The Tortoise
Community Network

IMPACT REPORT 2021
About Tortoise

Tortoise is a new media organisation, one that is focused on slow news and opening up journalism. At the heart of Tortoise is the ThinkIn – our live journalism event that is modelled on an editorial conference. We host ThinkIns every day for our members and guests and have hosted recent ThinkIns with Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister (1997–2007); Valerie Jarrett, Adviser to President Obama; and Helle Thorning Schmidt, Danish Prime Minister (2011–15).

Tortoise was founded by James Harding, former Editor of The Times of London and Director of News at the BBC; Katie Vanneck-Smith, former President of Dow Jones, the publisher of the Wall Street Journal; and Matthew Barzun, President Obama’s Ambassador to the UK and Sweden. Tortoise is a membership organisation – for every paying member we fund a membership for people who don’t usually have a voice via partner organisations that join the Tortoise Community Network. This report is about the impact of the Network in its first and second years.

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July 2021
Introduction

At Tortoise we do journalism differently. We open up our newsroom so that our members have a say in what we do.

They come to our meetings, tell us what they think and what they know – and improve the stories we cover.

But not everyone can afford to pay for good journalism. Which is why we created the Tortoise Community Network. It has helped thousands of people join us for free as fully-funded Tortoise members.

It means real people, with real experiences – carers, nurses, taxi drivers, students – can all get a seat at the table alongside business leaders and politicians.

We set up Tortoise to slow down, dig a bit deeper and try to make sense of a fast-changing world.

And we wanted to close the power gap that exists in so many areas of life between people and big organisations.

But we recognised early on that unless our newsroom was genuinely different, we would create another echo chamber of like-minded thinkers who would enthusiastically join us, but not bring the breadth of experience that we need to truly understand the world.

So we built the Tortoise Community Network – uniting dozens of charities, non-profits and organisations working for change at the frontline of communities, often supporting people who don’t usually engage in the news or ever get a voice.

Groups like the Social Mobility Foundation and Sound Delivery have helped us contact the people they support and make them Tortoise members, paid for by our commercial partners who believe in the power of a better conversation.

In our first two years, we have funded over 26,792 Community Network memberships and partnered with 75 charities and organisations to help distribute them. Our Network members have made their voices heard in the 712 ThinkIns we have held from March 2020–June 2021 during the C19 crisis and continue to do so today.

Our Community Network members told us what it was like to be homeless and living in Heathrow as the pandemic struck; we saw first-hand the splintering of political identities as “red wall” communities shifted their votes during elections; and we heard the passion of young people from all backgrounds who can’t understand why the media doesn’t properly report the climate emergency.

Their contributions drove our editorial conversations, challenged our thinking – and definitely made our journalism better.

Our priority for the coming year is to keep growing the Tortoise Community Network and to make sure it is truly at the heart of our journalism. This means more members, from ever more diverse backgrounds, and deeper relationships with them and the organisations working with them.

We couldn’t do any of this without our supporters – businesses, foundations and individuals, who can fund these memberships for people who deserve to be heard.

We’ve discovered that so many people want to be positively involved in shaping the world they live in, to feel they are part of a joint effort to challenge, question, investigate and make progress.

Our Community Network members help Tortoise to be a different kind of newsroom and we work hard every day to do them justice.

“Journalism is often losing the battle for people’s attention and, in some countries, for the public’s trust”

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford

“Coming into an empathetic newsroom like Tortoise changed the way I think about the media and made me want to tell my story”

Anne Marie Douglas, a Network member who works with traumatised teenagers

Katie Vanneck-Smith and David Taylor
The State of UK Media

Looking at the media landscape, there are two trends we have set out to combat:

1. Individuals from lower income backgrounds are most locked out of reading news online.

Use of main platform for news by demographic group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>ABC1</th>
<th>C2DE</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Minorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers (print/website/app)</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet (any device)</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ofcom, News Consumption in the UK: 2020

“There is a real divide in the news available to people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, creating a democratic gap in news engagement.”

The Cairncross Review, 2019

“Poor information for poor people; richer sources for the rest. This digital divide has serious ramifications for every element of our democracy and society.”

