

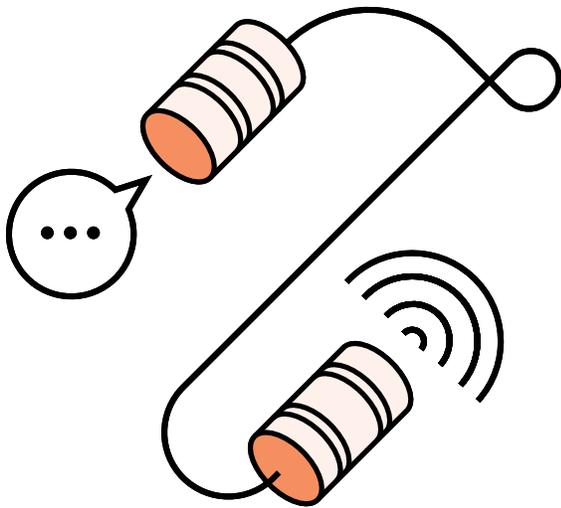
JMR'S PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM PLAYBOOK

A FIELD GUIDE TO LISTENING AND REPORTING WITH COMMUNITIES

by jesikah maria ross

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Cover photo: Jaxon Elvis gets ready to write down his hopes for the Meadowview Neighborhood at the Meadowview Community History Festival, March 23, 2019. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio

INTRODUCTION: LISTENING TO MEADOWVIEW

Most of my extended family are farmers or work in the agricultural industry in California's Central Valley. Whenever we get together, they always seem a bit puzzled by what I do for a living.

They've never heard of National Public Radio or CapRadio, where I lead participatory journalism projects. When I explain our public service journalism, they ask about how we are covering the economic crises facing their small family farms, whether we're devoting airtime to the agriculture industry's perspective on pesticides or portraying the realities of ranch life. They want to know whether we're investigating zoning variances that jeopardize farms and why there are field worker shortages or changes to irrigation district policies that impact their way of life.

In other words, fair questions.

In the seven years that I've been in CapRadio's newsroom, I don't remember seeing any of these stories covered. My family members are smack dab in the middle of our coverage area, but I can't recall hearing voices like theirs in our journalism.

I don't think that it's because our reporters and editors aren't interested in their perspectives and the bigger political and economic shifts that are impacting people like my family. I think it's because our newsroom's structure makes it difficult to report on a range of voices and topics, to tell stories from the ground level throughout the large region that we serve.

Our starting point is probably a lot like yours: a very busy newsroom.

Our reporters produce spots, features, and talk show segments daily. This includes broadcast pieces and web stories with text, images, and videos. They manage social media accounts and produce stories for these platforms as well. It's a heavy lift in a short time frame, so it's easier to cover stories that are coming to them instead of looking for what's missing or assessing community information needs. It's easier to choose stories that come from press releases, and from people and organizations that are in regular contact with news organizations.

At the same time, our newsroom mirrors our core audience, which is mostly white, college-educated, urban, and financially well off. However, it does not mirror the broader community that we are tasked to serve. We don't have reporters who look at the world through the lens of a family farmer, immigrant, or African American student.

And yet, CapRadio still does good, award-winning reporting that our current audience values highly. But that audience is narrow, leaving out lots of folks, like my rural farming family.

However, with intention, we make space for new perspectives.

Newsrooms are workhorses that pump stories out of a churning workflow that is routinized and habitual – and like any habit, workflows are hard to change.

Involving and serving community members who aren't already part of our audience requires new habits. It necessitates allocating more time to report stories. It means adopting a mindset that views community knowledge as key to accurate and relevant stories. It takes a willingness to forge reciprocal, instead of transactional, relationships. It means creating encounters in which people feel invited and welcome into the reporting process.

These new habits are what I call participatory journalism.

When I say “participatory journalism,” here's what I mean:

- Selecting and developing stories in conversation with the communities most affected
- Designing a reporting process that generates understanding, connection, and trust
- Strengthening existing networks and forging new alliances that build community resilience beyond reporting

While CapRadio continues its daily news, it is also making intentional investments in other kinds of reporting, including participatory journalism. Our documentary series, *The View From Here*, was launched in 2011. I came onboard in 2013 to develop an engaged journalism methodology for the program and lead community engagement activities. Each year, the program focuses on a pressing social issue involving people who are most affected to help us understand and report on it. Last year, the program reported on a community that was thrust into the national spotlight by police violence.

Meadowview is a South Sacramento neighborhood, a place of diversity, entrepreneurship, and resilience. However, that's not how many outsiders have seen it. In 2018, two white Sacramento police officers killed 22-year-old Stephon Clark, a black man who was in his grandmother's backyard. He was unarmed. News accounts following Clark's death often called attention to a small window in the neighborhood's past when gangs and drugs got out of hand. To residents, this was just another example of how reporters only cover negative stories about the neighborhood.

CapRadio wanted to take a different approach to reporting on Meadowview and the people who call it home. To do that, we committed to spending a year in the neighborhood, listening and reporting stories guided by residents' needs and aspirations. The podcast and digital reporting project, *Making Meadowview*, showed how we can produce journalism that foregrounds community perspectives, priorities, and hopes.

This is a guide to help equip your newsroom to involve communities and create more nuanced and relevant reporting. It uses, as an example, one long-form reporting project and its impact on broader editorial processes. *Making Meadowview* used in-person events, but the principles apply to virtual or ongoing community building as well.

The guide aims to make what community engagement practitioners do visible and demonstrate why it matters. We're not walking Rolodexes for reporters to tap, nor are we party planners or social media administrators. We create spaces and processes for the people we want to serve to articulate their experiences and collaborate with our newsrooms to report them.

This takes more time and effort than you might think. It involves a lot of unglamorous labor, such as coordinating meetings, taking and distributing notes, following up with people about tasks, facilitating group processes, and developing partnerships — skill sets that are not often celebrated in newsroom culture, but whose absence is felt acutely when they are missing.

