



Putting Engagement to Work

**How News Organizations are Pursuing
“Public-Powered Journalism”**

Thomas R. Schmidt & Regina G. Lawrence



UNIVERSITY OF
OREGON

**School of Journalism
and Communication**

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Foreword

The University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication established the Agora Journalism Center in 2014 to drive transformational advancements in journalism and communication to enhance public knowledge and to enrich civic life for all community members. We care about the future of journalism because it is linked to the future of a healthy democracy. We believe the future of journalism depends on journalists finding new and better ways to engage with the publics they serve.

This report, based on research led by our first Agora Journalism Center postdoctoral fellow, Thomas R. Schmidt, examines how newsrooms across the country are pursuing deeper audience engagement using the tools and methods provided by the company Hearken. Hearken has emerged as a leading innovator, both challenging and guiding newsrooms to pursue a deeper approach to audience engagement. Our goal with this report is to examine how newsrooms are adopting those tools and taking up the challenge to involve the public at every stage of the news production process. We find the challenge is addressed somewhat unevenly, largely due to resource constraints and variations in the way outlets produce “public-powered” news within their particular contexts. We also find a heartening commitment across these outlets to more deeply engage with the communities they serve. In the end, all of the newsrooms we spoke with believe that meaningful engagement is key to journalism’s continuing relevance and sustainability.

We think these insights come at an opportune time; the news industry is looking for better ways to build relationships and trust with the communities they serve. We welcome your thoughts on the future of news and the developments outlined in this third Agora Report.

Regina G. Lawrence

Executive Director Agora Journalism Center

Andrew DeVigal

Associate Director and Chair in Journalism Innovation and Civic Engagement,
Agora Journalism Center

Executive Summary

At a time when “engagement” has become a buzzword in the news industry, a number of tools and platforms have emerged that aim to help news organizations interact with their audiences. Hearken is one such company, offering digital tools and consulting services to newsrooms to involve audience members in the production of news stories “from pitch to publication.” The company calls its model “public-powered journalism,” and advertises that its users create deep audience engagement that “builds trust, generates original, high-performing journalism, yields valuable data and attracts more paying subscribers.”¹ Currently, Hearken has more than 130 newsrooms under contract.

The purpose of this study, written with both scholarly and practical questions in mind, is twofold. First, we explore how Hearken is being used in various newsrooms. We analyze how Hearken’s digital tools and its philosophy of public-powered journalism are being put to work and where newsrooms run into challenges. Second, we look at how implementation of the Hearken approach differs in some patterned ways, despite the fact that the company offers the same platform and strategic consulting to all its clients. We examine the organizational culture of a sample of 15 news organizations across the United States to better understand how particular factors affect the process of using Hearken. We find that:

- 1.** All the newsrooms featured in this report embrace deeper audience engagement conceptually and strategically, acknowledging that involving the audience in at least some aspects of the news-making process is important to them. All report using Hearken toward at least one of four main goals: to better relate with, listen to, interact with and collaborate with their audiences.
- 2.** Most outlets aim to both deepen and expand audience engagement using Hearken. As news organizations try to simultaneously expand the reach of their audience and increase the depth of their relationship with their communities, they may face an underlying conflict between two priorities: either focusing on targeted community-building with potentially smaller reach or pursuing wider reach that may make it challenging to sustain a tightly knit community of readers or listeners due to limited newsroom resources.
- 3.** While the news organizations we analyzed all use the same platform from Hearken, they follow one of two organizational models (special team or rotation) for producing Hearken-driven news, each with its own opportunities and challenges. Newsrooms with a special team for Hearken-driven stories gain efficiency but run the risk of relegating those stories to a niche of the news operation. Newsrooms that rotate reporters can find that resources and commitment to pursuing engagement-driven stories are distributed unevenly throughout the newsroom.

¹ <https://www.wearehearken.com/>

4. Although news organizations in our sample are keen to contextualize their reporting of Hearken-driven stories within traditional notions of journalists as investigators, watchdogs and information brokers, our findings suggest that audience members are interested in a variety of topics and issues, including local history and culture, that expand the repertoire of what journalists are asked to investigate.
5. Hearken's philosophy of public-powered journalism encourages newsrooms to involve audience members in each stage of the reporting process, from pitch to feedback. Our findings show, however, that newsrooms involve audience members mostly in the pitch, less frequently in the assignment and feedback phases, and even less frequently during reporting.
6. When asked about the biggest obstacles in using Hearken, journalists we talked with pointed to three areas: technical challenges, workflow complications and constraints of organizational resources and culture. At the same time, most of the journalists we interviewed praised Hearken for providing feedback and guidance on implementing and adapting the software as well as improving workflow issues.
7. In order to gauge the success of Hearken-driven stories, the newsrooms we studied use a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures in four major dimensions: reach, engaged time, quality (of individual stories and overall performance), and conversion of audience engagement into memberships or subscriptions. Overall, most reported some measurable success using Hearken according to these metrics.
8. Journalists in our interviews expressed two responses when they were asked whether working with Hearken had changed their expectations toward and attitudes about their audiences. One group emphasized that Hearken did not change their expectations or attitudes because they had believed in the value of engaging more deeply with the audience in the first place. Another group indicated that, sometimes after initial skepticism, their attitudes toward engagement with audience members had become more positive.
9. To realize the full people-powered news ideal that Hearken promotes, newsrooms have to accomplish several things at once: publish Hearken-driven stories on a regular basis, allocate sufficient staff resources, and fully involve audience members in the entire story cycle. Most newsrooms in our sample are still finding a balance across these objectives, and most are not able to fully implement public-powered journalism at every stage of the news-making process on a consistent basis. We distinguish three archetypal models of how newsrooms are finding their balance: frequency-focused, staff-focused and participation-focused.
10. Our findings also reveal several tensions underlying the implementation of public-powered journalism that shape and constrain how thoroughly and in what fashion news organizations adopt the Hearken model of public engagement. We suspect these tensions exist as newsrooms undertake other engaged journalism initiatives.

Introduction

We hear a lot these days about distrust in the news media. We hear a lot about “fake news.” We hear a lot about filter bubbles, polarization and disgruntled citizens. But increasingly, we also are hearing a lot about how news organizations are trying to rebuild the relationship between journalists and audiences from the ground up. These initiatives encourage journalists to listen, to talk with, not just talk to, audiences and to engage and involve the communities they serve.¹

Although the meaning of “engagement” varies across news organizations,² many increasingly see engaging with audiences and communities as a key strategy to maintain relevance and achieve sustainability.³ As the imperative to innovate and engage has grown, several companies and platforms have emerged, such as The Coral Project, GroundSource and Hearken, each offering different engagement tools to newsrooms. Hearken is a major player in this evolving ecosystem of audience engagement. In concert with practitioners and entrepreneurs, funders and researchers, the company aims to shape journalistic norms, values and practices with regard to audience engagement. Hearken’s stated goal is to help newsrooms “cultivate deep audience engagement; create original, high-performing content; collect valuable data, emails and insights; [and] generate new revenue streams through user-acquisition, advertising and underwriting.”⁴ Hearken’s prominence, with approximately 130 newsrooms with access to its tools, makes it an important test case to explore what its model of deep audience engagement and relationship-building looks like in the bustle and clatter of daily journalism.

Engagement is an evolving set of practices, and its impact on attracting, developing and satisfying audiences has yet to be fully documented by the scholarly community. How newsrooms are managing the imperative to engage poses another set of questions. This report is one step toward understanding how engagement is being implemented in newsrooms and how journalists are meeting the challenges inherent in Hearken’s call to shift not only strategies and practices, but the very culture of newsrooms.

In conducting this study, we chose to focus on Hearken because of its prominence and growing presence in newsrooms around the United States and beyond. At conferences and professional workshops focused on journalism and the news industry, Hearken is regularly invoked as an ideal approach to engaged journalism. Moreover, beyond offering tools and consulting services, Hearken advocates for a cultural shift in newsrooms.

The company’s claim that public-powered journalism can not only deepen news outlets’ relationships with audiences and make news more relevant, but also help outlets’ bottom line, has received scholarly scrutiny. Jacob Nelson’s ethnographic case study of Hearken concluded that engagement remains an “elusive metric,” difficult to measure because the operational definition of engagement has not been settled.⁵ Though Nelson’s study

¹ <http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/04/so-what-is-that-trusted-news-integrity-trust-project-all-about-a-guide-to-the-many-similarly-named-new-efforts-fighting-for-journalism/>

² Green-Barber, Lindsay, “Towards a Useful Typology of Engaged Journalism.” Medium, October 18, 2018. https://medium.com/@lindsay_impactarchitects/towards-a-useful-typology-of-engaged-journalism-790c96c4577e

³ Radcliffe, Damian, Local Journalism in the Pacific Northwest: Why It Matters, How It’s Evolving, and Who Pays for It. Agora Journalism Center. http://journalism.uoregon.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Radcliffe-Agora_FINAL-for-web.pdf

⁴ <https://www.wearehearken.com/hearken-overview-about/>

⁵ Nelson, Jacob L. “The Elusive Engagement Metric.” Digital Journalism 6, no. 4 (2018): 528-544.

stirred some controversy and some push-back from Hearken itself, his basic insight remains relevant: As much as “measurable journalism” has expanded with the rise of digital tools that allow newsrooms to track audience behavior, the effect of engaged journalism strategies on news organizations’ economic viability has yet to be examined by rigorous research across multiple settings.

Our study, however, takes a different tack. We set out to examine how newsrooms are deploying the Hearken model—not just its tools, but also its methodology and philosophy of public-powered journalism. Our research does not directly examine whether Hearken has improved organizations’ bottom line—though our interviews shed light on how outlets are measuring its impact and finding successes—but how organizations have grappled with implementing Hearken’s brand of deep audience engagement. As fellow travelers in the field of engaged journalism, we have admired Hearken’s work, and we also have questions about how resource-strapped newsrooms are implementing its journalistic approach, and with what impact on organizational culture, workflow and attitudes. Underlying Hearken’s tools is a philosophy that fundamentally challenges certain traditional notions of how journalism should operate. How is that challenge taken up, resisted or modified by reporters and editors going about their daily work?

This report provides a comparative analysis of how 15 news organizations (see Table 1) across the United States use Hearken tools for engaging their readers and listeners. Along with examination of each organization’s website and questionnaire responses (customers submit these to Hearken before signing on to use its tools), we conducted interviews with 28 editors and reporters to explore in detail how their organizations are implementing Hearken-driven reporting (see Appendix for methodology). Hearken CEO Jennifer Brandel and her team provided an initial list of newsrooms that had been using Hearken for at least a year, from which we selected a sample that would reflect as diverse a range of sizes, locations and platforms as possible. Although the company offers its services across media (radio, print, digital), the population of Hearken customers from which we drew our sample includes a high number of public radio stations, perhaps because Hearken evolved in that segment of the news industry (Brandel formerly worked for WBEZ in Chicago). The list we received from Hearken included only two newsrooms that Hearken characterized as large (with approximately 30 or more staff members at the time the sample was drawn), and one of those located in the Netherlands. Therefore, our final sample includes only one large newsroom (LancasterOnline in Pennsylvania). Most of the newsrooms in the sample examined here are mid-sized, and five are smaller operations with staffing of 10 or fewer at the time, according to Hearken. The small organizations are all public radio stations (Boise State Public Radio; KCRW in Los Angeles; WUFT in Gainesville, Florida; WUWM in Milwaukee), with the exception of the digital outlet CALmatters, a nonprofit with a statewide distribution network that covers politics and policy statewide in California.

