MADISON POLICE AND FIRE COMMISSION CASE STUDY

MIT's new [Center for Constructive Communication (CCC)](#), in collaboration with its non-profit partner [Cortico](#), is working on the development of new human-machine systems that advance capabilities for marginalized, vulnerable, and underheard communities to learn, to be heard, and to more fully participate in civic life. This case study highlights how this was put into practice as part of the selection process for the new police chief of Madison, Wisconsin.

Abstract

Like many other municipalities across the country, Madison, Wisconsin's city government solicited citizen input through organized participation in public meetings. While giving the illusion of inclusion, more often than not, this mechanism for citizen participation only served to reinforce the existing power structure.

Then, in 2020, Madison's five-member Police and Fire Commission (PFC) tried something new. Working in collaboration with the non-profit Cortico,[1] they augmented the standard three-minute-per-person input allotted to citizens at their public meetings with "lived experience" feedback gathered through smaller group [Local Voices Network (LVN)](#) conversations.

These conversations were recorded, and then machine-listening technologies were implemented to enable sense-making across dozens of unique voices from citizens who had a wide range of experiences related to issues that heavily impacted their daily lives. The goal was to demonstrate the feasibility of a new model for facilitated listening that more effectively incorporates and amplifies previously underheard voices to inform public understanding, policy development, and decision-making.

Specifically, the Madison listening project proved a viable example of how community listening could be implemented to improve the process for selecting non-elected officials, such as school superintendents or police chiefs, hopefully leading to the hiring of civic leaders who are more accountable for advancing racial equity and healing, and communities more confident and secure in their trust of the institutions that serve them.

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[1] Originally based out of the MIT Media Lab, Cortico was spun off as a 501C3 non-profit organization in 2016.

"If we want to learn the truth, we have to find new ways to listen. If we want our best work to have consequences, we have to be heard." Amanda Ripley, journalist

Introduction

Increasingly the loudest, most extreme voices dominate the public sphere, stifling constructive communication that might offer bridges across ever-widening and increasingly dangerous divides. We see this all too often with government efforts to "listen" to the public: there is an appearance of civic participation in town hall meetings and public forums, yet the voices of those in underserved communities are rarely heard. Lived experiences are not shared, perspectives and needs are ignored, and frustration and distrust grow.

Tragic events that have increasingly been exposed by the media (and cell phone videos) over the past few years have accentuated a longstanding failure of the police to gain the confidence of communities of color. Today, police violence directed at people of color poses one of the U.S.'s greatest challenges. Despite recognition of this problem, we have seen very few communication models emerge that blend facilitated conversations and advanced listening technologies to provide an unfiltered lens into the lived experiences of citizens of marginalized communities.

The prevailing culture of many police departments is often cited as contributing to community trust or distrust. A police chief is a key figure in defining department culture and practices. Therefore finding ways for community voices to be heard in the hiring process for a new police chief can provide a critical first step in changing a department's culture and in developing trust.

In the fall of 2019, Mike Koval, the police chief of Madison, Wisconsin suddenly announced his resignation. Madison, like many urban centers across the U.S., had experienced its share of tensions between communities of color and the police, and Koval had faced strong criticism from the public, especially for officers' excessive use of force and the killing of unarmed civilians, notably the 2015 shooting of Tony Robinson.[2]

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[2] Robinson was an unarmed bi-racial 19-year-old in the midst of a mental health crisis that resulted in a 911 call. A post-mortem determined that he was under the influence of psychedelic drugs when shot seven times at close range by the police. *Source Wisconsin Public Radio Sept. 30, 2019*

Koval's resignation provided an opportunity to take a new approach to the search process – one that could more effectively include meaningful community input, potentially resulting in the hiring of a chief who was more in tune with community concerns and need for police reform.

The Search Process

The search for the new police chief was led by the Madison Police and Fire Commission (PFC), a fully volunteer, independent statutory body appointed by the mayor and responsible for the hiring, promotion, discipline, and terminations of police and fire personnel in Madison. The purpose of establishing the independent commission was to separate police and fire staffing matters from local politics.

Jacquelyn Boggess (pictured below), an instructor at the University of Wisconsin and equity consultant who is active in race, class, and gender issues, had joined the commission six months before Koval's resignation. She was one of two members of the five-person PFC[3] who identifies as Black. Of the remaining three commissions, two identify as white and one identifies as Latina.