This guide is about what engagement looks like and what it takes to do it well. My hope is that it fuels colleagues' efforts nationwide who struggle for recognition and support in newsroom workflows, as well as helps editors and reporters realize that engagement is not separate from editorial, but plays a fundamental role in crafting relevant, powerful, and nuanced journalism.

Jesikah Marie Ross



jmr leads a project-planning brainstorm during WarChild's participatory radio training in Gulu, Uganda, in 2012. Illustration by Tyson Pease

JMR'S PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

To practice participatory journalism, it helps to have a set of guiding principles. Here are five that I've developed in collaboration with Yve Susskind of [Praxis Associates](#).

PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM PRINCIPLES

INCLUSION

Who is involved and represented?

Ensure that reporting processes and content involve and reflect our region's diverse perspectives as a whole, prioritizing those most affected by the issues and whose voices our coverage often leaves out. At a minimum, actively listen to identify people's questions, needs, and aspirations to help shape our editorial decision making and project activities.

COCREATION

How do we involve broader communities in our reporting?

Involve people in developing our editorial vision through listening sessions and advisory groups. When possible, equip people with tools, training, and resources so they can learn and participate in the reporting process in the ways they desire. Always design participatory activities so people feel safe and a sense of belonging.

FACE-TO-FACE EVENTS

How do we increase empathy and understanding?

Design face-to-face opportunities — and this is true whether in person or virtual — in which people can speak for themselves and develop relationships with our journalists and each other. Facilitate group processes that enable participants, including reporters, to hear different experiences, reconsider their own views, envision solutions, and consider how they can play a part. Build empathy by facilitating productive movement between “heart

space,” i.e., the emotional experience that stories evoke, and the “headspace” of social issues or civic concerns.

PUBLIC SERVICE

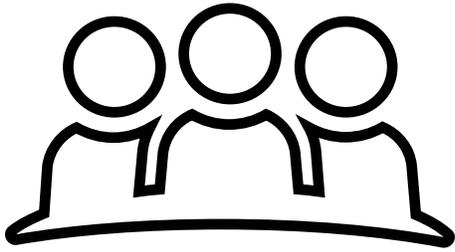
How do we support our communities to navigate life with deeper understanding and connection?

Provide reliable, accurate information that people need from multiple perspectives, correct myths and stereotypes, and hold powerful people accountable. Produce stories that cover solutions, as well as issues. Provide information on multiple platforms so that most people can access it in their preferred ways, identify audiences who are not accessing our information, and allocate resources to learn why these people are not accessing our content, then meet them where they are.

CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

How do we support democratic self-governance and a better life for all?

Attend to relationships and processes (in addition to content) to generate benefits beyond the newsroom. Use the reporting process to create relationships, culture, networks, and capacities that build community resilience beyond the project. Set the conditions for both natural and unusual allies to form ongoing connections, collaborations, and partnerships. Build pathways through which people can participate in existing or new community change efforts (e.g., as volunteers, contributors, organizers, etc.). Specifically, connect project co-creators and audiences to each other and to existing resources so they can work toward shared goals and the public good. Weave the newsroom into these efforts so that reporters — and the news organization — become known, valued, and trustworthy.



STEP ONE: GET TEAM BUY-IN TO MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Like many community engagement practitioners, I work on multiple projects in my newsroom, but most of my time is dedicated to our documentary series *The View From Here (TVFH)*. *TVFH* examines one topic a year, creating opportunities to develop and report compelling first-person stories in deep collaboration with community partners.

Usually, I spend three to six months building relationships that result in reporters and residents working together to shape these documentaries' editorial focus. For *Making Meadowview*, I had about seven weeks — including Thanksgiving and the December holidays — because project editors wanted to roll out a podcast series to mark the one-year anniversary of the **fatal police shooting of Stephon Clark** in his grandmother's backyard.

I knew it was critical that we begin well: Meadowview was inundated with journalists after Clark's death, and I had

heard neighborhood leaders complain that reporters were only coming to their community because there had been a crime, and that the news they produced reinforced tired stereotypes of Meadowview as poor, gang-ridden, and unsafe. Even at CapRadio, which did not have strong relationships in the neighborhood, we could see that most reporting didn't add context to the event or provide a range of perspectives about it.

In crisis, the change we need becomes clear.

As a public service journalism outlet, we felt that we could, and should, do more. We generated good coverage of the news event within the confines of spots, features, and a daily talk show, but we were not set up to tell deeper stories. Meadowview was in our backyard, and we were uniquely positioned to report not just the issues, but also some solutions. We also could help amplify residents' own views of the place they call home.

However, CapRadio is not a news source that many Meadowview residents use or trust. Plus, it's a predominantly Latino and African American neighborhood with significant Hmong and Pacific Islander populations, while our journalists are almost all white.

Making our newsroom reflective of the communities that we cover has been an ongoing goal that we've moved forward on over the past year. However, we aren't there yet, and we weren't close in the fall of 2018. So, how could we launch this project and get off on the right foot?

Every newsroom is different, and the process of helping a team imagine a new way of reporting will vary. However, it usually involves building a shared vision that inspires the team and includes strategies they'd like to try. You can invite reporters to discuss their personal interests in stories and brainstorm their own approaches.

What are the gaps in their experiences? Brainstorm together, listing different approaches they could take and the resources they would need to fill these gaps and follow through. Most reporters I know are whip-smart and ambitious. Unleashing their creative thinking to craft a plan that builds in the resources they'll need is my recipe for success when doing the internal work of participatory journalism. But keep in mind that the more diverse your team, the better this works.

