



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**

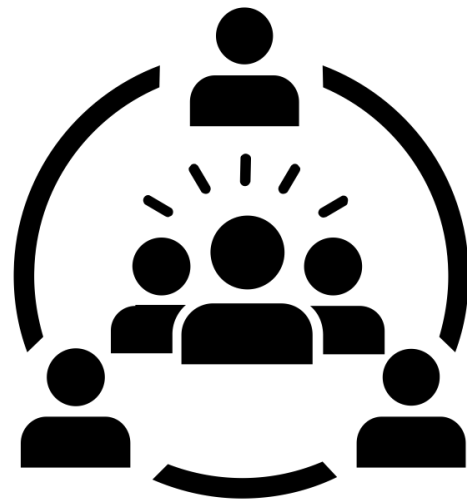
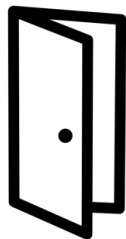


Optimized for Listening, Relevance and Trust

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

Characteristic	Dominant system	Emergent system
The who		
Org culture	Lone-wolf, Star Reporter	Collaborative, distributed
Beneficiary	Customers	Community
User pays with...	Attention, personal data	Connections, contributions
Team composition	Reporters, editors, owners	Reporters, editors, organizers, facilitators, educators, community leaders
Amplification	Experts	People's life experience
Ownership	Corporations, non-local, disproportionately white men	Communal, local, diverse
The what		
Focus	Problems	Solutions
Impact	Partisanship	Participation
Product	Physical goods	Civic infrastructure

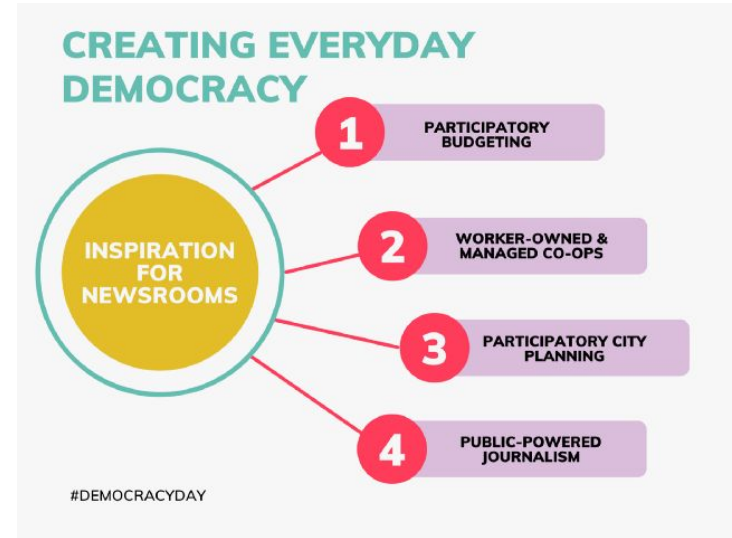
https://twitter.com/d_holli/status/1621158615141990403

