Lessons on Engagement

February 2023

Solutions Journalism Network
Why We Exist

Many newsrooms and journalists need help with:

- Understanding the information needs of their communities
- Creating trusting relationships with those they serve (or aim to serve)
- Sustaining their business operation through direct support from the public
- Scaling up engagement projects into ongoing practices
The Paradigm Shift:
Don’t Assume
Start By Listening
Optimized for Speed, Efficiency, Distribution

Traditional Newsroom Model

- Built for the **machine age**
- Newsroom is focused on the format & “feeding the beasts”
- Public is **shut out** of story process
- Public is treated as a **consumer**, from which to **extract value**
Optimized for Listening, Relevance and Trust

Emerging Newsroom Model

- Built for the information age
- Focus is on “what can we help the public understand or do?”
- Public is engaged in story process
- Public is treated as a partner, for which to create value

In other words, engagement is required!
### FROM > TO

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[https://twitter.com/d_holli/status/1621158615141990403](https://twitter.com/d_holli/status/1621158615141990403)
META LESSON: ENGAGEMENT CAN DEMOCRATIZE YOUR NEWSROOM

The fractal nature of democratic practices

How can we expect to sustain a national pattern of democracy if it’s not practiced at a more basic level?

If newsrooms want to be better for democracy, they must become better at democracy.

- Representation
- Voice in decision-making
- Collaboration
Engagement Fundamentals
How Hearken Defines “Engagement”

Engagement happens when members of the public are **responsive** to organizations, and organizations are in turn **responsive** to members of the public.

It’s a feedback loop — a mutually beneficial **relationship**.
**The Engagement Ring (Feedback Loop)**

- **NEWS ORG** invites input from **PUBLIC**
- **PUBLIC** provides input
- **NEWS ORG** creates content or insights based on input (and acknowledges input, follows up)
- **NEWS ORG** listens to input
The Engagement Ring

NEWS ORG invites input from PUBLIC

NEWS ORG creates content or insights based on input (and acknowledges input, follows up)

PUBLIC provides input

NEWS ORG listens to input

If you stop here, you risk being an “askhole”
The Engagement Ring

NEWS ORG invites input from PUBLIC

Michelle's note: If you stop here, you risk being an "askhole"

NEWS ORG creates content or insights based on input (and acknowledges input, follows up)

PUBLIC provides input

NEWS ORG listens to input

Closing a feedback loop
Top Line

The more your audience is invited, included, engaged and heard

The more insight, ideas and relationships you’ll generate and

The more likely your reporting will:

- be original / differentiated
- break news
- be relevant
- be effective
Traditional Reporting Approach Starts with Telling

“Here’s what we think you need to know!”

Newsroom as parent
Public-Powered Approach Starts with Listening

“What do you not know that we can find out for & with you?”
Traditional Story Cycle

- PITCH
- ASSIGN
- REPORT
- PUBLISH
- FEEDBACK

LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

NEWSROOM

PUBLIC

COMMENTS
Public-Powered Story Cycle

- Pitch
- Assign
- Report
- Publish
- Feedback

Level of Involvement

- Ask Questions
- Vote on Favorites
- Shape Story + Accompany Reporters
- Ask More Questions

Newsroom
Public
ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM + PUBLIC-POWERED PROCESS

Technology designed by and for journalists
START WITH LISTENING

How it works

1. Listener Eric asks a question

2. Reporter Olivia curates it into a voting round

3. Public votes for their favorite option

4. Olivia reports out the answer & involves Eric

Story performs 11x better than average KQED story!
The public-powered process is based on questions. Why curiosity?

It attracts engagement from people who are humble & starts stories from a more neutral position.

Questions enable discovery, and opens people up to new ideas, widening the opportunity for dialogue.

Reporting answers focuses a story on a quest, or an adventure, instead of conflict, & attracts people with news-fatigue.

Questions are the atomic unit of journalism. Everyone has questions & can participate.
Cascade Public Media + Crosscut: Northwest Wonders for topic focus

Questions for the great beyond

1. You ask a question
2. Vote for your favorite
3. We dig for answers
4. We report the story!

What stories should Crosscut be telling about Native communities in the Pacific Northwest?

Manola Secaira
Staff Reporter

Here in Washington state, there are 28 federally recognized tribes, and many more Native communities beyond that. It makes sense that our reporting would represent them; after all, the story of this land isn’t complete without Native voices. So with that in mind, I’m interested in stories that highlight the histories, as well as the current experiences, of Indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest. Native people are an integral part of Washington’s past, yes — but how are Native people shaping this region’s future?

Here are some example questions:
The EMS drives engagement, opt-ins, and revenue opportunities
Hearken’s process & tech is **good business**

- **15x more readership** on average for Hearken-powered stories vs. staff-written stories
- Hearken-powered stories are **10x more popular** (clicks, likes, comments and shares) on Facebook than staff-written stories
- Average **time on page is 4x higher** on Hearken story than staff-written stories
- Average **time on page for Hearken story is more than 1 minute longer** than average for all staff-written stories
- **54% of people opted in to a newsletter** when given the opportunity on Hearken tech
- On average, readers were more than **2x as likely to become a paying subscriber** after reading a Hearken-powered story than a staff-written story
- **56% emails of questions askers are new** - were not previously registered
- **50% of people** asking questions or voting are engaging with that newsroom for the **first time**
ENGAGED ELECTIONS APPROACH

Hearken’s process & tech is **builds trust & relationships**

Of the newsrooms who participated in our Engaged Elections training in the 2020 elections cycle,

- 84% said participating built trust between their newsroom and their community members
- 89% said participating helped them be more able to listen and respond to their communities
- 78% said participating increased the size of their audience
- 100% said they will use the engagement strategies they learned in the next election