Another tactic to help reporting teams embrace a new approach is to launch a project with a meeting that includes the diverse range of people related to the story they plan to tell. It's not hard to get reporters to meet people where they are. The challenge is to have that meeting go differently than usual. Most reporters don't make or have time in their workdays to just hang out with folks and examine their experiences. They're focused on getting specific questions answered, along with some "bites" for their story on deadline. That's a workflow issue, and it closes down the possibility of creating journalism that addresses people's needs and hopes, not to mention how it sets up an extractive relationship instead of a reciprocal one. That's why it's important to explain to assignment editors and newsroom bosses the importance of building in time to get to know people and places as part of pre-reporting, then develop stories from there.

Getting buy-in isn't always easy. For the Lunch and Listen sessions in Meadowview, we had to commit two to five journalists to participate in each of the six sessions. Like in many newsrooms, the most deadline-driven people in the newsroom were skeptical. I gave the managing editor a clear accounting of reporters' time: I would take no more than two hours per week for each reporter on the five-member team and not involve them in planning or logistics. The reporters, on the other hand, were ready to try this new way of doing editorial work. The managing editor agreed in part because I minimized the impact on the newsroom. She also agreed because the chief content officer (who both she and I report to) backed up my request.

**The takeaway:
It's important to
have a champion
for engagement at the
highest levels of the
organization to move
participatory journalism
processes forward
effectively.**



Health care reporter Sammy Caiola learns about Meadowview, California, from Ivan Caballero, who grew up in the neighborhood. Caiola was among five journalists who participated in six sessions with residents in 2018. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio

IMAGINE NEW WAYS TO BEGIN REPORTING

Here are some strategies to help you get your mind working on new ways to begin your coverage with communities:

Lunch and Listen

For our reporting on Meadowview, we started by hosting six “Lunch and Listen” events in the fall of 2018 to introduce ourselves to Meadowview, share our reporting process, and learn about what the neighborhood values and needs. These 90-minute sessions were quick and relatively easy to pull together, and not very expensive to host. The meals cost about \$7 per person and were catered by

a Meadowview youth development organization focused on the culinary arts. (One tip: Spend your money in the neighborhood you want to reach.) The total Lunch and Listen budget, not including staff time, was \$545. We hosted three of the events at community centers in different parts of Meadowview and the other three at CapRadio.

World Café

For *Hidden Hunger*, the 2016 *View From Here* series, we wanted to know why nearly 20 percent of the residents in Sacramento County, California’s agricultural breadbasket, were food-insecure. To seek answers, I convened a group of 50 diverse stakeholders who are working to alleviate hunger (food bank staff, community nutritionists, urban gardeners, non-profit leaders, city staff, food policy researchers) and used the *World Café Method* to rotate them through a series of small table discussions, each focusing on a different question: Why are so many people going hungry? How does hunger impact our community? What stories can we tell to raise awareness of the challenges and solutions?

A journalist hosted each table to facilitate introductions, guide the conversation, and take notes. Between table conversations, I asked people to mix themselves up so that they sat with different people for each discussion. A full group debriefing generated shared insights, stories, and solutions. By the end of our two-hour gathering, which cost about \$600 for a catered meal and supplies, we developed key relationships and data to produce impactful reporting.

Field Trip

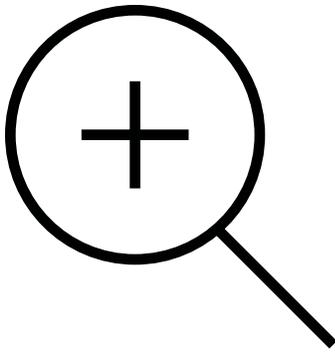
For *Place and Privilege*, the 2017 *View From Here* series, our team wanted to tell the story of the housing affordability crisis in California's capital city, Sacramento. To get started, I organized an off-the-record day-long site visit at an affordable housing complex where reporters toured the building, had coffee with residents, met with staff, and participated in a series of interactive presentations featuring housing experts, social service providers, and community health workers. During lunch, reporters were paired up with residents for 45 minutes to hang out in their apartments or explore other parts of the building. At the end of the day, we debriefed as a team to identify key themes and organize questions, story ideas, and possible sources. The event cost around \$200 for lunch, snacks, and \$5 gift cards to the neighboring coffee shop for participating residents and staff.

Story Circles

To go beyond sharing *Place and Privilege* content on air and online, in 2018, I organized intimate gatherings that brought public radio listeners together with people

heavily impacted by the housing affordability crisis. We set up chairs in a circle, with flowers and candles in the center, to convey a welcoming vibe. Our reporting team greeted guests and introduced them to others as they got dinner and sat down. After dinner, guests were invited to share a personal story about a time when having a home made a difference in their lives. This simple process opened participants up to each other's struggles, fears, and dreams, creating an emotional intimacy alongside a deeper understanding of how housing affordability impacts us all. Afterward, the group considered what they heard and what it means, eliciting epiphanies and action steps.

By the end, participants (including reporters) saw both real differences and commonalities in how they experienced the housing crisis. Although we hosted these gatherings after our stories were aired, I discovered that they are ideal for beginning a project because they create an informal space in which to build trust, hear different perspectives, and uncover new stories. Story circles cost between \$100 and \$250 (depending on the number of guests) for food, flowers, and other supplies. Here is a [video](#) that illustrates what they're like and a [guide](#) on how to host your own.



STEP TWO: FOCUS ON COMMUNITIES' STRENGTHS, LISTEN, AND SHARE BACK

In our Meadowview sessions, the questions we asked came straight out of traditional place-based organizing. Organizers, like journalists, often don't live in the exact neighborhoods where they are working. When that's the case, a time-tested strategy to uncover issues and solutions is to hear from as many people as you can about the challenges they face, local strengths, and their aspirations.

Whether your first time listening is via community events, such as a Lunch and Listen; surveys; or virtual gatherings, the way you frame your interactions is crucial.