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

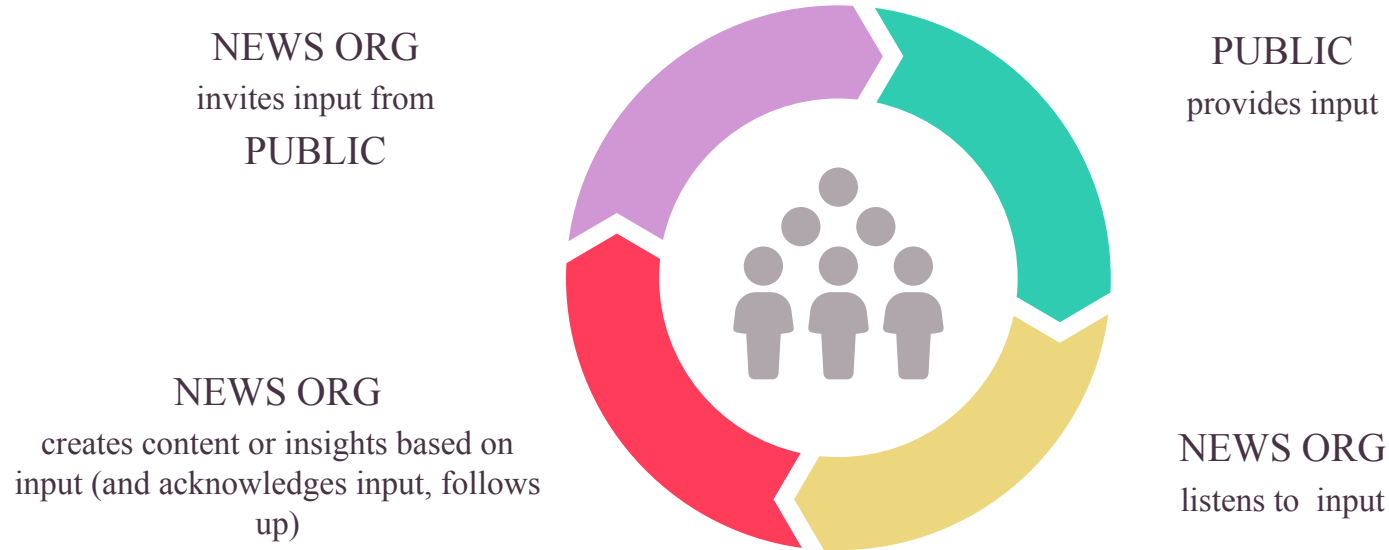
How Hearken Defines “Engagement”

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)



The Engagement Ring



The Engagement Ring



Top Line

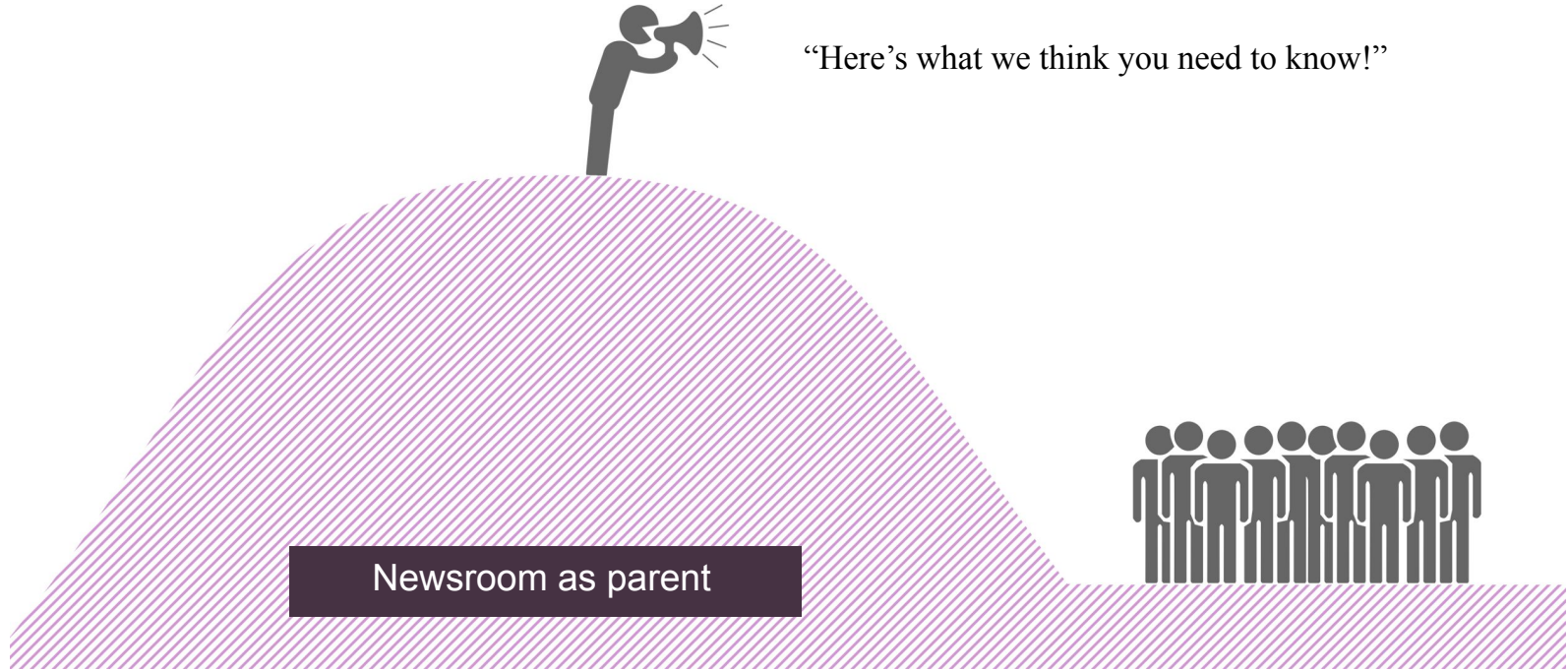
The more your audience is **invited, included, engaged** and **heard**

