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**MEMBERSHIP IN NEWS  
LITERATURE REVIEW  
AUTUMN 2017**

By Jacob Nelson

# the MEMBERSHIP PUZZLE PROJECT

## PART ONE THE JOURNALIST-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP THEN AND NOW

### Introduction

The news industry is now two decades into a period defined by instability and confusion. In a media environment with a constantly increasing diversity of publishers and formats, journalists can no longer assume that what they publish will reach enough people to generate revenue or impact public policy (Hamilton, 2006; Prior, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Industry stakeholders and researchers have suggested many solutions to save the profession from financial ruin and irrelevance. Some focus on increasing revenue, others on improving the craft. The Membership Puzzle Project is investigating a path that, if successful, would address both: membership-supported journalism.

The idea behind this model is that journalists must first and foremost prioritize the needs of their audience so that readers who want public service journalism feel compelled to support it themselves. “Membership” here means more than one organization asking its supporters for money. It means doing so by engaging audience members more deeply than their predecessors. Frequently, these attempts include opportunities to involve people previously considered “the audience” in the storytelling itself – a radical reconceptualization. For example, De Correspondent’s journalists build a relationship with the audience by pursuing a “journalist as conversation leader” ideology, which requires them to share updates about the stories they’re working on with their readers while they’re reporting. These are work-in-progress emails that demonstrate vulnerability and show readers their process. This inspires discussions and makes the news production process more collaborative and transparent.

This approach to the audience is not new, but we are now seeing a greater number of organizations try new forms of audience participation/involvement in storytelling. It has historically existed on the fringes of journalism practice. Community presses traditionally aspired to maintain strong, collaborative connections with their readers (Janowitz, 1967), and the public journalism movement of the 1990s attempted to push commercial newsrooms to more explicitly engage with and galvanize the communities they covered (Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1996). However, this approach is wildly different from the way that mainstream newsrooms have operated until now. In a news media environment where advertising revenue has always mattered more than any other kind of profit, audience traits like trust or engagement have meant much less to news publishers than audience size and demographics. As a result, the obligations of journalists to their readers – what Jay Rosen calls the “social contract” between the two – have tended to be far less obvious, and arguably less important for the survival of the profession. In other words, the importance of pursuing ad revenue has tended to overshadow the need for journalists to connect with the communities they cover. Organizations like De Correspondent, Berkeleyside, and Inside Story are among a growing number of organizations trying to change that.

What follows is an overview of the scholarly and critical literature about how journalists have approached their relationship with the news audiences in the past, and the factors currently persuading them to change that approach. By examining the relationship between audiences and digital news media

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producers, this literature review seeks to better understand what the social contract between journalists and their readers has looked like in the past, and what it might (or should) look like going forward.

## **PART ONE** **THE JOURNALIST-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP**

Within the U.S., mainstream journalists have historically perceived their audience narrowly, both in potential for interaction and in the demographic makeup of their audiences. Namely, they have written their stories for white, middle-class citizens. This has been observed in studies of different platforms of journalism (e.g., broadcast in Epstein, 1974; newspapers in Fishman, 1980; both in Tuchman, 1978) as well as in both national (Gans, 2004) and local news (Kaniss, 1991). Before online news and web analytics, journalists pursued and wrote stories for an audience they imagined comprised people much like themselves – white, middle class, and male (Tuchman, 1978). They considered this audience monolithic: they chose stories for themselves and their editors, assuming everyone else would find them interesting, too. These journalists also assumed their stories would reach a wide audience, and saw the audience’s role as a passive one. Audience feedback was rarely sought and hardly valued (Gans, 2004). Journalists viewed the audience more as revenue providers rather than dialogue partners.

Mainstream, daily journalism throughout the 20th century was primarily a one-way conversation that was mostly unconcerned with building a more collaborative relationship with readers – what many now refer to as “audience engagement” (Batsell, 2015; Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2012; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010). In this model, journalists positioned themselves as information providers, and the audience as recipients, and enjoyed different and deeper credibility than they do today. Within this environment, a few widely respected broadcast anchors like Walter Cronkite or Edward Murrow delivered the news in an intentionally neutral, detached manner, trust was assumed. Furthermore, advertising revenues were high, so a deeper, more cooperative approach to the news audience was unnecessary. That all began to change in the early 21st century, when what scholars refer to as “the newspaper crisis” began (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Within this more volatile media landscape, profitability has become far from assured, and trust is now something news organizations are struggling to earn.

