

Two perspectives on developing benchmarks for representation in local news coverage using an automated local news mapping tool

By collaborating with NKCDC, we deepened our understanding of the usefulness of our team's tool and how coverage shapes narratives within communities.

Proposed hed - Two perspectives on collaborating with community for a highly technical project

Proposed dek: By collaborating with the NKCDC, we deepened our understanding of the usefulness of our tool and how coverage shapes narratives within communities.

In March 2022, The Lenfest Local Lab @ The Inquirer, the Inquirer's emerging Community & Engagement desk, the Brown Institute for Media Innovation, and New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) started a series of conversations that would span about nine weeks. The original objective of these conversations was to co-design and co-develop community-informed [benchmarks](#) for using our [local news mapping tool](#) to analyze community representation in coverage. The co-design process was critical to ensuring that the data displayed on the map would not live inside a vacuum, and that insights from the tool would incorporate feedback that reflected the realities of residents that live in communities being covered. So that the questions and insights the tool elicits could be grounded in the reality of those affected by coverage.

As we came together, we realized there was much more to discuss, grapple with and confront. Together, we realized that mapping local news coverage could merely be an entry point for those broader conversations about pushing for change.

Below, the lab and NKCDC outline why each group came to the table to have these discussions, why this community-centered work is so important as a model for other newsrooms, and what each team felt were some of the key takeaways from our conversations.

**Editor's note: A key theme that came up in our concluding conversation was the significance of acknowledging power dynamics in our discussions and collaborations. It is important for us to note that as the party with data about coverage and direct lines of communication to The Philadelphia Inquirer newsroom, we entered these discussions from a privileged position.*

The Lab's perspective on community conversations with NKCDC

Background

In early 2020, the Lenfest Local Lab @ The Inquirer and the Brown Institute for Media Innovation came together to try to answer a simple question: What can we learn by using computation to map local news coverage? This question was inspired by a 2009 study at Ryerson University that measured the Toronto Star's reporting by its quantity, subject matter, and frequency of coverage through the lens of geography.

The Star study was manually done and very time intensive. It made us wonder what it would be like to explore similar questions more quickly, by leveraging technology to automate the extraction of locations and speed up the mapping of those locations, purportedly in real-time.

As we set out to do this work, we consulted many trusted advisors, including Roxann Stafford, the former managing director at the Knight-Lenfest Local Fund, who has extensive experience working at the intersection of technology, race, and community. In our conversations with Roxann and others, it became clear that our computational work and the tool itself could not live in a vacuum, and that whatever insights we hoped our tool could generate about the geographic equity of coverage needed to be informed by the reality of those who are disproportionately affected by coverage.

A tool like ours could show concentrations of coverage in neighborhoods, but the more critical piece is understanding what that cluster of coverage really means for residents of that area.

Is this concentration of coverage about a specific topic that may perpetuate harmful stereotypes? Is this concentration of coverage a true representation of what happens in the community on a day to day basis? Is this coverage useful to the community? What does equity in coverage look like for residents of a neighborhood?

These were some of the questions that emerged throughout our tool prototyping process.

Why Kensington?

The Lenfest Local Lab @ The Inquirer was founded with the mission of improving the local news experience for residents of the Philadelphia area. Be it through new, more accessible formats, or by curating and contextualizing news at a hyperlocal level, the lab's objective had been to explore ways of better serving communities through intentional, thoughtful product development.

As we prototyped our mapping tool, the lab was working on a project related to our goals of accessibility and geographic equity in local news: a bilingual, hyperlocal newsletter for residents of Philadelphia's West Kensington and Fairhill neighborhoods. Work on the newsletter had spanned about a year, and involved multiple conversations with the community to really understand the neighborhoods' residents' news and information needs. During that process, we met with NKCDC's Lowell Brown, communications manager, and Katsí Miranda-Lozada, director of community engagement, and we came to understand the organization's deep commitment to equitable community work in the Kensington area.

