COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, NEWS: ENGAGED JOURNALISM FOR THE SOCIAL NATIVE

by

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This thesis explores how engaged, or community-centered, journalism might best meet the needs of social natives, or people currently ages 18-24, who have different and more hyper-personalized engagement patterns than their generational predecessors. This is done in part in the form of a feature-length journalistic article supplemented by a focus group with students at the University of Oregon, with the intention of demonstrating how journalists can engage with a community in order to produce a work of journalism that is inclusive and reflective of those they seek to represent. Through discussing with these students topics of community and identity, what news means to them, and potential solutions, it is clear that these particular social natives seek a news landscape with more hopeful coverage, diversity in newsrooms and topics covered, and appreciation and respect demonstrated for all communities being reported on.

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Introduction

I was initially inspired to do this project in the winter of my junior year, while working as a research assistant for Professor of Practice Lori Shontz in the School of Journalism and Communications. Professor Shontz was developing a new class for the SOJC titled "Journalism and Democracy," which would detail why journalism is fundamentally necessary in upholding a democracy, and she sought the perspectives of journalism and non-journalism students alike while developing the curriculum. She conducted focus groups with these students to ask them about their understanding of and interest in things like news, civics, and democracy, and I was partially responsible for recruiting participants. Getting a diversity of perspectives was of upmost importance to Professor Shontz, so we ended up speaking with an incredibly far-reaching group of individuals. These students were from a variety of majors, backgrounds, and parts of the country, and they held various racial and gender identities as well as sexual orientations.

While sitting in on these groups, I identified a pattern between students' identities/cultural backgrounds and their news interests. The student who hailed from the campus LGBTQIA+ center paid the most attention to queer rights' issues. The students we had recruited from the Black Cultural Center followed stories about race. Students' communities directly informed the journalism that they cared about and engaged with. In a news climate that seems to be losing its grip on young people, if it ever had a grip to begin with, this felt like something that was important to know.

This connection between community and engagement felt especially critical to me when thinking about the goals of "engaged journalism" — "journalism that responds to community needs and is created with community participation" (Gather). The goal of engaged journalism is to foster relationships with the community that a publication represents, whether that is through

outreach, surveys, or incorporating more citizen voices into storytelling, and as a result, to produce journalism that is more "inclusive, responsive, and reflective" of those communities (Gather). But how can engaged journalism achieve these goals of inclusivity and reflectivity if young people are siloed into these heavily personalized engagement patterns, only consuming news directly related to their own groups? I could understand why this might happen — the 24-hour news cycle is overwhelming; it seems reasonable that young people would gravitate towards issues and topics they could relate to – but I was interested in exploring ways to resolve this tension all the same.

However, as I would come to learn over the course of this project, the goals of engaged journalism and the existing engagement patterns of young people don't actually exist in opposition to each other — in fact, they seem to share a lot in common, mostly predicated on their prioritization of community. I now believe that an understanding of these commonalities, when paired with a willingness to listen to the needs of a growing populous of young people — whose participation in civic life becomes more critical with each passing day — can result in something that is both beautiful and productive.

In producing a piece of work that reflected this sentiment, I felt it was important to treat young people, specifically voting Gen Z individuals — those around the ages of 18-24 — as a community in and of itself. Therefore, if I was going to employ the goals of engaged journalism, I would need to foster relationships with that community, to respond to their needs in a way that utilized their participation, and to create something inclusive, responsive, and reflective of them. For that reason, I decided to have in-depth conversations with a diversity of young people at the University of Oregon and produce a piece of engaged journalism myself.

When writing the article that will follow, I used the "social native" framework to understand the specific population — older Gen Z individuals — that I am focusing on in this work. According to Reuters Institute research fellow Kristen Eddy, the social native is someone aged 18-24, who grew up in the era of social media. Having this specific definition of the age group I was speaking with helped me to keep my work targeted, rather than trying to make blanket claims for all of Gen Z.

