Public Political Talk on Twitter and Facebook:

The View from Journalists

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Executive summary

Journalists are heavy users of Twitter, but what role do journalists play in political conversations on Twitter, and what role do they think they should play? And where were the best (e.g. most moderate, most civil) conversations on Twitter and Facebook that journalists were a part of, and how might journalists help those conversations improve?

Those were some of the questions examined in a textual analysis of Twitter threads, along with 42 in-depth interviews with journalists from 37 national or large metro news organizations and non-profit news organizations` who were very active on social platforms in broadcast/cable, radio, online and print, including several non-profits. Five major findings emerged:

1. **"Not My Job:"** Traditional journalists do not aim to decrease polarization. Amplifying extremists sometimes comes with the job of objectivity, unless there is a case of false equivalency as in climate change;
2. **Amplify Journalism:** Even if it's from a competing news organization, the journalists we talked to respond to the onslaught of "fake news" by countering with "good" journalism
3. **"The Great Pullback:"** Journalists abandon Twitter for audience engagement. Instead they only use the platform for networking with other journalists or political elites or to push content. Many are turning to more private connections with audiences. The result is less access for non-connected, non-savvy citizens who do not know how to get on news listserves or into closed Facebook groups;
4. **"Journalists Diverge:"** We are witnessing a rising class of "engagement specialists" who are carefully constructing online communities. These journalists say it is the press' job to decrease polarization and to improve public discourse through intentional and authentic engagement on specific platforms.
5. **"Friend Me/Us, Friend You:"** Moderate dialogue happens when journalists engage directly and actively. Even participants on Twitter, when recognized by reporters, make meaningful posts centered in rational discourse, often changing their minds. Participants in closed spaces especially expect journalists to respond, guide, explain, theorize and analyze with them. In return, participants help maintain and nurture the community and also, re-subscribe, renewing bonds with the brand.

"Not my Job"

The majority of the traditional, mainstream reporters we interviewed and observed claimed journalists play no role in bridging polar extremes, or even bringing disparate communities together. They felt no obligation to do so, as one columnist for a major metro daily made clear in this comment from an interview:

> **"I think journalists just have to do their job to the best of their ability and just be honest when they're on social media and engaging. If other people on the other side of that conversation want to really be a part of a conversation, they will. If all they want to do is kind of sling arrows at something, then that's not up to the journalists to sit there and say, well, let's see how we can figure this out. I think that's left up to the individual on Twitter."**

When asked if they ever tried to nurture a more centrist conversation, many demurred, as this columnist from another long-time major metro news organization did:

> **"No, I don't think of myself as that guy. I don't think of nurturing a centrist conversation, I don't even know how that would begin to happen. One thing I've discovered, just in doing the column, is that my power to guide the conversation towards what I think might be more fruitful areas is actually more limited than I'd like to think."**

For these journalists, the only major role for reporters was to find information, make sure it was accurate, and get it in front of audiences. This mindset was especially prevalent for high-profile, national-level professionals. Their social media accounts reflected this perspective, with very few of this group entering into conversations with people and instead focusing on pushing out their own stories or that of their colleagues. For these journalists, Twitter offered a chance to promote their own work as well as (mainstream) journalism in general, as a direct response to "fake news." Said one national political reporter: "I mostly use social media to monitor developments in the news, follow what my peers at other outlets are doing, monitor what newsmakers such as lawmakers or members of the administration are saying publicly, and also, to broadcast my own work and insight to a broader audience." In other words, instead of bridging differences on Twitter, these reporters sought to bridge with journalists into a tighter network of the profession.

This came out in articulations about audience; journalists in our sample considered "social" audiences to be made up of: 1) other journalists, 2) those who are politically aware, news junkies and their sources, 3) trolls and political extremists who spout vitriol, and 4) what one journalist, an editor of a non-profit, called "normals." He described these "normals" as "people [who] don't live and breathe this stuff and [whom] we want to bring them into the conversation and provide them with — I don't like this cliche but I'll use it because it's descriptive — news they can use." Despite these general categories, for these traditional, long-time reporters, audiences were fairly amorphous to the journalists, with several saying some version of what this Washington investigative political journalist articulated:

> **"These are people who are interested in the things I'm interested in, right? If I find it interesting, I assume that there are other like-minded people out there who will find what I'm writing about or reporting on is interesting as well. So, I don't worry too much about it. And like anybody else, I look to see how many retweets I get, or how many likes I get. It's always nice to get a lot of them because it means that somebody finds what you have to say of interest."**

Furthermore, this group of journalists, while lamenting the polarizing turn of politics, declined to accept any obligation as disseminators of public information to ameliorate the situation. Rather, they cited journalists' role as "truth tellers" in the public sphere. Said a Washington political reporter, "Our mission is to tell the truth, and to expose wrongdoing, corruption, hypocrisy. And oftentimes when we do stories along those lines, they can be polarizing, and they will be polarizing. But that should not inhibit us from performing our primary mission of truth tellers." The political consequences of reporting on extreme views were not thought of as the responsibility of journalists. An editor of a non-profit political journalism outfit asserted,

> **"I don't think we have any different responsibility based on the political perception of the sources in the story or the perspectives of the people we may be sharing in a story. So long as we…are fair and are factual and evidence-based, then let the cards fall where they may."**

Those who did feel it was their responsibility to report on extreme voices cited the journalistic norm of objectivity as key to their decision making. That said, all those interviewed worried that they contributed to the dominant public vitriol with what they published and agreed that it was their responsibility to not reproduce fake information or propaganda. Several of our participants, as this national broadcast network political reporter did, were vehement that they not amplify fringe groups merely for the sake of "balance":