### **An industry in crisis**

The newspaper crisis comprised a combination of economic, technological, and social factors that caused the journalism industry to plunge into its current, dire state (McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Newspapers have long depended on ad revenue to maintain profitability, which declined sharply with the advent of the internet and the financial recession that began in 2008 (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Between 1990 to 2010, the total circulation for newspapers within the U.S. dropped from about 60 million to just over 30 million. Ad revenue similarly dropped from about \$50 billion in 2004 to around \$18 billion in 2016 (Barthel, 2017). As Siles and Boczkowski

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note (2012), the newspaper crisis manifested itself in readership declines, newsroom staff cuts, and reductions in the amount of coverage a publication could provide. Advertising revenue evaporated with the arrival of websites like Craigslist, and print subscriptions plummeted. Things continued to worsen with the advent of news consumption via Facebook and Google, profitable platforms which increasingly absorb the bulk of digital ad spending (Waldman, 2017). As the popularity of online news consumption grew (and continues to grow), news production practices began to more intensely emphasize digital content creation (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Many news producers went bust, and the ones that survived slowly started investing online.

In transitioning to digital, these publishers learned to embrace online audience metrics such as time on site, article scroll depth, and visitor location (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Petre, 2015; Tandoc, 2015; Webster, Phalen, & Licthy, 2014). Audience metrics have always been an important part of the relationship between media producers and consumers (Webster, 2014), though this relationship was often fraught and one-sided, with visitors give their data (sometimes unknowingly to them) for advertiser benefit. However, the advent of sophisticated measures available via digital technology combined with the increasingly dismal economic circumstances facing newsrooms has resulted in these measures playing a larger role in newsrooms than ever before (Anderson, 2011). Now, many major publications subscribe to multiple sources of online audience measurement (Graves & Kelly, 2010), despite their uncertainty about how to best incorporate these data into editorial decisions (Anderson, 2011; Usher, 2014). And many modern newsrooms display prominent screens flashing the latest performance metrics for all their staff to see. These measures can track the amount of time people spend on a site, the number of times a site is mentioned on social media, and, most importantly for the purpose of attracting advertisers, the number of people who visit a site (Kosterich & Napoli, 2015).

Because news organizations look to reach as wide an audience as possible, audience size has become the currency by which advertisers evaluate the quality of a news site (Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016; Sanghvi, 2015). The establishment of a currency is the result of negotiations among the affected parties – namely media companies, advertisers, and currency providers like the TV ratings company Nielsen and the web analytic firm comScore (Kosterich & Napoli, 2015; Napoli, 2011). The prevailing audience currency in media generally and journalism specifically privileges size, meaning for-profit news sites have a huge incentive to publish content that will appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and much less incentive to publish anything else. Although advertisers increasingly look to reach highly targeted audiences (e.g., people whose high socioeconomic status or past online shopping behavior suggests they are likely to buy luxury goods), news outlets still tend to take a legacy media perspective wherein they pursue a large, mass audience.

The growing significance of online audience metrics has forced news publishers to acknowledge that public affairs news is wildly unpopular (Boczkowski, 2013; Prior, 2007). Stories about the ongoing conflict in Syria will almost always garner fewer pageviews than celebrity gossip. As online audience metrics become a larger part in newsrooms, they play two important roles: This realization has meant that, within an industry that relies on clicks and pageviews to generate necessary ad revenue, the

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news that most journalists consider “important” (i.e., necessary for a well-functioning democracy) is conspicuously unprofitable. This is the current situation, and it has many scholars and industry stakeholders wondering what’s next for this shaken profession (McChesney & Pickard, 2011), its role in American democracy (Schudson, 2012), and its relationship with its audience (Singer, 2013).

### **The return of public journalism**

In the face of this industry-wide uncertainty, many have pinned their hopes about the future of journalism on news nonprofits, which typically combine aspects of traditional reporting with a more collaborative, solutions-oriented approach to the news audience (Konieczna & Robinson, 2013; Robinson, 2011, 2014; Robinson & DeShano, 2011). These organizations seek funding from grants and donations rather than ad revenue, providing them the ability to court a small group of loyal readers rather than forcing them to appeal to a mass audience. This model is spreading quickly across the country: all but nine states in the U.S. have at least one news nonprofit (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Holcomb, Enda, & Anderson, 2013), and most are less than ten years old (Rosentiel, Buzenberg, Connelly, & Loker, 2016).

