

MEMBERSHIP IN NEWS & BEYOND:

# WHAT MEDIA CAN LEARN FROM OTHER MEMBER-DRIVEN MOVEMENTS

**Emily Goligoski & Matt Thompson**

*For the Membership Puzzle Project at New York University*

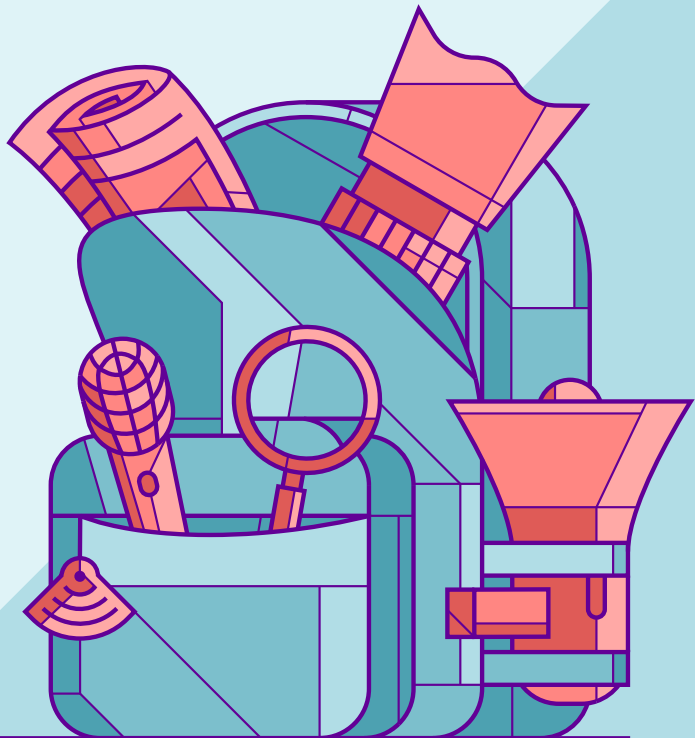
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**MEMBERSHIP  
PUZZLE  
PROJECT**



The University of Texas at Austin  
Knight Center for Journalism  
in the Americas  
*Moody College of Communication*



## Journalism's traditional financial models are dying. Could churches, environmental movements, and open source communities hold clues to its survival?

### Background

We're Membership Puzzle Project research director [Emily Goligoski](#) and open collaboration expert [Matt Thompson](#). Together with Laura Ballay, JP Gomes, Corinne Osnos, Daniel Stringer, Cherie Hu, and Gonzalo del Peon we conducted research for a report about what our project has learned from studying spaces outside of news.

Part of our impetus was [the reflection](#) that people in the news business need to look horizontally, not just vertically, to be sustainable and better tell the stories of how we work. Earlier this summer our team reflected on some findings from these analogous spaces in [this webinar](#), and we're eager to share the work with more people who can put the knowledge to use. Since then we've published with The Guardian about [what why we undertook this work](#).

[Membership Puzzle Project](#) is a research project funded by the Knight Foundation, Luminate, and Democracy Fund, and collaboratively run by NYU and the Dutch journalism platform [De Correspondent](#). We're delving into research on ways that journalism organizations are diversifying revenue with a particular focus on membership programs and optimizing news for trust. Below you'll see themes that our team under the direction of Jay Rosen has identified in studying open source software, faith-based groups, alternative currencies, eco and intentional communities, and more.

The Membership Puzzle Project is funded by Knight Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Luminate.

Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots. It invests in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. The goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which we believe are essential for a healthy democracy.

Democracy Fund is a bipartisan foundation that invests in organizations working to ensure our political system is able to withstand new challenges and deliver on its promise to the American people. Today, modern challenges – such as hyper partisanship, money in politics, and struggling media – threaten the health of American democracy. Democracy Fund invests in change makers who advocate for solutions that can bring lasting improvements to our political system and build bridges that help people come together to serve our nation.

Luminate is a global philanthropic organization focused on empowering people and institutions to work together to build just and fair societies. It was established in 2018 by

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Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay.

Luminate works with its investees and partners to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in, and shape, the issues affecting their societies, and to make government, corporations, media, and those in positions of power more responsive and more accountable. Luminate does this by funding and supporting innovative and courageous organizations and entrepreneurs around the world, and by advocating for the policies and actions that will drive change across four impact areas: Civic Empowerment, Data & Digital Rights, Financial Transparency, and Independent Media. Luminate was previously the Governance & Citizen Engagement initiative at Omidyar Network and is now part of The Omidyar Group. To date it has supported 236 organizations in 18 countries with \$314 million in funding.

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## Executive Summary

*The traditional financial models for news are dying. Could churches, environmental movements, and open source communities hold clues to its survival?*



*Working towards a more sustainable neighborhood, together: members of Ecobairros, a community-led volunteer group in São Paulo, Brazil, joined forces to revitalize neighborhood springs during the city's worst water crisis in decades.*

We're at a moment of profound transition and successive crisis for news. Our mission is to explore how membership models might help. A key takeaway from our research over the past 12 months is that membership models are fundamentally different from subscription or product models--and that they require whole new methods and mindsets to be successful.

Membership isn't just "subscription by another name" (though it's often referenced that way), or about giving consumers access to a product. It's participation in a larger cause that reflects what they want to see in civil society. In membership, there's a different "social contract" or "value proposition" between the site and its members. At the basic level of: ***What do you give? What do you get?*** Subscribers pay their money and get access to a product. But members join the cause and participate because they *believe* in it.

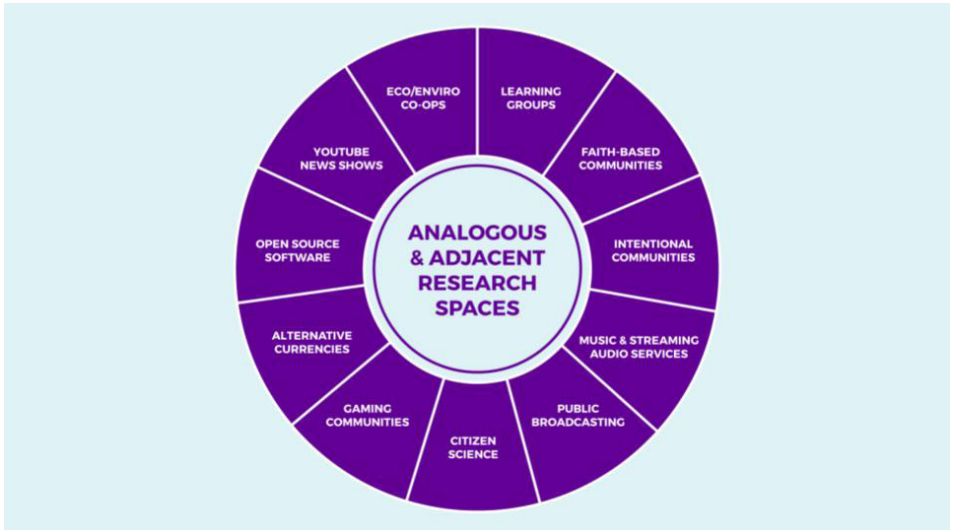


Image by Leon Postma

## What can news membership programs learn from other spaces?

The news industry isn't the first to wrestle with these questions. Other spaces have been experimenting with forms of membership and belonging, sometimes for thousands of years. Others are engaging their members to do everything from build open source software for automobiles to build jumbo jet disco camps in the desert.

The question for our team of freelance researchers around the world was: what clues might we glean from other membership veterans and pioneers? How are \*they\* tackling their own membership puzzles? And how might news organizations emulate some of those techniques, be inspired by their thinking, and/or learn from their examples to bolster membership models for news?

Over six months researchers including Laura Ballay, JP Gomes, Corinne Osnos, Daniel Stringer, Cherie Hu, and Gonzalo del Peon interviewed dozens of leaders and members across key spaces around the world, with an emphasis on three key questions:

- **Motivation** **What motivates people to join?** What membership value propositions stand out in contrast to present social, political, and financial events that prompt common feelings that “something feels broken”? Is there a secret sauce? A magnet? What larger forces or feelings are driving people to seek out membership in new ways right now?
- **Participation** **What do members do?** Beyond plonking down their hard-earned cash, how can individuals contribute time and expertise in ways that are mutually useful? What are the most innovative member-driven organizations

asking their members to do — and how does that strengthen member engagement, retention, and loyalty?

- **Scale How do successful member-driven movements grow?** How do they stretch limited marketing budgets and cultivate word of mouth? How do they recruit new members and scale up while staying healthy and not diluting what attracted people in the first place?