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



Public-Powered Approach Starts with Listening

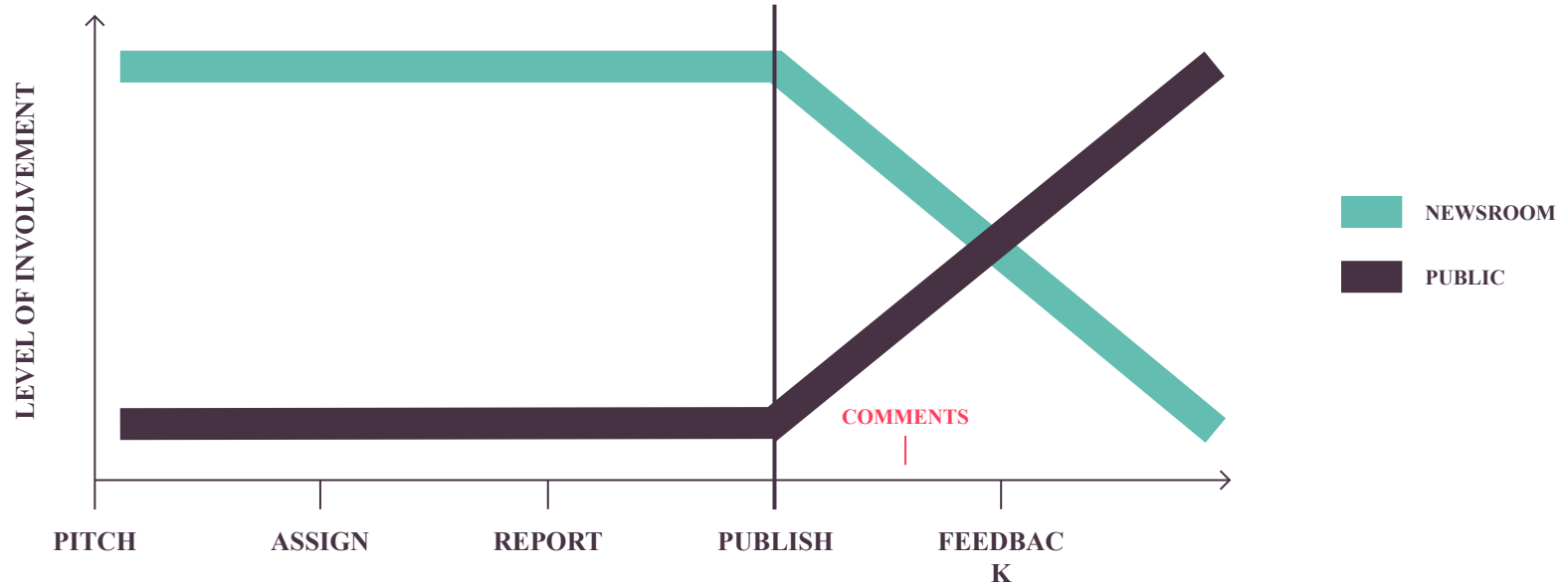
“What do you **not know** that we can find out for & with you?”



