



How to Have a Voice in Local News

A News Voices Guide for Communities

Strengthen your community by strengthening local news

Our communities rely on local journalists to tell stories about the things that affect our neighborhoods, schools, jobs and environment. Local journalism helps us hold our leaders accountable so they apply resources where we need them most. We need reporters keeping an eye on those in power, informing the public about important local issues and elevating community voices.

But you may have noticed that sometimes the media fall short. Local news tends to overemphasize crime and underreport on community-based solutions. People of color are often ignored, misrepresented or maligned. Despite the onslaught of information online, there's a lot less local coverage out there, and many important stories simply don't get told.

The truth is, local journalism is in crisis all over the country. Digital technology forever changed the economic model for journalism, and media consolidation over the last two decades has resulted in layoffs and newsroom cutbacks, with a number of outlets closing their doors. The impact has been even less diversity in our newsrooms and far fewer eyes on the players and issues that shape our lives.

At News Voices, we believe communities and newsrooms must work together to create and support local news that meets our needs. For our communities to thrive, we need to work closely with journalists to report our most important stories and use those stories to create positive change.

This guide offers concrete steps to building relationships with reporters — along with ideas, strategies and tools for anyone who wants to have a voice in local journalism and contribute to a healthy local news environment.

We all have a role to play in local journalism

The absence of community voices in local news means reporters get their quotes and information from people in power, and not those fighting for change. We have to organize to change how news covers and informs our communities.

Sending a press release or asking reporters to attend your event isn't enough anymore. If we want local media to cover important community issues, we need to build relationships with reporters, share our expertise, support and amplify the best local journalism, and become indispensable to the newsgathering process.

Anyone can publish information online, and many essential functions of journalism — documenting, verifying, bearing witness — are things non-professionals can do well. That said, reporting is a job, meaning it's time-consuming work that ideally should be compensated, and it's best accomplished by people with some training.

Even if you don't consider yourself a journalist, you still have an important role to play in the local news ecosystem. Once we understand the different roles journalists and members of the public play in keeping communities informed and civically engaged, we can begin to work more collaboratively together.

HERE'S A WAY TO THINK ABOUT THOSE ROLES:

Journalists:

- Gather information from a variety of viewpoints and sources
- Verify information independently before publishing
- Demonstrate skepticism and ask hard questions
- Stay out of the fray by setting aside their own views
- Report truthfully, accurately and fairly
- Respond to community feedback and serve residents' information needs

Community members:

- Provide expertise, facts and context
- Help reporters find important, useful and valuable stories to tell
- Respond to news coverage with corrections, clarifications, praise or criticism
- Use reported information to engage in their communities, advocate for change and challenge those in power
- Tell news reporters and editors what they want and need from them



Find stories by asking questions

Now that we've talked about roles, how do you start engaging with local newsrooms?

That starts by thinking like a journalist.

Most people who are active in civic life — as organizers, advocates or activists — think in terms of issues, because they have to work to get those issues on the public agenda. But journalists don't write issues; they write stories. You can get attention focused on the issues you care about if you figure out which stories need to be told.



Questions are the way to break issues down into stories. After all, asking questions is the fundamental way journalists report: “who, what, where, when, why and how?”

You might also ask:

- “Who does this help, and who does this hurt?”
- “How much money is being spent, and who is getting that money?”
- “What relationships do these people have with each other?”
- “How is this process supposed to work, and how did it actually play out?”

These sorts of questions give reporters opportunities to gather concrete facts and piece together a narrative.



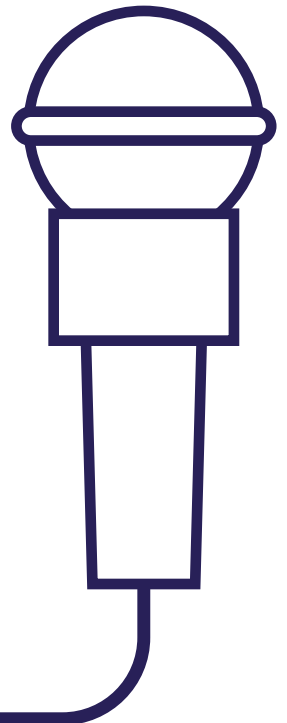
Your questions about the community are important, and your experiences and relationships give you the power to think of questions others might not. When you're coming up with questions related to issues you care about, push beyond your initial assumptions.

