



The Idea Propeller (or how to revive collaborative storytelling practices in journalism)

From our research, we learned that journalists in established newsrooms faced with digital transition struggle to find time to develop good stories. They also told us that they would like to work more in teams, but lack the resources. These and other observations made us realize the need for “scaffolding creativity” – to support and build new work practices to strengthen the core of journalism: the storytelling. We started experimenting with a simple tool that put the first phase of story development in the centre, with the aim of enabling newsroom staff to implement collective creative practices with the resources available.

The Idea Propeller consists of nine questions that will boost any idea for a news story. Each question addresses a particular difficulty that journalism in general faces in the transition from print or linear publication to digital audience engagement. The tool is designed as a peer-to-peer exercise that can be easily implemented in the everyday story development. It was designed to be effective, energizing and adaptable to each setting, whether it is finding a new angle to a yearly event, enriching an investigative story or turning a well-known phenomenon into an engaging narrative that moves the audience.

How to use the Idea Propeller...

- Gather around a standing table in groups of three or more
- Appoint an idea coach (IC). The main task of the IC is to challenge people’s statements and ask questions about the obvious or points taken for granted. This does not have to be an editor, or formal leader in the newsroom.
- Using the chart, the IC should start with asking: “What is the idea for the story?” The IC should then move the group through the other eight questions in the order that is most likely to propel the idea process.
- After all the questions are addressed (degree of thoroughness depending on time available), the group will move to the bottom section of the chart to create a snappy title and pitch that will engage an editor.

Here are a few general guiding principles to get the most out of the Idea Propeller:

1. *Stay in the green zone:* Respond with “yes, and”, never “no, but” when someone proposes an idea. Build on each other’s thoughts, and refrain from shutting others down.
2. *The laughter advantage:* Silliness leads to serendipity and surprisingly great ideas. Restrain from ridiculing others’ ideas.
3. *Tangibility rules:* Delay the discussion on digital tools, designs or platforms. Use pen and paper to minimize the distance between the participants. Boost spontaneous comments and ideas.

4. *Sharing is caring*: The outcome of an idea enriched by the Idea Propeller is a shared product. Keep up the colleague-support throughout the process and celebrate the success together.

The tool changes the very structure of how journalists talk about the stories they want to make, from informing colleges and editors, “I have a story,” to asking a smaller group of peers, “what is my story?” and then developing it together. The Idea Propeller often inspires 3-4 new ideas for stories to tell. This addresses the scarcity of “newsworthy” stories that we generally observe in newsroom meetings.

The tool is free to use and tweak... we would love your feedback on what you like, don't understand, or think could be improved. Reach out to Aina Landsverk Hagen, email aina.hagen@afi.no

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