According to Eddy, social natives do not form strong connections with or loyalty to specific news brands, instead using "side-door" approaches — social media, aggregators such as the iPhone "News" application, and search engines (where they look up something specific rather than engage with an entire days' worth of news). Social natives are more likely to believe media platforms should take a stance on issues like climate change, and more likely to believe that journalists should be free to express their personal views on social media. Additionally, Eddy says that social natives' engagement patterns are fundamental, not reversible. Therefore, the onus must be on journalistic institutions to make the changes necessary to meet the social native's needs, rather than the other way around.

Research Questions

1. Where do young people today find community and identity, and how does this inform the issues they care about?
2. How does this generation define news, what does it mean to them, and how are they utilizing it in their lives, if at all?
3. How can engaged journalism practices better reconcile with the more hyper-personalized engagement patterns of Gen Z citizens?
4. What current practices of engagement are working and can be expanded upon, and where is there space to get more creative, to think bigger?

Methods/Study Overview

I decided to conduct focus groups, rather than individual interviews, because I had seen firsthand the success of this format while working with Professor Shontz. In focus groups, the students can bounce ideas off of each other, and being among a group of peers cultivates a more relaxed environment than a one-on-one interview. Particularly because we would be discussing things like news and identity, I anticipated that these students might be articulating ideas they hadn't before, and I wanted them to have a sounding board for these ideas. I wanted the power dynamics in the room to feel equal and comfortable.

I emailed my focus group recruitment script, which described who I was, the aims of my thesis, the format of the focus group, and the themes we would be exploring, to professors in departments across the University of Oregon, as well as to students involved in on-campus groups, clubs, activity centers, and workplaces. Several professors invited me to their classrooms, where I orally pitched my thesis and participation in my focus groups.

My initial intention was to conduct two focus groups with six students in each. However, recruiting for these groups proved to be much more difficult than I anticipated. I could not offer any kind of compensation for the students' time, which I believe created a barrier. Other than sheer interest and enthusiasm, there was no real incentive to take part. Because of this, I decided to only conduct one focus group instead of two, with five students participating.

Ultimately, the majority of my success in recruitment came through snowball sampling within student activity centers on campus. When I provided my focus group recruitment script to students involved with on-campus jobs and clubs, they could then pass this information along to other students within their groups, and those who were interested in my work reached out to me directly. In the end, students in my focus group hailed from a Black Lives Matter and Democracy

course I visited, the Oregon Public Health Corps, the Portland Internship Experience program, and UO Housing.

Having fewer students involved, and conducting one group instead of two, worked out well – I was able to give each student's perspective adequate attention in the final piece, and the five people who attended my focus group — Yazzie Chee, Chloe Bridges, Alara Wayne, Gillian Allen, and Josselyn Studer — were enthusiastic, focused, and collaborative with one another. I think for the scope of this project, trying to incorporate twelve student voices would have become disorganized and overwhelming.

For the focus group itself, we met on a Friday morning in mid-February in Allen Hall, home of the School of Journalism and Communications. Prior to beginning, the students signed consent forms that spelled out the content we would be covering, that I would be audio-recording the focus group, and that I would be using their full names in the article so as to adhere to journalistic practice.

The focus group was 90 minutes long, and after introducing themselves to each other, the students answered questions pertaining to three main themes — community & identity, news, and solutions. I asked what community meant to them, where they found community, what identity meant to them, and what identities they held or considered a part of themselves. I asked what it meant to them when I said "the news," what topics in the news interested them, and how, if at all, those topics intersected with their community and/or identity. I asked how they found news, and what medium of news was most interesting to them. Finally, I asked what they did not like about the news, what journalists could do to make news better for them, and what advice they would give to a journalist seeking to cover one of their own communities or identity groups.

These questions came from a script that I had devised prior to the group's meeting, and I asked follow-up and clarifying questions where necessary.

I closed the session by asking if there was anything else they wanted to add or anything I should've asked but didn't, told them they could follow up with me if they had any questions or concerns, and sent them on their way.