These news nonprofits bear a strong resemblance to the failed public journalism efforts of the 1990s, in that both focus on altering traditional journalistic norms in order to more effectively connect with local communities (Ferrucci, 2015). The goals of public journalism were to engage the community, give citizens the power to shape the news agenda, present the news in an easily understood format, and galvanize readers (Ferrucci, 2015; Nip, 2006, 2008). Public journalism advocates hosted town hall meetings and other participatory events in an attempt to turn news production from a one-way lecture into a two-way dialogue (Garden, 2014; Marchionni, 2013a; Nip, 2006). As Lewis, Holton, and Coddington write, “Professionalized journalism lost touch with its community—a problem that the public journalism movement sought to resolve” (2013, p. 230).

The news nonprofit approach, recently dubbed public service journalism, is ostensibly the same, except that public journalism often appeared in for-profit newsrooms, while public service journalism so far has mostly been taken up in news nonprofits. Also, in the old public journalism experiments, while the idea was to give audiences this power, journalists kept it for a variety of reasons. Today’s public service journalism efforts tend to offer the audience far more agency in news construction processes (Ferrucci, 2015). Though both public journalism and public service journalism advocates believe the audience should actively shape the news agenda and play a part in telling their own stories (Charity, 1995; Ferrucci, 2015; Glasser, 1999; Merritt, 1995; Rosen, 1996), some believe the latter model has a stronger chance of survival because it does not depend on generating ad revenue for economic success (Ferrucci, 2017; Knight, 2012). Because public journalism primarily occurred in market-driven newsrooms, it often ended up looking like a cheap marketing ploy rather than a sincere attempt to connect with communities. Even efforts in newsrooms that took public journalism seriously fizzled when employees invested in their success left the organization (Marchionni, 2013b; Nip, 2008). As a result, some see public journalism as the right idea that had the misfortune of coming along at the wrong time (Schaffer, 2015).

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Regardless, public journalism pushed newsrooms to connect with their audiences, inadvertently providing a roadmap for current efforts to bring a stronger relationship with the audience to the forefront of news production. Public journalism highlighted – without solving – a problem with the professional model in journalism: a tendency for news professionals to orient themselves horizontally, to one another, to prize committees, to editors that might hire them in the future in some larger market, to abstract goals like objectivity and adversarialism, rather than staying attuned to the people they actually served. Now that the internet allows newsrooms to more easily interact with and measure their audiences (and has left them financially desperate enough to prioritize doing so) many see public journalism's embrace of the audience as critical to the future of the industry (Batsell, 2015; Lewis et al., 2013; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2015; Stearns, 2015). Organizations like the local news nonprofit City Bureau explicitly pursue a more collaborative relationship with the audience. For example, City Bureau holds weekly Public Newsrooms to encourage discussions between Chicago residents and journalists, and also holds live events themed around stories its journalists publish. These efforts suggest that perhaps public journalism was not a blip in journalism's history, but a necessary step in a punctuated evolution.

### **Transforming the social contract**

Few public service journalism organizations have operated long enough to demonstrate their sustainability, but the fact that they have formed and have begun publishing original reporting is enough to have piqued the interest of journalism researchers and practitioners (Coates Nee, 2013; Ferrucci, 2015; Knight, 2012; Nee, 2013; Rosentiel et al., 2016). The pressure on these organizations is intense. Many believe they will not only provide a new model for journalism, but, by maintaining a focus on working alongside their audience, they will fundamentally change the social contract between journalists and their readers. By contract, we mean the give/get bargain for both sides. What do members and news organizations give each other, and what does each get in return? During the heyday of the newspaper model, this contract was fairly simple and transactional. It entailed an elite group of journalists delivering news that addressed what they assumed the audience needed and/or wanted to know. In return, the audience handed over their money in the form of subscriptions and their attention in the form of readership. Because media distribution options were limited, this contract was skewed towards the news providers, who could take for granted that the audience would do their part.

What might a new social contract look like? The recent emphasis throughout the news industry on improving the relationship with the audience suggests this emerging contract will be far more collaborative and open-ended. But what does the application of public service journalism ideals look like in practice? Part Two of the literature review addresses this question by exploring models currently implemented within journalism that focus primarily on the relationship between news publishers and their audiences.