Ask yourself:

- “What questions do I have about this issue?”
- “What questions have I heard others ask about this?”
- “What questions should be asked, but haven't yet?”
- “What are the specific people, institutions and events involved?”
- “Who would know the answer to that question?”
- “Are there documents or some written record that contain the answer?”
- “Are these documents available somewhere? If not, are they being withheld? By whom?”

Here are some stories that people who have worked with News Voices have brought to light:

- A woman who wanted reporters to cover the local refugee community realized that a fellow church member's personal story would illustrate the challenges refugees face in a way that would engage local readers.
- Residents who were frustrated with gentrification and the lack of job opportunities in their low-income neighborhood asked questions about the city policies involved and came up with a “what if?” solution about using existing municipal jobs programs.
- Labor organizers tipped their local paper to a disturbing trend: construction workers dying of heat-related illnesses on the job. Reporters used the story to document problems with how the municipal government handles worker health and safety.



Build relationships with local journalists

Once you've come up with these questions, a good next step is to reach out to a journalist and build a relationship with them.

Look at journalists as partners in informing your community and answering the questions you've raised. Building relationships with reporters will have a much greater impact on your ultimate goals.

Too often the relationships between community members and journalists are transactional. Journalists on deadline and under pressure often turn to community members only at the last minute to get a quote or information. Community organizations want coverage that can help their cause, and philanthropic grants may require that their work generate press coverage.

We often hear groups lament that local news outlets didn't "cover their event." It's not a journalist's job to cover an event if that event isn't really news.

But if you get journalists interested in questions and stories that have to do with the purpose behind an event, you and your organization become a valued resource. That relationship makes it more likely the media will spotlight issues you care about and highlight your concerns.

- Start by surveying the coverage of your community or the issue you care about. Find the journalists or outlets in your community that have done a good job of covering that issue. Make note of the stories and find the reporters' contact information through social media or the news outlet's site.
- Send the reporter an email thanking them for their coverage. This lets them know you're familiar with the work they're doing and sets a friendly tone.
- Offer to meet face-to-face — it's the best way to build trust and deepen a relationship. Suggest coffee, lunch, a visit to the newsroom, etc. Don't just invite them to cover something; set up the meeting with the sole purpose of building a relationship with them.
- Offer your time and expertise to help inform their coverage. Tell them what you do, what you know, the questions you have, and what information you think the community should know.
- It's even better if you can tie the topic of conversation to a "newsworthy event" (for example, an upcoming local government vote, or a public incident that's been in the news).
- Keep in mind that what you email or say to a reporter could be "on the record," meaning they can publish the information you give them and attribute it to you. We'll get more into what this means later, but just be careful and don't say anything you wouldn't want to be published.



OTHER WAYS TO CONNECT:

- Write a letter to the editor for publication (these letters usually have a limit of 250 words).
- Invite a reporter or editor to your community event, meeting or public forum.
- Submit a story, photo or video for publication (opinion articles are generally 600 words).
- Participate in a discussion with the editor or reporter on social media.



Photo: Jonathan Cooper

Know what to expect

- Once you've set up your meeting, it's important to know what to expect. As in any relationship, you can build credibility and trust by being truthful, transparent and intellectually honest.
- Explain who you are and share your experience. Show you care about your community and are not just interested in having your name in the news.
- Ask the reporter about their job and what they're interested in knowing more about. Get a sense of how much experience they have with covering the topic at hand. The less experience they have, the more they may appreciate help. If they're more experienced, they're likely to have greater depth of knowledge and interest.
- A reporter's job is to ask questions and be skeptical, so don't be offended if they don't take your word for something.
- Know that journalists will double-check what you tell them, and they'll talk to people with opposing points of view, because it's their job.
- Whenever possible and appropriate, provide documents and links to primary sources (meeting minutes, budget line items, correspondence) that the reporter can use to verify what you're telling them.
- If you know something, explain how you know it.
- If you don't know something, say so, and offer to connect them with someone who does. Who you know can be as helpful as what you know.
- Offer to provide background information for the next article, even if you aren't cited or quoted. You or your particular organization may not get a "press hit" out of it right away, but the reporter will be that much more likely to write about your issue — and much more likely to get the story right — because of your involvement.
- The reporter may have follow-up questions, so be sure to provide your contact info.
- If they follow up, you can ask them to clarify how they'll use the information or quotes you gave them, but don't expect a reporter to show you the story before it runs.