> **"I'm not in the business of propaganda. I don't give a damn what side of the political spectrum you're on. I'm very anti false equivalency. I think we've gotten where we are because of it. I've shared things from Fox News with not as much fervor as I have from other news outlets because Fox has been challenged in its reporting. But where it gets it right, and where they have a point, and where it's relevant to the conversation, sure. But I'm not gonna twist myself into a pretzel to share things on the basis of some flawed notion of objectivity or equivalency."**

This reporter and others spoke out against this notion of false equivalency and called for critical judgment on the part of journalists. One columnist for a major metro news organization explained the importance of judgment in journalism and its relationship to objectivity:

> **"I think what we have seen in Twitter and Facebook is a lot of what we have seen in American journalism over the last 20 years, which is this idea that they have no responsibility to make judgment, no responsibility to make a call…That's one of the things that causes the news media trouble…I think there's some judgment that is called for to be made."**

One engagement editor at a statewide news organization differentiated and criticized the amplification of what she called "hateful groups…I don't think we should elevate people that are pro-hate." Rather, she contends that it is only when such alternatives are relevant and potentially productive that she will share them, implying that journalists must maintain a sense of critical judgment and responsibility in their amplification of various viewpoints. An anchor at a public broadcasting entity agreed that "I think it's sort of becoming a little bit more aware of how you're used, and we have a responsibility for that." He asserts that journalists have a responsibility to consider how their work may be "used" in the political agenda of fringe groups, and suggests that journalists should ask themselves, "Is this statement…newsworthy for newsworthiness sake, or am I part of a propaganda campaign?"

Rather than providing equal forum for such beliefs, one engagement specialist with a news consulting firm asked journalists to consider the norm of objectivity in light of the broader mission of journalism. She explained, "As much as journalists are objective, we do believe in democracy and a free society…That's a lot of where journalists' mission belief is. So, when those extremist voices are in fact trying to communicate that white supremacy is a good thing, that goes counter to the beliefs in journalism." Thus, she feels that while objectivity is an important facet of journalism, it is not necessarily prior to journalists' role in preserving democratic values and a free society. Journalists must therefore make judgments about whether their objective reporting serves these larger goals.

Thus, more traditionally oriented reporters, especially highly visible ones such as the participants in this research, work toward producing accurate, relevant and multi-perspective political information for dissemination on social platforms but do not work to bridge disparate communities in either online or offline spaces with that content in any way. Although they hope their journalism offers a reasonable and helpful accounting of what is happening, they do not strive for particularly centrist or moderate dialogue, preferring instead to amplify those perspectives they find to be the most factually true and relevant.

"The Great Pullback"

As a result of the vitriol they encounter, some journalists remove themselves from extensive social media debates, and some from Twitter completely. Several of our high-profile journalists (including those who helped pioneer journalistic social-media practices a decade ago) are pulling back from these spaces other than pushing out content. "I would say I've made a deliberate effort to not interact with people, at least not in a public way, meaning that I'm generally happy to talk to someone via DM or via email, but I try not to engage with people very extensively on Twitter," said a national political reporter. There is a belief that Twitter is not a fitting venue for "real conversations:"

"I just don't really think that the public nature of fighting with someone on Twitter is conducive to any sort of real conversation about where two people can come to some mutual understanding or, at least, acknowledgement of each other's positions," said another national political reporter. He continued:

"The most outrageous voices tend to draw, .. engagement of some kind, either various responses or likes or shares among a certain radical subset of the network, and that, in-and-of-itself, is essentially rewarding behavior that is not necessarily undertaken either in good faith or is not necessarily content that was posted to invite debate or rational discourse."

Such interaction runs contrary to the journalist's role, these reporters contended. As a columnist for a major metro daily added, "I think a lot of time people tend to put stuff off on journalists that is really not our role. So, I don't know that we have any particular part to play in improving the tenor of discussions on social media, at least not as a profession." Indeed, the numbers on the tweets we pulled for our qualitative analysis — 20 conversation threads each for 21 journalists — bear this lack of interest out with the majority of the journalists going in to these randomly pulled threads (some of which have hundreds of tweets) is one tweet. There are a few exceptions with one investigative reporter for the New York Times clocking in at 292, one syndicated columnist (one of our "engagement specialists"; see below) at 80, and a CNN journalist at 41.

Part of their rationale for this attitude is the problematic atmosphere on Twitter in particular. Moderate and civil voices tend to be drowned out by more vitriolic posts and get lost amid the reporters' various filters. As we saw in the evidence, national-level reporters had a higher

level of vitriol than the others in our sample as citizens often openly expressed that they believed the platform was meant to be that way. One of our political columnists who described himself as "moderate" said he actually enjoyed Twitter to spar with people but tried to engage with civility above all else. He said he was often called out for being too polite, indicating an expectation of this space as uncivil.

Several commented that "Twitter has no real people anymore," referring to the bots, paid political operatives, and trolls that run amok on the platform. One conservative talk show radio host said his life online was unlike the "real world," and described "an amazing disconnect;" "People in the real world are nothing like your Twitter feed. They're smart, they're open minded, they're actually polite. You can have a conversation with them. And so it is important to realize that your social media world is not the world. That it is not a mirror on society." Vitriol, especially for the high-profile journalists we talked to for this study, often got personal and mean (though as we see in the quantitative analysis, insults were not the majority of tweets). Consider getting thousands of tweets like this one, found on one of CNN's reporter feeds: "We literally hate you now. for 2 years you have called us the worst part of humanity. We fucking hate you...Before it was just a vote for the direction you wanted to see.. your side has made it extremely personal."

