

# LISTEN TO PEOPLE TALK

## *A window on different views*

**J**OURNALISTS SPEND MOST OF THEIR REPORTING time listening to answers — answers to questions *they* have framed.

Covering an issue as difficult as race relations requires another kind of listening: listening not for answers but for nuances and patterns. Reporters on many of the most engaging projects we reviewed spent time listening to conversations people were having with *each other* — either in community-wide forums, small study circles and focus groups or other gatherings of various sizes and settings.

Sometimes the news organization itself set up the conversation. The important element was that journalists stepped back to listen when people began talking to one another. The musings, opinions, concerns and questions that arise when people speak about the topic, unprompted, can provide the best guide for issues important to a community.

“I saw it as a natural complement to other research we were doing,” said Bob Moore, now managing editor of the *El Paso Times*, which sponsored a community-wide forum in 1998 for the series “Attitudes and Answers,” about relations between the city’s white and Hispanic El Paso residents.

The series included a poll and more tradi-

tional reporting techniques. However, the forum, Moore said, provided two additional benefits: It allowed voices and views that were important to include but that reporters might not have found beyond issuing a general invitation for people to speak up. And it gave readers a chance to connect with the series in an active way.

“One thing that struck me as I was leaving the forum,” Moore recalled, “was seeing clusters of six or seven people sitting together and talking about this issue. The forum provided a framework for them to feel comfortable having these conversations.”

Similarly, small-group discussions can provide an atmosphere for people to open up in ways that no traditional interview technique could. In its 1993 series “A Question of Color,” the *Akron Beacon Journal* held a series of focus groups while reporters watched from behind two-way mirrors.

Within the security of small, segregated groups, white women said they cross the street to avoid black men; black men said they wouldn’t want their daughters marrying whites. When the groups included both blacks and whites, the participants restricted their discussions to the goal of achieving racial accord.



The El Paso Times gave citizens a chance to discuss racial issues in a forum broadcast on KVIA-TV, its partner.

## SPONSORING FORUMS

Some news organizations still do not feel completely comfortable convening such conversations. Smaller papers and broadcasters may find the logistics daunting but, more often, their newsrooms voice a lingering reluctance to step outside the bounds of traditional reporting techniques.

That was the case at *The News Journal* of Wilmington, Delaware, in 1998 when the paper co-sponsored a forum (with the YMCAs and YWCAs of New Castle County and the University of Delaware) in connection with its five-part series “The Turning Point.”

“*The News Journal* had not played that kind of role in launching and coordinating public discussion,” said then-Managing Editor Randall Beck, now executive editor of the *Argus Leader* in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “It was not really part of the culture at this newspaper.”

Beck said the objections were familiar to anyone who has witnessed a newsroom take on its first civic journalism project: Were they crossing some line? Weren’t they becoming part of the story, not just an observer?

Beck said, however, the editors guiding the project were confident it would be good for the paper and for the state of Delaware, and they never wavered from the direction they were taking.

In the end, Beck said, no one on the staff felt they had gone too far. “In retrospect,” Beck said, “there’s a feeling of pride at the role the newspaper played in the project.”

Often when broadcast news operations sponsored community conversations, they also used them as programming tools, allowing the audience to listen in directly. KVIA-TV, the ABC affiliate in El Paso, partnering with the *Times* on “Attitudes and Answers,” recorded the entire two-hour public forum held in

connection with the project. The station broadcast portions that evening in its regular news show as well as a one-hour show, an edited version of the forum, the following Sunday.

KVIA-TV newsroom action officer Ace Bole said reporters also used citizen views gathered at the forum to enrich the individual stories produced for newscasts as part of the series.

## FINDING DISCUSSIONS

News organizations don’t always need to sponsor such conversations. Many successful projects found discussions already going on in the community and were able to get the benefit of honest exchanges simply by careful listening.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* had held its own study circles for a 1998 series on poverty but for its 2000 series on diversity and immigration, the paper built on small-group discussions already being sponsored by the League of Women Voters.

