Rectifying Harm Through Care-Based Practices: How Journalists Might Tend to Disengaged Communities

Sue Robinson & Patrick Johnson

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Rectifying Harm Through Care-Based Practices: How Journalists Might Tend to Disengaged Communities

Sue Robinson and Patrick Johnson

School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA; Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA; University of Iowa, Iowa, USA

ABSTRACT

Journalists struggle to engage with disengaged communities, especially conservative and BIPOC groups. In this research, we suggest that an ethic of care, born from developmental psychology, can be a strategy for trust building. Using a multi-phased, multi-method approach through interviews, surveys, and a focus group, we found that community members believe journalists must be more careful and intentional with cultural and political language relating to ideology, racial identity, and sexual orientation. This study shows that journalists must address harm by contending with negative news experiences, nuancing labels and language associated with their communities, and adopting a combination of five care-based values (drawn from political scientist Joan Tronto): attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity. The findings from this applied research will be used to create training that improves relationships between newsrooms and their communities, as well as help journalists to become more receptive, flexible, and empathetic to audiences.

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We know that certain communities hold more animosity towards reporters and their mainstream journalism than others. Scholars, media pundits, and others have paid attention specifically to how conservative people abandoned local news outlets in favor of the right-wing media spheres, led by Fox News (Carlson, Robinson, and Lewis 2021; Phillips 2014). But immigrants, African Americans, and other communities have also disparaged mainstream news, turning instead to friends/family or influencers on social-media platforms (Spink and Cole 2001) and ethnic media. Solutions to this abound: Make content inclusive! Listen more! Diversify your newsroom! But these solutions get subsumed by the daily chaos of economic crises, pandemics, and the like. In this research, we partnered with Trusting News, a program training newsrooms on how to listen and engage in a way that appreciates job constraints. Over the summer of 2022, we asked nine newsrooms to host 78 listening sessions with disengaged community members to develop a more nuanced appreciation for audience needs. This applied research offers insights drawn from the results of that community-based partnership with Trusting News where our findings will then be used to improve the training.
We came to this study by considering the impacts of diversification in newsrooms and in news content, as well as the political and economic concerns that consistently challenge the press—especially in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also emerged from concerns about news avoidance and a lack of trust in the press and institutions across the United States. First, we wanted to know “What do people who are disengaged from mainstream news need from journalists to engage with (even subscribe to) the brand?” A series of journalist-conducted listening sessions and follow-up surveys with both journalists and participants provided the information needed to understand our second question, “How do these disengaged community members feel whether journalists cause, relieve, or otherwise negotiate harm in their communities?” The answers we heard led us to apply “care ethics” to this data. The ethic of care offers a moral framework that prioritizes the meeting of needs for all through intentional and active outreach and nurturing (Gilligan 1982). We wanted to know: “How might journalists adopt an ethic of care to fill the informational voids and feelings of harm that these disengaged community members hold?” Journalism studies scholars have sporadically turned to an ethic of care as a way that reporters might develop a new kind of value system for their audiences (Hamington 2011; Hossain and Aucoin 2018; Robinson 2023; Steiner and Okrusch 2006). Here we center the ethic to understand different communities’ needs and, in the process, to mitigate any harm from problematic reporting or content. We used Joan Tronto’s five care components—attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity (1995; 2013)—as a theoretical framework to explain our data.

Our qualitative, multi-method approach not only uses the conversation transcripts to hear specific needs according to different community perspectives (we had about half BIPOC and half white conservatives participating with local journalists) but also follow-up reflections and surveys by both the journalists and the community members. We also conducted a focus group with the journalists after all 78 conversations were done. Using these techniques to answer our questions, we make the following statements:

- Participants need to feel represented holistically, without caricatures of assumptions. Furthermore, they want journalists to engage with both political and cultural language more carefully and selectively, making extra effort to work within communities for both the representation and the vernacular.
- Participants feel harmed by the content journalists produce, particularly as it relates to their political ideology, racial identity, or sexual orientation. Journalists must therefore address the harm by contending with negative news experiences, intentional labels, and language associated with community members—especially those who described themselves as disengaged.
- In order to address the harm, we believe that journalists must adopt combinations of Tronto’s five care-based values: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity. We provide suggestions in the conclusion.

