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## Special thanks to our recent reviewers

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We would like to take this opportunity to extend a special thanks to the reviewers who contributed to the new issue. Your expertise and hard work make our journal's success possible.

Myoung-Gi Chon, Myleea Hill, Jacqueline Lambiase, Chad Wertley

**EDITORS' ESSAY**

# **ENHANCING COMMUNITY THROUGH INNOVATION IN TECHNOLOGY AND STORYTELLING**

**JOSEPH RADICE, KELLY CHERNIN, CODY HAYS**





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# Editors' Essay: Enhancing Community Through Innovation in Technology and Storytelling

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Recent discourse highlights a heightened focus on technology, with particular attention on AI and social media. Communities across the globe are asking important questions in the face of technological advancement. What are the ethical implications of AI in today's tech and academic landscapes? Will emerging technologies replace knowledge workers in the near future? How do social media and AI affect adolescent mental health and development? These valid concerns largely emphasize the negative consequences of technology, but we have also seen technology strategically deployed to benefit communities and underscore community engagement efforts.

For public interest communicators, addressing the challenges of emerging technology means returning to the fundamentals of empathy and authenticity through ethical narrative storytelling. While digital platforms dominate the discourse, it's crucial to remember that transformative communication often occurs through community-driven initiatives.

Over the past eight years, our journal has published work related to creative and strategic approaches to communications, ever informed by the evolving needs of the diverse communities we seek to represent and serve. This latest issue of the *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, Volume 8, Issue 1, presents a compelling compilation of research and practitioner perspectives delineating the transformative potential of technology and storytelling. We invite readers to consider fresh perspectives on the shifting roles of firsthand narrative and technology in community empowerment and engagement efforts. For public interest communicators, this issue spotlights fresh perspectives on these evolving trends to address

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important societal issues and foster positive change, while also acknowledging the ethical challenges and possible risks linked with these advancements.

In the first article, Baines et al. highlight technology adoption and digital literacy among women transitioning from incarceration in the U.S. Midwest. The study elucidates modern challenges faced by underrepresented justice-impacted communities and underscores the significant role of social influence and facilitating conditions in fostering technology adoption to support individuals recently released from jail or prison. The article aligns with the core tenets of public interest communications, which uses research-based strategic communications to advance the public good and address pressing social issues. By focusing on the unique needs and challenges of women transitioning from incarceration, Baines et al. demonstrate how targeted, community-centered communication strategies can empower marginalized populations and promote positive change.

Building upon the theme of community engagement, Maben and Horton offer insight into the #CityHallSelfie social media campaign initiated by the organization Engaging Local Government Leaders. The campaign celebrates local government by asking local government employees and residents to snap selfies in front of their local government buildings. Through the lens of framing and social presence theories, this piece offers insight into how local governments can leverage social media trends to strengthen resident-government relationships, harness the power of digital storytelling associated with selfies, and celebrate civic engagement to foster a sense of belonging. By highlighting the potential of social media campaigns to bridge the gap between residents and their local governments, Maben and Horton offer valuable insights for public interest communicators looking to leverage digital platforms for community empowerment.

The third piece takes us to Albania via an interview with Elira Canga and explores Mister Stethoscope, a children's puppet show promoting vaccine awareness and combating public health misinformation. The project is sponsored by the WHO Country Office in Albania and funded by the European Union. Mister Stethoscope is a novel example of how creative arts can be used to convey crucial health messages to the public, including young audiences. The interview focuses on the Mister Stethoscope team's challenges and successes in creating a powerful, accessible tool for promoting public health through innovative storytelling. Ultimately, this article showcases how creative, audience-centered approaches to storytelling can be used to address pressing public health challenges. By highlighting the success of Mister Stethoscope, this piece offers valuable guidance for communicators seeking to develop innovative strategies for advancing public health goals.

The fourth and final piece in this issue features an interview with Maggie Kane, focusing on the transformative initiative A Place at the Table—a nonprofit, pay-what-you-can café battling food insecurity in Raleigh, North Carolina. The café provides access to healthy meals and fosters a sense of dignity and community among its patrons. Through strategic storytelling rooted in public interest communications, A Place at the Table amplifies the voices of those it serves and mobilizes community support to build a more inclusive, equitable community at the local level.

By showcasing how a local initiative can have a profound impact on the lives of individuals and the broader community, the piece offers valuable insights for communicators looking to effect change at the grassroots level.

Collectively, the articles in this issue of the *Journal of Public Interest Communications* showcase the transformative potential of innovative technology and storytelling in empowering communities and advancing social change. As we navigate the complex and rapidly evolving landscape of public interest communications in this age of emerging technology and social media, the insights and examples provided in this issue serve as a reminder of the enduring power of ethical, community-centered communication to effect change and promote the greater good. The work presented in this issue allows researchers and practitioners alike the space to consider an additional question: How can we make evolving technology work *for* us to help instigate positive social change?

By embracing the potential of new technologies and storytelling techniques, while remaining grounded in the fundamentals of empathy, authenticity, and social justice, public interest communicators can continue to play a vital role in building a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future for all.

# TECHNOLOGY LEARNING AND JUSTICE-IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

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## Technology Learning and Justice-Impacted Communities

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### Abstract

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This study, guided by the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT), assesses how a technology education program affects technology adoption, use, and digital literacy for women transitioning from incarceration. Results highlight social influence (impact of instructors) and facilitating conditions (devices and access to lessons) as crucial factors in technology adoption. Most of the women stated their success and use of technology communication was enhanced through the support instructors and peer mentors provided. The research carries scholarly and policy implications for addressing technology education and information literacy within underrepresented justice-impacted communities in digital inclusion efforts.

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## Introduction

As individuals rely heavily on communication technologies for various aspects of their lives, there has been increased emphasis on technology learning (Connaway et al., 2017; Foley, 2017). In particular, the ability to critically evaluate information available online (i.e., information literacy) has gained prominence due to the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms (Anderson & Rainie, 2017). Despite the availability of diverse resources on technology learning and information literacy, significant disparities persist in these domains. For instance, previous research has shown that there is considerable gender and racial inequity in the

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use of digital technologies for entrepreneurial, educational, and digital activities (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Rajahonka & Villman, 2019; Robinson et al., 2015). This inequity results in disparity in building social capital, employment opportunities, and educational attainment (Chen et al., 2015; Witte & Mannon, 2010).

It is crucial to recognize that justice-impacted communities face even greater challenges in technology learning. Correctional facilities often struggle to provide adequate technology resources, including digital devices and internet access (Davis & Ostini, 2019). Within justice-impacted communities, women transitioning from incarceration face additional challenges in terms of technology learning (Blomberg et al., 2021). Despite the increasing number of women incarcerated in the United States, reentry programs tailored specifically for women remain limited (Harris, 2018). With this lack of tailored reentry programs for women, women transitioning from incarceration have fewer opportunities to gain digital skills compared with similarly situated men (Miller, 2021). Gender-based digital exclusion is compounded by barriers such as limited access, affordability, education (or lack thereof), gendered skillsets, content production patterns, technology literacy, and gender-related labor market dynamics associated with technology-related jobs, all of which contribute to digital gender divides (Brimacombe & Skuse, 2013). Moreover, as compared with men with criminal justice involvement, women are less likely to gain employment and more likely experience additional factors of precarity, which increases their vulnerability and risk of exploitation (Seo et al., 2022).

For women transitioning from incarceration, technology serves as a double-edged sword; it offers opportunities for education, employment, and social connection, but also presents barriers that can hinder their reintegration process. To bridge this digital gap and support women's reentry into society, there is a pressing need to explore their experiences, perceptions, and needs regarding technology education programs. This study examines how women recently released from jail or prison decide to participate in a technology learning program and what facilitating conditions contribute to their technology adoption and use.

This study contributes to the field of public interest communications by highlighting the unique challenges faced by women transitioning from incarceration in accessing and adopting technology. Empirical research on the marginalized population's experiences and needs regarding technology education programs fills a crucial gap in existing literature, offering valuable insights as to how digital inclusion efforts might serve public interest (i.e., supporting justice-impacted individuals' reintegration into society and thus reducing recidivism). By uncovering barriers and facilitators influencing participation in these education programs, the study informs the development of targeted communication strategies that promote inclusivity, reduce gender-based digital divides, and enhance more equitable opportunities for education, employment, and social connection (Seo et al., 2017). Ultimately, this research supports the broader goal of public interest communications by fostering an inclusive and informed society (Chernin et al., 2023), specifically addressing challenges faced by women transitioning from incarceration.

## Literature review

### Digital divide among marginalized women

Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of information and communication technologies has had a profound impact on various aspects of society and increasingly played a critical role in economic, social, and political realms (Robinson et al., 2015). People increasingly integrate online practices with traditional methods to achieve diverse goals, such as accessing relevant information, communicating with friends and contacts, completing transactions online, and participating in entertainment pursuits (Vilhelmson et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). However, research has shown that not all individuals benefit equally from the access and use of digital technologies and programs. A reason for this inequality is the digital divide, a phenomenon highlighting those who can and those who cannot effectively access or use communication technologies (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). Factors contributing to this inequality include age (Loges & Jung, 2001), digital skills (Hargittai, 2002), and user familiarity (Merkel, 2004).

Additionally, the divide has exposed social disparities, particularly affecting women, racial/ethnic minorities, individuals with low income, those with lower education levels, and rural residents (Goedhart et al., 2019). Women transitioning from incarceration experience marginality at the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Seo et al., 2022). However, there is little research on this population's technology learning experiences. By focusing on women transitioning from incarceration in the context of digital skills training, our research contributes to narrowing the gap in the literature and offers new perspectives on marginalization and digital inequality.

### Digital disconnection and reintegration challenges among formerly incarcerated women

To contextualize the digital challenges faced by women transitioning from incarceration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this already disadvantaged group, it is essential to acknowledge the broader backdrop of the U.S. criminal justice system. The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world with nearly 2.1 million individuals behind bars as of the end of 2019 (Gramlich, 2021). Recent reports suggest that women have become the fastest growing segment of incarcerated population since 2009 (Sawyer, 2018). Compared to men, most incarcerated women are serving time for non-violent offenses, often related to mandatory sentencing for drug-related crimes (Foster & Sanford, 2006; Ryder, 2020). While approximately 1.9 million women leave prisons or jails each year in the United States (Sawyer, 2018), the pandemic and subsequent recession have compounded the challenges women face when reentering society. Besides struggling to meet the demands in their new lives such as stable housing, food, jobs, and health care, they also face significant challenges in digital access and use because they had limited opportunities to utilize technologies while incarcerated (Blomberg et al., 2021; Craigie & Grawert, 2021). Reports indicate that women in transition often have poor

employment histories, low levels of literacy, low exposure to technology education, and very limited preparation for engagement in economic opportunities due to past criminal justice involvement (Blomberg et al., 2021; Duwe & Henry-Nickie, 2021). This digital disconnect is especially prevalent among those who have been incarcerated for several years (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). While security measures regarding Internet connection within correctional facilities are necessary, the limited opportunities create challenges when women leave prison and reenter an increasingly digital world.

The effects of a digital disconnect are far-reaching and can place women-in-transition into deeper social isolation. This in turn may inhibit their ability to socially and economically reintegrate into society. However, studies have shown that when digital literacy training is provided, either through correctional facilities or after their release, they not only feel better prepared for release but are also better equipped to reintegrate into society, therein possibly averting the negative impacts of the digital disconnect (Castek et al., 2015; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022).

### Educational technology as a learning tool

Technology-enhanced instruction is an effective tool to increase digital competence and skills for underserved populations, including high-poverty urban groups and people transitioning from incarceration (Blanchard et al., 2016). It improves digital literacy, access to information, and employment prospects (Smith, 2015). Community-based technology programs have demonstrated numerous benefits for these populations, which in turn affects both their lives and the lives of their children. For instance, Rivera and Francis (2015) studied the impact of an intervention technology program designed to assist Spanish-speaking low-income families in learning and using technology. They found that participants reported positive attitudes on what skills they learned through the program and could help assist their children with school-related activities at home and their involvement in the classroom. Overall, their pre-post survey data suggests that the program positively influenced marginalized groups' digital literacy skills (Rivera & Francis, 2015).

Further, studies have shown that digital literacy training for adult learners promotes autonomy, confidence, self-efficacy, competence, and self-regulation (Castek et al., 2015). For instance, Castek and colleagues reported on a program that operates on a ten-week, reentry-focused digital literacy curriculum in a prison setting. Each year, 700-900 people in prison complete the program. The curriculum focuses on Internet navigation, creating and sending resumes, creating email accounts, and how to effectively perform online searches for information. Over a period of three years, they found a 47% decrease in recidivism after the program started. The authors emphasize the importance of teaching advanced skills, including touchscreen technology, digital collaboration sites, Microsoft suite program, and social media use (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016).

When it comes to people's adoption and use of the Internet and social media, several factors, including education, age, geography, income, and race affect Internet use (Perrin & Atske, 2021). In a recently published study, the researchers examined how information literacy education positively influences participants' information assessments. Specifically, the study examined how low-income older Black adults assess the credibility of online information (Seo et al., 2021). The older adults in this study were the least likely to use the Internet if they had less than a high school degree. Those participants who had higher education attainments were more likely to accurately assess the credibility of information presented to them during a survey.

Specific to formerly incarcerated people, recent studies have found that they not only use technology for education but also engage in online spaces to reflect on their previous actions, engage in supportive relationships, and perform prosocial identities within the group (Hinck et al., 2022). These online spaces and the affordances they offer may provide vulnerable groups the support they need after being released from jail or prison.

Offering digital skills and information literacy education to digitally disadvantaged groups is an important step in their reentry to society, which may also reduce recidivism. By providing the essential educational skills, vulnerable populations, including formerly incarcerated women, can gain confidence in their online pursuits, enhance their information literacy, improve employment opportunities, and reconnect with society, especially during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Theoretical framework: Technology acceptance and use

Understanding why individuals adopt or refuse certain communication technologies is key to developing educational programs and community engagement strategies aimed at reducing digital divide. Unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) offers a helpful guidance for our research study, as UTAUT considers social influence and facilitating conditions in accounting for access, adoption, and use of technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In addition, UTAUT is comprehensive with its incorporation of different models and has been widely used in research on technology and education or innovation adoption (Williams et al., 2015).

According to UTAUT, individuals develop diverse beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes concerning a particular piece of technology, which “in turn, have an impact on their intentions to use the technology, and, therefore, affect their actual use of the technology” (Garfield, 2005, p. 25). In particular, *performance expectancy*, *effort expectancy*, *social influence*, and *facilitating conditions* are considered as direct determinants of an individual's intention and behavior related to technology. Performance expectancy refers to the extent to which the individual believes a particular technological device or program will support them in achieving benefits (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Effort expectancy is related to how much additional effort is anticipated (or how easy it would be) to adopt or use a particular piece of technology. Social influence concerns the individual's perception regarding how important others believe it to be that the individual should adopt or use a technological device or program. Finally, facilitating

conditions refers to the individual's belief about availability of technological support or training needed for their adoption or use of a digital device or software program.

