Deep Cuts: How a barbershop and a local newsroom
"complicated the narrative" around race and reconciliation.
Hosted by Richland Source and Solutions Journalism Network

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1 . The conflict

Convening a difficult conversation starts with a conflict, and it should be a significant one. You'll want to find an issue or subject that seems impenetrable. The conversations happening in your community that draw out emotion and risk hard feelings and misunderstanding are where you want to be.

Questions for brainstorming:
- Which conflict in our community feels intractable right now?
- Which issue generates the worst arguments on social media when you post stories?
- On which issue can your town/city/state just not seem to make any progress? Where have people seemed to accept that nothing can be done? Or can't stop blaming each other for that fact?

Task: Think about a few issues around which your community could benefit from this approach to a tough conversation and jot them down. (You don't have to lock into one now.)

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2. The goals

Doing this work is inherently and necessarily a bit risky. You're opening a huge can of worms with the confidence that you will be able to wrangle them. You won't be able to do this without clear goals. These goals can involve your newsroom's relationship with the community, their relationship with each other, or everyone's relationship with the place they live. With clear objectives and goals, structuring the event becomes much easier. You also become significantly more likely to successfully pitch partners. Strong, clear goals help them envision success too.

Questions for brainstorming:
- Whom do you want to impact?
- What do you hope happens as a result of this work?
- Imagine you just hosted this and it went perfectly. Now one of the participants approaches you. They had a transformative experience. What do they say?
- What benefit could this work have that your community desperately needs?

Task: Boil it down to an elevator pitch of goals. Write down 1-3 sentences describing them. (Bonus points if you focus the goals entirely on others. For the purpose of the exercise, assume trust-building and reporting benefits to be a given.)

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3. The Partners

Goals can also help you pick partners, as your ideal partners share and enrich your goals. Odds are, other people in the community share your sense that this conflict is unhealthy. Identifying them and approaching them with a clear sense of what you want to accomplish is key. Mapping who shares these hopes, how this will help them achieve their own goals, and how they can help this project succeed is key to take the project to the next level.

Questions for brainstorming:
- Who shares these concerns and goals?
- What resources do we lack and who can supplement them? What resources can we offer and who is searching for them? (+1 million points for any partner that generates great answers for both questions.)
- What location/area is directly impacted by the conflict being discussed?

Task: Who are a few potential community partners that come to mind (for this specifically) immediately?

4. The Where, How and When

Just as your partners can enrich an event, so can the setting. It can also throw off an event. Scheduling it at a time or place where impacted people can't attend or don't feel comfortable is a dealbreaker. It's important to find a place that puts people at ease, a time that is as accessible as possible, with language that encourages belonging, and a format that welcomes everyone.

Questions for brainstorming:
- In New York City, warring mafia groups declared Nat Sherman Cigars a truce area. All could gather and enjoy their cigars without fear. Can you think of a place like that in your community? (Bonus if it is accessible for those with ability differences.)
- What times/places maximize convenience and accessibility for your hopeful partners and intended audiences?
- Reflect on alllllllllll those Zoom meetings you've had lately. What can you add into the structure of the event that will help keep everyone focused and comfortable?

Task: Where might this happen in your community? What format might work? When might it happen?

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5. The Tech

The beauty of this event is that it can accommodate a wide array of tech, from a simple livestream to fully-produced videos. No matter what, keep things simple and lightweight. The tech should be in service to the conversation you want to have, not the other way around. If you need a piece of tech, think of who among your partners can help with that.

Questions for brainstorming:
- How might you share this work with your audiences? What tech would that require?
- Don't reinvent the wheel: What internal assets do you already have?
- Where do you have gaps? Are there any potential partners who also can help with tech? Can you involve the local economy?

Task: What internal assets do we already possess? Who might fill the gaps we've identified?

6. The Talent

Answering all these questions well isn't just in service of your newsroom. They're just as much - if not more so - in service to those having the actual conversation. Finding the "right" people is an art, not a science. But consider who can represent this macro conversation in the micro. Your partners in the event can and should help you figure this out and may help you do outreach too. Much as in journalism, the most compelling people have a stake in the conflict. This isn't a panel, so don't stack it with "experts." You want people who can make for interesting, open conversation without it going off the rails. Remember: While this is centered on a conflict, it is not about inflaming or selling that conflict.

Questions for brainstorming:
- Where do you already (or with partners) have a well of trust from which you can invite people?
- Who feels really unheard in this conflict? (That could be everyone, but try to be specific.)
- If you're discussing this particular conflict, who (either a specific person or category of person) absolutely can't be left out? Who are the people/groups directly affected by this conflict?

Task: For guests, who has authentic lived experiences AND wants to participate in this format? For your audience, with whom do you have a deep well of trust from which you can invite people?

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7. The Day

When planning a live event, as many decisions as possible should be intentional: the timing, the space (both the location and the layout), the atmosphere, the music, resources and more. This of course includes how you moderate, using deep listening/looping and The 22 Questions. It can also serve as another excuse to check in with your partners in this to ask, "What would help make people comfortable?" Some of this will need to be balanced with your needs as well, but the effort at intentionality is worth it.

Questions for brainstorming:
- What ground rules might you set in advance of the conversation?
- Besides the conversation, what else might people attending want/need?
- What can partners add so that it doesn't feel like an "interview" or focus group?

Task: Imagine the day. Really, imagine it! How do you want people to feel? Write a few sentences about how it feels in the space and any specifics that come to mind.

8. Distribution

While the live event is the core offering, not everyone will be able to make it or even know about it in advance. Consider how else you might share it with interested audiences - stories about the event, posting videos or snippets on different platforms, etc. As Joy Mayer of Trusting News says, "Get credit for your work." Holding this conversation is difficult, but you're doing it because of the impact it could have on your community. Make sure as many people as possible can access it and see that work.

Questions for brainstorming:
- To think about where and how to share this, first ask, "Who really needs to see this?"
- What resources do we already have where we can share this work during and after the conversation? (Think podcasts, newsletters, bustling FB groups, etc.)
- Outside of conversation partners, who else could help you share this widely?

Task: Write down 2-3 ways this could be effectively shared after the conversation.

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9. The Follow-up

One of the biggest complaints against journalism is the parachuting. Think, "You're only here when you need something," or, "You're only here when something goes wrong." Following up and following through after the conversation is a huge opportunity to change that, as well as being an opportunity to do some reporting (especially solutions reporting). Make your partners aware of as many metrics as you're comfortable with. Share feedback with them from the audience and invite them to share feedback with you. How you do it will be different for everyone, but it's an essential part of creating a sense of trust, safety and that their participation was valued.

Questions for brainstorming:
- Think back on your goals. How might you measure them?
- Who on your team can help you measure sentiment and impact over time?
- Who might step in now and add value/skills tracking impact? Researchers? Universities?

Task: With your goals in mind, pick a few things you might want to measure around these conversations. In other words, what metrics can you zoom in on to help you understand whether you are meeting those goals?

10. The Money

Your financial considerations will be linked to the goals and objectives you set early on, and the partners you've chosen to work with. A 12-episode web series will beget different money conversations than a series of small dinners in family homes. In any case, consider your goals and partners carefully, and address the costs (and potential cost sharing) in a direct and transparent way.

Questions for brainstorming:
- Where do you definitely not want to cut corners?
- Where do you have staff, other resources, or partners who can help reduce costs?
- What other costs like advertising, catering, t-shirts, etc. might come up?

Task: Sketch out a budget (like, right now) based upon your work so far. Get your soft and hard costs in the ballpark. Now, imagine who might want to help you cover the hard costs to make this all happen. Make a list.