From there, I transcribed the audio recording of the focus group, created an outline for my article based on what the students discussed, and began writing. What follows is a feature-length journalistic article that adheres to AP Style and journalistic ethics, including the use of direct quotes and full names. My intention is for this article to stand on its own, outside of a thesis project, and that hopefully, it serves some practical purpose for journalists like me, who want to make our work better for people my age. It's a fairly simple goal, but, as the article may make clear, will by no means be easy.

Community, Identity, News: Engaged Journalism for the Social Native

Young people find belonging in their communities, seek it in journalistic spaces

By Ella Hutcherson

Yazzie Chee, 22, attends weekly meetings at the University of Oregon Many Nations Longhouse, along with other Native American students at the UO. In November, during Native American Heritage Month, two journalists, one from the UO Daily Emerald and one from The Oregonian, came to the longhouse to write stories about the student group.

Chee says he talked with both journalists for the articles they were writing. He says he knew they had great intentions, but it was strange to see journalists only interacting with his community, one he values deeply, when there was a designated holiday celebrating it and an article deadline to meet.

"I would've liked to see more engagement," he says. "Maybe even come before you want to write about something, and not just one time."

Chee is a social native. According to Reuters Institute research fellow Kirsten Eddy, social natives are those currently ages 18-24, who grew up in the age of social media, and have a different worldview and relationship with news than that of their generational predecessors. Through interviewing social natives at the UO, it became clear that many in this age group deeply value community groups and defining their identities in relationship to these communities. However, the news as they know it doesn't always mesh with how they carry themselves through the world, and they find it difficult to engage with the news without becoming overwhelmed, confused or horrified by the state of the world as it is being communicated – something they often find inaccurate and dishonest.

It seems that, while social natives recognize the humanity of journalism and even the flaws within their own generations' outlook, they also seek a better way, one with more hope, representation and a closer relationship between journalists and the topics they cover. Many of

their expressed needs align with the goals of engaged journalism – journalism that "responds to community needs and is created with community participation," according to the project and platform Gather, which aims to support community-minded journalists and the work they create. The goal of engaged journalism, according to Gather, is to foster relationships with the community that a publication represents, and as a result, to produce journalism that is more "inclusive, responsive and reflective" of that community. Actual engaged journalism practices are far-reaching, but can include outreach projects, surveys, reception to suggestions and input, and the prioritization of community members' voices in storytelling.

Because these social natives value community-building so highly in their daily lives, it makes sense to employ engaged journalism practices when thinking about how to meet their needs more accurately and intentionally than traditional, mainstream news has done thus far. Through listening to these young voices, journalists can be taught not only how to engage this particular audience, but how to show up better for all of the communities they serve. Because despite common stereotypes about the disengaged youth, for every social native interviewed for this project, the well-being of the collective seems to be the priority.

Identity is a Group Activity

Five social natives at the UO find and define community differently, but across the board, it contains inherent value in their lives, as well a capacity to create common ground between individuals and bring one to a better understanding of themselves as an individual. For Chee, spaces like the Many Nations Longhouse, and the people within them, are crucial sources of community.

"It means the world to me, especially navigating through a predominantly white institution. Finding those communities helped me continue to do what I do," Chee says. "Without them, I don't think I would be as successful as I am now."

According to political scientist W. Lance Bennett, older generations tended to engage civically, or participate in the public sphere, through a sense of obligation to vote, pay their taxes and stay informed. However, more recent generations have gravitated towards other activities — like community volunteering and activism — that fit less neatly into older, conventional understandings of engagement. This impacts not only the ways that younger people receive information, but also how they find groups and develop their identities. According to several social natives at the UO, finding community is fundamental to the management of their personal lives, and they rely heavily on friendship and peer networks for this.

Chloe Bridges, a 21-year-old political science major, says friends are her biggest source of community, but that she found them through common interests and circumstances, such as her passion for politics.

"Maybe you get a little bit more open with people who have at least something in common with you," she says.

Gillian Allen, 22, says that identifying common ground not only opens people up to those they feel similar to, but can bridge gaps between themselves and those they might not have previously interacted with.

Originally from Modesto, California, Allen says she was not in touch with her bisexuality until arriving at the UO. But at college, she found commonality between herself and other queer individuals. Now, she is part of a friend group that all identify as LGBTQ+.