Polly Curtis, Visiting Fellow, Reuters Institute

2. More people are actively avoiding the news than before, they feel locked out. Unable to drive change.

Proportion of people often or sometimes actively avoids the news (UK)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Overwhelmingly the public feel that the Northern regions of the UK are covered less fairly by news outlets than the South.

Difference between proportion that say the news media cover them fairly and unfairly by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Unfair (-60)</th>
<th>Fair (+60)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and the Humber</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
<td>-12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2021)

“Those who claim not to follow any news are younger, less educated, have lower incomes and are less likely to be in work than those who do. We don’t like to talk about it, but news habits are closely aligned to something that looks very like class.”

Polly Curtis, Visiting Fellow, Reuters Institute

Year 1 & 2 Overview

Through the Tortoise Community Network, we’ve radically diversified our newsroom demographic, and given our members a voice. We gave paid-for memberships to 75 Community Network partners – charities, non-profits and organisations with deep roots in local communities across the UK. They distributed those free memberships to the people they exist to support and their front-line volunteers, the people working for change.

In our first year of the Network we focused on partnering with organisations working in three priority areas:

1. Youth and schools. Giving young people a voice and developing the leaders of tomorrow.

2. Culture and community. Bringing people together where they live, and in communities created around shared interests and causes.

3. Social justice. Closing the power gap by reducing inequality, increasing social mobility, and advocating for women’s rights. As the Covid-19 crisis unfolded, we also offered members the opportunity to share Community Network memberships with key workers.
Our Impact

The pandemic marked a step-change for the Tortoise Community Network with a rush in demand from our partners and the move to digital enabling a rapid increase in activations of our memberships.

Over the course of the past two years the Network helped increase the proportion of female members we have...

May 2019 | May 2021
---|---
Female: 41% | Female: 50%
Male: 59% | Male: 50%

...and also our out of London footprint.

May 2019 | May 2021
---|---
% of UK members in London: 59% | % of UK members in London: 52%

We’ve heard more than 33,000 voices through 331 ThinkIns, all over the UK.

Locations where we’ve hosted ThinkIns since the beginning of the Community Network

With the National Citizen Service

With My Life

My Say

With IntoUniversity

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Case study
Grimsby

WHY?
The media is too London based – we don’t hear the views outside of the capital and big urban areas enough. We decided to try to build a local Tortoise membership in Grimsby, which has the lowest Twitter use in the country and sits near the end of the nation’s travel links, to make sure we were truly listening to people outside of the media bubble.

HOW?
When Grimsby sees a journalist from the national press for a story, it’s usually a one-time event. We knew, to build an engaged membership, we needed to approach this through partnerships with deep roots in the Grimsby community. We partnered with East Marsh United, a local community group, as well as The Grimsby Telegraph, the local newsroom. We secured funding from Nesta’s Future News Fund for the partnership enabling us to return with new ways of reporting on this often overlooked part of the country.

WHAT?
• Five election ThinkIns where we documented the moment the Red Wall turned blue in this bellwether town.
• One on “The Rules” of politics where we heard the case for a radical new social contract.
• Two on life in Covid.

Our persistent reporting and bridge-building is paying off over time, as we then launched our ‘ReportIn’ live blog on Grimsby and Covid-19, on how the pandemic is affecting the town, which has the lowest rate of admissions in England, but is suffering nonetheless from the economic lockdown. It highlighted the case for regional lockdowns.

Through the partnership, East Marsh United were able to launch a new local news service for their hyperlocal community, which will go into print once the pandemic allows. Our work there featured on BBC Humberside, in the Daily Mirror and in the Grimsby Telegraph itself.

"Tortoise ThinkIns allow me to hear voices and opinions I wouldn't usually encounter, and as a young person it’s a space where I get to share my own opinion and my voice carries just as much weight as the middle-aged businessman next to me or the ex-councillor, for example. The Thinkins have also helped me think about politics on a much more local scale rather than a national one which has been really interesting."