There is a community-organizing concept that is helpful for newsrooms engaging in new spaces, known as **Asset-Based Community Development** (ABCD), which inverts and challenges the typical "deficit perspective" for assessing neighborhood

needs (what's wrong, missing, lacking, etc.) and instead identifies assets that already exist so they can be recognized and mobilized.

Many people – especially in culturally diverse, lower-income neighborhoods like Meadowview – are sought out by journalists only to talk about problems. Asking neighbors what made Meadowview special flipped the script in a way that pointed out gaps between our reporters' understanding of the neighborhood and residents' ground-level experience. Plus, the resident-generated list of assets and issues gave reporters a roadmap for research.

Hearing about their issues and challenges likewise illustrated the difference between what we thought would be important to residents and what they actually valued. For example, in the aftermath of Stephon Clark's death, our reporting team assumed that police-community relations would be a key concern. It wasn't.

After exploring issues, we wrapped up with a question about what works well to address their concerns and why. This **appreciative inquiry** method got people sharing little-known stories, naming unsung heroes, and identifying home-grown solutions. In other words, journalistic gold.

We took detailed notes at each event and emailed them back to participants, along with a thank-you note. We told them we would keep in touch throughout the project – we used this opportunity to start a contact list – and invited them to share stories and questions at any time.

When you listen to communities for the first time, you are establishing a relationship, not just hosting an event.

“Share back” what you hear; we followed up both in real time during the events and through follow-up emails. This will help you establish an open and transparent process that creates space for questions, requests, and even some venting. Be open not only to hearing neighborhood perspectives, but also to addressing head-on any misconceptions or lack of trust. If this is done well, leaders in the group will become active networkers on behalf of the project, which is key for reporters doing stories in places that recently experienced trauma.

Use these initial conversations to diversify your pool of sources, get new story ideas, and deepen your understanding of a community’s information needs. Allowing those most affected to frame issues and solutions before you chase a story will help make your reporting nuanced and grounded in lived experience.



Luther Burbank High School students tell CapRadio reporters and each other about neighborhood gems and assets on November 28, 2018. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR LISTENING

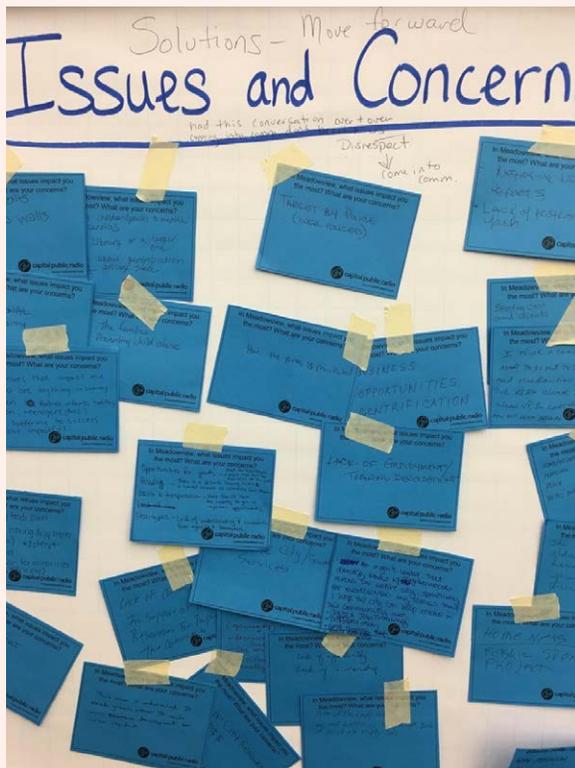
During the Lunch and Listens, we met with about 110 people over six gatherings. We heard from neighborhood leaders, youth advocates, social service providers, law enforcement, business owners, community organizers, teachers, and parents. (For more on how we structured these listening sessions and what we learned, see the [article](#) Olivia Henry and I wrote in *Current* in August 2019.)

We did not begin by asking about police violence, drugs, or gangs because that is what Meadowview is known for in the public’s imagination.

Instead, our listening sessions focused on three questions, in this order:

What makes the Meadowview neighborhood special? Residents talked about diversity, a strong sense of community, elders, beautiful parks, recreation facilities, how it's conveniently located near downtown, the Pannell Community Center with its pool and free activities for people of all ages, local faith organizations, and the Florin Arts and Business Complex.

What are the issues and concerns in the area? They said they were concerned about their children, specifically the lack of youth opportunities and graduation rates. They often talked about employment, homelessness, and economic development. Their everyday concerns related to access to grocery stores and clinics, as well as the perception of the neighborhood.



If you could put a story on the front page about Meadowview, what would it be?

Some ideas included:

- “Community working to control its future”
- “Low crime statistics”
- “Elders and youth working together”
- “How we all gathered together after Stephon Clark’s death”
- “That the ‘View is a good place at moments in time, not all”
- “Women in the community”
- “Resilience in a place called Meadowview”
- “South Sac is not as bad as you think”

In this video, [hear Meadowview residents talking about their neighborhood](#) after the listening session we held at the Florin Arts and Business Complex in March 2019.

Meadowview residents identify problems in the community to begin a conversation with CapRadio reporters about their needs and hopes on November 27, 2018. Andrew Nixon/ CapRadio



STEP THREE: USE YOUR MOMENTUM TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Following the lunches, we wanted to learn more about the places residents said were important to them. In January 2019, we partnered with John Sloat Elementary Principal Angela Novotny — whom we met at one of the Lunch and Listen sessions — to host a Community Fair in connection with a school family night. We invited everyone who attended the Lunch and Listens, in addition to families from John Sloat in Meadowview. About 100 people came to have dinner, talk with journalists, and participate in a series of hands-on activities.

Schools are natural partners for place-based reporting projects. They know the families in the neighborhood and how to reach them. They have facilities where residents generally feel comfortable. Plus, school staff often have deep histories in the neighborhoods where they work and are experts at creating events that appeal to a wide range of ages and cultures.