Alara Wayne, a 21-year-old studying human physiology, global health and biology at the UO, says that coming to college also broadened her conception of community. As a STEM-focused major, she says she spends a lot of time in the school's science library, and that the place, as well as the familiar faces she sees each day, create a sense of common ground and academic community that is almost unspoken.

Josselyn Studer, 20, says that people don't belong to just one community. She says that being a part of multiple communities is critical to exploring and developing a sense of self, especially when entering adulthood.

"Community is a means by which you can have the courage to explore different parts of yourself," she says, "that you otherwise wouldn't have known you could."

For Chee, this rings true. Growing up, he says he bounced from city to city, and struggled to find a sense of belonging, primarily due to his race. This was reinforced by facing a constant, dehumanizing question from those around him: "What are you?"

"I was just consistently put in the 'other' category," Chee says, "While at the same time trying to live a life that was conforming to the norm."

Because he moved around so much, Chee says he was unable to be consistent with his ancestral cultures or traditions. Instead, he kept his hair short and always dressed a particular way in an attempt to conform with white hegemony. He grew tired of being perceived as 'other.' In fact, he says he grew tired of being perceived at all.

In reaction to this, Chee decided to become so loudly a member of the Native community that there wouldn't be any guesses. He began collecting resources that would allow him to participate more distinctly as a member of the Native community.

While attending Lane Community College, Chee says he still felt a little bit shy about reaching out to local resources. But a higher-up encouraged him to become involved with the campus Native group, and continued to push him until he did so. Now, she remains an important figure in his life.

Chee says he now finds both community and identity through participating in Native American culture and groups and by spending time with those who look like him and understand both his current and former struggles as a Native American. The process of getting involved, he says, "has made me more comfortable about who I am."

Allen says that identity and community go hand-in-hand. She says that people in marginalized groups, who feel isolated due to their identity, will turn to others in that same marginalized group for a sense of belonging.

"I think because of that, you can't have one without the other," she says. "So many people are forced to rely so heavily on the community that they identify with."

Studer says that this is why representation, like Chee's higher-up at LCC, is so important, especially for those in marginalized or isolated groups.

This critical need to develop one's own identity as a young person, while also earnestly seeking community, aligns with Bennett's understanding of the changing nature of citizenship in newer generations. According to him, social identity processes — or the ways that young citizens are developing their perspective of and connections with the world — are changing rapidly. In recent decades, he says individuals have become increasingly responsible for manufacturing and managing their personal identities, leading to a pattern of engagement with civic life, including journalism, that prioritizes the individual.

But Studer says one’s sense of individuality is far from the only factor that contributes to identity construction. She says a lot of how young people see themselves, or what they feel they must perform, is based on the culture in charge – in the U.S., a white, hegemonic patriarchy. Social perceptions, which come from outside forces, play a major role in developing one’s internal identity and how it is expressed.

Wayne says when she was younger and exploring her sexual identity, she would try to dress a certain way to signal to the world that she was a member of the queer community. Now, as she’s gotten older, she feels differently – she knows that her outward expression doesn’t have to correlate with a specific stereotype of an identity in order to appease societal expectations.

Bridges says that, while she feels identity might begin as a lot of outward pressure to act, look or feel a certain way, that it is possible to shift the burdens society places on an individual. She says that, as a person understands themselves better, sometimes through entering new spaces and communities, identity can grow and change to be more specific and personal to how one feels on the inside.

But this changing relationship between the individual and their society makes it harder for civic institutions, such as mass media, to appeal to the highly personalized preferences of their constituents. Civic life has not yet found a way to connect to this multiplicity of needs, leading to a generation of young people that feels disenfranchised by democratic structures, journalism included.

“The News”: Connection and Distance

Wayne is Turkish by descent. She has family in the country. So when a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern and central Turkey, as well as northern and western Syria, in early February, Wayne says she closely followed news coverage of the catastrophe. She says she felt concerned for all of the people affected, not just those she was related to.

