Stronger journalism through shared power

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INTRODUCTION

The Engaged Journalism Accelerator (the Accelerator) convened 47 practitioners – including journalists, editors and researchers from across Europe – in Birmingham, United Kingdom (UK), in March 2019 for a one-day workshop titled Building power for more informed communities. Our objective with this event, which reflects the broader goals of the Accelerator, was to learn about the ways journalists are building and navigating relationships with communities, ways they are creating and sustaining value through those relationships, and ways our community of practice is getting stronger.

In designing the workshop (and this report), we built on our two-day workshop in Madrid three months prior and all that we had learnt from it. Accelerator grantees attended both workshops, and they played an important role in helping transmit the culture of engagement that we developed in Madrid to a new mix of participants. This new mix included representatives from national and local (traditional as well as emerging, independent) news organisations in the UK, global organisations with presence inside and outside the UK, and individuals from organisations that have been part of previous Accelerator events, but who they themselves, had not personally taken part in these events.

While we shared some of our experiences of the day in a blog post, this report focuses on broader lessons and themes, and challenges and opportunities that emerged in Birmingham. It also captures what we're learning about our grantees, and other engaged journalism organisations in our community, and the ways they are strengthening their culture of engagement both internally and externally.

Practical tips, takeaways and examples¹ are highlighted throughout, and four case studies are included that draw out specific examples of challenges and ways news organisations are meeting them:

¹ The workshop discussion in Birmingham took place under Chatham House rules, so this report includes quotes without attribution per that agreement. In some places, we attribute quotes and stories to participants who were interviewed after the event and have agreed to be named.
1. How to combine live events with digital community building
2. How to do engaged journalism on a global scale
3. How to do justice to local engagement while serving a national audience, and
4. How to move on from an investigation without leaving the community behind

Building power, sharing power

We chose for our theme ‘building power’, a term borrowed from the American tradition of community organising – a concept in which organisers build sustainable, large-scale movements through relationships rooted in trust and shared leadership. While community organising first emerged in the United States (US), it’s been growing throughout Europe and worldwide over the past two decades thanks in part to the European Community Organizing Network, a network of NGOs organising across Europe. Organisers anywhere will tell you that power can come either from lots of money or from lots of people. Community organising is the practice of building ‘people power’ to realise the democratic values of justice, inclusion and nonviolence.
Building power refers to a process of building relationships based on mutual trust and shared values to pursue solutions to common concerns. Organising is fundamentally about listening and working with people to build the world they want. Through these relationships and ongoing collaborative work, organisers build leadership among peers, making their efforts more resilient. Organisers often say that by cultivating the leadership of others, they are effectively cloning themselves – that is, increasing the number of people doing the work of relationship-building, listening and advocacy.

Engaged journalism offers an opportunity to build not only an audience for this work (meaning, people who consume and share content), but a community that will contribute to the work of information gathering, reporting and distribution, provide eyes and ears on the ground, be equipped to take action and, ultimately, increase the impact of that work. Building power also means embracing a very different power dynamic between journalists and audiences and communities than our field has previously known. Once journalists and news organisations start to recognise that they have power, they have a responsibility to use it thoughtfully. And when the public holds the news media accountable to its promises and responsible use of its power, that accountability builds and maintains trust.

There’s been an ongoing conversation in the field of engaged journalism about how we might learn from community organising. You can see signs of its influence in City Bureau’s community engagement guidelines, in the work of graduate students in the Social Journalism programme at City University of New York, and in the development of ‘movement journalism’ to cover social justice in the American South.

News Voices, a project of the US-based non-profit organisation Free Press, offered this way of thinking about organising for journalism in its 2018 guide on the topic:

“This work requires us to build relationships based on shared values, and out of those relationships cultivate an organised constituency that’s ready, willing and able to demand change and hold the powerful accountable. This is called building power.

“Since journalists and news organisations have access to information in communities, have

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2 The author of this report was Journalism Programme Director at Free Press from 2015-2018 and co-developed the News Voices project.
relationships with people in power, and have a platform, organising in the context of journalism requires sharing power. And sharing power starts with shifting away from a traditional newsroom culture of transactional relationships to a culture that prioritises deep listening and collaboration to build relationships that are rooted in community.”

To seed Accelerator conversations about building power, we asked co-founder and director of Impact Hub Birmingham, Immy Kaur, about her community organising in the city. Impact Hub, which hosted our workshop, is the anchor for a variety of efforts to create a more equitable civic infrastructure, including a movement known as radical childcare, which emerged from public conversations with Birmingham residents about the lives they wanted to live and the ways they wanted to see their community flourish. These community-rooted efforts toward solutions provided an example from outside of journalism that sparked our discussions.
This report explores the ways Accelerator grantees and participants are:

- building power in their work engaging communities
- building power within their news organisations to make engagement integral to their work
- building power as a community of practice to create and sustain a culture of engagement and collaboration within the field

**BUILDING ON THE ACCELERATOR’S RECOMMENDATIONS FROM MADRID**

At our [December 2018 gathering in Madrid](#), we explored the question, *What would journalism look like if it was generated from within rather than for communities?* Among the topics, we discussed: how do we manage the engagement process, and what perks do we offer to our members? What does success look like and how do you measure engagement? How can we involve users in investigations? How do we safeguard the people involved in our journalism?