Boggess had already been familiar with the benefits of smaller, facilitated conversations through her own work in this area, and through her long-term, close working relationship with Colleen Butler, director of capacity building at Local Voices Network (LVN), as well as through her work with the nINACollective. Butler also has a close association with Katherine Cramer, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and a senior advisor to both the non-profit Cortico and MIT's Center for Constructive Communication, which was instrumental in the design and launch of LVN in Madison.

Until the commission engaged with LVN to bring lived-experience feedback into the search process, the only community feedback came through those individuals participating in the public PFC meetings. Members of the public who wanted to speak had to register in advance using the city's registration form, and each speaker was limited to a maximum of three minutes.

"We were doing it all wrong," says Boggess. The commissioners were listening to three-minute "soap-box" monologues that did not foster dialogue or bring insights from the underheard voices of those living in the most affected communities.

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[3] The other four members of the commission are Willaim Greer, Kevin Gundlach, Fabiola Hamdan, and Mary Schauf.

The question became: How could the commission get more meaningful feedback from the people most impacted by police and policing in Madison? According to Boggess, it wasn't by having people tired from a long day's work, many of whom would have to find child care or navigate public transportation or were uncomfortable in such a public setting, make the effort to show up and participate in an unfamiliar environment.

"You can't get community input without targeting folks who have had life experiences," said Boggess. "But it's hard to get the input if Black folks think that no one is listening. Why should I go out in the snow when I could be home having dinner?"

Bringing in the Local Voices Network

This is why Boggess suggested to the consultants who were helping with the search that they consider bringing in LVN to incorporate more meaningful, lived-experience feedback in the process. At the time, LVN had been convening small groups of between four and six people for conversations in Madison for 18 months, so it already had access to community conversations where encounters with police, criminal justice, and crime were raised.

All LVN conversations were conducted in friendly settings where complex and nuanced stories of underrepresented individuals could provide insights that are too often missed in mainstream and social media. Due to the COVID pandemic, the conversations specifically recorded for use by the PFC were conducted via Zoom. Earlier conversations that were part of the larger Madison program had been held in person. To create a more informal and inviting listening environment, many of the in-person conversations took place around a custom-designed, circular wood-framed "hearth listening device" (below) placed in the center of the table.
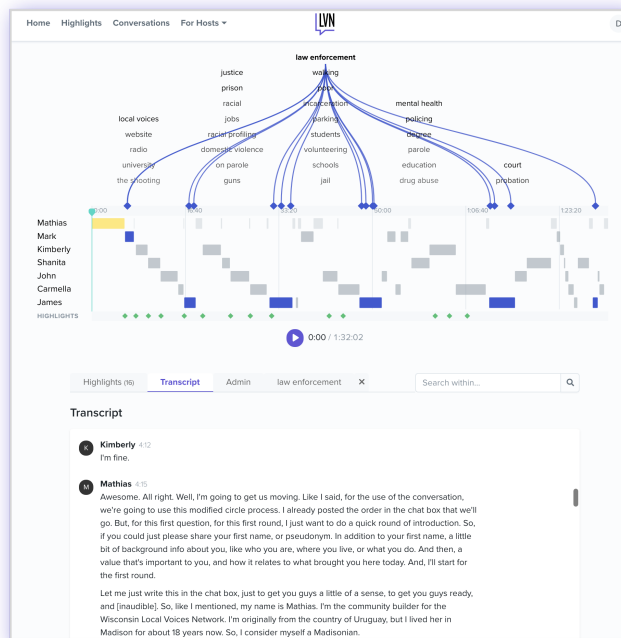
All conversations were recorded and transcribed so their full breadth and depth could remain on the public record. All participants gave prior consent for the conversations to be recorded, and for their contributions to be used.

"What is so important about this approach is that it's not just listening – an act of consumption – but rather an act of dialogue in which new understanding is co-created and a new shared reality is co-constructed based on an exchange of experiences, thoughts, feelings, and stories," explains Maggie Hughes, an MIT graduate student who was involved in selecting key snippets of conversation and categorizing them into relevant themes.

"What we saw," said Butler, "is that often when a story was told, others in the conversation would respond with 'Yeah, I know that!' and that one story would lead to other corroborating stories that together exposed a systemic problem."