As our central concept is a caring kind of trust building, we begin with a section on the myriad ways in which journalistic trust has been theorized before bringing in our interrogating concept of an ethic of care.
Review of the Literature

Building Trust in Journalism

Much attention has been paid to trust in news media as journalism’s relevancy declines and the profession pivots to find sustainability both financially and culturally in Western countries like the United States. “Trust can be defined as a belief that someone or something can be taken at face value in terms of its credibility, accuracy and truthfulness or authenticity” (Robinson 2023, 10). In this article, we are using two versions of the concept of trust: One, the institutional, branded trust that news organizations need people to have for advertisers and subscriptions (Furlan 2012; Kohring and Matthes 2007; Örnebring 2013). This kind of trust tends to be abstract, deriving from a sense that the news represents contextualized, well-evidenced, and accurate truths over time and that people accept that content as such. This kind of trust utilizes a “cognitive” approach, as described in a Democracy Fund post (Gopal and Mazzola 2017), where people determine how much they trust information based on reliability, credibility, and other reason-oriented factors. And, two, a relational trust that reporters as individuals develop with the people that make up their sources, subjects, and audiences and that comes from “working the beat” and building relationships through being reliable, consistent, present, and caring (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 2002; Lenard 2010; Rousseau et al. 1998). For Democracy Fund (Gopal and Mazzola 2017), this kind of trust is more “affective,” based on feelings and emotions. Indeed, research has shown that people respond according to personal and social-media influencers, past experiences, and preconceived notions of the particular news brand (Arguedas et al. 2023).

Engagement journalism is one way journalists might build trust with the news audience (Stroud and Van Duyn 2023). Batsell (2015, 145) defined engagement as journalism that “must actively consider the needs of an audience and wholeheartedly embrace constant interaction with that audience.” One engagement journalism approach asks journalists to rethink the very core of the journalist-audience relationship, not just relationally but also fundamentally as people who are in a community together. This is the “ethic of care” that journalism studies scholars are borrowing from other disciplines to suggest journalists start caring in different ways and about different things.

An Ethic of Care as a Journalistic Tenet to Build Trust

A product of development psychology, care theory emerged when Carol Gilligan felt existing studies on moral behavior made erroneous assumptions about females, as most of the research to date sampled only men. Caring refers to: “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 2013, 19). For journalism studies, a handful of scholars have been suggesting that journalists would do well to adopt an ethic of care as a way to improve feelings of connectedness between themselves, their brands, and their audiences (Hamington 2011; Hossain and Aucoin 2018; Mathewson 2021; Steiner and Okrusch 2006). For Hamington (2011), care offers a pathway towards justice as a norm, especially as a caring practice that can mitigate the journalist’s tendency toward horse-race coverage of elections, for example. For Hossain and Aucoin (2018) and then for Mathewson (2021), care is the expression of compassion and empathy on behalf
of journalists in the treatment of tragedy, and through that kind of coverage, we—as policymakers, as activists, as humans—can act in a caring manner in response. According to Steiner and Okrusch (2006, 114–115), such a guiding moral system might counteract the critically distant demands of traditional journalism, giving journalists “permission” to act with humanity.

But what might this caregiving look like in practice? We draw specifically from political scientist Joan Tronto’s work (1995; 2013) applying an ethic of care to democracy through five values: attentiveness (knowing the needs of others by attending to others), responsibility (feeling responsible for others’ care), competence (adopting an ethic of care requires action with appropriate resources and effort), responsiveness (adjusting our caregiving specifically for the person or entity at hand, and not by simply imagining what needs we ourselves might have), and solidarity (collectively understanding and accepting that care is essential to a working democracy and thriving humanity).

**Methods**

This action-based research is a qualitative multi-method design in three phases: (1) journalists listening to disengaged community members in conversation, (2) journalists reflecting on that listening experience, and (3) the community members reflecting on the listening session. Our community partner, Trusting News, asked their constituents to conduct the listening sessions; in all, nine journalists hosted 77 listening sessions with 78 community members. Our nine U.S. journalists came from across the United States, with the exception of the Pacific Northwest. We had one broadcast reporter with the rest online and print. Community members who participated in the sessions ranged from 20 to 82 years old and included 44 women and 34 men, and represented about half white conservatives and half BIPOC people, according to the journalists’ documentation. Our training partner gave the participating reporters a template for the listening session, with open-ended questions and the caveat that they not get defensive. Questions included: “What do journalists often get wrong about you or about things in your life (interests, demographics, values, beliefs, etc.)?”; “What could local news organizations and journalists do to earn more of your trust?”; and, “Tell me about your experience consuming the news. What does it feel like, and what do you hope to get out of it?”

The second phase of the project included two surveys following the conversation: one for journalists and another for community members. The journalist survey asked how they interpreted the conversation, what they would use from the conversation in their practice, and how their personal identity may have impacted the conversation. It also collected information about the length of the interview, the time it took to recruit the community member, and what tangible outcomes the journalist felt would come from the conversation (such as source cultivation or story ideas). We collected 77 surveys from the journalists about the sessions, a 100% response rate. The community member survey was a mix of open and closed-ended questions that resulted in both qualitative and quantitative data points. Of the 46 (59% response rate) community members who responded to this post-survey, all types of political affiliation were reported, with the majority self-identifying as independent (n = 13), conservative (n = 18), or liberal (n = 17). We asked them specifically if the conversation had built trust for them with the news brand as well as whether they would now consider subscribing or becoming a member.
The final phase of the project was a 90-minute focus group on Zoom. The focus group included all nine journalists who participated in the community interviews. The journalists were asked about their experiences participating in this project, but also about possible outcomes of listening. The focus group provided a space for the journalists to respond to one another’s experiences. While we asked initial questions to guide the conversation, the opportunity for the journalists to engage as a group led to an open and free-flowing dialogue centered on community outreach and care, journalistic harm, politicization and polarization of news and communities, and reimagining journalistic practice.