Newsroom as servant

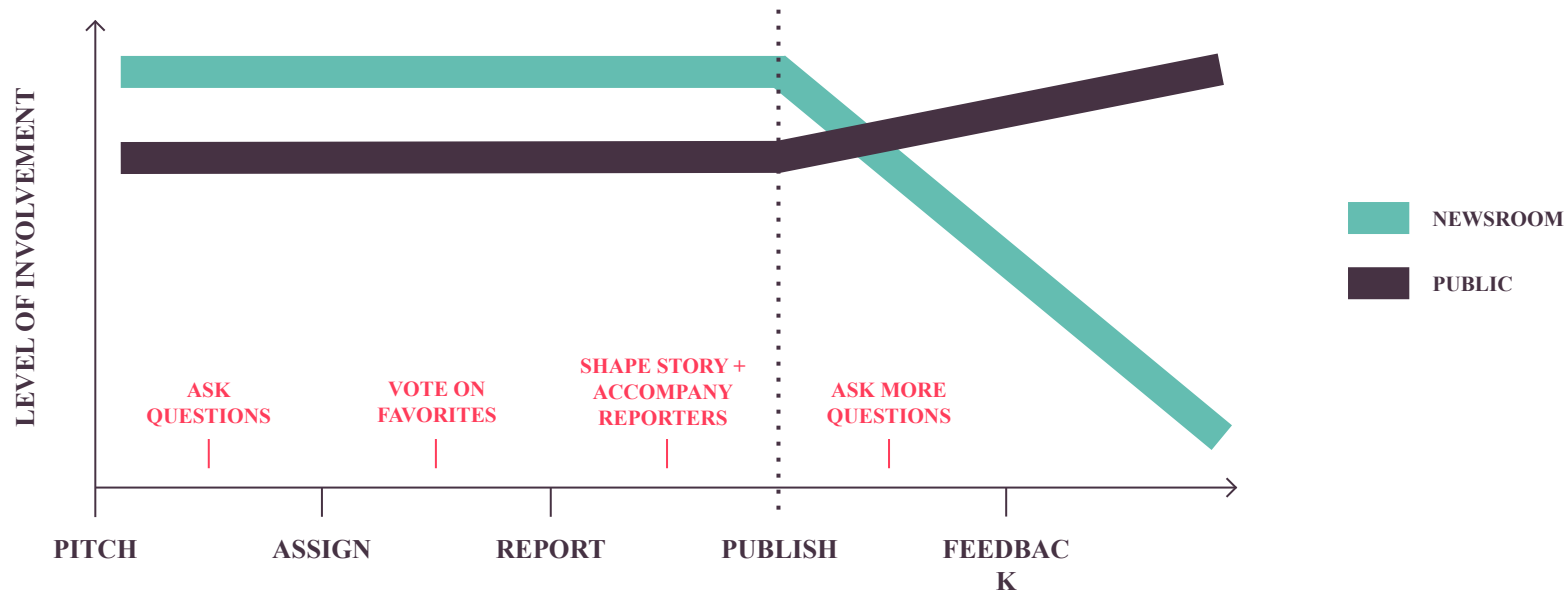
OUR PROCESS

Traditional Story Cycle



OUR PROCESS

Public-Powered Story Cycle

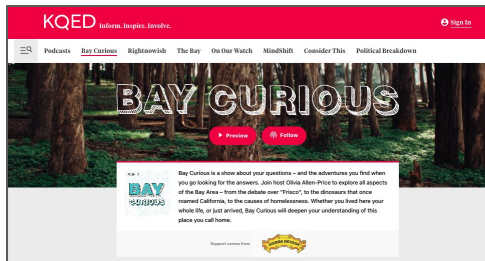


Technology designed by and for journalists



START WITH LISTENING

How it works



1 Listener Eric asks a question

WHAT'S YOUR QUESTION?

What do you wonder about the Bay Area, its culture or people that you want Bay Curious to investigate?

2025

Your contact info
We'll be in touch if we look into your question.

Name

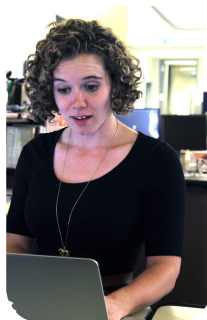
Email address

Phone number (optional)

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2 Reporter Olivia curates it into a voting round

3 Public votes for their favorite option



Voting Round

Which question should we investigate next?