Several in our sample had so many filters on their feeds, they saw just a fraction of the content. The vitriol made reporters cynical about any improvement to polarization in these spaces. One conservative political commentator said, "you can try" to babysit the feed and redirect the conversation toward a more moderate tone, "but I think that ship has sailed. I really do. And when you're talking about people who are hanging out on the polar extremes, they don't want light; they just want heat and that's all they're going to be looking for." Some contended the "engagement" aspect of being on Twitter seemed like busy work to check boxes without any real benefit to anyone: "A lot of goading, a lot of pushing of buttons just to say you did it," said a radio political talk show host. This woman also cited concern for personal safety as the hate and venom increased on her feeds: "I don't know who half the people are that I engage with on Twitter, but they sure know where I am when I'm on air." This worry echoed throughout our interviews, especially among female journalists as well as reporters of color.

"Amplify Journalism"

When these reporters did engage, it was done so very selectively, such as by answering questions or correcting inaccuracies: "As a matter of course, we don't argue with people, but if there is some fact that they have wrong, if there's some context, we'll point that out," said an editor at a major political non-profit. In other words, for these journalists, their major role on Twitter was to amplify "real news." Indeed, almost all the participants felt the responsibility to share good journalism. As a syndicated columnist put it: "(W)e have to also be supportive of other journalists and use social media to promote strong journalism….. I've had too many thank-yous for sharing work and driving traffic to their sites to not believe that we can make a difference through it doing that." In reposting other journalists' work very intentionally, these prominent reporters are using online political spaces to remind citizens of the importance of truth and journalism, even in the face of institutional democratic undermining and direct

attacks on the press. Sharing other people's journalism also works in favor of the journalist's own credibility, argued a public radio show host, even if it means giving away clicks to competing news outlets: "I know we don't want to highlight other places because we feel like we'll lose our competitive edge, but I really think you become a knowledgeable and more robust source if you're sharing content that isn't always yours."

Political journalists told us they sometimes use their knowledge and resources to provide "live fact-checks" on suspicious social media posts. As one example, consider this excerpt from a Washington Post reporter's Twitter account, where he often links in the comments to fact-checking articles: "Mouth agape. Tripling down on a total Four-Pinocchio falsehood. Saying it over and over does not make it so. We have now fact checked this three times. It's still false." (This was in response to this tweet: "ENOUGH of the misinformation. This Administration did not create a policy of separating families at the border.") A major network broadcast political reporter said: "One of the biggest things I like to do in posts is if I see some idea going viral, that I think is misleading or shading the truth, to push back, to say, you know, look, I think people are getting an incomplete picture here because of X." He considers this work "another layer of day-to-day news coverage, where I'm usually just adding some additional reporting or perspective to stuff people are reading." To do so, however, is not without costs and the reporters expressed fatigue, frustration, and wariness about this part of their job. For one thing, real-time fact checking on social media drags journalists into arguments, which costs them extra time and effort: "So, if I'm spending an inordinate amount of time to just combat someone else's, trying to be a counter narrative, that's not my job," said a political anchor on a public broadcast station. Another, an engagement specialist at a state-wide daily, worries that fact-checking by retweeting factually false posts boosts the exposure of the disinformation.

Finally, the most frequent strategies that these journalists used for Twitter especially was networking with political elites and other journalists. Most of those they follow are these political insiders and most of their online conversations are with these people in direct messages. As one national political reporter told us: "There's probably like 20 to 30 people who I interact with by far the most. They're often people I've accumulated over the years, depending on what I'm reporting on." In other words, he said, "the core theme," on Twitter, "is still reporters talking to each other a lot."

"Journalists Diverge"

But some of these more traditionalist attitudes, strategies, and goals shifted for other journalists. In our sample, we discerned an emergent class of journalists who prioritized audience engagement in social-media spaces. Some of these people were calling themselves "engagement specialists," while others had more traditional titles like "reporter" or "op-ed editor;" but their mindset offered a stark contrast to the other half of the sample. For these journalists, social media platforms – and the aim of improving public dialogues – represented a key strategy in their organization's daily journalism work, and to their long-term survival. Consider what one engagement editor of a national-focused, alternative online news publication described as their aim:

"Our primary goal is to get high engagement on the individual posts on our Facebook page. That means people who are responding by sharing or commenting and really actively interacting with the stories and videos that we put up. We value that more than traffic or more passive forms of engagement such as likes or reactions. So it's more about deepening the relationship that a reader has with our organization, with everything that we post. That relationship goes beyond Facebook, ultimately converting some of our followers to newsletter subscribers and members who help support our journalism."

Several of our columnists, engagement specialists, and editorial directors across the country very explicitly declared that journalism's role today was about building community and not only disseminating facts. An engagement specialist at a large daily called it "connecting people to each other." Another engagement specialist at a southwest state-wide news entity said journalists have a significant obligation to "moderate discussions" to "push the conversations forward" while giving "people a place to voice their thoughts." For one engagement consultant, journalists can use social media platforms to not merely distribute information and share facts but as a place in which citizens can react emotionally to those facts based on their own experiences. "In the past...it's been 'we create a thing, we distribute the thing, and then we never talk about it again.'. ...Now we have the rare opportunity to create something, see how our audiences feel about it, see what it triggers, and then we can also listen to them," said an editor of a liberal news organization.