“I really identify with that region, because that’s where I’m from,” she says. “Obviously I really care for those people, even though I don’t know them. It’s still that sense of community.”

Others shared the experience of closely following news and issues directly related to their communities. Studer, a political science student, is interested in political news. She says her partner is Iranian, and this, along with her inherent connection to gender politics, has made her interested in the women’s liberation movement in Iran. And witnessing the overturning of Roe v. Wade in June 2022 has her following abortion rights more closely, as well.

Allen, a passionate global health minor, loves health news, and pays special attention to news outlet Global Health NOW. She also follows specific newsletters and social media pages to get information specifically targeted to her interests.

Chee has always been interested in learning about indigenous issues. But it worries him to see members of one community group, with a particular kind of interest, isolating themselves from other community groups. For example, he says he attended a reproductive health crash course a while back and was one of two or three male-presenting individuals in the room.

“It’s such a scary thing to think about people only being able to want to get informed about issues when they are part of that group,” he says.

Wayne says she tries to go out of her way to find things that don’t affect her directly as an individual, such as health news from around the globe.

According to Eddy, the social native tends to have a broader definition of what news is than older counterparts. She says they see “news,” or what deserves to be considered noteworthy information that ought to be publicly disseminated, as something “encompassing topics like sports, entertainment, celebrity gossip, culture, science.” Eddy says “the news,” though, is something entirely different: a “narrow agenda of politics and current affairs.” This interpretation of “the news” as something different from just “news” can drive young people away from more traditional forms of journalism, which may feel to them more in line with “the news” and therefore less desirable and approachable.

Wayne says that when she thinks of “the news,” she thinks of words like “global,” “current” and “negative.” Instantly, large media companies, like BBC and CNN, come to mind.

Chee says he associates this kind of “larger” news with the 1%.

“When I look at it, I see people that are distant from the news they’re reporting on,” he says. “Or they’re reporting on things that are just so distant from me.”

According to Bennett, the more traditional coverage of politics and government seems “distant, irrelevant, and inauthentic” to younger demographics. Likewise, the Reuters Institute of Journalism Digital News Report for 2022 found that subjects that journalists feel are important – political crises, international conflicts, pandemics, and climate catastrophes — are driving away young people who are finding traditional news to be both depressing and unhelpful. In short, the multiplicity of needs, as described by Bennett, are not being addressed. Instead, there is a disconnect between what is being disseminated and what is desired.

Additionally, recent events have affected the way these social natives, as well as those around them, interpret “the news.” Studer says that the 2016 presidential election was a turning point for her perception of what news is — how it can be used as a tool to scare people and engender certain beliefs. She now feels that news consistently feeds into the political polarization of the U.S. In fact, she feels that the news takes advantage of the fact that many only pay attention to

the news that concerns themselves or their communities directly by tailoring coverage to a certain political party and roping people into a certain perspective.

Wayne also feels that there is strong polarization present in the news. She says her father, who she refers to as a “Trumpy,” has been fed a certain agenda by the news coverage he consumes, and now she can’t even have a civil conversation with him. She says he called her a “communist” when she was home for the holidays.

Allen witnessed her mother going cold-turkey on watching any news when Donald Trump was elected into office, saying she “couldn’t handle it.”

Allen says a lot of news is just too “scary” — it’s deceptive, there’s an agenda, important information is missing or it feels like the news anchor is just yelling. This kind of coverage can make the news feel catastrophic. She says someone who isn’t fully educated on the topic being presented is going to panic, and reasonably so.

“Everyone has such a subconscious fear of the news right now,” Studer says, “that I feel like it inhibits their ability to have the courage to go out and seek new topics.”

“Social” Native

The social native, aptly named, grew up in the era of social media. Therefore, they rely more heavily on social media to receive their news than generational predecessors. According to Eddy, instead of developing loyalty to a certain publication or a routine news diet, the social native more frequently accesses information through platforms like Instagram or Twitter, search engines or aggregators such as the iPhone “News” application.

