

JOURNALISTS DISCUSS REPORTING ON COMMON GROUND AND DIVISIVENESS

A HIDDEN COMMON GROUND REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How do journalists view their roles and responsibilities in reporting on cross-partisan common ground and divisiveness? What do they believe would help to support developing different approaches to journalism that addresses those issues? To explore those questions, Public Agenda conducted in-depth confidential interviews with a snowball sample of 18 journalists in the fall of 2021. Findings include the following:

1. The journalists interviewed for this research generally did not view the media's focus on partisan conflict as a problem. They assumed that stories about common ground had to be "positive" stories.
2. Interviewees said that journalism focused on divisiveness reflects reality and that they have a responsibility to inform the public about partisan conflict.
3. These journalists emphasized that institutional norms in the media encourage a focus on conflict. But they were divided over whether conflict-based stories actually drive business in the news industry.
4. Interviewees said that in order to cover common ground and divisiveness differently, they need resources, namely time and skills to understand issues more deeply and to connect with communities. They emphasized that individual journalists cannot change institutional practices alone but need support from news organizations.

The report concludes with brief reflections on the findings. To learn more about this research and about Public Agenda's [Hidden Common Ground](https://publicagenda.org/reports/journalists-discuss-reporting-on-common-ground-and-divisiveness/) initiative, please go to <https://publicagenda.org/reports/journalists-discuss-reporting-on-common-ground-and-divisiveness/> or email research@publicagenda.org.

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research.

BACKGROUND

As part of the [Hidden Common Ground](#) (HCG) initiative, Public Agenda has been conducting a series of surveys of the American public since 2019 on issues including health care, immigration, policing, and the economy. These surveys have consistently found substantial cross-partisan agreement on many issues, alongside some differences of opinion. These surveys have also found that [most Americans across the political spectrum](#) believe that there is more common ground among the public than the news media and political leaders typically portray.¹

However, HCG surveys have also found considerable concern among the public about partisan divisiveness. For example, [most Americans across political affiliations](#) believe that hostility and divisiveness between ordinary people, between politicians, and in the news media are all serious problems.²

Furthermore, a substantial share of Americans blames the news media for fostering divisiveness. Only [17 percent of Americans](#) believe the news media promotes constructive public debate. [Four in ten Americans](#) say that the news media actually has more to gain than to lose from partisan divisiveness.³ Focus group research by the Harwood Institute found considerable anger at the news media for stoking polarization. As one focus group participant said, “The media sells a package of outrage and fear and hate.”⁴

Despite blaming the news media for its role in divisiveness, Americans also think journalism has the potential to help bridge divides. [Two-thirds of Americans believe](#) that creating more accurate, trustworthy, accessible sources of news and information would help to bring the country together, including nearly identical shares of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.⁵

¹ Public Agenda, Hidden Common Ground Initiative (2019-2022), <https://publicagenda.org/the-hidden-common-ground-initiative>; “America’s Hidden Common Ground on Divisiveness in American Public Life” (2019), <https://publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>; “America’s Hidden Common Ground on Overcoming Divisiveness” (2021), <https://publicagenda.org/reports/overcoming-divisiveness-charting-a-path-forward/>.

² Public Agenda, “Putting Partisan Animosity in Perspective” (2021), <https://publicagenda.org/reports/partisan-animosity/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard C. Harwood, “Civic Virus: Why Polarization is a Misdiagnosis” (Harwood Institute and the Kettering Foundation, (2021), <https://theharwoodinstitute.org/civic-virus-report>.

⁵ Public Agenda, “Putting Partisan Animosity in Perspective” (2021).

In this complex civic landscape—characterized by substantial cross-partisan agreement on substantive issues alongside differences of opinion, by feelings that divisiveness is simultaneously a serious problem and that it is overstated, and by a sense that journalism both contributes to and could help reduce divisiveness—how do journalists view their roles and responsibilities in reporting on cross-partisan common ground and divisiveness? What do they believe would help to support developing different approaches to journalism that addresses those issues?