Table 1: News Organizations and Representatives Interviewed

Organization	Location	Hearken Project	Interviewees/ Job Title at Time of Interview
AL.com	Alabama	Ask Alabama /Reckon	Elizabeth Koekenga-Whitmire, Senior Director of Audience John Hammontree, Managing Producer
Bosie State Public Radio (BSPR)	Boise, Idaho	Wanna Know Idaho	Tom Michael, General Manager Lacey Daley, Digital Content Coordinator

Table 1 Continued: News Organizations and Representatives Interviewed

Organization	Location	Hearken Project	Interviewees/ Job Title at Time of Interview
CALmatters	California	<i>The question tool is attached to individual stories</i>	Marcia Parker, Publisher and COO Matt Levin, Data and Housing Reporter
The Columbian	Vancouver, Washington	Clark Asks	John Hill, Editor
KCRW	Los Angeles, California	Curious Coast	Caitlin Shamberg, Digital Editor Jenny Hamel, Reporter
KQED	San Francisco, California	Bay Curious	Olivia Allen-Price, Producer and Host Jessica Placzek, Reporter
KUOW	Seattle, Washington	Local Wonder	Brendan Sweeney, Managing Producer Jim Gates, Senior Editor
LancasterOnline	Lancaster, Pennsylvania	We The People	Dustin Leed, Digital Editor Lindsey Blest, Reporter
Texas Tribune	Austin, Texas	Texplainer	Amanda Zamora, Chief Audience Officer Alex Samuels, Community Reporter
VPR	Vermont	Brave Little State	Angela Evancie, Managing Editor and Host
WBEZ	Chicago, Illinois	Curious City	Shawn Allee, Senior Editor of Editorial Operations Katherine Nagasawa, Multimedia Producer
WDET	Detroit, Michigan	CuriousID	Sandra Svoboda, Special Assignments Manager Shelby Jouppi, Multimedia Producer
WFPL	Louisville, Kentucky	Curious Louisville	Laura Ellis, Senior Producer Ashlie Stevens, Reporter
WUFT	Gainesville, Florida	Untold Florida	Ethan Magoc, News Editor Christina Morales, Reporter
WUWM	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	Bubbler Talk	Michelle Maternowski, Digital Services Coordinator Ann-Elise Henzl, News Director

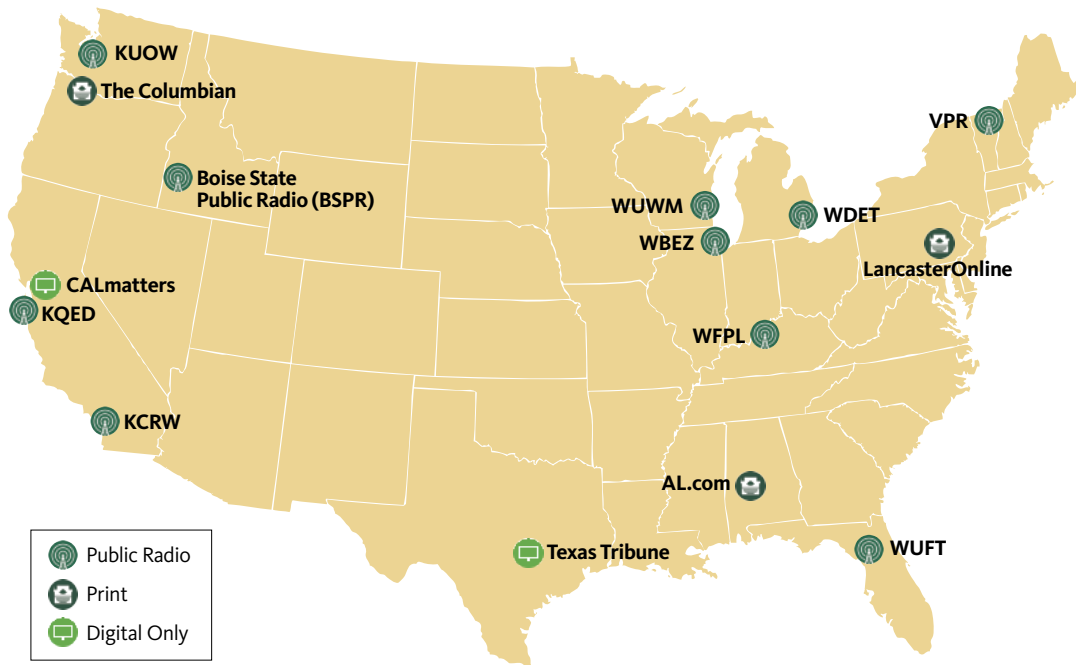
After initially introducing us to our selected newsrooms, Hearken played no further role in this research beyond fact-checking about their tools and how they are typically implemented. Because some time has elapsed between our interviews, conducted between January and April of 2018, and the publication of this report, it is important to note that any particular newsroom's engagement philosophy and practices may have changed.

Through our interviews, we learned that some newsrooms began using Hearken because they previously knew or had worked with Brandel. Some editors and managers heard about Hearken at conferences or through the industry grapevine and advocated for the use of Hearken in their organizations. Some signed on with Hearken because they wanted to add innovative tools to their digital presence. All of them wanted to improve their outreach into the communities they cover and to go beyond haphazard interactions with the public on social media.

The newsrooms featured in this study are early adopters and not necessarily representative

of news organizations in general. However, given the growing interest in community engagement in general and Hearken in particular, it is worth examining how these newsrooms are actually putting Hearken tools—and its particular model of journalism—to work. In this report, we explore the successes and the challenges these newsrooms have experienced when using and adapting to Hearken’s engagement tools. By looking at experiences across organizations, we gain insights into the process, opportunities and challenges of deepening audience engagement through the public-powered journalism model.

Examining the experiences of using Hearken at these 15 news organizations also addresses broader questions about what some scholars have called “reciprocal journalism” or “participatory journalism”⁶: What does it actually look like to involve the audience in reporting stories? Why are news organizations doing this, and what are they hoping to accomplish? Have journalists changed their expectations or attitudes about working more directly with their audiences as a result of using Hearken?



Map of participating newsrooms

⁶ Lewis, Seth C., Avery E. Holton, and Mark Coddington. “Reciprocal journalism: A Concept of Mutual Exchange Between Journalists and Audiences.” *Journalism Practice* 8, no. 2 (2014): 229-241; Lawrence, Regina G., Damian Radcliffe, and Thomas R. Schmidt. “Practicing Engagement: Participatory journalism in the Web 2.0 era.” *Journalism Practice* (2017): 1-21.

What Hearken Offers and How it Works



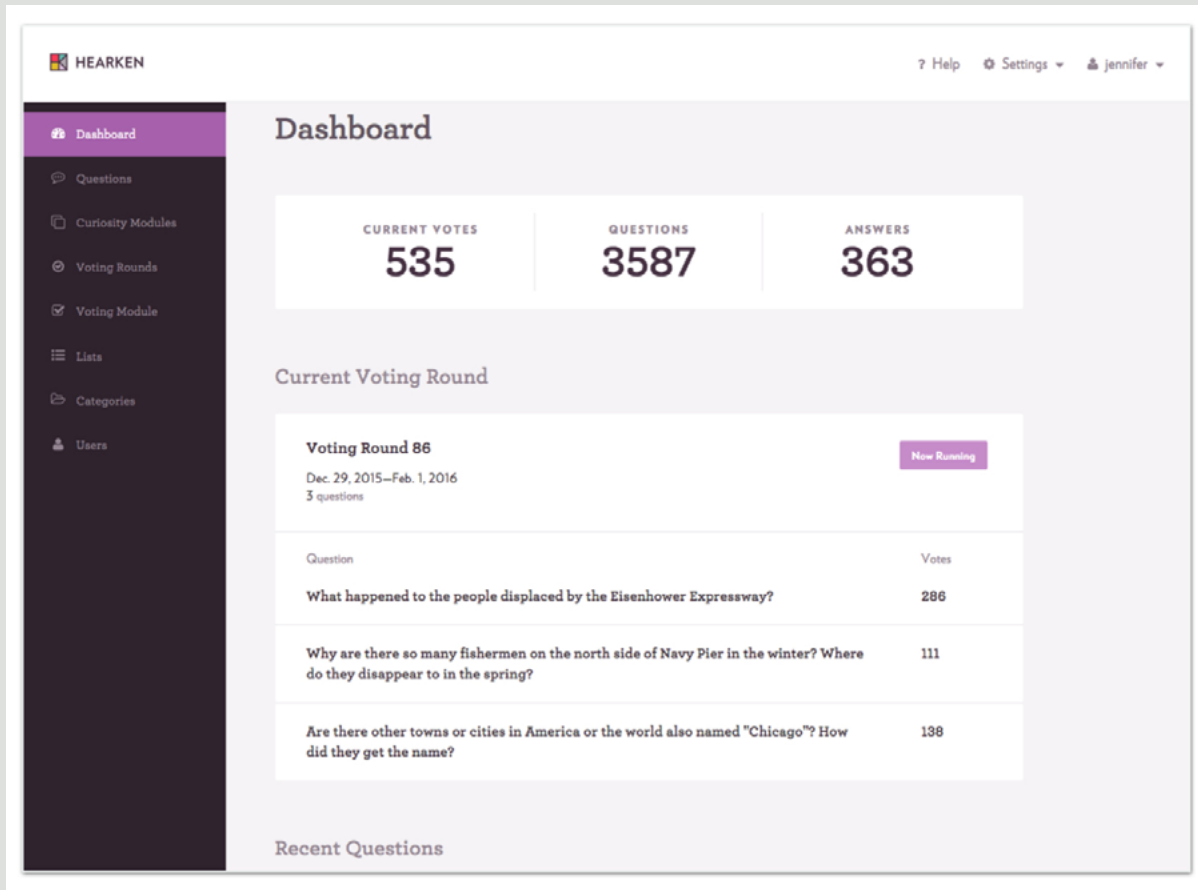
Screenshot of WBEZ's Hearken-powered question prompt

The three major Hearken software tools that news organizations can use on their websites are a “submission embed,” a “vote embed,” and a “list embed.” The submission embed provides audience members with the opportunity to ask questions or submit information that they want the newsroom to explore. When submitting a question, users have to also submit their email address, which allows newsrooms to use that data for customer relationship management; newsrooms can also collect email newsletter opt-ins or create custom fields to gain more insight into their audience (e.g., ZIP code). The vote embed serves to organize voting rounds to determine the most popular reader-submitted question and has the option to collect email information to build customer relationships. Typically, news organizations pick a few questions submitted by readers/listeners and put them up for a vote on their websites. (Voting rounds are used at the discretion of the newsrooms.) According to the Hearken model, after audience members select their favorite question, newsrooms investigate the answer to the question and produce a news or feature story. The final option, called the list embed, allows newsrooms to display submitted questions or information to help show audiences what others are contributing.

More than software tools, Hearken promotes a philosophy of journalism centered on a vision of the public as active participants in news. As articulated by Brandel, journalists can improve and deepen their craft by moving beyond common journalistic notions that “The public’s role in journalism is pure consumption” and that “Journalists are the only people who have smart questions that make for great stories.”¹

¹ Brandel, Jennifer. “7 Things I Never Learned in Journalism School.” <https://medium.com/we-are-hearken/7-things-i-never-learned-in-journalism-school-db63078618bf#.2itervmt8> (current engagement efforts focus). Hearken also provides consulting

Hearken advocates for including the public in every stage of the news-making process, from pitch to story assignment to reporting, as well as at the feedback stage after publication (where most to help news organizations implement its journalism model throughout their work. Through personalized and targeted consulting, the company aims to “help newsroom staff transition from viewing the public as consumers to [viewing audience members as] partners.”²



Screenshot of Hearken dashboard

At the heart of the Hearken model is the question. Reflecting its roots in Brandel's experiences building the Curious City project at WBEZ in Chicago, Hearken tools are fundamentally designed to allow audiences to pose interesting questions they want journalists to answer. This simple starting place of evoking and responding to audience questions seeks to re-engineer the relationship between journalists and audiences by empowering inquisitive members of the public to influence the topics news organizations cover. Hearken offers news organizations a customized platform that invites audience members to submit questions (i.e., story prompts) or vote on questions they want journalists to explore. Hearken also provides templates and suggestions for these prompts, though the actual wording each organization employs varies. On the back end, Hearken provides news organizations with a database to organize incoming questions and to view user information, which enables journalists to reach out to individual users.