Making Meaning from the Conversations

As a first step, the MIT team and Cortico collaborators brainstormed on how best to frame the conversations, asking such questions as:

- Who do you want to "uplift" (e.g., giving more value to those who speak from personal experience)?
- With whom will these conversations be shared, and for what purpose?
- Which snippets of audio text from community conversations are most valuable?

Once the framework had been defined and the conversations recorded, researchers began the listening and pattern-recognition process, analyzing the conversations to identify patterns of response and common themes.

Conversation Pattern Analysis   Common Themes
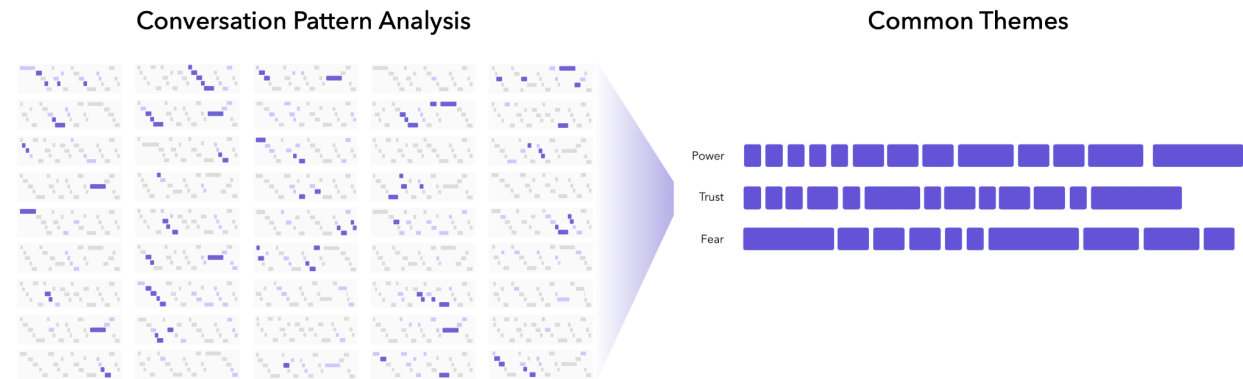
Power

Trust

Fear

For the Madison police chief search, identified themes included: trust; fear; power, police and youth; scope and knowledge of police; disability, mental health, and police; and compassion and bias. After they were collected, the snippets were annotated and organized by similarity and frequency to identify the most common, larger themes.

The result was an LVN report that pulled 57 snippets of audio text directly related to policing from 48 people across 31 community conversations. These provided wide representation in terms of age, race, ethnicity, gender, language, disability, and socio-economic status. Snippets that came from personal experience were tagged as "priority."

What Was Said

Many participants told stories related to misuse of power, corruption, unnecessary use of force, disrespect, and coercion against the most vulnerable. Others acknowledged the police as human beings, but human beings emboldened by guns. The conversations revealed that fear of the police was a common and clear theme that overlapped with issues of trust and power.

"What happens when they have a bad day, or they aren't nice guys?" one participant asked. Another related a story about police coming to her house after neighbors filed a noise complaint about her 13- and 14-year-old kids jumping on a trampoline at 8:00 in the evening, and her kids were handcuffed. Others weighed in with their own perspectives and stories about trust, power and policing:

- *"It's hard to get away from how powerful the institution and the badge and having a gun is, and how much that emboldens individuals to treat people like crap …. I don't know how you train people to be nice, to be good people when they just have a bad day."* [Carla]

- *"One of the moments that has really disturbed me, and sticks with me, was being at the Common Council meeting when the previous chief of police verbally berated Tony Robinson's grandmother rather than saying that he would be willing to make an appointment for her to share with him her thoughts, and instead, in an open hallway… called her a lunatic and a number of other names."* [Linda]

- *"Growing up, one of the first values, or principles, that I was taught, was to never trust the police in any situation or circumstance. And then, that was kind of proven to me around age 12 or 13 when I saw a family member be shot in the back eight times. Law enforcement really took their time. I watched him lay there on the ground and had to wait for a significant amount of time before somebody cared for him.*

  The second one, was watching a friend of mine be shot in the head, and dying in the gutter at my feet. And again, nothing be[ing] done about it. That kind of sealed my perspective on who the police were …. Once I began to really understand the police from a historical perspective, I totally understood this is not an institution that's designed to help people. They don't, in any way, shape, or form, prevent crime, and sometimes make the situation worse." [James]