METHODOLOGY

Public Agenda explored these questions by conducting one-on-one confidential interviews with a snowball sample of 18 journalists. Interviews were conducted by video from October to December 2021. Participants included the following:

- Thirteen print journalists and five radio journalists
- Eleven journalists working at local news organizations and seven working at national news organizations
- Eleven journalists working at for-profit news organizations and seven at nonprofit news organizations. Several of the interviewees who currently work at nonprofit news organizations had previous experience at for-profit news organizations.

FINDINGS

1. The journalists interviewed for this research generally did not view the media's focus on partisan conflict as a problem. They assumed that stories about common ground had to be "positive" stories.

These interviewees were generally not troubled by the focus on partisan conflict in the news media. They tended to say that doing so represents the reality of the world and fits with prevailing norms in the news industry, views discussed in findings two and three of this report.

“Conflict—it’s absolutely true we focus on it. It’s going to where there are fault lines. You don’t cover the ten thousand planes that land safely, you cover the ones that crash. [It is a] natural human tendency to focus on what’s not working as opposed to what is.” –*Editor, local news organization*⁶

“If you are writing stories for page one, they want tension. The editors and reporters gravitate to conflict, because that is what sells. Whose ox was going to get gored, because someone’s ox was going to lose, and that is the story. That is newsworthy.” –*Reporter, national news organization*

“It’s probably true we cover conflict and disagreement more. But conflict can mean different things when talking about storytelling. It’s good for stories, and it doesn’t have to mean divisiveness. It’s about telling a story about how two groups want something, how are they going after it?”
–*Editor, local news organization*

Some interviewees rejected the premise that journalism focuses on conflict. Furthermore, these journalists tended to assume that stories or narratives about common ground or consensus were “positive stories,” as discussed later in this report.

“We look for stories that are positive just as often. The media is more balanced than people think.” –*News director, Local news organization*

“What you learn while investigating a story can turn it positive or negative. Sometimes the facts tell the story, and you can’t control them.”
–*Editor, national news organization*

All of the journalists interviewed for this research worked in print or radio. They almost unanimously agreed that TV news is especially likely to focus on divisiveness or polarization. They saw print as more balanced and digital-native outlets as falling somewhere in between. Radio did not come up as different from other types of news although several interviewees were radio journalists.

“Conflict is obviously more visible on TV than print. Print at least is edited, so there’s attention to both sides.” –*Reporter, national news organization*

⁶ Quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

“Cable news has become way more partisan, so common ground stories just don’t happen on broadcast. Everything is now arguing and opinion on cable news. The primetime hours are now anchored by opinion, not facts. So broadcast has really influenced journalism. Local broadcast still has some common ground stories, but their market share has sunk a ton. Print journalism doesn’t have the time constraint of broadcast so they have more time to develop the common ground stories.” –*Reporter, national news organization*

The interviewees generally believed that local news is more likely to address common ground than national news. They felt that at the local level, there is less pressure to cover national news, which they said tends to be rooted in partisan conflict. Interviewees also felt that audiences can connect more easily to stories of common ground in their local communities.

“Local news organizations are better positioned to cover common ground. A lot of the issues that are in front of you in local [news] are less partisan. You can focus on people’s daily lives. You can highlight people who are solutions oriented and give people more amplification.” –*Editor, local news organization*

2. Interviewees said that journalism focused on divisiveness reflects reality and that they have a responsibility to inform the public about partisan conflict.

Public Agenda’s [HCG](#) surveys have found substantial cross-partisan agreement regarding many of the challenges our nation faces and how to address them.⁷ Yet the journalists interviewed for this research indicated that common ground is actually rare, and therefore that focusing on it would be disingenuous.