² <https://www.wearehearken.com/hearken-overview-about/>

Table 2: Story Prompts Posed to Audience by News Organizations Using Hearken

Organization	Question
AL.com	What have you always wanted to know about Alabama? Help Reckon discover and investigate the stories you care about.
BSPR	What questions do you have about the Gem State, Idaho culture or the people who call it home?
CALmatters	<i>Questions vary and are connected to special reporting projects.</i>
The Columbian	What do you wonder about Clark County and the people who call it home? Help Clark Asks find and investigate stories that matter to you.
KCRW	What do you want to know about Southern California, the culture or the people who live here?
KQED	What do you wonder about the Bay Area, its culture or the people that you want Bay Curious to investigate?
KUOW	What do you wonder about Seattle, the Puget Sound region or its people?
LancasterOnline	What do you have always wondered about Lancaster County that you'd like LancasterOnline to investigate?
Texas Tribune	Ask us a question about Texas politics and policy.
VPR	What question do you have about Vermont, our region or its people that you want VPR to investigate?
WBEZ	What do you wonder about Chicago, the region or its people that you want WBEZ to investigate?
WDET	Have a question about the Detroit region or the people who live here? Anything you've always wondered about, found strange or downright confusing that you would like WDET to answer?
WFPL	What do you wonder about Louisville and the people who call it home? Help WFPL find and investigate stories that matter to you.
WUFT	What do you wonder about in your community? What do you want to know about how things work in your town? What can we help you understand or do today?
WUWM	What have you always wondered about the Milwaukee area that you'd like WUWM to explore?

1. Engagement Goals

>>> News organizations use Hearken and its model of public-powered journalism to reach four main goals: to build relationships with communities they serve, to listen to audience members' ideas and concerns, to interact with audiences differently than on social media, and to collaborate to "foster conversation that's meaningful." In pursuing these strategies, they sometimes face a tradeoff between reach versus depth.

Our interviews and the analysis of questionnaires submitted by newsrooms to Hearken revealed that newsrooms identify a number of different goals for using Hearken in their work, ranging from improving basic outreach to audiences to evoking public participation in the news-gathering process. Four engagement goals emerged, which we label *relate*, *listen*, *interact* and *collaborate*.



Relate

The most basic objective for newsrooms to use Hearken is to build a relationship with the audience in the first place, which a few newsrooms in our sample acknowledged they hadn't really done before. "We don't have a relationship with the community today," editors from LancasterOnline wrote in a strategy document that Hearken had sent to them to learn about their goals. "Our first goal is to gain trust and readership from our audience." During our interviews, many journalists told us that before using Hearken, their relationship with the public consisted of exchanges on social media that were in many cases, as Shawn Allee from WBEZ put it, "very limited and haphazard."

Listen

Another goal described by many news organizations we interviewed was using Hearken as a form of "listener outreach" (Tom Michael, Boise State Public Radio) or "listening campaign" to better feel "the beat of the community" (Ethan Magoc, WUFT in Gainesville). For Elizabeth Koekenga-Whitmire (AL.com), one of the benefits of using Hearken is that it "really forces us every day to make sure that we're listening to what the audience wants and that we have content that's a direct result of what the audience has asked for."

Interact

All the newsrooms featured in this report had some kind of interaction with their audiences through social media before using Hearken, but after signing on with the company, interaction efforts have deepened and become more structured. "Before

Hearken, I would say that that interaction was not necessarily one-sided, but there was not a lot of substance,” said Dustin Leed (LancasterOnline). “Interaction was just [readers’] feedback after we put time and effort into developing a story.” For some, Hearken also has expanded the range of their interaction efforts. “We’re looking to engage our audience in as many ways as humanly possible through social media [and] through new platforms like Hearken and GroundSource, etc.,” said Marcia Parker (CALmatters).

Collaborate

Most of our interviewees said they wanted their audiences to participate in the news-gathering process as much as possible. Most acknowledged, however, that consistent collaboration with audience members to develop and report stories was more often desired than actually achieved (see Participation below). Nonetheless, many journalists we interviewed said they strive to develop a strong relationship with their audience because they believe in its transformative potential. “We believe in sort of lasting and deeper engagement, so we don’t chase clicks as much as we try to foster conversation that’s meaningful,” said Caitlin Shamberg (KCRW in Los Angeles). Angela Evancie (Vermont Public Radio) put it similarly when she described engagement as a “deeper level of connection and feeling of participation in our content and more of a feeling of investment and ownership. So the best engagement is when our audience feels like they are helping to shape and direct our reporting.”



According to Hearken’s stated philosophy, the ideal version of journalism would encompass all four engagement goals; newsrooms would use Hearken tools not just for general relationship-building and listening but also for interacting with audiences and generating public participation in news gathering. In reality, however, as described later, we found that news organizations that use Hearken are constantly balancing different priorities, leading them to emphasize some goals more than others.

Moreover, these early-adopter newsrooms didn’t often spell out their strategic goals for using Hearken, perhaps because they were in the early stages of connecting their efforts to larger strategic and revenue goals. Only one news organization (LancasterOnline) pointed to a written newsroom strategy or definition regarding audience engagement. Although most editors were eloquent in describing their strategic vision for audience engagement, they didn’t reference organizational documents. At the same time, many of the reporters we talked with told us they have a personal interpretation of what engagement means. This gap between reporters’ practices and organizations’ stated policies illustrates the fluid character of news outlets’ ongoing efforts to better connect and interact with audiences. As a result, the personal interpretation and individual practices of editors and reporters matter as much as any explicitly stated organizational goals.

Reach versus depth

Overall, our interviews suggest that news outlets adopt Hearken tools in order to achieve two major outcomes: to expand the reach of the news organization’s audience and/or increase the depth of its relationship with existing listeners or readers.

“[Hearken] really forces us every day to make sure that we’re listening to what the audience wants and that we have content that’s a direct result of what the audience has asked for.”

Several editors underscored that they wanted to reach more people with Hearken-driven stories as well as diversify and develop new audience segments. For example, Milwaukee's WUWM is using a Hearken-driven approach to explore issues of race and ethnicity in order to draw in audiences the station was not reaching before. Chicago's WBEZ used Hearken tools to solicit questions when organizing a live event on the topic of interracial relationships in the Muslim community. The Texas Tribune, whose traditional audience mostly includes people highly interested and invested in Texas politics, aims to use Hearken to reach people "who aren't already news junkies" as well as younger readers and people outside of Austin. In all these initiatives, using Hearken is the preeminent strategy to invite new audience segments to submit questions and indicate holes in coverage that need to be filled in order to reach a wider and more diverse audience.

The other overarching reason these newsrooms are using Hearken is to foster a sustainable relationship with the local audience by giving the public more voice in determining news coverage. "The deeper understanding [of engagement]," said Brendan Sweeney (KUOW, Seattle), "is to really authentically allow audience curiosity to drive our editorial decision-making about what stories we run at." At KQED (San Francisco), Olivia Allen-Price also described one of the motivations behind using Hearken as trying to achieve a "deeper level of engagement," meaning that "You are talking back and forth in some way with a member of your audience." Many news organizations we interviewed aim for this deeper level of engagement in the hope that the audience will develop more loyalty to and trust in the news organization, increasing its legitimacy, relevance and status in the community.

For many news organizations we interviewed, deepening and expanding audience engagement are equally important. As CALmatters told Hearken in a questionnaire, "[There's] no question we want both—we need more engagement from our existing audience, but we also need to reach a broader audience—in fact, we need to demonstrate that the latter will be an outcome." While each goal is critical, the challenge of simultaneously achieving both reach and depth highlights a potential tension in many newsroom engagement efforts: The more targeted the community-building, the smaller the reach may be. The more general the outreach, the more challenging it may be to build or sustain a tightly knit community of readers or listeners, simply because the public's demand might not be met by the newsroom's supply. As staff time and resources are limited, newsrooms are struggling to offer both mass appeal and quasi-personal relationships with their listeners and readers. That dilemma is not specific to Hearken customers—it's a practical challenge of implementing deeper engagement.

This dilemma was not explicitly addressed by our interviewees, but it emerged as they talked about the need to reconcile results from the voting contests (i.e., story ideas with the most popular appeal) with other goals (e.g., reaching a particular ethnic community that hadn't been represented well in their news coverage). Similarly, some reporters observed that submitted questions tend to cluster around certain topics, making them wonder whether the questions were coming from only particular segments of the local community. Jessica Placzek from KQED said she sometimes got the impression that questions reflected a white and well-educated audience but "not necessarily the community at large," undermining the station's goal of more inclusive coverage.

2. Organizational Models

>>> News organizations tend to staff Hearken-driven stories either with small dedicated teams or with rotating reporters, and for either customized or general reporting. Each staffing model may come with tradeoffs.

Although news organizations use the same Most of the public radio stations featured in this study create a weekly or monthly show, also offered as a podcast, for Hearken-driven stories. Typically, the number of staff members assigned to Hearken-driven reporting is small (one to five people). Some of those teams have a sole focus on producing stories that come from audience questions rather than developing their own story ideas. In some instances, other reporters in the newsroom may pick up the Hearken approach for

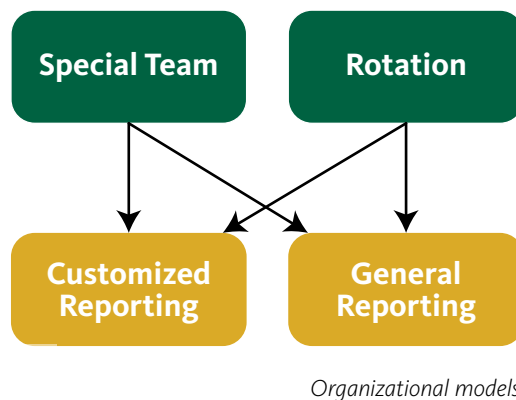
Table 3: Hearken-Driven Projects and Staffing

Organization	Format	Regularity	Staff
AL.com	print, digital	weekly (more or less)	special team (two reporters)
Boise State Public Radio	radio, digital	monthly	rotation
CALmatters	digital	irregular	rotation
The Columbian	print, digital	monthly	rotation
KCRW	radio, digital	monthly	special team half-time position
KQED	radio, podcast, digital	weekly	special team (one host, one reporter)
KUOW	radio, podcast, digital	monthly	rotation
LancasterOnline	print, digital	monthly	special team (two reporters, two digital producers, editor)
Texas Tribune	digital	weekly (more or less)	special team (one community engagement reporter)
VPR	radio, podcast, digital	monthly	special team (one show host/reporter)
WBEZ	radio, podcast, digital	weekly	special team (one reporter, one multimedia producer, one audio producer, one editor)
WDET	radio, digital	monthly	special team (part-time position)
WFPL	radio, digital	monthly	special team (two co-hosts, reporters rotate)
WUFT	radio, podcast, digital	weekly	rotation
WUWM	radio, digital	monthly	rotation

individual stories, but it is mostly these podcast teams that specialize in audience-driven stories. Consequently, these shows have distinct identities and characteristics, becoming, as Shawn Allee from WBEZ described it, a “sub-brand” of the larger station.

