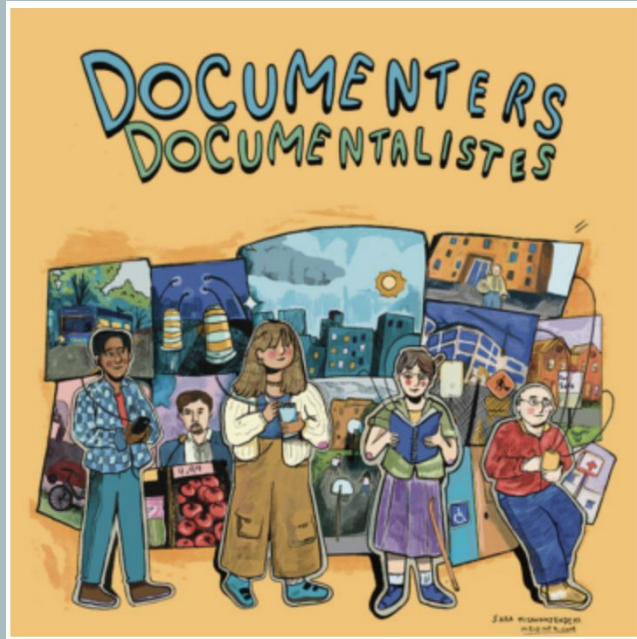


From First Steps to Growing Pains: The Evolution of Documenters Canada in English Newsrooms



Dr. Nicole Blanchett,
Tyler Nagel and
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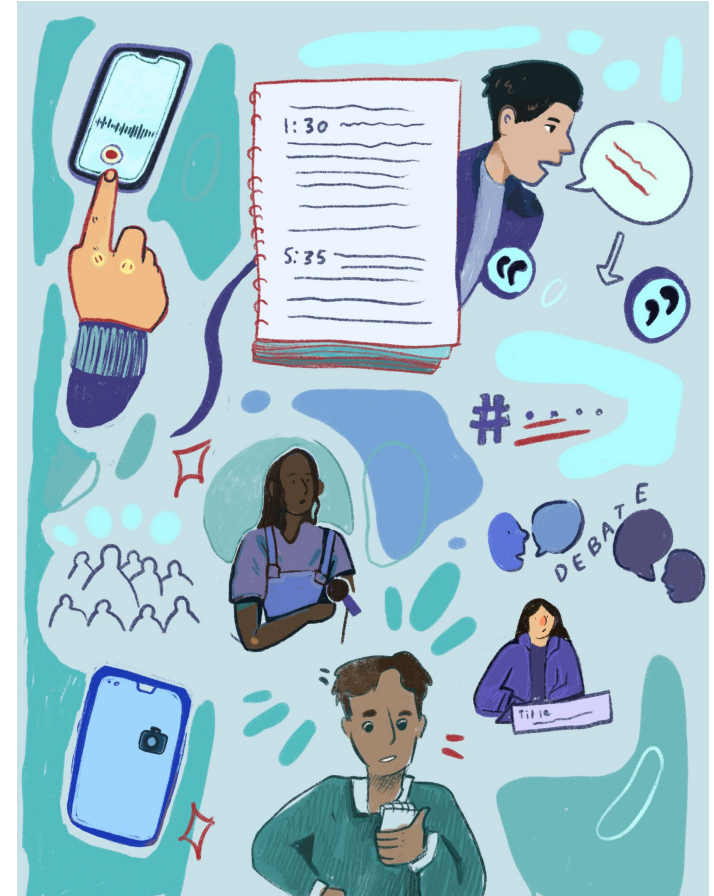
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What we'll cover ...

- Theoretical framework
- Documenters at The Green Line in Toronto, Ont.
- Documenters in Crowsnest Pass, Alberta
- Conclusion



Sara Mizannojehdehi/Documenters

Where data come from ...

- Personal experiences working as part of Documenters' teams
- Focus group with Toronto Documenters (4)
- Documenters meeting last June (entire Canadian team)
- Interviews with Documenters (2)
- Interview with TGL senior editor + ongoing discussions with TGL team

Diffusing Innovation (Rogers, 1995; García-Avilés et al., 2018)

- Innovation spreads across populations through social systems over time
- The theory explains how and why new ideas are adopted
- The theory has five adopter roles:
 - Innovators
 - Early adopters
 - Early majority
 - Late majority
 - Laggards

Diffusing Innovation con't ...