“Common ground is less common because society is more polarized than 20 or 30 years ago. It is more divided. There is less opportunity for this type of story.” –*Reporter, national news organization*

“It’s a divisive time. This is not a spin, that’s the reality. We’re not making it up.” –*Editor, local news organization*

“It’s a fact that things are polarized. People won’t believe you otherwise if you say it’s not.” –*Reporter, national news organization*

⁷ Public Agenda, “Hidden Common Ground Initiative,” (2019–2022).

The perception among these interviewees that common ground is rare are consistent with Public Agenda's experiences of working with journalists. Public Agenda researchers have briefed journalists from several news outlets on findings from each of the [HCG](#) surveys that have been fielded since 2019, including findings about both common ground and differences of opinion. Yet the stories that journalists have produced based on those findings have generally emphasized points of disagreement rather than common ground.

The journalists interviewed for this research tended to say that they have a responsibility to report on conflict. They felt that members of the public need to know about conflict more than about common ground. Moreover, they felt that reporting on conflict can spur change. Journalists did not frame these responsibilities in terms of playing a role in democracy per se, but in terms of informing and educating the public.

"People are affected more because of the disagreement. It fuels the public health issue, for example. By covering it, we hope it will lead to change. There is an activism to it." –*Editor, national news organization*

"Getting rid of the opinion page altogether would reduce conflict, but you also have to let people engage, because that's good for democracy. We allow people to write letters as long as they're not abusive and they put their name and address down. This might be conflict, but we allow people a voice because it's important not to stifle or silence as well." –*Editor, local news organization*

Many explained that the field does not reward "happy" or "feel good" stories, and that reporting on common ground cannot lead to change. As one journalist put it, there is no Pulitzer Prize for stories about consensus.

"You don't win awards for writing happy stories, you win for changing something. There are explanatory awards, but it's much easier to get rewarded for something divisive, like someone has to have screwed up and not been doing their job." –*Editor, national news organization*

In fact, many said that a journalist or news organization would lose credibility by focusing on common ground.

"Consensus often fails eventually in real life, so you don't want to take the risk of writing positively about it." –*Editor, local news organization*

“There’s less of a penalty for forecasting doom, like a bad storm versus mild weather. That’s why the weather reporters exaggerate bad weather forecasts—because if they don’t, people will get mad that they weren’t warned.”

—*Reporter, national news organization*

3. These journalists emphasized that institutional norms in the media encourage a focus on conflict. But they were divided over whether conflict-based stories actually drive business in the news industry.

Interviewees said that they learn early on that conflict is a valuable narrative device to engage readers. They said that journalists are trained that all stories should have a point of tension or conflict. They tended to assume that stories about common ground necessarily lacked tension.

“Conflict is an easy storytelling device; it’s easy for people to understand.”

—*News director, local news organization*

“You learn this from day one in journalism school that every story should have a tension—it’s a core way to build a narrative.” —*Editor, local news organization*

These journalists also noted that the sources they interview tend to offer up conflict narratives so that journalists will cover their issue or story.

“Political parties and advocacy groups are more sophisticated than they used to be about offering up more conflict-driven perspectives to media so they will get coverage.” —*Editor, local news organization*

“There’s a machinery set up whether we are doing stories or not. State and local politicians are always grinding at each other ... so the conflict story is already there, parties always developing candidates for the next election cycle. There’s always something going on. Arguments are taking place all the time, so the beats are structured around that machinery.” —*Editor, local news organization*

Interviewees also felt that focusing on conflict is connected to readers’ interest and engagement. That is, readers are attracted to stories involving conflict and find them more interesting than stories that are about common ground. A few interviewees contended that people’s endorphins increase in reaction to emotional, conflict-driven stories.

“People respond chemically to things that rile them up.”
–*News director, local news organization*

“Social media drives interest in divisiveness content. Endorphins get activated. Conflict, something bad happening is just far more interesting. It might not be a story if it’s too positive.” –*Reporter, national news organization*

“It’s about response to the audience. You go to places where people care. Part of that is human nature—people are most engaged and most care about an issue when they perceive there is something to be fixed or are unhappy with the status quo. It makes it more interesting, and easier to cover in the sense that people have investment, and readers have deeper interest in it as well.”
–*Editor, local news organization*

Interviewees also said that dwindling resources in newsrooms contribute to the resource strain that they feel also prevents them from covering common ground.

