



LVN Case Study: Real Talk for Change Boston

A Collaboration Focused on Giving Voice to the Unheard

In municipalities across the country, city governments most often solicit citizen input through public meetings or opinion polls. While the goal is to increase inclusion, more often than not, these mechanisms for citizen participation fall short of their desired goal. Lived experiences of unheard citizens are not shared, critical perspectives and needs are not brought forth for public debate, and community frustration and distrust grow.

A First for Boston

To address this, **Real Talk for Change (RTFC) Boston** brings together people and technology in a new way through facilitated conversations, giving citizens from marginalized communities across the city an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogues where complex and nuanced stories of their lived experiences provided important insights too often missed in mainstream and social media.

These conversations, which emphasize the personal experiences of each participant, are conducted in familiar settings throughout neighborhoods across Boston and in close collaboration with trusted grassroots organizations. Every conversation is recorded with the permission of the participants. What makes this process unique—and a potential model for other municipalities—is what happened after the recorded conversations take place: Using pioneering machine-learning technology for analytic sense-making, privacy-preserving data architectures, and co-designing civic networks with community partners, researchers in MIT's Center for Constructive Communication (CCC) focus on sifting through hundreds of hours of audio to make sense and define themes from these conversations. As part of this process, snippets of conversations are excerpted and publicly shared, again with the permission of the participants. These snippets prove to be powerful, uncensored expressions of how lived experiences from day-to-day life in Boston factor into citizens' concerns and opinions, providing important feedback that decision-makers need to address issues that are foremost on the minds of Boston's most unheard citizens.

This effort to create a more honest and stronger public dialogue draws heavily on a collaboration with the non-profit organization Cortico, which utilizes the Local Voices Network (LVN) platform for conducting the facilitated conversations throughout the city.

Pre-Election Launch

Launched in August 2021, RTFC's initial efforts in Boston focused on issues of importance for the upcoming Boston mayoral race. Conversations were recorded, analyzed, and publicly shared prior to the election to encourage discourse in the hope of contributing to a better and more equitable Boston. This involved working closely with six local grassroots organizations¹ including Dunk the Vote and the South End Technology Center. According to Ron Bell, founding director of Dunk the Vote, "This effort reached Boston residents who would otherwise not get a chance to weigh in on the

¹ In addition to Dunk the Vote and the South End Technology Center, local organizations included: Circle of Nations, Freedom House, Family Nurturing Center, and MetroBoston Alive.



future of Boston by combining old-school community organizing techniques along with the use of new technology that captures these voices and shares them with our government leaders.”

RTFC is led by Ceasar McDowell, Professor of the Practice of Civic Design and Associate Head of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT. McDowell has deep roots in the Boston community, with research interests focused on civic and community engagement and the use of social technology to enhance both. According to McDowell, “RTFC seeks to engage new voters and build trust between diverse communities, local media, and candidates for public office.” He emphasizes the goal of creating “an experienced-based accountability system that government officials can use to craft more appropriate responses to problems.”

“What makes RTFC unique is how it rebalances the role of people and technology in today’s democracy, bringing together age-old methods in facilitated group dialogue with modern machine learning, data visualization, and social network design,” explains Deb Roy, MIT Professor of Media Arts and Sciences, director of CCC, and co-founder and chair of Cortico. “We’re doing this by reaching beyond academia to collaborate with experienced, locally based organizations. By engaging with pilot programs like RTFC we hope to leverage data-driven analytics to better understand community issues and, with this knowledge, to design new digital tools and communication networks capable of bridging social, cultural, and political divides.”

Reaching the Mayoral Candidates

In the weeks leading up to the Boston mayoral race in November, 2021, *Boston Globe* reporter Meghan Irons published [an article](#) on RTFC, providing the link to an [online portal](#) where the public could easily access short excerpts from the numerous conversations that were conducted throughout some of the city’s most marginalized neighborhoods. This article brought many readers to RTFC’s portal, where they could experience the conversations firsthand. As a follow-up to the article, Irons hosted a candidate forum aired on the Boston Neighborhood Network, where the two primary winners, former City Council members Michelle Wu (who was soon elected) and Annissa Essaibi George, were asked to respond to questions that had been captured through the RTFC conversations. [Listen to sample questions and responses from the candidate here.] Additional news outlets that covered RTFC’s activities related to the election included Politico’s Massachusetts Playbook, Boston Praise Radio, and GBH radio.

Building on Earlier Work in Madison, WI

RTFC builds on the success of the facilitated conversation techniques employed in the hiring process for a new police chief in Madison, Wisconsin in 2020. The benefits of these facilitated conversations were perhaps best described by Jacquelyn Boggess, a member of the Madison’s Police and Fire Commission, tasked with selecting the next police chief. According to Boggess, “You can’t get community input without targeting folks who have had life experiences. 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?”