- Diffusion is a five-step process
 - Awareness
 - Interest
 - Evaluation
 - Trial
 - Adoption
- The idea becomes mainstream even when laggards use it, eg., Facebook

The innovators: The Green Line ...

- Small organization (owner/publisher + one full-time employee, variety of contract positions at start), BIG city
- Community-driven, hyperlocal, digital-first news/information organization
- Started program in Fall 2024: Five Documenters trained (none currently documenting, but former CEL is)

“The expectation and intention was to share this knowledge of how our local governance works, and equip people who are not journalists and don't necessarily have this background to be able to go into the meetings feel confident about understanding, you know, who's who and what's going on and how to take notes and how these notes eventually get published, and sort of bringing in civilians, so to say, into the news gathering process.” -Senior editor TGL

DOCUMENTERS TORONTO



Nicole Blanchett
Co-director of Documenters
Canada



Anita Li
TGL Founder
and Editor-
in-Chief



Aia Jaber
RA & CEL



Angela Misri
Web design and researcher



Yara El Murr
Senior Editor, former
Managing Editor



Current Documenters

What are the RA/CEL jobs?

CEL:

- Coordinating with Documenters
 - Assigning meeting slots, finding relevant agenda items, answering questions
- Creating training tools and scheduling sessions
- Creating write-up and videos based on meeting notes
- Creating information packages eg., Civic Big Sister series

RA:

- Train Documenters through a three-part module (two information sessions and one in-person meeting)
- Fact-check all notes from Documenters
- Complete website modifications and updates
- Social media creation



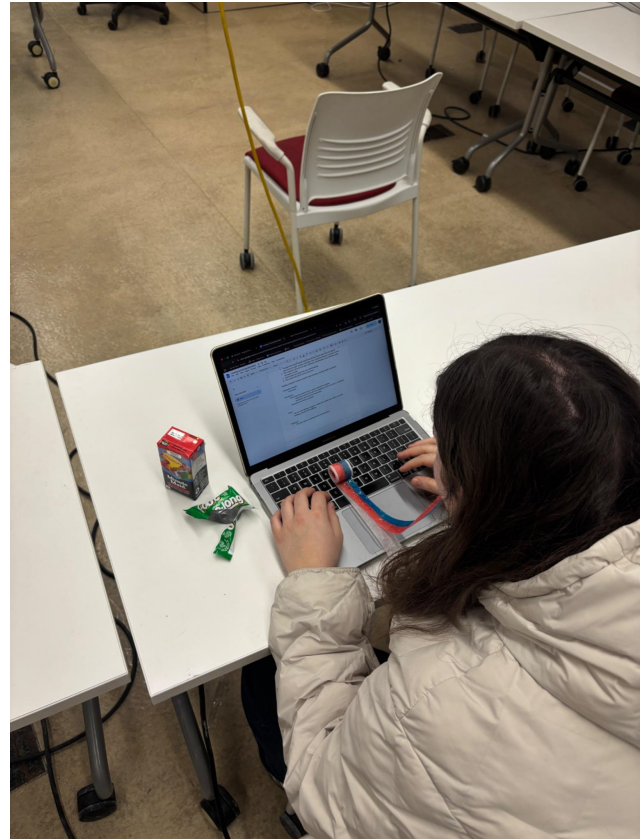
RA/CEL Challenges...

- Figuring out attainable social media goals/project goals
- Adhering to notetaking structure and providing relevant perspective
- Need to encourage them to go to in-person, smaller meetings/earlier in process
- Scheduling
 - Sometimes there's too much interest
 - Sometimes there aren't enough meetings re: March Break
 - Documenters' availability
- Sometimes challenging to fit fact-checking, social media, website changes and training into hours available



RA/CEL What works well...

- Being both RA & CEL streamlined the process
- Expanding outreach into community spaces, classrooms, online platforms & more
- Making training collaborative, fun with snacks and friendly rather than overly formal
- Encouraging Documenters to cover meetings connected to their own interests or communities
- Consistent texting > emails for speed and relationship building



Focusing on videos vs. text to meet audience where they are . . .



Evaluation and trial...