Kensington is a large neighborhood in Philadelphia, composed of several smaller neighborhoods, and Inquirer coverage varies within each of those smaller areas. Parts of the neighborhood are rapidly gentrifying and becoming popular restaurant destinations in the city, while other parts are experiencing the effects of intersecting opioid and gun violence epidemics that disproportionately affect residents in this part of the city. Coverage in Kensington tends to center on crime, while other stories highlight aspects of gentrification, and are told through an outsider lens.

Meanwhile, our collaborator, Sabrina Vourvoulias, the editor of the Communities & Engagement desk of the Philadelphia Inquirer, had previously worked with NKCDC's executive director, Dr. Bill McKinney. She had published his [writing on the principles of community development](#) and his (and NKCDC's) take on a number of Philadelphia — and community-specific — issues at a different news venue. Sabrina knew him to be a thoughtful and collaborative community leader, who, if engaged in this process, would provide clear-sighted and honest feedback. As such, he and NKCDC were poised to become valuable collaborators for the desk. Additionally, NKCDC — unlike some of the other Kensington community-led nonprofits — serves members across demographic divides within the community.

In having all of these considerations come together for our team, we felt we could work in Kensington in a way that mitigated harm and would also lead to important insights for our work and for our collaborators alike.

Our model for community collaboration and discussion

In approaching NKCDC to collaborate on this work, we were aware that there may be skepticism on their part. We anticipated questions to the effect of: *Why now? To what end? Will this really impact structural issues in coverage?*

To ensure we were all comfortable with the pace and structure, we took the following steps:

- 1) **Create time and space to truly listen.** We ensured we had enough time and space to explain our work and objectives, and built-in time to listen to NKCDC's concerns and questions. This spanned two hour-long meetings, along with answering questions via email to make sure we were all on the same page about things that were important to each of our groups.
- 2) **Make an opt-out easy at any time.** We made clear that if things didn't feel right as we moved along in our discussions, there would always be an opt-out option. This went hand-in-hand with a meeting schedule we all agreed upon.
- 3) **Agree on a comfortable meeting cadence.** In our particular case, we initially agreed to having a minimum of three recurring calls over the span of three weeks, but we ended up extending to seven weeks. Overall, we convened for more than 10 hours over the span of nine weeks — including the meetings we held before agreeing to have concerted discussions about our work.
- 4) **Create structured conversations.** We ensured that all of our conversations were guided and structured. To achieve this, we kicked off conversations by using a manually-created sample set of Inquirer stories to read and have as a reference point for what recent coverage looked like in Kensington, which was sent ahead of our first group discussion. We also created a running Google doc of meeting agendas, pre-meeting tasks, and meeting notes that was circulated the Thursday before each Monday morning meeting.
- 5) **Adopt an equitable collaborations framework.** Each year, a portion of our team's budget was allocated to collaborations, and in this case, that took the shape of community investment.", we had allocated a portion of our budget for community investment. In order

to decide how to best use those funds, we had a conversation with NKCDC and developed a statement of work.

Key takeaways

Once we agreed upon the structure and flow of our discussions, we came together and had deeply insightful conversations.

Each group took away their own set of learnings that, when taken as a whole, can create a powerful framework for thinking of ways in which news organizations and community can both play roles in transforming the way a neighborhood is served by journalism.

Here are some of the main highlights for our team:

- 1) **Context, follow-ups, and volume of stories were recurring themes.** A reporter often intends to keep up with an evolving story in a community. However, when follow-up stories are written, they tend to lack the adequate context community groups think is needed when covering complex social issues that impact residents. We also found ourselves asking the question: *Even when there is a high number of stories written about a community, what is the value of that volume of coverage if they are mostly one-off mentions of places in Kensington, especially if the reference can have a stigmatizing effect?*
- 2) **Reporters must ask whose voices are being prioritized in their stories.** Oftentimes, stories about Kensington are told through an outsider's lens looking in. In an effort to be more representative, there is an opportunity for residents to exercise their agency within these stories by elevating community voices. Many times residents are well-positioned to offer informed takes on hyperlocal issues as the ones with lived experience in the area.
- 3) **Physical boundaries matter in storytelling.** We discussed differences in the way north Kensington was written about, versus the rapidly-gentrifying southern section of Kensington. The disparity in tone and topic of this coverage can hinder the way community members can navigate over-arching neighborhood issues, since this phenomena shapes the public discourse around what is and isn't taking place in Kensington.