In [our report](#) from the Madrid workshop, we presented five recommendations for the engaged journalism community. Here is a brief update on how the Accelerator and its community are responding to those recommendations:

**1. Make internal culture change a priority**

- We invited news organisations to send two people to our Birmingham workshop rather than one. This way, colleagues return to their organisations with a shared experience, having absorbed the same language, analysis and sense of possibility. Several attendees reported later on that having a colleague present made it easier for them to sustain the work of internal culture change upon their return.
- Culture change is a particular challenge for traditional news organisations. See our brief case studies on p. 25 on Birmingham Mail’s Brummie Mummies, p. 28 on New Internationalist and OpenDemocracy, and p. 30 on the BBC, for examples of how the Accelerator has supported change in these news organisations.
TRY THIS: Maldita conducts staff interviews every six months to obtain feedback from team members about how they are feeling about their work and Maldita’s progress. In the most recent evaluation, it was found that some projects were delayed because staff needed sign off from one of the founders, who are not always in the office due to work commitments. The whole team is now working together to identify opportunities to overcome this challenge. But in the interim, this practice shows the usefulness of undertaking and reflecting on internal processes regularly.

“Every time I come back from a [work] trip, I update the team and try to engage them in what I have gained from each event, what should we change in our strategy and why the changes that I’m proposing are crucial. [With different team members now going to Accelerator events] more people from the team realise the need of these new ideas [...] and even using the same words to describe [...] what I have expressed to the team in the past so many times. So of course now it’s much easier to engage the whole team than when I was the only person who had realised the need for changes.”

2. Face value speaks louder than online tools alone

- All grantees are experimenting with live events as part of their grant commitment, and several Birmingham participants shared their experience of running live events. Including Brummie Mummies, which has built a community among parents and caregivers through live events and Facebook groups (see case study on p. 25), Decât o Revistă’s DoR Live and pop-up newsroom initiatives, and Clydesider’s Creative Cafes and Walkin’ Talkin’ sessions.

TRY THIS: As part of the Accelerator, Médor is running a series of events in which the team will temporarily relocate to four different cities outside of Brussels, to listen to local residents and work with them on an investigation of their choice. The Médor team has realised that each of the cities requires different approaches and that the same format
cannot be reused across all four. Subsequently, Médor has spent time on the ground in each location to develop a more tailored methodology for the events, based on the needs of each community.

“From the feedback forms that were completed [at one of our Creative Cafes], attendees said they left the event feeling ‘better’ than when they had arrived, particularly those that took part in the laughter therapy and photography sessions. A woman who cares full-time for her son came to the photography walk very stressed, but remarked that she felt much calmer by the end, while others said they felt ‘hopeful’ and encouraged by writing music.”

3. Simplify the language you use and enhance accessibility to your work

- We talked a lot in Birmingham, and also in our ongoing monthly community calls, about the language we use to convey the purpose of our work, the practices we use and the value journalism brings. This was particularly relevant to conversations about how to build and sustain membership models. See the section on p. 18 on ‘lessons in creating and sustaining value’.
- There are useful examples from the US, including the work of engagement lead, Journalism + Design at The New School, Cole Goins, who encourages news organisations to truly understand their communities through human-centred design processes and deep listening. And also co-founder at City Bureau, Andrea Hart, who suggests that traditional production of news mirrors unhealthy codependent relationships - such as having an exaggerated sense of responsibility for actions of others, and a tendency to do more of their share all of the time. Therefore, if we know this doesn’t work in human-human relationships, why do we think it works in journalism? To overcome these barriers, news organisations can, instead of being exclusive, collaborate with communities and make a call for radical transparency so people feel like they are makers instead of experts.
TRY THIS: As it builds a community of young solution-oriented correspondents in Denmark, Koncentrat has developed a guide explaining what students need to know before applying. This process has led the team to think carefully about what Koncentrat’s value is and how they communicate it to 12-17 year olds interested in learning more about the craft and role of journalism. Koncentrat’s decision to use inspirational language, such as ‘creating change through journalism’, is designed to appeal to the target group.

“Not all communities want to be listened to – partnerships are key, as well as having people in your staff that are representative of the communities you are looking to work with, to be able to build trust with them.”

4. Avoid parachuting into communities

- Our conversations in Birmingham advanced from merely why this matters, to a deeper dive into how it’s done. Building long-term relationships with communities takes time and practice, and navigating those relationships can be tricky. See p. 16 for the section ‘lessons in navigating community relationships’. For instance, how can a traditional broadcaster pursue deep local engagement while serving a national audience? See the case study on p. 30 to learn how the BBC used thoughtful engagement to begin reporting on a city in Yorkshire where it had previously had no footprint.

- Head of engagement at The Ferret and community organiser for Bureau Local, Rachel Hamada, brought a question to the breakout session that speaks to the heart of these issues: How do we end an investigation without abandoning the community that the organisation has relied on throughout the reporting and storytelling? See the case study on p. 33 to learn how Bureau Local brought about a graceful conclusion to its investigation into deaths in homelessness in the UK.

TRY THIS: Part of On Our Radar’s work is equipping local people to be community reporters through training. Rather than parachuting in and doing a one-off reporting project, On Our Radar teaches reporting and storytelling skills to individuals, building a long-lasting network and resource in that community that they can work with regularly.
The organisation works with people who are often unable to share stories on their own terms, using a framework that aims to enhance the community’s connectivity, capacity, confidence and conviction.

