Communities of Practice:

Lessons for the Journalism Field

BY ANGELICA DAS

EDITED BY JESSICA CLARK

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PREFACE

At a time when news and journalism are experiencing significant disruption, Democracy Fund is seeking to better understand and equip news outlets and reporters for public engagement. Individual newsrooms are ill-equipped to deal with large-scale transformations in platforms, news economics, and audience habits. Culture shifts are difficult to achieve and often happen from the bottom up or the outside in. We recognize that new solutions are needed across organizations that can be compared, replicated, scaled, and evaluated.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) provide a structure in which this activity can happen adjacent to or outside of legacy settings. This paper examines the theory and evolution of CoPs and explores in greater detail the nascent CoPs developing around engaged journalism. The appendix provides a checklist for building and grouping CoPs.

Democracy Fund is committed to supporting a vibrant media and the public square. By examining how CoPs have developed in the field of engaged journalism to date, we can better understand how a community of practice provides useful structures for learning, growth, and innovation. We can also learn how the ideas can be applied to other communities in journalism, including leaders at local news hubs, media business innovators, and other cohorts where new practices are emerging.

We welcome your feedback on these ideas and look forward to hearing more from you about how communities of practice are being adopted in your newsrooms and communities.

TERESA GORMAN | LOCAL NEWS ASSOCIATE, PUBLIC SQUARE PROGRAM

What is a Community of Practice?

The concept of "communities of practice" (CoPs) provides a useful framework for understanding how cohorts of practitioners, researchers, and investors coalesce around a shared identity that binds together networks of learning and practical application. Understanding how CoPs form, operate, and are sustained will provide opportunities to develop new standards, practices, and professional roles within the larger field of journalism.

CoPs can be considered in the context of other connective terminology: groups, "intentional networks," learning cohorts, "tribes," or even "movements." While there is some debate, the distinction is that CoPs involve building infrastructure for continual learning and opportunities for leadership.

Communities of practice are defined in academic and consulting literature as self-selected, active practitioners in a field with shared commitment and expertise, committed to interaction and learning. According to Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner,[1] academics who have helped to define CoPs, "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."

CoPs are characterized by informal organizational structure designed to capitalize on knowledge sharing. While they often exist within larger institutions or corporations, Etienne C. Wenger and William M. Snyder place particular emphasis on the unstructured nature of CoPs, describing them as "organic, spontaneous, and informal."[2] The Wenger-Trayners note that "Members engage in joint activities and discussion, help each other, and share information."[3]

CoPs need to grow beyond mere networks in order to function. They thrive and are sustained via regular in-person interactions and what Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder refer to as "aliveness."[4] These authors write, "what makes [CoPs] successful over time is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members."

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The Network Weaver Handbook identifies CoPs as specific learning communities on more focused topics that operate within larger networks.[5] Coordinating networks is challenging because no one has actual authority, and structured communication and engagement are necessary. Interaction is the key to generating value. Nicole Anand, writing about the Open Government Partnership (OGP) – a multilateral commitment to practices of open government including transparency and anti-corruption – takes interaction a step further. She declares that principles that help to structure and sustain in-person interactions allow for community building.[6]

Anand explains that community of practice "describes the productivity that happens when people gather regularly to discuss common work. Through offline convenings, online meetings, or in a blended approach, CoPs aim to deliberately organize collective action."[7] OGP brought in a social impact firm that guided and encouraged the community to consider how it is organized. Participants used conversations as data, and role-playing to stimulate

new ways of thinking — participants were empowered in a user-centered model that starts before and lasts beyond in-person convenings.

Examples of communities of practice around public interest media

A number of creative and academic communities have formed useful models for how CoPs operate in real life, for example, here are a few that we've personally participated in and helped to build over the last five years:

Best Practices in Fair Use: In a movement pioneered by documentary filmmakers, a number of creative communities declared their professional standards for fair use of copyrighted material to support the creation of culture within the limits of the law. Published best practices are regularly shared and exercised by self-identified communities such as media literacy educators, research librarians, poets, and visual artists. Scholars at American University have led and convened this CoP.

Global Public Service Media Experts Network: The Global PSM Experts Network provides a means of connection among "academic and applied researcher experts of public service media around the world." They have organized to provide online platforms for cultivating the network via a roster, newsletter communication, and a private Facebook group. While these activities support the network, they also function as a CoP with the intention of strengthening this network and inspiring collaborations in the name of addressing challenges faced by public media worldwide. The Global PSM Experts Network grew out of the larger European network of RIPE (Re-Visionary Interpretations of the Public Enterprise) and gathers in person at the bi-annual RIPE conference with explicit goals of facilitating knowledge-sharing and collaboration. The network recently announced a partnership with the Center for Media, Data and Society at the Central European University to support members in organizing workshops and conferences.