This emergent cohort of "engagement specialists" have different conceptions for journalism as a profession. First, they argue that a change of paradigm valuing audience engagement would increase traffic and foster a "two-way communication" that can encourage talk across differences. One engagement editor argued that interacting with audiences is "everything" because "we can't do anything without them." One conservative columnist advises journalists to "stop using Twitter as merely a way of promoting your stories, but also go back and see if anybody has responded" because that way they can ultimately "wind up getting more traffic over time." Second, they consider the engagement effort from journalists a measure against uncivil discourse on social media. One op-ed director at a large metro on the West Coast recommends that journalists take control of their own social media threads, "cause if you let the trolls and the haters and the nasty elements of the online world drive the discussion there, people who might otherwise want to have a thoughtful debate aren't gonna post there because it's not a good space for them."

Recommendations

We interviewed 23 "engagement specialists" who adopted a new role for journalists and whose paradigm seemed to indicate that they might be the kinds of journalists best equipped to nurture centrist conversation. Their production in online communities carefully massaged the groups into very structured, intentional environments. Indeed, the very best, most moderate and most civil conversations we found exist on individual Facebook pages, on closed Facebook group pages of the news organization, or in private direct messages in response to things like emailed newsletters. We title this section "Friend Me/Us, Friend You" because the major ingredients for civil, moderate conversations include active outreach by both journalists and citizens: building community and being present, setting standards, finding connections, and selecting platforms according to the kind of engagement you want to have. In response, citizens report in these spaces: more moderate conversations (e.g. more "light," less "heat"), more subscriptions and brand loyalty for the news organization, changed minds, and a calling out of the impediments to good talk.

"Friend Me/Us, Friend You"
Build Community and Be Present

The best way to engage in positive manners in political communities online is through active initiating of communities and moderating of civil conversations. "If readers see you weigh in, if they know you are reading the comments, they are more likely to participate, and they are more likely to return. It also makes it easier to moderate for civility because they know you're actually reading." Reporters need to be present in the spaces to answer questions, redirect conversation and remind people of the guidelines. One syndicated columnist and freelancer encourages people to add evidence-based facts, deletes non-credible links or vitriolic content, and goes to great lengths in explaining her decisions. One public television anchor also agrees that journalists' intervention would positively affect the discourse in comments: "I think as soon as you, the author, gets into the comment threads and responds to somebody's question, it changes the dimension of the conversation in a positive way. I think people mellow out if they're critics of yours when they see that you are actually alive and responding. They are less likely to be as acerbic to others."

Here and there were snippets of genuine questions, sharing of stories, and soul-searching that indicated some people were seeking a dialogue more substantive, as in these three citizen tweets from the feeds of three different journalists:

"Neither of these positions appeal to me, but do you think there is a legitimate difference between 'design immigration to produce certain ethnic proportion' and 'design immigration to slow down changes in ethnic proportions without preference for what those proportions are'?"

"Painful yet I share your concerns for our darkening future. What next? How can I make any difference as an aging GOPer??"

"I get our founding fathers created this voting system and whatnot, but....what would be so wrong with getting rid of it and going by popular vote for just one election? Idk...just an idea. Do we have to follow and not change anything in the constitution for the rest of eternity?"

However, in the feeds of these high-profile journalists, these "moderate" and "civil" tweets get lost in the goading and insults. The key, said our engagement specialists, is to nurture this kind of talk in a space where the expectations foster an ambiance of deliberation, where individual comments can stand out. This means: confront the trolls, explain civility, moderate closely, be genuine and authentic, tone down the overreaction, be proportional in coverage, educate people about journalism, and answer questions, as this editor at a political news non-profit did in this Twitter back and forth:

Citizen: *Could that be a violation of campaign finance laws? . . (I know that it's quaint to take such things seriously, but I am an academic so I ask academic questions.)*

Editor: *Unlikely. FEC is basically outta biz. Plus, I mean, risky biz to go after a journalism outfit, however widely defined.*

Citizen: *So, can a campaign just set up a "newspaper," have donors donate to it ("buy subscriptions") and then have that "newspaper" publish whatever the campaign wants?*

Editor: *Well, no they'd at least need to set up another company*.

The individual Facebook pages of reporters and columnists were also places of great dialogue, but only if they were closely moderated and run with similar rules as the secret group pages. Note this comment by a nationally syndicated columnist, signaling respect and heeding on her individual Facebook page:

I read frustration in [Commenter's] words, and I share it. So many elected Democrats are taking a stand against this, publicly and oh-so-visibly, and it is, indeed, wearying to keep hearing, "Where are the Democrats?" I am asked this countless times every day, to my utter disbelief. [Commenter], I mean no disrespect to you when I write this. I know your heart is always in the right place.

Set Standards (civility, praise)

In these spaces, these engagement specialists can work toward creating a better discursive community, because they control the space. They highlight good comments, praise publicly, and remind people constantly of the rules of engagement. One columnist for a major news organization often goes into his Twitter thread to call out great comments or highlight part of the thread, as in this one: "Thanks for trying! Some people's minds are closed, but there are still lots of folks who may disagree but who are open to change if one is respectful." Note here that he is also laying out a mode of discussion

that depends upon respect. Establishing a value system is essential to the health of the discussion. Consider how another syndicated columnist posted this segment from a New Yorker article, reflecting her values on civility for her personal Facebook page:

> **"And what about civility? Well, fundamental to, and governing the practice of, civility is the principle of reciprocity: your place at my table implies my place at yours. Conservatives and liberals, right-wingers and left-wingers, Jews and Muslims and Christians and Socialists and round- and flat-Earthers—all should have a place at any table and be welcome to sit where they like. On the other hand, someone who has decided to make it her public role to extend, with a blizzard of falsehoods, the words of a pathological liar, and to support, with pretended piety, the acts of a public person of unparalleled personal cruelty—well, that person has asked us in advance to exclude her from our common meal. You cannot spit in the plates and then demand your dinner. The best way to receive civility at night is to not assault it all day long. It's the simple wisdom of the table."**

In selecting this quote on civility to post, the columnist is nurturing a set of norms around public discourse and suggests that while bridging of difference is important to deliberation, truth is more important. Other journalists in their Twitter feeds often modeled the behavior they hoped would dominate their online conversations, as in this tweet from one of our columnists in response to some criticism and suggestions that the reporter expand his knowledge by doing some additional reading: "I understand that this is a real thing and I'm sorry if I contributed to it. But I haven't maligned anyone and this is honestly my first introduction to the names mentioned. Thank you and I will be sure to read their work." Or this investigative journalist with a national news organization's tweet where she takes a commenter seriously and clarifies her reporting: "I don't think the flip can be all attributed to the working class. The people I interviewed were middle-class folks who worked for the state or other jobs with good benefits."