What does this mean for journalism and for your organization? We offer five key takeaways for news:

1. **There is deep value in listening, testing, and being fascinated with what members value.** This is a mindset shift. Instead of just assuming what members want, successful membership organizations have developed ways of listening, fresh thinking about what their members actually want, and strong feedback loops to get it right. They're empathetic and open to learning. They frequently adopt more agile approaches than they may have used to in the past.
2. **Inspiring membership-driven organizations connect individuals' passions to a shared larger purpose. They sell more than a product or a cause.** Successful membership organizations recognize and celebrate the individual while making them feel connected to something bigger than themselves. They get the ratio right between the individual and the group. This is neither a product pitch ("get 20% off exclusive content!") nor a traditional "cause" ("save the whales!"). Instead, it's a unique cocktail or hybrid of both. Getting that ratio or recipe right (which is hard because it often defies typical marketing approaches or advice) feels like a secret sauce for many of the successful movements we looked at, in terms of how they think about the member mission, "social contract," and pitch. This goes beyond offering plentiful member perks and relies on studying members' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.
3. **Membership is one way to restore what feels broken.** Many people told our team that they join as members because they feel something fundamental in the world and/or in themselves is broken. In membership they seek a way to feel part of a solution. Successful membership programs don't shy away from connecting to the larger state of the world. They connect to the present zeitgeist in which something crucial is broken or out of balance — and then offer membership as credible grounds for optimism.
4. **Offer flexible means of participation.** The organizations we studied are attuned to people's abilities, goals, limitations, and lifestyles. There is a whole range of ways for their supporters to participate in ways that are designed to maximize their time and effort.
5. **Grow at human scale.** Unlike more transactional models (including subscription), membership cannot scale beyond an organization's ability to serve its

members. In some cases we see organizations strategically limiting their growth to support members and ensure member value is not diluted. We think this has important ramifications for restoring the “human element” to news.



## PART 1: MISSION & MOTIVATION

After [talking to hundreds of supporters of independent news sites](#) about their desire to contribute, we can break down their motivations for contributing into six types. These types reflect both intrinsic motivations like “I want to learn something new” and extrinsic motivations like “I want to support you because your public service mission matters”:

I want to learn something new: <b>Curiosity / learning</b>	I want to contribute my expertise: <b>Show a superpower!</b>	I want to have a say and be heard: <b>Voice</b>
I want the inside scoop & to find out about your process: <b>Transparency</b>	I want to show some love because this topic / your public service mission matters: <b>Passion</b>	I want to be a part of something bigger: <b>Community</b>

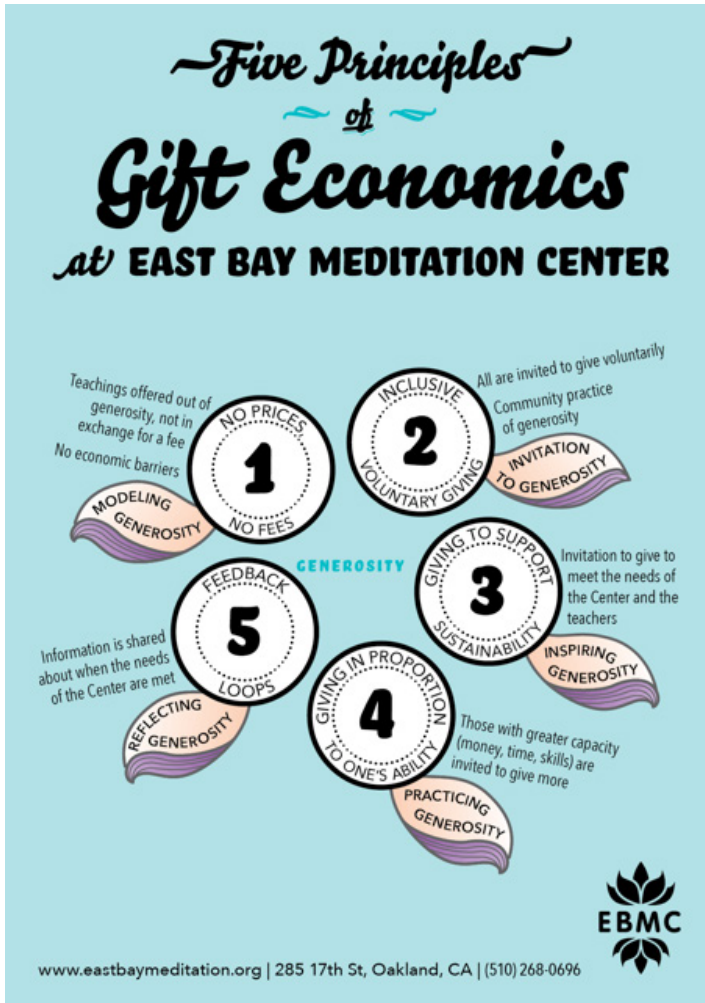
*Illustration by Lukas Kouwets. More details are in the article [Why your community members want to aid your reporting & 25 jobs you can ask them to do](#) by Emily Goligoski and Stephanie Ho.*

### The Motivation Puzzle

What motivates busy people to become a “member” of something — and how is that changing? How are smart member-driven organizations changing alongside it?



*A meditation session at East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California.  
Photo by Candi Martinez Carthen. Source: [Lionsroar.com](#).*



The [East Bay Meditation Center](#) describes its gift economics program accordingly: “We charge no set registration fees to attend our events (except fundraising programs), and EBMC receives very little outside funding. We rely on joyful reciprocity within our community expressed in different ways, as people are moved to give of their resources, time, and skills to EBMC, according to their ability.”

**Churches and meditation centers might seem like a strange place to seek clues for the news industry.** But in many ways, faith-based organizations have been in the “membership business” longer than anyone; their survival has always relied on attracting and retaining a community of engaged, loyal supporters. And as with journalism, that lifeline is increasingly tenuous and in transition as service attendance in many parts of the world dwindles and populations become less religious.

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But in interviewing leaders across faiths, geographies, and regions, we discovered that those challenges are driving a range of surprising innovations in the space. They engage in deep listening, testing, and taking a flexible approach to delivering what people value.

### **Ballet, BBQs, and death metal**

David Allred, the lead pastor at High Places Community Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, embodies that experimental spirit. David said he never imagined he'd become a pastor when he was growing up. "I never felt comfortable in church pews. Like [Henry David] Thoreau, I encountered God when I was out and about in nature," he said.

He's an unlikely person to convene a new-style church congregation in a converted 1940s theater — a space that now plays host to members and non-members alike for everything from ballet recitals, to barbecues, to death metal bands.

"In 2004, [the church] purchased an old Manhattan Project-era theater that had fallen into disrepair and restored it for the community," Allred said. "We created it with the goal of 'giving the space away.' We said 'this is a crowd-funded venue, so use it for free and be a part of the crowd.'"

Maintaining a 25,000 square foot space that's more than 75 years old is onerous ("I feel like a theater manager sometimes, not a pastor"), but Allred said it now accounts for more than 80% of the church's outreach to new members. "We have about 15,000 people per year come through and enjoy a performance, whether it's the ballet or an orchestra or a death metal concert or a beauty pageant. It's busy pretty much every weekend."



*Sound Company, a children's show choir that draws talent from across four Tennessee counties, performs at The Grove Theater, operated by the High Places Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.*

That steady stream of people creates what Allred calls "the environment," a loose ladder of engagement or membership funnel that includes:

- **A no-strings-attached community level:** "Just come hang out and talk to us

- about your experience — we won't talk about the church"
- **An outreach level:** "Come have a good time, but also: would you be open to hearing our story?"
- **A growth level,** where people become members of the church: "Come work with us on some of our stuff"

Allred said, "We don't do the 'bait and switch' where you invite people in to use the space — and then suddenly you try to talk to them about Jesus. I think there's too much of that going on, especially in the [American] South."

Instead, they attempt a creative approach to reach what their surrounding community wants and needs most — whether it involves artists teaching painting workshops, hosting public meetings about the opioid epidemic, providing free weekly meals to over 50 kids who may not be church members, or teen summer camps and "superhero parties."

### "Share your story with us. We need to know that to serve you."

Allred reflected that "many of our members experienced church 'PTSD' in the past. But today, I think they'd say that we are like an extended family for them." He said, "It's cradle to grave care. I tell people in ministry, 'you're in the living room of everybody at their worst moments, and at their best moments.'"

What struck us in inviting leaders like Allred to talk to us about their process was the importance they routinely place on listening to their members. Allred sees membership as sometimes informal, subtle, and not as concrete as someone "signing up" or even paying dues. For this to work, listening to what people need and experience is a regular practice that can lead to surprising new ways to create value and positive experiences. The church's "extra touch team" regularly reaches out to members to keep up-to-date on what's going on in their lives. And a questionnaire is sent to people who have used the church's facilities to hear about the impact that the space has had on them.

As we see in open source projects, there is an entire continuum of ways that people might become more involved in your work. Take Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that is created and edited by volunteers:

- **The foundation behind the crowdsourced encyclopedia staffs 300 people,** including a 24-person Global Reach team that includes professional fundraisers who focus their efforts on Wikipedia use and introduction in places where it's less widely used.
- **200,000 people contribute edits each month.** When we asked Caitlin Virtue, director of development for the Wikimedia Foundation, why volunteers say they edit, she said that most find it "personally fulfilling." They want to support an effort they want to see exist in the world.
- **Donors are considered volunteers and, at 4 million,** make up the largest volunteer type.
- **Its lightest touch but most frequent engagement comes from readers.**

People on 1 billion unique devices access it every month. ([The organization says](#) their commitment to privacy prevents them from tracking unique visitors.)

