

Global Voices Community Council 2022 Issue Paper: Defining our strategy

As we approach our 20th anniversary in 2024, we ask: what are the goals for Global Voices in the current world context? What should we plan, what should we prioritize, and what strategies should we use to reach those goals?

Global Voices' 2022 Council focuses on several large strategic questions that might shape the direction of our work. This paper provides background for Council discussions and a forthcoming poll.

Global Voices: a community dedicated to international understanding?

Global Voices' primary focus has been on creating space for people who do not benefit from mass media representation of their perspectives and priorities, especially in the majority world (also known as the Global South). The aspiration for a more open world, a more inclusive information ecosystem, and the sharing of knowledge has underpinned Global Voices' organizing logic.

Today the global order that supports these aims is undeniably under threat. An increasing number of states are restricting access to online participation in order to control what is said and shared in their information spaces. This fact, in too many places, fundamentally affects how community members can contribute to Global Voices, especially when covering issues such as human rights, democratic governance, and violent conflict.

We also work on a range of crucial issues that deserve more attention, from climate change, to gender violence, to the effects of populism, to Indigenous language rights. These issues often intersect with other, fundamental rights, but they contain nuances and risks of their own. How can we work to support our contributors to achieve their goals of understanding on these topics?

Activating our mission

For our 2022 Council, we are building on the work of our previous year's Council, in which we explored and refined our mission statement.

A mission statement is a claim about why an organization exists, and what its primary goal is. In our discussions, we explored six [different models for a mission](#), from information access, to greater understanding, to structural change, to multilingualism. In polling, a large plurality of Council members selected "[building understanding across communities](#)" as their preference. Results are available in this [post](#), and analysis in this [post](#).

Refining this statement in discussions with subsections of the community and the board of directors, our working mission statement is:

Global Voices builds understanding across communities, nations and languages, using the power of our network to connect people with a diversity of perspectives and experiences.

The aim of building understanding, if taken seriously, is undoubtedly a major challenge. Underlying it is the idea that access to information and expression is not sufficient to build healthy societies, but that listening and acknowledging the perspectives of others is the baseline for social cohesion and democratic participation. This idea has long been reflected in Global Voices goals, as can be seen in our old tagline: “The world is talking; are you listening?”

Understanding, however, is also a vague goal. How do we know when we have succeeded, and what does it mean when we do? How should we focus our work specifically to achieve it?

We need, therefore, to start with a working definition. For the purpose of this paper, we define understanding as:

an act in which all sides in a discussion acknowledge the context, perspectives and concerns of others.

In this construction, understanding is an interdependent process. It requires all sides to acknowledge the perspectives of others.

Building a strategy

A strategic plan is a tool many organizations use to state their goals. The plan sets out a 3-5 year timeline of priorities for how an organization should work, including how the organization will know if it has achieved its ambitions. For a strategy to be successful, a few elements need to be in place:

- Mission and vision statements that have the support of the community
- Clearly stated goals that give a mission direction
- A deep understanding of the challenges to achieving a mission
- A plan for how we can make progress toward those goals, given funding, staffing, and other resources

In the 2021 Council, in addition to questions about the mission, we also polled the Council on related questions, such as the most important issues for us to address related to conflict and misunderstanding between countries and peoples, and approaches to correct imbalances to media attention. The full list of poll questions and responses is [here](#). The responses can be combined to create a draft statement (for discussion) about our goals for the next few years:

Global Voices strategic focus in 2023-2025 includes: supporting underrepresented groups to provide more contextual information and knowledge in many languages, helping audiences to

understand complex issues, and countering state-driven propaganda, narratives and disinformation.

Strategic considerations for the Council

Our next step is to explore, concretely, how we intend to make progress toward these goals. We have our ongoing projects with the [Newsroom](#), [Advox](#), [Rising Voices](#), [Lingua](#), and research with the [Civic Media Observatory](#). However, we also have the opportunity to shift directions in our work, to prioritize, or to expand in specific ways. In order to do so, input from the Council in the form of ideas and preferences is extremely valuable.

We have chosen three questions that will help us to further define, specifically what we mean by “understanding” and how we might know when we’ve achieved it. For each question, we will provide context and a selection of possible responses. We will discuss them through email and group video calls, then poll the Council to better understand the perspectives of members.

Challenges to understanding

Problem/Context: In an increasing number of political contexts, we see a huge power imbalance between opposing sides, and the idea of “understanding” seems marginal to the size of the problem. In the face of Myanmar’s military dictatorship, the suppression of rights in Hong Kong, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Ethiopia’s civil war, and in numerous other contexts, attempts to resolve differences through dialogue are met with force.