These five social natives at the UO prove that their literacy with social media extends beyond the apps themselves, however — they make these platforms work for a more nuanced approach to consuming news. Studer says that social media can be a huge tool in the face of news censorship, especially abroad. Raw footage posted on social media, often by civilians rather than actual journalists, can help to tangibly show other sides of an issue, flipping the script away from those in control of the dominant narrative.

Bridges points out that many news outlets now, like the Washington Post, have TikTok accounts that they use to put out three-minute-long videos that provide a general understanding of a topic. She says this is especially important in making information accessible, as some cannot afford the paywalls on full-length articles, or just might not have the time for them.

Wayne says that social media can be a great starting point for diving deeper into an issue. If a tweet or short video sparks her interest, she can follow up by reading the articles, and sharing the articles or information she gleans with her partner and friends.

These individuals’ engagement with different mediums of journalism, outside of social media, range far and wide. Wayne listens to podcasts from The New York Times and Vox while she’s getting ready. She also likes reading, and even makes an effort to grab a physical copy of the paper when she can. Studer also reads articles and watches videos. Allen likes videos because she says the verbiage isn’t as academic. Chee gravitates towards videos so he can see things for himself. Bridges also prefers videos, specifically one-on-one interviews, which she says feels more accessible as an audience member.

Studer agrees, and even seeks comedic relief from these formats, like the Patriot Act with Hasan Minaj or the Daily Show with Trevor Noah. She says these kinds of shows of shows can be stepping stones for people who are distanced from issues to still learn about them, and personally, don't leave her feeling like "the world's going to explode."

Bridges agrees that comedy can make news feel more approachable because it has an entertaining element. And Allen believes that could work for those who want to be informed but feel like they can't handle serious news.

According to Reuters, rising active news avoidance is a problem across the board. Many, including young people, choose to limit or ration the news they pay attention to, especially more depressing news coverage, because they find it useless, disempowering, or hard to follow — 15% of young people who actively avoid news say they do so because they don't understand it. And additional causes for news avoidance that plague the political left and the right — the left expresses overwhelm, feelings of powerlessness, and worry that it might create arguments, the right that it is biased and untrustworthy — are also being expressed by young people, regardless of political identity.

Intentional focus must be placed on the social native and their needs if an uptick in engagement, and a reduction in news avoidance, is ever going to occur.

Moving Forward

When checking the news, "I think people just automatically assume it's something bad or something negative," Allen says.

Studer says she wishes that the news would expand beyond the controversial and the negative. She would like to see coverage that pairs problems with solutions, to demonstrate that there is hope, and that hope is newsworthy.

Fortunately, a model for this type of coverage already exists. Solutions journalism, developed in recent decades, illuminates innovations and responses to social problems. This kind of journalism subverts the notion that news is inherently negative, instead focusing on real and innovative changes to the status quo, while maintaining the same rigorous standards regarding truth-telling, evidence and accuracy as in traditional journalism. These kinds of stories are constructive rather than disheartening and can result in changes to discourse and responses to issues, according to the Solutions Journalism Network.

Studer says that positive interactions with news, like the kind one might have with a solutions story, might make people more likely to engage. And according to Temple University professor Andrea Wenzel, solutions journalism functions hand-in-hand with engaged journalism, as collaborating with a community in creative and citizen-centered ways can bring journalists and community members together with a shared focus on addressing community needs.

According to the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), two key elements of solutions journalism are evidence — using data or qualitative results to indicate effectiveness — and limitations — contextualizing a solution and being transparent about shortcomings. Prioritizing these elements in reporting beyond solutions, as well as a rigorous fact-checking process, could aid in the fight against misinformation in journalism, which many young people are distinctly wary of, especially considering the key role the 2016 election and subsequent discourse played in their understanding of news.

Another way to expand beyond the politics and polarization that appear dominant in the news cycle, Chee says, is to simply push a diversity of topics to the forefront. Seeing other topics — like science or art — highlighted in the mainstream might incline more people to engage. Other researchers echo this sentiment— according to Reuters, adding softer subjects to mainstream coverage can make "the news" in its most traditional sense feel more personally relevant to social natives. And, as Chee says, "there's so many other things going on than some orange asshole in the office."

