

DEAR READER: Let's solve problems together

By [Shaina Cavazos](#)

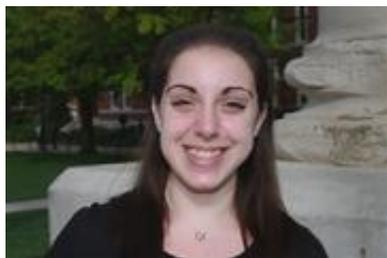
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Dear Reader,

This time last week, I was sitting in a conference room in St. Paul, Minn., at Minnesota Public Radio. I was one of a few students invited there to listen to journalists from across the country talk about [the Public Insight Network](#) (PIN) and how it can be a tool for journalists looking to connect better with their communities.

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What's PIN, you ask? [Joy Mayer](#), our director of community outreach, explains it as a tool to help keep journalists in touch with the interests and expertise of the community.

I hadn't worked a lot with the network in the past, but as the future assistant director of community outreach, I welcomed the amazing opportunity to get my feet wet and explore a tool that could better help me understand what knowledge Columbia residents have to share.

One presentation from [Cole Goins, with The Center for Investigative Reporting](#), focused on how we as journalists can use that knowledge and expertise to help spread information to solve community problems.

Some might argue that journalists shouldn't be charged with solving problems. And usually, I'd agree — not everything can be solved with shoe leather reporting, nor should it — but some things can. If we can dig up and put together the information that informs community members about how they can effect change, that's an invaluable use of our time.

If we take our reporting a step further to identify what has or hasn't worked in the past and what could work in the future, we are doing more for our readers than if we just report straight facts.

[Michael Caputo, a PIN analyst with American Public Media](#), said he likes to think of journalists as the activists that get a conversation going.

That really rings true for me. When I interview a person about an issue, I'm looking for ways to not only tell that person's story, but also to figure out what aspect of that issue I need to pay attention to so that the public can make informed decisions.

If I learn, for example, that parents are concerned about school lunches, I'll be able to get their side of the story and a more detailed explanation of what they're worried about and why. Then, I can begin to do more reporting to find out the background and contributing factors.

I can talk to school officials and other community members about what they know. I can contact my PIN sources who have perhaps already professed an expertise in schools or child nutrition. Through research and interviews, I can try to identify what has helped fix this problem in the past and even point to new solutions for the future based on what I've learned and collected.

Then I can present it to you, the reader, who can then make choices about whether to act on it. In a way, we're solving the problem together; you share information with me, I find others like you with more information, and then I write something that knits those viewpoints, facts and suggestions together.

Journalistic efforts coupled with a knowledgeable network of people who are deeply embedded in the places they live can work together to make sure change agents have what they need to solve problems.

And, as it turns out, this is an attractive way to keep people invested in journalism, too.

[David Bornstein](#), writer of the [Fixes blog for the New York Times](#) and co-founder of the [Solutions Journalism Network](#), called it the "Law and Order effect" — people tune in and pay attention to a story if it involves a problem that might be solved.

So for journalists and community members alike, working together can accomplish so much more than if we tried to tackle problems on our own.

In short, if you think there is a community problem we should be paying attention to, let us know. Get others involved. Maybe even get involved in PIN.

If you choose to participate in PIN, occasionally you might be asked to share your observations, insights and experience. That information gets funneled to reporters and editors who might ask for an interview. If you give your permission, those insights might also be published.

The Public Insight Network is based on the idea that everyone has knowledge they can share. It might be related to your job, or it might be about your hobbies, passions, family, education or relationship with the community. Whatever it is, we encourage you to share it.

If you're interested in participating, take a minute to [share your expertise with us](#).

Together, maybe we can change something.

Shaina Cavazos is an assistant city editor at the Missouriian this summer and will be the assistant director of community outreach in the fall.