We're similarly interested in projects in which "civilians" and others without formal training in the sciences have contributed useful knowledge. An increasing number of citizen science projects stand out from the status quo in their field. To see what we mean, consider the ways that most scientific research -- and most daily news, for that matter -- is currently produced and published.

A limited number of people with specialized credentials seek funding and approvals for their work, gather data (often over years in which they may be unaware of other related stealth work that's relevant), and collaborate with a small group of trained insiders to review their work before it's available to the rest of us through scientific journals and news coverage. Where are lay people in this process? We're not. At best, any public involvement involves a discrete set of post-publication tasks: read findings, share them for the researchers' and institutions' own visibility, and give respect ... and sometimes donations.

Compare that with participatory research projects designed differently from the start. Projects that invite people to contribute in the public interest from anywhere with an internet connection include [games to create three-dimensional models of neurons](#) and crowd-sourced OpenStreetMap mapping projects to assess damage after natural disasters. Each of us can partake in collecting local data for environmental conservation efforts or, with a GitHub account, contribute to a project for [DIYBio](#), a large-scale "institution for the do-it-yourself biologist" which hosts projects ranging from the Open Insulin Lab to a distributed community to "bioprint" physical materials for prosthetic limbs.

These citizen science projects are part of a broader global movement that's growing. [Professor Muki Haklay](#) is the co-director of the Extreme Citizen Science group, a collective at University College London. The group is "dedicated to allowing any community, regardless of their literacy, to use scientific methods and tools to collect, analyse, interpret and use information about their area and activities."

Haklay describes the work that he, his fellow organizers, and contributors do as "[bottom-up practice](#)" that integrates technology and social practices for inclusive, meaningful forms of participation. The actionability and usability of this joint production of scientific knowledge are key. Knowing that not all contributions involve the same volunteer skills, commitment, or project size, he has set up a useful ladder for organizing participation possibilities:

## Levels of Citizen Science

### Level 4 'Extreme'

- Collaborative Science – problem definition, data collection and analysis

### Level 3 'Participatory science'

- Participation in problem definition and data collection

### Level 2 'Distributed Intelligence'

- Citizens as basic interpreters

### Level 1 'Crowdsourcing'

- Citizens as sensors

University of London professor Muki Haklay's [participation ladder of citizen science contributions](#).

### “Blurring the lines between self and other”

When Membership Puzzle Project researcher Daniel Stringer started gathering stories about what motivates people in contemporary faith-based organizations to get involved, he thought he would hear about things like “higher purpose” or “serving others”: motivations focused on altruism or serving a higher cause.

“I expected to mostly hear about what members had to do to fit into the mold created by the organization,” Stringer said. “It turned out to be more about what the organizations did to meet the diverse needs of members. The members were hungry to connect to some larger purpose -- but the orgs had to see them as individuals in order to help them do that.”



Darrell Jones (left), who was a member of East Bay Meditation Center for several years before moving out of state, said something similar in describing the moment he first felt like a member at EBMC. “I went from not talking to people at the meetings, to feeling like I was a member of a community,” Jones said.

**“I went from feeling like I was supporting something else to feeling like I was supporting myself. Being a member here means I get to support parts of myself that I care about.”**

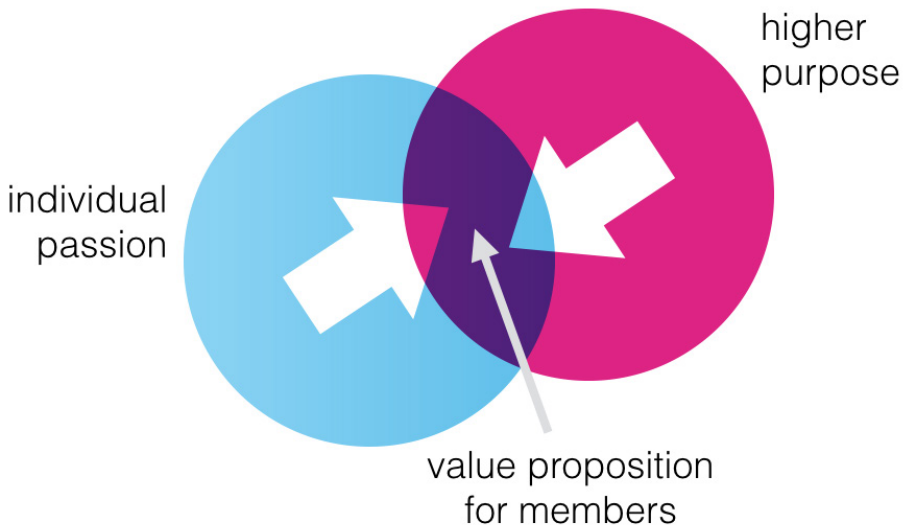
“The meditation center went from something that was outside of me to something that was a part of me,” Jones said. “It’s blurring that distinction between self and other.”

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Casper ter Kuile, a Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School and co-author of [How We Gather](#), said that mix — of feeling recognized as a unique individual, while at the same time being connected to something larger — is a key part of what’s driving people to seek new forms of belonging. He said his research was sparked by hearing a growing number of people, especially millennials, talking about non-theological organizations in religious terms.

ter Kuile said, “I think the big underlying value is community. People want to feel like they belong. But they don’t just want to show up -- they want to design and participate. Member-driven organizations thrive when they allow people to attain or emulate their ‘best version of self.’”



*Co-author Matt Thompson shows where the member value proposition lies.*

**Individual passion + higher purpose**

What we found in our research — in stories like Darrell Jones’ and across other spaces — is a mixture or cocktail of those two things: member models fuse individual passion with shared or collective purpose. Daniel Stringer said, “The implicit message from members seems to be: ‘Recognize and celebrate me as an individual — and connect me to something larger than myself. At the same time. I want both.’ People want to be a part of something bigger than themselves; helping them get there requires a focus on their needs.”

We all want to feel recognized as unique individuals, with our own individual interests, strengths, and expertise — none of us wants to be treated as part of a mass or faceless crowd, and our research bares this out, too. And at the same time: we want to feel connected to something larger than ourselves. It's no surprise that we are also looking -- maybe more than ever -- to be treated as more than isolated or atomized individual consumers.

This is the unique space in the marketplace that membership occupies. Getting both pieces of that puzzle right is crucial for successfully designing and marketing membership programs in and beyond news. As many leaders and membership staff are learning, connecting to the bigger shared goal is as important (sometimes more) as outlining functional benefits that members can unlock.

### Something feels broken



*Ecobairros member Maurício Oliveira (left) volunteers with SOS Mata Atlântica Foundation, a Brazilian non-profit, to help monitor water quality of a stream in his São Paulo neighborhood. Photo credit: Cecília Lotufo.*

Maurício Oliveira, a foreign trade expert living in São Paulo, Brazil, never gave much thought to issues like water quality and sustainability until the taps in his house started to run dry. In 2015, São Paulo entered its greatest water crisis in decades, the result of a complex set of factors that experts say included climate change, deforestation, lack of investment, and poor management.

Oliveira said, “I was constantly checking reservoir levels on my phone, buying storage



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tanks, but it wasn't enough. I had always thought Brazil was the 'country of waters.' This didn't make any sense."

That led Oliveira to join Ecobairros, a community-led volunteer group that works to improve urban sustainability in local neighborhoods. Now he helps organize educational activities for school children, participates in public forums and helps mobilize government officials. He also helped lead his community's efforts to protect local spring water sources like the one near his house.

"The water crisis made me face the problem head on," Oliveira said. There was this spring close to my house that I never really cared about. But all of a sudden, it became my problem."



*Memo Salazar at the Sunnyside Community-Supported Agriculture Co-Op. Photo by Buck Ennis. Reprinted with permission from Crain Communications Inc., copyright 2017.*



*Sunnyside CSA volunteers come together at a community center to work on the weekly distribution of vegetables to its members. Photo credit: Sunnyside CSA.*

For Memo Salazar, a New York writer and filmmaker, he felt a sense that something crucial was out of joint whenever he opened his refrigerator door. The more he learned about about the health and climate impacts of industrial agriculture, the more he felt complicit in a broken system.

“You start to realize that everything you eat or use just to survive, to be a functional part of society, is based on someone getting exploited somewhere or the planet getting exploited,” Memo said. “And you just have to accept that because you’re trying to function in society.”

Salazar’s desire for healthier, more sustainable food led him to start volunteering at the Sunnyside Community-Supported Agriculture Co-Op in 2006, where he helps coordinate communications with members in his spare time. Co-op members receive weekly boxes of fresh, organic vegetables from a local farm and something more intangible: a direct relationship with the farmers that grow their food.

“Whenever farmers come to visit, members crowd around them like celebrities,” Salazar said. “They share their experiences from the past year, the challenges, and stories behind the food we eat. It’s amazing how intensely people feel connected to that.”



Visual by JP Gomes.