The News Journal, Wilmington, Del. Nov. 20, 1998 Page A3B

A NEWS JOURNAL SPECIAL REPORT


With the publication of today's special report, "A Turning Point," The News Journal continues its look at race relations in Delaware by bringing together about 500 people who are committed to making a difference.

An outgrowth of The News Journal's working series of special reports on race, the forum shows what can happen when concerned Delawareans of different races and ethnicities come together to examine the problems of race and to explore ways to progress toward accepting a more multicultural society.

**A Turning Point**

**A PEOPLE TOGETHER**

**UNITING TO FIND SOLUTIONS**



Lonnie Thomas (left) and Robert 'Boss' Buchanan, head of the Delaware chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute, at the forum.

About 500 people of different races, ages and backgrounds come from across Delaware to discuss frustrations, hopes and dreams of a diverse society

**By GUY WILSON**

**T**hey came to talk about race and racism, to venture into the sensitive territory that has divided Delawareans for three centuries.

They left with ideas and a new commitment to do their part to bring Delawareans together to change the course of the world for the better.

Black and white, young and old, about 500 people came to the University of Delaware campus Thursday for a community forum on race relations. They talked, they laughed, they shared their frustrations, their hopes and their dreams.

Sponsored by The News Journal, the YWCA of New Castle County and the university, "A Turning Point, A People Together" was enthusiastically embraced by participants, while acknowledging that

much work remained to be done.

"I don't know any other place where this type of dialogue is going on," said Shacey Madala, a senior vice president at the DuPont Co.

But Madala questioned that Thursday's forum is only the beginning of what must be a continuing dialogue. "Just when you think you've communicated to death, you've only just started."

St. Curtis Hildie, president and publisher of The News Journal, praised the participants for their willingness to delve into what he called "a difficult, if not a dangerous" topic. "We didn't fully anticipate there would be such widespread and diverse participation as you've shown by your attendance," he said.

Participants broke into three groups to discuss the topics of affirmative action, tolerance, respect and education. There also was a demonstration of the YWCA's study circles on race relations. The forum was capped off with a talk by Harvard University professor and best-selling author Cornel West.

"Wow, I think there's something happening in Delaware," West said as he took the podium, adding that he felt "a great spirit in the room."

See FORMER—A3B

© THE NEWS JOURNAL

When The News Journal of Wilmington co-sponsored a public forum for its 1998 series "A Turning Point," it was the first time the paper had been a convener.

For a segment on race in the workplace in its 1998 "About Race" series, KRON-TV, then the NBC affiliate in San Francisco, sat in on a discussion group that met regularly at the NASA Ames Research Center. Its cameras captured exchanges as enlightening for viewers as they were for participants.

One well-dressed black woman spoke about her co-worker, an attractive blonde named Alison.

"When we see Alison," she said, "we assume — and I'm not saying it's right but there's an assumption — that she has not gone through the trials and tribulations that I have. She is the stereotype model of the perfect person,

according to the advertisements that I grew up with."

When the camera turned to Alison for a reaction, she looked astonished. "Wow," she said after a moment. "That is how you see me. You do see me as the model American person. I'm not black. There's nothing I can do about that."

"If she walked into a meeting here," the first speaker continued, "they would not discount her right away. But when I walk into the room, if I am not dressed in a manner that is going to command some respect, I'm going to be immediately discounted. I'm 50 percent valueless."

The series won the 1999 Batten Award.