ENGAGEMENT IS A BUSINESS MODEL

Bottom Line

The more your audience feels included, engaged and heard

The more they see and hear proof that you’re serving them directly

The more likely they are to:

- **trust** your work
- **consume** your work
- **share** your work
- & **become members**
Who Benefits?
Non-Extractive Engagement
# Approaches to Engagement

## EXTRACTIVE

**Designed to benefit the asker**

- No context given to participant
- No meaningful incentive to participate
- No follow-up with participant
- Takes advantage of power differential
- Focused on scale and reach, not depth
- No value of participant beyond playing by rules of the asker
- Participant not left better off than before

## TRANSACTIONAL

**Information or service exchange**

- Context given for participation
- Incentive to participate
- Focused on meeting specific need
- Limited menu of predetermined options for value exchange
- Potential follow-up with participant
- Time-bound: does not infer longer-term relationship

## RELATIONAL

**Relationship and insight generation**

- Deep context given for participation
- Goals: produce new insights, build relationships
- Compelling incentive to participate
- Co-creation potential
- Expansive listening
- Value of participant extends beyond product
- Flexible: option to expand relationship and fold into new initiatives
- Participant better off than before engagement
Engagement + Solutions = GREATNESS!
Ask people what additional questions or solutions they have about the topic to fuel more stories.
How Tucson's Southside Worker Center has helped undocumented workers earn fair wages over decades

Since 2006, the center has provided a place for 44-day laborers to find dignity and lead the way

Ask people for their suggestions, questions or ideas for who is doing X thing better
For every problem-based story, solicit solutions!

‘Unconstitutional hole’: How Pima County jail deaths — one recently ruled a homicide — are part of a grim pattern

After 20 deaths since 2019, former employees, families and advocates say the jail should be shut down and Sheriff Nancrede held accountable.

Lyndse Wuycheckin
November 16, 2022


People continue to die in Pima County’s jail. Could bail reform make it less deadly?

What Yavapai can learn from communities across the US experimenting with solutions that reduce the number of people in jail

By John Washington
January 30, 2023
WHYY sent a reporter to listen to communities impacted by gun violence. Here's what we heard

By Sammy Caloia  ·  Updated Jun. 20, 2022 9:10 am
Trauma Informed Reporting, Engagement & Solutions

- Check our Sammy Caiola’s work & lessons learned around sexual assault engagement reporting
- Learn ways of repositioning sources as co-creators around traumatic topics
- This can be viewed as reporting approaches that help create a solution to a problem (see this example)
A Few Lessons on Engagement
Audience Engagement

- Focus on building habit, loyalty, and audience revenue
- Analyzing data of current audience, such as content performance, consumption habits, and incorporating into decision-making
- Focus groups of current audience members to better understand their needs and design for them

Community Engagement

- Focus on understanding voids in the local ecosystem and positioning the newsroom to help fill those
- Physically and digitally appearing where people are, listening to what they think and incorporating it into your decision making
- Centers the community a story is about
- Often generates community partnerships with orgs & groups

Read the full piece here.
START WHERE YOU ARE

Start with engaging your audience, then community
PARTICIPATION INVITATIONS

Ways to Invite Participation

- Digital calls to action
  - On social media
  - On your website / content
  - Ads
  - Newsletters
- Broadcast calls to action
  - Promos
  - Tops / kickers of stories
- IRL calls to action
  - Events
  - Tabling at festivals
  - Billboards / QR codes
  - Flyers / door knockers / bookmarks at libraries
  - Sky writing (sky is the limit!)
- Partnering with community groups to announce / share
ENGAGING - LIGHT TO DEEP

Depth of participation & representation = likelihood to share content

Some ways the public can be included in your process

- Their input is invited (question, insight, comment, experience)
- They’re able to vote on which story or topic you pursue
- They’re included in your reporting process & content (from shallow to deep)
  - Acknowledge them by name in the story (example)
  - Include their photo in the story and a bit about them (example)
  - Feature them in the story (example)
  - Allow some ridealong-type experience in reporting (example)
Examples of involving / showcasing participants

**More about our questioner**

JJ Nwosu has been born in Nigeria and attended D.A. Wells Elementary School in Bronzeville. When he and his family moved to Chicago last year, he joined the Chicago Astronomical Society. Then, he heard about the city’s plan to install LED lights, which he feared would make the night sky even brighter. When he told JJ about that the city is at least considering a less-bright LED light, he was ecstatic.

“That’s actually great news,” he says. “That light could actually be useful in reducing light pollution here. I think we are on the verge of stopping light pollution, but the only thing we can do now is cross our fingers.”

The 13-year-old has testified about light pollution at a Cook County Board meeting and corresponded with famed scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson on the matter.

JJ says when he grows up, he wants to be an astronautical engineer at NASA.

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**Who asked the question?**

John Wenitong is an Aboriginal author from far north Queensland.

In his youth he worked on industrial construction sites and as a result has a number of injuries that still cause him significant pain.

He says he now writes fiction to fulfill his life, as he can’t travel much nor play sport.

John was interested about the decriminalisation of cannabis in the ACT as he says a mixture of slow-release painkiller capsules and patches fail to relieve his back muscle spasms.

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From WBEZ Chicago

From the ABC - Australia
ENGAGEMENT IS A SOLUTION!

In closing

The more you invite, engage and represent your audience

The more likely they are to pay attention to your work and to …

- get more solutions journalism
- offer solutions ideas
- be civically engaged
  - contribute to solutions
Try it at home!
We are here to support listening, engagement & solutions!

Engagement Training, Coaching, Technology

info@wearehearken.com

Solutions Journalism Questions:

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