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**PART TWO**  
**THE AUDIENCE-FOCUSED SOCIAL CONTRACT**

This section explores innovative attempts within journalism to improve the relationship between news publishers and the audiences in order to return the profession to sustainability and relevance. It examines the journalism experiments City Bureau and Hearken to illustrate the way that these audience-focused efforts differ from more traditional subscription models. Though these experiments do not explicitly identify as membership models, they have adopted a social contract that privileges the pursuit of a more collaborative relationship with the audience.

In this section, we contextualize these experiments by summarizing communication and political science scholarship focused on the relationship between journalism and democracy. It closes by posing important questions facing journalism researchers and practitioners alike: What might the news industry look like in a world where organizations focus more on their relationship with the audience than they ever have before? Will it lead news producers to pursue small, devoted audiences rather than pursuing one-way knowledge exchanges with a faceless audience? If so, what are the implications for such a shift for an informed citizenry, civic engagement, and democracy as a whole? What are the obstacles currently preventing this shift from occurring? What steps can be taken to overcome them?

**City Bureau and Hearken**

The local news nonprofit City Bureau was founded in early 2016 as a collective of news professionals that both creates local news stories and trains residents from underreported neighborhoods to become “community journalists”. City Bureau staff, which comprises four core founders and a rotating group of about a dozen journalists, investigates stories that traditional outlets have neither the time nor resources to pursue, and then partners with those outlets to get these stories distributed. City Bureau’s mission statement explicitly positions itself as a publication pursuing the audience’s input into its own reporting: City Bureau recruits journalists of any ability to mentor one another in a collaborative learning process, and seeks community input “every step of the way”. City Bureau attempts to report “with” these communities, rather than “for” them.

Hearken is a for-profit tech company that provides news outlets with an online platform that invites audiences to submit story ideas, allowing these outlets to explicitly bring the audience into the reporting process (DeJarnette, 2016). This platform is seen by many as being one of the most promising opportunities for creating and measuring audience engagement (Brandel, 2015; DeJarnette, 2016; Lumb, 2015). Though it is a for-profit company, Hearken eagerly presents itself as the embodiment of public service journalism values. In interviews and public appearances, the company’s founder has argued that inviting audiences into the reporting process at the very beginning will lead to substantive stories that will garner a larger reception than investigative stories reported without public input. Many journalism researchers and professionals wonder if Hearken’s approach to news audiences will become the new normal, especially considering its product has already been adopted by well-known news brands

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like BBC, NPR, and Tribune Company. “Hearken’s success — or its failure — could tell us a lot about where the journalism industry is going” (DeJarnette, 2016).

Taken together, Hearken and City Bureau are indicative an increasingly popular approach to journalism, where the audience is not just offering their attention or their money, but is actively participating in its production and shaping its final result. Should these experiments in news media become the new normal, they would dramatically change the social contract between journalists and the audience from something primarily transactional to something far more collaborative. What follows explores what these changes might look like by contextualizing them within journalism’s role in a democratic society.

## **News producers and public policy**

Journalism offers a connection between citizens and the place they live, which can be defined as narrowly as their neighborhood and as broadly as their world (Gans, 2004; Janowitz, 1967). No matter the scope, there is an accepted understanding that journalism plays a pivotal role in encouraging political participation in democratic societies (Habermas, 1989; Tocqueville, 2012). Many scholars have observed a positive correlation between news consumption and civic engagement, like voting, reaching out to elected officials, or participating in public protests (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Nielsen, 2015; Ognyanova et al., 2013; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010; Shaker, 2014; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Political news enhances learning of political information (Cappella, 1997), so much so that when the journalism industry undergoes drastic changes or faces a crisis, many fear not only for the state of the profession but the implications for democracy (Katz, 1996; Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015; Prior, 2007; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012).

News production also mediates political and social realities for audiences (Baumgartner, 2008; Cappella, 1997; Lawrence, 2000). The way stories are framed draws attention to certain features of a news event and away from other features (Tuchman, 1978). Historically journalists have often chosen what events become news and which sources to include in these news stories with the help of other reporters, editors, and political elites, rather than input from the actual news audience (Tuchman, 1978). Public service journalism organizations like City Bureau and Hearken actively bring the audience into these discussions (Charity, 1995; Ferrucci, 2015; Merritt, 1995; Rosen, 1996; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010). These attempts serve two purposes. They encourage more audience engagement with the organization’s content, and they foster a greater sense of political agency among the audience members themselves.