These four constructs are particularly relevant to our research, which focuses on technology adoption among marginalized women who have traditionally been disadvantaged in technology access and use (Blomberg et al., 2021). Previous studies with such individuals have shown that perceptions of beneficial gains from technology use and anticipated efforts required to learn or use technology influence these individuals' decisions to adopt or use technology (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Seo et al., 2019). Moreover, peer influence (social influence) and community support (facilitating conditions) can play significant roles in this.

Based on the above literature and guided by the UTAUT theoretical framework, this study poses the following research questions:

*RQ1:* What performance expectations did recently incarcerated women have that affect their participation in a technology education program?

*RQ2:* How do recently incarcerated women evaluate their effort using digital devices that affect their participation in a technology education program?

*RQ3:* How do recently incarcerated women find support through a technology education program?

*RQ4:* What facilitating conditions contribute to recently incarcerated women's adoption of technology and participation in a technology education program?

## Methods

### Interview research and sampling

To answer the research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with women transitioning from incarceration who participated in technology education. Qualitative interviews were deemed most appropriate due to their capacity to elicit rich, in-depth data that enabled participants to share their narratives organically, while also allowing researchers to probe specific areas of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The immersive nature of qualitative interviews was important for capturing the context-specific dynamics of the participants' engagement with the technology education program.

We conducted interviews with 40 women recently released from jail or prison in two neighboring states in the U.S. Midwest. Participants for the interview were recruited through a technology education program provided by a university research team and funded by a federal grant. The program uses an online Learning Management Site and has been operating online

since 2020. The program is free of cost and provided for women who have been recently released from jail or prison. The program teaches a range of computer skills that are important for job participation and career advancement. To qualify, participants must identify as female, be above the age of 18, have served time in jail or prison, and live in a specified midwestern state. Once participants complete a phase (consisting of several lessons), they receive a technology stipend (\$50) and a certificate of completion that they can add to their resume.

For this study, recruitment emails were sent to technology education program participants who had completed at least one lesson (not necessarily an entire phase) within the program. The recruitment emails stated that participants would receive an incentive of \$10 for their time. Those who expressed willingness to participate in this interview research were asked to read and verbally agree to an information consent form before the interview took place.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted by Ph.D. research assistants in the field of media and communication who closely collaborated with most interviewees through the technology education program. To ensure transparency and mitigate potential biases, the interview questions underwent thorough examination by faculty researchers prior to the interviews to avoid and revise leading questions. To further address the inherent challenges posed by the close relationship, multiple authors and research assistants reviewed and coded the data of this study separately. Using the peer debriefing method, the research team then compared and discussed their findings to determine points of continuity and key themes (Collins et al., 2013).

Using a semi-structured interview method, each interview session covered a set of open-ended questions on participants' motivation to enroll in the technology education program, their overall experiences with the program, the influence of the program on their technology access and use, and areas of improvement for future program offerings. In total, the interview guide had 19 open-ended and three follow-up questions that followed a consistent interview protocol. The interviews consisted of two parts: a structured interview and a close-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire mainly asked demographic questions. The open-ended interview questions were developed based on a review of previous research in this area (Blomberg et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2019), and they relate to constructs within UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). For example, to measure *performance expectancy*, one of the questions asked what motivated them to want to enroll in the program. Regarding *effort expectancy*, one of the questions asked if the participant was motivated to seek other education opportunities in technology or employment after being involved in the program. Regarding *social influence*, one of the questions in this study was if the instructors of the program were helpful and available. Finally, one of the questions covering *facilitating conditions* asked what type of device they used to access the program and what challenges they may have faced. The selection of interview questions was carefully curated to encompass a comprehensive range of topics relevant to the study objectives, including participants' experiences with technology and their perceptions of

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<sup>1</sup> All research protocols for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the authors' university.

barriers and facilitators to technology adoption. The question development process involved a collaborative effort among the research team, drawing on insights from existing literature and expertise in the field of technology education and public interest communications (Blomberg et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2019).

### Procedure and coding

The interviews took place between April and November 2022, and on average each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. Following COVID-19 safety guidelines, the interviews were conducted via phone and recorded on Zoom. The consent form was read aloud before the start of each interview session. Once participants gave their oral consent, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and loaded to Dedoose 9.0., a qualitative data analysis platform, to analyze interview transcripts. We conducted two rounds of coding (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The first involved open coding to identify broad patterns and themes (Berg, 2018) across the interviews, which informed multiple empirical projects within the larger research program. The second round was focused coding (Saldaña, 2018), guided by the UTAUT framework and concepts. We systematically analyzed the transcripts to identify patterns and themes related to the four UTAUT concepts (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions), as well as technology experience, usage barriers, and other emerging themes.

### Results

In total, 40 women who have recently been released from incarceration participated in the study. A summary of key demographic characteristics of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.



**Table 1***Demographics of Interviewees*

Variable	Value	Count	Percent (%)
Age	18-29	4	10 %
	30-39	12	30 %
	40-49	16	40 %
	50-59	8	20 %
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>
Race	Black or African-American	7	17.5%
	Hispanic or Latino	2	5%
	White or Caucasian	25	62.5%
	Other	6	15%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>
Education	Some high school, no diploma	4	10%
	High school graduate, diploma or equivalent	9	22.5%
	Some college, no diploma	19	47.5%
	Trade/technical/vocational training	6	15%
	Associate degree	1	2.5%
	Bachelor's degree	1	2.5%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>
Employment status	Working at a regular job	15	37.5%
	Working part-time	6	15%
	Working on and off	1	2.5%
	Unemployed and looking for work	8	20%
	Unemployed and not looking for work	2	5%
	Self-employed	1	2.5%
	Disabled, not able to work	4	10%
	Other	3	7.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>	

Perceptions of beneficial gains (*RQ1*)

Participants expressed a range of reasons they joined the program and completed lessons. Many responses were related to a desire to improve their life situation, their career prospects, or their educational opportunities. As one 50-year-old participant stated, “better pay so I can help with my grand babies and my daughter...and pay my own bills, and not have to worry about anything.”

Eighteen participants aimed to improve basic Internet and technology usage. Most had specific technological goals, such as mastering software programs (Excel, PowerPoint, MS Word), social media, online security, Internet navigation, and email, and working with PDFs. For

example, one of the participants mentioned that she uses Google Excel to create “monthly budgets.” While she only uses these newly acquired skills in her personal life, she plans to implement them in her “next job.” Three participants indicated that they wanted to understand the technology their children were using and to help them navigate email, PDFs, and their schoolwork. Given that the program occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants’ children were engaged in remote learning for the first time.

Many joined the program to enhance job prospects, develop occupational skills, and advance their careers. This included using software programs for employment, improving resumes, job-seeking online, and leveraging social media for job searches. Other entrepreneurial skills, like branding, website development, coding, marketing, doing payroll, developing flyers, creating business cards, designing slide shows, and communicating professionally were also motivating factors. One 33-year-old participant discussed that she was interested in learning web design as a business:

I wanted to take the web design one because I want to use it to be able to build web pages and web... like business pages for people...And I feel like if I have at least the knowledge that was given in that course...to do so, it would make it easier.

An additional factor that five participants mentioned was that the course and program were free. As one 53-year-old participant stated, “I don’t have to go into debt getting my education.” Many stated that since the course was free, they had nothing to lose by participating. Another 32-year-old participant stated the course helped her “fill my time in the process of getting my life together.” Another aspect that many participants felt was helpful was the online, self-paced structure of the program. One 50-year-old woman stated, “You’re able to do it at your own pace...and able to ask as many questions as possible...And get them answered in, you know, in a timely manner.”

This program gave many participants the flexibility their lives demanded, at no cost, and with supportive instructors. In contrast, others indicated that in-person classes would have been the ideal environment for motivation and completion, had the COVID-19 pandemic not interrupted them.

Six participants mentioned they were motivated to join the program because they had been away from the technological world during their incarceration, that they felt like this was a continuation of the computer training they had received during incarceration, or because this program was specifically designed for women transitioning out of incarceration. As one 33-year-old participant stated, this was a door opening, rather than shutting, because of her background:

Honestly, I primarily, I think just the fact that I was asked to the fact that there was like an opportunity for me, I was really excited about. So. And there’s, there’s, there’s something about being invited to do something because of my circumstances instead of being rejected [laughs]. Because of my circumstances, that was like really heartwarming. I think like, instead of being like, “No, you can't have this job, because you have felony drug charges.” They're like, [laughs] “Oh, you've been to jail? Let's help you out! [laughs] Let's bring you in to do something!” [laughs].

Another 45-year-old participant, who already had advanced technological skills, discussed how she wants to use the program to improve her digital storytelling about her life and experiences:

Well, right now I have a TikTok platform, and I have Instagram and things like that. But I also blog. And, so, when I was in prison, my brother came to me, and it's like, "you have a really interesting story. You should write about it." So, I would type everything up, send it to him, and he would publish it for me. But I would, and so, while I was away, he published like 50 blogs for me. Well, I have a ton more I need to publish. And I would like to expand on that to be able to do more things to tell my story. And, so, I just feel like this is such a great opportunity and with the resources and people to be in contact with. I just feel like it's extremely helpful.

The interview responses collectively reveal the diverse expectations and motivations that influenced their engagement with the program, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of their aspirations and the ways in which they anticipated improvements into their lives, career prospects, and personal fulfillment through technology education.

### Effort expectancy (RQ2)

In UTAUT literature, effort expectancy is vital for technology adoption, considering the anticipated effort of ease of use. In our interviews, we coded participants' expected and actual effort in the program. Participants often had a variety of beliefs about learning new technology that ranged from a learning growth mindset to more cautious or anxious mindsets. In terms of the effort required to complete the technology education program, there were a range of context factors that made this program challenging for our population. One 53-year-old participant said that this program turned her from being technology adverse to having more confidence:

Well, it's given me education and self-esteem, I think. And I've met a lot of people...There's so many ways that it has benefited me. I can't even tell you...Because you wouldn't catch me near a computer. I was always too afraid I would break something or mess someone's work up on the computer, you know. You made me comfortable with, you know, getting on there and, and you know, if something gets messed up, I can bring it to you guys [laughs].

This learning growth mindset was beneficial for women who were looking for new educational opportunities. Additionally, the program encouraged many participants to pursue other educational opportunities: "It inspired me, gave me more confidence...the fact that you guys are working with us—women that have a hard time—says a lot, you know" (49-year-old participant). Another 42-year-old participant stated the program encouraged her to enter into higher education, stating, "It definitely encouraged me, and gave me the confidence to pursue it. It was a thought that I had like, 'hmm maybe I want to go back to school.' It definitely gave me the confidence to say, 'yeah, I can do this,' you know."

Other participants did not have an increase in their confidence. A few participants stated that the program, learning management system, and online lessons required more effort or more

background knowledge than they had. As one 47-year-old woman stated, “Phase Two was just—it was really like creating the website and doing all that. It was just way too much.” Another 38-year-old participant stated, “Vocabulary is not very fluent when it comes to technology, so so, any type of software format, whenever word that was used, I wouldn’t know what to do just because I didn’t, wouldn’t know what the word meant.”

In contrast, another 39-year-old woman talked about how this program was helping change her life, since it had been 20 years since high school. She stated, “you know, with going in and out of jail and living that kind of lifestyle that I did before, we didn’t need computers for that kind of good stuff. So I, I just feel like I’m going through this whole paradigm shift, you know, and so I’m trying to soak up all the information I can.” She was able to articulate a common theme in the interviews that signals how this population of women had some significant life circumstances that shaped every aspect of their lives.

While the participant above was able to use this program on her path toward personal transformation, other participants were not able to do so. Several participants reported that their laptops, hot spots, and mobile devices were either lost, stolen, or stopped working. Others talked about losing their jobs, custody of their children, family health issues, deaths in the family, having their cars repossessed, being evicted, or losing stable housing. One 49-year-old woman stated, “I was in between homes for a while. I’m just now getting stable again.” Participants became houseless during the program, and the challenges of survival had to take precedence over the program: “things started happening in my life to where I put that on the backburner, that I lost my laptop, and I lost my house” (38-year-old participant). Some participants talked about almost a cascading effect that one life situation could impact almost every aspect of their lives, as one 54-year-old woman stated:

My daughter’s health issues are pretty much my whole world right now...It’s affecting everything, everything. My car got, you know [repossessed], it got to where I was either...had to make a choice...My credit isn’t that good, they gave me a loan, but they charged me a lot of interest...I paid \$37,000 on a car for \$15,000...and then with her, I have to pay for the pump, you know, and we had to pay 11 payment, and we were lucky that they agreed to do that, because usually they want it all at once...and then her Dexcom sensor, transmitters, and all that, I have to pay 25%. And so I can’t get to my job, so I’m not working...It’s day by day right now. It’s horrible.

These factors are crucial in designing programs for economically and socially vulnerable groups. Our participants were already facing multiple vulnerabilities before and after their incarceration. Program designers should therefore proactively address these challenges and consider their role in preventing recidivism.

### Social influence (RQ3)

Social influence refers to the impact of social factors and opinions or beliefs of others on an individual’s decision to use a particular technology. In the context of this technology education

program, social influence was operationalized as the level of support from respected individuals or colleagues. This support greatly assisted and provided confidence to the women who considered joining the program. Nine participants said the way they were recruited into the program was an important factor in their motivation to participate. Some participants were encouraged by shelter staff, probation and correction officers, or other service providers to participate in the program. For example, one 38-year-old participant said her probation officer presented her with this opportunity at just the right moment, “And, so, all the things that I needed to know and that I’ve been struggling with—it’s just like were a blessing in disguise, because they came right on time when my probation officer asked me if I wanted to do this class.” Word of mouth was especially important for the second cohort of participants. Many stated they were inspired by the Digital Navigators, a select group of program participants who serve as peer mentors after obtaining technology and teaching skills through the program. Hearing about the program from people who had enjoyed it, learned from it, and completed it was a prime motivating factor for them to join the program. As one 43-year-old participant stated, learning about the program from the Digital Navigators was the encouragement she needed to enroll:

And to talk to her and hear how and see how hopeful and how driven she was. And I was like, I want that, and then she told me about the classes. I wanted something different. I hadn’t done anything with my life for 12 years. You know, I was stagnant. I wasn’t doing anything...so I was just excited to better myself really. It was like getting a new start for me.

Notably, this level of direct encouragement and peer support was invaluable in the successful recruitment of many women into the program.

Once participants had joined the program, they also mentioned how important it was to have people support them in their efforts throughout their educational training. The role of instructors was critical to their success, and many participants also mentioned friends and family who would help them solve issues with technology, the online material, or specific tasks in the program. Similarly, they found it encouraging to have feedback from others about their progress. One 39-year-old woman explained how proud she was of developing her first slide deck, “We go to this ‘ready training’ center and use the computers there. So, there’s a lady that works there. And I was showing it off to her. She was like, ‘Oh, my gosh, [name of participant], this is so wonderful!’ Like, thanks!” This external validation from peers, employers, and family members underscores the importance of social influences throughout the technology program, not just at the recruitment stage.