The *Virginian-Pilot* in Hampton Roads demonstrated the value of careful listening at public meetings with an October 1999 story about the role prejudice played in the opposition to a proposed light-rail system linking Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Arguments against light rail, as the story noted, revolved around cost, taxes, efficiency and growth. But reporter Mike Knepler caught a subtext that sounded almost like a coded appeal to those who fear blacks. He quoted the president of the Virginia Beach Council of Civic Organizations:

"It's going to make us more urban. There's going to be all sorts of people. There's going to be people who are coughing and not everybody is earning \$45,000, \$50,000 in a business suit and has a laptop computer. You're going to have some people who are bag ladies ... people who ride it have to be aware that they're going to meet a lot of people that they didn't meet before and they're going to have to tolerate a lot of things that they wouldn't normally have to tolerate."

It took a great deal of careful reporting to establish that, indeed, race was playing a role in the debate but Knepler's story effectively captured the complexity of the emotions being exploited by light-rail opponents.

**DEVELOPING SKILLS**

To get the most out of community conversations, reporters must develop a different set of listening skills and reflexes than they employ when conducting an interview.

Valuable tips can be found in “Tapping Civic Life,” a publication of the Pew Center based on research by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Tips listed below are especially crucial for an honest exploration of race, an issue about which people are as likely to try to conceal feelings as reveal them.

- **Listen, not just for what people say, but for where they get stuck.**

On racial issues, there is going to be plenty of territory where people — even those earnestly attempting honest dialogue — will fear to tread. Those are going to be the very places where readers, viewers or listeners probably need more information. Rather than leave topics out of coverage because they’re not mentioned, reporters need to provide more perspectives on them.

- **Pay attention to the language people use.**

When trying to cover a community’s race relations, reporters have to try to understand and capture the full and complex ways people think about the topic. Certain words and phrases have become a kind of code that can mask thoughts — or reveal them in ways the speaker doesn’t intend. Reporters from *The Times* in Trenton, New Jersey, kept hearing the phrase “comfort zone” and realized that it referred to self-segregation. People wanted to stay in a comfort zone with others of the same race. It’s a good idea to probe the meaning of these phrases with the speakers and, if necessary, decode the thoughts to paint a more accurate picture.



*The Virginian-Pilot's story about the role race played in a light-rail referendum demonstrated the value of careful listening.*

- **Produce a synthesis, not a record.**

Particularly in large community forums, it’s unlikely that a single speaker will utter an all-encompassing quote that captures a community’s concerns or even a particular point of view. Piece together nuggets of insight that emerge over time.

- **Watch out for your own preconceived views.**

A reporter’s biases can detract from any story but, in race coverage, the harm can be deadly. Reporters have to listen nondefensively, even if they feel they’re being attacked as members of a particular racial group or as members of the media. Likewise, they have to bring journalistic skepticism even to discussions with which they generally agree.

*For a copy of “Tapping Civic Life,” contact the Pew Center for Civic Journalism at [news@pccj.org](mailto:news@pccj.org), or 202-331-3200, or view online at [www.pewcenter.org](http://www.pewcenter.org).*

## THE PROJECTS

### *The Charlotte Observer:* Creating Community Conversations

The “e-race-ers.” That’s what Annelle Houk thought they should be called, her group of “low-maintenance friends” who got together monthly to talk about race. Included were a couple of college professors, nurses, former schoolteachers, a psychologist, a fireman. This odd assortment of men and women, black and white, all ages, all income levels, could never have gotten together on their own; they probably would not even have met.

*The Charlotte Observer* introduced them and gave them a group identity. The newspaper had asked, in its pages and on its Web site, for volunteers to join “deliberative discussion groups” as part of a project on race relations.



STEPHANIE GRACE LIM, THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Valerie Patterson hugs Annelle Houk after a study circle meeting initially put together by *The Observer*. Group members continued to meet for two more years.

The discussion groups were meant simply to involve readers in an active way. The paper did not cover them but a reporter did attend some meetings to get a flavor of how the members interacted.

A number of newspapers have used similar techniques to cover a variety of issues. *The Observer* has found such groups useful on other projects, as well. Its experience with the groups who met on the race issue in 1997 is one example of the added life such an approach can give a project.