In their desire to increase audience engagement, organizations like City Bureau and Hearken begun using a combination of two audience-oriented news production strategies to tailor their content for their audiences:

- More inclusive reporting
- More sophisticated audience awareness (Clark, 2016; Spinner, 2016).



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For example, *Curious City*, a radio program from Chicago Public Radio, uses the Hearken platform to ask its audience what to investigate next in an attempt to encourage more audience participation (Fitts, 2015). And many local news nonprofits, including City Bureau, hold “public newsrooms” in poor, minority communities where they welcome residents to stop in and pitch or discuss stories (Knight, 2012; Walker, 2016). These efforts embrace New York University Professor Rodney Benson’s call for journalists to “self-consciously recruit journalists” who come from diverse backgrounds, and give them “greater freedom to express their class-based perspectives” (2013, p. 212).

How reporters conceptualize and approach news audiences is important because the way a news story is framed can have profound effects on our understanding of the world we live in. In-depth investigative journalism forces the public to make a decision on what it is morally willing to tolerate in a society (Ettema & Glasser, 1998), and evidence within political science that supports it. For instance, when journalists began framing stories about wrongfully convicted inmates on death row as part of a systemic problem, public opinion on the death penalty shifted from overwhelmingly in favor to overwhelmingly against (Baumgartner, 2008). A similar, more recent phenomenon has unfolded in the coverage of unarmed black men who have been killed by police, which has played a role in swaying public opinion towards more scrutiny of police departments across the U.S (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016; Kang, 2015; Stephen, 2015).

News reporting and analysis often takes place amongst a small, closed group of people that look little like the majority of the public they are trying to reach. That explains why, at least until recently, news stories about police officers using force have been overwhelmingly defined by the police rather than their victims (Lawrence, 2000). However, changes in news economics have incentivized news publishers to pay more attention to their audience, and digital tools have made it easier than ever for them to do so via social media, users’ mobile and web visitation data, and online comments (Anderson, 2013; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2015; Robinson & DeShano, 2011; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). As a result, in their embrace of the audience via public service journalism values, news producers like City Bureau and newsrooms using the Hearken platform are increasingly reaching out to less obvious sources and more explicitly take their audience into account when creating their content. Far from being a novel idea, it is actually borrowed from an even smaller brand of journalism called the community press.

## **The appeal of community news**

Community presses often explicitly feature sources typically left out of national and metropolitan news sources (Cochrane, 2016; Janowitz, 1967; Kaniss, 1991). Scholars have found that national and metropolitan news sources tend to feature a narrow set of sources comprising those with the resources necessary to be in regular touch with reporters (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Kaniss, 1991; Tuchman, 1978). This leads to an emphasis on sources in official positions, because these sources have time to reach out to reporters, and because their titles give their statements built-in credibility. The bureaucratic institutions they represent are “socially sanctioned schemes of interpretation” (Fishman, 1980, p. 63). Fishman observed that news reporters relied on police departments for information about crime, to

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the detriment of the accuracy of their crime coverage (1980). In this approach to news, bureaucratic “facts” represent hard data, whereas accounts from non-bureaucratic sources represent little more than speculation (Fishman, 1980). Community and ethnic presses, on the other hand, attempt to focus on alternative voices in terms of the sources they interview, as a mechanism for creating a stronger bond with their audience (Kaniss, 1991). Rather than reach out only to elite sources, these presses highlight citizens within the community. Public journalism advocates attempted to bring this approach into national newsrooms in the 1990s, and now public service journalists are again emulating the community press’ aspiration to speak with and to its audience.

As a result, many of today’s audience-focused journalism experiments echo this community news philosophy that privileges local residents over bureaucratic sources (Pickard & Stearns, 2011). They have embraced what the renowned newsroom ethnographer Herbert Gans refers to as a “multiperspectival” approach to journalism, in that they actively seek out as many perspectives as possible (Cochrane, 2016; Gans, 2004; Lichterman, 2016). City Bureau explicitly rejects the national newsroom understanding of what constitutes fact and where these facts should be collected (Cochrane, 2016; Lichterman, 2016). Instead of automatically deferring to politicians and city departments, for example, City Bureau journalists are careful to compare what they hear from official sources with the what they hear from actual South and West Side community members. By inviting residents of Chicago’s marginalized communities to walk into its newsroom and speak to its reporters, City Bureau practices audience engagement that begins with journalists “listening to the people [they] serve” (Jarvis, 2015, p. 15), and it reveals the community press influence that has taken hold within this increasingly popular interpretation of the relationship between journalists and the communities they report on. “We’ve created this group to link together a lot of these unheard or seldom-heard voices,” City Bureau’s editorial director said (Lichterman, 2016). Scholars and practitioners agree that journalism needs a more diverse set of voices, and audience engagement appears to be the method publishers are embracing to make that happen.