**“In the rest of our world, trust is something that has been broken,”** Salazar said. “This is an antithesis to all that. To know that this one part of your life is positive and sustainable, and you’re at least helping rather than exploiting or hurting things -- that’s the biggest reason I joined.”

### **Membership as grounds for optimism that’s credible & compelling**

**That theme — that something feels broken and that people are seeking membership as part of a solution — was reflected beyond environmental organizations and in all of the other spaces we studied, too. For congregants in faith-based organizations, it’s frequently a sense that supporting their own needs isn’t enough.**

For participants in open source software projects, we heard tension between a toxic, commercialized, and monopolized internet compared to open source and related projects in “civic tech.” For participants in Burning Man camps, it’s about disillusionment with a workaday commodified world that leads to excitement about an alternative way to live.

This sense of profound dissatisfaction with the status quo emerges as one of the key catalysts that push people to become members. Individuals increasingly lack trust in systems, faith in mainstream society, a sense of connection to community, or a belief that we are living sustainably. And this is driving them to seek out and experiment with new forms of membership that make them feel as though they’re part of a solution. Put another way, something important or fundamental feels broken, and that the acts of joining and contributing help fix it.

At Arcosanti, an experimental town in the Sonoran desert, 70 miles north of Phoenix, Arizona, students, professionals and volunteers come together to radically rethink life in sustainable urban spaces. Guided by the principles of “arcology,” an amalgamation of architecture and ecology developed in the 1960s by Italian architect Paolo Soleri, supporters of Arcosanti can take part in five-week workshops to learn about sustainable urban design and apply newly acquired knowledge in the construction of environmentally balanced buildings.

Architect Jeff Stein, co-president of Arcosanti, said that his and other member-driven projects offer “a kind of possibility for thinking about things in a much broader and even holistic way, so to come out and have a short experience with these ideas allows people to sort of rethink their own stories.” His town is an extreme example, but it has implications on members’ sense of agency more broadly. “I think people imagine that they’re not any longer just part of the problem, but they’re part of a possible solution.”

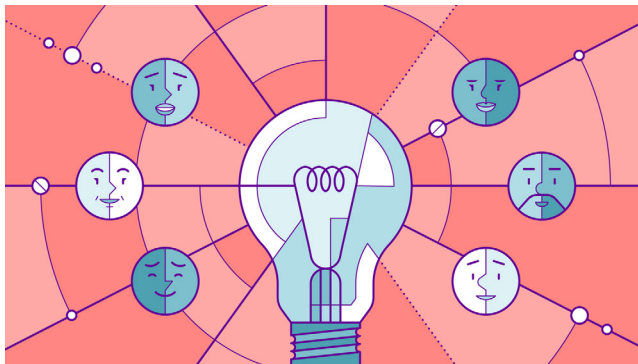
We know there is high public interest in stopping collaboration with broken systems and instead contributing to better ones. This encouraged us to consider how news audience members currently experience news and other media. [Their frustrations are numerous](#), as we found in other qualitative research with supporters of independent news. Journalism of course involves major contemporary questions — about the health of the world, the state of democracy, civil discourse, and how we talk to each other — about which news organizations are increasingly marketing themselves as a guide. Connecting to that broader moment, and not backing away from it, is key. We’ve long heard public broadcasters make these connections, and subscription services including The Washington Post’s and The New York Times’ are increasingly taking a page from their playbook.

Our researcher Cherie Hu [wrote recently](#) that “For news, this means not only [persistently articulating your case to readers], but also careful self-reflection about why people are paying for your product in the first place. **In an increasingly crowded online media landscape, these alternative value propositions are central to successful and meaningful membership appeals for both publishers and supporters.**”

## Clues for News: Mission & Motivation

### Brainstorm in a Box

**What motivates your members to join?** How can you brainstorm new ideas and approaches for your membership mission, value proposition, and pitch? Try these questions inspired by what we learned from sister spaces.



*Illustration by Leon Postma & Lukas Kouwets, Momkai / De Correspondent*

1. How might you re-imagine or get creative with your organization's mission and value propositions for members? What problems are your audiences are trying to solve that you're uniquely positioned to help them with?
2. What is your membership program's mission?
3. How might you answer those things collaboratively? How might you invite members to help shape your organizational mission?
4. How can you deliver value for individual members \*AND\* make them feel connected to something larger? How might your organization be loyal to them?
5. How do you connect membership to the bigger picture of how your prospective members are feeling about the larger world right now?
6. How might you connect to a growing sense of brokenness of current models (for news, democracy, civil discourse, internet, institutions) as an opportunity? How do you connect your program as grounds for optimism / positive steps / helping members feel like part of a solution?
7. How can you take a more agile, test-driven approach based on listening to members, testing to learn about motivations, and adapting?
8. How can you tap into members' passions, including desires to share what they know and other forms of useful contribution?
9. How can you place your organization's work in a broader global or societal context? Don't shy away from connecting to the broader moment / bigger picture.

## 2. FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION



*Members of the Big Imagination camp brought a 747 airplane -- and an accompanying disco party -- to Burning Man in 2016. (Guardian)*

How do you convert a jumbo jet into an immersive art experience in the middle of the desert? Antonio Tambunan was part of a team that wanted to find out.

Tambunan, a financial strategist living in Los Angeles, had participated in the Nevada arts festival Burning Man for five years before leading a 2016 sourcing of a 747 Boeing airplane. He did this on behalf of the Big Imagination camp, one of hundreds of groups that create art installations and projects in advance of spending the week on the playa in a shared temporary home for their campers.

“Big Imagination is a 100 percent participation camp,” Tambunan said. Compared to some other camps, members must aid in joint creation efforts through their time and money -- no freeloaders or “sparkle ponies” allowed. (People who come to Burning Man unprepared for the desert’s harsh elements and become reliant on other attendees for water and shelter are referred to as “sparkle ponies.”) Prospective members of Big Imagination completed an online application form in which they list skills and resources they might offer the camp, including teaching workshops or undertaking a leadership role.

The production to bring a plane to the playa required thousands of hours with volunteer members. Some people spent a week at a rented house in the Mojave Desert in the summer months preceding the festival for hands-on work on the plane. They gutted, reconstructed, extended, and reinforced the plane, then refurbished the cockpit and installed new staircases. They moved the wings, landing gear, and upper half 500 miles to Blackrock City, the location of Burning Man, where they bolted the rest of the plane together.



*Big Imagination camp members refurbish the inside of the plane they later brought to the playa.  
Photo by Antonio Tambunan.*

But that wasn’t all participants they did: they also paid up to \$750 in annual dues to the Big Imagination camp (people who contribute their time paid less) and, during the main

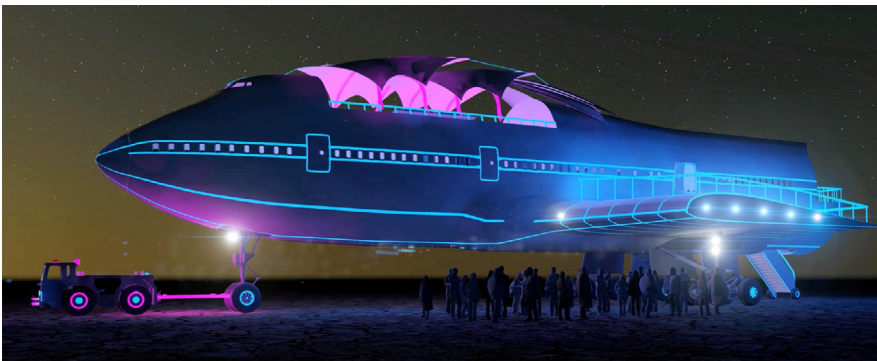
**Membership in news & beyond:  
what media can learn from other member-driven movements**

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event, committed to work shifts. These shifts involved cooking for fellow campers, ensuring that everything that's brought to Burning Man be removed or disposed of at the end of the festival, and more. (The expectation of dues raised questions for us. Similarly, we have ongoing concerns about economic equality and elitism as the focus of newsroom business model innovation has largely shifted from advertisers to audience members. [Heather Bryant has reported for our project](#) about what it will take for newsrooms to create pathways to membership for low and no income audiences: people who have been historically excluded from mutually beneficial relationships with newsrooms. We have more research underway on this topic and [recommend Fiona Morgan and Jay Hamilton's related work.](#))

Big Imagination camp and other intentional convenings show that there can be great value in contributions beyond cash. They make it clear to members that there is more -- in their time, energy, ideas, expertise, and contacts -- that they can bring to move shared goals forward. Sometimes these can be adaptable opportunities to contribute; in this case, campers traveled to help build on weekends, putting in sweat equity well in advance of the main event. This requires host organizations to understand what their members know and can do, and that starts with active listening.

The resulting project was called the biggest art car in the history of Burning Man intended to take festival goers on "an interactive journey to transform their futures." A team of more than 100 makers, creators, artists, and engineers brought a week-long program of speakers and parties on board.