“Back in the day, reporters went to every single board meeting and covered it. In newsrooms that are smaller, they are drawn toward the controversial stories. We will focus resources on where there is tension or conflict or something unusual.” –*Editor, national news organization*

“Journalists are probably not looking for common ground stories anymore. It is easier to just report on the division right in front of your face. Don’t want to ignore it, but it is harder work to do. And as the number of journalists dropped, you don’t have the person power to focus on the good news or consensus story. You also now have to file way more stories than you used to. With less journalists, you focus on the low-hanging fruit.”
–*Reporter, national news organization*

Interviewees differed over whether conflict-based stories are good for business. Some said that conflict is better for clicks and helps sustain media organizations financially.

“I can keep readers for a long time if they spend ten minutes versus two minutes reading my story. It’s good for advertisers because the reader’s engagement increases the chance they’d see the ads.” –*Editor, national news organization*

“If web traffic drives the business model, they will do more conflict, ‘clicky’ stories. You want clickbait to get people whipped up. You have more freedom if your business model isn’t as based on that. Doing original storytelling online can work—people do respond well, but it just takes more resources.”

—*Editor, local news organization*

But several interviewees noted that media organizations are diverse in their business models and use of metrics: while some base success on clicks, others look at more sophisticated measures of audience engagement. These differences in perspectives did not appear to correlate with working for a for-profit or nonprofit outlet, likely because interviewees often had cross-sector experience. Interviewees tended to see both for-profit and nonprofit news as driven by the need to build, maintain, and engage audiences.

“It’s been vastly overstated that there is a drive to chase page views or audience for the sake of it or for making money. That’s never been part of any meaningful conversation I’ve ever been in as a journalist. It’s true we’re more cognizant of business imperatives than we ever were, but readers tend to have more sophisticated interests than other readers think they do. They’re not susceptible to clickbait. If you look at measures, substantive articles do better. There’s actually a built-in aversion to chasing a business model among most journalists. Even if that was a prerogative from above, they would meet a lot of resistance to that.”

—*Editor, local news organization*

“Page views are not the answer anymore. We are prioritizing better journalism and respectable reporting because that’s what engages in the long term.”

—*Editor, local news organization*

4. Interviewees said that in order to cover common ground and divisiveness differently, they need resources, namely time and skills to understand issues more deeply and to connect with communities. They emphasized that individual journalists cannot change institutional practices alone but need support from news organizations.

Interviewees varied in how optimistic they were that news organizations could broaden their focus from conflict-driven stories. Several said the news industry is not set up to encourage a massive shift toward writing about common ground, making it difficult for a lone journalist to buck convention. However, these journalists cited several approaches to facilitating different kinds of reporting and coverage.

Using the right language may be important to engaging journalists on the premise that they overrepresent partisanship and conflict. Many interviewees pushed back against the terms “common ground” and “consensus.” They felt that neither of those terms really represented alternatives to partisan conflict or divisiveness. Instead, they suggested terms like “compromise,” which still involve tension and can direct focus toward the process of achieving compromise.

“Consensus is really about compromise. Solutions may be a better framing and is a more attractive and achievable form of journalism than consensus. Readers are also sick of no solutions, so we are trying to train journalists to focus on this.”
–*Editor, national news organization*

“Consensus-building stories are sometimes treated as fluff. Maybe they could be reframed to focus on how tough the process is.”
–*Editor, local news organization*

Interviewees said that stories about common ground require more resources, especially more time, and involve more of a deep dive into communities. Journalists feel they need time to develop expertise about topics and knowledge of communities in order to spot and report on common ground.

