

Renewed Hope for Journalism Creates Shifts

Image



Gathering centred on how communities, journalists can thrive together igniting new connections, possibilities

An energy for discovering and bringing to life journalism's deeper promise is still pulsing days after a gathering in Portland, Oregon, inspiring participants to new connections and possibilities.

“My hope has been renewed,” says Renee Mitchell, admitting she had long bought into the pessimist view that journalism was basically a dying industry, gasping for its last breath, which “deeply saddened her.”

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— *Renee Mitchell*

“But I now recognize that what is bubbling up in the void between what was and what is coming is not new journalism but next journalism, where the possibilities are endless on how to use technology to tell stories that build, empower and inspire community. That’s what’s so exciting for me.”

Hosted by Journalism That Matters and UO SOJC’s Agora Journalism Center, the gathering drew more than 100 journalists, community activists and others representing a diversity of professions. Called Experience Engagement, the highly participatory gathering or “unconference,” as it was called, centred on the question: What is possible when the public and journalists engage to support communities to thrive?

What’s now possible in the lives of three participants in the gatherings begins to answer that question.

Shaping a Community’s Soul

Amalia Alarcon Morris joined the Portland gathering as a government administrator responsible for civic engagement. Her bureau provides support to people at the community level to build capacity, develop leadership, identify issues that matter to them and build bridges back to city government, so that they can influence

decisions that shape the community's quality of life.

Amalia was encouraged to attend the events after participants at a conference on public participation heard her passionate reflections on the importance of story in shaping community.

"I was on a panel around equity and civic engagement and one of the things I said, which I firmly believe in, is that when we work in government, there is a kind of data lust that happens where people are constantly asking us for statistics; they want quantitative information to support the work that we do. But they don't give the same respect to people's stories."

Quantitative data is fine, but people's stories are the data, Amalia continues, and it is in "sitting down and listening to people's stories" that hearts and minds are changed.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Photo courtesy of Journalism That Matters

As a result of the Experience Engagement gathering, Amalia is now actively working towards forming collaborations with journalists in the city of Portland who have an orientation to the journalism that she saw might be possible.

"One of the biggest things that I walked away with was just this feeling of, 'Oh my gosh, what influence could we have in the world if we approached the practice of journalism in that way,'" Amalia says.

"To walk into a room filled with people who are journalists or students of journalism who were talking about how to engage with community and approach journalism from an assets based perspective ... to me, that was a completely new way of looking at journalism. It was amazing."

Amalia adds one of her resonating reflections from the gathering was that if a community is always being portrayed negatively, what does that do to the soul of that community?

“My biggest ideal, my dream, would be some collaborative work so that together with the (traditional) investigative pieces there would be this collaborative storytelling about what else is going on amidst the chaos and the wrongdoing.

“How are people putting the pieces together or holding the pieces together or building community as opposed to tearing community down. To me, that would be the most exciting thing.”

Journalism Still Matters

Renee joined the Experience Engagement gathering to see if there was still a place for her, as a spoken word poet, multimedia artist and youth voice advocate, to connect with others based on the work she now does outside of traditional journalism.

“One of my aha moments was in the confirmation that hope is still alive, that journalism still matters, and that journalists still have an important role of facilitating conversations that help people find common ground,” says Renee, a journalist of 25 years who is now working outside of the industry.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Photo courtesy of Journalism That Matters

“I was thrilled to see that there were so many other current and former journalists and non-journalists in the room who still cared deeply about the intention of why I got into journalism in the first place, which was naively to help save the world,” she adds.

“It was amazing to see so many others, 30 years later, who still believe in the potential of making a difference in the lives of others through journalism.”

As a result of her experience in Portland, Renee now feels supported to try things that engage the community more directly and to collaborate with other journalists in different cities in creating projects that excite her journalistic urgings and also empower her community.

One specific possibility now coming to life is her intention to create an interactive youth voice project she learned about from Terry Parris, Jr. who now works for ProPublica in New York City. Terry led a project that involved working with young poets who wrote about their dreams for their neighborhood. “He was so open in sharing information and ideas, while also giving me permission to duplicate the project, which I intend to do next year,” Renee says.

She also found tremendous support and inspiration for a new initiative she is leading, which is to create a career-technical track in journalism for a local high school.

Eager to avoid, the standard “me-teacher, you-student boring lecture approach,” Renee was envisioning project-based learning that offered students a chance to do social justice-based journalism that was relevant to their lives and to their communities.

“I walked away from the conference with so many ideas for really cool storytelling projects, so much enthusiasm for the potential of what my students can learn and create, and so much more direction, and confidence, really, about teaching students to embrace the heart and intention of serving community through journalism,” she says.

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It's for all of these reasons that Renee says she has “fallen in love with journalism all over again.”

“I see this industry I loved so much and for so many years through fresh eyes now. I am reconnected to it in a way I didn’t expect. I am so grateful.”

Strengthening the Practice as a Tribe

As someone already venturing down the path of active community engagement, Ashley Alvarado with the Southern California Public Radio has been most thrilled to discover a “tribe” with whom to build and strengthen and amplify the possibilities in this “next journalism.”

As a public engagement editor, Ashley was especially struck by the various engagement practices and activities modelled through the Experience Engagement gathering, from Open Space Technology to the space made for group reflections on the experience as it unfolded. She is now looking at ways to bring some of these practices and activities back into her own work of engaging listeners and the broader community.

“I think lot of people at Experience Engagement found it was this transformative experience; it was renewing, and I’m excited to see what happens now so many people have found their people and what we can pull off when we get together,” says Ashley.

Intrigued by the possibilities in the rebirthing of journalism? Click [here](#) to learn more about Journalism That Matters, the host of Experience Engagement.

You can also [sign up](#) for a co-discovery experience Axiom News is hosting on Generative Journalism and the New Narrative Arts.

** In the photo, Experience Engagement participants swap cards, each with a response to the question: “What’s a key idea that guides your engagement work?” The activity, called [Thirty-five](#), leads to a crowd sorting exercise in which the highest scoring cards rise to the top. The cards are posted [here](#).*

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