Many participants proudly used the certificates they earned, displaying them on resumes, during job interviews, and with existing employers. As one 50-year-old participant stated, “I have proof. I have my certificates to back up what I have practiced on, what I’ve learned.” Having earned the certificates through the technology education program bolstered their confidence and career prospects, as they could demonstrate their acquired skills, benefiting their job search on platforms like Indeed and LinkedIn.

## Facilitating conditions (RQ4)

In the UTAUT literature, facilitating conditions refer to an individual's beliefs about the availability of training, technical support, and necessary programs for learning and using new technology. While the literature typically focuses on these beliefs before program intervention, our interviews considered both pre-program feelings and experiences during the program. Two major facilitating conditions emerged: people and devices. These themes expand the concept of facilitating conditions, particularly for this specific population. For instance, women who were living in a shelter setting benefitted from facilitating conditions such as on-site computer labs, supportive shelter staff, and peer mentors.

### People matter

Participants provided overwhelmingly positive feedback on the instructors and staff of the technology education program; this included staff, instructors, and Digital Navigators. They not only found the staff to be knowledgeable and accessible, but participants also said that the instructors and Digital Navigators were one of the main reasons they stayed engaged with the program. Participants named individual members of the team who stood out to them, and they spoke in glowing terms about how they felt seen as people, not as someone with a jail sentence or record. The women in the program who were able to interact with program staff, instructors, and Digital Navigators found these experiences validating, as one 45-year-old participant shared:

I just thought it was excellent. Like, they're all super supportive and helpful and just, just genuinely caring. And so I thought that that was great...Oh! I don't want to forget [name of Digital Navigator]. I think she's amazing. And that's another thing that I look forward to is getting together with her and even like some of the more in person stuff as well.

The distinctiveness of the technology education program in comparison to other educational initiatives became evident through participants' consistent feedback about feeling empowered, valued, and recognized as important members by the program team. This qualitative difference was rooted in the team's philosophy of prioritizing support over judgment, a key factor that participants believed contributed to the program's high success rate. The words of a 43-year-old participant resonate profoundly, capturing the transformative impact of the program on individuals who often feel undermined and stigmatized by societal labels following incarceration:

I mean, once you are incarcerated, you just kinda have this, you have [this] label on you. You know what I mean? And like you feel like there is nothing to do but just keep going the same stuff over and over again. There is no way out. And I feel like the program does that. It, I mean it gives you that light at the end of the tunnel...People do care. Not everyone looks at you like you are a convict, or you are a drug addict or, you

know what I mean, you are just a hopeless, you know, individual. You are just a liability to everybody.

The program's unique approach, fostering a sense of care and support, stands in contrast to challenging the negative perceptions associated with incarceration. Within the realm of public interest communications, the program provided a caring and empathetic atmosphere by promoting positive change. This alignment with public interest communication principles (Chernin et al., 2023) emphasizes the program's commitment to societal well-being, addressing the stigmatization often faced by justice-impacted individuals. Instructors also played a pivotal role beyond their teaching responsibilities, serving as professional references for participants seeking employment. The immediate and positive connections formed between the participants and the team members were crucial in facilitating the participants' success in the program. This aspect underscores the program's commitment to creating an environment where individuals are not solely defined by their past but recognized for their capabilities and potential contributions.

Despite the overall positive atmosphere, there were some communication and technical challenges that participants faced. One frequent challenge in accessing support came through a misunderstanding of how to communicate with the instructors through the Learning Management Site. Some participants thought this feature was a live chat, with instructors synchronously staffing the chat, rather than more of an email environment. A 32-year-old participant said, "So, at one moment I thought I was doing the process of initiating a conversation with the professor, but actually it was just leaving notes for myself." Participants stated that the staff helped them navigate the Learning Management Site.

Similarly, when COVID-19 restrictions lifted, the program staff began holding in-person office hours to provide more direct human and on-site communication. For several participants, the hurdles of transportation, money, and time precluded their visits to office hours. Those who were able to attend the office hours found the interaction invaluable. One 53-year-old participant talked about how the program approached adult learning and how the program let participants be relaxed. These qualities made a difference in her own drive and accountability: "When you're an adult and so many other things going on in life, it's nice to be able to do something like this without someone waving a finger at you [laughs]."

#### Devices matter

Another significant finding of the program is that the type of device the participants used and had access to greatly affected their ability to participate and succeed in the program. While this may not be surprising, it is important to note that the team's ability to coordinate technology access and provide computers and hotspots was essential for many participants' success. One of the many challenges participants faced was related to devices: Internet access, device access, and device reliability. Some individuals were experienced users of technology, but most were not. Several participants attempted to take the course on their phones, with very uneven outcomes. The technology education program staff introduced to participants local nonprofits offering

refurbished devices, but some reported issues with device reliability. Participants accessing computers through residential or service programs had better outcomes and built-in support from fellow residents, some of whom were also taking the classes.

The women also reported significant benefits from having their own devices. One 53-year-old participant stated, “I’ve been able to help other people apply for things online,” including housing, benefits, and care programs. She continued, “I helped someone to apply for that [name of care program] and for Social Security, and I help someone apply for that care program for rental assistance on the laptop. So it’s been really beneficial.” This type of support was not uncommon. The women mentioned using the computers for supporting their children and friends and applying for jobs, housing, and other assistance. They also were able to use the computers for accessing entertainment, searching for relevant information online such as health information, and staying in touch with friends and family.

## Discussion

Based on interviews with women transitioning from incarceration, this study provides useful and applicable insights into how to enhance digital literacy among this and other marginalized populations. Based on empirical data from women who participated in a technology education program, this research provides evidence that digital literacy education is a powerful tool for social-educative integration and personal transformation.

Findings from this research contribute to advancing the UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2015), which was used as a theoretical framework for the study. UTAUT provides a useful framework to examine individual’s perceptions, motivations, and beliefs that influence their decision to adopt or use technology for an educational program. Of the UTAUT constructs, *social influence* and *facilitating conditions* are the most valued and important determinants in the adoption and use of technology among this marginalized and underserved group. Our research suggests that facilitating conditions—for example, the individual’s belief about availability of technological support or training needed for their adoption or use of a digital device or software program (Venkatesh et al., 2003)—is important in the women’s adoption of technology and participation in technology education. In addition, a majority of the women stated their success and use of technology communication was established through instructor support. These findings indicate the importance of providing facilitating conditions that help underserved populations succeed in technology education and digital literacy programs. While UTAUT has successfully been applied to the general public, this study contributes to the UTAUT framework by applying it to women transitioning from incarceration, a population to which the theory and its components have not been sufficiently applied.

Another important finding from this research is the cascading effects of technology learning among women recently released from jail or prison. This study shows that incarcerated women have a range of needs that can be met through technology access and use. These include



parenting-related activities, financial independence, improvement of online security, occupational skills, career advancement, and social connections. Many women participating in this research study mentioned that the program not only increased their digital access and literacy skills, but the program also fostered their motivation to pursue other educational opportunities. The learning experiences enabled participants to gain cognitive and social skills needed upon release. This finding shed light on the wider impact of skills that people need for social and economic successes post-release.

This study is not without limitations. First, the interviews were conducted with different Ph.D. research assistants and the length of the interviews varied. This might be due to the close relationship some of the women had with the research assistants and their willingness to talk more about their experience in the program. However, each interviewer asked follow-up questions when necessary to provide a full extent of participants' responses.

Future research should examine the impact of other characteristics of the participants. For example, it would be helpful to examine age- or education-related differences in digital capabilities and needs for technology among women transitioning from incarceration. In addition, while this study focused on those living in two neighboring U.S. Midwestern states, a study involving participants from broader geographic areas would allow comparisons between groups in different regions.

To gain a deeper understanding of intersectional dynamics at play, future research could explore gender differences in technology adoption and support needs among justice-impacted individuals. Specifically, comparing experiences of women transitioning from incarceration with those of similarly situated men could provide valuable insights into specific challenges and opportunities faced by each gender group.

### Policy and practical implications

This research offers practical and policy implications for supporting technology education of women transitioning from incarceration and other marginalized populations. The influence of facilitating conditions, such as instructor and peer mentor support, has direct implications for the replicability of the program. While the online Learning Management Site and curriculum used in a technology education program might be easily transferred to other entities interested in replicating the program, relationships are difficult to replicate. As shown in this research, the success of a program for this marginalized population is significantly related to the approach of the team and their interactions with the participants. Programs designed to serve this or other marginalized populations should consider incorporating learning circles on respectful and empathetic communication for trainers and others involved in public interest communication initiatives.

The adoption and use of communication technology have broad impacts on justice-impacted individuals' reintegration into society including employment. Furthermore, their adoption of communication technologies and digital skills are integral to their fuller participation in

economic, civic, and cultural activities. However, there is a significant lack of funding for programs aimed at supporting technology learning among justice-impacted communities. It is essential to establish collaborative partnerships between the public sector and the private sector to provide much-needed funding for technology education programs for those in and leaving incarceration. Moreover, public-private partnerships can contribute to strengthening capacities of local communities to better support justice-impacted individuals' technology learning and ultimately to building a sustainable ecosystem in this area.

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# LOCAL GOVERNMENTS LEVERAGE SELFIE CULTURE WITH #CITYHALLSELFIE CAMPAIGN

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Local government  
#CityHallSelfie  
Hashtag campaigns  
X (Twitter)

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### Abstract

The Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) hashtag campaign #CityHallSelfie asks local government employees and residents to celebrate local government by snapping selfies in front of city hall. This study analyzes five years of the annual, ongoing campaign at the juncture of advocacy, member engagement, and marketing. Through the lens of framing and social presence theories, the study examines how X posts and selfies represent levels of resident-government relationships and short narratives of individuals, pairs, and groups. Findings reveal a nearly equal presentation of short narratives of groups and individuals, as well as a 98% function of simply sharing information, the lowest level of resident-government relationships. This campaign highlights how local governments can capitalize on hashtags and selfies to celebrate their efforts to govern their cities.

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## Introduction

E-government embraces using the web and social networking sites to provide city services and to encourage participation and two-way communication. As part of E-government, city governments now manage websites, social media platforms, and apps to better communicate with residents in a possible two-way conversation. Much of the official city communication is the responsibility of public information officers (Syed, 2023). They are challenged with balancing the need to inform stakeholders, listen to city and resident needs, as well as foster feedback and conversation on numerous inbound and outbound channels. This public

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communication has the potential to bridge gaps between residents and their governments. The public information office generates much of a city's messaging, manages social media accounts, provides website content, and seeks feedback from residents through surveys and town halls. The public information officers are the liaisons between residents and governmental departments. However, governmental agencies and departments' messaging on websites and social media sites originates from a position of authority or power and is typically one-way, serious, and informative (Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Lambiase, 2018; Mergel, 2012). Since 2016, one annual, single-day social media campaign has aimed to connect residents with their local governments. Launched by Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL), the City Hall Selfie Day asked participants to celebrate local government by taking a selfie at their city hall buildings and posting them online with the hashtag #CityHallSelfie.

The campaign is annual and ongoing. The purpose of this study was to analyze how that hashtag campaign has functioned as public communication, how participants framed their messages, and what levels of resident-government relationships were displayed. The importance of such an investigation is to elucidate the successful features of public communication efforts so those leading local government communication can better engage with their residents in the governing process. Understanding the successful features of an ongoing and annual hashtag campaign provides benchmarks for other communicators to set realistic goals for connecting with residents. Public communicators will be able to devote their time and resources to campaigns that have a larger impact on the resident-government relationship.

## Literature review

### Local government and social media

Governmental entities benefit from the use of social media sites. Most cities and their departments maintain a presence on multiple social media sites. Even a decade ago, the International City/County Management Association found that, in 2014, 88% of local governments maintained a social media presence, with 80% on Facebook and 60% on X<sup>1</sup> (formerly Twitter) (ICMA, 2015). These sites allow for direct communication with residents, solicitations for feedback and participation, and opportunities for organizational listening. For instance, cities can post inclement weather and emergency messages for their residents from a mobile device in seconds (Quintana, 2019). Engagement efforts on social media can increase transparency and potentially improve the city's image (ICMA, 2012). Distributing information on social media can also influence public satisfaction and affect the public's intent to participate (Hariguna et al., 2019). However, public relations literature laments how organizations, including governments, have failed to take full advantage of the two-way potential of social

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<sup>1</sup> The years studied for the campaign pre-date Twitter's sale to Elon Musk and the transition to X.

media (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Linvill et al., 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Other shortcomings and disadvantages include adding yet another communication tool that must be handled, monitored, and archived by the public information office. Social media sites can also fuel rumors, misinformation, and discriminatory or hateful language, and the 24/7 nature of social media can make it a never-ending stream of messaging for public information officers to tackle.

### Hashtag campaigns and activism

Corporations and nonprofits alike have capitalized on the ease with which they can now directly communicate with stakeholders and create digital campaigns. Through digital means like social media, organizations can engage in dialogue and empower their stakeholders to share, reply, forward, and expand upon a given message. The push toward digital communication involves the public sector and governmental entities at all levels. From the federal government to local parishes, an online campaign can bolster followers for such endeavors as upcoming events, conservation efforts, or bond elections. Cities have used hashtags, or keyword labels, to aggregate messages on social media and as calls to action and rally cries. Some hashtags have been born of city pride like #MyDallasIs (Maben et al., 2019) or out of a local tragedy like #VegasStrong (Barrie, 2019), #OneBoston, and #BostonStrong (Williams et al., 2017). These hashtags celebrate the resilience of entire cities.

Hashtags also serve as search terms to help users aggregate data and connect posts to other data streams. By adding # before a term, users contribute to a larger, searchable conversation. Conferences and membership events often provide a hashtag to connect participants in online spaces for networking purposes, or participants organically develop hashtags on their own (Ross et al., 2011). Hashtags have been used for activism and social causes; #BlackLivesMatter (Freelon et al., 2016), #ows from the Occupy Wall Street movement (Papacharissi, 2016), and #MeToo (Xiong, 2019) are some of the more well-known hashtags for online activism encouraging solidarity and social change.

Chon and Park (2020) asserted that people are more likely to participate in social media activism when they are motivated regarding the issue at hand; they also maintained that people's collective problem-solving in social media campaigns leads to collective action. Motivated people become activist publics, and online activism extends to the offline world (Bode et al., 2014; Chon & Park, 2020; Hyun & Kim, 2015). While past studies have focused on campaigns around contentious issues (e.g., gun ownership and immigration), the present study focused on less controversial topics. #CityHallSelfie champions the work of local government and its actors.

#CityHallSelfie does not easily fit into a hashtag typology. It is not a social justice activism or advocacy hashtag, nor does it align with the conference/membership participation tag. It is also recurring and more episodic than a full advertising/marketing campaign. A built-in community is using the tag, rather than consumers. A city's brand advocates are tagging to celebrate their city hall and local governments at large. Cities, like countries and regions, have

developed brands for the purposes of community building, tourism, and economic development (see Caldwell & Freire, 2004; Scholvin, 2023; Zavattaro, 2013). Hashtags offer a way to collate social media messages. Kim and Phua (2020) described how consumers “obtain valuable information about brands from campaign hashtags alone” (p. 10). Coupled with visuals from selfie culture, the #CityHallSelfie hashtag helped cities brand their local governments and highlight city employees.