5. Undertake research and development on the link between trust and revenue/resilience

- The need for meaningful metrics was a big topic in Birmingham. Participants stressed that meaningful metrics depend on the specific goals of each story, project and element of the work at hand. Some suggested to measure not only output (how many stories are produced and how many unique visitors to the website) but also input, for what it tells you about how you do your work. For instance, if you want to track how well you’re doing at keeping the community engaged, measure not only how many community-generated articles you publish, but how many members of the community return to contribute to articles.
- For an example from the US, jesikah maria ross from Capital Public Radio in California, used the Impact Pack developed by Dot Connector Studio, to help the radio station team to prototype and evaluate their media engagement plans. Dot Connector Studio is also conducting research into how engagement can lead to more revenue through subscriptions, membership and grants etc.
- There remains a significant need for research across the industry on the link between engagement, trust and revenue. See p. 14 for some ideas about how we can start to unpick this.

💡 TRY THIS: Krautreporter is using funding from the Accelerator to build a ‘trust funnel’ to map and understand the behaviours that lead users who interact with the publication for the first time to actually become paying members. With the support of a mentor who has expertise in customer insights/ analytics, the Berlin-based digital magazine has also started to consider mapping lapsed memberships. Including aspects around why a user might let their membership lapse, or why they intentionally cancel their membership, and how to prevent this process in the future.
“Getting a snapshot (through a survey and interviews) of members’ trust in general, as well correlations, was a good starting point. Most members gave us a very good rating on the trust statement (‘Compared to other media, I trust Krautreporter’s reporting’). However [...] we found that trust has little to do with members’ actual activity in terms of engagement or reading frequency [...]”

“One factor, however, stands out as a determinant of general trust in Krautreporter – feeling well-informed. This points towards two interpretations. Firstly, well-crafted journalism still works, and secondly, we need better and more detailed terminology to grasp what this trusting relationship is made of beyond a reliable information transaction. Furthermore, developing hypotheses about what generates trust, through interviews before the survey, would have been a logical first step.”

UNDERSTANDING ENGAGED JOURNALISM’S CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH THE ACCELERATOR COMMUNITY

Since the Accelerator’s launch in April 2018, our goal has been not only to support European news organisations that place community engagement at the heart of their strategy, but to learn from them – what’s working, what’s challenging and what can we do together? Grants and mentoring are key to directly supporting organisations to overcome challenges and exploit opportunities, while our events have an added dimension of connecting and learning. It’s during our events that news organisations hear directly from one another about the strategies they’re developing and how those strategies are playing out, about experiments they’re designing and what they’re finding out and iterating on the back of them, and where journalists build relationships of mutual support that they carry forward into their day-to-day work.
We've known from the start that resilience is a core concern. Journalism in Europe and globally faces a crisis of resilience in terms of financial sustainability, attention, trust and independence. Engagement is one path to a solution, but there's much we don't know about how engagement might address these concerns. We've also observed that scale has emerged as a challenge, in that engagement demands moving away from the broadcast model to one based on relationships, and relationships with communities resist scale.

We are also struck by the ways resilience and scale play out in the contrast between start-up versus traditional outlets. The vast majority of organisations in our database of engaged journalism publishers across Europe launched in the past 10 years, if not the past five, and small independents dominate.

Engagement is an ever-evolving set of practices, and start-up environments tend to encourage experimentation and nimble responses to change. Yet engagement is also a tremendous commitment of time and resources, and in a small news organisation the burden of that commitment can be difficult to sustain. Start-up organisations always face the challenge of how best to scale, and when engagement is at the core of their work, it can
be difficult to envision a way of scaling that maintains the integrity of relationships. By contrast, traditional news organisations aren’t known for being nimble but they often have incredible reach, having already scaled their newsgathering and publication. Traditional publishers also have infrastructure in place that can make the work of engagement more sustainable.

With that in mind, we note in this report contrasts between traditional and start-up organisations and what they have to learn from one another. As executive editor for News Online at the BBC, Eileen Murphy, put it: “I want to see larger, legacy organisations build the confidence to do this stuff. It’s too easy to think that someone else who is younger and more agile has got this covered. An organisation like the BBC not only has a public service remit, but has a loyal audience and a real need to connect with people it does not currently serve well. That’s why we need to work hard on engagement. Building it, displaying it prominently and measuring its success.”
How can we understand the link between engagement, trust and revenue?

Organisations in the US including The Trusting News Project, The Membership Puzzle Project, American Press Institute and Hearken have been undertaking research into this area, but so far there are no clear answers, in part because ‘trust’ is a complex and multifaceted idea that is hard to measure. Some academic research has also been undertaken, including The effects of journalistic transparency on credibility assessments and engagement intentions by Talia Stroud and Alexander Curry of the Center for Media Engagement, The University of Texas. Experimental results from this research ‘suggest that increasing transparency (by providing news consumers with information about why and how a story was written, details about the story’s author, etc.) leads to an increase in credibility evaluations and intentions to engage with news’.

We reiterate our earlier recommendation (p. 10) that the industry needs to undertake research and development on this connection. Here are some ways we might break down the big question into specific ones:

- What can we learn from European news organisations that have undertaken a community share offer or similar cooperative-style ownership structure? How can those organisations engage their member-owners meaningfully in their journalism while maintaining editorial independence? Do owner dividends provide an incentive for owners to promote and champion the organisation’s journalism (an incentive that doesn’t exist in the subscriber model)?