- Many growing pains, including conflict over perspective vs. opinion
- Took on too much at first (3 meetings per week), dropped to 1 per week, eventually dropped to 1 per month, now do 3 per month
- Hired someone with journalism experience to be community engagement lead
- Switched to hybrid model – some online some in-person meetings
- Focused on meetings likely to have an action outcome
- Decreased TGL workload by having RA fact-check

“I think we were overly ambitious in the beginning and not realizing how difficult different processes would be, from finding meetings that are actually interesting and beneficial ... editorially, it's sound fact checking. I was the only journalist in that workflow, basically. So that ended up being a lot of work on myself, and then on the journalists in our newsroom who were doing the video summaries of Documenters.” - Senior editor TGL

Adoption: Bespoke plan required ...

“We can’t just import Documenters as it’s done in whatever newsroom it’s done in the U.S. . . .

What we’re doing here has to work for us. It has to work for a Canadian context, for a Toronto context, and for a Green Line context, too.”

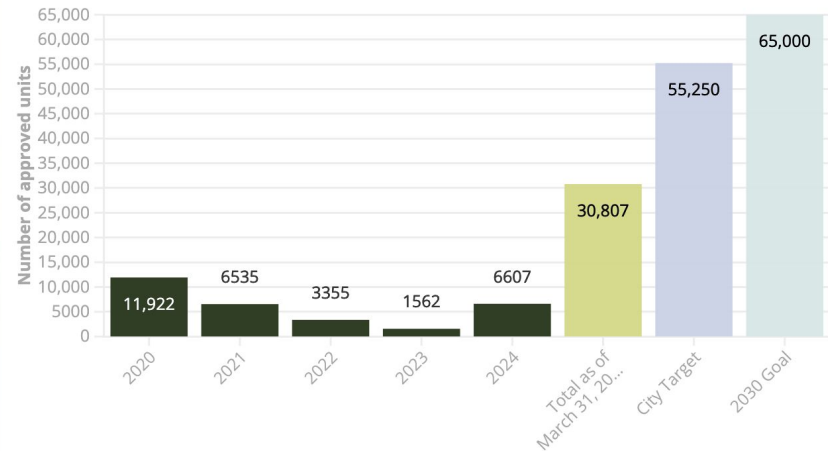
- Senior Editor TGL

“Okay, our Documenters have come back with this, these notes, these observations, and we can see a trend. This is what we can add about this particular trend, so that now it’s becoming a bit more integrated in what we do.” - Senior Editor TGL

Since affordable housing has come up at virtually every community consultation for new developments that we’ve covered, *The Green Line* team looked at city data to understand this trend.

NUMBER OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING UNITS APPROVED BY THE CITY OF TORONTO SINCE 2020

The number of approvals had been steadily declining in the past few years up until 2024.



Source: [HousingTO Action Plan 2020-2030 Dashboard](#)

Adding context with meeting notes ...

THE GREEN LINE
ORIGINAL STORY

May 2026

WHY THE CITY OF TORONTO DENIED ONE OF ITS MOST FLOOD-PRONE NEIGHBOURHOODS AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN

A local resident provided an audio recording of the June 2025 meeting between Rockcliffe-Smythe residents and city officials to *The Green Line*.

“It is important to note that Rockcliffe-Smythe is already supported through the city’s city-wide emergency response system, which is in place across Toronto to respond quickly to major floods. The decision was made by the city to provide additional support unique to the Rockcliffe-Smythe area called the No-Fault Grant program, which no other area receives.”



About a dozen Torontonians from Etobicoke to York South-Weston came to a packed and busy Executive Committee meeting in City Hall on Jan. 28 to voice their frustrations with the city’s plan, or lack thereof, to deal with recurrent stormwater floodings.

January 2025



During the Jan. 28 Executive Committee meeting, frustrated residents pushed for urgent sewer infrastructure upgrades — but the city shelved a proposed stormwater charge on commercial parking lots.

Highlighting what's been done so far....

THE GREEN LINE
CIVIC WATCHLIST

WHERE TO FIND THE MOST IMPORTANT TORONTO UPDATES FOR THE 2026 FIFA WORLD CUP

As the FIFA World Cup approaches, we round up all our civic notes and break down where to find out more.

Here are a couple of the notes we've done in the last few months related to the FIFA World Cup, in case you wanted to catch up on everything and see the development for yourself.

