

Learning to Listen: Building a culture of engagement in newsrooms

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**Community
Listening &
Engagement
Fund**

PRODUCED BY

Jessica Clark,
Katie Donnelly,
and Michelle Polyak of
Dot Connector Studio

RESEARCH SUPPORT

Hannah Eaves, Multiply Bureau



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the News Integrity Initiative, the Democracy Fund and the Knight Foundation, **CLEF: The Community Listening and Engagement Fund** is a fund designed to “help news organizations better listen to, engage, and produce more relevant and differentiated content for the public they serve by using models, tools, and consulting designed for this purpose.”

The \$650,000 fund includes contributions from these foundations to support adoption of audience engagement and newsroom transparency services, including **Hearken**, **GroundSource**, **the Listening Post Collective**, **Document-Cloud/MuckRock**, and **the Coral Project’s “Talk.”** Ideally, the integration of these audience-focused services will ultimately lead to more engaged audiences, more informed storytelling, and deeper relationships between newsrooms and communities. In turn, this will lead to revenue: subscribers and members, grants from foundations, and sales of event tickets or associated merchandise.

Philadelphia-based media strategy firm Dot Connector Studio consulted with the Lenfest Institute to evaluate

CLEF and examine how this initiative is changing relationships between newsrooms and audiences. We conducted this research by interviewing funders, service providers, and staff members responsible for audience engagement in newsrooms that were part of the CLEF’s Cohort One and Cohort Two, which used either/both Hearken and GroundSource services. We also reviewed grant reports, scanned related literature, and participated in a convening of grantees.

Our research found that Hearken and GroundSource can both be used effectively to deepen community engagement, open up relationships with new audience members, and shape editorial coverage, if managed by motivated staff members in newsrooms with ample support from leadership and enough time to employ the services well. However, these experiments with engaged journalism services are taking place within a broader journalism sector that is in crisis, with significant issues of capacity, budget shortfalls, and staff turnover. Funders are playing a key role in shaping this engaged journalism ecosystem, which is still emerging.

Insights at a glance for newsrooms

1. Audience engagement tools work—if you work them.

Many CLEF newsrooms reported increased levels of engagement around new reporting avenues, as well as the chance to deepen use of existing content. However, this took consistent effort and a well-crafted ask—especially when finding meaningful ways to reach out to underserved audiences.

2. Success factors include a receptive newsroom culture, leadership buy-in, and a dedicated staff member.

Not all reporters or editors in the CLEF newsrooms were keen to pivot to engaged journalism strategies, but many reported that even the exercise of focusing on audience engagement led to an internal shift in thinking for their staff. Successful newsrooms often had “engagement superstars,” who not only have support to

lead such efforts internally, but are also vitally involved in the national conversation about engaged journalism.

3. Engaging audiences takes significant time and capacity.

Newsrooms found that onboarding the tools, dealing with technical hurdles, and crafting successful strategies was more time-consuming than they anticipated. Personnel changes and lack of resources in an industry in flux also posed challenges. They requested more resources on best practices in creating workflows, successful use cases, impact measurement, and tying engagement to revenue.

This report examines CLEF’s first two cohorts of newsrooms and how they used Hearken and GroundSource

Newsrooms are struggling to find capacity to experiment, but these services can help to engage audiences

Insights at a glance for funders

1. Funders are playing a central role in shaping the engaged journalism field, which is now at a tipping point.

Through collaborating with one another, amplifying successful efforts, bolstering field-building, and incubating innovation, foundations have been central to sustaining engaged journalism, often in nonprofit newsrooms. Now, the field is at a vulnerable moment where it is being tested in the marketplace. Mission-driven goals and foundation timelines do not always mesh smoothly with the realities of running either a service business or a newsroom. This can cause friction.

2. Adoption of new tools and services is neither linear nor rapid.

Hearken and GroundSource were enthused and challenged by the influx of new users. The process of quickly bringing the CLEF newsrooms on board forced

them to take a hard look at their services, technical infrastructure, revenue models, and assumptions about use cases. Both made mid-course corrections to improve services in the long run, but posed disruptions to existing clients. Newsrooms also are dealing with their own business challenges. This means a simple tally of return customers will not tell the full story of this initiative, and outcomes might not be clear immediately.