- What can we learn from non-journalism initiatives about the opportunities of community investment? In this 2019 report by UK innovation foundation Nesta, Taking ownership: community empowerment through crowdfunding investment, it highlights the link between non-financial contributions and advantages (such as increased volunteering, shared local knowledge and resources, and strengthened community resilience) and financial benefits:

“Financial stability is a challenge for most community organisations. Crowdfunded community investment can help address this by enabling more certainty through
longer term investment, flexibility in comparison to grant funding, the creation of new revenue streams, and increased accountability to the community. Showing that a project has backing from the public can provide the legitimacy needed to open doors to other sources of funding such as larger grant funding or social investment. Finally, giving the community a stake in an asset means they are likely to use it more, increasing revenue and sustainability of the project.”

- What sort of survey questions might news organisations use to measure willingness to pay (or otherwise offer support) beyond broad questions about trust? How can we check these survey responses against the actual choices of the public to pay or lend support?

- Despite Europe not having the same culture of crowdfunding that exists in the US, there are news organisations in Europe that are doing it effectively. Therefore, what can we learn from their efforts? How might news organisations convey the impact of their work and the unique role they play in a democracy, in a way that leads the public to support them financially?

- Another interesting approach is to look at the link between engagement, trust and revenue/resilience as a recipe. In undertaking research and exploring a range of organisations with strong business models, is there, say, a minimum and/or set number of ingredients (or conditions) that organisations need to be resilient? And do these need to be added in a certain order or at a certain stage? And lastly, are there different stages of readiness that organisations need to be at (both internally and in regards to their standing in their community – their reputation, how long they have been established for etc) in order for them to become resilient through their engagement and the trust they are gaining?

**KEY THEMES AND LESSONS FROM THE WORKSHOP IN BIRMINGHAM**

The themes of resilience and scale were further reflected in Birmingham by a range of organisations, from the Scottish local publication Clydesider to the pan-European digital
media collective Are We Europe, and from organisations such as Maldita that is debunking misinformation on contentious national elections, to The Bristol Cable that is building a community through reporting and storytelling at the local level.

The lessons that emerged from our conversations fall into roughly three categories:

- navigating community relationships
- creating and sustaining value
- building a community of practice

Lessons in navigating community relationships

What does it mean in practice to listen to your community? Sometimes the signal-to-noise ratio isn’t good, and, without careful design and facilitation, noise can overtake the process. Our participants shared their experiences learning how to keep the conversation strong. When conflict does arise, don’t be held hostage by the concept of community. You won’t please everyone and the ‘community’ won’t necessarily agree.
Community isn’t one thing, after all. (In fact, as our participants emphasised, the terms ‘community’ and ‘engagement’ have very different connotations in different languages and cultures – not all of them positive.) A community can be defined by geography, by common interest or by shared experience. The German investigative outlet Correctiv has identified many of these shared interests and publishes more than a dozen newsletters catering to different topics and the groups of people that care most about them.

**TIP 1:** Tailor your engagement to the community (or sub-community) best suited to the subject at hand.

We live in a time when attacks on journalists are very real, and trolls – both online and offline – can and do target reporters with threats and harassment. But trolls are the extreme of a bigger challenge for engagement: disruptive people – those with their own agendas and axes to grind – whose purpose may be contrary to yours or simply hard to figure out. Dealing with disruptive people is time consuming and draining. It’s okay to avoid them or cut them loose. Decide on your values, communicate those values and engage the elements of the community that share those values unapologetically.

**TIP 2:** You can’t make everyone happy all the time, so be clear on your goals, values and rules of engagement.

Filters can reduce the likelihood that people will be able to be disruptive. Filters can include registration forms, minimum commitments of time, or training. For instance, the Spanish fact-checking outlet Maldita uses surveys and training modules to vet contributors. However, Birmingham attendees raised the concern that those barriers can filter out people based on their access to technology and wealth, not their suitability for participation.

**TIP 3:** Use filters to ensure community participants want to advance shared values rather than their own agendas.

Relationships take work, and that work takes time and resources that make it tough to sustain. That’s why it’s so important to remember you don’t need everybody; you need the
right people, the ones who will make your journalism more resilient and help you reach a larger community of people who find value in what you do. This is how you build power.

“When you don’t see your community as one community but a combination of different communities, you need different measures for each, then you can understand them better.”

Lessons in creating and sustaining value

The challenge behind aligning public participation and resilience comes down to this: Does the public value the journalism that we produce? Which raises the related question: What’s in it for them?

For some people, contributing their time and expertise may be a satisfying hobby; for others, it may be akin to a political act. Participating in reporting and storytelling may be an opportunity for creative expression or a way to develop marketable job skills. Regardless, everyone wants to feel that their work is recognised and valued by the people they’re working with.
TIP 4: Don’t assume you know why people are motivated to support or help you – ask them.

A number of news organisations have found that community participants value training. Community members may be curious to learn new skills, or they may see training in reporting, photojournalism or fact-checking as a professional development opportunity. In the latter case, make sure the training you offer is solid, and consider offering a certificate or job reference upon successful completion.

For some news organisations, training is integral to the mission. Solomon, an outlet based in Greece with a mission to promote social inclusion through media, has made training central to its work. Solomon’s LAB is a series of workshops that introduces people to the power of journalism and media-making. Solomon is building a movement, and its training builds power. The organisation recently hired one of its LAB participants as a Farsi translator, a move that indicates how highly it values participants’ skills and contributions.

TIP 5: Provide training as a way to offer something of value to those who contribute their time and expertise.

Members of the community who find value in journalism can be powerful ambassadors, conveying that value in a way that journalists themselves may not do well and can’t do alone. In this way they help scale the outreach to new groups of people.