Special teams for Hearken-driven stories also can be found at newspapers and digital-only publications. AL.com, for example, has two reporters who take turns writing stories that respond to audience questions. Their stories appear on the website and its investigative platform “Reckon” as well as in its three newspapers, the Birmingham News, Huntsville Times, Mobile Press-Register. Some of these stories are produced as videos and are posted to AL.com as well as to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. LancasterOnline’s special team includes two reporters, two producers and one editor who produce stories for print and online. At the Texas Tribune, the community engagement reporter dedicates part of her time to producing stories for a feature called “Texplainer,” in which readers submit questions about Texas politics.

Other news organizations use a rotation model and assign reporters to specific Hearken-driven stories. Editors allocate specific stories depending on particular beats, or reporters themselves select questions they would like to work on. Most of these news organizations have also established a brand for Hearken-driven stories (including a page on their websites) but might not follow a regular timetable for publishing Hearken-driven stories. For example, as John Hill from The Columbian explains, “We were hoping to do one every week or every other week, but we haven’t been able to sustain that just because we’ve been fairly busy.” The digital-only publication CALmatters doesn’t have a specific project using Hearken. Instead, Hearken trained all of its reporters to use it, and the Hearken question tool is added as a follow-up to particular stories as needed. For example, after CALmatters published a story about the housing crisis in California, it asked its audience to submit questions about housing issues and to vote which ones they most wanted answered.



Organizational models of newsrooms’ use of Hearken also differ with regard to their output. Hearken offers a few suggestions¹: to power a general assignment series on a subject or location; to inspire coverage for a targeted series; to shape a daily column, segment or feed; to collect great ideas for ongoing coverage by a beat reporter; or to power live events. In reality, most organizations only focus on one or two of these options. Within our sample, some news organizations use Hearken predominantly for customized reporting within individual specifications (e.g., a radio show), while others

¹ <https://www.wearehearken.com/faq/>

focus on expanding their general reporting to include more input from audience members. Some public radio stations are attempting to infuse more of their routine reporting with Hearken-driven stories. KUOW in Seattle, for example, was building a specific approach for using Hearken. “We call it ‘outside-in,’ ” said Jim Gates. “And it’s sort of a new mission that we’ve set up where we’re trying to reach outside and bring outside ideas into the station, reaching people on the outside.” As Brendan Sweeney explained, “We’ve moved a little bit from the idea that this is a special little project to [the idea that] this has to be a core part of our news story-telling priorities. Managers at KUOW in the next year will be held accountable fora specific target for percentage of stories sourced from the audience.” WUWM in Milwaukee created a segment called “Beats Me.” It is “an opportunity for people to specifically ask beat reporters questions that are in their subject areas,” explained Ann-Elise Henzl. As a result, at the time of our interviews, the environment reporter at WUWM was producing one story a month based on a question submitted by a listener.

These organizational models for using Hearken can come with tradeoffs. As much as a special team working on a special product may increase brand loyalty and foster group cohesion within the newsroom, it may also insulate the Hearken approach from the rest of the newsroom. On the other hand, if news organizations focus their energies on implementing an audience-driven approach to their general reporting, resources and commitment for pursuing engagement-driven reporting might be distributed unevenly throughout the newsroom. For example, Angela Evancie (Vermont Public Radio) said that because the editing and production process for their Hearken-driven stories is more intensive, in part due to how they deploy the Hearken model to take on big questions and produce sound-rich pieces, “There might be some general frustration in the newsroom about basically losing someone for a month or at least a couple weeks during our deadline time [for the Hearken-driven podcast].”

“We’ve moved a little bit from the idea that this is a special little project to [the idea that] this has to be a core part of our news story-telling priorities...”

3. Questions & Stories

»» Journalists using Hearken report that audience-submitted questions don't just ask about current events and issues but also ask reporters to provide historical context and, potentially, a solutions-oriented outlook.

While news organizations in our sample are keen to contextualize their reporting of Hearken-driven stories within traditional notions of journalists being watchdogs and information brokers, our interviews illustrate that audience members are interested in a variety of topics and issues, expanding the repertoire of what journalists are asked to investigate.

The typical template for a Hearken-driven question prompt includes the geographic location of the news organization (see Table 2 above). It ranges from the city level (Detroit, Chicago, Louisville, Milwaukee) to the county level (Clark County, Alachua County) but can also include whole regions (Southern California, Bay Area) as well as states (Alabama, California, Idaho, Texas, Vermont). It is noticeable that most news organizations use the word "investigate" in their requests for story suggestions. This rhetorical strategy indicates that they emphasize competencies that are traditionally associated with journalistic work, even as the execution of public-powered journalism departs in some ways from conventional reporting.

Not surprisingly, these prompts elicit many questions that focus on local or regional characteristics. Angela Evancie (Vermont Public Radio) said "We've gotten a ton of questions about basically, why is Vermont so liberal, and when did we become so liberal? We used to be a pretty conservative state. We get a ton of questions about state identity." Local and regional change is a popular topic as well. "By and far," said Lacey Daley (Boise State Public Radio), "people are really interested in sense of place and just how Boise or this area are growing. People have a lot of questions, concerns, things that they feel aren't being addressed in other boom stories [about the rapid growth of the city]." Local issues also often include the odd and the quirky. "I think our strong suits are probably in the local quirks, community and culture, history," said Katherine Nagasawa (WBEZ), "and I would say that some of the questions that I don't think are a good fit for us are ones that are beyond Chicago, like a national question." Local history is another topic that garners lots of audience questions. "I feel like nostalgia's a powerful feeling," said Dustin Leed (LancasterOnline), "and a lot of people want to know about history." For John Hammontree (AL.com), their great success with history stories means that "It does give us license to go do some more historical reporting that we maybe wouldn't do otherwise." Elizabeth Koekenga-Whitmire calls this category of question "Wikipedia questions." "One of the most popular ones we had," she said, "was, 'Why doesn't Alabama have more of the Gulf Coast, more of the Florida panhandle? How did Florida get that chunk of land, and Alabama was left with just a little four-mile beach?'"

Journalists also report that audience members often submit questions related to current issues that are salient in the respective communities. For example, listeners in the Bay Area send many questions on the topics of housing and homelessness. Environmental issues are popular topics in Gainesville, Florida. Transportation, roads and traffic-related questions were mentioned by several interviewees. "We get a lot of questions about

transportation-related things, like roads, traffic, street signs,” said Laura Ellis (WFPL, Louisville). “I wonder if people are hearing our promos in their car, and that’s what they’re thinking about?” Jessica Placzek also wondered if people submit questions about the Bay Area subway system because “That’s what they’re doing when they are listening.” Oftentimes, practical questions like recycling are of particular importance to audiences. “I think there are a lot of questions that we get about the process of how things work in a city,” said Ashlie Stevens (WFPL). “It can range from something that seems kind of trivial like recycling to something that’s maybe a little more weighty like how redlining, for example, has affected Louisville.” In one example, a complex local issue (segregation) led the news organization (WUWM in Milwaukee) to spin off a whole series called “Project Milwaukee” because the station had received so many questions asking why Milwaukee is so segregated.

Specific regional or national news events may also trigger a wave of related questions. When wildfires raged in the Bay Area, KQED focused one Bay Curious show on the topic. “We just collected questions specifically to the wildfires,” said Olivia Allen-Price. “We did a show where we answered a bunch of those questions, and it was a quick-turn show. It wasn’t as highly produced as our other shows because we had to turn it around in two or three days, where usually we have a couple of weeks to work on a show. But that was one that really outperformed what I was expecting because we’re not particularly a topical show. We’re not always covering what’s in the news. That’s pretty rare for us.” In Alabama, Elizabeth Koekenga-Whitmire noticed a high level of political questions during that state’s special election that involved controversial judge Roy Moore. “That could just be the climate of what’s been going on [during that special election],” she said.

Despite the predominance of local and regional issues, some journalists also detect groups of question-askers related to national news or developments. “The Trump presidency and the campaign brought out some of the pro-white rights groups,” said John Hill (The Columbian) who noticed increased interest among his audience in questions about these groups. Jim Gates (KUOW, Seattle) said he noticed that “Whenever there is something big happening, like the Parkland shooting, there was a bump up in questions. If there is a spike in a news event, we seem to get an increase in the number of questions as well.”

Several journalists said in our interviews that they found audience questions particularly helpful when they highlighted blind spots in the news coverage. “One of the things that I like the most about [the Hearken model],” said Ann-Elise Henzl (WUWM, Milwaukee), “is that when you’ve been in this business for a while, I think sometimes you feel like you have sort of seen it all, and you know about the story automatically without even thinking about it.” As Olivia Allen-Price from the Bay Area’s KQED put it, “In a way I am heartened by the fact that I no longer feel that I can predict what a hit might be, and I think the reason I’m heartened by it is because, to me, that means that this engagement thing is working because stories that are not on my radar, that I am not excited about but the audience is telling us they want to know, we are doing, and we are giving them, and they are liking, even if it’s not something that I personally would have thought of to begin with.”

Taken together, the actual content of submitted questions (as reported by the journalists we interviewed) indicates that audience members are not just interested in current events and ongoing issues but also want reporters to provide historical context and, potentially, a solutions-oriented outlook toward the future. In addition, while political issues and questions about politics play an important role, questions-askers are equally interested in social, cultural or practical issues such as transportation. While this study does not

When using Hearken’s tools, journalists are often asked to expand their roles beyond that of information brokers and watchdogs to play the role of local historians, community organizers or cultural analysts.

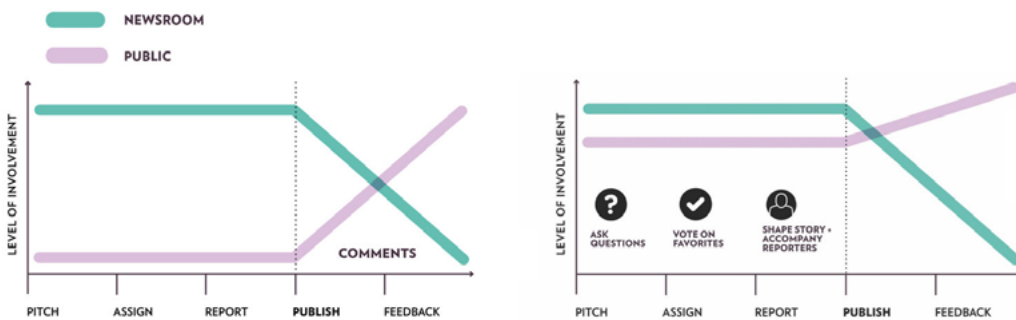
Putting Engagement to Work

include an analysis of actual submitted audience questions, these accounts by journalists indicate that audience members have a variety of expectations for coverage about their communities and thus assign a variety of expectations to reporters. When using Hearken's tools, journalists are often asked to expand their roles beyond that of information brokers and watchdogs to play the role of local historians, community organizers or cultural analysts.

4. Participation

»» The Hearken model encourages including the public in each phase of the news process. All the newsrooms we examined involve audience members in the pitch phase; public participation is somewhat less widespread during the assignment, reporting and feedback stages.

A central component of Hearken's public-powered journalism concept is the notion that it flips the traditional story cycle—focused on journalists developing story ideas from pitch to story assignment to reporting to publishing, and only then taking feedback from the public—on its head, “enabling journalists to know before publishing that their work is relevant.”¹ In the pitch stage, according to Hearken's model, news organizations ask their audiences for questions. In the second stage, story assignment, newsrooms might ask their audience members to vote for the most popular reader-generated questions. In the reporting stage, reporters may team up with question-askers to investigate a particular story idea. In the final stage, feedback, the newsroom may reach out to a particular question-asker, sharing the reported story and asking whether the result answered his or her question or may more generally seek audience feedback about whether the story was satisfactory.