Impact Producers: As the field of socially engaged documentary film has evolved transnationally, so has the professionalization of the role of impact producers — members of the film team who are dedicated to public engagement or social impact strategy and implementation. Still a largely unknown role outside the industry, impact producers in recent years have networked with each other and drawn on a growing body of knowledge on social impact through film. BRITDOC, a documentary funder and producer, has become a leader and serves as a convenor for this CoP.

Funders have played a key role in supporting the formation and growth of each of these CoPs by supporting research, convenings, coordination, and university-based hubs.

The need for leadership

The OGP case for guiding principles also illuminates the role of leadership and guidance that infuses structure into an inherently unstructured field. But this structure differs from organizational design that focuses on hierarchies, systems, and roles. Instead, community design should "bring out the community's own internal direction, character, and energy."[8] CoPs are self-guiding, changing direction as growth of new members drives new interests and directions. And at the heart of communities is individual interaction, facilitated by communication channels and in-person convenings — set-up by self-identified community coordinators.

This need for community coordinators mirrors the crowd-powered leadership described by best-selling business author Seth Godin in *Tribes*.[9] Similar to CoPs, though with added emphasis on individual leaders, "a tribe is a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea."[10] Godin cites Micah Sifry of Personal Democracy Media as a leader of a "tribe" devoted to civic tech. "Heretics are the new leaders," writes Godin, "The ones who challenge the status quo, who get out in front of their tribes, who create movements … heretics, troublemakers, and change agents aren't merely thorns in our side – they are the keys to our success. Tribes give you leverage." [11]

Sifry has since leveraged his own tribe to glean foundation support for the annual Personal Democracy Forum and the creation of Civic Hall – a "collaborative innovation center that advances the use of technology for the public good,"[12] based in New York.

Coordinators emerge as a result of the need for stewardship of the shared knowledge and information in CoPs. Coordinators take on the work of organizing events and cultivating connectivity among members, and often are unpaid at first. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder point out that "Good community design requires an understanding of the community's potential to develop and steward knowledge, but it often takes an outside perspective to help members see the possibilities."[13] Distributing resources within the communities of practice allows more and better opportunities for the day-to-day exchanges and knowledge sharing that sustain CoPs, without imposing hierarchical structures.

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Journalists recognize the value in such interventions: "One of the ways to help level the existing playing field is to make sure everyone knows about the groups that already exist. Many of these groups are not well-advertised and are hard to find, particularly if you're a freelancer or new to the field," writes Melody Kramer – a digital strategist, writer, editor and producer recently hired by the Wikimedia Foundation – by way of introducing a list she curated of "every hidden journalism related social media group I could find."[14]

In journalism, these interventions that take the forms of curation, communication platforms, and convening also have the potential go beyond cultivating the CoPs themselves – they are essential for addressing the critical issues of diversity and representation. "Mainstream media is by and large a white institution," writes Andrew Haeg, "and so when decisions are made to cover our increasingly diverse communities by a small cadre of journalists who look like each other, and often live in the same neighborhoods, we all lose out." Intentionally constructing an inclusive CoP promises to serve not only the field, but communities.

CoPs, networks and institutions

Not all of the communities or groups we have discovered inside of journalism, such as those identified by Kramer, would qualify as CoPs. A network indicates a set of connections among members, and in many cases a shared platform that identifies those connections. But the degree of interaction and engagement would determine whether the network rises to the level of a community of practice. The key attributes of CoPs – shared identity, shared knowledge, learning, and interaction – set them apart.

Kramer, writing about new ways to define membership in public radio, identifies such interactions in a useful way as offline experiences. "There are meetups and tweetups and ways to find people who like what you do. And then after finding those folks, you generally ... do something with them. You take your community that you found online and bring it offline."[16] These face-to-face experiences are what sustain communities.

Take, for example #mojocon, one of the "12 communities for journalists you should know about" identified by Abigail Edge: "Started after RTÉs recent MoJoCon in Dublin, this Facebook group is a space for anyone to ask questions and share ideas around mobile journalism. It also organises a fortnightly mojo setup in Dublin."[17]

The experiential element of the "setup" sets this CoP apart from a network in which participation is simply defined as "membership."