Find Connections (common topics, universal emotion)

Another characteristic of successful, civil conversations that brings out both left and right people whose "good" comments that approach something resembling a moderate conversation, is to foster communities around specific issue topics such as healthcare. Such a strategy must include marketing those spaces throughout the niches of the social media spaces. Said an engagement specialist for a national online news outlet:

"The biggest thing we did was an article that we had about healthcare. Anything healthcare-related, we added it into the article. We did a snippet in the middle of the article, and then at the bottom, too. We had a call to action that said, "Join the conversation. Are you interested in more conversations about healthcare policy? Join our Facebook group." That is targeting people whom we know are already interested. If you made it to the bottom of an article about Medicare, you probably want in a Facebook group about Medicare. And we have expanded that a little bit, so now we talk about the group in spaces where we already know there are people who are interested in our content. Two examples of that is, we have a newsletter for healthcare policy. Once we expanded the Facebook group, we started telling that newsletter about the Facebook group. People who were already getting that newsletter, which is thousands of people, suddenly had another space to go talk about healthcare. And we know they're going to be interested in it.

This allows national publications whose subscribers are geographically, economically, socially and politically disparate to find common ground within a common interest. Other journalists made sure to inject some levity into the conversations as well, posting questions such as this engagement specialist for a large metro daily in their closed Facebook "subscribers" group:

"Positivity thread. School is starting. There's a lot of news flying around. It can sometimes be hard to find your center. Why don't we try to start the week off on a positive note? Share in the comments something positive or lovely you've experienced. It can be big or small, but let's help everyone find a little joy this week."

Twenty-nine people shared in this thread, posting about getting great deals on plane tickets to discovering yoga. This helps people connect with each other beyond the polarized viewpoints, to see their fellow citizens as individuals whose lives are actually very similar in a lot of ways, reported the moderator.

In addition, it is important for the moderator to make all views welcome, even when they are divergent (as long as they are not hateful, of course). In this national columnist's Facebook message about the Trump official getting kicked out of a restaurant, the columnist makes sure to direct the commenter toward more accurate information as he begins to assign the space as a place of polemic viewpoints:

Citizen: *Sorry, but this is just wrong. Know I'm in the minority here. Everyday I try to watch the news, but it just makes me angry. Currently trying to hold onto a friendship with a conservative, but stories like this (and the other recent restaurant episode) don't help. I had hoped when I started following your page, I would see opinions from both sides of the issues. But I can predict what the comments will be here, just as easily as I can predict how CNN and FOX will cover the news.*

Columnist: *I suggest you read this thread. We have a wide range of responses here.*

Citizen: *I started composing my comment before the comments started pouring in, and didn't notice. Still surprising to me how many think her behavior was ok.*

Columnist: *Still, you certainly are not alone here in your views.*

Note here how the columnist affirms his viewpoint within the thread, so that other commenters can see her model behavior of respect.

Select Platforms According to Engagement

Another pathway towards healthy online discourse, these journalists suggest, is to consider platforms and activity other than Twitter engagement. Consider first the purpose of the engagement before selecting the platform. If Twitter is a place for "heat," and the organization wants to nurture a place of "light," abandon Twitter. Journalists may not have felt a particularly pressing obligation to connect polar extremes through more moderate discourse, but the majority did wish to help people be exposed to as many different perspectives as possible. Engagement specialists in particular were interested in "making people think," as one opinion editor at a West Coast organization said. He went out of his way to write and post about controversial topics such as vaccines and carefully "cultivated" the space for a wide-ranging conversation. Sometimes that has meant expanding the idea of where that "space" exists, for it could mean re-posting on other people's walls and blogs to get the prompts into dialogues already ongoing, he said.

For one CNN commentator, his personal email newsletter serves "kind of a community forming sort of function" and he finds himself slowly backing away from Twitter in favor of this more closed outreach to audiences:

"It's written in a very casual voice, where it's me talking to readers and my colleagues. And I get a lot of really supportive and friendly and helpful and insightful feedback from doing the

newsletter, apart from normal viewer emails that come through LiveShot. These are emails that are replying to the people that really feel they know me through the voice of the newsletter. And I would say that's probably the best connection that I have to the audience in a personal way. You think about it: people have signed up; they've opted in; they've chosen to be a part of it; and, they want to know my take on what's important. And it's coming from my email, so they have my info and they think they feel they know me through what I mention in the newsletter. I find that to be a kind of a community-forming sort of function. I just wish I knew how steal it and expand it."

One engagement specialist described how the subscriber-only Facebook group she moderates for a major metro daily has "been able to bring together people who would've never met before, but they have shared interests in that they care about life in [our state]. We've seen people become better friends through this and also sort out some of their differences." Bounding an online community, she suggested, increases the civility in discussion and creates the environment for a more moderate conversation that can bridge difference.