The staff at John Sloat Elementary encouraged us to think about visual, low-stakes ways for families to engage with our questions. They pointed out that adults would likely be juggling kids and might only be able to stay for a few minutes. We wanted to design an event that would value their time and perspectives.

I decided to set up a series of mapping activities. I knew from my experience leading international media development initiatives that maps are great story generators. They are easy and fun ways for people of all backgrounds to quickly share experiences about their home turf. The giant maps turned out to be a fantastic tool for starting conversations.

Children and families were the key audience for this event, so we also created an activity for kids. Using craft supplies such as pipe cleaners, plastic flowers, Popsicle sticks, Play-Doh, and construction paper, we invited kids to build something — a building, an activity, a feeling — that they wanted for Meadowview in the future. They, too, placed their creations on a neighborhood map.

At each activity station, we placed instructions in Spanish, Hmong, and English. Event staff (reporters, educators, and project partners) stood near the maps and asked people to elaborate on the places they identified.

Our experiment hosting this Community Fair was deeply instructive. Music, decorations, and shared meals created a welcoming and festive atmosphere, in a relaxed environment in which to engage with reporters. Hands-on activities generated interest and excitement among diverse participants. By scheduling the event just a month after the Lunch and

Listens series, we leveraged momentum and provided a path for residents' continued involvement.

Organizing the fair took about two months and only cost about \$500 for expenses, but a live event with so many activities happening at once requires a lot of **people power**: We involved 10 CapRadio staff, three CapRadio interns, eight school staff, and four community volunteers to set up, manage activities, and clean up. Plus, I worked full-time for nearly two months to plan and promote the event. Scaling back activities or taking more time to plan will make future events more manageable.

Although the fair took a lot of resources upfront, it was still a more efficient (and fun!) way to build relationships, trust, and understanding. Instead of lone reporters connecting with a couple of residents one story at a time, the event helped journalists meet scores of Meadowview neighbors and

learn what they care about. Our reporting team represented different beats so they discovered stories and sources not just for *Making Meadowview*, but also for their ongoing reporting. Furthermore, getting dozens of community members to explore their experiences with each other super-charged our reporting process.

Bringing communities together is like farming. The more time you put in upfront to prepare the ground and carefully seed it, the greater your harvest will be — not just this season, but for years to come.



Resident Monica Mares describes what she would like to see built in her neighborhood to CapRadio intern Janis Pope while local youth create models and place them on a map of the neighborhood at the Meadowview Community Fair at John Sloat Elementary in Meadowview, California on January 16, 2019. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio



Ternel Taylor shows CapRadio journalists the places he would take people at an event at John Sloat Elementary School in Meadowview, California, on January 16, 2019. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio

WAYS TO SHARE BACK

For teens and adults in Meadowview, we created wall-size maps and invited participants to place dots on several types of locations:

- Places where they live
- places where they would take people if they were on a tour of Meadowview
- places that they would change
- places they avoid
- places that are no longer there

“It gave people something to physically reflect on, as opposed to just being asked a question. They started sharing moments and memories, and it brought the neighborhood to life,” one journalist observed. “It also takes the focus off the interviewer and puts it on the neighborhood, which I think gets people feeling more comfortable and natural.”

We also asked participants to draw Meadowview’s boundaries using a highlighter, which helped our reporters understand what might fall inside or outside the neighborhood’s invisible borders.

- [Here is the boundary map that residents created.](#)
- [Meet Principal Novotny and see what the event was like in this video.](#)
- [Here is what the dot map looks like on ArcGIS.](#)

Here are other ways in which you can use momentum to listen, learn, and share back:

Set Up a Mobile Storybooth

Put together a portable recording kit and/or photo backdrop, head to places where people you want to hear from gather, and invite them to share their experiences or have their portraits taken. Get their cell phone numbers to send them complimentary copies of their photos and the link to where you’ll be posting their stories. When possible, collaborate with community partners to promote when and where the storybooth will be set up and coordinate ways to share produced content.

As part of the research phase during *Hidden Hunger*, the 2016 *View From Here* documentary, I created a mobile storybooth that traveled to food banks around Sacramento, California. It comprised a pop-up tent, two chairs, and a coffeetable with clipboards for our sign-up sheets and forms to give CapRadio permission to use their stories. We also brought a small cooler of drinks and a basket of toiletry kits to provide as thank-you gifts. The storybooth required three people to staff: one person to explain the project and sign people up, plus two others to record

audio stories and take photos. I trained community college interns to operate the storybooth and collaborated with project partners to identify locations and participants. We collected and curated nearly 50 stories and posted them to an interactive website designed in consultation with local anti-hunger organizations. Our reporting team listened to these stories to develop our editorial vision for the project, while partners used them in their outreach and educational material. About a dozen of these stories became part of our hour-long public radio documentary broadcast.

(Here are some designs of recording devices for a self-operated version of a storybooth, from the Listening Post Collective.)

Offer Community Media Workshops

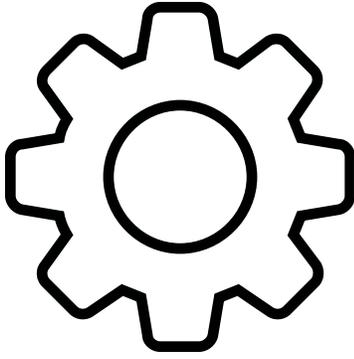
Storytelling workshops create a space for people to talk about their experiences and learn how to translate them into media pieces. In the process, journalists hear ideas that usually don't come up in interviews and get deeper context for their

reporting. Workshop participants often gain skills and pride while reporters gain trust and more nuanced and relatable stories. If you plan to use community-produced stories in your reporting, find ways to provide stipends, gift cards, or other financial remuneration for community mediamakers.