☒ Was there a plan to develop more of the peninsula? If so, what happened? Hiking in the "preserved" canyons of the peninsula, it's not uncommon to find of street signs or old abandoned vehicles. What's that about?
Submitted by Anonymous

☒ I worked with Stanford's clothing archive and remembered seeing dresses with a label that said City of Paris. What was City of Paris, and how did the brand fall out of fashion?
Submitted by Anonymous

☒ Every spring we can find hundreds of goats grazing in the Oakland and Berkeley Hills. Who are these infamous goats? What are they doing? How do they get from each location?
Submitted by Porsche Williams

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4 Olivia reports out the answer & involves Eric



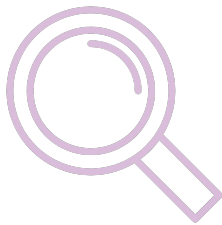
Story performs 11x better than average KQED story!

THE MAGIC OF QUESTIONS

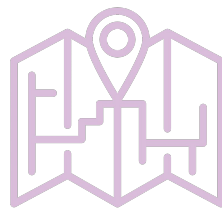
The public-powered process is based on questions. Why curiosity?



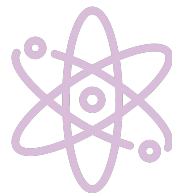
It attracts engagement from people who are humble & starts stories from a more neutral position



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

ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM + PUBLIC-POWERED PROCESS

1



Submit Your Questions

2



Vote for Your Favorite

3



We Investigate

4



We Share What We Find

ASK
#curiousKC

What do you wonder about Kansas City, the region or its people?
Type your question here.

0/300

Tell us a bit about you:
Note: One of our reporters or producers will send you an email if we look into your question.

☒ Keep me looped in with your newsletter!
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Send!

Click [here](#) to learn more about curiousKC and read Flatland's stories.

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Flatland KC: general assignment

The curiousKC Team



Vicky Diaz-Camacho
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vdiaz@kansascitypbs.org



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City PBS in cooperation
with Report For
America
choffman@flatlandkc.org

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 29 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:

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

0/280

Your contact info

We'll be in touch if we look into your question.

Name

Email address

Zip Code

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ENGAGEMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The EMS drives engagement, opt-ins, and revenue opportunities



WOMEN:
HOW HAS THE COVID-19 CRISIS AFFECTED
YOUR WORK AND/OR HOME LIFE?
KXLY.COM

0/140

Your contact info
We'll be in touch if we look into your question.

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Voting Round

Which question should we investigate next?



Did fantasy football really start in the Oakland? Does it have origins with the Raiders?
Submitted by Terese O'Malley



Monarch butterflies are plummeting toward extinction. This is my first year trying to raise them and I'm shocked at the difficulties in getting, planting and protecting native milkweeds. Why is it so hard?
Submitted by Ellea



What impact does Emma Chamberlain (a Bay Area native) have on teenagers in the Bay today?
Submitted by Anonymous

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Ask us a question


0/200

Your contact information.
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Charles P. Hahn, CFP®

Hearken's process & tech is good business

AWARENESS

- **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

ENGAGEMENT

- 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

CONVERSION

- **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

RETENTION

- **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**

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

From: Robinson, Sue. (Forthcoming). How Journalists Engage: A theory of trust-building for a multicultural world. Oxford University Press




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

Characteristics:

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

Power hoarding



TRANSACTIONAL

Information or service exchange

Characteristics:

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

Power exchange



RELATIONAL

Relationship and insight generation

Characteristics:

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

Power & possibility growing



Engagement + Solutions =
GREATNESS!

The 6 Steps of Writing a Solutions Story



ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY

Ask people what additional questions or solutions they have about the topic to fuel more stories



<https://azluminaria.org/2023/01/13/how-tucscons-southside-worker-center-has-helped-undocumented-workers-earn-fair-wages-over-decades/>

What other questions do you have about essential workers or labor that you'd like us to consider covering? (required)

Name (required)

Email (We'll use it to get back in touch if we can answer your question) (required)