### Selfie culture

Selfies are spontaneous self-portraits taken on a mobile device’s camera and posted on social media sites. Typically, selfies are close-up images shot by the actor at arm’s length. Approximately 92 million selfies are taken every day, which account for four percent of all the photos taken daily (Broz, 2023). Selfie culture has been both vilified and celebrated. Negative views point to narcissism, abandonment of privacy, false sense of empowerment, and selfish exhibitions. On a more positive note, selfies offer self-presentation by groups that may not be reflected as often or as accurately in media outlets with traditional gatekeeping functions (Giroux, 2015; Maben, Benedict et al., 2019). Giroux (2015) asserts that selfie culture can be used to “rewrite the relationship between the personal and the political, and in doing so expand the vibrancy of public discourse and work to prevent the collapse of public life” (p. 164). Examples include #ILookLikeAnEngineer and #ILookLikeAProfessor selfie campaigns, where professionals in those industries posted selfies on social media to expand the catalog of online images to include more women and people of color (see Maben, Benedict et al., 2019). These grassroots campaigns created public discourse about how professions, and the diversity therein, are displayed through online searches. Hess (2015) acknowledged the complexity of what a selfie might reflect, positioning them as assemblages connecting “machines, physical spaces, bodies, and networks” (p. 1,642).

The motivation for selfies varies. Georgakopoulou (2016) suggested that selfies are shared performances and small stories. This assertion aligns with the current #CityHallSelfie campaign, which illustrates a mini campaign for local government. In this campaign, city government officials seek to make their work more visible and connect with their respective communities. Eager and Dann (2016) viewed the selfie as a “deliberate, consciously considered communication approach to maintaining social bonds between friends, family and wider audience” (p. 1,835). Murray (2015) concluded that the selfie is a way for individuals to define themselves and “to make themselves visible” (p. 512).

Regardless of the motivation, people decide how to frame themselves or others. Georgakopoulou (2016) identified three ways people typically depict themselves or others in a selfie: me, significant other, and groups. Page (2019) considered group selfies on Snapchat, noting, “the invitation to share the perspective of a group is much stronger than the individualistic interpretation of selfies might suggest” (p. 91). The groups created an “us-ness” and that is one aim of the campaign, to engage residents with the “us.” In the case of

#CityHallSelfie, this would be their local government. Page's (2019) study focused on technology to create the illusion of being part of the group. The #CityHallSelfie images reflected in-person groups in real life commemorating a moment in front of city hall.

## #CityHallSelfie

Residents may think of their government as amorphous entities and buildings, like a city hall, and may not think to engage in communication with local governmental departments unless there is an issue such as a water leak, bulk trash pickup, or utility connect/disconnect. Within this context, the Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) developed the #CityHallSelfie campaign to expand on everyday conversation between residents and their local governments. ELGL is a group of "innovative local government leaders with a passion for connecting, communicating and educating" (ELGL, 2014, para. 2). On July 24, 2016, a tongue-in-cheek post from Dan Weinheimer kicked off the campaign. He posted: "Wondering what percentage of #cityhalls have been backdrops for a #cityhallselfie. @ELGL50 any ideas? When is national #cityhallselfieday?" (Weinheimer, 2016).

The next day, ELGL responded on X with the date for the digital event and posted details about the first National #CityHallSelfie Day on its blog (ELGL, 2016a), thereby launching an international campaign to encourage civic engagement. ELGL teased #CityHallSelfie as an effort to break the record for city hall selfies in a day, which organizers then estimated to be nine. ELGL requested participation across social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and X) and email. Participants were promised an ELGL koozie and other prizes (ELGL, 2016a).

Cities encouraged both employees and residents to embrace the campaign and included city-specific hashtags to add to #CityHallSelfie on social media posts. In an effort to set a Guinness World Record, ELGL set a goal of 12,598 selfies in a single day for the campaign (ELGL, 2016b). A spirit of competition began to develop. Mark Van Baale (2016), from Kansas City, Missouri, posted: "Working on the finishing touches for #CityHallSelfie Day on Monday. KCMO goes all out for these types of challenges! :)." The city even set up a Twibbon, a graphic users can add to an avatar, where supporters could easily add a banner of support to their profile pictures on X. ELGL posted a how-to video for creating good selfies. Oakland Park and other cities posted instructions for residents. ELGL developed categories for best selfies including local governments who had the most per state, most creative, best dressed, most people in the selfie, and selfie with the most famous person.

On August 9, four days before the set date, ELGL posted a graphic for members and participants to use as their X avatar. City mascots also got involved. To fuel the competition, ELGL added more categories to its contest, including one for best promotion. The organization even referred to #CityHallSelfie eve, likening anticipation for the event to the excitement before Christmas. On August 15, 2016, municipal governments joined the online selfie and hashtag culture with #CityHallSelfie Day. The first post rolled in from Adelaide, Australia. To capture all

the images, ELGL set up a Facebook album, which overflowed into a second album. ELGL also created a map showing the locations of posts.

The awards promised by ELGL such as Best Animal Picture inspired some of the content, explaining the number of selfies with dogs. Another award challenged participants to post the most, leading one city to post 70-plus images from all of its different buildings. Award-winning selfies, as selected by ELGL and member votes, were posted to the ELGL website within two weeks of #CityHallSelfie. The city of Boulder, Colorado, posted an eye-catching overhead spherical image, winning the Best Promotion Award. ELGL explained why selfies were selected as winners:

Why They Won: The creativity in this photo fully encapsulates the spirit of local government employees in Boulder, Colorado. We love the interesting and new perspectives they continue to bring into all that they do. Thanks for being cheerleaders for #CityHallSelfie Day as well as avid supporters and content contributors to ELGL! (ELGL, 2019, para. 2)

The hashtag campaign also leveraged local media to spread the message beyond X. One of the award categories was Best from a Newspaper or TV Reporter. Talking points and a media kit were posted on the ELGL site to help participants gain legacy media exposure. Some cities used the campaign to garner legacy media coverage. For example, local media featured the participation of cities including Texarkana, Kansas City, and Phoenix (Gutierrez, 2016; KTAR, 2016). The social media campaign thus served the additional purpose of assisting municipalities in “engendering greater community support, trust and conversations around innovation and policy” (Nyczepir, 2016, para. 2).

### Resident-government relationships

Like any other public relations and communication tool, social media fulfills a mission to create and maintain relationships between an organization and its stakeholders. Hon and Grunig (1999) established how public relations practitioners can measure relationships through six components of long-term relationships with key constituents: control mutuality (power to influence each other), trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship (p. 3). Hon and Grunig (1999) suggested that communal relationships are more important than exchange relationships; the main difference between the two is that benefits are expected to be reciprocated in an exchange relationship, whereas benefits are given without an expectation in a communal relationship. In a communal relationship, each party is concerned with the other’s welfare. Extending Hon and Grunig’s 1999 work into social media, a hashtag campaign in social media acknowledges the power of influence because the platform allows for two-way communication. Social media outlets provide a space for reciprocated messages and the hashtag communicates a person’s desire to be part of the conversation. The other tenets of the organization-public relationships framework (Hon & Grunig, 1999) are hard to pinpoint in a social media campaign such as #CityHallSelfie. As for trust, local governments attempted to

engender feelings of transparency and openness by giving faces to city hall, which could be considered an attempt at trust building. Commitment might be derived from the efforts of some local governments to participate in the campaign in a bold fashion. Having a mayor or entire staff photographed in front of city hall would denote a larger commitment than the public information officers snapping an individual selfie on the way into the office.

Arnstein’s (1969) work analyzed the resident-government<sup>2</sup> relationship specifically, creating a ladder of participation (see Table 1). Within an eight-rung line-up, the lower rungs of participation represent elements of nonparticipation, moving toward degrees of tokenism in the middle and ending with levels of resident power at the top. Informing and consultation are two rungs categorized as tokenism. At these levels, residents are heard and have a voice, but they have no power to ensure action or make decisions for the city. A hashtag campaign inviting residents to contribute constitutes an online dialogue and has the potential to empower residents for mobilization. How the campaign actually unfolds and how invested participants become would dictate where it falls on the ladder. A post in front of city hall without any additional participation is tokenism. In social media research, the term slacktivism—slacker and activism—refers to a “disconnect between awareness and action” (Glenn, 2015, p. 81). Along a continuum of participation, slacktivism represents the minimum level of effort.

**Table 1**

*Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Participation*

8	Citizen control	Degrees of citizen power
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership	Degrees of tokenism
5	Placation	
4	Consultation	Nonparticipation
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	
1	Manipulation	

*Note.* This is a recreation of the original 1969 image that appeared in the *Journal of American Planning Association*.<sup>3</sup>

Falco and Kleinhans (2018) focused on the flow of information and offered four types of the resident-government relationship that occur in social media: information sharing, interaction, co-production, and self-organization. Through information sharing, government entities use social media as an information dissemination tool—a one-way transfer of information to residents. Interaction entails two-way communication encouraging dialogue and feedback among

<sup>2</sup> While some literature uses the word “citizen” to describe an individual living in a city, the authors use “resident” as a more inclusive term that does not convey citizenship status.

<sup>3</sup> While Table 1 reflects the use of “citizen” in Arnstein’s (1969) original ladder of participation, the terms “resident control” and “resident power” will otherwise be used throughout this article.

government officials and their constituents. Co-production highlights the collaborative efforts between government officials and constituents to effectively utilize each other's assets and resources to enhance governmental processes. Self-organization is resident-driven, such that residents create solutions independent of government officials' input with the expectation that government entities will facilitate the policy process to adopt the solution. Falco and Kleinhans (2018) suggested that self-organization is the goal, involving minimal direct interaction between residents and their government because the overall objective is for residents to self-organize to create solutions.

### Framing social presence through selfies

Goffman (1974) suggested that people's view of reality is influenced by frames, or preconceived ideas whose function is to organize and interpret new information and assimilate it to better comprehend their experiences in a larger social context. In messaging, framing entails both selection and salience. Senders "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Thus, people's view of reality is influenced by what is and is not included in the frame. Per Entman, "Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location—such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel—to that consciousness" (pp. 50-51). In the #CityHallSelfie campaign, organizers provided the hashtag, which acts as Entman's (1993) keyword or Gamson's (1985) catchphrases to articulate a frame of local government.

Journalists, news media, and politicians frame messages to influence public opinion (Chong, 2007). Regarding social media, research suggests the critical role of framing in not only "textual but also inside picture-linked context" (Güran & Özarslan, 2022, p. 451). Picture-linked context or visual framing encourages interaction between the viewer and the subjects pictured, creating a shared point of reference by using tonal shades, people's actions and poses, and the portion of the person (e.g., face only, head and shoulders, whole person) (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

The #CityHallSelfie campaign encouraged people and places of local government—namely city hall and what it represents—to be highlighted by a visual image (i.e., selfie) accompanied by a post. Social presence theory describes how the digital realm can be bridged, showing real people in computer-mediated communication. Short and colleagues (1976) defined social presence theory as the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). Social presence can help project closeness between participants (Cui et al., 2013) and brands (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018). Counts and Fellheimer (2004) added that social presence is driven through the sharing of life events through photographic media that can help create a common social milieu.

With theoretical foundations in framing theory and social presence theory, this study aimed to unpack the case of the #CityHallSelfie X campaign, discovering the characteristics of a hashtag campaign positioned at the juncture of activism, membership participation, and

marketing. Our research objectives were to a) examine how participants frame their realities of local government through photos and text and b) better understand how the #CityHallSelfie campaign creates a social presence. To accomplish these objectives, we focused on two areas: what participants chose to include or not include in visual images (e.g., selfies) and textual content (e.g., posts), and the types of resident-government relationships created by these choices. These considerations constituted two key research questions:

*RQ1*: What kinds of selfies (me, pairs, and groups) were most frequent in the campaign?

*RQ2*: What kind of resident-government relationship types were present in the campaign posts: information sharing, interaction, co-production, or self-organization?

## Method

To examine participants' photo and textual content choices, posts were collected from 2016-2020 of the ongoing #CityHallSelfie campaign that was spearheaded by ELGL. For the sample, posts were collected using a paid third-party data analyst who pulled all historical X data tagged with the hashtag #CityHallSelfie. A total of 20,345 posts were gathered in a spreadsheet; the mean number of reshared posts for the entire dataset was 1.62 and the mean number of favorites was 9.19. The total number of screen names represented was 4,875, where @ELGL represented 2.8% (n=540) and @cityhallselfie represented 2.3% (n=452) of the total. The total number of followers for the participants who posted the hashtag in the dataset equaled more than 137 million. Only 3,058 posts in the dataset included country codes; 94% of these (n=2,862) were posted by X accounts coded with a U.S. country code. Australia represented the next most frequent country code with 2% (n=52), and the 38 remaining countries represented the remaining 4% of posts. Most of the posts were original messages and only 13% (n=2,459) were replies to another message. For this dataset, posts by year peaked in 2017 and 2018 (see Table 2).



**Table 2***Historical X Data with #CityHallSelfie*

Entire Year	Posts with #CityHallSelfie (n=20,345)
2013	2
2014	52
2015	192
2016	2,609
2017	6,432
2018	6,233
2019	3,745
2020	1,080

*Note.* This data represents hashtags for the entire year, not just those posted on the day of the campaign. The 2013 tweets occurred before the campaign.

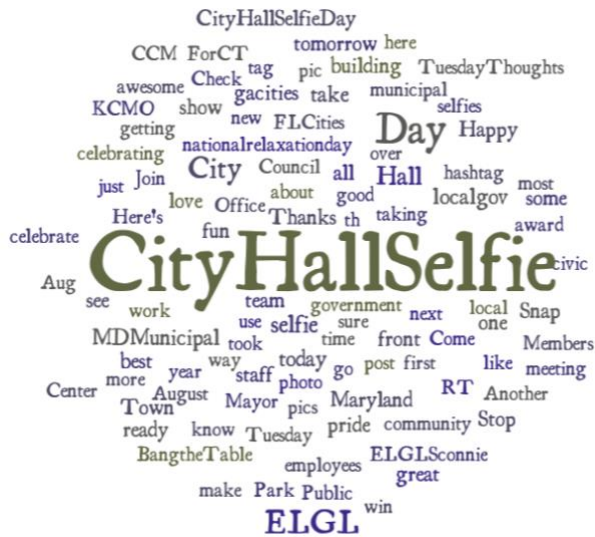
### Preliminary one-year content analysis

When selecting one year for a preliminary content analysis, the campaign day for 2019 was selected because, by that year, the campaign was established. The advertised date for the one-day #CityHallSelfie campaign was August 15, 2019, so this date was selected for a preliminary analysis (n=2,184). The posts were reviewed as text displayed in SPSS and as posts collected on TweetDeck, with images visible on the screen. Due to the nature of accessing X data, the dataset may not be identical if viewed on the open web from two different browsers. Word clouds were run for 2017 and 2018 to check for any major differences between the years (see Figures 1 and 2). Posts were input into an online web cloud generator. Word clouds synthesizing 2017, 2018, and 2019 data appeared similar, and the project moved to a sample representing the entire dataset for coding related to post and image function as well as selfie composition. Because the data

appeared similar overall, a sample was derived from the entire dataset rather than sampling each individual year.

