellent communication skills, self-awareness and empathy. They'll be called on to deal with escalating tension within a conversation, and participants count on them to support everyone in the group. A thick skin — the ability to not take things personally — is helpful when navigating conversations among those on either side of divisive issues, as is the ability to be earnest and transparent about personal opinions on tough topics. More on the role of moderator on page 45; we have mapped many specific strategies for successful moderation on page 56.

Reporters

The role reporters play in Dialogue Journalism projects is varied. Reporters often observe a group working work hand-in-hand with moderators, letting them know if they see a conversation that is unfolding in an unproductive way. Reporters also answer questions and provide information when they have topic-specific reporting to add. Reporters also look for story ideas (some reporters think of the conversation as being like a mini-beat). Conversations are typically off-the-record, but when a reporter wants to use a quote from the group for a story or interview a participant more in-depth they are welcome to ask. Participants typically say yes.

ABBY CRAIN, AL.COM REPORTER
ON HOW SHE REGULARLY CHECKED THE MANY: A CONVERSATION ACROSS DIVIDES FOR STORY IDEAS

Reporters of my generation have always looked to social media to see what people are talking about. It's easy to get the person with the most polarizing response, but it's important to get the nuanced stories. This really helps dig a layer deeper.

Reporters often generate the FactStacks which are delivered to participants in the conversation. Other reporters spend time reporting back in to the group as well as out of it. In both Guns: An American Conversation and The Many: A Conversation Across Divides reporters created a newsletter that was sent out to participants about interesting conversations they may have missed each week.

Librarians

In The Many: A Conversation Across Divides, we partnered with librarians who provided research and reporting that our editors turned into FactStacks for the conversation. If your newsroom is tight on resources, a library partnership for creating FactStacks is an excellent option. While this method still requires an editor (in the case of The Many, that job was part of the duties of the Project Manager), it leaves the research to the librarians, who are well-placed to provide this kind of in-depth, well-sourced reporting. In a time when trust in journalism (and journalists!) continues to dwindle, libraries and librarians continue to enjoy public support as beacons of truth. .

Participants from The Many: A Conversations Across Divides gather to discuss conversations across political and social polarization at the Birmingham Public Library.

Participants

When selecting participants for a conversation, you'll want to look for people who are interested in and open to having conversations of substance with those whom they disagree. Not everyone is interested in this! That's OK. And sometimes people say they're interested, they'll respond to a call out and fill out the survey, and then change their minds. That's OK too. You want to find people who are game to be a part of different sort of dialogue.

You also want to build communities that are even on both sides of the divide. You'll also want each group to be reflective, as best as possible, of the diversity, by all metrics, of each side of the divide.

3.1 THE PLATFORM

Where Should You Host Your Project?

There are many questions to consider when thinking about where to host a Dialogue Journalism project. The first of which should always be: Where is the community you are interested in engaging gathering already?

If you are able to host your project in a space or on a platform where people are already gathering, you will spend less time answering technical questions, have better participant retention, less frustration and, overall, better dialogue.

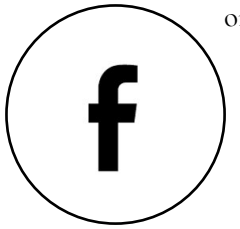
Other possible issues to consider:

- What is the geographic distribution of the community you are gathering?
- Is computer and/or internet access an issue for any potential members?
- If you decide to host all or a portion of your convening in person,
    - Is transportation an issue for potential members?
    - Do you have a neutral, accessible, available location?

  Note: hosting within a newsroom could potentially limit how forthright participants may be, especially in the current media/public climate
- What platforms is your staff most familiar with?
- Will a platform bring additional cost to the newsroom or the community?
- Is cost a limiting factor in building a representative community?
    - If so, would there be room in the budget to subsidize users?

Platforms that might work well for dialogue journalism:

Facebook

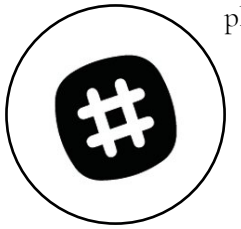


Pros: Ubiquitous, group-friendly platform where groups can be opened and linked to your organization with ease. Files are easy to share. Sidebar conversations can be done in private messaging with ease.

Cons: Oft-changing, sometimes-difficult to use interface; not currently trusted in many circles.

Summary: In many populations/communities, Facebook remains the most used platform. Even when people don't use it daily, most have accounts and are familiar with the platform. Facebook is ever evolving, however, and that leads to problems for users — including moderators — which can be frustrating. The algorithms can be confounding.

Slack



Pros: Common with professionals. Simple ways to gather participants and suitable platform for conversation. Files are easy to share. Sidebar conversations can be had through the chat function with multiple participants

Cons: It can be expensive and offers nothing additional to what FB Groups does.

Summary: Large Slack communities have been successful in many communities, with people applying to take part in the Slack group similarly to Facebook Groups. However, there is a cost incurred to retain archives.

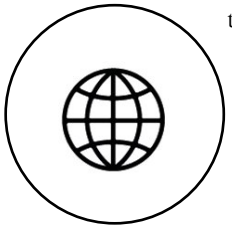
WhatsApp

Pros: Many underserved population are on this platform; creating large groups is easy with a phone number; usable across the globe; heavily encoded so conversations are secure; files are easily shared.

Cons: Interface could lead to conversations getting lost in the shuffle. Threading feature (replies to a single message placed underneath the original) is frequently ignored by users. Sidebar conversations would require separate group creation.

Summary: The interface would be difficult to moderate because there's little way to follow a whole thread without careful reading, especially when the threading function isn't used.

Newsroom comments threads

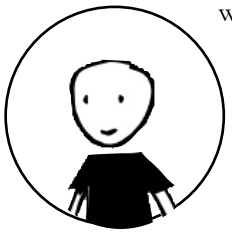


Pros: Most journalists are already in comments threads for their organization — whether these are traditional or within the comments of the organization's social media pages — so the learning curve is less about technology and more about how we talk to the public.

Cons: With no dedicated space to Dialogue Journalism, you're really only bringing deliberative, empathetic dialogue to engagement journalism. Sidebar conversations and file sharing is difficult.

Summary: Spaceship Media's methods for moderation can influence the tenor of discussion and give your organization a series of tactics and a unified voice when engaging with the public while still maintaining individual journalists' voices.

In-person



Pros: Creates a deep sense of connection; confrontation and character flattening is difficult when we are in the room together; break out sessions are easy to structure.

Cons: Cost and resources. Finding a good location, scheduling and planning all take time and resources. Sharing of reporting, presentations and other things like refreshments and seating require additional planning and resources.

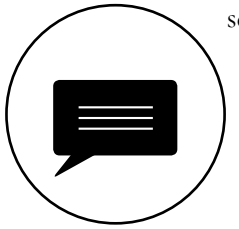
Summary: In-person gatherings make most sense as part of a larger Dialogue Journalism project. They are cost- and time-intensive to produce, but yield rich conversations. Timing is important: having an in-person gathering at the beginning of a Dialogue Journalism project has worked well, and having them at the end also has value. All of this to say that timing should be discussed and planned for intentionally. There are things said into the computer that often won't EVER be said in person. That single layer of anonymity is as much a help as a hurdle.

Other means of communicating

Gathering working phone numbers and email addresses at the outset of the project will open the door for many other ways for you to communicate with participants. Be clear with participants about how you will use their contact information. Sometimes, people are afraid that their information will be sold or misused. Be prepared to have responses to those concerns.

Not only can you send out individual emails and texts, you can reach out by phone call when conversations are challenging and you think a one-on-one conversation might help. Here are some suggestions for other ways of reaching out.

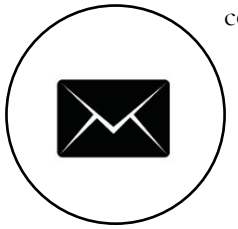
Instant messaging/chat



Check-in: The best way to reach out to members if they are part of a difficult thread or seem in need of individual connection. Many platforms have capability for sidebars built in. If you aren't on a platforms that allows this, consider using texting or WhatsApp as a second communication channel.

Individual questions/alerts: This provides a quick and informal way of asking questions about pending posts or letting someone know the status of reporting or posting.

Email

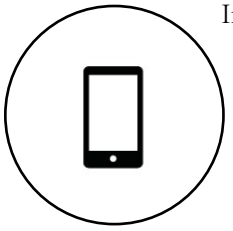


Newsletter: An effective way to keep everyone in the loop about what's happening in the conversation regardless of how much they are able to participate. It's a good idea to collect interesting items throughout the week (or whatever span of time you decide on) and send it out on Saturday or Sunday morning giving folks some leisurely scroll time. Remember to include links, if that is appropriate for your group.