Sometimes those experiences come from working at the same place but across departmental lines. Researchers have also identified a number of CoPs as informal skunkworks formed within formal institutions, "During the past five years, we have seen communities of practice improve organizational performance at companies as diverse as an international bank, a major care manufacturer, and a U.S. government agency," write Wenger and Snyder.[18]

Amy Schmitz Weiss and David Domingo apply the CoP theory more directly to newsrooms: "The CoP approach can help to explain the relationship between journalists and technology, particularly with the innovation processes implemented in the newsroom."[19] The authors argue that framing individual newsrooms as CoPs "unveiled a crucial element in the mechanisms of innovation processes in the newsrooms: the learning and sharing of knowledge."[20]

But more commonly, CoPs in journalism, and more specifically engaged journalism discussed below, are dispersed among institutions and organized on third-party platforms.

Journalists – unique from actors in corporations or government agencies – are also disproportionately freelance and independent. And as such, "people want to be part of something larger than themselves, they want to invest in improving their communities, and they want to find people with shared values," said Kramer in conversation with Josh Stearns.[21]

The role of platforms in supporting CoPs

The Wenger-Trayners write that "A community of practice is not defined by the medium through which members connect. Mutually relevant challenges of practice are much more important than modes of interaction."[22]

But in general, digital platforms are essential to the existence of CoPs. Christopher Hoadley, writing on how to support them, observes "More recently, networked technology has allowed communication to be increasingly time and place independent, with ever richer communication channels."[23] Technology supports CoPs by linking people to each other and providing a shared repository of knowledge with easy access.

In the end, CoPs aren't platform-specific. As Edge recognizes, CoPs in journalism are often taking advantage of social media like Facebook groups or Twitter hashtags. Medium serves as a popular open-access online journal.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder note that "At the heart of a community is a web of enduring relationships among members, but the tempo of their interactions is greatly influenced by the rhythm of community events. Regular meetings, teleconferences, Web site activity, and informal lunches ebb and flow along with the heartbeat of the community." [24]

We see this happening actively in journalism: "Luckily I found a few online journalism communities – aside from the obvious Twitter – which have been great for those times when I need advice or simply a little bit of banter," writes Edge, who identifies individual groups she loves, such as "Open Newsroom" and "Journalism Tools" operating on Google+, and the Facebook group "The No1 Freelance Ladies' Buddy Agency." [25]

Fostering diffusion of innovation

CoPs in journalism have the potential to act as those hubs for innovation, but they face an uphill battle to move newsrooms beyond current practices. Mark Briggs writes for Poynter that "too many news organizations and journalists still see innovation through the lens of their legacy medium. [...] True innovation in news means connecting that reader/user to important information in a new and meaningful way." [26] Neal Mann, a journalist writing in Medium argues that "The innovation we talk of in journalism isn't the kind of innovation designed to radically change the way consumers behave, it's really just short term reactionary attempts to try and deliver content to platforms the majority of consumers already use." [27]

Moreover, researchers investigating journalists as agents of innovation published findings in the *International Communication Gazette* that "professional culture – articulated in skills, ideas and practices – acts as a network that weakens the potential impact of technology towards innovation and audience-oriented models of journalism." [28]

In order to spread innovation, journalism CoPs need to have a deliberate focus. As communities dedicated to generating and sharing knowledge, they are uniquely organized. Where individual newsrooms may struggle to innovate as the above writers suggest, members of CoPs aren't constrained by institutional norms. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder explain, "Unlike team members, community members can offer advice on a project with no risk of getting entangled in it; they can listen to advice with no obligation to take it." [29]

But the informal nature of CoPs means that diffusion of innovation may falter without leadership and initiative. Practitioners in engaged journalism therefore need resources in order to support this effort, which can take the form of more general infrastructure, communication channels, and systems of knowledge sharing dedicated to innovation.

CULTIVATING CoPS IN ENGAGED JOURNALISM

To understand how this might work, let's take a look at the case of building a CoP for engaged journalism. Real innovation in engaged journalism is about forging more meaningful connections with audiences – the tools, platforms, and technology are a means to an end.

The above exemplars share a number of traits that are useful for understanding how communities of practice can be cultivated. While primarily self-organized, these CoPs rely on volunteer leadership to provide organization.

In the case of fair use, researchers at American University received foundation grants that provided a structure for creative communities such as academic librarians or poets to meet and determine best practices. The researchers continue to promote the results and work with new communities, while practitioners serve as ambassadors in the field.