Using the qualitative software program NVIVO with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2010), we analyzed what we are considering to be five “research stories” that comprised (1) the conversations; (2) the post-conversation reflections from the journalists; (3) the post-conversation surveys with participating community members; (4) pre-surveys with the journalists about their attitudes and behaviors related to audiences; and (5) the journalist focus group. NVIVO catalogued our data and we used CDA to analyze the interconnectedness of the research stories. CDA allowed us to interrogate the power in the discourse, but also the power behind the discourse (Fairclough 2010). This framework revealed the dynamics between journalists and community members, the implications of identity-based categories on news practices, and the role of care in addressing harm to communities by journalists’ storytelling.

Findings

What People Need from Journalists

Our first research question, “What do people who are disengaged from mainstream news need from journalists to come back to the brand?,” revealed a deep distinction between the sample, half of which were people of color who identified mostly as either liberal or independent and half of which identified as right-leaning white people. Nonetheless, everyone felt uncared for by journalists and indicated that their rejection of the news outlet stemmed from what they perceived as longtime neglect and rampant misunderstanding about who they were. Said one reporter, “everyone I spoke with mentioned feeling one or all of the following: their community being over-generalized, under-represented and shown in a negative light when given attention from news sources.” However, the needs changed between our sample of conservative-identified participants and our BIPOC-identified participants.

Politically conservative community members especially wanted journalists to be much more careful with their word choice. For them, the new “woke” language showed a liberal bias and, as such, they felt this as an active rejection of their beliefs—and as a result, them. Wrote one community member in a survey:

Be careful about the language that is used and be as neutral and unbiased as possible. For example, instead of “voter rights” consider “voter integrity”. Forget the woke baloney that has no basis in scientific facts such as “gender assigned at birth”—this automatically shows your bias and that you have no interest in rationale debate and scientific evidence.

Some suggested that coverage of so-called “liberal” issues such as race or LGBTQ topics was neither needed nor wanted. A few of the respondents stated that even running a wire story with a byline from either The Washington Post, the New York Times or the Associated
Press meant the entire local news outlet skewed liberal. Another asked of their listening journalist,

Why do we have to colorize everybody? … The color of somebody’s skin is not the determination of who they are on the inside. Everybody’s the same color on the inside, red. And, when it is put on that a white man killed a Black man or a Black man killed a white man, how about two men are losing their life because of a violent episode between the two of them, and one of them killed the other?

In these examples drawn from the transcripts of the listening sessions and the follow-up surveys, conservative participants revealed a connection between their resistance to the more culturally relevant distinctions around identity and their ideal of a world that draws from a common humanity. These people need from journalists a reification of this paradigm that for them, constitutes their core identity. Finally, most of the conservatives repeated some version of this to the question of what they wanted from news: “Report and inform. All views. Let the individual come to their own opinion on the subject.” For these community members, journalists had:

become the propaganda arm of the Democratic party, especially the woke progressives. Journalists seem to think their job is to convince/browbeat the public with the Democrat party line. There is no objectivity, opinion masquerades as “factual” content, and journalists are clearly left-wing and do all they can to promote that viewpoint to the exclusion of everything else.

They needed journalists to admit this bias and be more transparent about how they reported. They needed journalists to “stop trying to provide racial or politically correct viewpoints in every article,” to not “intentionally try to hide race, number prior arrests or conviction records,” and, especially, to “hire more conservative thinkers to see both sides.”

BIPOC members reported that they needed journalists to be more present, to take steps to become more trustworthy, and to be more culturally relevant: “How much are you planning to recruit interns that are bilingual? How much do you guys invest in high-quality Spanish reading articles?” asked one respondent of the journalist she was talking to. During the conversations, community members asked the journalists these questions with an accusatory tone, implying that they assumed the newsrooms had not done any of the “work” required to build trust in BIPOC communities. As they listened, journalists paused to ruminate about their role and practice:

It was really through these conversations that they would be asking me questions like, “Well, what different tribal communities are you a part of? What community centers have you gone to? What Indian churches have you been to? What elders have you spoke with? What events have you been to lately?” … Even for me, who’s been in this space reporting and covering issues, I haven’t been doing it from an indigenous perspective.

BIPOC participants felt ignored and uncared for because of what they perceived to be a deliberate inaction about a fuller, more holistic characterization and depiction of their communities.