Small group moderation: After challenging threads, reach out to the people involved individually. You might also wan to send a group email.

Individual questions: If someone doesn't respond to a question about a pending post or a more formal alert about deleting or editing a post are necessary, email is a good way to communicate that and maintain a record of the back and forth.

Texting



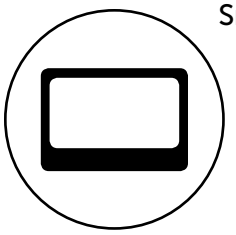
If you plan on using texting as a means of communication, be sure to mention that when you ask for a phone number. Landlines won't receive text and sometimes interfere with mass SMS*

Text polls: Wondering what people think about something specific? Wanting to take the temperature of the group? Texting is a good way to get a quick response or take a poll.

Text Alerts: Is there an interesting/engaging thread? Are you trying to let everyone know about an in-person meet up? Texting is a good way to give people quick information without requiring them to respond.

**Mass SMS platforms sometimes require fees*

Video conferencing



Small group moderation: After difficult/emotional threads, touch base with participants individually. Once you've done that, if you feel it would be fruitful to connect all the people involved, a video conference is an effective way to get everyone together. It's difficult to ignore someone's humanity when you're looking them in the eye, even in video. Video conferencing suggestions:

- FaceTime: Requires Apple products
- Google Hangouts
- Zoom: Time limited to 45 minutes without a paid subscription.
- BlueJeans (fee for service)
- Google Duo

Focused sidebar: If a handful of participants had an intense but not necessarily unfriendly discussion, a video conference might take that discourse further. This is could be an opportunity for a reporter to have extended interviews with several participants across several ideologies at the same time.

Expert sit-in: Similar to a focused sidebar, if a topic has a lot of interest among members or there is deep division but not a lot of knowledge, an expert sit-in video conference is the way to go. The newsroom might have many such experts, but don't be afraid to tap local organizations and academic institutions.

3.2 THE CARRY

Role of moderator

Moderators are essential to Dialogue Journalism. They are the ones who support and nurture dialogue and also deal with day-to-day logistics. Most importantly, moderators make sure the conversation is progressing in a useful, valuable, respectful manner.

Moderators are models of curiosity, civility and careful listening. When seeking moderators — whether from your own team or from outside your organization — look for people who are observant, empathetic, clear communicators, even-tempered and willing to have one-on-one contact with conversation participants.

Other than overseeing the activity of the group, a moderator's job duties include helping participants reframe their thoughts, alerting others of and getting help when dealing with tense discussions, pacing the discussions and documenting participation.

LYXIE SANFORD, MODERATOR,
THE MANY: A CONVERSATION ACROSS DIVIDES

> *As a moderator, it was fascinating and beautiful to watch how, over time, people changed the way they talked to one another. As The Many grew, I saw members change their approach, take time before reacting to comments, and, sometimes acknowledge they had never thought of things the way someone else presented them in the conversation.*

What do moderators do?

Moderators are there to care for the participants in any number of ways. Moderators model civil behavior. They pose curious, genuine questions, handle disagreements and misunderstandings, and keep the conversation progressing. Moderators also take the helm of administering the group and setting the tone for conversations. They are the main touchpoint for sidebar conversations with participants, reaching out to individuals to allow them to vent or simply help them absorb difficult interactions. Moderators are also the main contact for reporters and editors working on a project, often sending them story ideas or conversations that may be of interest.

How do I pick a good moderator?

Moderation is essential to the success of the project. Deep empathy will grow a community that engages in active listening and learning.

In choosing moderators, select people who have the ability to communicate well with participants and project team members alike. They should be adept at diffusing arguments and seeing all sides of the story.

You should seek a moderator who listens empathetically. Moderators are the support system of Dialogue Journalism.

They encourage conversations to unfold in a way that provides support to all parties. One example of how moderators care for participants is by helping them reword posts and comments in a way that is non-combative and encouraging them to exchange ideas in a respectful manner.

Dialogue Journalism need moderators who are thoughtful and kind but also unafraid to enforce guidelines and redirect conversation as needed. They need to model curiosity by asking questions. A good moderator is able to be real and whole and humble; in order to hold others' humanity, they must be willing to reveal their own.

How many moderators should a project have?

The number of moderators depends on the size and length of a project. The potential intensity of a project is something to consider as well. For example, a group discussing gun control will likely need more support than one discussing farming policy. When choosing moderators internally, one thing to consider is the other job functions you will need an employee to fulfill.

Your group should be monitored more often than not. Consider having moderators work shifts with a little bit of overlap. This will allow moderators to communicate the status of the group to the next moderator. Additionally, moderation can be done in tandem with other duties as long as these can take a back seat to moderation if a group's participants require attention.

How often should a group hear from a moderator?

Moderators should have a regular presence in the group. Participants should know that moderators are there, not only because they are posting in the group, but also because they are asking questions on threads, 'liking' posts and comments, and engaging with interesting exchanges. Moderators must be present so that participants feel like they can reach out to them whenever necessary. Additionally, the more present the moderators are, the more likely participants are to self-monitor their own behavior.

KRISTINE VILLANUEVA, MODERATOR,
THE MANY: A CONVERSATION ACROSS DIVIDES

> *As a reporter and moderator, I made it point to get people on board with talking across difference. I had to bring them along for the ride, even if it was a bumpy one. People in the group showed me nuanced perspectives that need to be elevated and that issues we perceive to be polarized are not always so.*

What is the relationship between a reporter, moderator and researcher?

Moderators work with reporters to identify points of interest in the conversation that could result in stories or quotes for stories. When a project has dedicated researchers, moderators identify information needed by the community and work with them to produce FactStacks.

Sometimes, FactStack topics are the backbone for full stories; in Guns in America, a national conversation gun control, reporter Steve Koff said he "reported into and out of" the group. Koff reported stories for mass consumption about the group and questions that arose within it, but also reported FactStacks and explainer stories into the group to help inform the conversation. Some explainer stories came out of questions that may seem basic, like "What are assault weapons?"

STEPHEN KOFF, REPORTER, ON HIS DAILY NEWSLETTER FOR GUNS: AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION

> *I'd start working on the newsletter at 6 a.m. We made it a point for moderators to note potential material for me in their end-of-session notes, and they helped me discern things like tone. The newsletter became part of the daily process, letting me get to know individuals in a way that removed some of the subject-reporter distance.*

In Feeding the Future, a project about farming with Minnesota Public Radio, reporter Elizabeth Dunbar had a similar experience. She provided information into the group and harvested ideas and quotes from the group for her stories.

Keep in mind that the reporting is not necessarily about what the reporter sees as newsworthy, but about what participants need to know at that moment. A reporter should allow for serendipity and be willing to wait for story ideas that they never anticipated.

Typically, traditional narrative journalism starts with an idea in a reporter's head — "this is what is interesting to me" or " I think this would be interesting to my community." FactStacks, however, originate from the questions the communities need answered. The goal is to give communities a shared baseline of agreed-upon facts from which they can engage. When questions arise in a community, these data points and primary sources of information are provided to support the discussion. Oftentimes, we work with library partners to vet and contextualize information. In past projects, participants have responded well to this format of clear and accurate information.

Ask questions to get to people's underlying values and motivations

When creating posts, moderators and reporters should ask questions that get to the core of participants' values and character, not simply to generate discussion. Likewise, when helping participants create or edit posts, moderators should make sure that the questions posed are genuinely curious questions that will — hopefully — lead to greater understanding among participants about who they are.

The work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who describes moral foundations of political thought, has been used by Solutions Journalism's Amanda Ripley to explain the moral compass that journalism should utilize:

Haidt identifies six moral foundations that form the basis of political thought: care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority and sanctity. These are the golden tickets to the human condition.

Liberals (and liberal members of the media) tend to be most conscious of three of these foundations: care, fairness and liberty. Conservatives are especially attuned to loyalty, authority and sanctity. All, of course, care about all six. .

Moderators in dialogue journalism ask questions that try to get at these moral foundations. They elevate discussions away from particular news items into dialogue that critically dissects behaviors, events and the media.

A few (very broad) questions that accomplish this:

- What is oversimplified about this issue?
- What do you think the other side wants?
- What do you think the other side thinks of your opinion?
- What's the question nobody is asking?
- What do you need to understand better about the other viewpoints in this divide?
- Who does this affect?
- Is this decision fair from your point of view?
- Are all parties free to decide for themselves?
- Can you tell who benefits and who is hurt by this?
- Are you alright with being told what to do?
- What is at the root of your discomfort with this decision?