NKCDC's perspective on conversations with the Lab and The Inquirer

Background - About NKCDC

New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) is a 37-year-old community-based nonprofit with offices a block from the Somerset El train stop in North Philadelphia. Although some of our programs, like housing counseling, serve homeowners and renters across Philadelphia, our affordable housing development, economic initiatives, and new health and wellness collaborations have increasingly focused on Kensington: neighborhoods north of Lehigh Avenue, flanking Kensington Avenue.

These diverse efforts are grounded in three shared values:

- **Community driven**—Work inspired and implemented by our community and for their benefit.
- **Trauma-informed**—Building networks that acknowledge individual and community trauma and build supportive relationships to clients, community members, and staff.
- **Social justice and equity**—Focusing on the areas of greatest need and putting those most impacted in charge.

We believe that community development can and should benefit all residents. We use a strategic combination of real estate development, community engagement, and people-centered direct services to ensure all our neighbors can remain—and thrive—where they choose to live.

About Kensington

Like many Philadelphia neighborhoods, Kensington is home to renters and homeowners, seniors and students, small business owners and essential workers. Unlike any other Philadelphia neighborhood, Kensington faces the [worst health outcomes of 46 neighborhoods](#) in a 2019 study by the City of Philadelphia and Drexel University. It has the [worst gun violence of anywhere in Philadelphia](#) according to a 2021 Philadelphia Inquirer analysis. City agencies estimate the neighborhood supports at least 800 unhoused people, most suffering from substance use disorder. Attorney General Josh Shapiro says there is a [billion-dollar illegal drug economy](#) operating on Kensington's residential streets.

Media plays an outsize role in Kensington's story. To those who don't live here, Kensington is a caricature: a worthless wasteland, the set of violent video games and sensational TV exposés, a stubborn stain on the face of Philadelphia. Politicians and developers have license to propose anything they want for Kensington without consulting anyone who lives here, because in the regional imagination, no one of value could possibly live here. The media feeds into this deficit view of the community, which further allows the extraction of the incredible value that does exist.

Fumbling efforts at providing balanced coverage often do more harm. Flash-in-the-pan feel-good stories profile visiting do-gooders who come to Kensington to hand out sandwiches, paint a mural, preach salvation, or advance their political campaign. They stay as long as flash bulbs are popping. These antics have a positive impact—for the visitors, the news outlets who validate them, and the Philadelphians across the tracks who feel relieved of responsibility to support substantive change. They leave little lasting change in Kensington.

Collaborating with The Lenfest Lab and The Inquirer

NKCDC accepted Lenfest Lab's invitation to talk about community news coverage in the hope that we could challenge a bit of the mechanism that produces this tedious and destructive Kensington story, week after week, year after year.

We had some apprehensions. We didn't know what other organizations the Lab was talking to and what it might do with our input. We were uncertain about how the mapping tool might be useful to community, and whether it was already being used by The Philadelphia Inquirer, let alone at other news organizations.

When conversations began, however, we were impressed by the team's candor, humility, and obvious commitment to listening and discovery. We appreciated the opportunity to deepen our relationship with The Philadelphia Inquirer and expand our understanding of how large news organizations work. We were heartened that Sabrina Vourvoulias, the Inquirer's first Senior Editor of Communities and Engagement, participated in each call and probed for practical ways that the group's ideas could take root at the Inquirer. And we quickly discovered tangible things

NKCDC could do on its own to amplify the voice of residents and organizations in our community.

Offering three senior staff for weekly meetings felt like a significant commitment, but the conversations were so generative we were excited to participate.

Key Takeaways

Each meeting started with an agenda, but conversations often skated between intersecting ideas. We're highlighting three important themes here.

- 1. True stories are complex and need context.** News stories are often focused on singular events and lack the broader context of history, previous news stories, or longer-term community impact. NKCDC loves to hear a story about Kensington that acknowledges the creativity and resilience of Kensington neighbors alongside the daunting challenges they face. We love to see stories told from multiple perspectives and not just two conflicting ones; to understand the political motivations of a health story and the health implications of politics.