Hearken's Public-powered story cycle.
From the Hearken website: www.wearehearken.com

If Hearken's philosophy is fully deployed by a newsroom, audience members participate in each stage of the reporting process, though Hearken also instructs customers to use their editorial judgment regarding how much public participation is appropriate or beneficial. While the philosophy of public participation in news-making is shared by the news organizations we talked with, audience involvement throughout the story cycle is rarely achieved. All the newsrooms we examined involve audience members in the pitch phase, most involve the audience in the assign and feedback phases, and fewer involve the audience during the reporting phase (see Table 4).

¹ <https://www.wearehearken.com/hearken-overview-about/>

Table 4: Audience Participation in the Reporting Process Across Newsrooms

Organization	Pitch	Assign	Report	Feedback
AL.com				
BSPR				
CALmatters				
The Columbian				
KCRW				
KQED				
KUOW				
LancasterOnline				
Texas Tribune				
VPR				
WBEZ				
WDET				
WFPL				
WUFT				
WUWM				

Pitch

All news organizations we interviewed make use of Hearken's central feature that allows members of the public to submit questions in response to prompts (see Table 2 above). Some outlets limit public participation to just the pitch stage; at the time of our interviews, CALmatters and two other outlets involved audiences only or mostly by having them submit questions. "I wouldn't say that the audience has been engaged in the story," said Marcia Parker at CALmatters. "They've been engaged in providing questions that help us look for stories and identify story ideas." At KCRW, voting rounds were rare at the time we interviewed Caitlin Shamberg. "We don't really have the manpower to use [Hearken] as fully as I wish we did," she said.

Assign

Hearken's vote embed tool allows audience members to select which question out of several options they would like to see answered. Our interviews indicate that although it is widely used, this feature is not as universally used as the question embed tool. "We haven't really gotten a lot of engagement when we've run voting rounds," said Caitlin Shamberg

(KCRW, Santa Monica). “That’s not a great tool for us.” At the time of our interviews, WDET was not offering voting rounds in part because, in the one time they deployed it, there was not enough audience activity for the voting process to gain traction, according to editor Sandra Svoboda.

Report

Hearken also offers consulting to help news organizations involve the public in the actual reporting of stories. Although two-thirds of the outlets we interviewed use this approach, many of them find it challenging to involve the public consistently in the reporting phase for a number of reasons. While most news organizations in our sample seek to involve question-askers in the reporting process, they have seen mixed results when it comes to actual participation.

Geography is one of the biggest obstacles to more direct audience involvement for Vermont Public Radio. “Vermont is a pretty big state, and it’s kind of hard to travel around it,” said Angela Evancie. “But when we can, we work with our question-asker, invite them to our interviews, have them participate in the reporting as much as they can.” In addition, Evancie said she looks for opportunities to involve the community through crowd-sourcing photos or other pieces of information.

At The Columbian, “We liked the idea of engaging the readers,” said John Hill, particularly because it might offer a way to preempt public perceptions of media bias and accusations of fake news because audience members would be given a voice in reporting stories. However, when he and his colleagues started reaching out to readers, they were surprised to find that most question-askers didn’t want to be involved in the reporting process. “We thought they would be jumping at the chance,” said Hill.

At KCRW, reporter Jenny Hamel included question-askers several times in her reporting. “But for the most part it’s hard,” she said, “because you’re a little busy, you’re trying to coordinate with these listeners. So it’s not like I’ve brought them aboard for every reporting, every question that I’ve done. They’re all usually involved in the beginning and then, of course, I reach out to them and say, ‘Hey, I’ve answered your question. Here’s the blog post. Here’s the audio file. Share with your friends.’”

For KQED the best-case scenario is to contact the question-asker and invite him or her to participate in the interview process or other kinds of reporting. “It’s a challenging thing to do,” said Olivia Allen-Price, “because you’re usually having to schedule a question asker who has a 9-to-5 job, a journalist and a source, all during work hours. It’s a trickier piece of the puzzle than I wish it was because I wish we could do it more often than we do.” In some cases, she and her colleague at least tried to update the question-asker about the process and let him or her know about questions that might arise as they reported the story.

At LancasterOnline, Dustin Leed estimates that one in every four question-askers wants to be involved in the reporting process. Involving the audience can be “almost risky,” said Leed’s colleague Lindsey Blest, “because it can be a lot of time and resources for one person [to handle].” Nevertheless, she likes the idea “that if we post a video of the reporter interviewing someone for a story and then bringing them along in the reporting process [...], then other members of the audience could see it and feel more connected to the reporting process, even by association.”

While most news organizations in our sample seek to involve question-askers in the reporting process, they have seen mixed results when it comes to actual participation.

As most of the comments above illustrate, many outlets we spoke with see value in trying to involve the public in the reporting stage of news, despite the fact that the public response has not usually been high. Some news organizations do not see public participation in the reporting process as crucial—in some cases because involving the public in identifying questions for stories has been so effective. At the Texas Tribune, for example, Amanda Zamora described how their young community reporter “started out doing pretty typical daily political hard news...fast paced...political intrigue stuff. It’s very different to start to move to the other end of the spectrum...really trying to understand how a policy does or might impact regular people.” Other news organizations have by and large abandoned attempts to involve question-askers in the reporting process. For example, John Hammontree said AL.com would be interested in having readers more involved but that audience members were hesitant to participate because of what he described as a “lingering mistrust of media or an aversion to be named in articles.”

Beyond the reporting phase, it is worth noting that WBEZ, where Brandel developed the idea of Hearken, has expanded audience participation to the post-reporting editing stage as well—unique among newsrooms in our sample. “We do group edits anyway [...] where people will listen to a first draft of the story, and then the editor will facilitate a conversation about what might be either confusing or boring or interesting, unclear,” said Shawn Allee. “I’d like to do that more. I think there’s a lot of potential there.” Nonetheless, like most of the other news organizations we spoke with, WBEZ struggles with the question of how much listeners really want to be involved in story creation. “The uncomfortable answer, after doing it awhile, is that the easier it is for them to do, the more likely they’ll do it,” said Allee. “It doesn’t mean that they won’t do the hard stuff, it’s just that fewer of them will.”

Feedback

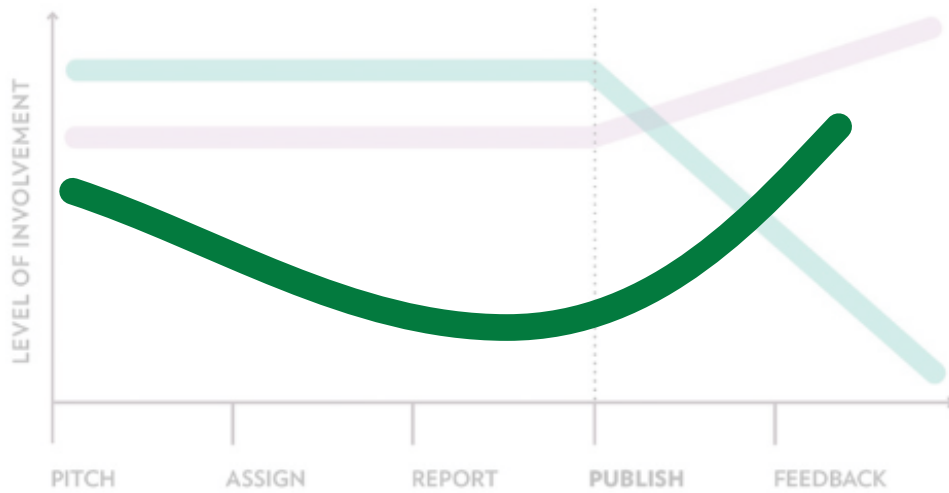
The final stage of the traditional news-making process through which the public can engage with the news is the feedback stage, when audiences can interact with the final news content by sharing stories and offering comments on a news outlet’s website—the focus of many newsroom “engagement” efforts. While Hearken does not offer a specific comments tool, most newsrooms we interviewed were actively engaging their audiences through social media after the publication of Hearken-driven stories. More importantly in terms of the public-powered journalism approach, most reporters we spoke with get in touch with question-askers after publication of the story their question inspired. For example, Jessica Placzek of KQED said she always followed up with question-askers, inquiring how they felt about the story that came out of their original question. “I will also email all the sources,” she added, asking “if they thought it was fair [reporting].” At WBEZ, journalists ask a number of questions both to themselves and via social media after Hearken-driven stories go on air and online. “We always have [internal] reviews for our stories,” said Katherine Nagasawa, “and I think one of the things we always ask is, is it on-mission? Which means does it answer the question that we set out to answer and did we incorporate the question or the public in that journey? Did we make it transparent for them?”

Our interviews suggest a story cycle model that differs in some respects both from the traditional news model and from a fully deployed “public-powered” one.



Putting Engagement to Work

Taken together, our interviews suggest a story cycle model that differs in some respects both from the traditional news model and from a fully deployed “public-powered” one. The aggregated findings from the 15 newsrooms in our sample indicate that public participation in the story production is most widespread across newsrooms at the beginning of the news process and somewhat less widespread during the assignment, reporting and feedback stages. This pattern does not necessarily undermine Hearken’s claim that it flips the traditional news model on its head, but it does demonstrate contexts in which newsrooms may find it more challenging to implement the full model.



Hearken-Driven story cycle across 15 newsrooms

5. Challenges

»» Some journalists using Hearken identified challenges implementing its tools, building an efficient workflow around public-powered news, and working within organizational culture and priorities. Ultimately, those barriers may be the most important factor in how newsrooms deploy Hearken.

When asked about the biggest obstacles in using Hearken tools, journalists we talked to pointed to three different areas: technical challenges, workflow complications and constraints of organizational resources and culture. None of the journalists we interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with Hearken's consulting. In fact, most of them praised Hearken for providing feedback and guidance both for the implementation of software and the adoption of its journalistic model. But the journalists in our sample did note a number of ways in which these engagement tools and the philosophy underlying them can be challenging to implement.

Technical Challenges

As described above, Hearken provides a technical platform to receive, screen and categorize incoming questions from readers and listeners. Reporters and editors pointed out certain technical shortcomings that made the management of these questions laborious or burdensome.

First, organizing incoming questions can be overwhelming for newsrooms, especially for small teams. "We're really a team of two people," said Olivia Allen-Price (KQED, San Francisco). "If we just get tied up with making a weekly show, we'll get behind on categorizing [incoming questions] and have to bomb out a big chunk of the day to go back and keep things in order." Once, she and her colleague Jessica Placzek received more than 1,300 questions in a short amount of time. "That was incredibly difficult to organize," said Placzek. "I was the one who went through every one of them and read all of them and organized them into different containers." Those experiences were echoed by Dustin Leed and Lindsey Blest from LancasterOnline. Leed said they were using Hearken's tools for prioritizing questions, but mostly that meant a basic sorting from most recent to latest submissions. "We have a lot (of questions) that come in," said Blest, "and some of them are relevant. Some of them aren't, and we're trying to figure out the best system for organizing them, kind of along the back end of things." Some of these challenges have to do with the search function, such as when journalists are searching the database to determine whether incoming questions overlap those that had been submitted before or when they try to determine if there are patterns in submitted questions. "I really do like the ability to create custom lists [of questions] and having categories. That's very helpful," said Katherine Nagasawa (WBEZ, Chicago). "But I think they've had a lot of issues in the past with their search function, where you'd have to literally type something verbatim and maybe there is a typo or maybe they used 'trees' instead of 'forest.' It's not smart in knowing related terms. I think the search has been a challenge, but it's getting better." (Hearken has since provided an update to its technology designed to improve search results to include similar words and phrases.)