For *Class Dismissed*, the 2013 *View From Here* documentary, I offered a series of multimedia workshops for San Joaquin County youths interested in creating and sharing stories about dropping out of high school. During these three-hour workshops, young people learned how to use their mobile phones to record intimate audio stories, produce video shout-outs, and create photo essays that expressed their views and experiences. Together, we curated their work into the youth media blog *RView209* (209 is the area code for San Joaquin County). In collaboration with CapRadio and community partners, these youth media makers helped develop a guide for using their stories in a series of community dialogues, called *209Talks*.



San Joaquin County youth learn how to use their mobile phones to tell stories about dropping out of high school during a community media workshop at the Federal Building in Stockton, California on August 16, 2013. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio



STEP FOUR: BE RESPONSIVE TO WHAT YOU LEARN

Through the Lunch and Listens and Community Fair, Meadowview residents told us again and again that journalists must understand the neighborhood's history to tell its story effectively. So, in March 2019, two months after the Community Fair, we organized the Meadowview Community History Festival in partnership with *The Sacramento Observer*, an African American weekly newspaper, and the *Center for Sacramento History*. We invited the general public and reached out to everyone we met through our prior events. We invited Meadowview residents to bring family photos that reflect their version of the neighborhood. History Center staff brought professional scanners and offered to include family photos in the city archive.

Listening is important, but only insofar as you act on what you learn. Here is how our listening events informed the *Making Meadowview* project, and the broader story we told about the people there.

The community generated content. It was important to us that *Making Meadowview* include both journalism and community media — specifically audio stories, images, and historical notes generated by residents themselves. We integrated residents' stories into our reporting and the project's Facebook page to reflect their perspectives in telling stories about the neighborhood.

We developed relationships. Our team connected with hundreds of residents through our engagement events — many more than we would have met through traditional reporting methods. These connections were not one-and-dones either. Meadowview residents who attended listening sessions were invited to the Community Fair and History Festival. A dozen of these residents joined a Community Coordinating Committee that collaborated with CapRadio to plan a culminating community event for the project, as well as a future community parade. We were invited to community events such as the Harambee Festival and National Night Out, as well as many neighborhood association meetings — all of which we attended.

Listening to residents changed our editorial focus. Like other media outlets, we first paid attention to Meadowview because of the police shooting of an unarmed black man, and we came with typical public radio ideas about surfacing issues and fostering dialogue on them. However, that's not what Meadowview residents wanted. Over and over, through

different engagement activities, participants told us they were tired of talking about the shooting, which reduced Meadowview to that single event and all the trauma that went with it. They wanted to hear what's good about Meadowview and celebrate it. They wanted CapRadio to lift up what's working, what's needed, how they were already on the job solving problems, and how others could (and should) help. And that's what we did — not to placate or become a mouthpiece, but to tell stories that can make a difference on the ground.

Residents named people and issues that shaped the podcast. Listening-session participants told us they care deeply about youth development and opportunities. In response, youths and youth advocates are featured in four of the six *Making Meadowview* podcasts. The team also heard how much residents deeply value Meadowview's cultural diversity. The [podcast trailer](#) and [long-form web story](#) focused on cultural diversity; the six episodes showcase the neighborhood's Pacific Islander community, spotlight African American voices, profile a Latina elder, and examine a Hmong activist's trajectory.

Some specific ideas from engagement activities became major elements in the project. A listening session participant brought the story of Police Officer Dan Ware to our attention, and he became the subject of the podcast's second episode. Another listening session attendee, RoLanda Wilkins, is profiled in episode four. We also met and interviewed Margarita Chavez at the Community History Festival. Her story is the centerpiece of podcast five.



Sacramento State University students set up a timeline that invites guests to crowdsource key events during the Meadowview Community History Festival on March 23, 2019. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio

TURN WHAT YOU LEARN INTO ACTION

The Meadowview Community History Festival incorporated activities from previous gatherings: We brought large-scale maps, boundary maps, and three questions from our earlier listening sessions. We also added three new activities: One invited residents to place important neighborhood events on a community timeline. Another offered participants an opportunity to create screen-printed posters featuring their vision for Meadowview. The third was a storybooth for recording people's reflections and memories. Here are some examples of what they shared:

I think maybe people moved to Meadowview because they feel that the diversity is very inviting, and it's not something that you need to fit into but that you, like, belong here. And it's not perceived that, like, you have to be of a certain background or income level to be a part of this community. —Monica Mares

I'm proud of where I'm from. I love Meadowview. There are a lot of great people here. There are a lot of people that are my age group that still have their parents who live here. But unfortunately, there's this myth that, you know, when you go away to college and do things, you got to move somewhere else. —Essence Webb

It's a community that's just like any other community around the United States. You know, people are having fun. They're playing games at the park, in the neighborhood. The older people are walking around getting exercise in the neighborhood. The kids are playing, riding their bikes. It's just a normal neighborhood like anywhere else. —George Green

ABC 10 even covered the event, Check out [their report](#) to hear from community member Robert Roots.

We scheduled the Community History Festival at the end of a week of activities scheduled by various organizers to commemorate the anniversary of the fatal police shooting of Stephon Clark. Two weeks before our event, the district attorney released a report and a decision not to indict the two police officers, which led to a wave of protests. By the time our festival came around, Meadowview residents were either exhausted or wanted to stay out of the fray.

Consequently, only about 40 people came to the event, but they were mostly people we had not yet met, giving our reporters a chance to hear new perspectives. Because we used activities similar to the Community Fair, we were able to compile information and spot patterns. We continued to collect contact information and created a mailing

list we used as we reported and distributed *Making Meadowview*, a list we continue to use to better cover the neighborhood now.

The festival cost \$2,200, which covered the facility rental, breakfast for 25 event staff, lunch for 125 people, a stipend for the photo booth photographer, and an honorarium for a mobile screen printing artist.