Make your question as open as possible

Often, people think that Dialogue Journalism tackles questions like: "Do you support or oppose increased enforcement of immigration laws?"

Dialogue Journalism, however, is about getting to the nuance in these tough topics. Immigration, like many other issues that we deal with in dialogue journalism, is a nuanced topic. In the above question, polarization around the issue of immigration is assumed. The goal is to resist underlining the accepted "sides" and to pull the nuances into light through a more sophisticated phrasing.

Ideally, the moderators realize and function within a reality where none of the participants fall to an all-pro or all-con faction on these complicated topics. Questions should give people space to identify the variability of their opinions and experience. A good way to approach this is by asking for personal stories of the participants such as, "What is your experience with enforcement of immigration laws? In what cases would you make exceptions to the standing policy?"

Nuance and complexity matter

Perhaps the biggest difference between traditional journalism and Dialogue Journalism is that in the latter, journalists explore and sit with complexity within the topics covered. On the other hand, reporters turning out stories for traditional media outlets sometimes have to simplify situations in order to get more people to understand the world around them quickly.

When teasing out nuance and complexity, an ability to sit in discomfort is a critical skill. Moderators should not just be OK with feeling uneasy but to leverage this discomfort for the benefit of the group — they should be able to navigate it. There will be moments when conversations become deep and, perhaps, uncomfortable. It's crucial for moderators to know when to let the participants take the lead. To make these decisions, moderators will need access to private means of communication with other team members. The decision about when to step in should not be made in a vacuum nor be made abruptly.

BRITTANY PETTIGREW, MODERATOR,
GUNS: AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION

Don't be afraid of people being uncomfortable or things getting intense because that's where the change happens.

It's OK to be personal

Most reporters have shared a sliver of a personal story in order to get a source talking. Dialogue Journalism is no different. Moderators must find for themselves what level of vulnerability is comfortable for them. Moderators are guides and models in this conversation and entirely impersonal interaction makes it difficult for trust to develop.

"Reporters use stories as a means to connect with their communities. They take one person's or a handful of people's stories and weave them, in their own voice, for the community at large. They shape others' views through their lens, with their own biases and present it under their byline," said Spaceship Media's Adriana García. "In The Many, that distance is removed; the interview part of the engagement is public. All the voices in these stories are in first person. I am transparent about how my personal experiences color my views, as is the member of the public; the interviewee is alive and voiced and real."

It's essential that conversations have a natural flow

Where possible, encourage participants to engage with each other about subjects that humanize them to one another so they can build relationships and get to know one another in various contexts.

No one wants to talk about race and the achievement gap all the time; most people need a break and want to be known for more than just their stance on a topic.

If participants don't readily raise questions that are not related specifically to the subject at hand, moderators should invite this by asking about weekend plans, favorite recipes, what the view is from their nearest window, what they're reading. Really, anything that might humanize one side to the other. What do you want to know about them? They probably have the same questions for one another.

This is a space for moderators to share something about themselves as well. Engaging on these less controversial topics is a great opportunity for moderators to build relationships and rapport with participants.

Remember, the project is about the participants

The conversation isn't about what moderators believe or think or what they think is right or wrong. The job is to hold space for people to come together.

This comes back to the core belief of listening first.

ENRIQUE LAVIN, MODERATOR,
GUNS: AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION

> *This work is not about winning an argument or changing minds. This is about listening, giving people a chance, and giving everyone the context they need to better understand one another.*

When you see or hear something in an exchange of comments and views that you think could — or are certain will — cause trouble, pause and keep listening. Often you are listening for something else going on — a tangent, an undercurrent, a hint that something else beyond sight is at play. It could be a personal tension between participants; someone having a bad day; someone trying a new idea out. You won't always be able to detect whatever it is — what the motivation is — but you must try. Then figure out what the best response to that motivation is. The response could be to provide the participant with something; to pull them aside; to redirect — it could be any number of things, but you're bound to arrive at a better option if you listen and think first.

RUTH GRUNBERG, PARTICIPANT,
GUNS: AN AMERICAN CONVERSATION

> *It is hugely important to understand the why behind an opinion and no one seems to have time to explore that except for this group.*

Background conversations keep the momentum going

When you see comment threads getting heated, or running into a wall (or seeming to be headed that way) consider checking in with the conversants personally. Moderators are well-served by making liberal use of whatever one-to-one messaging system the platform provides, whether DMs on Slack or Messenger on Facebook.

Ask how they are, acknowledge that they are engaged in something difficult, and ask how you can help. Or if you have one, suggest another approach they could take, even taking a breather or letting off steam with you.

This is akin to letting them know you are there, but it is more: it is engaging with someone personally to reinforce their belief that they can stay the course of a challenging path.

Empathize with them — meaning, sympathize with what they're experiencing without siding with one against another.

Remember you don't want to disparage or malign the other "side" (and do keep in mind that anything you say one-on-one can be shared out). But that doesn't mean you can't recognize that these topics are hard and charged. An opportunity to vent, recognition that they are trying hard, and a suggestion to take a break if they need to can help people.

Useful phrases for sideline conversations

- How are you doing?
- I wonder if there are any ways you could say what you're saying differently so they might be able to hear you?
- It's frustrating, isn't it?
- Can I do anything to help?
- Maybe take a break and then jump back in

Maintaining the emotional health of moderators

Because moderators are so involved, it often means they might be the first to burn out. Give moderators space. And moderators should know when to get up and walk away for a minute.

It's also helpful if moderators have discussions with each other frequently. Part of the role of newsroom leadership is to support moderators by making sure they are involved, but not overworking themselves. They should have natural outlets and someone should be checking on their well-being.

SPACESHIP MEDIA'S ADRIANA GARCÍA,
ON THE MODERATION PROCESS IN
THE MANY: A CONVERSATION ACROSS DIVIDES

I hoist these ladies into my emotional backpack every single day. I carry their conversations with me. My shoulders fall when there is discord. I feel genuine joy when they have breakthroughs. I root for them, all day, every day.

How to moderate, strategies

In many communities, place-based social media groups — with little, if any, moderation — have become spaces where people go to engage about the news of the day and the issues of concern and importance to their communities. Without moderation and without a journalism infrastructure for reliable information, these groups often devolve into sniping, GIF-offs and meme-fests, with the most partisan voices emerging as the loudest.

Spaceship Media has had good outcomes fostering Dialogue Journalism in Facebook groups. Groups already do well on Facebook, and the use of mostly real names possibly contributes to some base level of civility. Our strategies are useful in any number of arenas.

Structure but don't over structure

Structure is important. This should be fluid and responsive to the community. If something isn't working, pivoting is the best thing to do. Regardless of the platform, however, the most important thing to do when setting up structures and rhythms for you group is to keep playing. Don't get stuck. If something works, great! But don't be afraid to tweak things or abandon them all together. Each group is a unique ecosystem and should be treated as such. That said, here are some structured activities we have used in the past:

Themed days of the week

New Member Monday: No matter how well organized the being of a project is, membership goes on for weeks and sometimes longer (depending on the project). New Member Monday is a good way get engagement from new participants. It makes them feel that their voice matters and is valued by the moderators. Most social media platforms have methods for monitoring membership. Simply tagging a member and asking them to pose a question or introduce themselves works well. This strategy is imperative for groups with rolling membership.

What Do You Want to Know about Them Wednesday: We used the responses to one of the core survey questions of "What do you want to know about them?" to create a themed day where we put those questions asked in the survey to the whole group publicly. This required very clear explanation each week; otherwise, there was confusion as to who was posing the question and to whom. This strategy is best used in groups where the membership is fixed from the get go. In our group, The Many, which had rolling membership, we abandoned these questions during a secondary influx of membership where it was more confusing than anything else. These questions can also get incredibly heated if introduced too early in a group and should be considered once participants have developed some rapport. However, if the moderation can tease out nuance from responses, there can be rich discussion.

Some examples of questions posed for What Do You Want to Know about Them Wednesday:

- To Republicans from an Independent: Why does it seem as though you believe everything that comes out of Trump's mouth wholesale? Is that accurate?
- To Democrats from a Republican: Why does you think that protecting what's mine makes me a bigot?

Fun Friday: At the end of the workweek, people are usually ready to take a break from the heavier conversations that dominated the week as they ease into the weekend. Fun Fridays are a great way to lighten the mood in the group, and they can also serve to help people get to know one another outside of their political beliefs and serious conversations. On Friday mornings, moderators post a question to the group that gets them smiling, sharing, and connecting.

Some examples of Fun Friday questions we've posed in the past:

- What fashion trend flashback is your favorite?
- Who was your favorite teacher?
- If fear, money, and obligations were non-issues, how would you spend the weekend?"