Pheobe Mumby, 17, Tortoise member in Grimsby

"I was a little skeptical at first, journos from ‘that London’ coming here to poke around in our newly-constituted Brexitland – but, actually, the Tortoise people are lovely and come across as very experienced and genuinely interested. The Thinkin model and facilitation work REALLY well. I went to four Thinkins and each Thinkin circle contained all shades of political opinion and that in itself was quite the challenge for all involved – people were able to express themselves openly and freely with a respectful reception and the format especially demanded we move away from lazy off-the-shelf ideas and each Thinkin developed as a very rich experience for all involved.

Polly, our facilitator, was very deft at encouraging everybody’s voice to be heard, to the extent that we also heard from several young voices, very often reticent in such environments, and their contributions were amongst the most memorable – some of those young people, who I wouldn’t have met but for the Thinkin, offer us all hope for building a more progressive society – engaged, passionate and articulate. The facilitator was consistently non-directive, not as easy as it sounds – the conversation was allowed to flow according to the genuine thoughts of the people in the room. More please."

Billy Dasein, community organiser with East Marsh United

WHAT NEXT?
Grimsby is now baked into the Tortoise DNA. It’s a place we look to editorially to get a different view on what’s happening in the country. We plan to grow the number of Community Network Partners we work with to increase our presence in the area.
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**Case study**

**Unheard Voices**

**WHY?**

Covid-19 soon revealed it was not the great leveller as originally suggested by some pundits; in fact it was quite the opposite. We realised early on that the impact of the Covid was unequal and there was a risk we were all even more trapped in our own bubbles during lockdown, so we went out of our way to make unheard voices central to our conversations and coverage.

**HOW?**

We have heard from bus drivers, ICU nurses, a postal worker in his seventies, food bank volunteers, sex workers, a vet, factory workers, and more. We created a season of ThinkIns aimed at the next generation, giving young people a platform to together work out what the pandemic will mean for their futures. All are now Tortoise members; several have become regulars at ThinkIns, whatever the subject.

**WHAT?**

A series of three Unheard Voices ThinkIns, inviting people from across the Tortoise Community Network to tell their stories. This led to a file called Unheard Voices, documenting their experiences and a podcast about one particular issue, domestic violence under lockdown. Paul Atherton, a Tortoise member who was living homeless in Heathrow at the beginning of the lockdown contributed his letter from lockdown.

“Tortoise have allowed me a voice in their newsroom and in turn a platform to the British Public. As a homeless person reliant on welfare payments to survive, I’m often excluded from many things due to expense. Being a participant of the funded membership scheme, just levels the playing field. In Britain we’ve structured a social narrative that if you have no money, then your contribution to society is worthless. Thankfully Tortoise sees value in every voice and every background and in doing so improves their own value to its readers. I’m immensely appreciative of the gesture and in return hope my input is valued more highly than if I had the cash.”

Paul Atherton, homeless person and campaigner

“I was immediately struck by how the ThinkIn format encouraged personal sharing and a real depth of conversation, meaning that I learnt a lot from the people around me that I otherwise would never have discovered. Under lockdown, I have attended at least 25 Digital ThinkIns. I always leave the session feeling more knowledgeable, and often with my perspective slightly changed.

The pieces that are produced from ThinkIns are therefore very insightful, well developed and closely tied to the interests of everyday people. I strongly value the slow news produced by Tortoise in general, but I must say that the experience of the ThinkIns truly enhances that appreciation.”

Isla Virtue Thick, National Citizen Service Young Person

**WHAT NEXT?**

We connected hundreds of young people with inspirational speakers such as Samantha Renke, Alex Holmes and Flo Simpson as part of our NextGen series. The stories we heard during our Unheard Voices ThinkIns stayed with us, so we wrote about them in Isolation, one of our most memorable stories of lockdown. We continue to hear their voices today – on issues ranging from homelessness to gay rights, everyday racism and exclusion for people with disabilities – through our weekly Open News meetings.
**Case study**

**Family Separation**

**WHY?**

In a ThinkIn in the Bronx in the summer before Tortoise launched we were confronted with a powerful challenge from a family lawyer: she told us to look at how the state separates children from their families, because that is what people in her neighbourhood feared much more than the police. It triggered a year-long project that investigated the decisions that are made to remove children from their parents in the UK – and reporting back from the Bronx.

