2015 ENGAGING NEWS
PROJECT STAFF

DIRECTOR:
DR. NATALIE (TALIA) STROUD

COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATE:
KATIE STEINER

FACULTY RESEARCH ASSOCIATES:
DR. ASHLEY MUDDIMAN
DR. JOSH SCACCO

RESEARCH ASSOCIATES:
ARIELLE CARDONA
ALEX CURRY
CYNTHIA PEACOCK
EMILY VAN DUYN

SENIOR ADMINISTRATIVE ASSOCIATE:
MELODY AVANT

WEB DEVELOPERS:
BRETT BOWLIN
JERRY JONES
JOSH RACHNER
Dear Friends and Supporters,

The news media are a critical institution. Ideally, they provide the public with the information necessary for democratic participation. Today, much is amiss. We live in a world where news organizations struggle for audience and sustainability, and American citizens are either withdrawn from politics or attracted to polarizing partisan content.

The need for journalism intervention is critical. The Engaging News Project aims to be part of the solution. The success we’ve seen since starting this initiative in 2013 has encouraged us to develop a long-term plan to turn this pilot into a movement, and transform this project into a full-fledged organization.

2015 has been an incredible year for the Engaging News Project. We have seen tremendous growth in all aspects of this initiative. From the adoption of our work by newsrooms across the country to increasing discussion of our research in the media, this year has been our best year to date.

We can’t wait to see what 2016 will bring. We already have been hard at work on a variety of research projects to be released throughout the year, touching on a range of topics including headlines, comment sections and page design. We also have been chosen to present at the 2016 South by Southwest Interactive Festival this March in Austin.

Of course, we wouldn’t be where we are today without our supporters and funders. Our heartfelt thanks goes to the Democracy Fund, Hewlett Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and the Moody College of Communication. We also would like to thank Google and Facebook for their generous gifts. And to the friends we have made along the way — journalists, editors, academics — thank you for all of your support.

Sincerely,

Natalie (Talia) Stroud
Director, Engaging News Project
The Engaging News Project’s primary goal is to identify new tools and practices for today’s newsrooms.

RESEARCH

This year we released eight reports on issues facing the news industry. Highlights from our reports include:

1. **CLASSIC VS. CONTEMPORARY PAGE DESIGN**
   A news website with a contemporary homepage design yielded more page views and increased learning from news articles compared to a website with a classic, newspaper-style layout, according to our research. Across three experiments, we found the contemporary website had at least a 90 percent increase in unique page views compared to the classic site. We also found that study participants’ recall of details from the articles, although low overall, increased by at least 50 percent when they viewed the contemporary homepage.

2. **ONLINE CIVIL DISCOURSE**
   Collaborating with the National Institute for Civil Discourse, we released three reports examining civil discourse online:
   1. We surveyed and compiled what is known about online civil discourse.
   2. We reported on a series of focus groups that looked at how to engage young people in online dialogue about politics. The focus groups demonstrated that young people are often reluctant to get involved in political conversations online, but that they were interested in forms of online engagement that were more fact-based and more personal.
   3. The third report shared the results of an experiment we conducted testing whether having facts, background information that included pro and con arguments, or both affected participants’ commenting behavior. We found that people are more willing to get involved in political discussion when they’re provided with background information containing pro and con arguments.

3. **COMMENT STRUCTURE**
   There are several benefits — and limits — to using a three-column comment section as opposed to using a traditional one-column section.
   Study participants rated a three-column comment section more favorably than the one-column comment section. Participants also were more likely to leave a comment in the three-column format. Yet readers were less likely to interact with comments in the right-hand column when seeing the multi-column design.

4. **HEADLINE PRACTICES**
   Even though they’ve been around as long as newspapers, headlines still raise many questions for editors. Specifically, what headlines will catch readers’ attention online? In 2016, we will be conducting research on what makes a good digital headline. As a lead-up to that research, we released a report on what we already know about the functions and types of headlines, their content and use in news stories, and their effects on audiences.
OUTREACH

This year we made great strides in getting the word out about the Engaging News Project. We look forward to continuing this trend next year.

INDUSTRY RESPONSE

The best way to measure our success is hearing it straight from working journalists and editors. Having our tools and practices adopted shows us we are making a difference in newsrooms.

WORKSHOPS

Our two News Engagement Workshops have been a fantastic way for us to connect with digital news leaders and to hear straight from them what challenges and opportunities they face. Our last workshop, held in Princeton, N.J., had representatives from 10 news organizations: The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, NPR, Politico, Vox.com, The Denver Post, NJ Advance Media, Philly.com, and Gannett Digital.

FEEDBACK

“(The workshop) was such an inspiring few days and really reinforced the big picture opportunities we have to serve and influence our audiences. It is incredibly easy to get lost in the day-to-day management of a team, or a newsroom, and lose sight of the big picture. So thank you for the inspiration!”

Allison Lichter
The Wall Street Journal/Princeton Workshop Participant

COMMENTS

Based on our research on journalist involvement in comment sections, Philly.com began encouraging their reporters to interact with commenters.

“At Philly.com, we’ve been really inspired by the work being done by the Engaging News Project. They put out a study that showed that having writers moderate and comment on their own stories improved the tenor of comments overall. A handful of reporters … have started to do this and anecdotally, we feel it’s been pretty successful.”

Erica Palan
Director of Audience Engagement (as told to Poynter)

QUIZ TOOL

Our quiz tool has now been used by more than 20 news organizations, some of which have used it on a regular basis. The website Science Friday has used the quiz a few times since March 2015. Their first two quizzes had more than 30,000 views each.

The Center for Public Integrity creates a quiz each month to test their audience’s knowledge about money in politics. Reporter Michael Beckel said: “Thank you for making (a tool) so easy for us at the Center for Public Integrity to use!”

In March, three Gannett television stations shared the same quiz on Grammar Day on their websites. Between those three sites, the quiz was viewed more than 11,500 times.