Although in both of these samples, participants expressed a desire for more “positive stories” that reflected “only the facts,”—something we have heard for decades—a review of this discourse in aggregate shows that what people really wanted was more positive
representation—of their belief systems, of their places, of their communities, and of how they considered their identities. That is, all wanted more attention from journalists—to feel heard, to feel a sense of connection with the journalists and the news content. And, really, they wanted connection with each other and the world through the journalism and by these journalists. They wanted from journalism a reflection of how they and their beliefs mattered toward something larger, beyond the mere news.

Importantly, our post-survey results of the community members demonstrated that these one-on-one sessions fulfilled some of this need, actually. “The 1-on-1 approach is probably difficult to scale and reach a significant number of people, but it achieves so much more than writing something that only our existing audience will read,” one of our participating journalists said to us in a focus group. And here are the most significant and startling findings to come from the listening sessions in the post-surveys from the community members: More than two-thirds of the participants reported feeling that the conversations had built trust for them with the news outlet and the specific journalists, and a third of the sample wrote that they were considering subscribing to the news brand. This is so remarkable, especially given that the transcripts of these listening sessions seemed, in many cases, to demonstrate so much anger and vitriol toward the journalists and the mainstream news brands.

**How Do People Feel Harmed by Journalists?**

Our second question asked, “How do these disengaged community members feel that journalists cause, relieve, or negotiate harm in their communities?” The notion of harm for community members was deeply rooted in how they interact with journalism today: “There is so much division, hate, and violence today and journalism is not helping to combat that,” said a community member in the survey. Given that belief, journalists described two distinct ways to navigate harm for the sake of reengaging disengaged community members: One, by addressing negative news experiences directly with disengaged population, and, two, nuancing labels and language associated with community members.

The lack of positive news about the community led to some community members sharing that they rejected all news. One journalist reflected that the pandemic and national political unrest were driving a keen yearning for “more stories uplifting.” Another community member shared he wanted “upbeat stuff. Like positive stuff. Yeah. You just turn the news on. It’s just depressing. That’s why I don’t watch it.” Commonly, these negative news experiences reflected social ills occurring at the time of these listening sessions, such as police brutality, political discontent, and culture war issues. The concern about negative news experiences led community members to seek out alternative sources of positivity, but they also projected the negativity they feel from the news stories onto the journalists themselves. Said another:

> I stopped reading the newspaper from cover to cover. I actually stopped getting the newspaper altogether. I canceled my subscription.…. Like a full hard stop. Because it was so much. For me, I knew then that it was only going to get worse.

Even with recognition that journalists cannot always share positive news, the negative news content turned community members away from what journalists produced.
This expressed desire for positivity is of course not new for journalists, who noted that community members “always say they want positive news, but don’t click on them.” In the focus group, this tension came up repeatedly as journalists noted that their positive stories never drive analytics. However, the conversation turned to questioning “what positive stories are being written and how they are shared with communities?” And after some collective deliberation, the journalists were unable to arrive at a conclusion. Instead, what emerged was an understanding that positivity is a communal issue that spans all disengaged populations the journalists interact with and serve. The lack of a shared definition of positivity reflects communities’ drive to seek positivity in places that aren’t the news. For one example, a journalist shared that community social media influencers were something they noticed becoming a source of community news, especially in diverse communities. The desire for positive news often was connected to community members striving to rectify historic harms to their communities. One journalist shared that the positive stories and sharing them with communities is a way to respond to “those communities [who] feel they have historically been represented unfairly by news teams.” Essentially, the lack of positive representation in news itself is seen as both negative news content but a way to compound harm. A journalist said that the “positive stories about people in the Hispanic community to counter the negative representations she sees” is reflected in the community influencers, but not as consciously represented in the news content the journalist’s outlet produces.

Community members wanted to see people they cared for represented positively as well. For example, one community member recalled a time when he reached out to his local paper to have them cover his granddaughter’s volleyball team. He shared that the newspaper covered more prominent sports like football or basketball, as well as male athletes, but he saw that his granddaughter’s team—despite winning—was left out. The community member explained that the editor was dismissive of his request, which in turn left the community member feeling as though the newspaper didn’t serve all members of the community. He felt that both he and his granddaughter were harmed by what he considered to be disrespect and neglect. In other community conversations with journalists, it wasn’t uncommon for community members to express a desire to see “activities going on” where they can “join and enjoy themselves.” This type of positive story is more about participating in and with the community than simply the commonly held assumption that journalists need to write more positive content. Multiple community members identified schools as a place where that community positivity could be felt and heard. An example included a community member sharing that his newspaper used to give a list of the people in the honor society, and you knew who the teachers in town were and who was on the board of education and who was in the school system. You never hear that unless it comes election time, and then two months later, everything’s forgotten.

