



CLEF COVID-19 Community Information Needs Assessment Toolkit

During the COVID-19 pandemic, news organizations have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to provide their communities with indispensable news and information using engagement strategies to connect with audiences in a meaningful way.

To try and help newsrooms meet information needs for targeted communities, The Lenfest Institute and The Listening Post Collective partnered to highlight a four-step strategy for how newsrooms can identify and create coverage for their audiences. We've also created a printable worksheet, which you can use to begin to craft your own approach to socially distant audience and community engagement. We've also included links to other resources and case studies that can help illustrate successful approaches to engagement at lenfestinstitute.org/coronavirus.

These strategies are just a jumping off point, and we hope that they lead to meaningful journalism that provides valuable insights and information to your communities:

1. Connect with community influencers who can help build trust

It all starts with trust. News organizations can't provide resources or connect communities unless there's a willingness to engage with them. By collaborating with known actors and trusted agents, journalists can help bridge divides with their communities:

- **Where to look:** Leaders of existing nonprofit organizations, religious groups, schools, government agencies, or other community groups can help identify influencers within their communities who can help share stories or requests for feedback.
- **Be transparent:** Journalists must be clear with potential sources about their intentions. They must let people know what they're trying to achieve and how they're hoping to help. Journalists can also be advocates for media literacy, educating their communities that they play a critical role sharing necessary information.
- **Be patient:** Even in a crisis, relationship building takes time. Be willing to take no for an answer. Start small and build up to bigger collaborations. Not everything will — or even should — result in a story for publication.

Try it yourself: Who are the influencers in your community? How can you connect with them?





2. Identify places where communities congregate online — or offline

Even before the pandemic, communities were turning to online sources for information, camaraderie, and fun. Not everyone has access to a computer or phone, it’s important to think of how to reach folks who don’t use the internet the way journalists do. Here are some strategies for how journalists can work with online communities.

- What are you currently doing?: Many outlets already run successful online communities on their own platforms or off-platform. What are you already doing that’s working? What’s not working? Could you survey your audiences to see what they like? By assessing your current offerings, you could expand and reach new communities.
- Look for active Facebook groups: In the United States, Facebook groups, for better or worse, remain hives of activity in many communities. They can be a great jumping off point for identifying key topics of conversations and influencers. Don’t always look for the biggest group, but start with ones that have a lot of activity or conversations.
- Abide by the rules: Communities online have their own rules, guidelines, and structures. Journalists should always follow the group’s rules and should identify themselves as journalists.

Try it yourself: Describe any online communities that your newsroom is currently moderating.

Try it yourself: Are there communities you’re trying to reach that you’re not currently connecting with? Where do those communities congregate online? How are they accessing information?

Try it yourself: What are the standards and norms of the communities you’re trying to serve? How will you make sure that you respect their rules?



3. Safely visit places where communities are still gathering

Even as many of us are staying home and social distancing, there are still places where people are congregating out of necessity: Grocery stores, food distribution sites, places of essential employment, and more. Journalists can utilize the following strategies to reach communities in-person:

- Connect, from a distance: Utilize tools such as posters or white boards to communicate. For example, reporters from KBBF, a California public radio station, used a white board with a phone number on it to encourage people to call and ask questions.
• Go old school: Utilize retro strategies such as flyers or postcards that you can leave with people's homes or businesses to share information or provide a place to ask questions.
• Stay safe: Staffers' own safety and wellbeing should be a priority. Use common sense. Don't venture out if you're not feeling well. Wear a mask. You can't continue to perform essential journalism if you're sick or at home.

Try it yourself: Where are your community members still congregating in person?

Three horizontal lines for writing the answer to the first question.

Try it yourself: What strategies can you use to provide information or propose call-outs utilizing those in-person locations?

Three horizontal lines for writing the answer to the second question.

Try it yourself: How will you make sure that journalists and community members are able to engage safely?

Three horizontal lines for writing the answer to the third question.





4. Ask questions — and then listen.

Successful engagement is built on curiosity. Ask questions. Don't assume the answers. Listen with an open mind. Use your journalistic skills to get answers for people. It's that simple, but, of course, it's more complicated than it looks. Here are some tips:

- Meet people where they are: Don't expect that readers will come to your website or already engage with your audience. Use the strategies we described above as a starting point. Once you've built trust and identified ways to engage, you can act.
• Manage expectations: Be clear with audiences what you'll be able to provide. Include them in the process when appropriate. Keep them updated. Just because you've written a story about a topic previously, it doesn't mean they necessarily know about it. Resurface or re-use archival coverage.
• Respect everyone's time: Be upfront with community members about when they might hear back from you. Emergencies can be overwhelming for everyone, so it helps to be realistic and clear on timelines. Set a clear schedule so individuals know how to reach you and when you'll be available. Keep your office hours so people can build a habit and build your engagement into their routines.

Try it yourself: How are you going to reach out to audiences to ask your questions?

Three horizontal lines for writing the response to the first question.

Try it yourself: How will you prepare to handle the influx of questions? How will you publish the responses?

Three horizontal lines for writing the response to the second question.

Try it yourself: What are your goals for this initiative?

Four horizontal lines for writing the response to the third question.