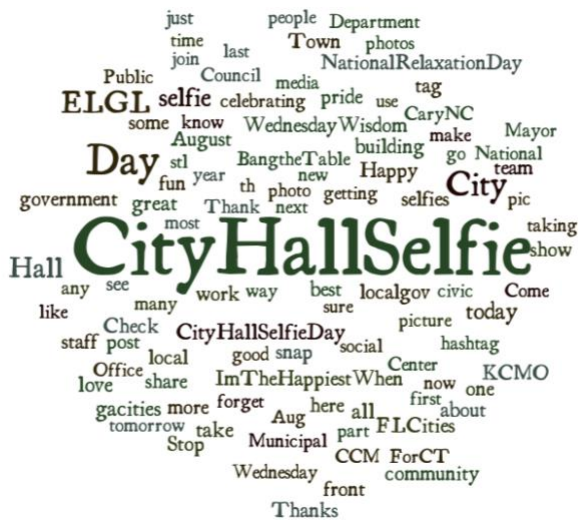
**Figure 1**

*Word Cloud using Tweets from Aug. 15, 2017*



**Figure 2**

*Word Cloud using Tweets from Aug. 15, 2018*



To create a dataset for a random sample of images connected to the posts, all posts apart from those posted on the actual campaign days (typically August 15 each year) for the years 2016-2020 were deleted, leaving 12,714 posts. A randomized subset of data (n=500) was created using a randomizer function in Excel. The researchers secured all images attached to those posts in the randomized sample (n=474), assigned a unique identifier for each photo and respective post, and uploaded the images and post text into NVivo 12.0 (Lumivero, 2017).

Analysis occurred in a series of steps using the software program NVivo 12.0, designed to organize and analyze data such as unstructured text and visual images. To consider how participants frame their realities of local government, the first step was to categorize images to examine what participants had chosen to include in their photos (see Table 3). Four major categories were identified: campaign features, other, participants, and selfie. Guided by Georgakopoulou's (2016) categories, researchers divided the participant category into subcategories of individual (one person), pair (two people), or group (three or more people), mascot, and prop. The campaign features category included subcategories of campaign logo, city/town hall, and other-building. Photos were also labeled as a selfie or a non-selfie. Selfie was operationally defined as a photo where someone in the frame shot the image themselves with evidence of an extended arm or selfie stick, or the close-up nature and angle of the shot was otherwise identifiable as a selfie. While some teams may have used clickers or Bluetooth-enabled automation, the photo had to present classic selfie characteristics to be coded as a selfie.

**Table 3**

*Features of Photographs from Code Book*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Campaign Features	City Hall or Town Hall	The building is clearly identified by signage indicating it is a city or town hall.
	Other building	The building does not have identifiable signage.
	Campaign logo	The campaign hashtag and/or city hashtag is evident.
Other		No subcategories of Campaign Features and Participants are evident in the photo and/or graphics are used.
Participants	Individual	One person is purposefully posing for the photo.
	Pair	Two people are purposefully posing for the photo.
	Group	Three or more people are purposefully posing for the photo.
	Mascot	A mascot is purposely used as a brand.
	Prop	The prop (digital or nondigital) is purposely used to draw attention to city services or departments. The prop is not related to the city services or departments but does add interest to the photo.
Selfie		A person in the photo shot the image him/herself with evidence of an extended arm or selfie stick or the close-up nature of the shot is obviously a selfie.

The next step in analysis was to categorize the textual information (i.e., posts) that accompanied the visual images to discover how the #CityHallSelfie campaign creates a social presence. Guided by Falco and Kleinhans’ (2018) resident-government relationship typology, researchers used the following categories to examine the levels of communication, interaction, and involvement that were reflected in the posts: information-sharing, interaction, co-production, and self-organization.

To tease out the nuances of the resident-government relationship typology, researchers used a grounded theory approach to guide the content analysis of the posts, thus allowing a theoretical framework to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Peterson et al., 2010). To do so, the researchers first identified common themes across the posts to create thematic categories reflecting conceptual nuances of local resident-government relationships; per Corbin and Strauss (2008), this process included constant comparison between preexisting thematic categories and emerging thematic categories. These thematic categories were then further clarified by consistently questioning the formulation of the categories and analyzing ideas about the thematic category formulation. Saturation (i.e., no new thematic categories emerged) was reached after creating

two thematic categories (Appreciation and Engagement) with thematic subcategories (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Tweets: Types of Resident-Government Relationships and Themes*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Information Sharing		Tweets convey information from the government entity to the resident; i.e., one-way information flow.
Interaction		Tweets convey information between government and resident; i.e., two-way information flow.
Co-Production		Tweets convey information to make use of government and residents' resources to achieve positive outcomes.
Self-Organization		Tweets convey information where residents offer solutions that are adopted and acted on by government.
Appreciation	External	Tweets convey appreciation for the city, its residents, or visitors.
	Internal	Tweets convey appreciation for specific city departments or services.
Engagement	City Hall Selfie Campaign	Tweets convey information to encourage participation in the campaign.
	City Services	Tweets convey information to encourage use of city services.
Facts		Tweets convey the who, what, where, when of the campaign or city entities.

A codebook was created to define all categories, train coders, and ensure intercoder reliability (Krippendorff, 2013). Coders used NVivo 12.0 to code photos and posts. The unit of analysis was each photo and post. Each unit of analysis was coded in multiple categories if it fit more than one category. For example, if a photo depicted two people standing in front of a city hall building, it was coded as both a pair and city/town hall. Two people independently coded all photos and posts. Intercoder reliability across all photos and posts was  $\kappa=0.93$  (Cohen, 1968).

## Results

Both the photos and posts demonstrated different ways participants chose to frame what it means to celebrate the presence of local government.

## Selfies framing local government presence

Analysis of the #CityHallSelfie photos revealed that most of the pictures included people in front of local government buildings like city hall. Of these photos, 78% were selfies. Single selfies, group selfies, collages of selfies, and video montages of selfies helped salute local government. Other photos were quick snaps as individuals headed into the office or left at the close of business. Within the sample, 22% of the photos were not selfies, but rather elaborate set-ups requiring the coordination of large groups and drones.

*RQ1* asked: What kinds of selfies (individual, pair, and groups) were most frequent in the campaign? Group photos were the most used in the campaign sample (n=474) with 43% (n=204), individual photos numbered 152; 18% (n=87) pairs were featured; and 6.5% (n=31) coded as other. Roughly 40% of the photos (n=186) in the sample showed the city hall or town hall, 6% showed the campaign logo, and nearly 2% included both the city hall and campaign logo. Other buildings were featured in 18% of the sample.

Buildings—or at least city signage—were prominent in many photos. Selfies were often shot in front of iconic parts of the buildings: seals, entrances, or areas such as a wide staircase where all participants could squeeze into the picture. Several selfies were shot in chambers as city councils prepared for or finished their sessions. Selfies in front of city hall were almost evenly split between group selfies (17%; n=79; see Figure 3 as an example) and individual selfies (16%; n=77), followed by duos in front of city hall at 5% (n=25).

### Figure 3

*TownofPikeRoad's Group Selfie in Front of a Town Hall*



*Note.* This selfie was posted to X accompanied by the text “And we’re off! It’s #CityHallSelfie Day, and the Town Hall team is up early to show you how to participate. If you stop by Town Hall on any given day, chances are you will be greeted by one of these smiling faces” (TownofPikeRoad, 2019).

Props were used in 22% of the photos (see Figure 4), and 3% featured a city mascot (see Figure 5). The images featured a range of city departments including public works, libraries, police and fire departments, city management, sustainability, and others. Mascots, police canines, horses (see Figure 6), and gear were on display. The tone of the photos ranged from silly to professional yet approachable. Most felt welcoming and fun. Images showcased groups in more relaxed poses and set-ups than a traditional staged group photo. Police officers snapped selfies from inside their squad cars, and librarians donned party accessories for their pictures.

#### Figure 4

*Little Rock Parks & Recreation's Individual Selfie with Props*



*Note.* This selfie was posted to X accompanied by the text “One of the CIC’s with a fist bump for #CityHallSelfie day. @LRParksRec @CityLittleRock” (Little Rock Parks & Recreation, 2017).

**Figure 5**

*Charlottesville City's Selfie Featuring a Mascot*



*Note.* This selfie was posted to X accompanied by the text “But first...let me take a selfie! #cityhallselfie @CvilleCityHall #Charlottesville” (Charlottesville City, 2019).

**Figure 6**

*Michael Vega's Individual Selfie with a Horse*



*Note.* This selfie was posted to X accompanied by the text “Happy City Hall Selfie Day #CityHallSelfie” (Vega, 2016).

*RQ2* considered which kind of resident-government relationship types are present in the campaign posts: information sharing, interaction, co-production, or self-organization (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). Analysis revealed that most of the posts fell into the information-sharing function (98%,  $n=465$ ), and only four were categorized as interaction. Five did not include text beyond the hashtag to accompany the picture. None were coded as co-production or self-



organization. Overall, the posts largely conveyed information about the campaign and fostered a social environment of appreciation for and engagement with local government.

The content analysis of X posts that focused on appreciation totaled 80, with 29% (n=23) focused on expressing appreciation of external entities such as a city and its residents or visitors. This external appreciation for the city was usually expressed by naming a geographical location such as “Happy #CityHallSelfie Day from @Tempegov and Arizona! I love this city!” (Gomez, 2019), “It’s city hall selfie day! Hello from beautiful Pismo Beach!” (Lewis, 2016). Sometimes the community as a whole was recognized as illustrated in this post, “Happy #CityHallSelfie Day! Woodridge staff snapped some photos to show their civic pride in serving the community for #CityHallSelfie Day” (Village of Woodridge, 2018). Other times appreciation was conveyed by recognizing specific groups such as “In honor of #CityHallSelfie Day we knew we had to save this keeper from last night’s Council Meeting honoring the Marietta City Schools Football and Cheerleader seniors! GO BIG BLUE!” (City of Marietta, 2019) or “Today is #CityHallSelfie Day. Selfies #CityofDouglasGA. Thanks Georgia Municipal Association for hosting” (City of Douglas, GA, 2016).

Of the 80 posts that expressed appreciation, 57 posts conveyed appreciation for the internal workings of specific departments and city services. City accounts thanked their employees for their GovLove (government love) and used the campaign to feature employees and teams that served the public through legal enforcement that offered “friendly smiles! Sharing a warm #CityHallSelfie greeting...and reminding us @srqparking Parking Enforcement employees are people too. Kudos!” (City of Sarasota, 2018) and “#CityHallSelfie photos with the cops of #NorthChicago, including the chief. It’s been an honor working with them during my time in #localgov” (Frumkin, 2018).

Other posts recognized members of government such as mayoral positions—“#CityHallSelfie Hazlet’s AWESOME Mayor Terry Bailey! 10 plus years as Mayor...” (Hazlet Saskatchewan, 2017)—and others expressed appreciation for public servants—“Its #CityHallSelfie Day, and I want to thank from the bottom of my heart each of the more than 8,500 public servants who work for the City and County of Honolulu. Every worker and the jobs they do make this city our amazing home. Together, we say MAHALO!” (Caldwell, 2019). Posts recognized public servants and departments, including city planners, IT departments, parks and recreation staff, library staff, housing support staff, accounting departments, intergovernmental coordinators, economic development departments, and health departments for pumping “it out day after day to help our residents know more about city government services! #ELGL #CityHallSelfie” (Kansas City, 2018). Appreciation for what public servants do was well articulated in this post: “My @LongBeachCity team inspires me every day, and I am grateful to work alongside them. Happy #CityHallSelfie Day!” (Lee, 2019).

City accounts also invited people to engage or participate in the campaign or with city services. Posts that conveyed engagement totaled 72, with 48 encouraging campaign engagement. The posts often suggested that city officials were having fun: “Our consultants are getting in on the fun! Here’s Greg Nelson bringing the #cityhallselfie to Carson City, NV!”

(Ralph Andersen & Associates, 2016). Other posts invited people to join in on the fun: “We are loving #CityHallSelfie Day in Goose Creek! Join the fun by stopping by City Hall or any City park or facility today to take a quick selfie ...” (City of Goose Creek, 2019).

Some posts invited people to visit specific locations: “Don’t forget! It’s #CityHallSelfie day! Stop by your favorite AZ city or town hall to celebrate! #AZCitiesWork” (City of Phoenix, 2016) or “#CityHallSelfie day is today! Stop by Meridian City Hall and snap a picture!” (Meridian Idaho, 2018). Some enticed participants with incentives: “To join in on the fun, come take a selfie at Hurst City Hall today and tweet us. While you’re here, come to reception, and we’ll give you a #HurstHearts t-shirt!” (City of Hurst, TX, 2018). Other posts asked that selfies be shared: “City of #Avl Human Resources Dept #cityhallsselfie. Post yours!...” (City of Asheville, 2016) or “It’s National #CityHallSelfie Day! Stop by Shawnee City Hall at Johnson and Nieman, snap your own #CityHallSelfie and tweet it to us!” (City of Shawnee, KS, 2017).

Of the 72 posts that conveyed engagement, 15 posts encourage people to participate in or promote specific city services. For example, some used the campaign for engagement with residents and posted their own #CityHallSelfie statistics with numbers of visitors to city hall that day or social media traffic. These posts enticed residents to make use of city services by challenging people to learn something new: “Don’t be a dummy! Come check out all of the cool new things at the Florence Library and Community Center! #CityHallSelfieDay #cityhallsselfie #TownHallSelfie” (Town of Florence, AZ, 2019) or “Did you know our Department has a social services home visiting program called Healthy Families America? They took a moment to take a #CityHallSelfie at a meeting with state partners. Learn more about the program: <https://t.co/2NbyMt4wVj> #ShowMeCoMo” (Columbia/Boone Co., 2019).

Many posts encouraged people to attend events such as art shows or community workshops or to be physically active: “...while exploring new potential water trails at Hindman Park! #CityHallSelfie” (Little Rock Parks & Recreation, 2019) and “...a cool Ninja obstacle course at Howdershell Park with races throughout the year! #parksandrec #CityHallSelfie #DiscoverHazelwood” (City of Hazelwood, 2019) and “Chip’s #CityHallSelfie invites you to check out @LRParksRec’s Rebsamen Tennis Center! We have 17 Lighted Courts ready for you all your tennis fun in @CityLittleRock” (Little Rock Parks & Recreation, 2019).

## Discussion

Overall, the #CityHallSelfie campaign offered participants opportunities to frame aspects of local government to increase its presence serving its communities. The selfies and X posts created “small stories” (Georgakopoulou, 2016, p. 300) about local government and encouraged others to become producers of government-focused social media content. Falco and Kleinhans (2018) lamented that government communication is locked in a one-way pattern, viewing residents as merely passive recipients of content. However, #CityHallSelfie invited residents to produce content and co-create a campaign about government, thus bridging the digital realm and showing

real people in computer-mediated communication. These “conscious producers or creators of information, data, ideas, solutions and decisions” (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018, p. 32) are partners and stakeholders in governance.