To help manage the tide of questions, some journalists expressed the wish to have a system that marks specific questions as answered. “I think it’s difficult that people are not prompted to understand that we may have answered [a particular question] already,” said Shawn Allee (WBEZ, Chicago). However, as John Hammontree (AL.com) acknowledged, “There’s no real way to automate that process. That’s just something we have to do. It’s something that can be a little bit of a time suck, but it’s not a huge deal.” (These observations may reflect journalists’ lack of full familiarity with Hearken tools: Hearken does offer a system to mark a question as answered. However, it does not inform the question-asker at the time of submission that they are asking a similar question to one that is answered.)

A second challenge is that after questions are selected for voting rounds, some journalists found it onerous that the voting tool could not be embedded in social media. “Just given the fact that you can’t have people vote on a question directly in Twitter or Facebook is a big divide,” noted Shawn Allee (WBEZ, Chicago). The fact that social media platforms do not allow embedding of outside tools like Hearken’s makes it more difficult to attract audience members to the voting rounds and may potentially be related to the lower-than-expected levels of participation that some interviewees noted.

Another feature on some of these journalists’ wish list was a tool for including comments from question-askers as they submit questions. “I would love an easier way to have comments and an interaction going on,” said Jim Gates (KUOW, Seattle). “The way it’s set up now, it’s not driving those conversations.” In other words, the tool that allows for public participation in the story pitch stage ironically may limit conversation between the newsroom and audiences about those story ideas. As noted above, however, some newsrooms do use the contact information (e.g., phone numbers and email addresses) collected in the question submission process to get in touch with question-askers.

Workflow and Resources

Many interviewees mentioned challenges in organizing the work that Hearken-driven reporting requires, particularly with limited staff and/or limited time. As Marcia Parker (CALmatters) put it, the biggest challenge was building the new workflow and philosophy into the DNA of the newsroom. “We’re a small newsroom, and it’s still a challenge,” said Parker. “It’s just because everybody’s busy, right? So you just have to constantly keep it in front of everyone and remind us at every editorial meeting, ‘OK, where is there a Hearken engagement opportunity in whatever you’re doing?’ ”

Some interviewees observed that multiple newsroom resources are required to really leverage Hearken’s engagement tools. For Michelle Maternowski (WUWM, Milwaukee), this form of audience engagement requires constant attention. “I don’t think there’s anything that doesn’t work,” she said, “but you definitely have to put effort in to make it work, not just set it up and expect things to just happen.” Part of the challenge derives from promoting Hearken tools in ways that encourage and make it easy for audiences to really use them. “It’s a lot of effort for us to get people to come to a Hearken landing page,” said Caitlin Shamberg (KCRW, Santa Monica), pointing to the need for planning and staffing promotional activities for Hearken-driven stories. (Some newsrooms choose to place their voting embed on their homepages, rather than a landing page, to maximize exposure and increase vote count.) Another aspect that demands some effort is crafting enticing question prompts. Matt Levin (CALmatters) noticed that, when question prompts aren’t specific enough, they might fail to trigger submissions. In one example, he remembers, a “super-broad question [that] wasn’t attached to a specific story already didn’t get any traction whatsoever.”

For some newsrooms we spoke with, challenges arose when they began implementing Hearken without a clear concept of the workflow that would be required. At BSPR, for example, the launch was “really messy,” said Lacey Daly. “When we signed on to Hearken, we didn’t have a news director at the time, so it was kind of like, ‘What do we do with this thing?’” Similar issues were mentioned by Shelby Jouppi (WDET, Detroit), who observed a lack of direction within the newsroom. “Something that’s interesting is, ‘Oh, we have to use this tool thing somehow, so we’re going to use Hearken.’ [...] It wasn’t shaping our coverage, really, so I think there was some confusion between the tool itself and what it was supposed to accomplish.” These observations illustrate that without a specific plan for implementation or buy-in from leadership, newsrooms might struggle to effectively put Hearken to use.

The amount of time required for successful voting rounds also raises challenges for some newsrooms. Organizing a voting round typically requires displaying the voting tool on the website for a week so there is a satisfactory number of participants, said John Hill (The Columbian). “And then you get the results. And then you’ve got to find a reporter to do the story. And that takes some time. And write it. So, sometimes there’s a whole month will go by [between stories]. So, that’s kind of a bummer of sorts because we’d like to do it more frequently.” In contrast, newsrooms such as WBEZ and KQED choose to constantly run voting rounds and publish answers when they are ready, not necessarily in the order in which they won a voting round.

Several journalists described a significant delay between question submission to story publication; a few said they had trouble being consistent in responding to submitted questions, and some further pointed out that delays might dissuade question-askers from submitting questions again. “It’s finding consistency,” said Ethan Magoc (WUFT, Gainesville). “If we tell the public we’re going to answer a question every single week, well, we’d better put a lot of resources into making sure that’s a true statement.” Otherwise, he added, fewer questions might come in. Similar experiences were described by Shelby Jouppi (WDET, Detroit). “I think one of the challenges,” she said, “was maintaining a momentum with the audience, so we would call out for questions and then we would receive questions, but then the turnover for actually getting back on the reporting sometimes took so long that it didn’t feel particularly relevant.” She said that some listeners complained that while they heard commercials requesting questions, they never heard the actual stories.

On the other hand, when Hearken-driven stories do well, they trigger more questions and thus increase the demand for audience-initiated stories. They also may then increase journalists’ work load, or at least their sense of trying to meet increased demand. “Every time a story airs or something’s published, we get more questions in,” said Caitlin Shamberg (KCRW, Los Angeles). As Olivia Allen-Price put it (KQED, San Francisco), “I think the biggest challenges are just bandwidth and staffing. In my dream scenario, what we aspire to do is, every question that comes in, we want to send a personal email from somebody on our team to the person who asked the question, thanking them for asking the question.” Angela Evancie (Vermont Public Radio) summed up a common theme when she said, “There’s really no shortage of enthusiasm, it’s just a matter of what we can manage on our end in terms of all that connection.”

“...everybody’s busy, right? So you just have to constantly keep it in front of everyone and remind us at every editorial meeting, ‘OK, where is there a Hearken engagement opportunity in whatever you’re doing?’ ”

Organizational Culture and Priorities

Most editors and reporters we spoke with said they would like to see the use of Hearken expand in their newsrooms. But in newsrooms that employ the “special teams” model for Hearken-driven reporting, journalists outside those special teams are sometimes reluctant to adopt Hearken themselves or simply don’t know about it. Jessica Placzek (KQED, San Francisco) said she remembers a brown bag lunch for a mixed group of reporters from different parts of the newsroom, some of whom weren’t familiar with Hearken. “Everybody was talking about things they could do better to engage with the audience, and everyone was like, ‘I could probably email people back telling them that ... or email my sources back telling them about sharing the story with them.’ I was just so shocked that that was something that they weren’t doing because that’s very much at the heart of what we [on the special team] do.”

In newsrooms without a special team for Hearken-driven stories, drawing reporters from the general pool can be challenging simply because of a lack of human resources. “I think my biggest challenge internally here is having reporters who are available to work on the stories,” said Jim Gates (KUOW, Seattle). “And it’s not necessarily any kind of resistance, it’s more just time because Local Wonder is a separate entity, and the reporters all have the stories they need to be doing. It’s sort of hard to pummel away and do the stories. I’ve tried to do as best I can and then I’ve pulled freelance reporters to try to come in and do them.” Observations like these are linked to newsrooms’ underlying determinations about the importance of audience-driven news. Even in newsrooms employing Hearken and other engagement tools, audience-driven news can still be viewed as “extra,” nonessential work, not as something that should be prioritized over “regular” news.

In this sense, news outlets need more than financial and human resources to get the full benefit of public-powered journalism. They need clear organizational priorities. For example, at the time of our interviews, WDET was rethinking its organization and its strategic goals, bringing in consultants to define its next steps. In that context, its use of Hearken was more limited. “We’re not in a place where we do a lot of enterprise reporting [with Hearken],” said Sandra Svoboda. She added that the station was doing other kinds of audience engagement such as interacting with callers to their talk shows, but that typically happened on Facebook and Twitter rather than through Hearken tools.

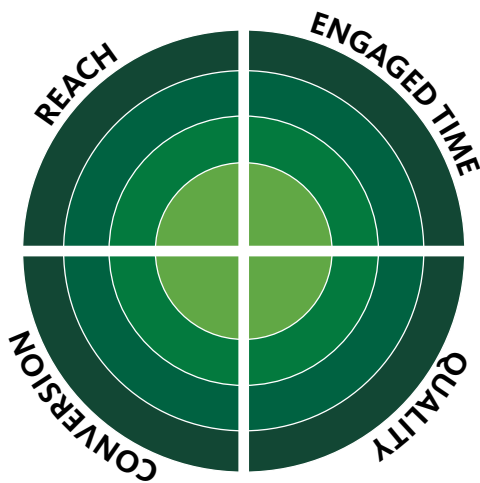
When Hearken-driven stories do well, they trigger more questions and thus increase the demand for audience-initiated stories.

6. Evaluation

»» Newsrooms using Hearken are employing various metrics, both quantitative and qualitative, to assess its impact. The newsrooms we spoke with all reported some degree of success in using Hearken to improve audience engagement and/or their news product.

In order to document the use of Hearken within their newsrooms and to gauge the success of Hearken-driven stories, journalists we interviewed use a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures across four major dimensions of engagement: reach, engaged time, quality (of individual stories and of overall performance) and conversion of engagement into memberships or subscriptions. Quantitative metrics include conventional measures such as clicks or engaged time, plus Hearken-specific measures such as the number of audience questions submitted, participation in voting rounds, social media shares and downloads of Hearken-driven podcasts. Qualitative criteria include perceived quality of questions, quality of audience feedback, comments on social media sites, diversity of shares, diversity of audience response and reaching diverse communities, as well as journalists' own personal satisfaction and pride in their Hearken-driven work.

These reports from our group of interviewees are in line with findings from other researchers¹ who have demonstrated that even as newsrooms commonly use off-the-shelf audience metrics, they also measure the impact of their work more holistically, combining quantitative and qualitative measures. Our interviews also indicate that editors and reporters have two strong incentives to gauge Hearken's performance: First, they can demonstrate to other parts of the newsroom that their audience engagement efforts make a significant contribution; and second, they fulfill their self-declared mission of serving the audience. Overall, our interviews indicate that nearly every newsroom in this early-adopter sample saw at least some success in using Hearken tools by at least one of these measures.



Evaluation

¹ E.g., Powers, Elia, "Selecting Metrics, Reflecting Norms." *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 4 (2018): 454-471.

Reach

The editors we interviewed closely track how Hearken-driven stories compare to typical news stories in terms of reach, mostly by looking at internal rankings of stories according to the number of people clicking on the web version or downloading a podcast. Michelle Maternowski (WUWM, Milwaukee) said Bubbler Talk stories typically make it into the station's top five of most-listened-to stories. Dustin Leed (LancasterOnline) said that "Every one of our Hearken stories is in the top 50 posts of the year for engagement and time spent on the story." At WFPL in Gainesville, Hearken-driven stories get a lot of shares and re-posts on social media, said Laura Ellis.

Editors and reporters also gauge success by tracking how many people submit questions and by evaluating the quality of those questions. The level of participation in voting rounds is also considered a measure of success. "I guess for me," said Alex Samuels (Texas Tribune), "one of the main metrics is [whether people] are voting in our voting rounds. One that we have right now, there's like 200 something votes, which is the most we've ever had. But I try to get at least between 60 to 80 per voting round. So as people are actively engaging in the voting round, that to me is a metric of success and then also if people are asking good questions."