*Image of the rendering of the plane from the project's [IndieGogo crowdfunding campaign](#) (above) and actual installation.*



*Burning Man participants bike around the illuminated art installation at night. Photo by Antonio Tambunan.*



## Community Supported

In order to make our project a reality and bring the 747 to Burning Man, we need your help. Such a massive undertaking requires an even larger amount of volunteer coordination and financial support. To date our project has been supported and funded through hundreds of individual contributors from the community. And we intend to maintain that trend - a project made by the community, for the community.

We are a certified 501(c)(3) non-profit foundation. Each donation you make today is entirely tax deductible.



*Big Imagination's 2016 [IndieGogo crowdfunding campaign](#) describes how individuals might be involved. The camp continues to operate as [Big Imagination Foundation](#).*

## Flexible participation

Nick Stoner, a 27-year-old copywriter at a Chicago ad agency, reflected on why large visible projects like Burning Man installations can't succeed on fundraising alone: they require the smarts and skills of many individual community members. "It's not just spending money; you need to spend the time. That invests you."

In interrogating what participation looks like in practice, we see that projects that offer flexible pathways are well poised to succeed. Their organizations have a range of needs. People can contribute to those needs in ways that best suit their motivations: to learn, be



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of service, be appreciated, meet people with shared values, and more. Their organizations make explicit “asks,” with flexible approaches to how, when, and to what degree members participate.

This actually deepens loyalty. Contrary to what we might expect, asking members to give something greater than money deepens their commitment to the cause. It adds to their connection and sense of value, even though they’re being asked to “spend” more.

Seen this way, participation becomes part of a loyalty and retention strategy. As our researcher JP Gomes said, “It’s possible that participation measured in hours, rather than dollars, correlates with how connected people feel to an organization.”

Organizations that are in regular communication with current and potential members are more easily able to identify participation paths that are useful on both sides. They’re able to find out about members’ appetite for involvement either informally (such as meeting over coffee to hear about their most positive experiences volunteering for a cause or other meaningful contribution) or formally (including surveying users in high interest audience segments to understand the kinds of participation options and acknowledgement you might offer). Where they land is matching individuals’ interests with the help that you and your project need.

### The participation puzzle

This teases out another core difference of the subscriber or membership model: members actively contribute. And many news organizations historically haven’t known how to make use of that interest. They’ve transitioned from print to digital, from web to social, from desktop to mobile. But one of their most difficult shifts has proven to be the shift towards audience collaboration, or to creating journalism with, instead of just for, audiences. Membership programs still primarily focus on contributing money, but not time or expertise.

There are some exceptions. The journalism engagement and listening services company [Hearken](#) enables “[people-powered](#)” stories. [WTF Just Happened Today’s](#) members moderate comments, commit code, and even produce the site’s podcast. [News co-ops like The Bristol Cable](#) solicit member buy-in for editorial and strategic decisions. Mostly, involving news audiences directly in the creation of the journalism itself is still rare.

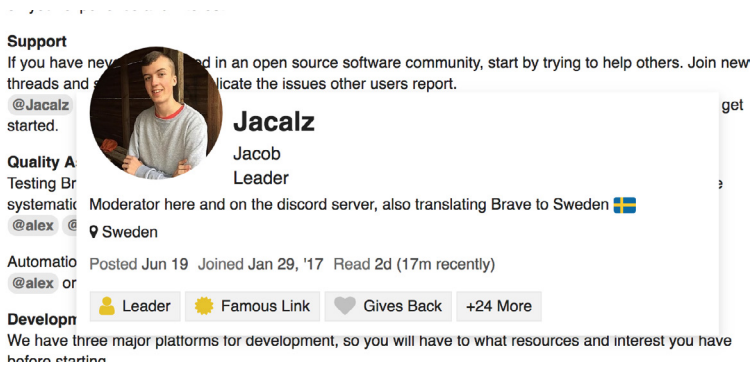
### What regular participation can look like

In the organizations we studied, members are doing everything from fixing software bugs to acting as unofficial brand evangelists. A sample of the ways that members participate includes:

- **Wayfinders & norm-keepers.** Burning Man rangers are trained volunteers who do everything from providing directions to mediating disputes.
- **Hosting events, modeling community standards, and facilitating meetings.** In Uruguay, supporters of the news site *La Diaria* organize events for commu-

nity members in the newsroom's office. Baha'i faith practitioners regularly host and facilitate meetings with other members members.

- **Community service.** At St. James Presbyterian Church in North Carolina, members help serve local residents through meal service, rallying for social justice issues, and writing grants to expand the church's programs.
- **Performance.** At High Places Church in Tennessee, members include local bands who perform at their performing arts center.
- **User support.** For open source projects like the open source Brave browser, community members are the front line support desk.
- **Design & software development.** Volunteer contributors to open source projects work alongside staff on design and development, answer other contributors' questions, and are recognized through a badging system.
- **Early access to new features.** Brave Early Access.
- Data collectors for citizen science projects.
- **Call-outs and challenges.** Brave regularly posts QA, Design, iOS, Development calls for contributions.
- And as lobbyists, conveners of annual check-ins with other members, authors of op-eds, social media managers, onboarders for new people, and more.



Self-described “passionate Linux and privacy enthusiast” [Jacalz's GitHub page](#) shows his web development work on behalf of the Brave Browser.

When it comes to recognizing staff as contributors, consumer advocacy organization Consumer Reports and the [Coral Project](#), an initiative to make online communities more civil, include part- and full-time staffing on their continua of involvement possibilities. Most of the people who want to be stewards for the organizations' work will devote significantly less time to it than paid staff, but we're in favor of this wide-ranging expression of what it means to belong to an endeavor and make it better.

### Sounds good — but how do you do it?

Limited staff bandwidth can make managing these contributions difficult. (Just ask anyone who has managed [a public radio pledge drive campaign staffed by members.](#)) The organizations we studied are not immune to these real resource constraints, and they

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offer multiple and meaningful ways to participate. They've invested up front in designing pathways that can allow involvement across different time availability, interests, and abilities. They offer clear, bite-sized participation asks that cultivate a feeling of agency, which as we mentioned, boosts loyalty.



*Citizens' Climate Lobby volunteers from across the U.S. meet in Washington, D.C., for their annual conference and lobby day. Photo by Rob Jinks.*

[Citizens' Climate Lobby \(CCL\)](#), is a global nonprofit, nonpartisan grassroots advocacy organization focused on national policies to address climate change. Approximately one-third of its 100,000 supporters nationwide are active volunteers. Sara Wanous, CCL's membership coordinator, said a key insight has been finding more about individual members' passions — then connecting those to the organization's mission.

"What helps bring people back is getting them connected to the things that they're most interested in," Wanous said. "We have a variety of resources that speak to the different levels of involvement that people want to meet us at."

New members receive a blueprint for action, or what the organization calls [Levers of Political Will](#), so they can match their interests and skill sets with different activities that need completion.

Wanous said, "When people first join we kind of provide suggestions of ways that supporters can start, but the ultimate goal for our volunteers is that they become kind of self-sustaining. So, ultimately we want to be able to utilize people's own area of expertise to get their maximum ability."



BECOMING AN ACTIVIST IS ABOUT FINDING YOUR BIGGEST LEVER FOR CHANGE. WHAT'S YOURS?

Think about it:

- Do you own a business?
- Do you work at a company that could change its practices?
- Do you have a large social media following?
- Are you a writer? Scientist? Both?

We all have a lever, we just need to use it.

**It's hard to overstate the importance of not just asking people to participate but to more strategically think about how to leverage or maximize their efforts. There are a million ways to "get involved!" — but a core part of the value proposition of participation is in helping contributors maximize their limited time and energy where it can do the most good.**

[Protect Our Winters \(POW\)](#), is a climate action group that mobilizes 130,000 supporters in the outdoor sports community worldwide. The organization created a [Climate Activists' Roadmap](#) that helps members start by "finding their biggest lever" for change based on their personal skills, expertise, and connections. They recognize that not every interested person has identical energy, connections, time, or funds to offer. Instead, the organization encourages potential members to be self-reflective in naming the way(s) they can be most impactful. This sounds obvious, but we're struck by how often organizations signal that cash is the only thing they really want.

"Do you own a business?" POW's onboarding process asks. "Do you have a large social media following? Are you a writer? Scientist? Both?"

*"Help me leverage / maximize my investment of time and energy on something I care about"*

This "find your biggest lever" example resonated with us a clue for news: as researchers, experts, and increasingly investigating solutions, journalists are in a unique position to help people maximize their limited time to participate on topics they care about.

**Members often don't get much in time or attention from the groups they give to. And they're savvy and skeptical about token efforts or generic calls to action like "call your congressperson."** When organizations are more thoughtful about how members can amplify their precious time and effort, it can be highly refreshing to busy, time-starved people who are looking to maximize their impact.

## Building a member “Rolodex”

David Allred, lead pastor at High Places community church, discussed how his church also offered varied participation opportunities by hosting events targeted at different members of their church and local community.

He uses a spreadsheet to track of the ways members participate. He’s turned what would be an afterthought for many leaders into trackable data. For a request that requires a lot of time, like helping to organize a Superhero festival for community kids, he turns to the members who have demonstrated a willingness to give extra time and energy to his organization. A small number of members participate at that level — but that comparatively small number of highly dedicated members was a big part of what made members so valuable to the organization.