Scope of Current and Future Work

Between August and November 2021, 322 unique participants engaged in more than 70 conversations, 67 percent of whom are Black and/or Latino. These conversations, which were facilitated by 18 community members, had participants from 21 of Boston's 24 neighborhoods, with the highest percentage of participants coming from the traditionally underheard communities of Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan. Six local organizations (mentioned earlier) collaborated with RTFC in this effort. The Boston Foundation provided critical funding to support this community participation.

Conversations were seeded with specific broad questions: "What is your question about the future of Boston and your place in it?" and "What experience led you to that question?"

Once completed, researchers use the sensemaking tool Insight to analyze all selected segments of the conversations. Thematic codes are then developed and applied to each conversation segment. As more and more conversations are added, additional thematic codes are created, and then subdivided, providing a more complete and nuanced understanding of the issues raised.

To date, the topic most discussed related to housing, followed by institutions (accessibility, expectations, and processes), public health, discrimination, economic opportunity and education. Members of the public can access excerpts from these conversations through [the RTFC portal](#), which is continuously being updated.

The following are three examples of excerpts from these conversations:

Police Discrimination:

I grew up in East Boston in the Maverick projects...in the late 60s and 70s. As a child when the white boys, white girls, [were] busting our windows...we'd call the cops. They'd come, do absolutely nothing. So as a little girl I watched this—my mom walking around the house with a football helmet because bricks were coming through the windows. It got so bad [sic] the Black Panthers actually came to help us...because the cops never ever did anything. So my whole life I've endured this kind of racism [from] the police force, as a parent living in the projects in South Street watching my son and his friends being harassed constantly by the police. And...in my opinion—my own experiences—there's never ever been anything but racism that I've seen. And then I think about the Black cops. When are you going to show up for us? You're sitting in the cruisers with these folks. I was arrested for trying to defend my son in my home. I'm in the back of a cruiser, and the white boy—because that's what they are to me—says to me, "What do you do for a living?" As he's transporting me to the jail, and I said, "None of your business." And his response to that was, "Probably nothing. You're just like the rest of them collecting a check."
—Darnese

Housing:

I'm one of the people who lives here in this community and would say that Dorchester is being regentrified, and no one was paying attention to that because, like I said, the three-family homes were being sold, but...they're being turned into condos, and how do you turn a three family home and all of a sudden start saying that these are condo floors, and each floor now costs \$360,000? I think, the American dream [is] of a hard working person owning a home and being able to...possibly use one of their floors to be their small business or...a second income...Where is



rent going to go from here if an average three-bedroom apartment—if you can get it—an apartment and not condo—is running like \$2,200, \$2,300 and more? There's something a lot of people who have decent jobs that work for the T that work for the police. I work for the city, one of the city department divisions, and that's astronomical to be asking somebody to spend \$2,000 a month. —Dionne

Mental Health:

So I've been in Dorchester...working with young people...and some of what's really popped out to me—especially over the summer—was our young people trying to get access to mental health resources. We had a number of people come through the organization I work with, dealing with everything from anxiety to depression, self-harm, just a lot of different things that they've been wrestling with and often feeling that they don't have an outlet. A big theme that popped up for the teens I worked with this summer was dealing with family dynamics and oftentimes not feeling safe or heard in their own homes. And how can we provide resources for them to work through that? So for me, I'm really just thinking about: How can we create safe spaces for young people: teenagers, middle schoolers, high schoolers, to talk about what they're going through and then to get the help they need? And hopefully, I can play a part in that as well. —David

Looking Forward

Cortico and CCC researchers will continue to look to scale and broaden this model of elevating underheard voices for more informed and civil discourse both within municipalities nationally in areas of critical importance to maintaining our democracy. To achieve this, researchers are working on streamlining the process while maintaining the critical balance of human listening with machine analysis, with the goal of eventually making RTFC sustainable and community owned and led. Part of this effort includes validating new tools and methods that will continuously be incorporated into the the LVN facilitated listening platform.

They are also looking at how the RTFC model can be adapted to provide a tool to facilitate honest, open discourse within organizations. As a first step toward this, CCC and Cortico are initiating pilot conversations within MIT through [RealTalk@MIT](#), in coordination with an Institute-wide Values Initiative. RealTalk@MIT will provide a new community-based civic space for deep and substantive conversations among MIT students, faculty, and staff—constituencies that do not often have open channels of communication.

More broadly, CCC researchers are working in collaboration with Cortico to develop more accessible, user-friendly, tools to categorize similar conversation snippets, and then apply 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.

MIT Center for Constructive Communication: www.ccc.mit.edu

Cortico: <https://cortico.ai>