- *"A couple of years ago, or maybe a little less, Bedrock did a survey, a community survey … on the south side. They showed how people are really worried about safety. And then people heard those stories and so … we need more policing. And I'm like NO!"* [Ananda]

In addition to the overlapping issues of trust and power, fear of police was a common and clear theme throughout the conversations:

- *"I still have the dread that I had when I didn't have a license – that every time I see, if there were like ten patrol cars there – to see who they were going to catch. Yes, I am very concerned about the community, especially that fear that may exist. That is not protecting our community, that is raiding our community. Why do you need ten patrols that are controlling traffic?"* [Baltazar, original in Spanish]

- *"And, a value that I trust, especially having two sons, is safety. I think that's my biggest fear as a parent. My oldest son is very vocal in the protest right now. He's also with the LGBT community. He has been very vocal, and I've been very proud of him. I've been scared with some of the threats that he has gotten."* [Shanita]

Some participants had more positive view of the police:

- *"I'm like, don't worry about the police, most of the police – 99 percent of the police – have enough training and have a decent understanding that they can try to de-escalate the situation, at least the ones I've encountered. Even the ones that I've disagreed with. Pulling me over for speeding or something. I'm not afraid of them."* [Mike]

- *"I remember growing up and knowing who the police officers were in my community, because they knew who we were. They didn't approach us with fear. They actually cared. My uncle was a police officer for a long time here in Madison, and was able to build relationships within this community. It will be nice to see that again, that they come in and build a relationship. It's going to take some time."* [Shanita]

And one told about getting support from a captain within the department:

- *"Madison's changed. I'll go with one particular incident. My wife and I … were sharing a car … and she came to pick me up. My wife is white. We went down Fisher Street and this officer was coming toward [us] from the opposite direction. He turns around and stopped me. We were trying to figure out what it was … He said, 'You got a parking ticket that needs to be paid.'.. I took that ticket … to the captain at the South precinct … and said 'Look, I want you to use this as a teaching tool because that's racial profiling.' He did. And the next day the officer called me and apologized for making that move. And I thought that was a big step because normally they take care of their own."* [John]

One police officer did speak honestly about first-hand experience of racism within the department:

- *"One time I had a supervisor lieutenant walk up to me, and this had to be now, 19 years ago. I was talking to an African-American officer inside the police department by the mailboxes, and when that officer walked away, he comes up to me. He was a white officer, and he says, 'You need to be careful who you talk to around here.' And, I'm like, man what's really going on? I think as an adult, that was kind of my first, 'Oh,' kind of gut check as to some things that are going on behind the scenes in law enforcement."* [Eric]

How Themes Were Basis for Candidate Questions

The PFC was tasked with selecting four finalists. They were: Shon Barnes, PhD, deputy chief of police, Salisbury, NC; Ramon Batista, Jr., police chief, Mensa, AZ; Christopher Davis, deputy police chief, Portland, OR; and Larry Scirotto, retired assistant police chief, Pittsburgh, PA.

On December 8, 2020, they conducted final interviews. As a portion of the final interview process there was a 35-minute recorded question-and-answer session with each candidate, released for public viewing. The LVN report on community listening, and the resulting questions suggested, played a major part in this process.

Based on the snippets of conversation gathered and organized by theme with the tools of machine-learning, researchers developed interview questions that represented concerns of the community. For example, in addressing the issue of power, one suggested question was: "Can you tell a story of a moment in your time as a police officer when you witnessed a misuse of power? How did you respond?" In addressing fear, a suggested question was: "What fears have you felt yourself while policing? What strategies might you deploy to help heal harms that cause these fears?" Three of the six questions used for the public interviews were created by Maggie Hughes and Colleen Butler based on the themes that emerged from the LVN conversations.

LVN-generated Question [via Jacquelyn Boggess]

"From these conversations, it seems that police fear some of the communities they work in, and the communities fear the police in return."

"What fears have you observed in the communities you've policed in? What fears have you felt yourself have while policing? What strategies might you deploy to help heal harms that cause these fears?"

Shon F. Barnes
Police Chief Candidate Interview
December 8, 2020
cityofmadison.com

Police Chief Candidate Answer [Shon Barnes]

"I believe that fear is a result of not understanding. That fear comes when we don't understand each other."

"I have dealt with that throughout my entire career. And it's always served me personally well by creating opportunities for me to get to know my community."