The lack of consistent positive coverage reflected the lack of economic means to be able to publish more content. Despite the community members wanting the positivity, the journalists shared they don’t see the community members reading the positive stories. This represents a limiting scope of care-based ethics in journalism. The logic of the market is pushing journalists to be less responsive to their communities’ desires for more positive storytelling.
Across the board, community members were asking for more care-based coverage, including conservatives. They wanted the journalists to care about what they cared about—a grandkid’s game, the National Honor Society induction, or the science fair. Some contradictions arose in nuancing these findings, however: Conservatives wanted journalists to celebrate their kids, but they did not want to hear about the success of trans students getting a bathroom or about the social justice work being done in the schools. Indeed, community members felt most harmed when they viewed as political negative news that journalists considered to be happy news. Harm, as expressed in these research stories, always related to the ways journalists labeled and described community members and their identities.

Reporters did harm when they overgeneralized or when they quoted the “the loudest person in the room”—the most visibly unhinged gadfly who then seemed to become emblematic for all those who held the same ideologies in the news, according to our participating community members. All community members wanted more nuanced descriptions and labels about their ethnicities, political affiliations, and gendered representations. Community members wanted to be understood for whom they perceived themselves to be and not the generalized, politicized, and provocative labels chosen by the opposite party. For example, when journalists used the inflammatory “Don’t say gay” phrasing for the Florida laws targeting content about LGBTQ+, and community members found that to be intentionally confronting.

Community members told journalists how frustrated and angry they often felt, feeling always like the “bad guy”—even though their positions often reflected hate for other groups. Everyone felt personally attacked by journalists. One right-leaning person wanted “to see that an effort has been made to understand a different view instead of just dismissing it and saying you’re racist, sexist, whatever, a neo-Nazi.” Another echoed this sentiment, sharing, “media truly doesn’t know my side of the story, so they don’t even know how to ask a question.” The desire to commune with other like-minded individuals was important to all the community members participating in this project. When a member of their community felt aggrieved by news content, they internalized that harm, as being an attack on their very identity:

Anytime that journalists inaccurately conflate things on Latinx people, that makes it hard to trust. So again, if you’re assuming that all Latinx people are brown, if you’re assuming that they’re all poor, if you’re assuming they’ve all had experiences being undocumented, all of those pieces, and then there’s the language piece as well, right?

This community member explained that her community also required additional techniques from journalists such as language translation that rarely happened. She asked the journalist in her listening session: “How much of your work is accessible, especially if you’re writing about a community? Are they going to be able to read the thing you wrote?” Here the community member expressed a desire for more care-based attention from journalists through accommodating news coverage.

However, in direct contradiction to BIPOC community members’ expressed needs, the right-leaning part of our sample actively did not want this kind of caring journalism. This kind of journalism—content that nuanced issues, amplified different voices, and ensured all communities could be heard—was felt as harm by these conservatives in the listening sessions. In the sessions, journalists were verbally harangued for their increasing diversity.
in their coverage, especially that of race or sexuality. For example, when asked what could be done to earn his trust, one conservative community member shared that he would like the newspaper to stop writing about LGBTQ+ people and issues completely, especially the coverage of trans youth “usage of the bathrooms” that aligned with their gender identity:

Journalist: We do try to stay as neutral as possible. And our goal is just to show what’s happening.

Community Member: I just don’t want to see it paraded around. ‘Cause I think the more it gets paraded around, the more it’s normalized and there’s 7-year-old kids that are furries and transgenders … everything’s so normalized now because that’s all you see.

Conservative viewpoints were demonized, these participants complained, even as they suggested that entire groups should not exist, at least publicly and in mainstream news. Rather, community members understood the press to be an important reflection of societal values and were dismayed that mainstream journalists seemed to be aligning themselves with more liberal values, with several members feeling like reporters were trying “to force” contemporary wokeness onto everyone:

Even if you look at TV news, you see all these liberal viewpoints. I mean, you don’t see an advertisement today that doesn’t have gay people or lesbian people or LGBTQ people, or black, orange, blue, green people in the ads. They’re forcing all this stuff down everybody’s throat. I don’t consider myself a racist. I never have been, but to all of a sudden see this stuff since the Black Lives Matter movement started up just being rammed down everybody’s throat is unbelievable to me.

The inclusion of diverse voices and language were seen as both personal attack and an example of the news’ liberal agenda. One community member explained that the use of language supporting “Black Lives Matter” and “LGBTQ rights” seems to be “what the paper endorses,” and not what really mattered, namely the Second Amendment and illegal immigration. The more issues surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion—tenets of care—were included, the more harmed these right-leaning community members felt. Here we revealed tensions between different applications of care, different understandings of what harm meant, and how all of it manifested for community members.

**Discussion**

**How an Ethic of Care Can Help Journalists**

In our last research question, we asked “How might journalists adopt an ethic of care to fill the informational voids and feelings of harm that these disengaged community members hold?” Here we consider the effectiveness of the listening sessions themselves and also apply the theoretical framework of Joan Tronto’s five values that must be present for an ethic of care to manifest. It was clear to us as we parsed all of these research stories that all the community members—BIPOC or right-leaning—yearned for a more care-based practice of journalism that that reflected these five values: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity. Each value emerged in the discourse between journalists and disengaged community members, but also in individual survey and focus group reflections. What surfaced for us especially as how what was a methodological tool for us—the listening sessions that journalists did with community members—
became a trust-building tool for the journalists and the community members, so this is also discussed throughout this section.