**HOW?**

We put the ThinkIns at the heart of this story, holding six in 2019 that led directly to a range of stories examining what’s going wrong with social care and family justice systems and how the State removes too many children in the UK and intervenes before trying to support families to stay together. We built a network around the story with 200 members with specialist knowledge and experience of this system. We partnered with Frontline social workers to bring their members into ThinkIns and we set up a members’ panel to advise on the story.

**WHAT?**

Our reporting exposed the man paying for mothers to flee the country to avoid the law – a symbol of the breakdown in trust. We revealed the scale of removals and the factors fuelling them and we questioned why it was being done without the rigorous checks and balances you might expect. We interviewed families and judges and revisited New York to find the lessons there. The stories were read in judges’ chambers across the country, at the heart of Whitehall and by families battling through the system.

The project was nominated for a British Press Award, 2019.
WHAT NEXT?

We returned to examine what was happening to the system in lockdown and how children had been left out of sight, and at greater risk than ever. The partnership with the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory led to a partnership with The Nuffield Foundation. This is helping us to develop ThinkIns as a way to improve research, as well as a way to have a better and more inclusive debate about a subject.

Louise Tickle then focused on young lives in lockdown, speaking to social workers and carers to uncover the terrible toll lockdown has taken on the UK’s most vulnerable children. The article was successfully chosen for the judges’ longlist for the Paul Foot Award in June 2021, a highly prestigious award for investigative journalism.

“As a birth parent having experienced the child protection process, mine is so often a marginalised voice, shamed into silence. Through careful and thoughtful journalism and the ThinkIns, Tortoise has given me an opportunity to speak both about my own experiences and on the broader issues around children’s social care leaving me feeling more empowered and confident”

Annie, a mother in the North East whose baby was removed at birth, then returned after a legal battle

Tortoise Local

Throughout the short history of Tortoise, we’ve strived to get out on the road. Taking our newsroom around the country and holding ThinkIns in towns and cities the length and breadth of the UK is one way we’ve been able to break out of the London media bubble. A major next step in our journey is Tortoise Local – permanent newsrooms outside the capital focused on hearing from Tortoise members locally.

The first edition of this new model is already underway, in the North East of England. Over the coming months, we’re rolling out a suite of live events, audio and written journalism all focused on the issues that matter most to people in the region.

HOW WILL IT WORK?

We believe in our model, and Tortoise Local will stick closely to what has already been successful. We’re not reinventing Tortoise. Instead, we’re focused on what’s already working, and producing it in a local context. A dedicated team based in the North East will report stories and host ThinkIns that hit on many of the themes that matter to all our members, no matter where they are. Meanwhile, our membership and partnership teams will be building on the relationships we’ve already established in the region. And we’ll continue to measure our success by looking at the impact of our journalism, and the engagement of our North East members.

WHY TORTOISE LOCAL?

A ThinkIn in March this year asked the following question: In the battle for truth, is local news the answer? What followed was an enthralling discussion that delivered a clear message – there’s a gap in local news coverage and our members want us to fill it. Press Gazette says that since 2005, there’s been a net loss of 265 local news publications across the UK. The rapid decline in titles has been accompanied by the rise of the ad-driven algorithms. That’s left local news at the mercy of the traffic gods, focused on news stories that deliver the most eyeballs, regardless of what really matters to readers. Tortoise Local is different. It’s a plan that grows our capacity to close the gap between ordinary people and those that hold power. And it’s a sign that we’re serious about an entirely new kind of journalism.
Community Network Partners

The Tortoise Community Network is made up of dozens of non-profit organisations and charities, sharing their knowledge of working at grassroots level in often marginalised communities.

They have helped introduce us to people whose voices too often go unheard.

And it is all made possible by funding from our commercial business partners who pay for people to become members of Tortoise so they have access to our journalism.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PARTNER?

• Organisations who want to innovate, and change the way things are currently done
• Any organisation or individual who believes that bringing people together, knocking down walls in communication, is the best way to drive change

The Network team

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