“With consensus stories, there is the element of expertise, reporters need to fully understand topics and have the time to build that expertise. They have to balance the imperative of telling stories quickly with telling thoroughly and accurately. They have to seek out diversity of viewpoints beyond the typical sources we tend to rely on because they are easier, like public officials or advocacy groups. We have to find people who are living the experience, whatever the issue is, and give those voices equal weight. And all of that takes time and money.” –*Editor, local news organization*

“Journalists are interested in doing the stories [about common ground], but there is just less capacity to do the stories. The pressure is to create more news, which means you go with the easiest stories to write. If there were more funding, more grants or fellowships for this type of work, they would write it.”
–*Reporter, national news organization*

“The barrier is time and resources because it’s harder to do a consensus story. It takes going into the community and really talking to people and understanding both sides and what’s happening. It’s a choice to do that kind of story or another.” –*Editor, local news organization*

“To do consensus stories, you have to find a newsroom that’s willing to sacrifice a handful of stories to do one consensus story. Because you need the time to do the community-building, it takes time to embed yourself and dig into the story.”
–*Editor, local news organization*

Interviewees suggested that various forms of diversity in newsrooms could also help encourage coverage of common ground. They felt that journalists who come from different backgrounds could add new perspectives and bring attention to issues that don’t normally get covered

“Diversifying newsrooms, not just with race but life experiences. In every newsroom they are homogenous in many ways, like education, socioeconomic background, training, and types of courses people take that lead them to journalism. Places we fall down in coverage are of military, religion—places journalists just don’t have deep connections to because they have not traditionally come from these spaces.” –*Editor, local news organization*

Journalists also suggested that readers may be attracted to “explainer” pieces that are rooted in facts rather than centered around arguments.

“People really respond to explainers and information-based stories, like Vox Explained. It’s like, you’ve heard about this topic, let me explain what’s going on. These stories have a tone of stepping outside of the arguments and just giving you facts—people respond well to this because they are sick of hearing about stories of polarization, they just want to know what the basic information is about it.” –*Editor, local news organization*

REFLECTIONS

Journalism reports on and shapes the news through decisions such as story selection, narrative devices, and editorial choices. The journalists interviewed for this report believed that focusing on partisan divisiveness accurately reflects a divided nation, which it is their responsibility to represent to the public. Interviewees felt that covering common ground would mean producing “positive” stories that lack tension and that doing so would cut against prevailing norms in the news industry. The terms common ground and consensus did not resonate with interviewees, suggesting a need to find different ways to frame those issues. A survey of journalists could help to establish how widespread these views are and whether these views vary across journalists in different types of media or at different stages of their careers.

These interviewees’ ideas about what journalists and news organizations need to cover common ground differently included setting aside personnel hours to dig into different kinds of stories and developing stronger connections with communities. Case studies could explore how journalists and news organizations are already using personnel differently and building these connections with communities. Case studies could also explore how journalists are finding narrative tension in covering processes of finding common ground or of coming to consensus.

Journalists and news organization leaders themselves are best positioned to develop approaches to covering common ground that are serious, accurate, compelling, and valuable to the public. Engaging those professionals in developing, experimenting with, assessing, and sharing these approaches with their peers can help to strengthen and sustain journalism and democracy.

ABOUT THE HIDDEN COMMON GROUND® INITIATIVE

This research is part of the [Hidden Common Ground](#) initiative, spearheaded by Public Agenda and USA TODAY, with the National Issues Forums Institute, American Amplified, America Talks, and the Kettering Foundation. Through research, journalism, and public engagement, Hidden Common Ground is designed to help Americans identify and strengthen their common ground, productively navigate their differences, and create fair and effective solutions to the challenges of our time.



ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Public Agenda is a national nonpartisan organization dedicated to creating a better, more inclusive and informed democracy for everyone. Through research, engagement, and communications, Public Agenda focuses on building trust and opportunity, raising up the voices of the public, and bridging divides to facilitate progress. Areas of focus include K-12 education, higher education, health care, economic opportunity, and democracy. Find Public Agenda online at PublicAgenda.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/PublicAgenda, and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).



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