Engaged time

For many newsrooms in our sample, the time that audience members spend actually reading, viewing or listening to Hearken-driven stories is a key indicator of success. "I found that our web posts are some of the most engaging that we put online," said Angela Evancie (Vermont Public Radio). "So people are spending the most time on them. The...number of minutes that people spend looking at any given post [compared to others] are on average quite high." More and longer engagement is also a trend that the Texas Tribune observes. "The bounce rate on the Texplainer stories are much lower," said Amanda Zamora. "The time spent on those stories is higher, and we're bringing back more repeat visitors through those pages." The same holds for LancasterOnline. Compared to conventional stories, Dustin Leed said, "the time spent in engagement, it's always through the roof. People read it a long time. It's not like a breaking news story where they're going to read the lead and a paragraph and then boom, leave."

Quality

In addition to quantitative measures, journalists also look at qualitative ways to assess the impact of Hearken-driven stories. Olivia Allen-Price (KQED, San Francisco) said she looks toward "more of a squishy interpretation of how successful a story is, and that combination of, how happy were we as journalists with the quality of the content that was in the story? With how that content came together? Was the story compelling? Was someone just hooked the whole way through? Did we find new things, or was this really a story that was a known answer, but we just presented it in a really nice, fun way?" Elizabeth Koekenga-Whitmire (AL.com) said that audience comments are also a good indicator. "We spent a lot of time, and still spend a lot of time, looking at the comments on the site, and the comments on Facebook when we share [a Hearken-driven story]," she said.

"Was the story compelling? Was someone just hooked the whole way through? Did we find new things, or was this really a story that was a known answer, but we just presented it in a really nice, fun way?"

Conversion

The most ambitious goal for using Hearken is to convert initial interactions with question askers into lasting relationships that yield memberships or subscriptions. “Engagement, for us,” said Amanda Zamora of the Texas Tribune, “means moving people from that initial contact into a more engaged experience with us, which primarily means they’re signing up for our newsletters, they are attending our events, they are, in some way, expressing an interest in having a persistent relationship with us.” As a result, the Tribune is working on developing a conversion metric that measures how many question askers become subscribers. Vermont Public Radio hasn’t developed such a specific approach yet but also planned to better connect Hearken-driven interactions to membership recruitment.

Overall, our interviews indicate some degree of success at each of these newsrooms in using Hearken to improve audience engagement and their news product, measured across these various metrics. As described above, though, Hearken promotes not just new tools and practices, but also new attitudes. In the next section, we’ll show that many journalists we interviewed also developed more trust toward their audience and understanding of its preferences, needs and suggestions.

7. *Change of Attitudes*

»» Using Hearken also affects journalists' attitudes and expectations about their audiences. Some report having their positive beliefs reinforced about the value of including the public as partners in producing the news, while others found their attitudes toward the public became more positive through using Hearken.

At its heart, the Hearken approach advocates that journalists re-examine their perceptions of the public. Embracing the idea of the audience as participants in news-making is perhaps the most fundamental way that Hearken and other “relational” engagement approaches challenge established ways of doing journalism.¹ Journalists expressed two responses when we asked whether working with Hearken had changed their expectations toward and attitudes about their audiences. One group, mostly editors, emphasized that Hearken did not change their expectations or attitudes because they had believed in the value of engaging with the audience in the first place. For this group, using Hearken reinforced their commitment to engagement. The other group, mostly reporters, pointed to perceptible changes, sometimes after initial skepticism, toward embracing deeper engagement with audience members.

Reinforcement

“I drank the Kool-Aid on this approach to journalism a while ago,” said Amanda Zamora (Texas Tribune). “I don’t think it’s changed my expectations, but I think it’s helping to demonstrate—when I’m talking about doing engaged journalism or audience-driven journalism or journalism that is responsive to an audience—it’s helping me illustrate what that means to a newsroom of journalists who do not inherently understand what I’m talking about. That’s what it’s helping me do. It’s helping me influence a culture that existed without an understanding of what I meant by engaged journalism when I walked in the door. People understand through seeing it in practice.” Marcia Parker’s (CALmatters) expectations didn’t change either. “I mean, it’s in our strategic plan,” she said, “and it’s in everything that we say and do. So no, we’re committed, but...this is a young organization and a team that’s learning to engage and experimenting with engaging. That’s where we are on the learning curve. I think that’s going to take some time to get there.”

For these editors, having a formalized process like Hearken helps to formulate goals and structure the process of engaging with listeners and readers. “I don’t think that using Hearken has changed our expectations,” said Elizabeth Koekenga-Whitmire (AL.com). “I think we’ve always had really high expectations, and we’ve always kind of gone to the audience to help drive the direction that we’re going in. I think what Hearken has done is give us a really good system for that, and because we decided we’re going to do this every week, it’s really, I would say, held us accountable, just because we have this tool we’re paying for. We decided we’re going to do it once a week, and we’ve assigned a reporter to do that.”

¹ DeVigal, Andrew. “Engagement is Relational, not Transactional.” Medium 2015. <http://mediashift.org/2015/11/engagement-is-relational-not-transactional/>

A few editors said that although using Hearken hasn't changed their minds, it has pushed them to set the bar higher for what they want to achieve. Jim Gates (KUOW, Seattle) said working with the Hearken approach "has increased my expectations to have people involved in the story." Shawn Allee (WBEZ, Chicago) said that as a result of using Hearken, he aims for even higher audience participation. "I have a much higher standard of the thoughtfulness of, or our intentionality of, how we're planning around it," he said. "Because we've learned a lot, and we should encourage using the things that we've learned but not make the same mistakes. We're much more precise, I think, when we're asking for the public to help." For John Hammontree (AL.com), hearing from readers has "solidified our expectation that the audience knows what it wants. That we should trust the audience when they say, 'This is something that we're interested in,' even if we think, 'Oh, well. Nobody would ever be interested in that story.' If the audience says they are, then they are. I think that we expect our audience to ask good questions, and they expect us to give good answers now. And so, I think, to some extent, that's changed the way we do engagement."

Some journalists said they take their positive experiences as an incentive to spread the audience-driven approach throughout the newsroom. Angela Evancie (Vermont Public Radio), for example, said it was affirming to see the audience response, which makes "it easy now on a monthly basis to continue to tell the story internally to my colleagues of how important this model is and all of the ways that it can improve, not just Vermont Public Radio content, but the way that our audience thinks of us, relates with us and feels about us."

Mind shift

For reporters and editors who described changes in their expectation or attitudes, they said they experienced interactions with the audience as more rewarding than in their previous work, they felt more sensitive to the needs of their audience and, as a result, they changed practices so that audience orientation would play a more central role.

Several journalists mentioned that Hearken-style audience involvement changed their approach to planning and reporting stories. "I like that it introduced us to bringing the listener, the community, into the reporting process a lot earlier, [helping us rethink] the way that we decide what our coverage is," said Michelle Maternowski (WUWM, Milwaukee). As Laura Ellis (WFPL, Gainesville) put it, "I think it definitely makes us think about who we're involving in a story. There's always this cliché of, 'Let's find a real person who's going to be affected by this story and see what they're saying.' I think that at least for me, I think more about how can this person shape the story? How can this person's experience or curiosity determine things about how this story ends up sounding?"

A few reporters said that being immersed in audience questions helps them to better understand the needs of readers and listeners. "I think it just taught me to not take any question related to policy and politics for granted," said Alex Samuels from the Texas Tribune, "especially if we are trying to engage with readers and bring new people to our audience [who] aren't already policy wonks. So how can we get people outside of that? I think Explainer and Hearken [are good tools] to help get everyday Texans involved. That's the audience we're hoping to build, so it's just given me a deeper understanding of that." This sense of deeper understanding was echoed by Olivia Allen-Price (KQED, San Francisco). "I've just interacted one on one with so many more members of the audience," she said, "which gives you ... it's just always a delightful experience because you're just meeting more people, and they're not just anonymous listeners, they're people that you're

"It's helping me influence a culture that existed without an understanding of what I meant by engaged journalism when I walked in the door. People understand through seeing it in practice."

interacting with. So, I think as a journalist, it makes me feel like I have a better handle on whom I'm talking to as I'm creating anything. So that, I feel, has changed within me." The personal component of interacting with audience members was also important for Lacey Daley (BSPR, Boise). "It showed me that I care more about it than I thought I did," she said, "because I've met the people that the reporters bring into the station because I'm usually the one that has those initial correspondences with them, and it's just been ... It's amazing to see them so excited about the process, to see them so excited about coming to their public radio station, and that to me means that people do care."

Some reporters changed their perspective only after overcoming initial skepticism. "One of the things that Hearken does," Ann-Elise Henzl (WUWM, Milwaukee) said, "is it encourages us to use a voting round for listeners to select what they want to hear. I remember one that was being presented to us at the initial meeting and I thought, 'Oh, come on, we're going really turn over control to listeners?' Because again, I had no idea what people would be interested in. Maybe I just didn't respect how constructive their ideas would be, or how creative, and how interested they are in things that are around them."

Many reporters found it rewarding to interact more directly and frequently with audience members because it boosted their morale. "I realized that the audience is so much more engaged than I thought that they were," said Christina Morales (WUFT, Gainesville). "That was very exciting for me to see. People actually cared about what I was putting out there, and that my material was actually really good." Several reporters also mentioned that hearing from the audience through questions helped them develop a better sense for important issues that might be overlooked. "I think it's made me, as a journalist, think about how to use audience engagement in other facets of my reporting," said Ashlie Stevens (WFPL, Louisville). "I think that maybe sometimes what we need to realize as reporters...that the people who are actually living it have questions that we may not even think about." As Katherine Nagasawa (WBEZ, Chicago) put it, "I definitely think it's like a very organized way of tapping into the public's conscious, in a way, what's on their mind."

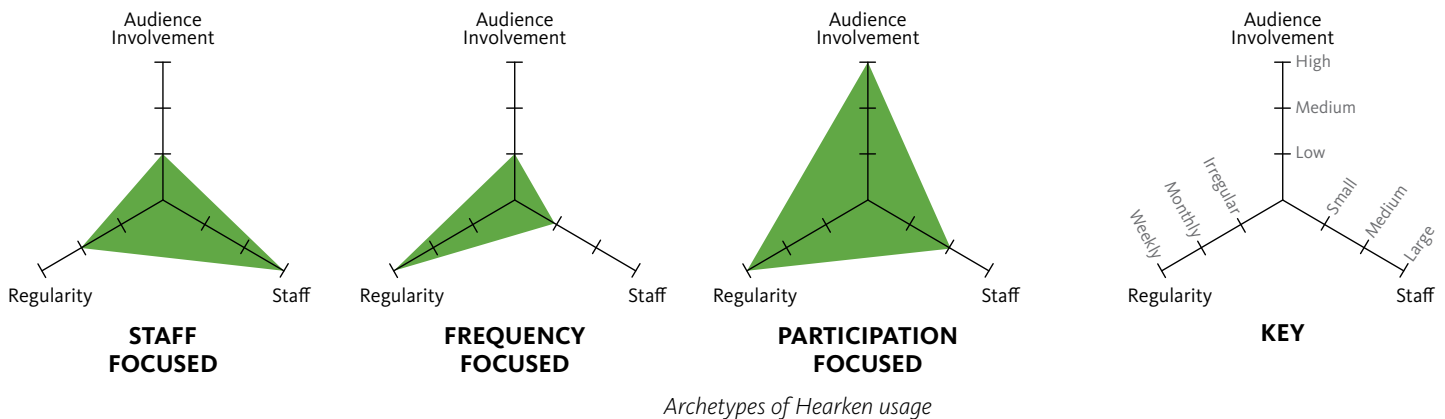
A few reporters said they felt better about their work after engaging with the audience more directly. "I think it actually embodies," said Lindsey Blest (LancasterOnline), "what I hope to do as a journalist to a degree in that it is driven by what people want to know, and I think journalists have the ability to find answers to things and accessibility to information and time to find information that other people in the public may not have."