Shon F. Barnes
Police Chief Candidate Interview
December 8, 2020
cityofmadison.com

While the final interviews were conducted in a closed session to ensure a fair process, they were recorded, and a 36-minute recording of each candidate's interview was publicly released the following day, December 9. That same day, the PFC held a special meeting to discuss and deliberate on the final candidates.

Three commissioners, including Jacquelyn Boggess, voted in favor of Barnes. Two voted for Batista.[4] The two commissioners who voted against Barnes stated that he was not the first choice of the vast majority of local police-reform activists based on the input of those who showed up to speak at the PFC meetings. These same activists complained that the public hadn't been given sufficient say in the hire. But according to Boggess, Barnes aligned more closely to the concerns raised during the LVN conversations, an important consideration in light of the recent protests against the treatment of Black people by police both in Madison and nationwide. According to Boggess, the community input from the LVN conversations was a greater consideration than the feedback from the "usual suspects" who showed up "to pontificate" at the meetings.

The Advantages of LVN's Conversation in the Search Process

Madison is not alone in seeking meaningful community feedback in hiring police chiefs. When Albuquerque, NM launched a national search for its next chief of police in October, 2020, it held 44 community-input meetings over three months to solicit a diverse array of perspectives and priorities. In addition, it received 2,257 responses to a survey that, among other things, asked respondents to identify qualifications they considered very important. The attributes most often identified were accountable to community, accessible to community, and strong ties to the community. But according to Colleen Butler, here were several key differences between the Albuquerque and Madison approaches:

- LVN conversations were between four and six people, which created more opportunity for participants to reflect on different perspectives and have more nuanced conversations;
- LVN conversations were recorded, uploaded, and transcribed, so the full breadth and depth of the conversations would remain on the public record; and
- With the use of advanced machine-learning technology, LVN was able to highlight key themes from conversations, and based on this information, to make specific recommendations for questions to be posed to the candidates and later shared publicly.

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[4] Jacquelyn Boggess, Mary Schauf, and William Greer voted for Barnes; Fabiola Hamdan and Kevin Gundlach voted for Batista.

"It is this unique combination of advanced listening analytics with very human contact that makes this a model that we hope to scale," says Deb Roy, director of the MIT Center for Constructive Communication, professor of media arts and sciences at MIT, and co-founder/chair of Cortico.

While those who collaborated closely with LVN saw the strong benefit of bringing local voices into the process, most media coverage of the search and the final vote of the commission focused more on the community feedback presented at the public meetings. "Unfortunately this meant that most of the public did not know about or understand the important role that LVN conversations played from the earliest days of the process," said Boggess. As a result, organizers of some of the city's social justice groups argued that the selection process lacked transparency, and that Barnes was not the consensus choice among local police-reform activists, many of whom favored Ramon Batista.

Looking Ahead: The Challenge of Scaling

This raises the question of how the benefits of Cortico's and CCC's participation in future searches could become more publicly visible, and how the process could become a standard practice for non-elected civic positions, such as police chiefs, across the country.

As Cortico and CCC researchers look to scale this model of elevating underheard voices for such searches, they need to find ways to streamline the process while maintaining the critical balance of human listening with machine analysis. Toward this end, CCC researchers are working to develop accessible, user-friendly, open source tools supported by AI that will provide an interface to categorize similar conversation snippets, and use machine learning and natural language processing techniques to make suggestions that human analysts can incorporate at their discretion. In doing so, the researchers are stressing the need for more visibility and transparency into how the conversations are analyzed. The next phase of this work will be to pilot these tools and sense-making process within communities so that the analysis is done independently from CCC researchers, providing "community-powered understanding" and furthering the mission to surface underheard voices in the public sphere.

Conclusion

The LVN report detailing its work with the Madison Police and Fire Commission stated: "Community stories are not the whole picture of what happens in any municipality, but too often civic leaders are working only with statistics about demographic groups or political positions. Polling data necessarily removes nuance and offers only one slice of what is true. If that quantitative data can be combined with community stories, not only do we have a fuller picture of what is happening in a community, we have a community that has grown in its connection neighbor-to-neighbor. And if those community voices are heard, acknowledged and made explicitly a part of the decision process, we start to restore community trust and faith in engagement practices. A virtuous cycle."

By the end of the process Boggess commented, "We could all tell that something different was going on." As one conversation participant observed: "Those who are closest to the problems are closest to the solutions ..."