The #CityHallSelfie campaign sought to involve stakeholders in the discussion and encourage a self-organized social media relationship between government and residents (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). How residents and city hall employees chose to participate could move the campaign from a simple interaction to co-production. Had residents co-opted the campaign or spun off their own campaigns to solve a city problem, the optimal level of self-organization may have been reached. From the digital evidence of the campaign, most participants created their own one-way information-sharing messages and did not elevate to a higher level of interaction in their resident-government relationship.

Chon and Park (2020) suggested that those participating in social media activism are the ones motivated on the related issue. In the #CityHallSelfie campaign, the issue was appreciating the work of local government. While this study did not measure how many participants were city employees or public information officers, it is our sense that those would be the most motivated to join the campaign because they are the individuals most invested in this issue. Communication officers at municipalities can accept the challenge to move beyond token participation efforts, climb higher than the low ladder rungs of participation, and prioritize two-way communication. Zavattaro (2013) asserted that cities are for sale, and a city’s communication efforts are largely those of a marketing/public relations firm. The key for public communicators will be to push campaign efforts beyond superficial marketing and parlay the efforts into higher-level engagement with residents. Viewing the #CityHallSelfie campaign as a public interest communications effort, communicators could strategize how they planned to move up Arnstein’s (1969) ladder or into Falco and Kleinhans’ (2018) more advanced resident-government relationships of co-production or self-organization. Cities would be wise to add their own city-specific hashtag to the efforts and follow-up with their residents who participated. To engage residents and move toward higher measures of involvement, cities could, for example, extend offers to participate on boards, solicit feedback on issues, or have individual residents take over the city’s social channel for a day.

The social presence of city employees snapping selfies outside city halls, in offices, or at city service locations to showcase their city was a primary driver of the campaign. Selfies represented a mix of individual frames, with one person documenting a place of employment and pride, and groups framing the collective energy of local government. Selfies with small groups and departments were framing their contributions as a team or department. The composition of the campaign centered on city employees and their city halls. The campaign aimed to humanize city government and celebrated the people behind the city hall facade by expressing appreciation for their services and actively inviting residents to engage with local government. Its impetus was to honor local democracy and its actors in action. A sense of pride was conveyed in the selfies and the act of publicly posting them. In a blog post, ELGL said:

#CityHallSelfie Day is more than a reason to take a break from work. It's about getting your community thinking about local government whether they realize it or not. For some community members they may finally figure out where city hall is, but at least they're getting involved. (ELGL, 2018, para. 2)

The main function of the posts reflected the lowest level of resident-government relationships, information sharing. While 72 posts attempted engagement, that engagement did not move toward true interaction. It may not be fair to say interaction was not evident. Some residents did participate as evidenced by mention of them as residents in the body of the post, but the digital part of the campaign was mainly a one-way blast into cyberspace. Posts did not use the @ symbol or other ways to engage online. The overall average for reshared posts was 1.62, but the average favorite was 9.19. People may have enjoyed a picture in their feed enough to click the heart icon, but maybe not enough to share the post on their own feeds with a reshared post.

Overall, the #CityHallSelfie campaign hints at transparency. It may not go so far as to invite resident partnership and participation in local government, but it is a move in that direction. #CityHallSelfie posts were mostly single one-way messages but gave information that would help residents participate and engage. When engagement is done well, ICMA suggests that it helps engender trust between residents and government, build community, and foster residents involvement instead of “demanding customers” (ICMA, 2016, para. 3).

In past campaigns, either the organizers or a select few key screen names have generated the bulk of related content (Bastos et al., 2013; Morales et al., 2012), but in the #CityHallSelfie campaign, no single entity was responsible for the majority of posts. The almost 5,000 different screen names in the dataset are a strong indicator of participation. Posts typically included other city-specific hashtags and @ELGL. Individual X accounts and the official city ones were used to post. Some campaign participants used the provided #CityHallSelfie media packet and logos to create selfie frames for resident involvement—one group even made a large banner for the centerpiece of their selfie (ironically, as it was not shot as a selfie). Others tied into community events or programs for added visibility. A few cities even used the hashtag to promote careers in certain departments and highlight job openings. One couple used the day to announce the newest resident in their #CityHallSelfie baby announcement.

Similar to how Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) outlined a three-stage adoption process for governments to use social media, a low-stakes campaign like #CityHallSelfie offered easy points of entry, such that a single post could be the first stage for digital resident engagement. One advantage of this campaign was the ease of entry. Local governmental officials could have snapped a quick selfie on the way into a building in a singular act and posted on their personal X account, tagging their city and the campaign hashtag. Some cities chose to make the campaign a much larger affair with props and planning, and even invited residents to participate.

The #CityHallSelfie campaign gave a glimpse into the people keeping city services moving and the buildings that represent local government. In his discussion of selfies, Murray (2015) suggested the selfie as a way for individuals to define themselves and “to make themselves visible” (p. 512). For local government employees, the hashtag is a small way to bring relevance

to the concept of city government, embodied by the representative buildings. Many local government employees are hidden, silent actors of civic service. They work behind the scenes and are rarely highlighted, except maybe in internal communication. A campaign like this asks them to stand in the spotlight for a moment and take credit for their work.

## Implications

In this campaign, local governments were figuratively and literally framing their cities. They wanted to highlight people and places of local government—namely city hall and what that represents. Framing theory offers a framework for describing how the narrative is cast. The selfie-takers selected a governmental building and the characters to include in an image that was shared publicly to celebrate local government. Edelman (1993) explained that observations are framed and characterized. The decisions made in the construction of the selfie tell a particular narrative. Additionally, social presence theory offers additional context; when we say city hall or local government, we are talking about people and their roles in running a city. However, the term “city hall” conjures images of a building of bureaucracy, and not so much the individuals who conduct the daily tasks required for residents to work, live, play, and stay in their communities. By seeing images of the people of local government in front of their city halls, a social presence emerges—residents were reminded that a real person is behind that main phone number at the public works department. These selfies tended to highlight the individuals who run city departments, putting real faces with the city hall image and projecting these individuals into the physical site of local government—creating a social presence. Social presence theory describes how the digital realm can be bridged, showing real people in computer-mediated communication. In this case, the relationship was between the local government and its residents, who might otherwise view city hall as nothing more than a building.

Regarding framing theory, this study expanded on extant literature about hashtag campaigns. While #CityHallSelfie sought to inform about our local governments, it did not have the same level of activism inherent in other hashtags. The hashtag represented and still represents a pseudo-event meant to draw attention to how local government affects residents each day and therefore deserves resident engagement. Instead of just a building, the campaign helped to transform city hall into a place for change and growth for communities—if residents choose to invest their time and energy by engaging.

Where we might think of our local government as an app on our phones for reporting potholes or a website to check for bulk trash pick-up days, the faces in the selfies remind us that people are behind our local governments. This campaign was unique in that it asked participants to frame their social presence. The study of the campaign aligned with Page’s suggestion that the research could extend to explore selfies for participation and protest activities.

Participants created a digital database of images with city buildings and local government employees. It is a visual campaign, and thus a discussion of visual narratives is necessary. In Lambiase’s (2018) study of city websites, she found that a quarter of the sample showcased an

image of city hall, but none of the homepages included a photo of people near city hall. Of the included images, only 20% showed people at all. The #CityHallSelfie hashtag filled a gap in the documentation of activity in and around city hall, even if staged for a selfie. Visual rhetoric seeks the meaning in images and expands upon the broader rhetoric of language. The study of photographs, including selfies, can be used as artifacts to build our understanding and decipher meaning from the campaign (Foss, 2005). Giroux (2015) acknowledged the power of selfie culture to “expand the parameters of public dialogue, public issues” (p. 162), effectively enabling others to be heard.

#CityHallSelfie offers a teachable case study for public information officers as well as public relations students. Students could brainstorm creative methods for participation for different departments within their own city’s government. They could think through incorporating the department’s mission or values into a #CityHallSelfie post. The campaign is a great example of a pseudo-event, where the organization found advocates, built up excitement prior to the event, fanned the flame during the day, handled media relations, and followed through with objectives (e.g., “if you liked this, you’ll love being a member”). This campaign highlights the potential in seizing an opportunity and the advantages of environmental scanning, or the constant analysis of future opportunities, threats, and weaknesses. If ELGL was not actively checking posts, the organization could have missed the original post that sparked this multi-year campaign.

### Limitations and future study

ELGL suggested the X platform for use in its original selfie day media kit. However, as of June 2020, there were 7,102 posts on Instagram, a photo-oriented social media site. In future studies, multiple platforms should be included in the campaign. Haro-de-Rosario and colleagues (2018) found that resident engagement with local governments was different for Facebook and X users. The effects of Twitter’s transition to X and changes on the platform should also be considered. This study included only one hashtag and no variations of it, but more than 1,300 posts on Instagram used the variation #CityHallSelfieDay. #OurDay was a similar initiative by the Local Government Association to celebrate the “people who keep our communities running” ([Local Government Association](#), n.d., para. 1).

Future studies could review a larger sample and investigate #CityHomeSelfie, a 2020-2021 addition to the campaign accommodating virtual workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigating participant motivation for posting and the strength of their online social ties could align with the work of Won and colleagues (2018), who drew connections between campaign awareness, motivation, and social ties. The current study did not identify screennames as residents, public information officers, or others, but it is our feeling that public information officers drove this campaign. Future research could look at this group, their participation as a community of practice, and their efforts to raise the visibility of their profession. It would be worthwhile to ask public communicators about their motivations to have their cities participate in

the campaign and whether they view it more as public interest communications or marketing. In 2026, a 10-year trend study could offer insights into attributes for a long-term reoccurring hashtag campaign.

The aesthetics of the group selfie with Page's (2019) synthetic collectivisation could also be analyzed, as she states that the research might inform collective activities like protests and participation. Images could also be analyzed for Gandhi and Kar's (2022) dimensions of social presence. Originally tied to the richness provided by the medium, social presence has developed to include the behavior of individuals in computer-mediated communication. Co-presence would represent the feeling of being with others; psychological involvements would include emotions and the salience of others; and behavioral engagement would include deep involvement (Gandhi & Kar, 2022). Visual and linguistic features of social media posts can influence the social presence of the message (Gandhi & Kar, 2022). For example, posts with human faces may elicit low-level engagement, but direct gaze ensured engagement at higher levels. In large, the campaign and its participants were framing the social presence of local government through their posts and photos shared on X.

Lines of inquiry could measure impact: Did more residents discover the location of their own city halls, and did they engage more with local government? Kim and Phua (2020) asserted that consumers can learn about brands from campaign hashtags, and with this campaign, the hope is that some residents took a moment to engage with their local government. At the least, #CityHallSelfie had the potential to reach 137 million X followers in its first five years.

## Conclusion

With 20,345 posts using #CityHallSelfie, the hashtag garnered some steam but has lost some traction since 2018. For 2020, the date was moved to August 14, to keep the campaign in the work week. However, #CityHallSelfie celebrated its eighth consecutive year on August 15, 2023. Through a single-day hashtag campaign, local governments have celebrated love for their cities and what they do for their communities. The #CityHallSelfie campaign emphasized local government pride and revolved around photographs of government employees, their city or town halls, and the hashtag #CityHallSelfie to showcase local GovLove (CityHallSelfie, 2020). The campaign highlighted local governments' desire to capitalize on the use of a hashtag and selfie culture to celebrate their collective efforts to govern. The campaign ultimately provides an opportunity to examine how one hashtag personalized city governments, their various departments, and employees—and the potential to transform a potentially lackluster image of a city hall building into a symbol of celebration of multifaceted local governance and its people.

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## *Practitioner Q & A*

Puppets, Vaccines, and Public Health: Harnessing Theater to Combat Misinformation in Albania

Interview with Elira Canga

*Arizona State University*

## Biography

Elira Canga is a journalist and strategic communications expert with extensive experience in international affairs. Her research interests include news writing, editing, media literacy, media relations, storytelling, and international relations, making significant contributions to the media and communications field. She holds a master's degree in EU Studies from the Centre international de formation européenne, with a deep understanding of European Union policies and issues.

Elira is a PhD student and research and teaching assistant at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Her academic pursuits are complemented by her professional experience, including developing communications strategies for the World Health Organization (WHO) in Albania from May to October 2023.

Elira was a communications expert for The World Bank from November 2022 to July 2023 and a media trainer and mentor for the British Council from August 2020 to March 2023, focusing on COVID-19 media coverage and combating misinformation.

She holds a bachelor's degree in Communication and Journalism from the University of Tirana in Albania and was a Humphrey Fellow at Arizona State University. Elira is dedicated to enhancing media literacy, fostering transparent communication, and mentoring future journalists, earning her a reputation as a proficient and impactful media professional.

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## Mister Stethoscope: Health Communication and Puppet Theater

In response to declining childhood vaccination rates and public confidence in vaccines across Europe and Central Asia, the “Mister Stethoscope” puppet show in Albania is engaging children aged 5-10 and their parents to boost vaccine awareness, combat misinformation, and prompt parents to get their children vaccinated. A UNICEF report released in April 2023 indicated that public perception regarding the value of vaccines for children decreased in the region since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, amid the largest sustained decline in childhood immunization in 30 years (UNICEF, 2023).

Conceived by the WHO Country Office in Albania and financially supported by the European Union, this creative project leverages the art of puppetry to highlight the critical importance of vaccinations for personal and community health. The show, produced by an artistic crew from the National Puppet Theatre of Albania, features characters representing vaccines for diseases such as measles, mumps, rubella, and the human papillomavirus (United Nations Albania, 2023). It underscores the crucial role of vaccinations in fighting infectious diseases and disseminates reliable information on the subject.

“Mister Stethoscope” debuted in 2023 in an open space—a public square in Tirana, capital of Albania, where children could watch, sing, dance, and interact with the performers. The show invites children to answer questions about vaccines, creating an engaging and participatory experience. Through this entertaining mix of music and interactive play, it delivers vital health messages to children and their caregivers (Bagcchi, 2024). The show runs 30 times a year in Tirana and Shkodra, two major cities throughout the country.

The puppet show features characters representing essential vaccines that are part of Albania’s national vaccination schedule, including vaccines against measles/mumps/rubella (MMR), human papillomavirus (HPV), and others (United Nations Albania, 2023). The vaccine puppets are portrayed in an entertaining artistic style, bringing the importance of vaccination to life for young audiences (Bagcchi, 2024).

This type of creative health awareness campaign is important in countries like Albania, where vaccine confidence needs boosting. A 2019 survey found 82% in Albania felt vaccines were safe and 86% believed it was important to vaccinate children, but immunization delays and refusals still occurred, often due to illness, safety concerns or misinformation (Bagcchi, 2024). Strengthening scientific, evidence-based online communication regarding childhood immunization, along with surveillance and analysis of vaccine hesitancy-related sentiments and anti-vaccination movements, can help enhance immunization timeliness and vaccine confidence in Albania (Bagcchi, 2024).

More than just raising awareness, “Mister Stethoscope” motivates its audience to take action. By presenting vaccination in a positive, non-threatening manner and highlighting the benefits of protecting oneself and others from infectious diseases, the show aims to reduce anxiety and increase acceptance of the practice. This approach aligns with the core tenets of

public interest communications, which emphasize the importance of not only educating but also inspiring people to act (Christiano & Neimand, 2017).