Allred uses his knowledge of people’s interests and abilities to send targeted requests for participation in activities hosted by the church. He said different members will opt for different forms of participation, and that faith-based organizations should support that.

Creating a list of member passions and expertise can provide organizational clarity about what members know. This is similar to De Correspondent, our project’s partner newsroom in the Netherlands. In [explaining the site’s efforts to make sense of their readers’ expertise](#), publisher Ernst-Jan Pfauth wrote: “We want to know what our readers know—so that when we cover something they have experience with, we can reach out to them. That’s why we need a CRM for journalists—a new and improved version of the good old Rolodex.” They ask readers to opt in to submit their expertise before the site verifies their credentials, categorizes members into expert groups, and reaches out to them when needed to proofread articles or join relevant conversations on the site.

## Matchmaking

For other organizations we looked at, that “matchmaking” function — matching member passions to specific pathways in the org — is played by a dedicated staff person.

David Boswell, a former head of community building at Mozilla, describes his current job as “matchmaker” at the Linux Foundation’s open source blockchain-based Hyperledger Project. As their director of ecosystem, he focuses on ensuring that new potential contributors understand how they can be most helpful to the project and community.

“My main lens when I approach work is to make sure that the interest and enthusiasm that’s out there gets translated into action,” Boswell said. “Otherwise people show up and say they want to help out and then there’s no way forward.” He focuses on directing people into a core set of “pathways” that connect the right contributors with the right actions at the right time.

In describing the importance of metrics for managing large projects, Boswell said:

“My observation is smaller communities can be managed in a more informal and ad hoc way. When a community is small enough you kind of have a sense of it. Two or three or four people who are kind of shepherding the project and have a sense of it if it’s small enough.

“Once it hits a certain size, you can no longer have a sense of the project... If you’re going to scale above a certain size it’s critically important that you have systems and data to basically give you that visibility. So I’m a big believer in metrics. I’ve implemented contribution metrics before at Mozilla and other places and I think that becomes vital at some points.”

### Listening for what members are *already* doing

In some cases, paying attention to what members are already doing in their daily lives and then looking to support them is key. The music industry is worth considering here. Liz Maddux, community marketing manager at Discogs, an online, crowdsourced database and secondary marketplace for music on vinyl, CD, cassette, and other physical formats, said, **“It’s just good business and good marketing to meet your core customer base where they already are.”**



*Music fans browsed vinyl records for sale at Discogs’ Crate Diggers Record Fair in Tokyo in 2017.  
Photo by Takumi Yamamoto.*

Record-of-the-month subscription club Vinyl Me, Please enables self-organizing community activity in its event series [The Spins](#), which hosts listening parties in nearly 30 cities around the world on the same night once a month. Paid subscribers can [apply](#) to become local ambassadors for The Spins, which involves spreading the word on social

media and volunteering in person at events.

Matt Fiedler, co-founder and CEO of Vinyl Me, Please, said that “the series was borne out of what we already saw users doing. They were hosting their own cocktail nights where they would listen to albums together, almost as an excuse to hang out with these new friends. The idea was not just to ‘create community,’ but rather to take that spark of what we already saw happening and try to replicate that across the wider community, and that’s really driven our growth.”

### Adaptable training & support

Genius, an online, crowdsourced collection of annotated song lyrics and musical knowledge, offers an example of how supporting member contributors can happen in adaptable ways. Colby Handy, Genius’ community manager, hosts a weekly meeting on Google Hangout with site contributors, giving the group a collaborative tutorial on how to edit and annotate a Song Page on the Genius site. The community staff team also gives contributors a heads-up on new features and products, such as a recent [Song Stories](#) partnership with YouTube, weeks before they go public to gauge enthusiasm and allow contributors to share feedback.

He shows that supporting members doesn’t have to be hugely time consuming; sometimes it can be as simple as hosting a Google Hangout or “office hours” in Slack to help new members get up to speed. Super-adaptable training and support can help boost the quality of participation that organizations want to see.

### Clues for News: Flexible Participation

#### Brainstorm in a Box

1. How can you help members leverage their time and civic participation on issues they care about? Consider how they might move from passive recipients of information on issues they’re interested in to more active participants in the topics.
2. Can you bring a curious approach to identifying the help you need to meet your goals, some of which your supporters might offer if you approach them honestly and with an understanding of their motivations?
3. How might you involve members in identifying the part(s) of your project, product, or process that can be improved so that you can prioritize the collaboration opportunities that most clearly achieve mutual goals?
4. To make your projects more participatory, can you better organize supporters’ needs and set clear expectations to make the best use of your collective time and skills?
5. Can you become fascinated with how your project can be loyal to your supporters? (Commitment goes both ways.)
6. What are your supporters already doing? How could you potentially support or amplify it?
7. Might you offer some adaptable training and support to help onboard members digitally, noting that this may be an area that existing members can help with?

### 3. HUMAN SCALE



*WikiSpeed volunteers gather at the kanban board for the day's build party. Image from [WikiSpeed](#).*

When we stepped inside a WikiSpeed workshop, our attention was immediately grabbed by one thing: the giant “kanban board” that dominated the shop’s big main wall. WikiSpeed’s members are engaged in something audacious: in tiny garages and workshops spread around the world, they’re getting their hands dirty building fully functional automobiles: lightweight commuter cars that are 400% more fuel efficient than the North American average. Produced from open source designs and sold for less than \$10,000, the cars are part of a larger vision: to build a greener transportation future that can help save the world from climate change. And they’re doing it through an approach that looks more like open source software than traditional auto manufacturing, using loosely organized, volunteer-driven teams that blend techniques from software development and agile project management.

That’s where the kanban board comes in. It’s populated with little Post-It notes, each describing a task that needs doing in that day’s build party. (Like “install steering column” or “test new engine management system”), divided into three simple columns: “To Do,” “In Progress” and “Done.” The kanban is like a giant open X-ray of exactly what the workshop is up to at any given moment. When a volunteer walks in to the workshop, they can glance at the board, grab a Post-It note, and start tackling it. It’s an ingeniously simple volunteer management system and “heads-up display” for the work.

“The kanban is the heart of the shop,” WikiSpeed founder Joe Justice said. “It’s the essence of the agile project management philosophy we use. And it gives our members a very concrete sense of accomplishment — you get a concrete sense of accomplishment by moving one of those little stories to ‘done.’”



## Members training members

Many of the tasks described on those little Post-It notes are quite complex; they're building cars, after all — and these aren't toys. They're fully safety-tested, street legal, and can reach speeds up to 100 MPH. How do they get new members, some of whom may have never so much as changed a spark plug, up to speed on how to do the work?

"We put a huge premium on one-to-one mentorship and hands-on teaching," Justice said. "In our build parties, we have new members pair up with older ones who have completed the task before. And we set very specific success criteria: you not only have to get the task done, you need to train up the new member so that by the end of the build party, they can now teach it forward, training others members in how to do it as well. That sometimes takes a bit longer in the short run, but it's worth it."

## "Human scale"

That simple use of the buddy system, of one-on-one mentorship and hands-up onboarding and support for new members, is one example of a wider practice in which members are norm-keepers and ambassadors for the collective work. These member-driven projects scale differently. They approach growth from a different starting point compared to other product or subscription-focused digital platforms: the goal is not simply to scale up quickly or achieve growth for its own sake. They're focused on community health, not just expansion.

We're not the first people to promote the value of these more human-oriented and participatory approaches, and they've earned a name among marketers: "co-creation." The people who joined the term, Venkat Ramaswamy and Francis Gouillart, point to profitable examples like the platform MyStarbucksIdea.com and the Nike+ co-creation initiative [in their book](#) on the topic. They note that co-creation yields different answers to questions about what to design and how "because it used a different starting point." These more collaborative projects start with a commitment to the experiences of affected stakeholders.

This is intentional growth, as opposed to chasing quick scale. That way, they don't end up diluting the very quality of experience that draws members in the first place, or that makes members valuable to the organization. We call it "human scale:" intentional growth that favors human-centered metrics like community health, engagement, and impact over simple raw numbers, click-through rates, and advertising reach to target audiences.

Member-driven projects [scale differently](#).

This attention to the quality of participation and more intentional ways to help welcome and onboard new members, acclimating and skilling them up, was a common part of the spaces we looked at — especially in open source projects like WikiSpeed. Making it easy for members to grab their first task and get help completing it (with a little hands-on

coaching from another member) was a mainstay for open source projects like Mozilla, makers of the Firefox web browser. Tasks (or “bugs”) were tracked in a giant open database that anyone could volunteer to help with, with good “starter tasks” (labelled “good first bug”) making it easier for newbies to get to work.

### More = better?

These projects are insistent on the idea that more does not always equal better. David Boswell from Linux Foundation said that organizations often make the mistake of chasing growth and scale over quality. “Having more people in the community does not necessarily make for a healthier community,” he said. There’s a push and pull between growth and quality, [he’s argued](#) — and more doesn’t necessarily mean better, in terms of return on effort and investment. “The cost and effort involved in coordinating a healthy community rises exponentially as more people are involved. The return on investment as the community grows, then, often drops off steeply.”

