

Notes Towards a Democratic Newsroom



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Start with what brings each journalist alive

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If one wanted to create a democratic and engaged newsroom the place to start is with what interests each journalist specifically. Find out what about their community is most important to them personally, what they care the most about. Ask them why the issue or opportunity they identify with, and are enlivened by, is important to them. Ask them to tell a story about a time in their lives when they felt closest to it. What moved them? Then ask, what is happening now? What would they like to see more of? What do they wish was different and how? Who is working on the same issue or opportunity, what do those people contribute, what is possible if all of those

peoples' stories were told with persistence as the question at hand unfolded and changed?

What questions might the journalist ask people to uncover their questions, what they would like, want, or need from the community to make their work more successful? What are the next steps people are taking and what do they imagine will be the best thing that could happen?

Then, ask your journalist what they are prepared to commit to the project and what they need from you in terms of salary, resources, time and space, freedom from interference, and connections. Then, provide all of those things. Stop yourself from telling anyone what to do. Then when their pieces come in, run what they bring you. Set aside your worry that the story isn't big enough, critical enough, world changing enough. Even if these stories seem small or deeply personal, in time you'll see how deeply engaging and democratic they are.

If you provide what they've asked for, asked them what they think will happen, and gained from them their own self-determined commitments there are no excuses.

You will find that most journalists will hold a higher bar for their performance than you do in this case. As a manager, or editor, the trick will be to be aware of the pressure they are putting on themselves. With this kind of freedom your journalist will be confronted with their own choices. This can be anxiety producing. They may both love you and hate you for it. If you provide what they've asked for, asked them what they think will happen, and gained from them their own self-determined commitments there are no excuses. This is accountability and agency, and therefore democracy, in its deepest form and highest order.

You will likely find that you will have to encourage them to keep the commitments they made to themselves and to you because the bar is so high. It won't be laziness that slows them down or causes them to veer off track, prognosticate or procrastinate. Instead, it will be the sheer weight of the responsibility and desire to perform that creates hesitancy to publish. This too will pass in time, just keep publishing.

And so, you will no longer be a 'managing editor' but a coach, encourager, connector, and champion.

Your newsroom, if you've done this with even four or five journalists at once, will be more democratic. Your journalists, and I can guarantee this, and their sources will be exponentially more engaged. Audience will come naturally what with all the engaged tweeting an' all. Generative community development will happen. Things, visible things, will start to change and show themselves on your front pages and in your lead stories. In the process, you will have been an agent for the deepening of democracy in your community. You, your journalist, your newsroom, and your organization will have held nobody accountable but yourselves, there will have been no watch dogging, no deciding from the top what the story of the day is. Instead, you will cultivate upward communication. In time, you will find that there is a great deal more power, knowledge, and information in 'upward' social communication than there ever was in downward communication. You'll wonder what you've been doing all these years.

Your newsroom will change. The org chart will be magically turned upside down, or perhaps be converted from a triangle to a collection of concentric circles and cross pollinations. This won't need a management consultant, controls, procedures. You'll keep a few of the rules and quality checks you have now but you'll also notice that there is a lot less work for you to do. Patterns, natural ones will emerge. The work won't feel like work, there won't be henpecking or dominance hierarchy games. People will be busy making the contribution most important to them and by way of the skills they most wish to employ. You will be making a lot fewer decisions for everyone else. A lightness of being might come over you.

As your newsroom changes, your community's narrative will change. The loudest power with the biggest bullhorn will find him or herself standing still in a stampede of inspired people rushing forward while enacting their gifts to create the community they want to create.

Suddenly, by starting at home, by being democratic and engaged in the way described above you will be beacon and resonance centre of engaged democracy. You will have done something great for yourself that also turns out to be great for others.

Changing ourselves is far more within our span of control than changing others first. Let's face the music and dance the democratic dance.

It'll be a ball.