Houk’s group of 13 people was one of three that met weekly for three weeks in the fall of 1997 for open and honest conversations about race relations in Charlotte, including personal experiences with people of another color.

“When they said at the end of three weeks ‘this is the last session,’ we just unanimously agreed: ‘No, we’re not through talking to each other,’ ” said Houk. “We wanted to go on.”

So on they went — for two years — without any further input from the paper, continuing the conversation, a seed for racial understanding in the Charlotte community.

“The conversation enriched their lives,” said Fannie Flono, *The Observer* editor who organized the discussions. “This idea that people who thought they were so different held the same values.”

## ASSEMBLING A GROUP

Flono was doing a one-year stint as public editor in 1997 when *The Observer* launched the project “Side by Side.” The three-month series included a poll and a special section in addition to stories in the daily paper that covered a wide range of issues.

It was Flono’s job to recruit participants and assign them to one of the three groups depending on when they were available to meet. She also tried to put together groups that represented a cross section of people to get as complete a discussion as possible.

“I should have used a computer,” she said, “but I just arranged the groups myself. This consumed four months of my life. To make it work, you have to be available for them to call and you have to help them solve their problems — kind of like a nanny.”

Flono said the paper hired a facilitator to train two members of each group to guide the discussions and paid them so they would take their jobs seriously. The groups met in libraries, where space was free, so the total cost for the paper was just a few thousand dollars.

The paper’s investment made a big impact on Houk and her group. Houk said the members didn’t click immediately. In fact, she said, they lost one member, a minister who began citing Jesus and God in his remarks. “It’s not that we were heathen,” said Houk, “But somebody abruptly told him that we’d agreed not to base our thoughts on what’s in the Bible.”

## GENERATING GOOD DISCUSSION

Other than that, Houk said, all views were welcome and they had quite a diversity of opinion. At 70, Houk was not the oldest member of the group; another member was 78. The youngest, Houk said, were African-American men in their early 30s. “They were angry young men,” she said, “and that was nice to have.” Houk said it was an important experience for white members to hear firsthand the young men’s experience with racism and their belief that their opportunities had been restricted because of their race.

The group had quite a different reaction to the claim of a white woman that she’d been oppressed because she was Catholic. “We didn’t really feel her suffering had been as great as she suggested,” said Houk, “and someone challenged her in some way that almost reduced her to tears. We all rushed in to tell her that we differed with her not to make her feel bad but to open her mind.”

She said the woman recovered and, in fact, became one of the group’s most reliable members, even cooking and bringing food to share when the group was meeting independently after the newspaper’s involvement ended.

“We got to where we could really talk about anything,” said Houk. “Homosexuality came up and one man made the flat statement that any son of his that got involved with another man would never set foot in his house again.

“We jumped down his throat and we worked that guy over until he said, ‘I would have to give him a chance, wouldn’t I?’ ”

The group disbanded in the summer of 1999. But Houk has made lasting relationships. “It came to the end of its usefulness,” she said. “When we see each other or exchange e-mail now, it has nothing to do with the group. We just care about each other.”

## Minnesota Public Radio/KMOJ-FM, Minneapolis: Connecting via Videoconferencing

The idea was to bring together two very different groups of people to see if simply talking to each other could lead to a better understanding. Lucille’s Kitchen, a small soul-food restaurant in a strip mall in North Minneapolis, was connected electronically via videoconferencing technology with Crookston, Minnesota, a small, mostly white, farming community fallen on hard times.

The participants entered with open minds and good intentions but, by the end of the first one-hour conversation — broadcast live on Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) and public radio station KMOJ-FM in Minneapolis, it seemed they had found more differences than similarities, more hostility than harmony.