☐ SIGN UP FOR OUR WEEKLY EMAIL NEWSLETTER

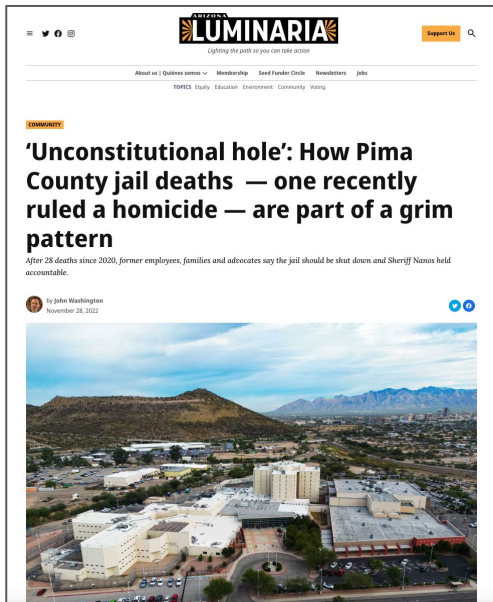
The 6 Steps of Writing a Solutions Story



ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY

Ask people for their suggestions, questions or ideas for who is doing X thing better

For every problem-based story, solicit solutions!



Solutions tip box

We won't share your email but may use it to confirm details with you.

jennifer.brandt@wearehearken.com [Switch account](#)

* Required

Email *

Your email

Help our tiny but fierce newsroom expand our capacity by telling us what we don't know. What existing organizations, people or programs do you know about in our community (or another community) that are trying to solve this problem? The more detail you can offer the better! Thank you for your support.

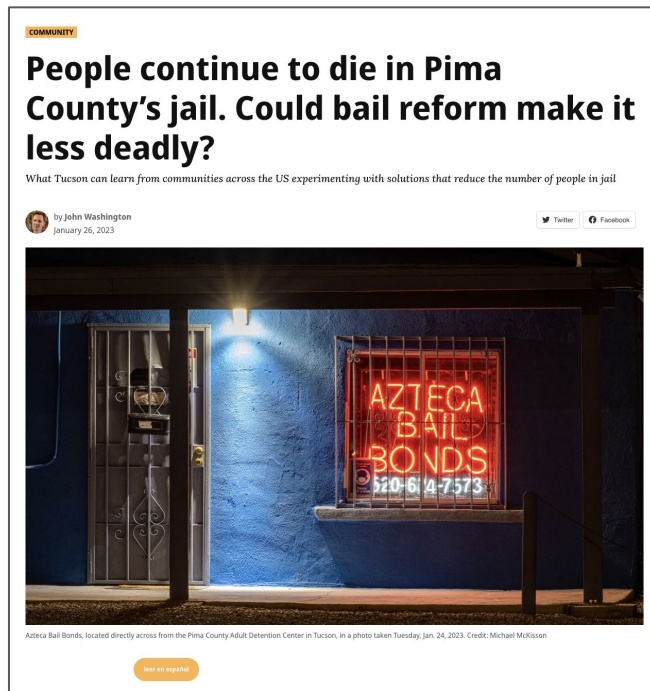
Your answer

Questions unanswered

The Pima Regional Critical Incident Team, a multi-agency team of investigators from law enforcement agencies throughout Pima County, is tasked with looking into serious use-of-force incidents, such as when someone dies or is injured during contact with law enforcement.

Nanos explained the importance of the regional investigative team that was created after the national civil unrest in 2020, following Minneapolis police officers murdering George Floyd.

<https://azluminaria.org/2022/11/28/how-pima-county-jail-deaths-are-part-of-a-grim-pattern/>



For every problem-based story, solicit solutions!

ESSAY | GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

WHYY sent a reporter to listen to communities impacted by gun violence. Here's what we heard



By [Sammy Caiola](#) · Updated Jun. 20, 2022 9:10 am



Working on a solution to gun violence? Share it with us.

What solutions to gun violence should WHYY News cover? What stories about the crisis should we know about?

0/250

Your contact info

Reporter Sammy Caiola may be in touch to discuss your experience.