In practice, this pursuit is both messy and endless. Traditional journalism, because of its transactional nature, tends to collect audience data only after a story is published that is only to assess how the story fared. However, City Bureau and Hearken believe engagement must begin with the reporting process to truly strengthen the relationship between audience and publisher. “Traditionally, the first opportunity the audience has to offer feedback for journalists and get involved is after a story is completed and published,” said Hearken founder Jennifer Brandel. She advocates for journalists to instead begin the reporting process “with questions the audience is asking” (Brandel, 2015).

Public and public service journalists have also adopted an equally significant aspect of the community press approach: the emphasis on creating more advocacy-oriented and solutions-driven journalism. Like community press editors, public service journalists believe that local news should not simply deliver facts to readers. Instead, it should become a mechanism by which voiceless citizens can feel politically empowered (Batsell, 2015; Ferrucci, 2015; Jarvis, 2015; Wenzel, Gerson, & Moreno, 2016). This suggests that the quality of journalism be defined as much by the consequences of its publication as the accuracy of its facts (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015). Publishers and researchers across the country are closely eying

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local news nonprofits that embrace this approach to quality, in order to see what these aspirations look like in practice, and how they can be emulated elsewhere (DeJarnette, 2016; Spinner, 2016).

## **Changing methods, changing goals?**

Although some curious editors, reporters, and publishers increasingly believe these more intensive efforts to connect with audiences will lead to better, more sustainable journalism, they have yet to make explicit what they believe “better” journalism actually means. Consequently, the impulse to publish stories that include more local voices and more community advocacy stems from a deceptively simple question confronting journalism professionals and researchers: who should their work reach? Now that there is no defaulting to a conception of a monolithic audience (which was never more than a myth in the first place), news publishers face the difficult challenge of deciding what groups they will prioritize trying to engage.

A satisfying answer to this question is impossible without news industry stakeholders first answering a bigger one: What do they believe journalism should accomplish? Should journalism provide useful information to as many people as possible? Should it advocate for social or political policy change, specifically for the sake of marginalized communities? Should it pursue some combination of the two? Should it do whatever helps it make a profit? Or should it take up what City University of New York Professor [Jeff Jarvis](#) calls the “relationship strategy”, where news producers conceive of people “as individuals and members of communities—no longer the mass.” Several reports have recently explored these questions (Friedland, Napoli, Ognyanova, Weil, & Wilson, 2012; Knight, 2012; Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015) and their inability to offer neat, satisfying answers further illustrates just how confusing a moment this is for journalism. As University of Leeds Professor C.W. Anderson argues in his analysis of Philadelphia’s local news ecosystem, “Journalists must begin the hard process of rethinking who they are, what they do, and who their work is actually for” (2013, p. 5).

These are some of the issues that more audience-focused journalism experiments must grapple with as they attempt to forge stronger bonds with their users. As the news industry continues to reckon with its ongoing crisis of economics and trust, its practitioners will continue their attempts to find a more meaningful, rich social contract with their audience members. This contract appears likely to continue its transformation away from something wholly transactional (i.e., journalists provide the news, audiences provide the revenue) to something much more collaborative. Perhaps the early success of organizations like Harken and City Bureau indicate that a social contract focused on engaging audiences and maintaining their loyalty will become the norm for the whole of the journalism profession. Should that occur, it would mean significant consequences not just for the role of reporters and editors, but for the audience as well.

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**PART THREE**  
**THE MEMBERSHIP MODEL OUTSIDE OF JOURNALISM**

The final section of this literature review examines how “membership” as a concept has been explored outside of news production. In general, why does membership appeal to organizations and their customers? How do organizations determine what their memberships will include, what motivates people to subsequently sign up? Finally, how has the conceptualization of membership outside of journalism changed over time? This section investigates these questions.