### A key difference for membership models

The successes of open source communities like WikiSpeed and Mozilla help to underscore another key aspect in which member-based and subscriber-based models are different: they grow differently. They scale differently. And in particular:

Membership programs cannot grow beyond their capacity to serve members.

Unlike subscriber models, their growth has natural limits — it’s not simply a numbers game. Member models — particularly those that invest in inviting their members to contribute in meaningful ways, or what we call “[robust membership models](#)” — need to grow in ways that help them stay healthy, without eroding the community norms or secret sauce that attracted people in the first place. As Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett, formerly with St. James Presbyterian and now president and executive director of the national governing body Presbyterian Mission Agency said, “A church cannot grow beyond its capacity to care for its members.”

Put another way by tech product expert and venture capitalist Hunter Walk in his [writing on communities being able to grow too quickly](#): “There are a number of dynamics which factor into the carrying capacity of an existing community to absorb newbies.... Figuring out the carrying capacity of your current community, how to onboard new users and manage growth is a set of fascinating design decisions.”

### New mindsets & metrics

These design decisions are imperative for news. Conversations about audiences and

financial sustainability in journalism can easily sound anything but human — revolving around optimizing acquisition funnels, improving engagement metrics, managing retention and churn rates, and more.

When it comes to membership models, we may need new methods and metrics to measure things like health and loyalty — not just sheer growth. This can seem counter-intuitive — how can more not be better? We encourage paying attention to performance indicators that measure more than pageviews. For people who are eager to grow a project, company, or organization that will be around years from now, their focus needs to be quality growth and impact. Some of the quantitative metrics and qualitative inputs that are worth watching include:

- User retention
- New community members reached and engaged
- Diversity of stakeholders and staff
- New routines designed and tried
- New participation pathways for community members identified and tried
- Likelihood of community engagement and repeat interactions
- Measurable impact created (i.e., a change in a policy an organization was working towards, money earned and distributed)
- Willingness to share successes and drawbacks for other organizations' benefit, as well as engagement with those who are critical about your methods
- Maturity (both tenure of community and how leaders of the organization conduct themselves)

Boswell [has written about](#) how different metrics capture different forms of value for a community and organization. One example features a Mozilla contributor who filed 3,000 Firefox bugs and edited over 5,000 support articles. This depth of value is not captured by just measuring community growth, in terms of number of contributors. Boswell [proposes other forms](#) of measuring value other than community growth, such as community retention, diversity, and maturity.

And how do organizations actually do this? How do they design membership programs for “human scale,” especially when staff and resources are stretched thin? We can’t all afford to necessarily hire a full-time member support staff or personally welcome every new member. We found trends in

1. Members supporting other members,
2. Members acting as community norm-keepers, and
3. How a strong code of conduct can be a competitive advantage.

### Community as norm-keepers

The Burning Man camps we spoke with are similar: when recruiting new members, they were intentional about deliberately limiting the number of festival “virgins” seeking to join each year compared to returning camp members. The number of first-time Burning Man attendees has stayed relatively consistent annually around 40 percent. The premium is on the member’s ability to contribute to the camp, versus mooching water and shelter as

“sparkle ponies.”

According to one female camp leader who asked to remain anonymous, everyone is a somewhat of a “sparkle pony” their first time. She said finding the sweet spot ratio of new people allowed into the camp was critical: “50 percent of our camp was new last time, and in the future I think I would do 25 percent.” Camp leaders want to introduce new people to the experience, she explained. In order to welcome newcomers, the camp must also have enough people who can show them the ropes.

Talking with members helped us to understand why getting that ratio has been so key to Burning Man’s growth. There is a common misconception that Burning Man is “lawless,” but it isn’t. Police and rangers are visibly present. The organization relies on community members to enforce their 10 principles:



[Burning Man’s guiding principles.](#)

As a festival “virgin” in 2016, Nick Stoner said, “I didn’t really understand how important the rules were because it was my first year.” He described walking around the festival grounds one day when a group of 20 people at a nearby camp began calling him out. He was wearing basketball shorts with an Adidas logo on them, not knowing that community guidelines forbid that kind of branding.

“The community does an even better job of enforcing the rules than the rangers do,” Nick said. “They will respond to things they don’t like and they will let you know--because they’re believers. It’s a respect thing. It’s like you’ve created these rules and you’re trying to create this society, and it’s like a religion.”

He compared the experience to a previous visit to a temple in Thailand, where visitors are expected to wear long sleeves as a sign of respect. “It’s the same thing, but it’s aimed at capitalism and corporate America,” said Stoner. “It’s like we’re shunning those things here, and to come here and to be accepted by us, you have to follow those rules.”

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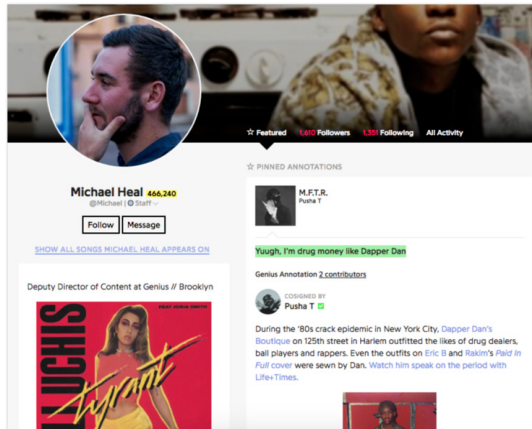
**Code of conducts that don't feel like homework**

When community members themselves help enforce norms, support staff don't have to and are freed up to work on other things. This also empowers community members who are charged with protecting what drew them in the first place. They're encouraged to learn and protect the values more broadly.

At music community Genius, deputy director of content Michael Heal also cited the importance of group norms. He defines his company's membership culture as "setting standards in collaboration with the community," rather than simply handing community guidelines to them top-down.

"Not only do we treat our users as stakeholders — giving them a say in where our product and community culture go — but **we also have our community staff with their boots on the ground doing the exact same things as our contributors are,**" Heal said. "It's not just one person on a Facebook page answering messages from angry customers. We're and editing lyrics discussing things alongside our single day."

actively annotating and metadata and in the forums community every



*Heal's Genius page.*

**Psychological safety & community health**

Having members enforce and uphold those rules is an important step toward creating a sense of psychological safety. Vicky Brasseur, vice president of the [Open Source Initiative](#), calls it her "no assholes" rule. "Nobody is too important to kick out of the project if they're an asshole. Because you can't have collaboration if you have an environment and a culture that's driving people away," Brasseur said. "The best way to avoid assholes

in projects is to have established ground rules to know what conduct your community will and will not tolerate. And the community should have a hand in defining and enforcing those ground rules.”

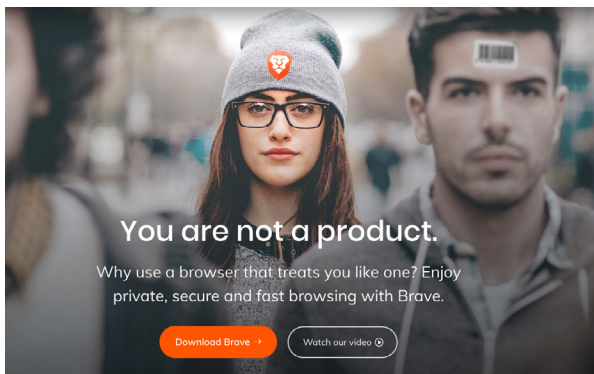
### Psychological safety as competitive advantage

Sometimes community codes of conduct can feel perfunctory or dull — something to tick a box against. Much of the web has fallen victim to this. But these examples suggest something else: the importance for membership-driven organizations to provide an oasis.

Offering emotional safety and inclusion can be a competitive differentiator. By establishing widely communicated ground rules, with buy-in and co-creation with community, organizations can design better and more collaborative experiences. The news industry has a rare chance to demonstrate healthy norms compared to the toxic platforms and online shouting factories that live elsewhere on the web. We want to see them use community guidelines and codes of conduct more purposefully: not simply as a compliance issue, but as a potential advantage for news member programs that can offer something different and better.

We’ve stressed the importance of limits on growth and achieving human scale. But of course not all growth is bad, and some programs need to grow if they’re going to survive. So how do other member programs do that, especially when marketing dollars and resources are tight? We looked to other spaces for inspiration.

### Creative approaches to marketing & recruitment



The [Brave browser](#) describes itself as having been “built by a team of privacy focused, performance oriented pioneers of the web. Help us fix browsing together.”

### Capitalizing on current events & controversy as a marketing opportunity

The internet browser Brave is a small player taking on Goliaths like Google’s Chrome, Microsoft’s Internet Explorer, and Apple’s Safari, using a unique model that’s member-driven. Instead of just running a piece of software, users are paid through cryptocurrency

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and incentivized to refer others to join.