Unfortunately, news deadlines are usually tight. Audience attention spans are short, or we worry they are. Most journalists, news outlets, and nonprofits need to make money. Both nonprofits and the media can suffer from poor internal communication and territorial mindsets. Community organizations and news organizations can find ourselves selling a tight, catchy tale when we should be inviting a nuanced conversation.

One way to discover more complicated, true stories may be through the Lenfest Lab's mapping tool. Using location as a proxy for community and editorial desk as an indicator of theme, the tool makes it possible to see what kind of articles have focused on certain communities, which communities receive less attention, and how those foci change over time. It has the ability to highlight gaps in coverage and where there are opportunities for follow-up. Those one-time, feel-good stories won't exist in isolation if journalists inquire about what happened months or a year afterwards, exploring if the efforts were impactful and sustainable, or another example of uncoordinated efforts that lead to no change.

- 2. Communities have a wealth of resources for telling complete stories, but community sources are not always respected.** On-the-ground reporting gives a stamp of credibility to journalists, but it seems to us that media organizations find the same kind of first-hand experience suspect in their sources, even if they have been eyewitnesses their whole lives. Community information is treated as inferior or biased, while less engaged, institutional voices are set up as authoritative, even when they lack complete experience or come with their own bias. In Kensington we have witnessed times when community sources are both the basis of a story and seemingly not worth quoting in it. Reporting that simply extracts a story and recapitulates it without credit (except when the source requests it) is simply intellectual exploitation.

We see many reporters working diligently to cultivate relationships of trust in the communities they cover. Certainly, building trust means a commitment to accuracy, and honoring confidentiality or giving attribution as appropriate. But trust also requires being aware of power. People who have little experience talking to the press deserve to understand journalistic roles, jargon, process, and their own rights as sources before they find themselves in the news.

Community members own their stories and experiences. They should have power in conversations with the media. Mutual respect built through relationships with communities considers news deadlines as well as shifting community dynamics and allows for co-creation of stories, rather than extraction of quotes or sound bites. People damaged by misrepresentation will be reluctant to make themselves available again.

- 3. Don't make the news.** News organizations play a powerful role in shaping public opinion. For a newspaper of record like The Philadelphia Inquirer, that public extends to elected officials, to policy makers locally and nationally, and to future readers.

News organizations prize accuracy, fairness and objectivity. But too often journalism isn't an exploratory process; the frame of a story is fixed at the moment it is pitched. Siloed editorial desks, fast deadlines, financial goals, official explanations, and popular assumptions all have outsized influence in setting the scope and direction of a story. The result is that news organizations can create the news in the guise of reporting on it.

NKCDC often receives calls seeking quotes to polish off stories that have already been written. But we see little value in being an accessory to content that we had no role in shaping. Silence can speak volumes, and we hope that news organizations and their audiences learn to listen for the voices that are not represented in published stories.

What we can do next

As a result of our discussions, NKCDC identified a few action items to help elevate community power and voice in the media.

- We have started to put our own primary source materials, like letters, opinion pieces, and internal planning documents, online. In future interactions with reporters, we will ask that journalists link to primary materials and documents in our own words. These primary sources add some of the context to news stories that cannot be covered in every article.
- We are moving to assist community organizations in building their capacity and skills to host their own primary documents, video, or podcasts online. Building this capacity will create more avenues for sharing community voices beyond the media and create a library of community history and background that supports more in-depth reporting.
- We want to leverage our connections with journalists and press to demystify the media for community members, including training on the media landscape, structure of news organizations, media terminology, roles and rights, how to talk to the press, etc. Collaborating with news organizations to build rapport expands our community's platform while improving journalists' access to leads and sources.

At times it appears that fears about the viability of a news organization as a business shortchange opportunities for full, accurate reporting. But NKCDC sees more opportunities than threats in imagining news organizations as collaborative partners: encouraging vibrant community voices, media-savvy sources, and a diversity of news outlets. The mapping tool is an opportunity for starting conversations about equitable community coverage and can provide specific graphics and data to prompt reflection and growth.