The puppet show illustrates how creative arts can be harnessed to effectively communicate critical health messages. By embracing experimentation, collaboration, and a deep understanding of the groups the show is trying to reach, the team behind this project successfully navigates the challenges of vaccine misinformation and creates a powerful tool for promoting public health.

The lessons learned from this experience serve as valuable guidance for other public interest communicators seeking to make a meaningful impact through the power of storytelling and the arts. When one combines creativity with a commitment to evidence-based communication, it is possible to unlock the potential to inspire, educate, and empower communities to take charge of their health and well-being.

**Question:** *Could you please share an overview of the “Mister Stethoscope” campaign?*

The “Mister Stethoscope” puppet show in Albania is an innovative public health campaign that uses the power of storytelling and creative arts to promote vaccine awareness and combat misinformation. Conceived by the WHO Country Office in Albania and financially supported by the European Union, this health communication project was crafted by a talented artistic crew from the National Puppet Theatre of Albania (United Nations Albania, 2023). The show engages children and their parents through an entertaining and educational puppet show, featuring characters who represent various vaccine-preventable diseases. By leveraging the art of puppetry, the campaign aims to deliver vital health messages in the public interest, underscore the importance of vaccinations, and disseminate reliable information to communities in a memorable and impactful way (Bagcchi, 2024).

The primary call to action of the “Mister Stethoscope” campaign is clear and direct:

“get your kids vaccinated.” At the very minimum, the goal of the “Mister Stethoscope” campaign was to open up opportunities for children to ask their parents questions about vaccination. By sparking curiosity and encouraging dialogue within families, the puppet show serves as a catalyst for meaningful conversations that can ultimately lead to better-informed decisions and increased vaccination rates (Bagcchi, 2024).

**Question:** *Could you share with us the inspiration behind “Mister Stethoscope”?*

**Answer:** Have you ever struggled to get kids excited about healthy habits? As a parent, I know firsthand how challenging it can be. That’s why I was thrilled when a colleague proposed the idea for the “Mister Stethoscope” puppet show during a brainstorming session at the WHO Country Office in Albania.

The concept immediately resonated with me because two years ago, I took my daughter to a theater show about a little boy who didn’t like healthy eating, preferring chips and chocolate instead. Some of the other characters were fruits and vegetables. I was

surprised by how much the kids loved the show, singing and dancing along, even though it was teaching them an important lesson about health and nutrition.

When my colleague suggested creating an interactive puppet show aimed at capturing children's attention while imparting important health messaging, I knew from personal experience that it could be a powerful tool. By personifying health-related characters and weaving together an entertaining story, we could make learning about wellness both fun and memorable.

**Question:** *What motivated you to choose puppetry as the medium to convey messages about vaccination?*

**Answer:** In today's world, we are constantly bombarded with information from various sources. It can be challenging to break through the noise and effectively communicate important messages, especially when it comes to complex and often controversial topics like vaccination. This is particularly true for parents, who are tasked with making crucial decisions about their children's health amidst a sea of conflicting information and misinformation.

Puppetry was chosen as the medium to convey messages about vaccination because of its unique ability to captivate and engage both children and their parents (Skinner et al., 1991). By creating an experience that is memorable, enjoyable, and informative, we aimed to facilitate a positive and open dialogue about vaccination within families.

For children, the puppet show serves to introduce the concept of vaccination in a non-threatening and relatable manner. By

using colorful, friendly characters and simple language, we can help children understand the importance of vaccines and alleviate any fears or anxieties they may have about the process. This, in turn, can make it easier for parents to discuss vaccination with their children and make informed decisions.

For parents, the puppet show provided a safe and engaging space to learn about the benefits and risks of vaccination, free from the polarizing debates and misinformation that often surround the topic. By presenting accurate, evidence-based information through a medium that is both entertaining and informative, we aimed to empower parents to make confident, well-informed choices about their children's health.

Ultimately, the decision to use puppetry as a medium to convey messages about vaccination was motivated by its ability to break through the noise, simplify complex ideas, and foster open, honest conversations within families. By harnessing the power of storytelling and character-driven narratives, we sought to deliver critical health education in a manner that resonates with both children and their parents, encouraging them to work together to make informed decisions about vaccination.

**Question:** *The National Puppet Theatre of Albania was instrumental in bringing "Mister Stethoscope" to life. Could you discuss the process involved in working with creatives to craft messages that effectively combine health education with entertainment through puppetry?*

**Answer:** Creating puppetry that effectively combines health education and entertainment requires collaboration among multiple people and organizations. In this case, the National Puppet Theatre of Albania played a crucial role by contributing their artistic talents and expertise. However, bringing together a public institution and a United Nations agency presented some challenges.

One major consideration was the difference in how these two entities operate. The National Puppet Theatre is primarily focused on artistic endeavors, while WHO is more procedure-oriented. They also had different resources and timeline expectations, which made coordination more complex.

Another significant challenge was the limited time frame. With only two months to bring the show to life, there was pressure to find the right director, actors, and puppeteers quickly. Creating the puppets and developing the production itself also required time, adding to the overall sense of urgency.

Despite these obstacles, the success of the project can be attributed to the dedication and effort of the teams involved. The WHO office in Albania provided unwavering support and encouragement, making the process smoother and more enjoyable for everyone. The National Puppet Theatre of Albania brought immense talent to the table, with a skilled director, composer, and actors who worked tirelessly for eight weeks to bring the show to life.

In the end, the shared passion for the project proved to be the driving force behind overcoming these challenges. The love for the creative process and the belief in the important public health message kept everyone motivated and focused. As the saying goes, “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” and this project is a testament to the power of collaboration and determination in the face of obstacles.

**Question:** *Can you discuss the theoretical framework that informed the development of this puppet show?*

**Answer:** One of the main focus areas of the WHO’s work in Albania was vaccination, as it plays a crucial role in maintaining individual and public health. However, we know that simply raising awareness about the importance of vaccination is not always sufficient (e.g., Christiano & Niemand, 2017). In July, just before the start of the academic year, reports and surveys indicated a concerning decline in vaccine coverage for infectious diseases like measles, rubella, and mumps. We needed a more strategic approach, and this timely health data presented an opportunity for intervention through a targeted public interest communications campaign.

Public interest communications campaigns aim to achieve significant and sustained positive behavioral change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organization (Fessmann, 2016). In this case, the goal was to boost vaccination rates and combat misinformation, ultimately promoting the health and well-being of Albanian children and communities.

Research demonstrates that interactive, play-based learning experiences can significantly improve children's health knowledge and attitudes. Drawing upon theories of both communication and child development, the "Mister Stethoscope" campaign incorporated several key elements to create an engaging and effective learning experience for young audiences:

- 1) **Use of bright, colorful, and friendly characters:** Aligning with Piaget's (1936/1952) theory that children in the preoperational stage (ages 2-7) learn best through concrete experiences and imaginative play, the puppets were designed to be visually appealing and relatable to capture children's attention.
- 2) **Accessible and digestible language:** As Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory proposes, social interaction and appropriately scaffolded language facilitates children's learning. The script used age-appropriate vocabulary and clear explanations to make complex health concepts more understandable.
- 3) **Emphasis on the "greater good":** Kohlberg's (1971) stages of moral development suggest that children ages 2-9 are motivated by external rewards and punishment avoidance. By framing vaccination as a prosocial act that protects both oneself and the community, the intervention aimed to resonate with children's emerging sense of morality.

Leveraging insights from developmental psychology, the "Mister Stethoscope" intervention was carefully crafted to make learning about vaccination engaging, memorable and motivating for young audiences.

**Question:** *In what ways did the communication strategy for "Mister Stethoscope" adapt to address the unique challenges of vaccine misinformation?*

**Answer:** The communication strategy for "Mister Stethoscope" was carefully crafted to address the unique challenges posed by vaccine misinformation. In today's world, we are constantly bombarded with information from various sources, and this abundance of information can often lead to confusion and misconceptions (Downs et al., 2008), especially when it comes to complex topics like vaccination.

As the mother of three children, I personally experienced the dilemmas and concerns that young parents often grapple with when it comes to making decisions about their children's health. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue, with a surge in misinformation and conflicting opinions about the safety and efficacy of vaccines (Hotez et al., 2021).

Our communication strategy centered on three main objectives:

- 1) **Making the messages understandable:** We wanted to ensure that the information presented in the puppet show was easily digestible and accessible to children and their families. By using simple language and relatable characters

(Vygotsky, 1978), we aimed to break down complex concepts and make them more approachable.

- 2) **Triggering interest:** We recognized that simply presenting facts and figures would not be enough to capture the audience's attention. Therefore, we incorporated engaging storylines, colorful visuals, and interactive elements to spark curiosity and encourage active participation in the learning process (Cawkwell & Oshinsky, 2015).
- 3) **Helping families understand risks and benefits:** One of the most significant barriers to vaccine acceptance is the lack of understanding about the potential risks and benefits (Larson et al., 2014). Our communication strategy aimed to provide balanced and evidence-based information, empowering families to make informed decisions about vaccination. Applying insights from Johnson's (2021) research on moral development and health advertising effectiveness, we framed vaccination as a prosocial act that protects not just oneself but the wider community. This taps into children's emerging sense of morality and desire to conform to group norms at the "maintaining norms" stage of development. The puppet show characters and storylines emphasized the "greater good" of vaccines using relatable, emotional appeals.

To further enhance the impact of our communications efforts, we collaborated with schools and teachers to engage parents, children, and educators in the conversation. By fostering open dialogue and encouraging discussion, we sought to create a supportive environment where individuals could ask questions, share their concerns, and learn from one another.

The timing of the campaign was also critical, as the beginning of the school year often coincides with an increased risk of infectious diseases spreading among children (Kurt & Serdaroğlu, 2024). By launching the puppet show just a few weeks before the start of the academic year, the WHO strategically aimed to capitalize on this window of opportunity to maximize the impact of their message.

**Question:** *Could you explain how storytelling in "Mister Stethoscope" supports principles of effective health communication?*

**Answer:** The storytelling approach in "Mister Stethoscope" was designed to support the principles of effective health communication by increasing recall, comprehension, and the likelihood of behavior change. Behavioral change is a complex process that occurs in various stages, and each stage requires a tailored strategy and a clear call to action (Nutbeam, 2000).

In the context of vaccination, the primary target audience is typically parents, families, teachers, and medical staff. However, the team behind "Mister Stethoscope" recognized the importance of engaging

children directly in the conversation. By presenting information in a friendly and accessible manner, the puppet show aimed to increase children's understanding and involvement in the decision-making process.

To enhance recall and comprehension, the storytelling in "Mister Stethoscope" employed several key strategies:

- 1) **Engaging characters:** The use of relatable and likable characters helped children connect with the story and the messages being conveyed. By creating an emotional bond with the characters, children were more likely to remember and internalize the information presented (Probart, 1989).
- 2) **Simplified language:** The script was carefully crafted to use age-appropriate language and explanations, making complex concepts easier for children to grasp. By breaking down information into digestible bits, the puppet show increased comprehension and retention of key messages.
- 3) **Interactive elements:** The puppet show incorporated interactive elements that encouraged children to actively participate in the learning process (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). By inviting children to engage with the puppet show characters and storyline through questions, music, and movement, "Mister Stethoscope" utilized the power of active learning to enhance information retention and influence.

To increase the likelihood of behavior change, "Mister Stethoscope" focused on presenting vaccination in a positive and non-threatening manner. Instead of emphasizing the common fears such as pain at injection or potential side effects, the story highlighted the benefits of vaccination and the importance of protecting oneself and others from infectious diseases. By framing vaccination as a normal and necessary part of staying healthy, the puppet show aimed to reduce anxiety and increase acceptance of the practice.

*Question: Engaging children and their parents in a conversation about vaccines through puppetry is innovative. What strategies did you employ to make the puppet show accessible and appealing to a wide audience?*

*Answer:* One of the most important aspects was choosing a venue that would allow for maximum exposure and participation. By deciding to stage the performance in a public square, we ensured that anyone interested could attend, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status. We recognized that the decision-making process around vaccination involves the entire family, and that children can play a significant role in shaping their parents' attitudes and beliefs. By crafting a narrative that spoke to both generations and encouraging interaction and participation throughout the performance, we aimed to foster a shared understanding and encourage open dialogue about the topic.

*Question: How do you think the use of mascots and puppets, as seen in "Mister Stethoscope," enhances the communication*



*of health messages to children? Can you discuss the advantages of this mixed-media approach over a traditional press campaign?*

**Answer:** The use of mascots and puppets, as seen in “Mister Stethoscope,” can significantly enhance the communication of health messages to children. By personifying key elements, such as the stethoscope, which is a main tool in a doctor’s office, we aimed to create a sense of familiarity and friendliness, making the entire concept of visiting a doctor or receiving vaccinations more approachable and less intimidating for children. As Skinner et al. (1991) found in their evaluation of the “Puppets Against AIDS” program in Africa, puppetry can be an effective medium for delivering comprehensive educational messages and contributing to audiences’ knowledge and intended behavioral changes around sensitive health topics. By combining entertainment with education, we can effectively reach and influence young audiences, ultimately leading to better health outcomes and increased awareness within families and communities.

**Question:** *Based on your experience with “Mister Stethoscope,” what advice would you give to other public interest communicators considering using creative arts to convey important health messages?*

**Answer:** You’ve tried the traditional methods—press releases, informational pamphlets, and even social media campaigns—but somehow, your message is not quite hitting the mark. That’s where the magic of creative arts comes into play.

Based on my experience with “Mister Stethoscope,” I can confidently say that embracing experimentation and thinking outside the box is the key to unlocking the true potential of your health communication strategy.

Understanding your audience and determining how to effectively connect with them can make or break a campaign. Do not be afraid to step outside your comfort zone and try something new, whether it’s a colorful puppet show, an interactive theater performance, or a thought-provoking art installation.

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**PRACTITIONER Q&A**

# **A PLACE AT THE TABLE: A COMMUNICATION MODEL FOR ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY**

**MAGGIE KANE**





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## *Practitioner Q & A*

A Place at the Table: A Communication Model for Addressing Food Insecurity

Interview with Maggie Kane

*Founder and Executive Director, A Place at the Table*

## Biography

Maggie Kane is the founder and executive director of A Place at the Table, Raleigh's pay-what-you-can nonprofit café. She graduated from North Carolina State University in 2013 and began working for Love Wins Community Engagement Center, a nonprofit serving people experiencing homelessness. By befriending people living on the margins, Maggie saw the challenges of food insecurity as well as the importance of providing dignity to those in need. In February 2015, A Place at the Table started as pop-up meals throughout the city. Since opening a physical location in January 2018, Table has served affordable meals to thousands in Raleigh while treating them with dignity.

## Description of Project

Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to adequate food due to lack of money or other resources, affects 12.5% of North Carolina households, higher than the national average (Feeding America, 2020). In Raleigh, the capital city, a unique project is making waves in the battle against this pervasive issue: A Place at the Table. This initiative challenges the traditional cafe model by operating on a pay-what-you-can basis, part of a small but growing trend of eateries across the United States aiming to make nutritious meals accessible to all (One World Everybody Eats, 2023). Opening its doors in January 2018, A Place at the Table contributes to a

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movement toward a more inclusive, equitable community where everyone, regardless of financial means, has a place at the table and access to healthy food.