Those other players have huge marketing budgets in comparison — so how do you compete? In part, by leveraging the news cycle and piggy-backing off moments of heightened awareness on your issues. For Brave, that meant capitalizing off press about GDPR requirements from Europe and Facebook’s Cambridge Analytica scandal. They used social media to give consumers concerned about privacy an action to take. They used current events and controversies that stir the “something feels broken” feeling.

Positioning membership as a natural next step for people to take to do something about what angers intriguing strat-membership concerns about heated political and growing platforms and generally.



#hodlnow™ @hodlnow · Jan 5  
#Facebook use of #third-party apps 'violates #dataprotection principles'

theguardian.com/technology/201...  
#BTC #Litecoin #LTC #ETH #ETC #XMR #MONERO #ToTheMoon #DOGE  
#DASH #NEM #ZCASH #Ziftr #Crypto #hodlnow #hodl #Surveillance #brave  
#DuckDuckGo #PrivacyAware #PrivacyForEveryone



**Facebook use of third-party apps 'violates data protection principles'**  
German watchdog accuses site of merging data from WhatsApp and Instagram into users' Facebook accounts  
theguardian.com

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*Breaking news about Facebook becomes a social media marketing opportunity for privacy-obsessed projects like Brave.*

**Taking a wider stance on the space you’re in**

Another example related to recruitment and growth comes from “taking a wider stance” on the space that organizations conventionally occupy -- thinking beyond their vertical. This allows organizations to become more creative about what’s competing for their

potential supporters' time and attention and spot creative marketing opportunities.

Bartering and exchange organizations such as [Bunz](#), Portland's [Hour Exchange](#), and [First Canadian Barter Exchange](#) have adopted a wider stance about what might be competing for their members' time and attention, and what they can learn from their competition. Hour Exchange considers [Next Door](#), a neighborhood social network, and traditional cash economy that supports service-based businesses, to be their direct competitors even though neither are barter-based systems.

With member-driven models, how organizations understand the space they're in and define "the competition" might evolve and grow in some surprising or novel ways that open up new opportunities and fresh approaches.



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[The San Francisco Chronicle](#) links subscribing to the paper with supporting democracy.

A local newspaper membership program might take a broader approach to what it offers by positioning itself not as simply selling "coverage." Instead, it talks more about the important role the publication plays in the civic and cultural infrastructure of the community. This could look more like addressing members of a museum: talking to them as people who might be encouraged to support a mission that boosts the overall richness of their city, rather than simply accessing a product.

Maybe news is no longer just in the "news" business. With member-driven models, the space or market they're in can begin to change. This allows compelling possibilities for their value propositions, understanding what members want, messaging and marketing tactics, possible partnerships, and more.

**Clues for News:** Human Scale

**Brainstorm in a Box**



**Membership in news & beyond:  
what media can learn from other member-driven movements**

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1. What metrics and measures are most appropriate to understand the success of your work with your supporters? Consider the role of retention and how members interact with one another.
2. Are there ways that existing members might support new ones?
3. Community health and psychological safety may be your competitive advantage. How might you not just message this, but make it a reality?
4. What established and widely communicated ground rules does your organization have? Should these change?
5. Might you “widen your stance” to expand your understanding of the space you’re in? Can you capitalize on relevant current events as a member recruitment opportunity?

## CONCLUSION

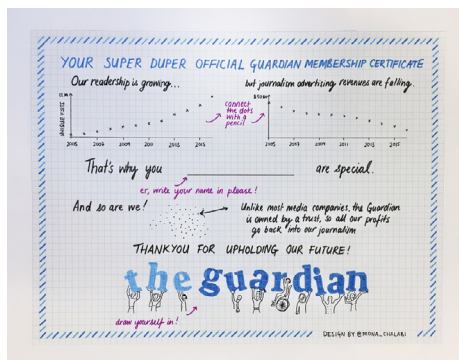
### Restoring the human element to news

“Something feels broken in the world” is a sentiment we hear often from supporters of independent news, whether it relates to having their personal privacy violated or feeling that websites too often abuse their attention. Combined with an economic system that is dismantling the living systems of the planet and a work-life “balance” that burns people out and makes them sick, it’s unsurprising that people are turning away from media that is optimized sheerly for scale.

In the midst of this, the opportunity to participate in something different is an invitation to potential contributors: an ask to be part of collaborative efforts to find solutions and to do something useful when they might otherwise throw their hands up.

Member-driven movements run on human energy. They’re centered on members’ interests and connect to something bigger for cities, causes, and spiritual lives. These projects are primarily responsible for something bigger than digital traffic chasing. They’re ultimately accountable not to advertisers or board members. **Instead, these endeavors are best poised for impact when they align business incentives and members’ incentives.** This makes for more just and equitable projects.

In addition to how accessible products are (including what languages they’re available in, what affordances they make for people with different abilities, and how many steps are required to check out) and what it costs, an emotional connection can make the difference between someone becoming a loyal user and never returning. There are practical ways of restoring the human element in commerce, media, and more. This means studying how users encounter your work and designing for belonging alongside them. The resulting participatory design projects are more inclusive and inviting, human, humble, unique, considerate, and operate with integrity and independence.



*The importance of tangible evidence of affinity is something that Guardian US has also recognized with the certificates it mails to members featuring art by data editor Mona Chalabi. The hand-drawn look supports an idea that the site is created by and for people.*

**Projects that invite people in early and send a clear message: we can fix this.**

These projects convey that the world hasn't spun completely beyond our control. We're not helpless bystanders; we're people with agency. Through reason, debate, and human-led efforts, we can still solve problems. There are lots of other people who feel the same way, and this represents a unique opportunity for savvy news organizations. De Correspondent appeals to current reactions to high volume but low value news by offering an "antidote to the daily news grind."

Membership often flows from a dissatisfaction with the world as it is — combined with the belief that it can change. This widespread pessimism often spurs an actionable optimism.

The call for more inclusive, interactive ways of working is imperative for the sustainability of spaces where people work, learn, shop, spend time online, and relax. Projects that solicit not just audience feedback but participation are more likely to avoid wasting time making things people don't want. They're the organizations we'll see growing in the years to come -- and the ones that we bet will be offering the most desirable and inclusive experiences, too.

## Team member bios

**Emily Goligoski** ([@Emgollie](#)) is Research Director for the [Membership Puzzle Project](#), a collaboration between the Dutch journalism platform De Correspondent and New York University. She previously worked as a user experience research lead in The New York Times newsroom and brought design research to Mozilla Foundation. Emily co-authored the Tow Guide to Audience Revenue & Engagement with Elizabeth Hansen and is writing a forthcoming book about designing with community members for A Book Apart.

**Matt Thompson** ([@OpenMatt](#)) is a writer, collaboration coach and former Senior Director of the Mozilla Foundation. He's the author of the forthcoming book, *The Joy of Teamwork: 30 ways to work smarter together*, a playbook for creative collaboration and team health. A former CBC journalist and Webby Award-winning filmmaker, he's a frequent conference speaker and a "human guinea pig" for cutting edge collaboration techniques.

**Gonzalo del Peon** ([@gonzalodelpeon](#)) is a recent graduate of NYU's Studio 20 masters program focused on digital journalism & innovation. In addition to his work for Membership Puzzle, he was the American Press Institute's 2018 summer fellow, and has consulted for news startups on their early-stage business models and audience revenue strategies. He is passionate about using human-centered design and human-centered business models to make the news landscape more sustainable and community-focused.

**Laura Ballay** ([@uxstrategist](#)) is a digital strategist and design educator interested in the intersection of people, spaces and emerging technologies. She divides her time between teaching at Simon Fraser University and practicing human-centered design to help organizations discover opportunities for innovation.

**Cherie Hu** ([@cheriehu42](#)) is a freelance music business journalist and researcher, focusing on tech/digital trends and emerging markets. Based in NYC, she is one of the main tech writers for *Billboard* and has also contributed to *Forbes* for over two years, with additional bylines in *Music Ally*, *The Juilliard Journal*, and the *Harvard Political Review*.

**Corinne Osnos** ([@osnosis](#)) is a journalist, design researcher, and recipient of a 2018 Google News Lab fellowship. In her current role, she manages audience strategy at New York Media and is passionate about designing user-centered media experiences. She is a graduate of Northwestern University's Media Innovation and Digital Entrepreneurship program. She lives in New York City.

**Daniel Stringer** ([@danieltheory](#)) is a social scientist interested in ways that new technologies might make society more just, humane, and mindful. He operates Stringer Labs, a consultancy that provides human-centered design expertise for technology and media organizations. With a career including positions at Google, Facebook, and The World Bank, his work addresses the cross-cultural realities of creating technology products on a global scale. Daniel received his PhD in Learning Sciences from Stanford University.

**JP Gomes** ([@JP\\_Gomes](#)) is a strategist and design researcher based in New York, with an extensive background in strategic comms and journalism. He has led the development and implementation of strategic communications and public diplomacy programs for the Presidency of Brazil, the UK Foreign Office, and the United Nations Development Program, with a focus on global climate change negotiations, sustainable development, and poverty eradication.