- On Aug. 29, 2025, we shared Documenter Sebastian Tansil's notes on KMBIA's plans for a [patchwork of cultural zones](#) across the neighbourhood.
- On Feb. 20, 2026, Documenter Sebastian Tansil gave us [an update on KMBIA's initiatives](#), including a special Pedestrian Sunday featuring different participating countries in the World Cup.
- On April 10, 2026, our newest Documenter trainees attended the TTC's Advisory Committee on Accessible Transit, where members [reviewed updates](#) to mobility measures for people travelling to FIFA Fan Fest and the games.
- On April 24, 2026, Documenter Rouaida Nassif attended an Executive Committee meeting, where Toronto made some [pretty controversial changes](#) to FIFA Fan Fest's free admission.

But evaluation/trial is ongoing . . .

“At what stage do we cover a decision that’s coming through city hall? At what stage do we come back to it and see how it’s changed over time, how feedback from residents has been integrated or not? I think this is something we haven’t quite figured out yet.” - Senior editor TGL

No laggards here ...

“My role as a Documenter, I feel like, is to attend these long meetings and really try to pinpoint the most important details that can help ... the journalists who will use these notes make the best article they can. So I'm trying to really give them ... and summarize the best... what I deem as the most important information for them.”

“The fact that we are actually from those communities, maybe, like, a person that would come in from the outside might not have a good understanding of what might be actually important to the community.”

“The pressure is really off as a Documenter [speaking re. having the support of the RA fact-checker/fear of liability] ... [and] “there's less onus to ... maintain that neutrality.”

Anecdotal impact ...

- Community organizations retweeting or reposting Documentor notes and thanking TGL for doing the work
- Documenters becoming more civically, active, eg., applying for a grant or being a deputant at a meeting
- Community members asking for a Documenter

“I’m at a stage where someone said, can we get a Documenter to document this meeting?”

Crowsnest Pass Herald

- Small organization, rural small town
 - 1 publisher/owner (Lisa Sygutek)
 - 1 ad salesperson
 - 1 full time journalist and 5 part time or freelance journalists
- Independently owned, established in 1930
- Emphasis on the print edition but all news is posted to their website
- Joined the network in Spring 2025 and launched in April 2026
- Challenges around roles, partnerships, recruitment and adaption to small towns

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Crowsnest Pass
Herald

Serving our communities since 1930

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Vehicle bursts into flames off Highway 3

Emergency crews responded after a vehicle caught fire near the intersection of Highway 3 and 129th Street.

Photos show firefighters responding to a vehicle fire at the intersection of Highway 3 and 129th Street after a driver reported the car had died and began smoking while turning off the highway.

According to police brief information, there were no injuries reported. Evidence at the scene was consistent with an engine fire. The fire department extinguished the fire and the vehicle was later towed from the area.

Tina Pedersen photos



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Crowsnest Pass – Awareness and Interest

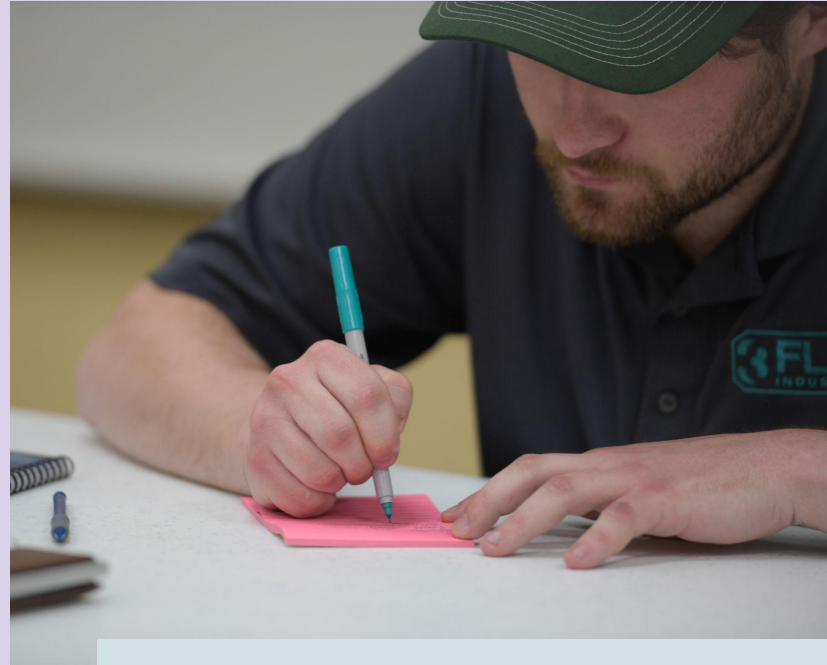
- Became aware of Documenters Canada in 2025
- Was curious to see if it could be adopted to a rural context
- Considerable learning on the part of Tyler, Lisa, and others as to the Documenters model