Participants look forward to Fun Fridays, and often post their own Fun Friday questions. They want to get to know the people they're talking to and learning from, and Fun Friday is a great chance to make that happen.

Simple Serious Saturday (SSS): If you choose to have conversations into the weekend, this method is a proven way to slow the pace and keep conversation going. SSS are reflective, thought-provoking questions that encourage participants to think more broadly about conversation, bridging divides, and their values without applying them to specific hot-button issues. This gives room for the conversants to get to know one another and stop seeing one another as flat avatars from one "side" or the other. Conversations are less likely to get heated because there are no political sides to take, giving moderators some time to breathe and get to know the participants on a deeper level.

Some examples of SSS:

- Why do you trust the sources — friends, family, news, etc. — you trust?
- Is your truth THE truth? Why or why not?
- What's one thing you thought you'd know by now?

No-[group topic] day: Again, sometimes, it's nice just to get to know one another without the layer of debate. We have played with days dedicated to talking about ANYTHING but the topic at hand. While participants frequently display some initial frustration with this strategy, they often do a complete 180 and understand the purpose.

The Daily/Weekly Newsletter: Some platforms can feel too quickly paced. Participants may complain about missing bits of the conversation. One way to address this issue is to provide a regular synopsis of the groups happenings. This can take a short story form, a more visual, graphics based delivery, briefs in a bullet-point style or a combination of all three. Be creative and be willing to drop ideas that don't work. Also play with delivery formats. We've tried in-platform documents and posts; emails and mass SMS. The goal is to keep everyone in the loop without having anyone feel spammed. Consider that something that works great at the beginning of the group might work well later on. Be flexible and agile in your tools and stragegies.

Sidebars

The job of moderator requires a lot of patience and observation, but when it's time to intervene, action should be taken quickly and gently. Being attuned to the mood of the group and in some cases, to individuals, is critical. There are several situations where publicly stepping in to a conversation would not be sufficient or appropriate. In those instances, the moderator should be comfortable reaching out to participants directly via private messages.

When would a moderator reach out via private message?

- If a participant who was active in a conversation suddenly drops out or leaves the group.
- If the moderator observes that a participant is the only one representing their point of view and others appear to be "ganging up" on them.
- If a participant is quickly posting comment after comment, not allowing space or time for others to present their point of view or respond adequately.
- If a moderator observes a participant doing a really great job — holding their own while respectfully, curiously engaging with members who have different views.
- If one participant is not engaging respectfully with the group, appears to not be listening or considering others, and seems uninterested in genuinely learning how other people came to their points of view.
- If, after moderators have publicly tried to redirect or diffuse a heated conversation, participants continue to engage disrespectfully with one another.
- If moderators need to take more drastic action such as muting threads or removing people from the group.
- If, despite everyone's best efforts, someone seems to be struggling through a conversation or taking things that aren't meant personally, personally.

Exactly when to reach out to individuals via private messages is up to the individual moderator's discretion. However, when employed it is a great strategy that creates trust and community. The more trust that can be created between the moderation team and participants the better. It means that the project will run more smoothly, but also that strides are being made toward restoring trust in journalism at large.

What should moderators say when reaching out to people directly?

It certainly depends on the situation, and each moderator should feel free to be themselves while communicating with participants. Here are some helpful templates for what to say when private messaging with participants:

Situation	What a moderator might say
If a participant drops out or leaves the group.	Hi [name]! I noticed that you left the group and just wanted to check in to make sure everything was ok. If you'd like, can you share why you decided to leave? We hope everything is ok!
If a participant who was active in a conversation suddenly leaves the group.	Hey [name]! I just wanted to check in with you...I was watching your exchange with [name]. How are you feeling about it?
If the moderator observes that a participant is the only one representing their point of view and others appear to be "ganging up" on them.	Hi [name], I see the thread was a tough one and that not a lot of people were seeing your point of view. I think you handled it really well. Do you want to talk about it?
If a moderator observes a participant doing a really great job—holding their own while respectfully, curiously engaging with members who have different views.	Hey [name]! Just want to reach out to let you know I'm keeping an eye on the thread about [x]... you are handling the conversation really well with a lot of curiosity and empathy. I just wanted you to know I'm here if you need any help!
If one participant is not engaging respectfully with the group, appears to not be listening or considering others, and seems uninterested in genuinely learning how other people came to their points of view.	Hi [name]! I know you feel strongly about [topic]. I just wanted to drop a friendly reminder that this space is about learning about point of views that are different from ours and having discussions across difference. Can you try to listen to what others are saying and ask genuine questions about their experiences?
If, after moderators have publicly tried to redirect or diffuse a heated conversation, participants continue to engage disrespectfully with one another.	Hi [name], Hope you're having a good Sunday! We just wanted to reach out with a gentle reminder that we try to foster a space where everyone's experiences are valued equally. I understand that these conversations can be difficult, but we aim to overcome some of that difficulty by encouraging open-ended questions and genuine curiosity.

Addressing the group at large

Sometimes moderators need to address the crowd as opposed to individuals. These posts are very important for transparency and to set the tone in the group. These posts are one of the most effective methods for creating community within the group. It names the problem, addresses it head on, allows space for diffusion and moves the conversation forward.

Situation	Post
If moderators need to take more drastic action such as muting threads.	*within a conversation* Hi everyone, we just wanted to let you know that we are going to mute this this thread. Not many people were asking genuine, curious questions and there was [name the problematic behavior].
When removing people from the group.	*as a new conversation* Hi everyone, we just wanted to let you know that one of our participants was asked to leave the group. They routinely [name the behavior] and that was detrimental to our community. **Please refrain from discussing her/him anymore. Nobody likes to be talked about after leaving the room. Let's extend that respect to everyone.**
When an active participant leaves.	*as a new conversation* Hi everyone, we just wanted to let you know that [name] has decided to leave the group. We've reached out to him/her and we've talked things through as much as we could. They won't be joining us for now but anything is possible in the future :) *Add bolded portion above.*
After a particularly emotional, difficult or heated thread.	*as a new conversation* Hi y'all! We wanted to take a minute to give everyone some space to discuss the thread from [when] about [subject]. We know the conversation got a little out of hand and emotions ran high. We are grateful for those of you who stuck with it and equally so for those of you who realized it was your time to exit the discussion. It is ok for us to disagree as long as we do it respectfully. Let's continue to learn from each other how to best communicate across our differences.

Post innovation

Most of the time, discussions online — in comments streams or on Facebook, anywhere really — are a free-for-all. A feature of Dialogue Journalism is an intentional slow down. Part of what that means is asking people to dive deeply into listening and ask genuine curious questions without feeling the need to respond immediately. But another method of intentional pacing can be introduced with staff posts. Posts from staff can introduce structure as discussed above, they can welcome members, they can encourage productive conversations, and also introduce journalism concepts and notable articles. Something that should not be overlooked is the ability to guide the discussion before commenting even begins. Here are some examples of this practice:

Intentional exclusion

Sometimes, in order to encourage deep listening, you have to ask people to step back and let others take their turns. Requesting participation from people on one "side" can be revelatory, not just to those sharing but to those reading. Not having the option to respond at all or for a specific length of time also gives people a chance to read things with which they would often not engage.

Example post: Hi everyone! We would like to get a conversation started based on the recent immigration legislation passed by Congress. We are wondering what you all think about it and what portions, specifically, you agree with and what you do not? For now, this post is only open to immigrants and first-generation Americans. We encourage everyone else to read the comments with an open mind and be ready to share their ideas tomorrow. We will open it to everyone on Tuesday at 10 a.m.

AMA

Taking a page straight out of Reddit, the Ask Me Anything, format can be a great interactive game and can be done a couple of ways. If you have a moderator or participating reporter who is willing to be asked anything about an area of expertise or a beat, that's a great way to engage. A member feeling like an odd person out can work in your favor in this instance too, as long as they're willing to share. We had a woman in one group felt like she was the only Mormon member. She did an Ask Me Anything about Mormonism and not only did other LDS members emerge, but non-Mormons were eager to ask her questions. This, of course, requires a willing participant — they don't necessarily have to be willing to post, however, but simply to answer questions. (Be sure to be very clear with the participant about expectations and ground rules in a sidebar conversation if you decide to go the way of the following example post.) Another way this works is if you have a community leader or expert in a field willing to join your conversation for an AMA.

Example post: Hi everyone! We have in our midst an expert on sex trafficking. Member Jane Doe is a social worker who specializes in helping young women who have been rescued from the world of sex trafficking. Jane is willing to have you all ask her anything! Ask away. She's tagged in this post so she'll get notifications whenever one of you asks her something, but please be patient with her. And thanks Jane for your willingness to do this.