Associations in the respective creative fields organize trainings and forums. Institutional leaders in the social impact documentary field BRITDOC took on the job of convening the first ever impact producers conference, hosted concurrently with the 2015 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam.

In both cases the organizers belong to institutions who do work beyond the individual community of practice and the CoPs are cross-sections of individuals working at a range of organizations or independently.

As noted above with respect to "coordinators," CoPs function most productively when there are active leaders and convenors encouraging dialogue and information sharing. This kind of volunteer leadership is evidence of the need for infrastructure and resources to support the CoP activities. Wenger and Snyder note that "Communities of practice are vulnerable because they lack the legitimacy − and the budgets − of established departments."[30] Leadership works to secure funding for CoP activity and can take a broad view of the landscape to identify opportunities and guide conversations.

Several nascent communities of practice are currently emerging to support engaged journalism. However, at the same time, previous communities of practice that were established for this purpose, such as the National Center for Media Engagement, and organizations dedicated to public journalism have dwindled for lack of funding, lack of adoption, or clarity of purpose.

A combination of institutions and individuals have recently taken on convening roles, but the structures are disparate and affiliated institutions have broader agendas and missions not necessarily specific to engaged journalism. We interviewed a number of the organizers of these events to get a clearer picture of progress and gaps.

Platforms

No central online hub has emerged for this CoP. Members of the Facebook group "Engaged Journalism" are a cross-section of members in the Online News Association, the Society of Professional Journalists, and an unknown number of informal online or in-person communities.

Leading outlets are playing a role. ProPublica hosts the popular Crowd-Powered News Network (CPNN) that reaches beyond its own staff to invite any "media professionals and others who are actively engaging communities − both online and offline − in the creation of journalism." Liz Spayd used the platform of her own outlet, *The New York Times*, for a public call to action on engaged journalism. "What would prove more fruitful is for newsrooms to treat their audience like people with critical information to convey - preferences, habits and shifting ways of consuming information."[31]

More research is needed to catalogue the existing platforms used by CoPs in engaged journalism, which are currently active and which generate the most energy. In the interim, Kramer's list includes engaged journalism networks and related complementary communication channels.[32]

Journalist and researcher Joy Mayer cautions that these platforms alone are insufficient for the practice. "Communication is primarily in the form of getting input or feedback from others, it's a good place to look for examples. [...] But I wouldn't call it a community of practice" just yet, she says, because there are no structures in place to ensure coaching and mentoring of these burgeoning skill sets.

According to Andrew DeVigal, chair in journalism innovation and civic engagement at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, engaged journalism practitioners are using "anything that happens on the computer screen" to connect with each other. These online platforms play an essential role for individuals who may not have the support of someone in the newsroom to bounce ideas off of. With support from the Knight Foundation, DeVigal hopes to create an interactive platform that supports the engaged journalism community as "a digital gathering space and resource repository where they can tap into a growing body of knowledge on these issues."[33]

Recent Convenings

Over the past two years, a series of face-to-face events have brought engaged journalism practitioners together to compare notes and develop shared language. Examples include:

- **Engage Local:** The second annual conference of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University in 2015 chose engagement as their theme to look at "the smart ways media organizations can use engagement to report the news, create brand loyalty, fund their enterprises and turn an active ear towards their communities." https://www.montclair.edu/arts/school-of-communication-and-media/center-for-cooperative-media/events/2015-engage-local/

- **Experience Engagement:** Journalism That Matters and the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon hosted a 2015 conference to "illuminate, inform, and support community information health that contributes to thriving, inclusive communities by learning about processes that grow it, creating products that support it, catalyzing a community of practice dedicated to it, and identifying actions to amplify it." http://journalismthatmatters.org/experienceengagement/

- **The Engagement Summit:** In January of 2016, GroundSource and Mercer University's Center for Collaborative Journalism presented an "un-conference devoted to breaking down barriers between journalists and communities they serve." https://medium.com/groundsource-notes/the-engagement-manifesto-part-i-9c348b34200f#.fbybqfnhc

- **ONA London: Audience Engagement:** The Online News Association dedicated its second international conference in April 2016 to "how audiences find and interact with news," featuring "audience engagement experts from around the world, as well as hands-on demos that will offer the chance to engage with emerging technology." http://london16.journalists.org/

- **People-Powered Publishing Conference:** In November 2016, Illinois Humanities hosted, with a range of partners, a one-day conference on Innovation, Community, and the Future of Journalism, "highlighting innovative projects and practices that build stronger connections between reporters and the publics they cover." https://www.ilhumanities.org/events/people-powered-publishing-conference/