Many of the reporters were moving away from Twitter as a way to connect with audiences and toward other kinds of platforms that 1) allowed for heavy moderation, 2) required names, and 3) involved some sort of closed network. Within these spaces -- such as newsletters from email accounts, WhatsApp or Slack conversations, closed Facebook Groups – reporters built community as safe discursive homes, building trust and improving relationships between news organizations and citizens as well as between disparate groups of citizens themselves. But these spaces were limited, of course, to specific networks of people and the content was closed. That means that participation is limited to certain people with the knowledge, access, and confidence to be in such places.

Outcomes

More Moderate Conversations

The result of such "friend-me/us, friend-you" strategies is more moderate, introspective conversation, according to our evidence. For example on a columnist's Facebook post about the White House press secretary getting kicked out of a restaurant, a long discussion occurred. Though the majority of these particular Facebook participants lean liberal, this conversation was mixed with thoughtful responses:

> **If we only resort to the political food fight, we have no reason to expect that we will ever have real discussions with the electorate about important issues and our future. And I know that it seems that folks seem immovable, but I have had fruitful discussions with Trump voters about policy. We have to start from a place of our shared humanity.**

Starting from a "place of shared humanity" represented a great way to inspire more moderate conversations. In these spaces people described shifting views on various political issues, admitted when their commentary went too far or when they were wrong, and encouraged each other to speak frankly. Engagement specialists make a point of coming into the threads to redirect conversation, ask follow-up questions of commenters, and reword someone's point to better advance the conversation:

Commenter 1: *There are different ways to call out a bully. Also, I think it wise for all of us to think about the kind of world we want to live in, if and when we get through this awful time. Will our actions set a precedent that is not so desirable. This is not hand-wringing; it is thinking about the world we want to live in as we address what is happening. When I lived in San Francisco, everyone I knew and saw shared most of my political views. Where I live now, however, many of my neighbors are rather right wing. While I abhor their politics, I have seen their capacity for kindness. They are my fellow human beings, and many of them support Trump. It is disheartening, but I have absolutely no ability to find common ground with them if I come across too strident. For the fifteen years that I served as a Democratic Committee person, I often told my counterparts when I disagreed with them, but I did so respectfully, and I believe that was most powerful. When I came out to my parents in the late 1980's, I felt a need to first think about the sort of relationship I wanted with my parents. That helped shape my discussion. I didn't just go swoop and poop and expect them to love me. I thought my parents deserved greater respect than that. And, while I abhor what this administration is doing, and I abhor what many of my neighbors, and even one or two at my Thanksgiving table, believe and advocate, they are deserving, by the fact that they are human beings, that I clearly, albeit respectfully, say my piece. I learned a long time ago that my saying "are you really that f'ing stupid" kept me from some desired dinner invitations. LOL*

Commenter 2: *We're not talking about "differing political views" or dinner invitations. We're talking about standing up to fascism.*

Columnist: *[Commenter 1], I appreciate your thoughtful contributions here. I think your question can be asked in this way, too, of each of us: What will be the outcome of our inaction?*

In these communities we see citizens exchanging information, providing links to evidence and answering questions, as in this post on a national columnist's post about the Trump-Kim Summit:

Citizen: *Wow you guys are brilliant. What do you suppose the North Koreans purchased with the billions of dollars that Clinton threw in?*

Columnist: *— under the Agreed Framework, 12 countries committed around $4 billion toward fuel and light water reactors. By the time the Agreed Framework was terminated in the first George W. Bush term, approximately $2 billion of the pledged $4 billion had been delivered. The lion's share of that came from South Korea and Japan. The US contributed between $200 and $400 million during the nearly decade long project, with most of that going toward heating oil. That was necessary because North Korea took its existing graphite reactors down during the transition to light water reactors and needed a way to heat the country during the transition. Out of that $200-400 million, we got IAEA onsite investigators, ongoing NTP compliance, dramatically reduced plutonium production capability, and far fewer nuclear warheads today than otherwise would have been the case. By contrast, the amount spent by the US under the Agreed Framework is roughly equivalent to the amount the current president has spent ... on golf.*

For those we talked to and whose social-media performances we observed, the "best" audiences were those on Facebook, particularly in Facebook group pages for which participants must answer some questions to enter such as whether they subscribe and if so, for how long, before being approved for joining. Once in, the news organizations have very strict rules for participating and those running the pages find that the participants often also come to feel a sense of ownership over the community, self-policing and reporting trolls, etc. Analysis of several of these groups shows much more civil conversations with participation from a much broader spectrum of political perspectives, as in this lawyer in Texas under a plug for a story about Trump's revoking of clearances:

> **"I accept Admiral McRaven's assessment! To understand the gravity of Trump's action, just look at the nature of the response. It is extraordinary to have retired military take these unprecedented steps in criticizing the present commander in chief. As far as Brennan is concerned, I read his actions to prove that Trump did personally cut a deal with the Russians to win the election. Brennan knows this and his criticisms are his only way of sounding the alarm to an extraordinary act of treason. We already know Papadopoulos**

was approached and agreed to meeting and accepting Russian help. This is the statement of the offense that he pled guilty to. Read it, it will make your eyes pop. *justice.gov/file/1007346* read for yourself what he lied about."

There is sharing of opinion along with sharing of evidence and contextualization based on this person's professional expertise.

Calling Out Polarizing Talk

The citizen members of successful closed groups take on self-moderation tasks that target trolls, vitriol, fake news, and talk that exacerbates polarization, according to some engagement specialists who run them. Said one engagement editor at an online news advocacy group:

"One of the groups is pretty self-sufficient, and they sort of help me moderate, especially the people who've been in the group since the beginning. They really feel a sense of ownership. Just today, somebody messaged me directly and said, "Hey, I think this person's a troll for x, y, and z reason. Can you check it out?" And I checked it out, and they were a troll, and I removed them from the group."

