

POLARIZATION AND THE PRESS: 12 WAYS TO RESTORE RESPECT FOR YOUR REPORTING

Stanford_Journalism

Stanford Journalism Guidelines

By Janine Zacharia and Emily Handzel

Declining trust in the media and increasing national polarization threaten to undermine our democracy. Determining what -- if anything -- the press can do to help reverse these phenomena are not only an academic exercise but an urgent national imperative.

To that end, after months of informal consultations with journalists and polarization experts, Stanford's Journalism Program in the Department of Communication convened two formal conversations with editors from across the country to share challenges and surface solutions that have shown promise, with the goal of publicizing these ideas for adoption by other newsrooms.

There has been similar work done in this area, especially by organizations including [Trusting News](#), [American Press Institute](#), and the [NiemanLab](#). Our current guidelines build on their important work.

The hope is that newsrooms across the country that are struggling in this critical election year with how to restore respect for the news they publish will find in this memo actionable ideas.

"It's true that access to reliable, credible information is key to our communities' ability to deliberate and self-govern," as Joy Mayer of Trusting News has noted. "It's also true that people only believe in the accuracy of information if they trust the people sharing it."

In other words, ensuring trust in the press is a monumentally important objective. As Leroy Chapman Jr. of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution said: "Our future depends on it, as does our community's ability to be informed voters."

Our process

A lengthy information-gathering phase led to the convening of a 90-minute discussion on Jan. 22, 2024 of seven editors including Michael Anastasi (VP of Local News at Gannett and Editor of the Tennessean), Rudolph Bush (Editorial Page Editor at the Dallas Morning News), Matthew Copeland (Chief Executive and Editor of Wyofile), James Fitzhenry (Ideas Lab Editor

at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel), Alison Gerber (Editor of the Chattanooga Free Press), and Yvette Walker (Opinion Editor at the Kansas City Star). This was followed by our public [Stanford Rebele Symposium](#) featuring Leroy Chapman Jr. (Editor of Atlanta Journal-Constitution), Lee Ann Colacioppo (Editor of the Denver Post), and Julie Makinen (former Executive Editor of the Desert Sun) on Jan. 29, 2024. The suggested guidelines draw on these discussions and from written comments submitted by the participants before our Zoom discussion.

12 Takeaways – A Roadmap for Newsrooms

Expand your mission from informer to convener.

Journalism is fundamentally about providing information to citizens to participate effectively in civic life. But repeatedly in our discussions, we heard arguments for a more expansive mission – to be a convener and to promote good citizenship. Retain the mission of establishing a “very basic foundational shared understanding of facts,” as Matthew Copeland of Wyofile, said. But be a “convener that all sides trust,” as Gannett’s Michael Anastasi said. This could include inviting readers to meetings with staff to pitch story ideas or organizing information sessions and debates on local issues including ballot initiatives in an election year.

Get out into the community.

The decline in trust in the media has coincided with major cutbacks in newsroom staff and a collapse of some news outlets altogether. This has led to fewer reporters in the field. When people don’t know journalists, it is easier to demonize them. “Make a concerted effort to show up,” Chapman Jr. said. To “combat” the “angry masses,” reporters and editors need to go out and “defend what we are doing...advocate for our work,” and explain how and why stories are conceived and framed, Lee Ann Colacioppo of the Denver Post said.

Go on conservative talk radio.

If you are having trouble reaching conservative voters, consider going on talk radio, where, as Colacioppo said, “You can reach folks who are maybe not tuning into your own work.”

Only court reachable readers – and shut down toxic comment sections.

Some readers may be too far gone down a conspiracy rabbit hole to be reached. Let those go. But the ones who send emails with queries -- even angry ones -- are still engaged with your

reporting and are worthy of continued dialogue. Keep that conversation open. By doing so, people will grow to respect you and could be emissaries for you to speak on your news outlet's behalf. Consider shutting down toxic public comment sections on stories. But encourage written feedback and respond to it. Also consider reinstating a public editor-ombudsman.

Be more transparent about why and how you are covering something.

Include explainers on the backstory of the story, especially deep features, and investigations.

Prioritize stories that relate to people's lives.

Figure out what is important to people – hold listening sessions, send questions via text message – and craft stories in a way that explains what's at stake for your readership. As Alison Gerber of Chattanooga Times Free Press said: "Get out of the politics." Frame stories about abortion, for example, in terms of the actual impact. Center the human element.

If an elected official is an internet troll, focus less on incendiary comments meant to draw attention and more on what that politician is doing -- or not doing -- in their job.

With limited resources, newsrooms who cover politicians who are frequently saying and posting comments online that are beyond the norm cannot cover all the bluster. Focus instead on the tangible. Explain to readers why you are making this decision. Find a way to document the rhetoric. But delve more deeply into what underlies the comments by focusing on their beliefs as the Kansas City Star did with [this opinion](#) on religion and Senator Josh Hawley or as the Denver Post did on Representative [Lauren Boebert's Christian nationalism](#).

When a politician lies or says something false, correct the record.

James Fitzhenry of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel described fact checking Senator Ron Johnson during a mid-term election. When he made a statement that was factually untrue, the paper provided readers with the information they could use to see how it was false. "You're never going to convince 100 percent of people who might disagree, but for the people who are reachable, who are open-minded and are willing to look at that, you have to provide that context. Because without it, then the misinformation, the lies are unchecked, and it allows it to kind of seeping into the system," he said. Those who were steadfast that the

2020 election was stolen, were critical; Independents desiring that information were appreciative.

In your editorial pages, give more space to local issues.

An experiment run by the Desert Sun in Palm Springs in which the newspaper “took a month-long vacation from national politics” on its opinion page, as its former editor Julie Makinen said, reduced polarization in the community, according to a [study](#) by academic researchers. Commission fewer pieces about national issues and recruit more local contributors to diversify the voices on your page.

Don’t require your reporters to post on Twitter/X. Encourage more meaningful community interactions.

Social media can be a cesspool of hate where attacks on journalists, especially women and people of color, can be rampant. Move away from the follower metric in evaluating your staff. It doesn’t drive traffic and it can endanger your reporters, or at least, cause mental stress for them. Instead, prioritize in-person interactions when possible. Let your staff show the community how the news pitching process works and encourage story suggestions.

Recognize your blind spots and address them.

Be willing to showcase voices of people who see the world differently from you. “What is most offensive to the readers who have written us off...is when you won't...make any space for their ideas,” as Rudolph Bush, editorial page editor of the Dallas Morning News, said.

Avoid unnecessary adjectives and adverbs that can alienate.

Scan your stories before publishing for any unnecessary modifiers that can be perceived as biased. Or as Bush said: “Get rid of the snark. Get rid of smart ass.”

Three interventions of note:

In 2022, the Dallas Morning News launched an editorial project called [The American Middle](#) to explore “the roots of political division as well as the reality that there is more common

ground than our politics admits,” editorial page editor Rudolph Bush wrote. The project received lots of positive feedback from readers, including one who said it should be “required reading for all adult Americans”.

In 2018, The Tennessean launched [Civility Tennessee](#), a campaign to model respectful dialogue on hot topic issues. The campaign hosts in-person events and maintains a closed Facebook discussion group.

James Fitzhenry said the conversations they hosted at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel as part of the [Main Street Agenda](#) project allowed people to listen to others, maybe change their mind about a few things, and left people “feeling much better about the state of politics and the world.”

Authors

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