For Andrew Haeg, who organized The Engagement Summit, beyond establishing a community of practitioners, the goal is to establish a large and active community made up of engaged audiences. "It is our job to prove to our communities that what we do is of value. Working with our communities, while being transparent about our process and struggles, is the most direct way to show them our value," writes Haeg in "The Engagement Manifesto: Part II," which emerged from the convening.[34]

Michelle Ferrier, president of Journalism That Matters and associate dean for innovation at Ohio University Scripps College of Communication, takes it a step further, saying, "I've been talking for years about a new role that is beyond community manager, a community weaver" – someone who sees the need for a community made of people who do and don't come out of traditional journalism and with outcomes that are different from traditional journalism.

What is needed for this CoP to mature and become effective? In the appendix, we've laid out a checklist of initial activities and longer-term indicators that can help community builders and funders gauge where they are in the process.

Competing CoPs

In choosing to support the formation and efficacy of the engaged journalism CoP and others, funders and organizers need to be aware of the cacophony of rival groups clamoring for newsrooms' attention.

As illuminated in Kramer's list, a number of established journalism networks overlap with and serve the engaged journalism CoP, without being fully focused on the goals and needs of engaged journalism. These could serve as hubs for collaboration and convening, but need to be more closely considered to see how their goals and priorities might conflict. The Democracy Fund is already supporting some of these networks, including INN and ONA.

There are also more established CoPs that could divert attention. For example, the loosely organized network Hacks and Hackers brings together journalists and technologists to brainstorm and "hack" news projects on myriad digital platforms. Supported via both online tools and local chapters, the group spans national boundaries with a mission to share knowledge and ideas. Activities include hackathons, training, and collaborative demonstration projects. Their work overlaps with those of engaged journalists in instances where these projects are more participatory in nature, but differs in its focus on technology over community needs.

We hope that this paper will prove useful not only for those seeking to organize CoPs around engaged and local journalism, but for other funders and organizers in the space aiming to coalesce around other crucial responses to disruption in news. In Appendix I, we've created a working checklist which lays out the various steps it takes to create and grow a CoP – print it out, hand it around and start organizing.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jessica Clark and Angelica Das of Dot Connector Studio are consultants to Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation working to ensure that our political system is able to withstand new challenges and deliver on its promise to the American people. Bringing extensive expertise in journalism, public engagement, media impact, and analysis, Clark and Das advise and conduct research for the Public Square Program and Democracy Fund at large.

For more information about Democracy Fund, please visit www.democracyfund.org.

Field Mapping

☐ Initial research into field players:

    ☐ Who are the researchers?

    ☐ Who are the practitioners?

    ☐ Where do they work? What do they do? What are their titles?

☐ Landscaping/mapping:

    ☐ How do related groups intersect and overlap?

    ☐ Who are the "in" and "out" groups?

    ☐ What are the other disciplines with related skill sets and regular collaborators?

☐ Building a network/database:

    ☐ What does the network map tell us?

    ☐ How can members of the CoP find out about one another's work?

    ☐ Is there a public directory?

Information Gathering

☐ Identifying relevant topics and tools, resource gathering:

    ☐ Creating libraries, archives, lists

☐ Building shared taxonomies:

    ☐ Understanding terminology

    ☐ Developing glossaries

    ☐ Writing up case studies

    ☐ Tagging resources for searchability

    ☐ Identifying a referee – who will monitor the parameters of the field?

Information Sharing:

☐ Identifying/attending/documenting relevant convenings and events

    ☐ Establishing/monitoring digital hubs for conversation

    ☐ Listservs, Slack, etc.

☐ Sharing relevant information through newsletters, articles, listservs, and social media

Next-level steps:

☐ Establishing best practices process for the field

☐ Establishing impact metrics

- ☐ Creating awards for the field
- ☐ Establishing job titles and professional standards
- ☐ Creating regular structures for mentorship and coaching
- ☐ Developing curriculum for unique and evolving skill sets
- ☐ Establishing trusted leadership
- ☐ Forecasting and change management for the field

APPENDIX II:
INTERVIEWEES

- Michelle Ferrier, Associate Dean of Innovation, Research/Creative Activity and Graduate Studies, Ohio University

- Andrew Haeg, Founder & CEO, GroundSource

- Peggy Holman, Co-founder and Executive Director, Journalism that Matters

- Joy Mayer, Audience Engagement Strategist, Mayer Media Strategy

- Andrew DeVigal, Chair in Journalism Innovation and Civic Engagement, University of Oregon

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