Citizens then become empowered to help structure the public talk, policing a consensual value system. Guidelines must be rigid and frequently posted, members model behavior, and trolls are quickly banished, said the engagement editor, "because they wanted to see their space continue to be a valuable space." Notice here that the editor uses the pronoun "their" to describe this Facebook Group. Not "our."

We found evidence that citizens themselves expressed a level of introspection about how to create a "good" environment for public talk about polarizing issues in these spaces as well. Consider this post from a woman whom the online-only news organization had singled out as a conversation leader with a special title because of her thoughtful, prolific posting. In this post she is commenting on a *New York Times* article about Facebook fueling anti-refugee attacks in Germany:

"Fascinating and disturbing.. Reminds me of what I've read about stoking of politically trumped up ethnic tensions in genocides of yore, now on steroids: "People instinctively conform to their community's social norms, which are normally a brake on bad behavior. This requires intuiting what the people around us believe, something we do through subconscious social

cues," according to research by Betsy Paluck, a Princeton University social psychologist. Facebook scrambles that process. It isolates us from moderating voices or authority figures, siphons us into like-minded groups and, through its algorithm, promotes content that engages our base emotions."

The distinction awarded to this woman meant that she is "consistently creating meaningful discussions with their posts." There are 12 labeled as such in this particular forum, out of 4,600 members. The engagement specialists say this type of system also gives members something to reach for while also helping to disperse both the content and moderation work. This kind of dialogue – much like therapy – helps citizens recognize the tendencies to polarization as well as some of the exacerbators around us.

Changed Minds

In these communities and through the in-depth interviews, we saw evidence of citizens changing their mind on generally polarizing topics through online interactivity with journalists. One example given to us in the interviews was from an engagement consultant, talking about a radio station she had worked with on engagement strategies. The station's engagement specialist took seriously a woman's Facebook question about how often guns were used in self-defense. The woman was very anti-gun and had been arguing with a friend who kept a gun in his home. The reporter told us:

"She was like 'I've had this position but I want to know if it's accurate." And so the newsroom did the reporting. They talked to a lot of academics, a lot of researchers. They talked to police. And continued to talk to her throughout the reporting process and really said, "It's hard to say how often guns are used in self-defense because there's not really a number for that; but here are some ballparks around where people think that might be. Here are what makes it unsafe to keep a gun in the home: history of domestic violence, mental illness, things like that. And then she talked with the friend she that she had been arguing with and she eventually came to the conclusion: Actually it is safe for him to keep a gun in his home because he doesn't have any of these marks that would make it unsafe for him to have a gun in his home. He keeps it in a safe, etc. So she was able to come to a place where she was like, "Well, I still believe this about guns. I also think that my friend has made a reasonable decision based on the data." So that

was a way to, in a very small, microcosmic way, consider two people who are very polarized in their positions and help them understand each other a little bit better."

This example shows how journalists can manage polarizing topics and help them be discussed in such a way that change people's minds. But note here that the key was a serious commitment to the woman's initial inquiry, the continuous follow-up, and the importance of having a space dedicated to such questioning so that her message didn't get buried.

More Subscriptions, Brand Loyalty

Perhaps most importantly, these communities are also an opportunity, said engagement specialists, to boost brand loyalty to the news organization. When run well, the members of the community feel a sense of belonging and that carries over into warm feelings for the organization running it. We found several comments in these closed groups that indicated participation in the group had driven the citizens to re-up their subscriptions, as in this participant at a large metro daily in the Southwest: "By the way, money is tight, and it's time to renew my [news organization]. This site was another factor in helping me decide to keep the subscription going." From another at the same site: "I take only the e-paper– i have participated in other online groups and if they are not moderated they get ugly at times– i am all in favor of the moderated discussion. And this group is also a factor in my decision to keep my subscription. Thank you." As newsrooms contract and subscriptions have plummeted, such an outcome is not to be taken lightly.

Conclusion

To improve public dialogue in social spaces, journalists say the following are needed:

Better tools and more constrained platform technologies to curb vitriol, fake news, and bots

Training for journalists in moderation tactics, guidelines for building communities as well as explicit direction in what exactly they are trying to foster with audience engagement

More newsroom resources to allow for more consistent presence and moderation in social spaces

More freedom to experiment (and fail)

Creating conversations and pushing them out to people no longer works. Today a much more robust and sophisticated strategy must be built, with follow-up, empathetic listening, joining of conversations already happening, and creating more authentic relationships with one-on-one readers to expand networks. "Just show that you are interested," said one engagement specialist, by going into discussions and asking questions. Other strategies for successful engagement included being judicious and constrained in what is asked of citizens, as another engagement specialist suggested:

“People are asked for so much stuff these days. It's like, your favorite swimsuit wants you to design new swimsuits, and please vote on the next flavor of Lay’s potato chip, and could you send in a photo of you drinking a coke? And by the way, if there’s a news tip could you send it in? That's a lot of stuff to give away for free, in terms of consumers.”

By far the most effective strategy suggestion was being present within the communities. The rampant distrust among many different populations of citizens, including both marginalized people of color and rural conservatives, can impede attempts at improving relationships: “The number one thing is really important to gain trust back in terms of news organizations is to get people to feel like they're heard,” said an engagement specialist at a state-wide news organization. For this to happen, journalists say they need more training:

“Journalists are hearing from their engagement teams, “You need to be in these conversations. Read the comments. Jump in.” But there's no training for that. It’s really a skill, to guide conversations and moderate a community, and that does not come naturally at all….But are you asking the right questions? Are you asking in the right spaces? There’s a lot of questions to ask. Directing more training and awareness, in general, in journalism itself, is super helpful.”