Studer says that effectively diverse coverage would be more likely to succeed if newsrooms themselves were diverse, too. That way, works of journalism that are intended to cover a wide variety of topics and communities could also be reported and/or edited by people who are part of these groups or possess knowledge of those topics. Diversification in a newsroom, as well as reporting within a community that one is based in, could help to prevent what is known as "extractive" journalism— reporting done without input from a community, which occurs most commonly when reporting on low-income communities or communities of color.

Considering the importance of community in these social natives' lives, it makes sense that effective community engagement in journalism is important to them, as well. In addition to diversifying newsrooms, they suggest that another critical element of community-centered is to adequately hear from members of whatever community is being covered — not relying on a single source to speak on behalf of an entire group.

"Especially considering a lot of journalists report on stuff that they are not directly involved in, and looking in on a community," Bridges says, "I think it's really important to have sources and talk to people who are actually within the community, but also numerous people, because just one person within the community does not represent the entire community."

Especially when reporting on a community outside one's own, which is inevitable in today's media landscape, Allen says it is important to demonstrate appreciation and respect for that group, rather than watching and commenting from an omnipotent, distant perspective.

Chee agrees. But he recognizes that journalists do not always have complete editorial control over the work they create. That they, too, are just people trying to make a living.

“I understand that they’re a piece in a really big institution,” Chee says. “I generally don’t demonize journalists.”

He sees journalism as a part of a system, and it is the system that he chooses to critique. That’s why he doesn’t hold anything against the two journalists who came to the longhouse in the fall. He even appreciates that they brought a story about indigenous issues to a largely white audience such as the readers of The Oregonian. In fact, he says this kind of work, when done correctly, could serve as a bridge between communities. It’s the kind of bridge that will be necessary for a future in which journalists report diversely, respectfully and inclusively, and social natives fully see themselves and those around them in the stories that are told.

Discussion

As previously mentioned, I originally began this project because I sensed a tension between young people's engagement patterns and the goals of engaged journalism. What I found, however, is that the social natives I spoke to possess a keen sense of the importance of community, and though their individual identities are entrenched in this, part of the identity-building process is to reach out and forge connections with those around them. What is turning these people away from some forms of journalism is not necessarily a lack of interest in communities outside their own, although their primary interests align with their personal identities. What seems to be more dissuading to them is the political, top-down, at times inaccessible and jargon-y, and discouraging nature of the news that they are familiar with. It is the polarization that they feel, even within their own families, that they are tracing back to journalism. And it is the hopelessness they feel after engaging that turns them away.

Therefore, engaged journalism must maintain its focus on community coverage aided by community involvement. This will help to produce journalism that is at these young folks' level, that won't feel inaccessible due to the language used or topics discussed. Based on my conversations and my outside research, it also seems that solutions journalism is a real and viable alternative to the often negative reception of news. If hope is an option, young people will engage.

However, all journalism can't be "engaged" journalism, mostly because it takes a lot of work. And these social natives are primarily familiar with the traditional, large news corporations that are not adept at employing these practices. The question remains, then, how can we make plain the necessity to employ these practices more broadly? One way to begin engaging with communities accurately and respectfully in larger newsrooms seems to be simply

diversifying these spaces. If there is a wider array of voices and backgrounds in journalism, this will be reflected in the coverage. It won't solve the entire problem, but it is a start.

Finally, talking with these young people has made clear that though social natives distinguishing feature is growing up in the social media era, this is not all that they are adept at. Rather, social media is an additional skill in an existing arsenal — not only are they using these online spaces to create community and engage with social issues, but they are tapping into a variety of other journalistic mediums: podcasts, newsletters, text stories, and videos, and even participating in the production of journalism themselves. Social natives have a variety of skills that no previous generation has. They are also living through social and political unrest, threats to democracy, a global pandemic, and the increasingly mortal threat of climate change. They understand the need to be active participants in the world as they become increasingly implicated in its future. Social natives are ready to engage, and they have the skillset to do so. It is now up to journalists to match them.

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