The beautiful Crowsnest Pass landscape

Crowsnest Pass – Evaluation

- Models used in Toronto and Montreal evaluated
- Consideration of how the model could be adopted to a unique environment:
 - Highly isolated community
 - Highly isolated media ecosystem with no competing outlets
 - Small population (6000 people)
 - Small host organization
 - Significant political polarization (staunch Conservative supporters)
 - Geographic separation between team members (2.5 hour drive from Calgary)



Brainstorming during Documenters training

Crowsnest Pass - Trial

- Field guide was adapted
- Training was modified to rural contexts
- Recruitment began (initial concerns about number of applicants were unfounded)
- Significant organizational-bridging had to occur
 - Rural - Urban
 - Academic - Industry
 - Private-sector news - CBC
- Three Documenters trained in April 2026
- Role definitions still in play



Taking meeting notes during training

Crowsnest Pass – Adoption

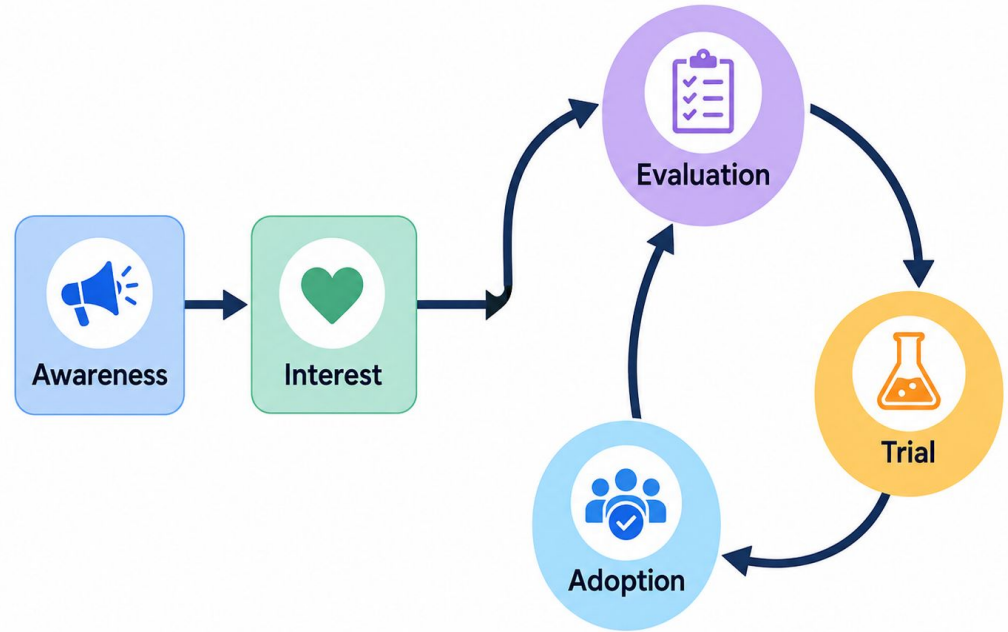
- First meeting was documented last week (May 26)
- Still to come!
- Funding will be a considerable challenge in the future



The Crowsnest Pass Documenters Team

Innovating on an ever-evolving model

- The model was still being developed at The Green Line when the Crowsnest Pass Herald became aware of it.
- Interest and Evaluation was difficult to accomplish at Crowsnest Pass because of an untested rural context.
- Learning (evaluation, trial, adoption) never stops



Conclusions (1)

- Documenters (and the organizations they work with) become early adopters of this type of civic journalism
- Documenters reduce barriers, to civic knowledge & make participation – in both civics and journalism – more accessible and transparent
- The transparency, and support from community, pushes adoption into media organizations and municipal governments

Toronto



Crowsnest Pass



Conclusions (2)

- Documenters reverses the typical newsroom diffusion process as innovation also comes from the community & works its way into the newsroom
- Opinions about innovation influence speed of diffusion and adoption and perceived value
 - Works well with an organization like TGL that is built on community-driven, innovative practice
 - Crowsnest Pass demonstrates how innovation can diffuse between organizations and contexts in real time