New Internationalist, a media organisation founded with a social mission in 1973, engages ambassadors in a variety of ways. Much of its marketing is done through outreach that resembles charity campaigns more closely than conventional marketing. This face-to-face engagement network trains volunteers to go to university campuses, music festivals and other gatherings to talk about its magazine and encourage people to subscribe. The organisation also trains ambassadors to run workshops on topics covered in the magazine, such as whether the West should stop giving aid to Africa. Last year, 35 workshops reached more than 7,000 people.
Workshop participants also talked about ambassadors as eyes and ears in the community who bring back understanding, insights, story ideas, reactions to reporting and other valuable input. In this way, ambassadors scale the reporting capacity of the organisation. The challenge, then, is how to manage the information ambassadors bring and maintain relationships with them in a way that’s sustainable. Doing so requires practices and workflows outside traditional journalism.

**TIP 6:** Because community ambassadors also have the power to put your brand at risk, formal oversight is key when enlisting them. (For example, New Internationalist volunteers are managed by a paid staffer who coordinates campaigns to ensure ambassadors are aligned with the mission.)

Membership is an increasingly attractive avenue to build and sustain value over time – including leveraging people’s contributions and expertise – and to avoid relying solely on advertising as a revenue stream.

In Birmingham, participants at various stages of exploring membership were eager to dig into specifics. Ukrainian outlet *Tvoe Misto* is in the process of launching a membership
offering and it is asking important questions such as how much to charge, what the benefits of membership should be, and how to communicate the value. These questions are especially tough in places without a culture of crowdfunding or paying for content.

**TIP 7:** When launching a membership programme, learn from the experience of other publications and look beyond membership purely as a way of bringing in income.

Some outlets in the UK have undertaken a community share offer, in which members of the public buy shares and become co-owners of a company. New Internationalist launched one in 2017, changing its ownership structure from a worker-owned cooperative to a cooperative society owned by 3,400 members. Co-editor Yohann Koshy said the magazine is still beginning to explore how this ownership change will play out in its engagement approaches. The team polled co-owners on which topics they want to see covered and invited them to encourage local news agents to stock the magazine. “It's been an ongoing experiment in media ownership. We don't have any clear answers,” he said.

**TIP 8:** Use crowdfunding campaigns or a community share offer as a way to boost liquidity in the short term, but don’t rely purely on these models for long-term financial sustainability.

Belgian magazine Médor operates under a cooperative structure. Founding editor Quentin Noirfalisse expressed the importance of continually growing the pool of members and listening to what they want, to develop the next tier of paying users and not only relying on the same members.

“We should communicate the value of quality journalism to the community. If we achieve a goal, we should show them what has changed with their support. That will help make the circle bigger and bigger.”
Lessons in building a community of practice

It’s always been our intention that the Engaged Journalism Accelerator helps to create and sustain a community of practice among engaged journalists across Europe. This means offering financial and other direct support to a cohort of grantees, including four Closed Call grantees that we selected in October 2018 and another eight Open Call grantees that we selected in January 2019. Developing this community also means engaging a broader group of news organisations of all kinds in our online and offline events, to learn from and offer support to.

In the process, we’ve learnt a few things about what sort of support is most valuable and how that value grows and gets expressed:

Whether they’re isolated within a large traditional news organisation or working in a very small start-up team, the people who do engaged journalism often feel like they are the only ones doing this type of journalism. People within the Accelerator community have said that our events and monthly community calls offer a much-needed opportunity to talk through challenges and get new ideas and feedback on their work. These conversations tend to bolster their confidence that they’re on the right track.

What’s more, these opportunities to create open lines of communication that often turn into collaborations. Following our Birmingham workshop, New Internationalist began talking to another media cooperative, The Bristol Cable, about using its online membership platform to manage memberships, conduct polls and the like.

In 2018, regional news organisation Diario de Navarra, based in Pamplona in northern Spain, started a project called ‘DN más cerca’ as a way to involve its community in the future of the publication. Director of new formats, Alfredo Casares, participated in the Accelerator workshop in Madrid last December and joined the community to continue to discuss engagement topics and approaches tackled at the event. Diario de Navarra was subsequently awarded a mini-grant from the University of Oregon’s Agora Journalism Center for ‘DN más cerca’, as part of the ‘Engaging Communities’ initiative. Alfredo credits the Accelerator for the ‘inspiration, support and confidence’.

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In 2019, Solomon and Are We Europe, the Dutch representative of the Accelerator Ambassador Network, were connected through the Accelerator. They then partnered, along with Dare To Be Grey foundation and freelance journalists to collaborate on a multimedia story produced in a week in Greece, as part of Are We Europe’s Edges of Europe series. Cross-border collaborations like this are rare and go to show the growing strength of the engaged journalism community in Europe.

To build a community of engaged journalism means building power among organisations and the people within them. When we’ve put in the work to build relationships, we can mobilise our network in moments of need and opportunity.

**TIP 9: Build momentum for people to re-connect regularly (in particular face-to-face), and also find ways to encourage new people to become part of the community of practice.**
“There were valuable takeaways from the Accelerator workshop in Birmingham. We shared knowledge and tackled very important issues related to the organisations. Most importantly, we had the chance to come together face-to-face and discuss our ideas, doubts, risks, innovations and challenges as well as to form new and concrete ideas.”

CASE STUDIES IN BUILDING POWER THROUGH ENGAGED JOURNALISM

Sometimes the best way to learn is by diving into specifics. The following case studies evolved out of conversations in Birmingham, and we followed up with interviews to dive deeper and draw out lessons.