Name

Email address

Zip code

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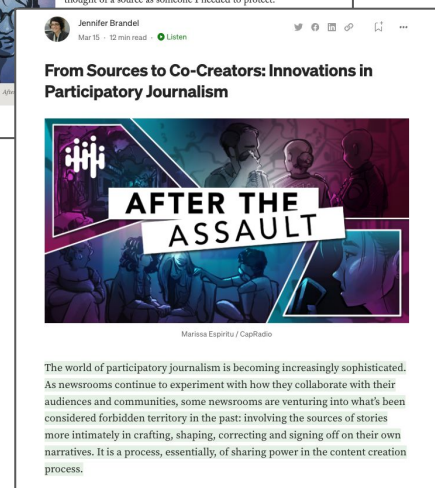
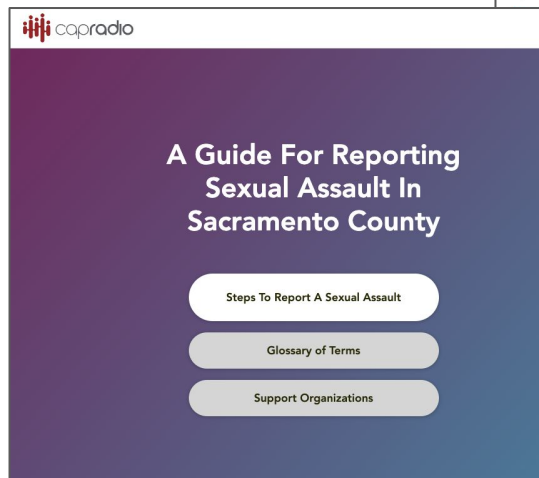
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Trauma Informed Reporting, Engagement & Solutions

- Check out 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 ≠ community engagement

— Ariel Zirulnick

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



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](#))

ACKNOWLEDGE PARTICIPANTS & PROCESS

Examples of involving / showcasing participants

More about our questioner



JJ Nnawuchi was born in Nigeria and attends Ida B. Wells Elementary School in Bronzeville. When he and his family moved to Chicago last year, he joined the Chicago Astronomical Society. There, he heard about the city's plan to install LED lights, which he feared would make the night sky even brighter.

When we told JJ about that the city is at least considering a less blue 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 12-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.

[From WBEZ Chicago](#)

Who asked the question?



[John Wenitong](#). (Supplied)

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 fulfil 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.

[From the ABC - Australia](#)

ENGAGEMENT IS A SOLUTION!

In closing

The more you 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!

How to Introduce Engagement Efforts to Your Newsroom

What it actually takes for your newsroom to listen to your audience (aka the public)

By Jennifer Brandel, co-founder of Hearken

If you're looking for quick technology fixes to "growth hack" your audience and blow up your engagement metrics, we'll save you time: this is not for you. If instead you're looking to create culture change that sticks in your newsroom and to improve your process in ways that lead to legitimate audience growth and more relevant content, welcome.

It's no surprise that journalism struggles to create positive, two-way relationships with audiences, because until recently, it hasn't been required to be good at it. But times have changed. These days, not listening to and responding to your audience means your newsroom risks irrelevance, which leads to drops in audience, trust, content consumption, and revenue. In the worst case scenario, irrelevance means having to turn the lights off. A lot of newsrooms are having to turn their lights off.

We're not going to sugarcoat this: Getting into the healthy habits that build meaningful relationships with

audiences is as hard as building healthy habits in other areas of life. There's no magic pill, no quick fix, no shortcut, no game-changing widget or app. It takes intention, practice, experimentation, buy-in, incentive structures, consistency, and — most of all — time.

We know this because we've done the work of building meaningful relationships with audiences ourselves, and have been working with more than 100 newsrooms worldwide to do the work, too.

Not every newsroom has what it takes. The good news: it doesn't require a big staff or deep pockets. Hearken works with outlets as small as 2 full-timers, and they're doing incredible audience-first work. Having what it takes means creating the right conditions for audience engagement work to take root, grow and thrive.

The following guide outlines the major elements that contribute to a newsroom's readiness for and success with engagement.

INSIDE: 4 EXERCISES AND 10 STEPS TO HELP YOU GET YOUR NEWSROOM MOVING

 **HEARKEN**

We are here to support listening, engagement & solutions!

Engagement Training, Coaching, Technology
info@wearehearken.com

Solutions Journalism Questions:
angela@solutionsjournalism.org