And they’ve got to stick it out if improvement in these relationships will happen: “Don't give up. Don’t be like, ‘We’re gonna try it for a year and if we don’t see an increase in subscriptions from this zip code, then we’re gonna stop covering that zip code.’ That’s not how this is gonna work,” according to one engagement consultant. In addition, the same kind of training needs to happen with citizens, with better education around media literacy in schooling and also on the part of news organizations. For one national conservative commentator, the major impediment to better relationships between journalists and the public is a crisis of citizenship:

“None of this stuff is gonna be fixed unless we really address the fact that people need to behave more responsibly than an electorate that is not informed, not engaged, is the real problem. We can’t simply fix the problem of propaganda and fake news. We have to deal with the problem of why are so many people gullible? And why do so many people not appear to care that they are

being told lies? I mean there's a supply problem, but there's also a demand problem. ...I'm willing to spend a lot of time criticizing Facebook and Google and all those folks, but ultimately, this is on us. On us as consumers. And we are really paying the price for having a citizenry that does not understand American civics, doesn't understand history, and apparently has not been well educated in critical thinking. Right now we have a crisis of citizenship and we need to have a "oh-crap" moment. We need to do something about this."

Finally, many journalists also called on the major platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter to give them better tools to moderate these conversations and develop better relationships with citizens. The most repeated requests: provide an edit function, force respondents to use their real names, weed out bots and fake accounts more diligently, and create more sophisticated search and filter functions. Over and over our interviewees mentioned the problem with accuracy on Twitter: "This huge, huge, huge dangerous field where misinformation can spread extremely rapidly, where if you make a mistake, it can spread extremely far and wide, and can be very difficult to correct or pull back," said a national political reporter. They are also concerned about the hijacking of conversations by paid operatives on social sites like Facebook and Twitter:

"I wish that they would be a lot more proactive about cleansing their site and platforms of people who are basically shooting their mass propaganda on. Literally. I mean not individuals but the proverbial person in their bathrobe, but obviously as we're seeing now also state actors using them as propaganda platforms to do nefarious things for the American people, the American electorate. I think they need to be a lot more proactive, take a lot more responsibility for that."

And they had a lot of ideas:

"I often times fantasize about technological solutions, that aren't ever going to happen. What I mean by that is when I'm reading the National Enquirer, I can kind of tell it's crap based on the paper quality, the colors, the production value. There isn't the equivalent to that digitally. My screen doesn't get yellow when I opened up the Enquirer website, but I think it should. When

there's a fast developing breaking news story, I believe that there should be a red border around the CNN.com article to warn you it's breaking and will change. I tend to think that there are design and technology solutions for some of it that I wish could be implemented."

Yet most expressed some wariness of yielding too much control to Google, Twitter, Facebook and the others to determine things like "truth" or "vitriol" or which outlets are reputable and which are not. Many reported that the vitriol was getting worse, not better. "But again," said an editorial director of a large metro daily, "the answer is not to walk away. The answer is to make a better space for all." On the one hand, journalists think of platforms as having all the power, as the only ones with the capacity to change deliberative parameters. For their part, distributors think of news organizations as just another customer. Instead we need to convince both sides that this could be a productive – and lucrative – partnership and collaboration. Our recommendation is for platform technicians and journalists to come together to work on better tools with an aim towards creating better dialogues in community and improved platforms for deliberation. "The purpose of it is to create a decentralized platform, so that journalists and their readership, or viewership, or listenership can engage directly. But in an environment that upholds sort of journalistic ethics. That is our goal," said a prominent news executive working for a new non-profit. But first there needs to be a sea-change in how many in the newsroom are still operating in terms of audiences and engagement.

Appendix

We conducted interviews with 42 journalists, most of whom were "nationally" focused with some more regionally based. Of these, 20 were females and 22 male, and about two-thirds identified as "White" with another third identifying as African American, Indian American, Asian American, and South Asian or multiracial. The sample split among 19 "traditional" journalists – mostly from prominent national or large regional/metro daily news organizations such as CNN, NPR, PBS, NBC, ProPublica, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, Vox, the National Review, and the Miami Herald – and 23 "engagement specialists" who approach their social-media production in a much more interactive manner. These latter journalists – who have titles ranging from the more traditional political reporter to "opinion editor" to "engagement specialist – hail from news organizations that range from 500,000 in paid circulation to non-profit centers to media-trust initiatives.

Table 1.0. Sample

NAME OF ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED	NUMBER OF NEUTRAL, LIBERAL, CONSERVATIVE JOURNALISTS	DEMOGRAPHICS
16 National/International, including Freelancers, radio and magazines **13** Non-Profit political news organizations or political news projects **7** State-wide or large metro dailies	**34** "neutral" **4** "liberal" **4** "conservative"	**20** female, **22** male **60%** White, **30%** Indian American, African American, Asian American, South Asian, Asian, or mixed race
TOTAL: 37	**42**	**42**

For all of these journalists we collected social media posts on both Facebook and Twitter, 20-30 conversation threads for each to qualitatively analyze. All of this was uploaded into the NVIVO qualitative software and coded for the nature of the interactions (e.g. whether it was "deliberative" or "civil" or "moderate" according to scholarly determinations) as well as concepts of journalistic roles, engagement, audience, and trust as well as for how they articulated their strategies to achieve these stated missions. During this initial, open coding, the conceptual split emerged within the sample, as we noticed much, much different approaches to journalism. So in the second round of coding, we performed a comparative analysis, putting these two different samples in conversation with each other.

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