X-number of words

Sometimes people feel intellectually outweighed online and that keeps them quiet. One way we have seen engagement from even our most silent participants is by asking everyone to keep their responses brief. By limiting comment length, you encourage people to be witty and pithy which draws out even the shiest of wallflowers.

Example post: The right to safety is an interesting filter through which to view both second amendment rights and gun control. In three words describe what makes you feel safe. Then take three more and describe what makes you feel unsafe.

Share only

Another strategy to support deep listening is to create posts that don't invite secondary comments at all. People are willing to share incredibly personal, meaningful stories to a room full of strangers if they know the strangers will just listen. This approach is most effective when exploring topics of a sensitive nature. These threads require some level of intimacy to exist in your group already, so don't deploy them too early on.

Example post: Everyone has a side on the abortion debate. Please share what lead you to your point of view. We ask that nobody comment on anyone's revelations. We will delete anything beyond messages of support, like "Hugs" or "I'm sorry you went through this." We are holding this space to learn about how we came to our stance and see the deep human reasons behind our positions.

Other means of communicating with participants

It is the job of moderators to build a community that supports the participants, in addition to the main conversation there are many other tools to use to create a meaninful, connected experience for participants. These include but are not limited to:

- Video conferencing
- Text messaging
- Email
- Telephone

A challenge to watch for

Sometime, over the life of a project, sidebar cliques will form. On Facebook, you might start seeing people becoming friends with other group members. Or you might notice people piling on or articulating the same points on a post. Try to be aware of this possibility and be keen to the fact that the same way you are holding sidebar discussion, participants might be too. As always, encourage people to be present as indivduals in the discussion.

The FactStacks

FactStacks are a central element of Dialogue Journalism. As conversations grow, we support them with this particular kind of reporting which allows us to establish a common ground of agreed-upon facts for communication. We report in a non-narrative form to remove, as best we can, both the potential for bias and potential for perception of bias.

FactStacks are reported in direct response to questions and issues that arise in the conversations we convene. Our goal here is to give the participants in our communities a shared set of facts on which to base their conversations. We report as transparently as we can and, after we share a FactStack, we respond as openly and transparently to questions about our reporting as we can. We explain why we chose the sources we did, how we parsed the data and information, and address any other questions and concerns.

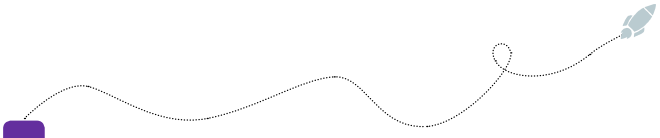
MICHELLE HOLMES, VP CONTENT,
ALABAMA MEDIA GROUP

> *This is work that offers a new way to think about the role of journalists and their capacity to serve communities, and improve the world through fact-based inquiry, combined with courage and civility. For publishers it is a sign that we care about our audience, we care about facts, we care about a democracy where all ideas are honored.*

The starting point for each FactStack is the dialogue. Reporters and moderators look for places where information would support more productive conversation. When a moderator thinks the conversation could use reporting, they can insert a question, for example: "It sounds like you could use more information about this topic. Would you like some reporting done?" Participants sometimes add additional questions.

After a moderator flags the need for a FactStack to the project leader, or an assigned FactStack editor, it is assigned to an in-house reporter or a librarian. After the FactStack is completed, it is presented back to the group. As conversations go on, participants usually begin to request specific reporting on their own and the moderator flags these requests for the creation of FactStacks.

A typical FactStack includes 12 to 15 points bulleted points, including statistics, findings from research studies, historical information, or other reliable and relevant data. Often the information comes from multiple published reports and studies so they can provide a concise overview of relevant information. Once posted, FactStacks serve as an excellent resource to fuel informed, well-rounded conversations about topics that are often complex and misunderstood.



DAVID BLAKE, RESEARCH LIBRARIAN,
BIRMINGHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

"This is rejuvenating traditional reference work but in a digital environment. Libraries always want to show all different viewpoints, and have always had a soft spot for the truth, as opposed to news of the moment. So I think those are two selling points.

Example FactStacks

Assault Weapons, Automatic Firearms and Bump Stocks: Some Definitions

STEPHEN KOFF·THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 2018

What an assault weapon is and isn't

"Assault weapon" is a term used somewhat loosely in the public conversation about firearms. The gun industry's traditional definition of an 'assault rifle' is a weapon the military generally uses and has 'select fire capabilities,' or the capability to switch between semi-automatic or a fully automatic mode," CNBC reported in February.

When the federal government had an assault weapon ban from 1994 to 2004, it had a lengthy glossary of what was included, including fully automatic weapons.

But it also included semi-automatic rifles that had an ability to accept a detachable magazine -- if the rifle had at least two of certain features, such as a folding or telescoping stock, or a pistol grip that protruded conspicuously beneath the action of the weapon. (The law, which has since expired, had numerous exceptions. We will provide a separate look at that federal ban and studies on how it worked).

Seven states and the District of Columbia have their own laws on assault weapons, according to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. One of them is California, which defines an assault rifle as a semiautomatic, centerfire rifle that does not have a fixed magazine but has any one of the following:

- A pistol grip that protrudes conspicuously beneath the action of the weapon.
- A thumbhole stock.
- A folding or telescoping stock.
- A grenade launcher or flare launcher.
- A flash suppressor.
- A forward pistol grip.

California also includes under its assault weapons definitions a semiautomatic, centerfire rifle that has a fixed magazine with the capacity to accept more than 10 rounds, and a semiautomatic, centerfire rifle that has an overall length of less than 30 inches.

What an automatic firearm does

Master-At-Arms 3rd Class Bryon McDonald, from Greeley, Colo., fires an M240B machine gun during a live-fire exercise aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island. (U.S. Navy photo via Flickr CC By-SA 2.0)

Fully automatic weapons fire repeated rounds with the single pull of a trigger. These are also referred to as machine guns, and machine guns are illegal, expensive and hard to get in most civilian applications.

"An assault rifle is fully automatic — a machine gun. Automatic firearms have been severely restricted from civilian ownership since 1934," says the National Shooting Sports Federation, a firearms industry trade group.

What a semi-automatic firearm does

A semi-automatic fires once with each pull of the trigger, according to gun rights and sports shooting groups including the Buckeye Firearms Association in Ohio. Some automatic and semi-automatic weapons look alike, but they operate differently.

A semi-automatic firearm automatically reloads the chamber with a cartridge from a magazine after each shot and is ready to fire again, says PolitiFact and a number of sport shooting groups. This allows for rounds to be fired as rapidly as someone can pull the trigger if ammunition is in the magazine.

How rapidly a semi-automatic weapon can realistically fire

Tom Kehoe, a Florida firearms instructor and leather holster maker, wrote in a Quora post that top sporting competitors can pull the trigger "three times a second — for short periods of time. So the theoretical 'cycling rate' might be 180 rounds per minute, but the reality is you're only maintaining it for bursts of a second or two."

Rapid firing generates tremendous amounts of heat, he wrote, and most modern semi-automatic weapons use 30-round magazines, "which means the mag would have to be changed six times to reach the magic 180 number. An expert can change a mag on some rifles in about two to three seconds (depending on the gun and how he/she has staged the mags), but that's still 12–18 seconds of lost shooting time per minute."

That would make the maximum theoretical rate about 138 rounds per minute, he said.

How a bump stock can alter that

The semi-automatic rifle at right has been fitted with a so-called bump stock device to make it fire faster. (Associated Press photo)

A bump stock is a device that attaches to a semi-automatic weapon and uses its recoil to fire more rapidly, explains Popular Mechanics. "So long as a shooter maintains forward pressure, the rifle will continue to fire at a rate much faster than could be accomplished with even the quickest possible series of manual trigger pulls."

Phrased slightly differently: A "bump stock" replaces a rifle's standard stock, which is the part held against the shoulder. It frees the weapon to slide back and forth rapidly, harnessing the energy from the kickback shooters feel when the weapon fires. This is from a New York Times explanation of how they work.

Bump stocks became better known to the public after they were found in a Las Vegas hotel room following the Oct. 1, 2017, shooting of outdoor concert-goers. Fifty-eight people were killed and hundreds were reported wounded.

Bump stocks are legal, with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives giving an opinion in 2010 that since they were parts but not actual weapons, bump stocks could

not be regulated under existing laws prohibiting certain firearms.

A number of groups including the National Rifle Association say that needs to change. "The NRA believes that devices designed to allow semi-automatic rifles to function like fully-automatic rifles should be subject to additional regulations," the NRA said in a statement.