**Attentiveness**

For Tronto, attentiveness as a value demanded that people feel like someone was listening to them, that what they said and did mattered in some significant way. In the work at hand, attentiveness was achieved through the act of listening—in the sessions, in the post-surveys, and the focus groups. Community members told us the sessions made them feel attended to; journalists said their conversations illuminated for them “more real answers.” Community members felt equal to the journalists, as if their personal stories and beliefs mattered, and they did not feel mocked nor excluded; indeed, they felt included. Journalists appreciated sharing with other journalists these often difficult listening sessions—where they were instructed not to explain or justify or defend, but just to listen. They felt the hard work of attending to and deemed it worthwhile. In some instances, they said they found new understanding about the communities they were covering and reported they would bring that understanding—attentiveness—to the next set of stories.

This notion of attentiveness also emerged in terms of the topics that were covered: journalists paying attention to Instagram influencers for each community, for example, or hiring a translator, or spending more time on complex subjects such as education like “getting really, really deep with the [school] district to understand their perspective, but not only that, but also building relationships with the organizations that had done some of that organizing work and students, parents, people” impacted the journalist’s story. The community member felt that it helped to “arrive at some level of analysis of like, ‘These are the parts that are going right, these are the parts that are like not going right.’” Finding opportunities to spend time with communities would allow the journalists to be attentive to community needs and in turn bolster the trust community members have in the journalist and their media organization. This was clear especially with the conservative community members in their post-conversation surveys. Furthermore, across the board, those who responded to the survey shared that they appreciated the journalist listening to them, and that through these sessions, they felt attended to. This, in turn, led them to consider subscribing or becoming a member, as mentioned earlier.

**Responsibility**

Responsibility, according to Tronto, is when tasks or attention and care must be accepted wholeheartedly. In other words, journalists must recognize and then accept and work to improve the impact of their storytelling on individuals and communities. From this dataset, one community member believed that journalists should “Stay focused on delivering content that helps readers know their place in current and world events. How does this news impact my life and how can I help better my community.” Responsibility includes journalists being conscious of the harms that may have been done to community members. Conservatives asked for more nuanced descriptions of themselves, including, as one community member described, “not interviewing the loudest person in the room.” Establishing a more nuanced vocabulary to talk about local communities was another “responsible” imperative. One community member felt that one media
organization harmed someone she cared for and she then rejected that organization because she felt it had not taken responsibility for its harmful actions. Others considered it journalists’ responsibilities to cover adequately, accurately, and reliably issues like “systemic oppression” as well as be nuanced and accurate in their coverage of polarizing issues. A Latina community member argued that when journalism used simplistic binaries or stereotypes, boiling down BIPOC people into “white, Black, or Mexican,” the more threats to her community centered on being “illegal immigrants who don’t belong.” When reporters do not assume the responsibility of more nuanced and less polarizing ways of covering Latinos, for example, they experience direct trauma and harm. A conservative community member focused her attention on the need for journalists to be responsible in their understanding of policy, especially related to election laws. Believing that the 2020 US Presidential election was “stolen,” she blamed journalists for not fulfilling their responsibility in knowing election laws. As a result, she didn’t trust them and shared that she now takes on the responsibility of doing “the research” herself.

**Competence**

Competence reflects not only the responsibility one accepts but the ensuing action towards care-based activities, according to Tronto. For journalists, competence has always reflected their norms, routines and practices in production. For all the community members, journalists must build trust with them by building relationships with them, and doing so every single day. For both community members and journalists, the listening sessions were an example of this competence, this caring in action, as one journalist told us in the focus group:

> People really want to feel heard, and don’t feel a personal connection with their local journalism outlet. If we could replicate this sort of outreach and include more of our staff, I think it would be beneficial for the audience and our staff.

Competence means providing a space for outreach and personal connection that is focused on the needs of the community. This value is closely connected to attentiveness. The difference, however, is about journalists’ news production practice, rather than the attentiveness of community engagement. Community members want journalists to “be the reporter no matter what language or race.” They want journalists to be themselves, but to do so with an eye on balance, fairness, and transparency in a way that actually shows up in how they choose stories, sources, and frames. In community member post-surveys, several shared that journalists need to use their increasing consciousness about word choice to actually change how they go about writing and approving headlines, for example. Applying more competence would mean that journalists do not instinctively stick any wire story into the content hole, but rather review the story for bias and stereotyping as well as polarizing language. It would mean perhaps choosing a story from an outlet not considered to be extreme in its political leanings such as *The Washington Post*. It would mean transparency sidebars and posts about how they were being more careful in all of these decisions. In other words, competence as value asks journalists to follow through with these refrains—ones they had heard for decades—with productive action and to make sure reporters have the resources of time and money to make these changes happen.
Responsiveness