The initial discord, however, made the eventual outcome of this experiment in listening seem

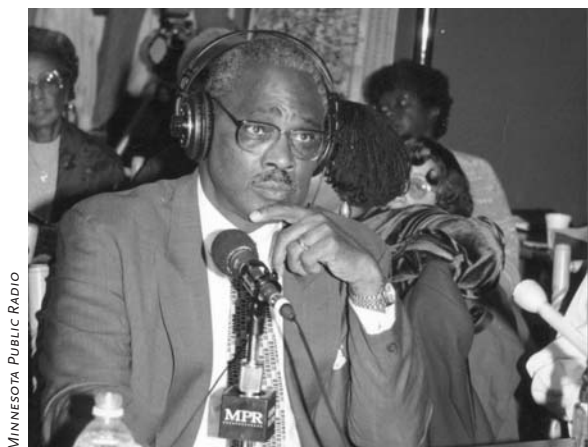
more extraordinary. By the end of the four one-hour conversations, spread out over three months, the two groups had built a bond of understanding that lasts, among some individuals, to this day. The participants and, in turn, the audience learned how valuable listening can be in building bridges.

The series earned the title “The Best Example of Community Journalism” from *City Pages*, the Twin Cities’ alternative newspaper, which described it this way:

*“This riveting four-part series ... highlighted the conflicts and kinships between two struggling Minnesota communities, one rural, the other urban .... While often expressed in terms of frustration, the hopes and dreams that came to light were so similar they were revelatory.”*

Len Witt, director of MPR’s Civic Journalism Initiative, who coordinated the project, said it could serve as a model for a national discussion on race.

“I think public radio can do that,” said Witt, “because one thing we do, with our civic journalism, is to make sure that voices are heard that don’t normally get heard. When we bring people together to talk about public policy, we make sure everyone has a voice and we amplify what they say.”



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Moderator Al McFarlane listened from Lucille’s Kitchen in Minneapolis as rural residents in Crookston talked about the connection they felt to urban communities of color.



Star Tribune photo by Jerry Hult. Sarah Lagos of St. Paul came to Minneapolis to take part in a radio forum connecting people at Lucille's Kitchen on Plymouth Avenue N, with residents of Crookston, Minn. "Don't tell me what works for you whites will work for me because I know it won't," she said. "Let's get together and talk about what'll work for each other."

**FORUM from B1**  
**Rural, urban residents want dialogue to continue — in person**

"We've had very preliminary discussions about trying to make that happen at some point," said Melissa Sommer, managing producer of Minnesota Public Radio, whose stations were connected for an hour to listeners of community station KMOJ-FM in Minneapolis. Sponsors of the conversation include Minnesota Rural Partners, University of Minnesota-Crookston, KMOJ, Insight News, MPR, the Star Tribune and KTCA-TV, Channel 2.

A standing-room-only crowd gathered at Lucille's for what was billed as a way for a distressed farming area to form a partnership with an inner-city neighborhood grows used to suffering.

"We're new to injustice," retired Lutheran pastor, Milo Mathison said from Crookston. "For those at Lucille's Kitchen, that's their life. They have a graduate degree in injustice." There were appreciative murmurs at Lucille's as he spoke.

Mathison spoke of the need for a Martin Luther King to arise on the prairie to galvanize anger over low farm prices. Others from Crookston, however, disagreed that "injustice" is the right word for what's happening to farmers.

Carolyn Weber, who described herself as a "recovering farmer," deemed the situation not so much as injustice as "change that happens over a period of time" as the market system adapts to new realities.

A speaker in Crookston, who drew applause there by suggesting that education and optimism are the solutions at both ends drew a chilly silence at Lucille's.

Sarah Lagos of St. Paul stood at Lucille's to tell the story of her daughter, an Ivy League law grad who became a judge in Illinois' Cook County but "still gets faldowed around in stores" by suspicious security personnel.

"Don't tell me that what works for you whites will work for me," she said, "because I know it won't. Let's get together and talk about what'll work for each other."

The Rev. Jerry McAfee, at Lucille's, turned the tables slightly on his fellow pastor Mathison by suggesting, in a lively mini-sermon, that what has sustained the black community is its Christian faith. Responded Mathison, dryly: "I have always admired the serenity of the black preacher."