President Donald Trump said in February he wanted the Justice Department to look into regulating bump stocks, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions on March 10 issued a notice of a proposed regulation "to clarify that the definition of machine gun in the National Firearms Act and Gun Control Act includes bump stock type devices, and that federal law accordingly prohibits the possession, sale, or manufacture of such devices."

Where the AR-15 fits in

Lynnwood, Wash., gun shop owner Tiffany Teasdale-Causer holds a Ruger AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. (Associated Press photo)

The civilian AR-15, which has appeared in mass shootings including the one that killed 17 people at a Parkland, Florida, high school in February, has only semi-automatic settings. A bump stock was not used in those shootings. The "AR" part of the firearm's name does not mean assault rifle. Rather, it stands for ArmaLite rifle, after the company that developed it in the 1950s.

The AR-15 is popular among hobbyists, with one in five firearms purchased in this country an AR-style weapon, according to National Shooting Sports Foundation figures cited by NBC News. It is sleek, delivering a gratifying blast of adrenaline, and a symbol, the embodiment of core American values — freedom, might, self-reliance, NBC said after interviewing a number of gun owners.

Gun control advocates say the AR-15 has a high muzzle velocity, which, combined with the small .223 round, "produces a violent ricochet through an animal body if it hits bone," the Washington Post reported.

But the AR-15 can be adopted for different uses and kinds of hunting. The National Shooting Sports Foundation says that because the AR-15 platform is modular, able to affix different "uppers" (barrel and chamber), its ammunition capability can include ".22, .223 (5.56 x

45mm), 6.8 SPC, .308, .450 Bushmaster and about a dozen others. Upper receivers for pistol calibers such as 9 mm, .40, and .45 are available. There are even .410 shotgun versions," the foundation says.

AR-15-style rifles "are no more powerful than other hunting rifles of the same caliber," the foundation says.

Sources and further reading:

"Definition of what's actually an 'assault weapon' is a highly contentious issue," CNBC, Feb. 21, 2018.

Text of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, Congress.gov.

Buckeye Firearms Association video on the difference between an automatic and semi-automatic weapons.

"Modern Sporting Rifle Facts," National Shooting Sports Federation.

"The difference between automatic and semi-automatic weapons," PolitiFact, Oct. 2, 2017

"How many rounds does a semi-automatic rifle fire per minute?" Quora, June 21, 2016.

"Assault Weapons," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

California definitions of assault weapons, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

"Four basic questions about the AR-15," Washington Post, Feb. 16, 2018.

"America's rife: Why so many people love the AR-15," NBC News, Dec 27, 2017

"Vegas Shooter Had 'Bump Stocks' To Give Rifles to Full-Auto Firing Rates," Popular Mechanics, Oc. 3, 2017.

Department of Justice notice regarding bump stocks, March 10, 2018.

"What is a bump stock and how does it work?" New York Times, Feb. 20, 2018.

National Rifle Association statement on bump stocks.

Welfare and Welfare Fraud

BY THE BIRMINGHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

Last month, on a thread about a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services starting a task force to look into naturalization. As the conversation wore on, a couple of you had a questions about SNAP and Welfare including how prevalent fraud is and who are the recipients of aide. Our partners at the Birmingham Public Library pulled together the following FactStack.

"The first formal food stamp program in the United States was implemented in 1939 as a means to help the United States at last pull itself out of the Great Depression. All throughout the 1930s, farm prices had plummeted and farmers were struggling to sell their surplus crops. At the same time, millions of America's jobless were going hungry. And so Uncle Sam stepped in with the "Food Stamps Plan," an initiative in which families that purchased $1 worth of orange stamps to buy their groceries would receive an additional $0.50 blue stamp with which they could purchase goods the government had labeled "surplus." By 1943, some 20 million people had used the program in some form or another." (1)

.....

"The total cost of the SNAP benefits disbursed in 2016 was $66.5 billion, down from $74.6 billion in 2012. Those are significant figures because America is a big country.
When compared with those total figures, the fraud identified in 2016 amounted to a mere 0.9% of the total. That was up from 0.5% in 2012. Or put another way, 99% of the benefit dollars were in no way associated with fraud, assuming that the government is doing its job of identifying malfeasance." (2)

"In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 State agencies issued approximately $66.5 billion in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, a 5% decrease from $69.7 billion in FY 2015. These benefits were issued to a monthly average of 21.8 million households or 44.2 million people participating in the Program, a 3.38 percent decrease from 45.8 million participants the previous year. The average monthly benefit was $125.40 per person or $254.61 per household." (3)

.....

". . . the vast majority of trafficking – the illegal sale of SNAP benefits for cash or other ineligible items – occurs in smaller-sized retailers that typically stock fewer healthy foods. Over the last five fiscal years, the number of retailers authorized to participate in SNAP has grown by over 40 percent; small- and medium-sized retailers account for the vast majority of that growth. The rate of trafficking in larger grocery stores and supermarkets—where 82 percent of all benefits were redeemed—remained low at less than 0.5 percent.

While the overall trafficking rate has remained relatively steady at approximately one cent on the dollar, the report attributes the change in the rate to 1.3 percent primarily to the growth in small- and medium-sized retailers authorized to accept SNAP that may not provide sufficient healthful offerings to recipients. These retailers accounted for 85 percent of all trafficking redemptions. This finding echoes a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report that suggested minimal stocking requirements in SNAP may contribute to corrupt retailers entering the program. (4)

.....

Here are tables showing number of families and children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families by state and month for October 2016-December 2017. (5)

"The single largest share (32 percent) of households with children receiving SNAP benefits are headed by a white, non-Hispanic adult. On average, SNAP-receiving households with children are comprised of three members, including a school-aged child. One in 20 participants are infants, and 1 in 9 are preschool-aged." (6)

.....

"A CBPP (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities) analysis using the government's Supplemental Poverty Measure, which counts SNAP as income, and that corrects for underreporting of public benefits in survey data, found that SNAP kept 10.3 million people out of poverty in 2012, including 4.9 million children. SNAP lifted 2.1 million children above 50 percent of the poverty line in 2012, more than any other benefit program.

SNAP is also effective in reducing extreme poverty. A recent study by the National Poverty Center estimated the number of U.S. households living on less than $2 per person per day, a classification of poverty that the World Bank uses for developing nations. The study found that counting SNAP benefits as income cut the number of extremely poor households in 2011 by nearly half (from 1.6 million to 857,000 . . .)." (7)

.....

"The history of public welfare in the United States has been one of continuing change and growth. Prior to the 1900's local governments shared with private charitable organizations major responsibility for public assistance or as it was often termed, "public relief." As the nation's economy became more industrial and the population more concentrated in urban areas, the need for public relief often grew beyond the means, and sometimes the willingness, of local public and private authorities to provide needed assistance. During the Progressive Era, some state governments began to assume more responsibility for helping the worthy poor. By 1926, forty states had established some type of public relief program for mothers with dependent children. A few states also provided cash assistance to needy elderly residents through old-age pensions. The programs and the size of the benefits varied widely among the states.

State financed public assistance programs were often inadequate to meet the challenges of large-scale unemployment and urban poverty that often afflicted states and urban areas. But it was the Great Depression of the 1930's that led to the collapse of state financed public relief programs. State systems of public relief were simply unprepared to cope with the volume of requests for help from individuals and families without work or income. On top of that, the economic depression reduced state and local revenues. Conditions were so grave it became necessary for the federal government to step in and help with the costs of public relief." (8)

.....

"Welfare received a bad reputation due to President Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign. He portrayed the welfare queen who cheated the system to get enough benefits to drive a Cadillac. He also warned of how welfare created a cycle of poverty. As a result, 61 percent of Americans believe the government should provide jobs instead of welfare payments.