It may feel intimidating to meet with a reporter. But keep in mind, you are a keeper of knowledge, and you have control over how you share that knowledge. You have power, and sharing that power is your choice.



Photos: Jonathan Cooper (top and middle), Tim Karr (bottom)

Protect vulnerable sources up front: If you're talking to a reporter about a story that involves people who are especially vulnerable, such as victims of violence or undocumented people, prioritize their safety and well-being. Journalists' code of ethics urges them to minimize harm, but it also keeps their focus on getting the truth out into the open, and reporters have varying degrees of understanding of the circumstances and dangers subjects might face. Share what you know about those circumstances so you can help educate the reporter on what's at stake. Don't share anything you aren't comfortable revealing. Ask the reporter questions about how they'll use the information you give. Once you reveal this source to the journalist, you won't be able to control what happens.

Speaking terms: Before you start talking with a reporter, it's important to know what the specific "speaking terms" are. "Speaking terms" refers to the understanding you have with the reporter on how they will use the information you give them. Before you start sharing information, make sure you mutually agree on how information will be shared and published. Even if that feels awkward, be explicit and say, "I want to speak ..."

- **"On the record":** Everything you say to a reporter is "on the record" unless explicitly stated otherwise. "On the record" means that everything you say can be published and reporters can quote you. Going on the record helps reporters immensely, because they need sources to tell a story. But you'll want to be thoughtful and deliberate about what you say on the record.
- **"Off the record":** While there's no clear definition of "off the record," it's generally agreed that what you say will not be published, attributed to you or shared with anyone outside of a newsroom. But there is consensus that both the reporter and the person they're talking to must mutually agree to going off the record at the start of a conversation; a source can't simply proclaim something to be "off the record" after they've said it. Gossip or hearsay are often shared "off the record" so a reporter can use it to guide their reporting and verify elsewhere.
- **"On background":** What you say will not be attributed to you directly, but the information may be published. When you want to speak freely and want the information used, but not quoted directly or attributed to you, speaking "on background" can be useful. This comes up with complex or nuanced information or policy issues. Speaking on background is a more complicated method of sharing information, so use it only if you feel absolutely comfortable with the reporter.

If you're unsure about any of this, ask the reporter before you share information. Feel free to negotiate the terms on which you're willing to speak for attribution.

Remember — you have the information and control of the situation. Journalists may push you to go "on the record," but do so only if you feel comfortable.





Photos: Fiona Morgan, Jonathan Cooper (bottom)

Other things to consider when meeting with a reporter:

- **What they'll need:** TV, print and online reporters all need images to go with their stories, so consider who and what they can take pictures of. TV is especially visual, and TV reporters always need someone willing to go on camera.
- **Code of ethics:** Empower yourself by reading the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (spj.org/ethicscode), the recognized standard for ethics in reporting. Keep in mind that not every individual reporter does things the same way, nor do they all have the same interpretation of these ethical guidelines.
- **If at first you don't succeed:** If things go awry, ask for a follow-up meeting and/or write the publication a letter to the editor. If you hit a wall with one reporter, hopefully you can build a relationship with someone else.





Photo: Tim Karr

About Free Press

News Voices is a project of Free Press, a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan organization fighting for your rights to connect and communicate. Free Press is working to create a world where people have the information and opportunities they need to tell their own stories, hold leaders accountable and participate in our democracy. We fight to save Net Neutrality, achieve affordable internet access for all, uplift the voices of people of color in the media, challenge old and new media gatekeepers to serve the public interest, end unwarranted surveillance, defend press freedom and reimagine local journalism.

We launched News Voices in 2015 because we believe the future of quality local journalism lies in collaborations between newsrooms and communities. We're building a network of participants, allies and volunteers, and we'd like you to be part of it. Contact us at newsvoices@freepress.net for more information, or follow us online at FreePress.net, on Facebook at facebook.com/freepress or on Twitter at [@freepress](https://twitter.com/freepress) with the hashtag #NewsVoices.

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