A Place at the Table is notable for its commitment to dignity and choice, ensuring that every visitor is treated with respect and has the opportunity to enjoy a meal in a welcoming environment. This nonprofit café embodies the philosophy that everyone deserves a seat at the table, making it a beacon of hope and community in Raleigh. “Café [Table Raleigh] is just so much more than just a food source. It’s a gathering of community, a gathering of necessities, and it just offers so much more than just a meal,” said Shelby Mathews, a resident of Apex, North Carolina, who has been volunteering at A Place at the Table for two years. The café sees about 80 volunteers a day, with as many as 40 to 60 volunteering for their meal (Butera, 2023). It’s a place where statistics on food insecurity transform into stories of individuals and families, each unique but united in their search for a sense of belonging and support.

Research has shown that restorative narratives - stories that highlight how people recover from adversity - can be a powerful way to share difficult news without overwhelming audiences (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Through the lens of public interest communications, A Place at the Table showcases how effectively framed narratives can transform public perception and mobilize community support. The café’s storytelling strategy centers on amplifying the voices of those it serves, moving beyond mere statistics to share personal stories of resilience, hope, and community. These narratives are carefully crafted to respect the dignity of individuals, avoiding sensationalism and instead highlighting shared human experiences. This approach demonstrates how telling stories about individuals overcoming adversity can be a powerful and positive way to convey information about hardship and rally support for solutions.

A Place at the Table offers valuable insights for public interest communicators. It underscores the importance of narrative in shaping public discourse, the potential of strategic communication to drive social change, and the transformative power of community engagement. In essence, this initiative demonstrates that when communication is rooted in genuine connection and shared values, it can indeed be a force for good, creating ripples of change that extend far beyond the confines of a single café.

**Question:** “A Place at the Table” is a name that carries a lot of weight and meaning. Can you share how you decided on this name and how it reflects the café’s mission and values?

**Answer:** The name “A Place at the Table” perfectly encapsulates our mission and values as a pay-what-you-can café (Holman, 2024). We wanted a name that was welcoming, inclusive, and would make people curious to learn more. As fate would

have it, while brainstorming names in our office, we noticed a songbook opened to a piece titled “A Place at the Table.” It immediately clicked—this name signified that everyone has a place at our table, regardless of their means. It’s an invitation.

**Question:** The concept of dignity and choice is central to A Place at the Table. How have you used storytelling and public communication to emphasize these themes and connect with the community?

**Answer:** As an organization fighting food insecurity, it's tempting to focus solely on numbers—how many meals served, how many people in need. However, Ken Booth's concept of 'emancipatory realism' frames food security as protecting vulnerable populations from the structural violence of hunger, reminding us that our mission goes beyond feeding numbers (Shepherd, 2012). Recognizing food insecurity as a significant human security concern, we understand the imperative to elevate our message beyond transactional metrics.

From the start, we knew that to truly uphold dignity and choice, our storytelling had to be about more than statistics. By centering the strength and progress of individuals, these narratives offer a path forward (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). We faced the challenge of elevating our message beyond the transactional to convey the transformational power of a shared meal in a welcoming space. Our approach has reflected that, encouraging individuals to speak for themselves, with our organization helping amplify the voices of those we serve (Bryan, 2023).

On any given day, you'll find 200 unique individuals at our tables, each with a story to tell. With their permission, we feature their first-person narratives on our website and social media channels, providing a platform for them to express in their own words what this community support means to them. Ultimately, the story of A Place at the Table is one of dignity and choice in action, of a community coming together to break bread and break down barriers.

It's not about numbers, but about the immeasurable impact of affirming each person's humanity, one meal and one story at a time. That's the story we will keep telling as we strive to set a bigger table for all, aligning with the understanding that addressing food insecurity is fundamentally about protecting human dignity and agency in the face of structural challenges.

**Question:** *Facing the unique challenge of communicating about food insecurity, how do you balance raising awareness and advocating for change without co-opting or sensationalizing the stories of those you serve?*

**Answer:** At A Place at the Table, we walk a delicate line when communicating about food insecurity. It's a challenge faced by many organizations working with vulnerable populations: how to tell stories that inspire action without exploiting or sensationalizing the lives of those in need (Dutta et al., 2016). We know that every person who comes through our doors has a unique story, filled with complexity and humanity. We want to honor each person, while still shedding light on the larger issue of food insecurity in our community.

Our approach is rooted in respect and dignity. We never share someone's story or image without their explicit permission. If a media outlet wants to take pictures inside the cafe, we allow photos of the food and space, but not of individuals' faces unless they've consented to be featured. Schraedley et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of ethical communication in addressing food insecurity, highlighting that empowering individuals to share their own stories ensures

their voices are not manipulated (Bryan, 2023).

When we do share someone's story, it's always with the individual's participation and approval. We may change small details to protect their privacy, but we always seek to preserve the essence of their narrative. It's their voice, their experience, and their truth. By giving them agency in the storytelling process, we aim to avoid reducing people to simplistic narratives or stereotypes (Schraedley et al., 2020).

The power of a story's ending is not to be underestimated. Just as Fitzgerald et al. (2020) found that restorative narratives may need to maintain a positive trajectory and end on an uplifting note to maximize their prosocial impact, we believe that the most powerful stories are the ones individuals tell about themselves—stories of resilience, hope, and community in the face of adversity (Schraedley et al., 2020).

Research by Cassidy-Vu et al. (2022) shows that food insecurity is linked to various health outcomes, highlighting the importance of dignified storytelling to raise awareness while focusing on positive community impacts instead of dramatizing hardships. By holding space for these personal stories and sharing them responsibly, we strive to change the conversation around food insecurity from one of stigma and shame to one of empathy and empowerment. It's a delicate balance, but one we must strike to create real change.

**Question:** *Public interest communications often involves changing narratives to inspire action or change perceptions. Can you*

*discuss any specific communication strategies you've employed to shift the narrative around food insecurity and community support?*

**Answer:** When we first started, it was challenging to convey why a pay-what-you-can cafe was so important. People struggled to understand the concept and its potential impact. We knew that before we could tell people about our mission, we needed to show the community the transformative power of a shared meal in a welcoming space.

From a communications strategy perspective, we recognized that to truly shift narratives around food insecurity, we had to engage people on multiple levels—cognitive, emotional, and experiential. This involves engaging audiences cognitively by aligning the message with their aspirations, evoking relevant emotions that resonate with their experiences, and creating interactive experiences that mimic interpersonal interactions, thereby making the communication more impactful and memorable (Oatley, 2009).

Cognitively, we needed to provide information and statistics about the issue in our community. However, we also understand that facts alone rarely change hearts and minds. From a neuroscience perspective, compelling stories can significantly alter our brain's chemistry, triggering the release of oxytocin, which enhances empathy and cooperative behavior. This neurochemical change is crucial because it influences not only our understanding but also our emotions and behaviors, making us more likely to act in



accordance with the narrative's moral (Zak, 2015). Therefore, while it's important to inform and educate with facts, integrating them into narratives that resonate emotionally and experientially is essential for truly impactful communication.

Emotionally, we turned to the power of restorative narratives. Research has shown that stories highlighting how people recover from adversity can be an effective way to share difficult news without emotionally overwhelming audiences (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). By focusing on the strength and progress of individuals impacted by food insecurity, rather than just their hardships, we aimed to elicit a sense of moral elevation in our supporters.

But perhaps most importantly, we needed to create opportunities for experiential learning. Social psychology research shows that attitudes and behaviors are more likely to change through direct experience and interaction. Russell H. Fazio's (1981) work indicates that attitudes formed through direct, personal experiences are significantly more likely to influence behavior than those formed through indirect methods. This phenomenon occurs because direct experiences enhance the congruence between one's attitudes and subsequent actions, effectively embedding these attitudes within the individual's behavioral framework. By inviting people into the cafe space, they can witness the impact firsthand, engage in dialogue with people from different backgrounds, and feel the intangible sense of community that emerges around a shared table, thus fostering a

profound and personal connection to the cause.

By creating a space that embodied our mission and inviting people into it, we were able to gradually shift the narrative around food insecurity from one of individual shame and scarcity to one of collective dignity and abundance. This shift took four years.

***Question:** How have you leveraged strategic communication to confront and transform public perceptions about food insecurity, particularly addressing common misconceptions and skepticism regarding the capabilities and dignity of those experiencing it?*

***Answer:*** The foundation of our strategic communication lies in fostering authentic relationships and trust. We understand the importance of moving beyond surface-level interactions to deeply engage with those whose stories we aim to tell. Here's how we do this:

**Active Listening and Trust Building:**

- **Strategy:** We start by deeply listening to individuals' stories, engaging in multiple conversations before considering how to share their narrative. By prioritizing relationship-building, we earn trust and ensure authentic storytelling. This process involves co-creating understandings through storytelling and listening, a dynamic interplay where both speaker and listener actively participate to negotiate meaning.

- **Impact:** This approach ensures that individuals feel heard and respected, laying a solid foundation for narratives that resonate deeply with audiences and accurately represent the storyteller. It helps in creating a listening culture that supports open systems thinking, allowing for the exploration and sharing of contextually dependent understandings (Bednar & Welch, 2013).

#### **Story-Driven Content Creation:**

- **Strategy:** Our content focuses on compelling storytelling through interviews, written articles, and video testimonials that highlight resilience, hope, and the community's strength. We emphasize relatable, uplifting themes rather than just statistics. By harnessing the power of narratives, we tap into the complex layers of human experience and emotion, which can be more effective in conveying the gravity of human rights abuses than traditional logical argumentation alone.
- **Impact:** This strategy humanizes food insecurity, making the issue more relatable while countering common misconceptions by showing real people with diverse stories. By prioritizing stories of resilience and agency, we move away from portraying individuals as merely passive victims, thereby fostering a deeper connection and understanding

amongst Raleigh's housed community (Meyers, 2016).

#### **Empowerment-Oriented Messaging:**

- **Strategy:** We emphasize language that highlights the inherent dignity and potential of those experiencing food insecurity, avoiding patronizing or sensationalizing tones. Instead of focusing solely on need, we present the capabilities and strengths of individuals.
- **Impact:** This messaging shifts the narrative from helplessness to empowerment, encouraging the audience to see individuals as resilient and resourceful rather than defined by their struggles. By fostering a narrative that emphasizes strength and resilience, we aim to build moral understanding and empathy, moving beyond simple sympathy (Meyers, 2016).

#### **Experiential Engagement:**

- **Strategy:** We invite community members to visit our café and participate in events where they can directly interact with our mission. This direct exposure not only helps to break down biases but also facilitates open dialogue, crucial for genuine understanding and community building. Experiential engagement in communications and personal interactions enhance emotional understanding and foster genuine connections between individuals (Oatley, 2009). By creating opportunities for community

members to engage in the daily activities of the café, from preparing meals to serving them, we provide a tangible experience that aligns closely with our mission.

- **Impact:** The firsthand experience of the café environment allows participants to witness the practical implementation of inclusivity and mutual support. This immersion into the café's operations and the visible impact of a shared meal elucidate the tangible benefits of social inclusion and community support. According to Oatley (2009), such direct experiences not only enhance empathetic understanding but also lead to more robust and enduring emotional connections. This deeper emotional engagement is critical as it transforms passive supporters into active advocates and contributors, fostering a community that is more cohesive and supportive. By integrating these experiences, we not only educate but also inspire and empower our visitors to take meaningful actions that contribute to the broader goal of reducing food insecurity.

These specific communication strategies enable us to reshape public perceptions about food insecurity. Rather than positioning ourselves as external narrators, we facilitate the process for individuals to narrate their own experiences, thus reinforcing their inherent dignity and dispelling myths around food insecurity (Meyers, 2016). This allows us to humanize the issue and dismantle misconceptions by

highlighting the common threads of hope and community that connect us all.

Ultimately, our communication mirrors our mission. Just as we bring people together around the table, we also aim to bring them together through the stories we share. Our approach focuses on revealing the humanity that often gets overshadowed by statistics, encouraging others to challenge their biases, and actively participate in building a more compassionate and inclusive society. Every story and every meal offers a step toward changing perceptions and fostering empathy.

**Question:** *Public relations and social media are powerful tools for public interest communications. How has A Place at the Table used these tools to engage with the community and spread your message?*

**Answer:** We've been fortunate to gain significant media attention and community engagement organically, without relying heavily on traditional PR strategies or press releases. Our approach has been to consistently tell authentic stories that resonate—stories about dignity, choice, and the power of community.

When we first started in 2015 we focused on sharing the story that inspired our mission—the story of my friend John who experienced homelessness and the lack of dignified food options. As we shared this story and our vision for a pay-what-you-can cafe, people in the community started listening and spreading the word. This grassroots, word-of-mouth approach led to initial local media coverage (Jackson, 2017) before we even had a physical cafe space.

The opening of our cafe was a turning point. We reached out to the local contacts and supporters we had built relationships with, and they helped amplify our message through local news stories. Somewhat unexpectedly, this local buzz caught the attention of national media outlets like the Kelly Clarkson Show (The Kelly Clarkson Show, 2023), and USA Today (Butera, 2023) and Good Morning America (GMA Team, 2019), who both came to Raleigh to feature our story.

Interestingly, while the national coverage was exciting, its biggest impact was actually driving more local engagement. Each time a major network spotlighted us, it spurred a new wave of local media attention and community interest. It was a cycle of national coverage leading to increased local awareness, which in turn attracted more national interest as our community impact grew.

The cafe's pay-what-you-can model, a central part of its story of dignity and inclusivity, has resonated with the community and nearly 300 patrons a day. Guests who can afford to pay a little extra do so knowing they are helping to cover the cost for someone who may not be able to pay. Over the years, this spirit of generosity has allowed the cafe to provide meals for those in need, with over \$100,000 contributed to pay it forward for another guest.

**Question:** *In the realm of public interest communications, storytelling is a powerful tool to engage, educate, and inspire action. From your experience, what key insights or strategies would you recommend to*

*communicators aiming to craft compelling narratives that not only inform but also motivate public engagement and drive change?*

**Answer:** Empower others to be storytellers and ambassadors. Identify the “eagles” in your community—the passionate supporters who will spread your message far and wide. Equip them with the tools and stories they need to be effective advocates. The most compelling narratives often come from those directly impacted by your mission.

The social issues we tackle are too big for any one organization to solve alone. Seek out partnerships and opportunities to uplift the work of others. When you collaborate and share each other's stories, you expand your reach and impact. There's power in showing a united front and demonstrating that we are all working towards a common goal.

Prioritize relationship-building and trust. Compelling stories emerge from authentic connections. Invest time in getting to know the people and communities you serve. Earn their trust by consistently showing up, listening to their needs, and following through on your commitments. Only share stories you've been given permission to tell.

Ultimately, crafting compelling narratives is about honoring the humanity in every story and inviting others to be part of something bigger than themselves. It's about recognizing that we all have a role to play in shaping the stories of our communities and our world. And it's about leveraging the power of storytelling to not just reflect reality, but to change it for the better.

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