Perhaps the most useful element of practicing an ethic of care for our journalists would be Tronto’s fourth value listed: responsiveness, which is making sure to align the caring practice for the actual needs of the individual or community. In other words, the caregiver must not assume all kinds of caring are beneficial or equal. What is caring for one person, may be harm to another. We certainly saw this play out in the varying needs from our community members. Responsiveness allows the journalist to lean into the needs of the community, acknowledge those needs—whatever they are—and in doing so, increase trust. For many of our community members this would look like: Giving “the fuller picture, both sides of the story, really showing compassion and empathy towards victims, towards the marginalized community” (with both conservatives and BIPOC groups asserting their marginalization when it came to mainstream news). More advice included to “ask the community what they hope to accomplish, not assume or generalize.” These ideas focused on compassion and positioned responsiveness as a way to give voice to the voiceless through more reciprocal relationships with audiences.

In one journalist’s reflection, competence meant listening to the community members in these sessions and thinking through how to respond specifically and explicitly, while navigating potential for harm with other parts of their audience. For example, this journalist listened to a contentious conservative community member who condemned the publication for its coverage of LGBTQ+ people. Thinking back on the experience, the journalist shared in the focus group that his response required a different approach, which led him to think more critically about how responsiveness must be more nuanced if journalists are going to connect with disengaged community members:

“I put that in the category of it was worth it to take the time to listen. That was not a conversation where I tried to … With somebody else, I think I would’ve said like, “We’re not here just to report on one point of view. We’re here to make sure we are reflecting all the points of views in our communities. And people of color and people in the spectrum of the LGBTQ are members of the community the same way you are. And we think it’s important to try to foster understanding between the various members of our neighborhood.” It didn’t sound like that was something that was going to sell him, so I just sort of listened and said, “Thank you.” And kind of left it at that.

Later, the community member expressed to us in a survey that this listening had the effect of feeling cared for. This exchange embodied the intricate relationships that community members feel they need from the journalists. A BIPOC community member specifically asked a journalist to care about the people they are catering to, thus the need to be responsive to the community. It should be underscored that responsiveness reflects a different role than journalists have traditionally played.

Solidarity

In 2013, Tronto added “solidarity” as the fifth and last value embedded in an ethic of care practice. Solidarity for her imbricated into the very idea of being a caring individual or practitioner a sense that we all deserve care in society. For our special case of journalism, we turn to Anita Varma’s definition of solidarity-focused reporting (2020) as when:

Journalists stand for basic human dignity and against suffering, and is practiced through newsworthiness judgments, sourcing, and framing that center the lived experiences of
people subjected to unjust conditions. The decision to report—or not report—one these conditions inherently leaves neutrality behind.

One notion of solidarity emerged during an interaction between a journalist and a bilingual community member, who shared that in her communities, Spanish speakers felt disconnected just when they needed to be wrapped in care from their trauma and other experiences. News content felt alienating to them. In her post-reflection, one journalist considered that partnering with Spanish-speaking news influencers would go a long way to helping them thrive, at least informationally. This need for solidarity was echoed by other Spanish-speaking community members who felt “the local news needs to understand that they’re not living in their own world.” In order for solidarity to exist, one community member believed that the newsroom should be investing in,

high-quality Spanish reading articles. ... Maybe like an intention to have something in Spanish, or maybe the intention is going to be focused just to cover Hispanic news and still keep it in English, but at least with empathy and with the cultural sensitivity.

In this data, it was common for community members to make connections within their community and how other institutions commuted in solidarity with them. Solidarity as a care-based practice provides journalists a roadmap to being more empathetic with the communities they serve—with an emphasis on serve. This came up when multiple community members addressed immigration issues. In one of their stories, the community member shared that students in her community have,

been coming as undocumented crossing the frontier, kids that are suffering of trauma, kids that are suffering of loss. During their immigration journey, they lose relatives or they saw death or they saw people that abuse one of their friends. And those are the kids that are arriving to the community schools with zero English.

This participant wanted journalists to directly address these concerns, advocating for resources, community involvement, and other expressions of care that could improve the situation, what they described as a responsibility of journalism. Instead, the coverage alienated immigrants just when they needed to be wrapped in care from their trauma. For conservative community members, though, this kind of solidarity expression would look like activism to them and be alienating for them. For example, conservatives did not want journalists to report on immigration, race or LGBTQ+ issues, or to “have them shoved down our throats,” which made them feel alienated and excluded from the world (the opposite of feeling in solidarity, of course). However, their resolution to this—to go back to ignoring these people and issues—do not align with care-based practices, either, and this is a quagmire we take up next.