An exploration of academic and industry research focused on membership finds that organizations with membership models have historically focused on building strong, collaborative relationships with members in order to retain members and attract new ones. This is true even for organizations with totally different organizational structures and goals (e.g., nonprofits, unions, service providers), though the motivations underlying these pursuits vary depending on whether the organization is commercial or nonprofit. Regardless, digital technology has only increased this focus, by first making it easier for organizations to “segment and target.” Organizations are rapidly working towards collecting detailed information about members, and subsequently using that information to create more personalized communication for those members. This combination allows organizations to attract and maintain members by tapping into something long observed in political science: the penchant people have to be a part of something larger than themselves.

**Before Tote Bags, Tocqueville**

To understand why we humans feel compelled to join groups, it helps to begin with research focused on civic life and political participation. Most commerce-based memberships are transactional relationships (e.g., a person pays a gym a monthly fee and gets access to the gym’s facilities; a public radio listener gives a monthly donation and gets a tote bag). However, within social movements, memberships refer to something very different: the opportunity for a person to join others to help create political or social change they could not accomplish alone.

As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in his examination of civic life during America’s earliest days, citizens of democratic societies have long relished the opportunity to be a part of something larger than themselves (Tocqueville, 2012). The French political scientist noted that Americans became involved in politics not only because they wanted something in return, but because they wanted to play a role in the political decisions that would affect their communities. Politics was far less abstract at the start of American history because the politicians shaping communities were community members themselves. These weren’t career politicians. They were people who resembled their neighbors more than commonly seen in today’s political processes.

Centuries later, industrialization meant a more globalized society, and communities consequently had become less self-contained. As a result, citizens who wanted to participate in public life struggled to find

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ways to do so where they could actually see the fruits of their labor. Citizens went inwards, focusing more on their own wellbeing than on the condition of those around them. Scholars have referred to this period as a retreat from Tocqueville’s community ideal (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Putnam, 2000). They argued that the solution was to increase participation in civic groups. People who worked together in pursuit of a shared goal had more success, and also were able to cultivate a different kind of community that existed outside of geographic constraints (Andrews, Ganz, Baggetta, Han, & Lim, 2010). As Andrews et al. write, “Civic associations seek to involve members in their activities both as an end itself and as the way the organization creates its capacity for achieving public purposes” (2010, p. 1197). As a result, civic groups have provided a de facto roadmap for membership-based organizations. And as modern days memberships with news organizations demonstrate, it’s a roadmap that news publishers are increasingly turning to as well. De Tocqueville himself grasped the connection between membership and news when he wrote:

*“...there is a necessary connection between public associations and newspapers: newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers; and if it has been correctly advanced that associations will increase in number as the conditions of men become more equal, it is not less certain that the number of newspapers increases in proportion to that of associations. Thus it is in America that we find at the same time the greatest number of associations and of newspapers.”*

— [Chapter VI Of the Relation Between Public Associations and the Newspapers]

## **A focus on retention means a focus on engagement**

Humanity’s long-observed desire to get involved with organizations that allow them to pursue some sort of common goal has not been lost on more commercial-oriented organizations. Both academic and industry research on membership models reveal an enduring pursuit amongst organizations to find more effective ways to engage with their members, regardless of whether the organization is focused primarily on profits or policy. Membership research frequently focuses on engagement, but differs on what engagement should entail and what it can accomplish. Advocacy and nonprofit organizations see engagement as an indispensable tool not just for building and maintaining membership, but also for accomplishing their core missions. For-profit organizations, on the other hand, see engagement as another tool for improving and maintaining brand loyalty.

A comparison between a nonprofit, advocacy-oriented organization and a for-profit membership group demonstrates this distinction. The Maryland-based Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association recently mobilized its members to create an army of about 3,000 volunteers who could monitor local efforts by politicians to restrict their ability to fly. In a report on the efforts of these volunteers, Anna Caraveli noted “these members are engaged because their relationship with the association enables them to do

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something they want to do in the first place, better than they would be able to do on their own... Its members choose to become engaged to achieve outcomes that matter to them” (2015).

