

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

Stanford\_Journalism

## **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.”

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