Three of the cases involve traditional news organisations: The Birmingham Mail, which developed a community among local caregivers of young children using a combination of digital engagement, live events and tailored content; New Internationalist and OpenDemocracy, outlets with a rich history and global reach looking to engage their...
audiences and contributors on an international scale; and the BBC, which used thoughtful engagement to bring local stories to its broadcast and digital platforms.

As previously noted, one of the first lessons of engaged journalism is not to parachute into a community. Bureau Local can’t be accused of parachuting – as we explore in the fourth case study, the organisation committed to investigating deaths in homelessness in the UK and built strong relationships with the people directly affected. But that level of engagement on a single topic isn't sustainable for a small, start-up organisation. The organisation’s challenge reflects a tension common in engagement – the challenge of resilience for deep, relationship-based work.

**CASE STUDY 1 (BIRMINGHAM MAIL): BUILDING A COMMUNITY ORGANICALLY WITH EVENTS AND DIGITAL**

Raising a family is expensive no matter where you live. In the diverse city of Birmingham, the second largest in the UK, a traditional news organisation developed an engaged community called Brummie Mummies for families and caregivers. A project of the Birmingham Mail, it emerged organically through a very simple offering: information about free and low-cost events for families.

“It was a very slow burn,” said parenting and lifestyle editor, Zoe Chamberlain, “but straight away we started to realise that this community was interested in different stories than what we thought they would be interested in.”

The story of Brummie Mummies offers lessons in how to grow a community organically through a combination of live events and digital engagement. It’s also a case where an engaged journalism project functioned like an innovation lab within a traditional news organisation, experimenting and learning in ways that have benefitted the wider organisation.

**TIP 10:** Committing time and resources to an objective-oriented engagement project or experiment is an effective way for traditional organisations to innovate.
Originally, Chamberlain used a Facebook group to post content from the publication’s family life section. She noticed the group expressed a lot of interest in free events happening in and around Birmingham - the sort of thing the wider publication wouldn’t include in its coverage - so she made a point to find and include them. Soon, Brummie Mummies hosted its own free family event at a local climbing center. Chamberlain made 60 free tickets available on Eventbrite and they were gone within an hour. All 80 tickets to a second event at a botanical garden were gone within half an hour.

But, as is often the case with free tickets, about half of those who signed up didn’t show, and some attendees were annoyed that they weren’t able to bring friends. Chamberlain asked the group if they’d be willing to pay a small fee of £3 to £5 per ticket as a commitment, and the response was positive. Events continue to be a central feature of Brummie Mummies, with venues offering to pay to host them. The emphasis continues to be on fun, low-cost things to do with kids.

**TIP 11:** When building a community through live events, sometimes it’s better to charge a small amount for tickets to ensure people are committed to attending.
Meanwhile, the content of Brummie Mummies has evolved in tandem with the online community. Brummie Mummies exists primarily as a Facebook group, though it also has a presence on Twitter and Instagram. Some content ends up in Birmingham Mail's family life section or the dedicated Brummie Mummies section on Birmingham Live, and stories with broader appeal go on the main page. While these stories don't necessarily have the highest page views, they tend to do well in time spent on page, a metric Chamberlain said reflects the relevance of the articles to their intended audience.

A newsletter was born organically when members of the community began to ask for a way to keep up with all the news and events. “I've got mums thrusting their email addresses into my hands on scraps of paper at events, which is really lovely,” Chamberlain said. The Brummie Mummies newsletter has the highest click-through rate of any of the Birmingham Mail's newsletters.

Chamberlain said the most important lesson for others is to allow growth to be organic, and to bring the community along with you as you make changes. For instance, as some of the Mail's sister publications have launched parenting groups with social events, they've found that it doesn't work to start charging for tickets at the outset. “I think it's because ours has grown really organically as a result of talking to people and finding out exactly what they want, how they want to do it, and explaining why we're charging and getting them on board,” she said.

**TIP 12: Provide to the community what they say they need or want – such as a new product or service – not what you think they want.**

Since our Accelerator workshop in Birmingham, Chamberlain has worked more closely with the Birmingham Mail's social media team to come up with content ideas (everyone loves a good parenting meme). She’s also launched a series celebrating ‘families of courage’, an everyday-heroes feature that tells the stories of people facing adversity or helping their communities while raising families. In addition, a call-out to the community has prompted more than 200 stories for an ongoing feature – published only in the
Facebook group – on kitchen-table entrepreneurs who are members of the Brummie Mummies community.

**CASE STUDY 2 (NEW INTERNATIONALIST AND OPENDEMOCRACY): CAN ENGAGED JOURNALISM BE GLOBAL?**

Because engagement relies on human connection, we often think of engaged journalism in the context of local news. Yet, several participants in our Birmingham event work for news organisations that serve international audiences. Some publish in multiple languages. What does engagement mean for a news organisation with a global reach? Is community engagement an impossibility when the audience (the people who consume and share the content), the community (the people who also contribute to developing the journalism), and the scope of coverage are global?

After our workshop, we spoke directly with a handful of international outlets that attended to understand how they define and engage community at a global scale. Here’s what we learnt:

When a story connects at the human level, it taps into a broadly shared, if not universal, experience. Those stories can be rooted in the experience of a particular place while speaking to something people anywhere can recognise. To that end, several organisations have turned the microphone or camera over to their subjects to enable their voices and points of view without the filter of the institution, making the stories more human, more immediate and thus more compelling.