However, there are other ways to host events that respond to what you learn when you engage in participatory journalism. These can be in-person or virtual. Here are some ideas:

Host Rough-Cut Listening Sessions

To help ensure that your reporting is accurate and reflective of the community you're covering, invite a diverse group of people who are close to the topic to spend an hour with you to listen to and discuss your work in progress. This can be raw tape or a more finished piece. It's helpful to do introductions before you start, give any important context for what they'll be hearing, and let them know that you are asking them to be advisors, not editors.

Class Dismissed, the *View From Here* documentary in 2013, examined the high school "dropout crisis" in California's Central Valley through the lives of four young people. We wanted to be sure these youths weren't outliers and that we were getting their stories right. We also wanted to determine whether we were telling these stories in a way that resonated with people involved with the issue. (After all, our team not only graduated from high school, but also went on to get multiple college degrees — we were pretty far from ground level on

this problem.) To do this, I convened about 60 youths and adults actively working to decrease the dropout rate. After introductions and some context setting, I played a few short clips, 30 seconds to 1:30 minutes each, and asked small groups to discuss:

1. Did what you hear ring true?
2. If so, what did we get right?
3. If not, what needs to change?
4. Will this story make a difference?

Each group reported back their key ideas as our journalists took notes on flipchart paper. We repeated this process two more times and walked away with clear ideas about what we needed to keep and change to make our reporting accurate and useful.

Form a Project Advisory Group

Advisory groups are my go-to participatory journalism strategy because they create an ongoing feedback loop among reporters and community members invested in a topic. Form them as early as possible in a project and try to meet monthly to share updates and collaboratively plan activities that meet mutual goals, such as media trainings, mobile story booths, and community events. Coordinating and preparing for these meetings takes time, but it also creates the space for developing lasting relationships and discovering how your journalism can advance existing community efforts. One word of caution, though: Don't form an advisory group unless you and your organization are ready to share decision-making power in concrete ways.

Throw Live Broadcast Parties

Ideally, your journalism doesn't end with the broadcast or publication, but instead leverages the work to continue to engage with the people you cover. One way to approach these continued relationships is to bring people involved in the topic to listen to the live broadcast together over a shared meal. After thanking the people who have helped make the story possible, workshop specific ways these people might use the reporting to spur wider public conversations and community action. Their actions could range from sharing the story with their social networks to hosting community dialogues to organizing a listening party with decision makers. If your organization has the bandwidth, identify a staff person who can help implement the group's ideas.

To culminate the reporting on *Hidden Hunger*, I invited station executives, journalists, community partners, and people featured in the stories, along with their families, to experience the live broadcast in our station's community room. After introductions over breakfast, nearly 50 people sat together and listened to an hour-long radio documentary. Afterward, I invited people to share their ideas and experiences with these questions:

- What stood out to you in listening to these stories? What resonated?
- What questions came to mind while you listened to the stories?
- How could these stories help raise awareness of the issues in the documentary?

- How can we use these stories to impact how Sacramentans think about hunger?
- What are you walking away with after being part of this documentary project?

The conversation generated concrete ideas on how community partners and CapRadio could continue working together to share their stories in places like food banks, art galleries, community harvest trainings, and food policy meetings. CapRadio secured a \$25,000 grant to realize the group’s vision, including a series of **dynamic public dialogues** (150 people attended!) that used *Hidden Hunger* stories and images to support community planning and problem solving. Everyone who attended the broadcast party ended up playing a role in organizing or speaking at the dialogue events.

Read more about *Hidden Hunger* engagement activities and internal impacts from a reporter’s perspective [here](#).

Organize Small Group Conversations

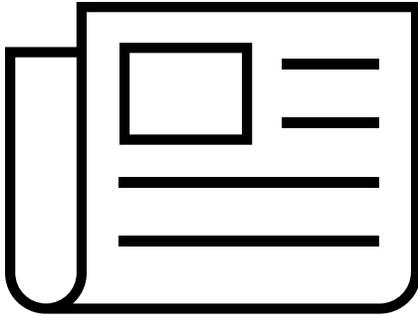
You can bring people together to talk about the stories you produce for whatever size group your resources allow and at whatever stage you are at in the reporting process (e.g., after stories go up on your website, between podcast episodes, post-broadcast, etc.). All you need is a room, AV equipment, selected stories, and a set of questions to facilitate group discussion. Food, flowers, music, and decorations always help, but they aren’t necessary. Whenever possible,



Joelle Toney from Councilman Larry Carr’s office leads Meadowview residents in the electric slide dance at the end of the *Making Meadowview* podcast party on December 7, 2019. Andrew Nixon/CapRadio

co-host with community partners involved with the issues featured in the stories to help answer questions, provide resources, and follow up on action steps generated through the conversation. Here are **10 tips for thinking about how to host these kinds of conversations**.

These events offer immediate and crucial feedback on the content, keeping us accountable for the stories we put out, as well as insight into how to improve our process. You can use the conversations as culminating events to honor and thank everyone involved, share any conversation guides or toolkits you’ve produced, and publicly hand the project off to community partners for further dialogue and action. [Here is an example](#) of how we did that for our *Rural Suicide* project in 2018.



STEP FIVE: MAKE LASTING CHANGES TO YOUR REPORTING PROCESS

As a limited-series podcast, *Making Meadowview* did well. With over 65,000 downloads, it was the most downloaded podcast to date in *The View From Here* series and the third-most downloaded podcast created by CapRadio.

However, we haven't discovered how to decipher what percentage of these downloads are from Meadowview ZIP codes, so it's hard to say how many neighborhood residents accessed the podcast. Still, we wanted to thank the communities that make up Meadowview for sharing their stories with us and ensure that we got the stories back to them. Most residents we met don't listen to CapRadio, so it's unlikely that they heard our on-air promotions or received the member newsletters. Thus, we did what we learned to do: Invite the neighborhood together in a culminating event.

Listening, when done well, results in useful journalism and relationships for the long haul. It makes good on the promise of public service media by surfacing and producing the kinds of information that people need. It helps us reach beyond our existing audience and show that we care. It also creates the kind of relationships that make us all feel committed to each other.