Fraud like Reagan described has been cut since 1996. That's when President Clinton created TANF out of the ashes of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The number of families "on the dole" dropped from 10 million [9]

Sources

Rude, Emelyn. (30 March 2017). "The Very Short History of Food Stamp Fraud in America." Time. Retrieved from http://time.com/4711668/history-food-stamp-fraud/

Constable, Simon. (4 April 2018). "The Facts About Food Stamp Fraud." Forbes. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonconstable/2018/04/04/the-facts-about-food-stamp-fraud/#5561459ef880

Food and Nutrition Service Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Program Accountability and Administration Division. (2017). "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program State Activity Report Fiscal Year 2016," U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonconstable/2018/04/04/the-facts-about-food-stamp-fraud/#5561459ef880

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (15 August 2013)."USDA Releases New Report on Trafficking and Announces Additional Measures to Improve Integrity in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.". Retrieved from https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2013/fns-001213

Office of Family Assistance. (23 May 2018). "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Caseload Data 2017." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/tanf-caseload-data-2017

Murphey, David. (28 June 2018). "5 important things to know about children and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)." ChildTrends.org. Retrieved from https://www.childtrends.org/child-trends-5/5-important-things-know-children-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap

Dean, Stacy. (9 June 2016). "SNAP: Combating Fraud and Improving Program Integrity Without Weakening Success." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from : https://www.cbpp.org/food-assistance/snap-combating-fraud-and-improving-program-integrity-without-weakening-success

Hansan, J.E. (2011). Origins of the state and federal public welfare programs (1932-1935). Social Welfare History Project. Retrieved from http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/public-welfare/origins-of-the-state-federal-public-welfare-programs/

Amadeo, Kimberly. (2 August 2018). "United States Welfare Programs, the Myths Versus the Facts." The Balance. Retrieved from https://www.thebalance.com/welfare-programs-definition-and-list-3305759

On healthcare

BY ZAIDEE STAVELY, FOR TALKING POLITICS, ALABAMA/CALIFORNIA CONVERSATION

Health insurance is cheaper on average in California than in Alabama, particularly when incomes are taken into account. And since the Affordable Care Act was enacted four years ago, costs have risen more slowly in California than in Alabama. The Affordable Care Act is the medical insurance system overhaul commonly called Obamacare, at first by the plan's critics and later by the Obama administration and its supporters too.

Number of uninsured

In 2013, California had one of the highest rates of uninsured people in the nation, with 17.2 percent (6.5 million people) having no insurance. However, with the Affordable Care Act, California cut that number in half to 8.6 percent in 2015.

California opted to expand Medicaid through the Affordable Care Act and create its own health insurance marketplace, while Alabama opted not to expand Medicaid and to rely on the federal health insurance marketplace. Almost half of those newly insured in California were insured through California's expansion of Medicaid (called Medi-Cal in California). Most of the rest were insured through individual plans.

Alabama started 2013 with a lower percentage of uninsured people than California, at 13.6 percent (645,000 people). That number went down to 10.1 percent (484,000 people) in 2015. That's a 3.4 percentage point change.

California has a lower percentage of its residents who are uninsured than Alabama does.

How most residents get their coverage

In 2015, 46% of Alabamians had employer-sponsored health insurance, 6% had individual non-group coverage, 19% had Medicaid, 15% had Medicare, 4% had other public insurance such as veterans' insurance, and 11% were uninsured.

In California, 45% had employer-sponsored health insurance, 9% had individual non-group coverage, 26% had Medicaid, 10% had Medicare, 2% had other public insurance, and 8% were uninsured.

Average costs

Employer plans

Employee contributions to employer-based plans tend to be higher in Alabama than in California. In Alabama, the average annual cost in 2015 for an employee for insurance through their employer was $1,228. In California, it was $1,116. The average annual employee contribution for a family plan through an employer was $5,606 in Alabama and $4,646 in California.

The cost for individual contributions in both states grew from 2010 to 2015, but those costs rose at a lower rate than before Obamacare was enacted.

The cost of an employee contribution to a family plan through an employer has gone up faster in Alabama since the ACA was enacted, growing by 8.3% from 2010 to 2015, versus 6.2% from 2006 to 2010. This is not true in California, where the average employee contribution to an employer-based family plan has grown more slowly since the ACA was enacted. The growth rate was 3.9% from 2010 to 2015, versus 5.8% from 2006 to 2010.

More plans in Alabama have deductibles (91%) than in California (67%). The average deductible in Alabama was $1,026 in 2015, versus $1,428 in California.

The average employee contribution and deductible represents more of the median household income in Alabama than it does in California. The average cost in 2015 was 11.2% of the median household income in Alabama, versus 9.9% in California.

Health Insurance Exchange Plans

On the health insurance exchange marketplace, the average monthly premium for the lowest-cost silver plan in 2016 was $288 in Alabama, and $297 in California, according to the Urban Institute. The cost of healthcare premiums on the exchange marketplace has risen much more per year in Alabama on average than in California. In Alabama, the premium went up by an average of 8.7

percent year-to-year from 2013 to 2016, while in California it went up 2.9 percent on average. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama will be the only health insurance carrier offering plans in the Alabama exchange in 2017, and their rates will increase an average of 36 percent in 2017. Covered California's statewide average rate increase for 2017 is expected to be 13.2 percent.

This reporting provides some context for this discussion. The sources of the information are below. Is there other information you feel should have been included, or are there other sources that should have been consulted? Say so in the comments.

Sources:

U.S. Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-257.pdf

Commonwealth Fund Study: http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2016/oct/slowdown-in-employer-insurance-cost-growth

Kaiser Family Foundation State Data: http://kff.org/statedata/

CHCF (California Health Care Foundation) Data on Uninsured: http://www.chcf.org/publications/2016/03/californias-uninsured

Urban Institute http://www.urban.org/research/publication/increases-2016-marketplace-nongroup-premiums-there-no-meaningful-national-average/view/full_report

Healthinsurance.org https://www.healthinsurance.org/

SPACESHIP MEDIA Dialogue Journalism Toolkit Supplemental information

DECEMBER 2016

Spaceship Media is founded by Eve Pearlman and Jeremy Hay in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.

Spaceship Media's first project, **Officers & Students: A Conversation**, is launched.

JANUARY 2017

Talking Politics begins. This is our first women-only, cross-country conversation, bringing together Trump voters from Alabama and Clinton voters from California. The conversation took place on Facebook and lasted 2 months.

Spaceship Media partners with AL.com to examine the achievement gap that exists between white and black students in Alabama and nationwide, for a project titled **Tackling the Gap**. It brought together 60+ Alabama teachers of different races and from different grade levels to discuss the causes of this inequity, and to strategize to address it.

MARCH 2017

Talking Politics ends, but participants create their own Facebook group to continue the discussion after having such a positive experience talking across divides.

SPACESHIP MEDIA'S JOURNEY SO FAR

AUGUST 2017

50 California residents team up with Spaceship Media, Univision, the Bay Area News Group, and Southern California News Group to take part in **Talking Across Borders**, a discussion about the enforcement of immigration laws.

SEPTEMBER 2017

Along with Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media, we supported a conversation called **Feeding The Future**, where all different types of farmers-- large and small, conventional and organic, joined in a technical, productive conversation about what modern-day farming practices will best suit our planet in the future.

OCTOBER 2017

Our partnership with the award-winning Seattle Times Education Lab begins for a project called **The Homeroom**, a conversation in which parents and guardians of students of color and teachers and paraeducators around Washington state discuss the inequities faced by many students of color and how to tackle that problem.

JANUARY 2018

Our biggest conversation yet, and our first nation-wide one, **The Many**, is launched. The Many brought together over 400 women from across the country, of all different political stripes, into a Facebook group for a wide-ranging conversation that would last through the November midterm elections.

MARCH 2018

Guns, An American Conversation kicks off with a 2-day workshop at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. 21 participants with a wide range of opinions on guns met in person for the event, beginning a conversation that continued with a 150-person, moderated Facebook group.

Spaceship was born after the 2016 election to address the interlinked problems of decline in trust in journalism and the rise of polarization. All of us, journalists and non-journalists alike, face a challenging social and political landscape: polarization is on the rise, trust in journalism is strikingly low. Here is some readings if you're interested in polarization and how polarization impacts democracy and community.

POLARIZATION IMPACTING COMMUNITIES & JOURNALISM

Local News Is Dying, and It's Taking Small Town America With It
Bloomberg

Summary of the numerous negative effects of local journalism budget cuts, including lower voter turnout and higher municipal costs. This affects communities in rural, suburban, and urban areas, especially areas just outside of large cities. Minority communities are the most underserved by local news.

"Between 2003 and 2016, the percentage of Americans who said they have a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the media fell from 54% to 32% before recovering somewhat to 41% in 2017."

Knight Foundation & Gallup

How we know journalism is good for democracy
Local News Lab

Compilation & summaries of numerous reports that point to how journalism benefits democracy, categorized by:

- Erosion in Civic Engagement
- Money on Local News Produces Hundred of Dollars in Public Benefit
- Local News is a First Draft of History
- Local News Builds Social Cohesion and Strengthens Community (and Vice Versa)

The Hidden Costs of Losing Your City's Newspaper
CityLab

Deep dive into the financial burden that communities across the country assume when a local paper folds, from short-term into the long-term.

Is Funding for Nonprofit Journalism Predetermining its Lack of Local Diversity?
Nonprofit Quarterly

Summarizes report covering nonprofit journalism funding, which tends to be highly concentrated among a few high profile organizations while most of the rest appear to have trouble attracting foundation and big donor dollars

Taxpayers Lose in the Bond Market When Local Newspapers Close
Bloomberg

When local newspapers shut down or are forced to scale down their operation due to budget cuts, bond yields rise between 0.05 and 0.11 of a percentage point, which adds up for taxpayers.