**TIP 13:** The power of a single story can transcend its local interest, therefore, think about the different ways you can connect people in different places, to draw on shared experiences and knowledge, and enable them to amplify their voices.

*New Internationalist* published a discussion about climate change in its magazine, about a 19-year-old Pacific Islander climate activist in conversation with a 14-year-old climate activist from England. “It was an example of our content staging a kind of global
conversation”, co-editor Yohann Koshy said. In that sense, the international organisation becomes a platform for local stories that have a global resonance. The publication is more of a conduit or “facilitator” as one editor put it, than a centralised, all-knowing news desk.

OpenDemocracy, founded in 2001 with a mission to support civil society, has a team of only about 30 people but a global reach to activists and policy makers. Managing editor Julian Richards said that over the years, the organisation has developed a deep and wide network of writers and contributors. OpenDemocracy has local writers covering post-Soviet states, Latin America, and working with the Fund for Global Human Rights to profile human rights defenders around the world. This kind of network is what makes it possible to mobilise quickly to investigate election fraud in Hungary, for instance, or document far-right activity during the recent European Union elections. Richards noted this as a form of building power within the journalism community. “We can get insider, expert coverage of things beyond our parochial borders. The better your network, the more quickly you can do that,” Richards said.
What isn’t yet clear, despite being established for 18 years, is how to develop a comparable network of international supporters to help the organisation move from relying on philanthropic funding to generating more revenue through memberships and contributions. Richards said having more two-way communications with readers is key to both better content and greater financial sustainability. “We can’t be hyperlocal, but we do need to find a way of engaging people more than simply them receiving what we decide to give them.”

**CASE STUDY 3 (BBC NEWS ONLINE): HOW TO DO DEEPLY LOCAL STORIES FOR A NATIONAL AUDIENCE**

At the end of the Accelerator workshop in Madrid, participants wrote themselves postcards with messages about ideas, plans or brainstorms they wanted to revisit. Eileen Murphy wrote herself a postcard asking how she might syndicate the idea of engagement within the BBC. Then she made it happen.
As executive editor for News Online, Murphy leads the development of editorial teams and systems across the BBC, connecting local news organisations with the BBC News website and television news. In other words, it’s her job to reach across this large traditional organisation and try new things.

As an advocate for community engagement, she knew that connecting the dots would be a challenge. “We were doing stuff. But one thing in one space and another elsewhere. And we were not sharing very well – be that resources or what we had learned. We needed to engage with one another as well as the audience.”

She had a mandate to reach audiences that felt the BBC didn’t serve them well and “ensure their ideas and stories are reflected”. Putting aside her own project, Murphy and her colleagues worked on a deep-dive local approach in collaboration with the digital team and the television news team. These stories would be rooted in place, but made for a broad set of audiences.

They chose to work in the Northern cities of Bradford and Middlesbrough, areas where the BBC has a traditional reach but where the organisation wanted to reconnect and find a new and different audience. Bradford is a city of half a million people, where more than 30 per cent of the population is people of black, Asian and minority ethnicity and more than a quarter of the population is aged under 20. The city is covered by BBC News from within the region, but it doesn’t have a BBC local radio station. The new project sought to strengthen the BBC’s local presence there by doing things a little differently.

“How do you engage with people but not give the impression that you’re riding into town, picking up a bunch of stories from them and, frankly, riding back out of town?” Murphy mused. “Experience shows us that when that happens, you can leave people feeling worse off than before you gave them some attention. People may feel ignored, but when you actually show them attention but then take it away, they feel even more deprived. It has to be sustainable in some way.”
The project team started by enlisting its existing local reporters to lead the project in each city and set up a pop-up news desk in a shopping area, with reporters using iPads and laptops to invite local residents to share their stories. “There was a pop-up newsroom in the street, inviting people to talk about whatever mattered to them.” The team gathered stories for several days before conducting on-camera interviews for the broadcaster. The BBC also hosted a town hall session in Bradford. Besides airing stories on the television and posting them to the BBC’s website, they also published to social media using the #BBCWeAreBradford and #BBCWeAreMiddlesborough hashtags.

**TIP 14:** Make time to listen, earn people’s trust and understand the nuances of a place and community before you turn on the cameras.

They also committed to presenting stories in residents’ own voices rather than always filtering them through a BBC reporter holding a microphone. Murphy pointed to one powerful account told by a young Bahinga Yorkshireman. His story is rooted in the community where he lives while also conveying the widely relatable themes about movement, culture, identity and belonging that make it compelling to a broader audience. “Where people live, the communities they’re in and the people next to them reflect their identity,” she said. “But there are other forms of identity and interest. You can feel a sense of community without it necessarily being about location.

“The fact that it’s him telling it probably has much more appeal and strength than if I went and told that story, or another correspondent from the BBC,” she added. “As skilled as we may be in storytelling, the relatability and authenticity of that story is strengthened by the fact that it’s a first-person piece.”

**TIP 15:** Know when the first-person story will be more effective than the journalist’s report on that person.

Traditional news organisations have a particular opportunity: to use their platforms to connect local stories to a broader audience. Murphy said that’s part of what the BBC can offer to the people its reporters engage with. “It’s not just about saying to the people of Bradford or any other city or place, ‘We’re interested in you, we want you to tell your
It's also about saying 'We are opening up your stories to the world.' That's a huge part of what I want to do with our engagement projects. It's not just people talking amongst themselves. One of the strengths of the BBC is that we want to tell those stories around the world."