Yet while this aircraft owners group saw engaging with its members as an obvious mechanism to empower those members, profit-oriented organizations tend to see engagement as “another sales transaction.” For-profit clubs like Costco and Sam’s Club utilize member benefits not to bolster a sense of community between members, but to grow their bottom line (Caraveli, 2015). As Joe Rominiecki explains, “In for-profit clubs, the engagement of a member is clearly based on a fulfillment of a benefit or a need” (2014). So while some see engagement as a means to build deeper relationships with members by empowering them to work with others to pursue something they could not accomplish on their own, others see it as a way to simply boost customer satisfaction and retention. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with latter, it just seems a bit short-sighted when it comes to the potential of membership participation.

## **The Movement to More Personalized Engagement**

Yet when it comes to the actual practice of engagement, both for-profit and nonprofit membership organizations look more similar. A review of industry articles about engagement indicate that both types of organizations attempt to create spaces for members to communicate with each other as well as with organization leaders (Ebner, 2017b). They want members to feel that their input is valuable, and that the leadership will be responsive to it. As more communication between members takes place online, this frequently results in the implementation of digital community forums where members can share their thoughts, complaints, and ideas, and organization leaders can publicly or privately respond (Ebner, 2017b). Furthermore, because this engagement occurs online, it allows organizations to collect more information about their own members, which they can use to learn more about who their members are and what expect from the organization (Ebner, 2017a).

The push for organizations to collecting more data about their members coincides with another push to create more personalized communications with members. For instance, a recent study of professional membership organizations found that while 84 percent of members are satisfied with their memberships, only 55 percent “feel a connection to their professional membership organization” (Gaertner, Myers, & Smith, 2017, p. 1 and concluded that “Personalization matters to members.” Creating more personalized communication for members, however, comes at a cost. In order to create more personalized communication, you need to limit the number of people you are attempting to communicate with. If organizations forgo a one-size-fits-all approach to how they interact with members, they run the risk of alienating and losing one group of potential members while increasing the likelihood of maintaining another.

This bet on target audience segments is the current focus of membership research. How much should organizations attempt to segment their members into distinct groups? Some believe segmenting members is vitally important. As people grow more accustomed to the tailored content they see within their Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu accounts, they have come to expect similarly personalized

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treatment by the other groups they have subscribed to as members. A 2016 study that surveyed over a thousand professional organization members about what motivates people to become loyal members concluded that:

Very few organizations target members with any sort of consistency, and instead, adopt a ‘one-size- fits-all’ approach across the entire member base. [However] There are stark differences in the way younger and early career members like to be communicated with versus older, more established members. Communication is essential in any relationship ... one of the top three ways members feel engaged is by receiving information. The better the communication, and the more personalized the communication, the stronger the relationship will become... Today’s members have higher expectations of how technology can be used to personalize their experience with organizations to which they belong. (Myers, 2016)

In short, the motivations underlying the steps organizations take to attract members and build member loyalty vary depending on a number of characteristics about the organizations themselves. Notably, nonprofit, advocacy organizations tend to be motivated by the desire to mobilize members so they can advance some sort of public policy aim. Commercial organizations, on the other hand, are motivated by the desire to increase revenue. Regardless, the actual tactics these sorts of organizations utilize are remarkably similar, and primarily focus on engagement. Recent literature suggests that organizations are more successful attracting and maintaining members when they are more effective at communicating with members and providing the means by which they can communicate amongst each other. While this has yet to be empirically demonstrated, many believe that organizations make their members happiest when they offer them more agency.

As digital technology makes it easier for organizations to provide members with platforms to connect with leadership and each other, this focus on engagement will only continue to grow. This will likely lead to more emphasis on segmenting members into distinct groups so that organizations can more effectively personalize their correspondences with their members. As the current conversation surrounding journalism and the news audience reveals, this shift has important implications for both these organizations and for society. As people are increasingly separated into distinct groups based on their demographics and preferences, that will likely increase the ease with which they can mobilize amongst each other, potentially providing citizens with a greater sense of being able to participate in public life.

## **Conclusion**

So where does this review leave journalism’s recent pursuit of more membership focused models? Well, the good news is that journalism’s growing emphasis on engagement and loyalty are consistent with the more general approach that membership organizations are increasingly taking. As the world grows more digital, the opportunities for more personal connections between organizations and their users grows as well. The bad news, however, is that this shift is happening within and outside of journalism simultaneously, which means its conclusion remains an open question. Journalism initiatives like City

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Bureau and De Correspondent can feel confident that pursuing members via explicit attempts to engage and empower users is a method that has been embraced throughout membership organizations as a whole. But news is a different animal. Membership models for news organizations may have to be different, as well.



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