"That was very exciting for me to see. People actually cared about what I was putting out there, and that my material was actually really good."

7. Implementing Engagement

»» Given their resources and organizational priorities, newsrooms can find it challenging to implement the full public-powered model. We present three conceptual models illustrating newsroom strategies for pursuing deeper engagement.

In order to realize the full public-powered news ideal, newsrooms have to accomplish several things at once: publish audience-driven stories on a regular basis, allocate sufficient staff resources to deeply engage, and involve audience members in every stage of the story cycle. Our findings suggest that most newsrooms are still working on finding a balance across these efforts. From our interviews, three archetypes of Hearken usage emerge: staff-focused, frequency-focused, and participation-focused.



In light of finite resources and capabilities, newsrooms pursue different paths toward the public-powered ideal that can be represented as three archetypal models. These models of engagement strategies do not offer a prescriptive statement on “best” approaches to engagement. But they do offer a visualization of ways in which news organizations structure their engagement efforts, given their particular organizational goals, strengths and constraints. We offer these three models as “ideal types” rather than exact descriptive models of specific newsrooms.

Newsrooms with a staff-focused approach dedicate more than one or two positions to producing Hearken-driven stories, creating teams in which reporters, multimedia producers and editors collaborate to create a variety of content. More staff positions enable more interaction with audience members and potentially richer reporting and content. Within our sample, LancasterOnline and WUWM (Milwaukee) provide examples that come close to this model. Newsrooms with a frequency-focused approach prioritize a quick turn-around for Hearken-powered stories, ensuring a continuous flow of audience-driven content to encourage an ongoing, frequent feedback loop. Establishing a reliable

rhythm for these stories is important to these organizations as a signal that they value the public's input. The Texas Tribune and AL.com come close to this kind of model. Newsrooms with a participation-focused approach (Vermont Public Radio and WBEZ in Chicago both come close to this model) try to maximize both regularity and public participation. They aim to include question askers in the reporting process as much as possible, soliciting their feedback about how the story is developing and where the story is going. This approach requires more time and is more challenging to routinize because the production process needs to be built around the deeper participation of audiences. While it maximizes audience involvement among highly engaged audience members, this process potentially yields fewer stories – though WBEZ stands out for regularly producing Hearken-driven stories in a context of ongoing engagement with the audience across the phases of news production.

While highlighting various elements of engagement and pointing out the balancing act that results from them, our findings also reveal several tensions underlying the practice of public-powered journalism in the 15 news organizations we analyzed. These tensions shape and constrain how thoroughly and in what fashion news organizations adopt the Hearken model of audience engagement. Similar tensions likely exist in newsrooms undertaking other audience engagement initiatives as well.

1. As much as journalists may aim to transform audience members from consumers to partners, they are also concluding that some audience members simply prefer to remain consumers.
2. While Hearken promotes its tools in part with claims that its model helps to attract more paying subscribers, only a few news organizations we spoke with had implemented a structured approach to converting question-askers into members—a project that may require more effort and a collaborative organizational culture.
3. While Hearken emphasizes that its approach to audience engagement goes beyond using software tools, some news organizations can find it challenging to develop corresponding organizational routines to fully implement the process and philosophy of public-powered journalism.

In light of finite resources and capabilities, newsrooms pursue different paths toward the public-powered ideal that can be represented as three archetypal models.

Conclusion

In this report we have explored how 15 news organizations have used Hearken and its model of public-powered journalism for audience engagement. Based on 28 interviews with editors and reporters in 12 states, we find that nearly every news organization reports some measure of success with using Hearken for reaching a bigger, more diverse and/or more engaged audience. At the same time, our findings also reveal challenges that shape and constrain how Hearken and its model are being implemented in diverse organizational environments. Because our findings are based mainly on self-reports by journalists in news organizations that are early adopters of Hearken, this report is limited in scope. And it is important to remember that Hearken offers consulting around a variety of outreach strategies—for example, consultants offer advice on how to craft good question prompts and how to promote them on social media—though newsrooms may lack the resources or authorization to fully implement those strategies. To the extent that newsrooms struggle to adopt and adapt to truly public-powered journalism, Hearken’s underlying challenge to journalism as usual remains unmet. By the same token, realizing a more public-powered journalism requires more than adopting software tools. It requires an organizational commitment that guides how limited newsroom resources are allocated.

Our findings point toward additional questions for future research. For example, we learned that question-askers are interested in a variety of topics and issues, but our findings are based on journalists’ reports rather than a direct examination of submitted questions. Content analysis of submitted questions could demonstrate recurring patterns in the public’s questions. More fundamentally, we need to hear directly from audience members themselves. Why do some get involved in suggesting and reporting Hearken-driven stories, while many others do not? To what extent do audiences actually want more involvement in news-making, and to what extent do they prefer professional journalists to be the main information brokers in their communities?

Moreover, we found that many reporters who used Hearken’s tools reported a higher level of trust toward input from the audience, but what about audience members themselves? Do they trust news organizations more when they are invited to be actively involved in pitching and reporting news stories?

Our findings also provide food for thought for newsrooms that are considering pursuing public-powered journalism and other forms of deeper audience engagement. What organizational resources can be devoted to the effort over the long haul, keeping in mind that when successful, public-powered journalism begets more interaction with and input from the audience that will need to be managed? What models from other newsrooms can be emulated to maximize the outlet’s resources, fit its context and meet its strategic goals? What metrics can be employed to measure impact—not just quantitative and off-the-shelf measures, but also qualitative measures linked to the quality of the outlet’s journalistic output? What are the organizational priorities that will guide the effort—or perhaps that will need to be reexamined if deeper engagement with the public is to succeed?

Hearken and its efforts to promote public-powered journalism play a central role in contributing to an emerging infrastructure of audience engagement and participatory journalism. In concert with an array of journalism organizations, funders and researchers looking for ways to improve journalism’s relevance and sustainability, Hearken seeks to

Our findings also provide food for thought for newsrooms that are considering pursuing public-powered journalism and other forms of deeper audience engagement.

drive organizational change within newsrooms—to shift the model of daily journalism from a top-down, “journalists know best” approach to a methodology for including the public throughout the news process. Our findings show that although newsrooms can find it challenging to implement, many remain eager to continue experimenting with a more participatory approach to journalism, hoping to better connect with, understand and represent the communities they serve.

Appendix: Methodology

To construct our sample, we selected from a list provided by Hearken of 33 news organizations that had been using its platform for at least a year. We selected an initial sample of 15 organizations, stratifying the sample to achieve diversity in terms of geography, newsroom size, medium (radio, print, online) and audience involvement (low, medium, high) as described by Hearken. After Brandel sent an email to these 15 organizations introducing the research project, we followed up with a detailed message outlining the purpose of the study. Of this initial sample, one news organization declined participation and two did not respond to repeated requests. To secure the above-mentioned criteria for diversity, three other news organizations from the list were then added to the sample. For each news organization, we tried to interview one editor who supervises the production of Hearken-driven stories and one journalist who produces those stories. (In one case, the news organization only has one person involved in producing Hearken-driven stories. In another case, the interview request for another team member went unanswered.) Interviews were conducted over the phone between January and April 2018 with the shortest interview lasting 18 minutes and the longest 1 hour and 1 minute. At the start of each interview, we read a short script stating that this research project was being conducted without further participation from Hearken and clarifying our role as independent researchers (see script below).

Following a semi-structured protocol (see below), the interviews covered areas such as main reasons for using Hearken, challenges when using Hearken and questions about expectations and attitudes with regard to audience engagement. Data analysis unfolded in three stages, adopting the conceptual framework of “organizational cultural analysis.”¹ First, the interviewer summarized the interview data by elements specifically outlining identifiable assessments, experiences and values as described by the interviewees. In a second step, the second researcher served as a debriefer and located intersections of overlapping elements and identified themes in the interview data. These themes were then discussed among the researchers with regard to referential adequacy (i.e., “checking preliminary findings and interpretations against archived raw data, previous literature and existing research to explore alternative explanations for findings as they emerge.”²) Finally, in a third step, the researchers determined master themes, recurring patterns and tensions, illuminating key elements of using Hearken in particular news outlets and their variation across organizations.

¹ Gerald W. Driskill and Angela Laird Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action: A Cultural Analysis Workbook* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2005).

² Bradley T. Erford, *Research and Evaluation in Counseling* (Cengage Learning, 2015), 102.

Interview Script

We are an academic research institution. Our goal is to explore, from a neutral point of view, contemporary newsroom practices. For this study, we are examining how newsrooms are using Hearken. We are not invested in the outcomes of this study: From our perspective, anything we discover is interesting and important to know. Jennifer Brandel introduced us to you, but that is the extent of Hearken’s involvement with this study. We will be sharing the results of our study with Jennifer and Hearken, but our goal is mainly to produce a report and/or a scholarly article.

In general, these interviews are not anonymous, but if there is information you would like to share that is not for attribution, we will honor that.

- » We hear a lot about the importance of engagement at present. Is there a working definition of engagement in your organization?
- » Think back to the time before using Hearken, what did your interaction with the audience look like, both from your personal perspective and as a news organization?
- » How long have you been using Hearken?
- » What are the main reasons for using Hearken?
- » How do you use the Hearken tool?
 - » Specifically, If you think about the story process as finding a story, reporting the story, writing the story and then distributing the story, how are you using Hearken?
 - » Does your newsroom involve users in reporting and research for Hearken-driven projects?
- » What was the response in the newsroom to using Hearken?
- » What staff positions are assigned to implementing Hearken-driven projects?
- » What are the main challenges in using Hearken?
- » How do you evaluate the impact of Hearken stories? (Be sure to explore how they are defining “impact”)
 - » What tools for audience analytics are you using with Hearken stories in particular?
 - » As you’ve been using Hearken, what hasn’t worked? (Could include technical challenges, etc.)
 - » Was anything about using Hearken a disappointment?
- » Is Hearken better suited for some stories than others?
- » Has using Hearken changed your expectations for audience engagement?
- » Has using Hearken changed your attitudes about your audience?
- » What other tools/techniques besides Hearken is your news organization using toward audience engagement?
- » Are you planning to continue using Hearken, either in the same ways or in new/different ways?
- » Is there anything you would like to add?

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About the Authors



Thomas R. Schmidt served as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Agora Journalism Center from fall 2017 to summer 2018. He is the author of the forthcoming book *Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism* (University of Missouri Press) and numerous articles in academic journals including *Journalism*, *Digital Journalism*, and *Journalism Practice*. He was inducted into the Kappa Tau Alpha National Honor Society for media scholars and has received prestigious fellowships such as the Fulbright Scholarship and the Transatlantic Media Fellowship. Schmidt earned his Ph.D. from the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication where he also earned a master's degree in Literary Nonfiction. Before his academic career, Schmidt was a reporter for major news organizations in Austria. Currently, he teaches at Boise State University.

Regina G. Lawrence is professor and Associate Dean for Portland in the School of Journalism and Communication and Director of the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon. Her research focuses on the journalistic norms and routines and the role of the media in public discourse. She has been chair of the Political Communication section of the American Political Science Association, book editor of the journal *Political Communication*, and a fellow at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University. Her books include *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (University of Chicago Press, 2007, with W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston), winner of the 2016 Doris A. Graber Best Book Award from the Political Communication section of the American Political Science Association, and *Hillary Clinton's Race for the White House: Gender Politics and the Media on the Campaign Trail* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009, co-authored with Melody Rose).