**TIP 16:** Open up your platform to communities in order to amplify local stories, which is a way to build and share the power that journalists have.

**CASE STUDY 4 (BUREAU LOCAL): WHEN IT’S TIME TO MOVE ON FROM AN INVESTIGATION**

Sometimes an investigation succeeds wildly, as did Bureau Local's investigation into deaths in homelessness in the UK. The investigative series blended data journalism, old-school reporting and the human stories of those who died. That's what made the series powerful, and that's also what made it hard to end the project even after it had achieved its goals.

Community organiser for Bureau Local, Rachel Hamada, brought forward this question in a breakout session at the Birmingham workshop: “How do we bring a long-term engaged investigation to a close in a way that honours the relationships we've built?”

Before the investigation, no one body (including government, charity or journalistic) kept count of how many people had died while homeless in the UK. To compile its own count, the Bureau Local worked with a network of local reporters as well as charities and grassroots organisations. It also memorialised each death, pulling together names, photos and stories where possible. In December 2018, a little more than a year after the investigation launched, the UK’s Office for National Statistics started to produce official data on homeless deaths in England and Wales, and the Registers of Scotland announced they will do so, as well. A charity called the Museum of Homelessness agreed to take over the memorial and storytelling aspect of the work. Few investigations lead to such concrete results.
With this success, Bureau Local was eager to free up its resources to pursue new investigations. Continuing to devote the same amount of resources to the story indefinitely was unsustainable. But it felt wrong to walk away from the relationships that reporters and editors had built in the process. The nature of the topic required thoughtfulness and respect. Consequently, Bureau Local took certain steps after the investigation had finished in order to enable people to continue to have access to the information and for them to keep in touch afterwards.

The team sought to convene stakeholders by hosting a roundtable discussion. The roundtable was an opportunity to open up conversations again, review the outcomes of the investigation, share thoughts on how Bureau Local might archive or create a legacy from the findings, and identify issues the organisation could look at next. For example, participants suggested a look into structural housing issues, including those responsible for housing vulnerable people and those profiting from council outsourcing. There was also positive feedback that this investigation had gathered various community members (volunteers, reporters, charity workers, academics and policy makers) together for the very first time.
During our workshop, we explored a variety of approaches and ideas that other news organisations might learn from. One participant noted that cultural anthropologists have a concept called ‘returning the story’, in which an ethnography is shared with the subjects of the study in a way that conveys gratitude and respect for their contributions. Another example is, if the community around an investigation doesn't access technology with ease, explore the possibility of a physical archive at a library or community center. In the case of the homeless deaths investigation, its lead reporter is working on a book.

**TIP 17:** Make sure the investigation and stories are archived online and offline, and the archives are well organised, and accessible for people with different needs.

**TIP 18:** A live event (not necessarily with a journalistic focus) can offer a chance to celebrate, bond and mark the end of the process. Depending on the nature of the story, this could be a town-hall meeting, a storytelling event, an art exhibit or a community meal.

**CONCLUSIONS AND WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE ACCELERATOR**

In creating this report, and in continuing to work with grantees and other organisations in our community, we have captured new insights, but also reaffirmed insights and recommendations that we presented after our event in Madrid. The tips and takeaways in this report aren’t intended to be ‘groundbreaking’ or entirely new concepts (engaged journalism, after all, isn’t). What they are intended to be are accessible, practical and effective steps that all news organisations – both traditional and start-up – can implement in order to build and share power with their communities.

These ideas and themes have helped us as a programme to shape our own activities. For example, for our most recent event **Engagement Explained Live**, in Berlin in June, we took the recommendation of **TIP 9: Build momentum for people to re-connect regularly (in particular face-to-face), and also find ways to encourage new people to become part of the community of practice.** We welcomed 140 practitioners from more than 20 countries to this open event. We also provided travel stipends to 14 people from news organisations that don't have professional development budgets.
The insights in this report (and what we learnt at Engagement Explained Live) will also drive the activities of the Accelerator in the coming months. We will:

- host another open event, in October/November (location and details to be confirmed)
- capture and share what our mentors are learning, and how they are helping grantees to develop their objectives
- publish a directory of experiments, which is designed to help news organisations introduce engagement practices internally, and try new ways to engage communities
- formally capture, evaluate and share the progress and impact that our grantees, and our Ambassadors, are making.

💡 **DO THIS:** Join our community to find out about Accelerator events first, so you can secure your place; receive updates about Ambassador meetups in your country; receive news about our monthly community video calls; and have the chance to input on resources and case studies produced by the Accelerator team.

💡 **DO THIS:** Sign up to our fortnightly Engagement Explained newsletter to receive case studies of European news organisations, including step-by-step guides about how they implemented specific ideas and projects; relevant and insightful articles related to engaged journalism; and updates on what the Accelerator team are getting up to.

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**About Fiona Morgan**

Fiona Morgan is a journalist, researcher, organiser and engagement specialist, and the founder of independent consulting practice Branchhead Consulting. She works with non-profits, news organisations, funders and community-based organisations to build stronger local news and information ecosystems.

**About the Engaged Journalism Accelerator**

The Engaged Journalism Accelerator is a programme delivering grant funding, coaching, mentoring, resources and events to support engaged journalism in European news organisations. The Accelerator launched in April 2018 and is entirely run by the European Journalism Centre (EJC), an international non-profit headquartered in The Netherlands. It is supported by a €1.7 million fund from News Integrity Initiative and Civil.