How to feed back to your communities

Managing the process for listening and reporting back to your network

Overview

Closing the feedback loop can be one of the most rewarding and creative parts of any project.

Every participant has a right to be kept informed about what is happening to the information they are submitting, where it is being seen and shared, and what's happening as a result.

Not all reports will end up being published or shared and so the feedback loop also means sharing your own reaction to their reports.

When people feel like they're not getting any feedback from you, or external organisations, they can quite quickly become demotivated. It can also lead to a breakdown in trust, going back to those old extractive forms of journalism, where people feel used and then dropped, and once again cut out of the conversation.

Too often, organisations only start thinking about closing the feedback loop at the end of the project – but this is a mistake. Closing the feedback loop should be a consistent, recurring process from the very start of a project, to the very end. Time should be spent to build space and moments into a project plan to do this work.

Key benefits

- Community reporters have increased belief that by engaging, speaking out and sharing insight, things can change.

- Reporters have improved confidence because they know their work is valued and being shared far and wide.

- When you bring communities together with key decision-makers who have influence over their lives at events (informal or formal), it can build human connection and break down the barriers between 'us and them'.

- By making those in power quantify and communicate impact, it works as an accountability mechanism.

- For future projects, the community will remember how they were included and kept in the loop and will be far more likely to put their trust in you again and again.

How to close the feedback loop

The reporter network

- On an individual reporter level, respond to reports that are sent in and provide 1:1 feedback in a timely manner. Their mentor is often best placed to do this, but can also be done by project staff

- Send weekly round-ups or newsletters, either via chat-app groups (Whatsapp/Signal), email or bulk SMS (for offline groups), sharing some of the most impactful stories from that week so reporters can read each other's work.

- Set up informal reporter 'meet-ups' either in-person, online or virtually using chat-apps to keep them updated on the project. These can also be used as an opportunity to create a shared bond and relationships across the network. These can be informal drop-ins or more structured sessions

- At the end of the project, letters of recommendation, certificates and providing references can be a great way to support reporters as they seek new opportunities.

Impact

- Whenever a story is shared, either by you or an external organisation, send a short summary – either written, or perhaps a more personal voice note or call – to the community reporter to let them know where it was shared. Include any quotes or reactions, and ideally any figures or data too (e.g. it was viewed over 200 times, and shared by 17 people with a reach of 12000 Twitter followers).

- If the outputs of your project are aimed at an institutional audience, perhaps in the form of reports of briefings which are less tangible to the reporters themselves, then setting up a community news feed or microsite can be a brilliant way to host the stories they have been sending in. The reporters can then have a nice neat link to their stories online, with a photo and byline, to share with their friends/family and connect to a wider portfolio of work. For those offline, printing out a copy of a story for the reporter to keep is another option.

- If you are trying to influence a particular audience with the community insight – for example a local authority – it can be very effective to invite a key stakeholder from that organisation to come and speak to the network to explain exactly how the insight is being used, and what impact it is having. This has immense value for the network.

Community playback

- With co-production projects, community playback is vital. With film content for example, this could be done in the form of online screenings, or in-person community events where their films are shown. Hosting an accompanying panel Q&A session afterwards to discuss the stories can be a brilliant way to create an equal platform and connect the communities with those you are trying to influence.

- You can also support your reporters to do their own community playback on a smaller scale – for example, providing transport funds so they can return to the community in person and show them the finished piece.

- Co-production assets often include beautiful imagery, photos and shots of communities and their families which they may not often have access to. Make sure to share this back with those featured either in printed or digital form.

Case Study – *Groundswell*

In our project with Groundswell, monitoring the impact of Covid-19 on those experiencing homelessness, we recently invited a senior figure within NHS England to attend an informal online zoom session with the community reporter network who had been sharing their challenges around housing, accessing healthcare and dealing with addiction during the pandemic.

The NHS Lead talked through exactly what impacts the insights from the community reporters are having, including who they are being used to influence internally and future plans. They were also completely honest about their own frustrations.

It helped to break down the barrier between a large, intimidating institution and the community reporters, removing the 'us and them'. The reaction from the community reporters was incredibly positive, helping to boost their confidence and conviction that the insights they are sharing are contributing to tangible change.

Case Study – *Beyond the Bite*

In our *Beyond the Bite* project in Sierra Leone, the community reporter network was trained how to use smartphones to produce compelling films telling the stories of life at the sharp end of the healthcare system.

Once they had finished producing their films, we coordinated a community film festival where the films were screened back in the communities where the stories came from, followed by a Q&A with key local stakeholders.

The communities also presented their ideas and solutions for how the healthcare system could be improved in the form of a manifesto with key recommendations, and encouraged local leaders to make commitments to addressing the issues raised in the films.