The next three Lucille's-Crookston conversations are to take place on March 2, March 23 and April 20.

The Star Tribune, a partner in the Lucille's Kitchen conversations, featured an outspoken Sarah Lagos in covering the first meeting.

**MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS**

In fact, that desire to get diverse voices into the discussion of public policy is what led to the rural-urban conversations between Lucille's Kitchen and Crookston. The media partners — which included the *Star Tribune*; *Insight News*, a black-owned newspaper; KMOJ; MPR and public television station KTCA — convened groups of citizens to develop questions for Minnesota's gubernatorial candidates in 1998. Crookston and Lucille's Kitchen were connected for a discussion of economic issues.

After that first forum, Crookston minister Milo Mathison was struck by the concerns the two groups shared and wrote a letter to Lucille's Kitchen, asking to continue the conversation.

*"We are traveling down a road that is new to us. We are plunging into poverty in record numbers. We feel the foundations of justice have been pulled from under us. We are being exploited and few seem to care,"* he wrote. *"As African-Americans living in the inner city, you are among the few that can honestly say to us, 'We know how you feel. We have been there.'"*

The participants at Lucille's were happy to work with Crookston residents and the media partners used digital phone lines, small video cameras and portable monitors to hook up the two cities for a simulcast. Witt said this was a massive technological challenge but it turned out to be easier than the emotional and cultural challenges that were ahead.

The first conversation, February 9, 1999, began cordially enough. MPR host Katherine Lanpher moderated the discussion from Crookston and helped *Insight News* editors at Lucille's field phone calls that were coming in through MPR's 14 news stations around the state.

One of the first calls came from a farmer who opined that city folk often don't understand what it means to be a farmer, the relentless hard work involved in keeping a farm going.

"This is what race does," retorted Mahmoud El-Kati, speaking from Lucille's Kitchen. "He doesn't think black people know anything about farming? You're crazy. We walked in manure before you walked in manure. Have you ever listened to the blues? That's what it's about."

El-Kati went on in this vein for some time, to the applause of the people at Lucille's, until Lanpher, in Crookston, felt compelled to point out that the caller "was talking about most urban dwellers, not just urban blacks."



As the conversation moved on, a woman in Crookston commented that when her farm collapsed, she chose not to think of herself as powerless and hopeless but went back to school. “I look at this change as an opportunity,” she said, “and today I see my life in a much better place than three years ago.”

Again, what sounded to many in the audience like an innocuous observation set off fireworks at Lucille’s.

“Black people have found it doesn’t make any difference how much education they get, they’re still black people,” responded Sarah Lagos. “My daughter not only graduated with an A degree from Providence but then went on to Cornell Law School and went on to become a judge and she said to me, ‘They still follow me around in the store.’ It makes no difference that she’s earning six figures. She’s still a black person. Don’t tell me that what works for you because you’re white is going to work for me because I’m black and I know it won’t!”

The hour left all involved feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Witt said the tension spilled into the post-forum discussions among the media partners. One member of the group chided Lanpher for seeming to defend the farmer who

### Another conversation with Crookston

Forum focuses on race, perception and communication

By Brandt Williams  
Executive Editor

After the first conversation held last month between residents of North Minneapolis and citizens of Crookston elicited occurrences of miscommunication and/or misunderstanding, the focus of the second collaboration between the Insight/KMCP Public Policy Forum at Lucille’s and Minnesota Public Radio’s Midmorning program was the apparent perception gap between the two audiences.

To illustrate the gap, two audience members -- one from Minneapolis, one from Crookston -- shared a story of how they talked about their differences in a phone conversation held after the first forum. In that forum, Carolyn Weber, a former farmer from the Crookston area talked about how she turned to education to help her out of a bad situation. Later in that program, while addressing the comments of another Crookston participant, St. Paul resident Sarah Lagos spoke defiantly about how education is not the cure-all for African Americans.