CapRadio continues to be invited to Meadowview events, and coordinating committee members keep in touch with me. One of the reporters involved in *Making Meadowview* continues to pitch and cover stories about the neighborhood. Even better, she's adopted the practice of asking me to send her stories to the Meadowview contact list to help ensure that residents continue to hear stories we create about the place they call home.

While the stories we produce are important, it's really how we steward the reporting process that makes a difference. By showing up, over and over, documenting what we hear and sharing it back, we demonstrate an alternative to parachute journalism and show people they can count on us. By involving people through a project's life cycle — from editorial visioning to story gathering to presenting work back — we build trust, reflect communities back on themselves, and create pathways for people to get more involved with our station. This might begin as sharing story tips, becoming a member, or joining a project advisory group. Better yet, we want to demonstrate our commitment so that Meadowview residents might consider becoming part of our reporting team via workshops, internships, and event staff positions. This is part of our broader goal that we have not yet reached.

Meetings are our superpower. Whether they are in person, online, or via email, consistent interactions and conversations are pathways to give people new knowledge, resources, and relationships. Dynamic storytelling events deepen people's sense of place and willingness to make it better. In other words, listening events engage public radio and the people we serve in the work of democracy.

Listening to and working with people over time in Meadowview fundamentally changed our newsroom's relationship to this South Sacramento neighborhood. They are part of our community now. We pay more attention to what's happening there because we know the place and care about it, and because residents now contact us.

What does this tell me?

Listening before pursuing stories — whether through in-person gatherings, online events, newsletters, or outreach — creates the kinds of relationships and understanding that result in newsrooms and residents committing to each other. It motivates journalists to continue telling stories about a place or topic, and it motivates people from that place or connected to that topic to support the media. It also helps audiences gain understanding and care about places they aren't from and people they don't know.

This is no small thing during this time of escalating distrust in the media. When democratic traditions are in jeopardy, we need more investment in the communities we cover.



Lamajhe Miles, a junior at Luther Burbank High School, speaks during the *Making Meadowview* podcast party on Dec. 7, 2019. Andrew Nixon/ CapRadio

EVALUATE YOUR IMPACT

Working with the Meadowview Community Coordinating Committee, a group that I formed after the History Festival to help guide future events, we designed a party to celebrate the neighborhood and mark the end of the *View From Here's* Meadowview season.

Nearly 250 people came out to Rosa Parks Elementary's K-8 multipurpose room on a wintry Saturday afternoon to enjoy a catered multicultural meal, watch international youth dance performances, and listen to podcast clips and panel discussions. Over 25 social service and community resource booths lined the walls, providing information on everything from voluntary legal services to mental health programs to neighborhood associations to family events. Sacramento Mayor Darryl Steinburg spent almost an hour talking with people. During an impromptu speech, he told the crowd that Stephon Clark's death was a tragedy, but that the CapRadio

podcast project shows that Meadowview “has many more strengths than it has difficulties.” Read reporter Pauline Bartolone’s account of the *Making Meadowview podcast party*.

In event surveys, participants expressed gratitude for celebrating “what’s right and real” about the neighborhood and “people coming together and showing love for the community.” They appreciated “getting to hear the teens speak” and “watching community members make connections with each other.” As one respondent put it: “Sometimes allowing people to speak makes a difference.”

These responses didn’t surprise us; they lined up with what residents asked for throughout our listening sessions.

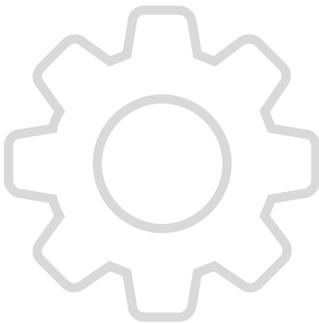
Other survey results did grab our attention; 45 of the attendees told us that through the event:

- 96 percent learned something new about Meadowview, even though most were from the neighborhood.
- 93 percent learned about community resources and how to access them.
- 88 percent met new neighbors and community leaders.

- 86 percent feel more connected to the Meadowview neighborhood.
- 86 percent are more motivated to address challenges facing Meadowview.

During a focus group interview, coordinating committee members told us that they made new connections among each other that are vital to their community health efforts. For example, *Fresher Sacramento*, a youth culinary arts program in Meadowview, connected with two neighborhood schools and the California National Guard, which has an armory in Meadowview, and formed partnerships to provide dinners at school family nights and meals for soldiers. Because of these new relationships, *Fresher Sacramento* delivered 30 free meals to school families in need over the holiday break and an additional 189 free meals to 35 families on Christmas Eve.

Twenty evaluations, or 44 percent of all evaluations, were filled out by people who live, work, or worship in Meadowview. Nine of these people were not CapRadio listeners — before the event they never heard of CapRadio, nor did they use it as a source of news and information. While this isn’t a huge number, it does point to how we can use community events to build relationships while distributing relevant content to those who wouldn’t otherwise access our work.



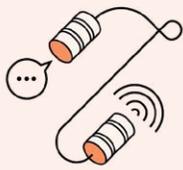
jesikah maria ross is an interdisciplinary artist working at the nexus of documentary production, community organizing, and socially engaged art. She produces journalism that generates public dialogue and community change. Her work brings reporters and residents together, creating paths to change how we collect, tell, and share stories about our communities. Together, we produce on-air broadcasts, interactive websites, and dynamic public storytelling events that advance community resilience. She directs participatory journalism projects at Capital Public Radio in Sacramento, California.

Olivia Henry co-authored [an article](#) and helped shape [another](#) that this primer draws upon.

Angilee Shah shaped and edited this playbook.

The format was inspired by the work of the **Listening Post Collective**, particularly their information needs assessments and commitment to community-powered news.

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**LISTENING POST
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