**Conclusions**

For research question one, we described the needs of community members: journalists need to be careful with their word choice and framing to avoid using polarizing language and stereotypes; journalists need to go out of their way to ensure many different voices are included; journalists need to produce more positive stories reflective of cultures and ideologies; and journalists need to partner with people in the communities to produce
more inclusive content. To answer our second research question about the negotiation of harm, community members told journalists that they felt trauma when journalists failed to appreciate the cultural relevancies associated with their political ideology, racial identity, or sexual orientation. In order to address these harms—the subject of our research question three—journalists should consider five components of an ethic of care in their practice: Attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity (Tronto 2013; 2013).

We surfaced several important tensions that mainstream journalists must deal with: First, even though audience members say they want more positive stories, they do not consume them when offered, which undercuts the commercial press’ bottom lines. This common and age-old narrative repeated itself both with the community members, who hyped the positivity as among their information needs, and with the journalists, who said their positive stories didn’t get clicked. What our analysis shows is that what “positive” means is perhaps different than what journalists consider to be positive. All want positive stories that align with their ideologies and identities, or their personal interests. The guy with a granddaughter who plays volleyball wants the volleyball story; the woman with a son in National Honor Society wants the NHS list of names. The solution here is to be more selective about “positivity” and to find new pools of story content from local partnerships like the schools, sports leagues and area organizations—showing not only attentiveness to these needs, but also the competence of meeting that need. Furthermore, “positivity” would also result from new kinds of relationships with networks of communities that are otherwise marginalized, allowing stories to bubble up that might be more culturally relevant as “positive stories” than journalists might otherwise publish. Ask the Spanish Instagram influencer for help promoting positive happenings in Hispanic communities, for example. Such pro-action could be considered a responsibility on the part of journalists to make sure all parts of their communities are covered and show a responsiveness to what community members say they need to feel cared for, informationally.

The second quagmire is more difficult and something journalists have been contending with since the former U.S. president Donald Trump made fake news popular in 2016: What white conservative audience members perceive as being journalistically cared for looks markedly different from what groups such as African American or immigrant need. Indeed, our conservative sample indicated that feeling cared for, informationally, would mean no more stories about race, immigration, or LGBTQ+ issues—which would directly cause harm to these communities. To relay misinformation, to ignore cultural news, or to cater to hate and fear are all non-starters for mainstream journalists. Yet this is not an either/or proposition. We heard an earful about word choice, tone, and topics that journalists can consider as they produce content. They can avoid adopting polarizing language such as the nicknames given to policies or bills by partisan actors. They can complicate issues beyond the binary Democrat versus Republican. They can acknowledge and work with the varying identity constructs at work with their audiences. They can develop more and closer relationships with people from all these different marginalized groups, listening always so that people no longer feel marginalized.

We note of course that these demands for new kinds of caring come at a time of intense fiscal and other resource constraints for local journalists, especially those in...
small, metro and regional newsrooms. Our nine journalists talked at length about this tension: They want to comply with the recommendations offered throughout the listening sessions but have neither time nor training in employing these specific caring practices. Of course, some limitations remain with these recommendations. There are real challenges to implementation of an ethic of care given the realities of newsrooms. Journalists might worry that the actual practice of caring thus negates existing, more traditional notions of professional ethics codes. In addition, a concentration of caregiving must inevitably bring production standards not from evidence but from the perspective of the audiences, whom we know to be fickle and polarized.

And so what should they do? They should strive each day to meet one audience member where they are at. They should participate in the free trainings such as the ones our partner organizations host. They should utilize partnerships and collaborations within community much more frequently. Because ultimately, the biggest finding from these research stories we analyzed is that the very act of the listening sessions alleviated feelings of alienation. These very acts illuminated for all the players involved that ideas were heard and that caring was present. The key to success, this study has shown, is listening. What this study demonstrated is that this ongoing trust building exercise for journalists is a process of deliberation and dialogue. It is through these kinds of outreach such as one-on-one listening sessions that this dialogue can happen and compromise can be reached, where ownership over news can be felt, where ultimately a sense of belonging can be seen within the content of a news outlet. So even though the journalists never, for example, conceded the point of amplifying stories like that the election was a fraud or throwing out stories about trans use of bathrooms, the very act of allowing those viewpoints to be heard in private conversation helped assuage the feeling that their views were being ignored and discounted in some way. As such, one way to begin for journalists, we found in this work, is with such listening sessions.

Notes

1. We should note here that we attained permission from our Institutional Review Board to label this data as “secondary” data given to us with permission from the journalists.
2. The journalists were compensated $500 by the partner organization for their participation in this larger project.
3. “Furries” is a reference to fake news that circulated around the time of the transgender bathroom controversies. Furries were supposedly kids who were demanding to be treated as animals during school, such as cats who needed litter boxes. This was an urban myth that became a GOP counterpoint to trans youth’s demand for bathrooms that aligned with their identity. (Kinkade et al. 2022)

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