

Sue Robinson, **How Journalists Engage: A Theory of Trust Building, Identities, and Care**, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023, 242 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

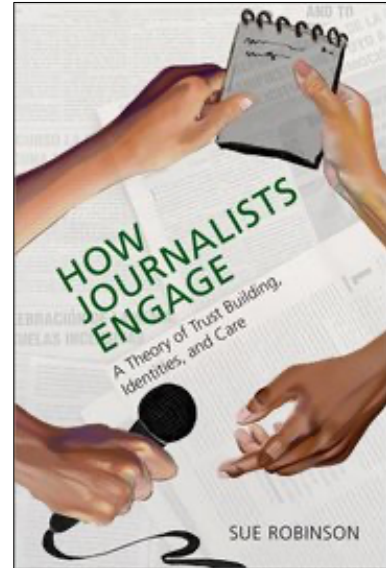
Reviewed by
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A substantial amount of research has been dedicated to diagnosing journalism’s “trust problem.” When it comes to interventions in building trust between communities and journalists, however, scholarly research has been substantially thinner. Sue Robinson’s work chronicling the growth of engaged journalism in the United States is a notable exception.

Engaged journalism refers to a range of practices seeking to build relationships between news media and community members or audiences. Robinson notes that engagement in journalism has spanned a continuum from passive (e.g., likes and clicks on stories) to active (e.g., nonextractive listening sessions, co-creation of content), and she primarily focuses on the growth of the latter. I have spent much of the past decade following and working within this field myself. This has included attending a variety of convenings where I noticed a growing number of journalism support organizations and consultants. Often Robinson would be one of the only other academics in the room. As I would learn (and full disclosure, I reviewed an early draft of Robinson’s book and have discussed it with her), Robinson was meticulously documenting these and other rooms in ways that grew into her book, **How Journalists Engage: A Theory of Trust Building, Identities, and Care**.

Understanding how what Robinson describes as a major paradigm shift in mainstream journalism matters because networks of newsrooms and journalism supporting actors, particularly in the United States, increasingly experiment with the kinds of practice change and interventions she documents. Some position these efforts as a pathway for journalism to build relationships with polarized and marginalized publics—and for making the industry “healthy for democracy” (p. 3). In this current moment, as already imperfect democratic structures look increasingly fraught, the idea of journalism supporting pluralistic dialogue or even a shared set of facts seems like an increasingly uphill proposition. Robinson makes no claims as to whether engagement strategies will succeed in building or repairing trust in U.S. journalism, but the stakes are significant.

In *How Journalists Engage*, Robinson uses surveys, observation, focus groups, and interviews with journalists and journalism students undertaking engagement work, including case studies in which she is a participant observer. From this, she offers a theory of trust building that is mindful of power dynamics, centers listening, and integrates what she calls an “identity-aware” ethic of care. While Robinson draws on her interactions with practitioners and reflects critically on her own time as a White CIS-identifying journalist, she



also deftly weaves in multiple literatures—not only within journalism studies but also feminist and political theory, particularly as it relates to an ethics of care.

The book offers a portrait of the formation of a “built environment” in the U.S. journalism industry that evolved from roughly 2010–2020 in response to layered contexts—including post-Ferguson reckonings with structural racism, partisan distrust, and polarization following the 2016 presidential election, the collapse of the advertising business model, shifting affordances of platforms and technologies, and earlier journalism movements such as public journalism. This growing collaborative network and infrastructure, Robinson argues, has attempted to build trust at the micro, meso, and macro levels and includes a range of actors including mainstream news organizations, community initiatives, philanthropic foundations, journalism support intermediaries, and technology companies.

How Journalists Engage also includes insights on election coverage, which may be valuable in the current moment. Robinson shares her experiences managing research for the Citizens’ Agenda project, a collaboration between New York University’s Jay Rosen and Hearken, a media technology and training company that specializes in engagement consulting. This Citizens’ Agenda project, which was initiated in the run-up to the 2020 elections, centered on training for newsrooms and journalism schools as well as a guide to election coverage that encouraged journalists to engage community members in a participatory process to explore and discuss their questions and concerns with candidates. Many of the journalists she spoke with shared lessons learned and things they wished they had done differently (engaging residents sooner, circling back with them more, etc.), and it will be interesting to see whether said journalists follow through on their past commitments. Regardless, the Citizens’ Agenda case offers possibilities for journalists who say they are not satisfied with traditional horse-race elections coverage.

As an educator, Robinson also used the Citizens’ Agenda as a jumping-off point to train other journalism professors in engagement skills—and to form an ongoing network of educators seeking to shift journalism education by integrating identity-aware engagement practices. *How Journalists Engage*, likewise, may be useful for journalism educators interested in introducing what Robinson calls new skill sets (or at least new-to-mainstream journalism): radical transparency, power dynamic appreciation, mediation, reciprocity and feedback loops, media literacies, community offline work, needs/assets/solutions analyses, and collaborative production. In addition to outlining the contours of these skill sets, Robinson categorizes the roles journalists play as they deploy them: relationship builder, community collaborator, community conversation facilitator, and professional network builder.

One of the most notable takeaways for educators and practitioners, however, may be Robinson’s intervention into the longstanding debate in journalism over the concept of “objectivity.” Robinson, in this and previous work, has been critical of how objectivity norms have been interpreted in U.S. journalism in a way that tends to reinforce White supremacy—overrepresenting people with institutional positions of power who are often White, CIS, and male while encouraging journalists to keep a distance from more marginalized community stakeholders. Robinson notes that identity-aware care offers an alternative to objectivity that is more nuanced than “subjective opinion.” Journalists can use engagement techniques in ways that are apolitical but also have “explicitly stated agendas for co-creating better communities” (p. 77). Robinson also offers concrete examples of what identity-aware reporting might look like and how it requires journalists to

call out bias and to apply a “racial/power lens.” She gives an example of how a local education story quoted someone without noting key background about them (he was a White man who had lost an election to a Brazilian American woman who was the first Black, Indigenous, or person of color to be elected), and how only with that knowledge could the reader recognize a racial dog whistle being made in the person’s quote (p. 82).

As with any portrait, part of the story of the trust-building environment Robinson documents is in its absences—what is not included. Robinson underlines that this evolving network and infrastructure draws on “a constellation of overlapping, contemporary journalism movements” (p. 26; including various *journalisms* like solutions journalism, solidarity journalism, movement journalism, etc.). However, while this is a growing and expansive constellation, many parts of journalism are not actively participating in this change. For example, I have had conversations with many of the actors who Robinson talks to about the challenges of recruiting participation from local and national television broadcasters, as well as the challenges of reaching many local news geographies that are outside the radius of the philanthropic journalism gaze. Others, as Robinson alludes, may have been doing related work through public access community media and ethnic media but are not connected to these same networks, infrastructure, or funders.

Robinson also references limitations that could undercut the work of care in journalism—notably citing political scientist Joan Tronto’s (2013) requirements for care that include “competence (adopting an ethic of care requires action with appropriate resources and effort)” (p. 71). Resources and effort are of course not things that can be taken for granted in the world of journalism. Indeed, many of the people and projects in Robinson’s book recount on and off the book’s pages the challenges of getting news organizations to prioritize resources and to sustain the effort and political will needed to put identity-aware care into practice. Nevertheless, at a time when there is great hand-wringing about the future (and present) of democracy in the United States, and the complicity of journalism in the country’s many ills, the concept of identity-aware care and the associated practices Robinson details in *How Journalists Engage* feel highly relevant.