Want to reduce political polarization? Save your local newspaper
Nieman Labs

Examines the connection between decline in local journalism and increased polarization as people only have national news outlets to turn to.

Across America, corporate ownership and closures are leading to vast 'news deserts'
Poynter

Review and summary of report examining the effects that corporate ownership and digital disruption have had on local news across the United States.

"For the first time in surveys dating to 1992, majorities in both parties express not just unfavorable but very unfavorable views of the other party."

From a 2016 Pew Research Center report Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016

Goodbye, Newspapers. Hello, Bad Government
Bloomberg

Opinion piece on the adverse effects of the print apocalypse, as it affects local government and taxpayers.

Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits
Pew

This report focuses on five ways the public can connect to civic life and compares the local news habits of Americans who engage in each with those who do not.

The Build

Newsroom leaders — reporters, editors, columnists — and community members work together to think through what conversation will have the most value for the community.

They take a look at the landscape of the community, where the charged conflicts or divisions lie, and what fault line/s it makes the most sense to organize around.

Ask questions like:

- What are the political and social issues dividing people in your communities?
- What groups or communities are at odds or not talking?
- What question should we frame a discussion around?

The Gather

After identifying the subject of the conversation, create a plan for gathering participants.

The Gather begins with a a call out or invitation to community members through partner news organizations and social channels. A call out is typically worded something like this: are you interested in and open to a respectful conversation with people on the opposite side of issue X?

Ask questions like:

- How long will the project last?
- How many people would make a worthwhile conversation?
- How will reporters gather and discover stories and how will they work with moderators?
- What platform you want your project to be based on?

The Welcome

When the group has been assembled, you're ready to welcome everyone. The participants should answer introductory questions and begin to get to know each other, the moderators, and the reporters.

Introductory questions to ask participants:

- What do you think of people on the other side?
- What do you think they think about you?
- What do you want to know about them?
- What do you want them to know about you?

THE SEVEN STEPS IN BRIEF

The last four steps of Dialogue Journalism — Experience, Carry, Nourish, Share — all happen concurrently. Each element is fundamental creating a successful project.

The Experience

The Experience — the conversation itself — reminds us that this project is, most importantly, about the communities we serve; that our work is about creating meaningful, valuable — sometimes even transformative — experiences for those on opposing sides of difficult issues.

The Carry

The Carry is how moderators support participants in what can often be difficult conversations across divides.

The Nourish

The Nourish is where facts and research enter the conversation. Participants may ask for FactStacks, but it is also the job of moderators and reporters to recognize where a FactStack can help support a conversation that has reached an impasse.

The Share

The Share is where editorial content about promoting deeper understanding between groups of people is generated.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE JOURNALISM?

Dialogue Journalism is a journalistic practice developed by Spaceship Media for convening extended, moderated, fact-supported conversations between groups of people who have not been communicating or have not been communicating effectively.

What features define Dialogue Journalism?

SUSTAINED

Many of us are used to receiving and reacting to information at hyperspeed. Dialogue Journalism works to slow some of these processes down. Weeks-long, moderated conversations give participants a chance to get to know each other as well as reflect with more nuance and depth about the difficult issues and policies that matter to all of us.

MODERATED

Yes, it is difficult to engage in meaningful, respectful conversations with people whom we disagree, particularly because the tenor and tone of our national discourse is so often ugly and unproductive. But we know that when given a chance and structure in doing so, people can engage constructively across social and political fault lines. Careful moderation supports participants in the practice of engaging thoughtfully and with empathy across differences.

NOURISHED

One of the struggles we face in our public spaces is a lack of trust in information. With Dialogue Journalism we report in response to the information needs of the people in the conversations we convene. We report in a transparent, non-narrative form that we call FactStacks. By responding directly to the information needs of the divided communities we serve, and reporting in a non-narrative and transparent way in an effort to remove bias and perception of bias we work to make our reporting trusted and useful for the conversation participants we serve. You can read more about

COMMUNITY-FOCUSED

Without community, there is no dialogue journalism. We focus on people getting to know one another and create community when none existed before due to lack of communication or deep divide. Moderation focuses its efforts in building community with posts that encourage participants from either "side" to expose their humanity and questions that lead with empathy and curiousity.

INTERACTIVE

Often, threads on social media blow up with the most idealogically entrenched voices emerging loudest. By modeling and encouraging questions and comments that are constructive and rooted in deep curiousity, journalists are interwoven into the community they build which leads to more meaningful communication and trust.

INVENTIVE NOT PRESCRIPTIVE

When something isn't working in Dialogue Journalism, we pivot. Every dialogue we host has been different. There are key questions and guidelines that inform our practice but there are multiple ways to achieve success. If something isn't resonating with your community or the journalists involved in the project, try something else — even things we've yet to dream up!

"I think it being acknowledged off the bat that we all come from different experiences, and that we will be openly discussing these differences to further our personal understanding makes it such a pleasant platform."

Jasmine Kick
Republican, Minnesota, August 2

"I'm glad we have had so many young people join the group and walk away with a positive impression. Learning the lessons on how to participate in respectful discourse is challenging in today's social media environment. Hopefully many more young people like you can have a positive impact on social media sharing going forward and change the environment and move the direction from name calling and one line insults to sharing real thoughts and ideas."

Debra Semanco, *Independent, Ohio, October 23*

WHAT PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE MANY

"I think for me, I've come to realize that people are not going to change their minds. However, if I can learn how to communicate better with those who differ from me, I'll be better off. That's my takeaway from this group — if I can learn to talk to people who have different views respectfully, then it serves a purpose. It's hard though, because sometimes I want to shout out, "why do you believe this?" but I think the group is teaching me to not name-call and insult the other side."

Wendy Ascione-Juska
Democrat, Michigan, July 9

"You know, I was just thinking today- The Many is very much integrated into my daily life these days. With the midterms just a few months away, I've been exploring the void I'm going to have when our time is over and how I'd be interested to continue with it in another similar forum. It has taught me to be measured and considerate and conscious of both my words and my boundaries and has really constantly challenged me to keep an open mind. I wonder if I will backslide into old bad habits if I'm not consciously making efforts to do all of these things daily."

Lauren Rowland
Democrat, Alabama, September 29

"Finally getting a chance to hear from people who have different points of view has reaffirmed my belief in how valuable our differences are, and softened my anxiety about the future of our country. Some of the discussions in this group are really hard, but I welcome them because it gives us a chance to practice having them — and we NEED to have them. This group gives me hope."

Bethany Sugawara
Independent, Washington, June 18

"This group is already helping me learn how to be more patient and have these conversations constructively."

Ashley Edwards
Democrat, Alabama, March 7

"It's been a challenging and fun experience, and a reminder for me that "everyone has a story" and that story has shaped them and their views. Get to know the person's story as that will help you understand them, help you find common ground, help you sympathize and have empathy. Those things help you hear; you can hear and not have to agree; you can disagree and not be ugly."

Holly Ashley
Republican, Alabama, October 31

"This group has also challenged me to be personally active in community issues that are important to me. There are a lot of options...just where to start?!"

Vanessa Kooper
Republican, Louisiana, August 22

Happy Friday! It is my turn to express my gratitude for being chosen to participate in this group. I have tried to listen to all views and appreciate those who did the same for me. My position on guns has not changed but my ability to acknowledge alternative viewpoints has. Thank you especially to the mods for all their dedication. Onward!

Helene Cohen Bludman, *Pennsylvania*
Guns: An American Conversation, 2018

I had an epiphany of sorts on Friday night during Real Time with Bill Maher. At one of several moments he bashed Trump voters and for the first time a voice sounded off in my head: "Hey, wait a moment, those are my new friends in The Many you're talking about!" It's only been a few days with you all but I now feel a sense of protectiveness of my new sisters.

Caroline Holley, *New York*
The Many: A Conversation Across Divides, 2018

WHAT PARTICIPANTS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT SPACESHIP MEDIA

Thank you for allowing me to participate in this amazing group. I have probably read more than written. I only wish that our government would have discussions as civil & respectful. Thank you to Jeremy & Eve for all you have done in the last month.

Jaqueline Messer, *California*
Talking Across Borders, 2017

"This has helped me to have some better idea of why people differ in their responses. This issue [immigration] is close to my heart, and usually my attempts to discuss it with people who disagree have ended up in rather ugly places.This has been very different. I am grateful to all of you who took time to write, and grateful for this community where it's possibly to discuss difficult questions tenderly and thoughtfully."

Joanna Hoyt,*Other, New York, October 29*