In last Tuesday’s forum, Weber explained why she decided to speak directly to Lagos. “After sharing what I did, I thought, did I say something offensive? Did I say something that wasn’t true?”



(Top) Forum moderator Al McFarlane and guests Mahmoud El-Kati and (bottom photo) Sarah Lagos. (photos/Brandt Williams)

FORUM: Turn to 4

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*Insight News reported on the calmer dialogue of the second conversation between Crookston and Lucille’s Kitchen.*

called in. This prompted another partner to defend Lanpher and accuse her critic of being sexist and dismissing her concerns because she was a woman.

“I thought this was a healthy part of the experiment,” said Witt. “We had to work these things out.”

### FINDING COMMON GROUND

Meanwhile, Sarah Lagos got a phone call from Carolyn Weber. Weber was the former farmer from Crookston who had found education so valuable after her farm collapsed. She called Lagos because she was angry about the way Lagos had reacted to her comments.

“I had just shared a very painful part of my life,” Weber said, so she was surprised at Lagos’ reaction. “I thought, ‘Did I say something offensive? Did I say something that wasn’t true?’ ”

Weber and Lagos started their own private dialogue as they continued to participate in the large forums. Appropriately, for the second conversation in March, the issue of miscommunication and misperception took the forefront. Rehashing the misunderstandings from the first session seemed to form the first steps toward true understanding. The subsequent sessions — another in March and the final one in April — deepened that understanding.

Participants continued to disagree about certain issues and the search for common experiences frequently turned up differences instead. But these differences and disagreements became part of the process of learning about one another. Through the live broadcasts, they offered listeners the chance to learn about each community.

The conversations ended, as planned, after the fourth broadcast in April 1999 but the story does not end there.

### EXPANDING THE REACH

Two years later, the media partners in the Crookston-Lucille’s Kitchen project are expanding their partnership to embrace more of the minority community. Larry Werner, the reader involvement editor at the *Star Tribune*, said the partners hope to put videoconferencing technology — of the kind that allowed Lucille’s Kitchen to hook up with Crookston — at four more sites around Minnesota where minority communities regularly come together.

“In rural Minnesota, there’s great growth in the Latino community. The Somali community is growing in Rochester. So there are opportunities to connect communities of color here and there,” said Werner.

The partners have used their videoconferencing ability at Lucille’s Kitchen in a number of creative and ambitious ways beyond the conversations with Crookston. For instance, they’ve hooked up the north Minneapolis community with South Africans at a videoconferencing center in Johannesburg to discuss the ravages of AIDS on the African community worldwide, including African-Americans. Werner said demographic changes in Minnesota make it desirable to extend this capability to other groups.

“Between 1990 and the last census, people of color in Minnesota increased 86 percent,” he said. “It remains a largely white state but it’s changed at a rate that is dramatic and greater than other places. We have to use our civic journalism tools to help our readers, viewers and citizens



Moderator Al McFarlane hosted Minneapolis school board member Louis J. King II for a conversation about education at Lucille’s Kitchen.

MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO

understand the issues raised by this dramatic change and to include new residents of our state in discussions of how to address these issues.”

For these reasons, he said, the partners plan to put videoconferencing equipment at the Vietnam Center in St. Paul, where there’s an Asian-American roundtable, and at the Mercado Centrale, where a Latino group meets, and at a restaurant called Black Bear Crossing, where a Native-American group meets. It will allow all the groups to plug into the partners’ broadcast events or simply hook up with one another.

He explained that with this technology, people of color can contribute to discussions without the discomfort of being a minority member in a majority group.



MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO

Michael Evans, an audience member at Lucille’s Kitchen, asked about the problems faced by farmers in Crookston.

slowly built a genuine friendship. Two years after their rocky start, Lagos reflected on how her relationship with Weber has grown.