This is unfortunately not a new problem—it has been the prevailing state of affairs in some countries for many years and it is becoming increasingly common around the world. Wherever this power imbalance exists, it constrains our ability to work in our usual way: recruiting volunteer contributors, editors, translators and researchers who can work openly, and be part of a community that shares common values.

Learning: We have limited influence in such scenarios. We cannot easily support or defend community members who live and work under threat, and where basic rights to expression, access to information, and participation in civil society are legally or forcibly repressed. When we are able to work in such contexts, our current approach is often limited to providing information and context for people not living in the countries in question, and rarely affects change.

Approaches/solutions: In an increasing number of situations, we resort to other approaches. Our contributors work anonymously, or reside outside the countries on which we report. In extreme scenarios we limit our work: we no longer have contributors in China or Saudi Arabia, for instance; and contributors in some countries are unable to cover key issues.

The question for the Council: What is the role of Global Voices in contexts where people refuse to participate in discussions that are framed as “understanding”, or when basic rights to freedom of expression and access to information are denied, either wholly or on sensitive topics?

Challenges: It could be argued that it is precisely in the most difficult situations that maintaining open lines of communication, of “understanding”, are most important. Should we therefore:

- Work only in countries where people can participate in GV’s work safely?
- Create ways for people in high-risk environments to participate in GV’s work, such as anonymous contributions and active listening in closed networks?
- Create projects that seek to change the information environment in high-risk countries?
- Work with international and governmental institutions such as humanitarian groups, policy organizations, and intergovernmental bodies, to reach people in high-risk environments?

What motivates understanding: a theory of change

Problem/Context: While the internet, in theory, allows people to access and learn about the lives, interests and priorities of others, in reality news remains mostly local and national. Many people either do not know how, or are not motivated to expand and diversify their understanding of the needs and priorities of others. At the same time, regulatory and technical barriers to international information and alternative viewpoints are increasing in many countries.

This tendency means that having access to information is only a first step towards building understanding. The work of “bridging” cultures, languages and peoples requires more active measures. And yet, for some issues that motivate our most active contributors, we see little public interest in their work; this has a demotivating and demoralizing effect.

Learning: Given the overwhelming amount of information in the world, many people maintain interest in a place or a topic when they have a personal as well as an abstract connection to it. The Global Voices model has emphasized the building of personal relationships and community, through co-work, meetups, summits, and other activities that are not strictly about work. This person-to-person approach likely reduces the scale of the work of Global Voices, and makes visible other barriers, such as language.

In our writing we emphasize “bridging” or connecting aspects of stories to highlight why our audiences should care. In this way, our focus is less on sensation, drama or scale, and more about nuance, and the effects of events on individuals and communities.

Approaches/solutions: We continuously strive to build connections and relationships within and across our teams. In our work, we highlight the personalities, personal histories, specific interests and backgrounds of both our contributors and the people we cover.

The question for the Council: How do we motivate people to learn and become informed about others and seek to gain understanding?

Challenges: GV's method is the building of personal relationships, both amongst ourselves and with our work. We ask how we might best expand our community and grow our impact, if we rely on personal connections as the basis for building understanding. Should we:

- Continue with the personal connection model and diversify GV's community by encouraging active participation from underrepresented groups?
- Shift to a more professional storytelling approach, covering popular topics and building partnerships with large media?
- Focus on smaller, more specialized audiences by targeting specific issues and communities?

Defining and measuring “understanding”

Problem/Context: Global Voices is in many ways a unique organization, and our volunteer-supported, multilingual newsroom is unusual. However, while we have for years included the concept of “understanding” in our mission statements, we haven't created a rigorous definition of what we mean by it, made a claim about specific and unique methods of fostering it, or sought to measure it. Perhaps, a general and broad definition of understanding is adequate for our purposes, and we should leave it at that. Or perhaps it would serve us to identify and promote our own brand of activities that support understanding as we see it.

Learning: Understanding remains a somewhat confusing and amorphous concept, and it is easy to lose sight of in daily work. Additionally, it seems likely that many Global Voices contributors do not use a concept of understanding as a starting point for stories.

Approaches/solutions: In most of our projects understanding is currently an implicit goal. For example, Rising Voices' rotating Twitter feeds of language activists functions as a window to help readers understand what issues are most important to those language communities. Identifying and highlighting the “understanding” element in our work should be possible in most cases.

The question for the Council: What might a Global Voices branding of a method/activity of “understanding” look like? A project or approach that we champion and expand?

Challenges: Should we:

- Continue to use the concept of understanding as a broad goal?
- Identify the “understanding” element of our projects, and build explicit goals and outcomes based on that?
- Promote a “Global Voices approach to understanding” as a brand to represent our work, akin to “solutions journalism” or “explainer journalism”?