“I think there’s a very, very strong affection we have for one another,” said Lagos, “almost what sisters would have.”



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Insight News announced the series of dialogues between Lucille’s Kitchen and Crookston with great hope.

“Some people might find it absurd to use videoconferencing to connect people within the same community,” said Werner, “but we have struggled with the challenge of convincing people of color to come to our discussions in largely white locations and then, in this mostly white environment, getting them to speak honestly. So connecting community centers where people of color already gather allows them to participate in discussions with people around Minnesota without leaving their own communities.”

Moreover, as the media partners continue to build on the Crookston-Lucille’s Kitchen experience, the individuals who took part also continue to reap the benefits. Carolyn Weber and Sarah Lagos have continued their dialogue and

## Chapter Tips:

### *Running Study Circles and Small-Group Discussions*

- **Invite participants in a number of ways.** News organizations tend to use their own resources, such as on-air announcements or notices in newspapers or on Web sites, to recruit participants. Flyers at local recreation centers and libraries or notices in community newsletters, however, will expand the pool of people you can attract.
- **Try to get a cross section of people in each group.** To get a lively discussion and to introduce new perspectives, it's best to group different kinds of people together. Try to achieve a balance in each group of men and women from different ethnic backgrounds but don't stop there. Also make sure the groups include a cross section of people from different neighborhoods and income levels. These groups are not the place for people to go to feel comfortable or have views reinforced. They join in order to be challenged.
- **Don't bust your budget.** Smaller news organizations may fear the cost of this activity but it can be done virtually for free. Libraries will usually offer space for free. Material needs are minimal. The more affluent newsrooms can provide snacks but they are not a requirement.
- **Provide support.** Don't expect discussion groups or study circles that you convene to be self-sustaining. Expect that they will run into glitches with everything from meeting logistics to wounded feelings. Appoint someone to be in charge of helping them work things out and make sure that person is easily accessible.
- **Give each group a leader.** The news organizations that sponsored small-group discussions hired at least one professional facilitator to keep the process productive. At *The Charlotte Observer*, which sponsored several groups at once, the facilitator trained two members of each group to lead discussions and *The Observer* paid them. "They took it very seriously," said Fannie Flono, now associate editorial page editor. "Some of these were emotional, confrontational discussions but the groups were good at staying in control of themselves."

## Chapter Tips: *Organizing Community Conversations*

- **Start planning as far in advance as you can.** Editors and producers were unanimous in wishing they had had more time to iron out all the logistics that make a forum run smoothly and produce genuine dialogue. “Give yourself more time than you think you need,” said Randall Beck of his experience in Wilmington, Delaware. “If you think it’s going to take a month, give yourself three.”
- **Get the whole staff involved.** In newsrooms where there may be ambivalence about a forum, having as many staff members as possible work on it is one way to build belief in it. Try assigning a role to at least one representative from each department to achieve buy-in across the newsroom.
- **Put someone in charge.** While you’re trying to involve as many of the staff as possible, you can’t turn a forum over to a committee. Forums require a strong leader, who makes decisions and makes sure things happen. You want to be democratic and get a lot of input but there has to be one person accountable in the end.
- **Aggressively reach out to as many groups as you can.** A forum on race relations is not going to achieve much if the participants are not as diverse as the community. Don’t believe that “if you hold it, they will come.” A notice in the paper will attract a certain number of community activists but special invitations should be issued to any civic leader, no matter how obscure, and to any community organization with a stake in the issue.
- **Give people a reason to come.** A high-profile speaker can attract and electrify an audience. Think broadly and be ambitious when inviting speakers. Again, this lesson comes from *The News Journal*, which invited Harvard professor and prominent author Cornel West to speak at its 1998 forum. “Though it was a forum for the state,” said Beck, “we felt it was important to find the most impressive speaker we could. West focused everybody’s thoughts; he held their attention. I don’t think there was anyone in the state who could have done that so well.”