3. Collecting meaningful metrics takes time and expertise.

It is difficult for grantees to devote resources to metrics collection given the shoestring budgets of many newsrooms, and the proliferation of different dashboards and proprietary data collection systems. Funders should consider supporting these efforts directly if they seek more rigorous evidence about the role that engaged journalism plays in strengthening audience relationships and generating revenue.

OVERVIEW

Given the current national crisis in trust and business models for journalism, many newsrooms now recognize the need for increased transparency and community connection. Through the practice of what is increasingly being called “engaged journalism,” news producers are finding new ways to bolster audience trust and buy-in, consulting with readers and listeners throughout the entire reporting process. Foundations have played a major role in supporting engaged journalism efforts.

This analysis takes a closer look at one such investment: **CLEF: The Community Listening and Engagement Fund**. Funded by the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the News Integrity Initiative (NII), the Democracy Fund, and the Knight Foundation, CLEF is a “fund to help news organizations better listen to, engage and produce more relevant and differentiated content for the public they

serve by using models, tools and consulting designed for this purpose.”

Launched in January 2018, the \$650,000 fund supports adoption of audience engagement and newsroom transparency tools and services, including Hearken, GroundSource, the Listening Post Collective, Document-Cloud/MuckRock, and the Coral Project’s “Talk.” Each of these purpose-driven services has been developed over the course of many years with support from foundations, donors, and public dollars. Now, they are adapting to the marketplace in different ways—finding investors and paying customers, reconsidering their platforms and business models, and evolving in tandem with the larger field of journalism.

In part, CLEF was designed to give these organizations more runway to work with clients, refine their offerings, and learn by

CLEF supported the use of Hearken and GroundSource by newsrooms and gave these services new clients

doing. Primarily, however, CLEF connects news organizations to these tools and services through subsidies to use them—plus associated consulting assistance from the providers to ensure that the services are integrated successfully within their newsrooms.

Ideally, the integration of audience-facing tools and services will lead to more engaged communities, more informed storytelling, and deeper, more trusting relationships. In some cases, news outlets are even reconceptualizing their role in communities altogether—putting service first and joining libraries, universities, and other local institutions in convening constituents both offline and online around pressing civic issues. In turn, the hope is that this will lead to revenue: subscribers and members, grants from foundations, sales of tickets and merchandise, and more.

CLEF fills in an important gap in philanthropic support for new forms of journalism. While

journalists are often encouraged to become entrepreneurs and develop innovative new ways to connect with audiences, there is a gap in dollars for adoption of new tools and services. This can be frustrating to grantmakers, who spend years supporting development only to see promising services fail to thrive. What's more, because foundations tend to support nonprofit outlets and organizations, for-profit newsrooms and service providers are often left out of the puzzle. CLEF subsidizes the cost of using the services by way of the newsrooms and then support flows to the service providers. In turn, the service providers have not only more income but a new cohort of users to help refine their offerings.

Has this happened?

In the first half of 2019, Philadelphia-based media strategy firm Dot Connector Studio worked with the Lenfest Institute for Journalism to evaluate the first year of the CLEF

Hypothesis:
Engaging
audiences
deepens
storytelling and
leads to more
loyalty, and in
turn to revenue

We gathered data through May 2019 via interviews, a convening of newsrooms, grant reports, and desk research

initiative. Our initial learning questions were:

- How are these services changing relationships between newsrooms and users?
- Is working with these services generating more engagement?
- How are these services changing news content?
- Are they helping the outlets to generate more revenue?

We explored these questions through a combination of interview and survey data, reviewing grant reports, and participating in cohort meetings. We took a developmental evaluation approach, which is well-suited to complex, experimental projects with multiple participants and factors. Much like engaged journalism itself, developmental evaluation takes into account the perspectives of the subjects and evolves in dialogue and participation with them, suggesting areas for further learning.

Not all of the grantees had finished reporting by May 2019, when we completed this research. As a result, we were unable to cleanly compare to what extent these tools and services are helping news outlets generate revenue. However, we were able to identify key insights based on this initial research.

HOW HEARKEN & GROUNDSOURCE WORK



HEARKEN

In the first two cohorts, CLEF subsidized the cost of using Hearken and GroundSource and, in some cases, the use of both services for newsrooms. Participating newsrooms received a grant to cover between 25 and 85 percent of the first-year costs of using either or both services. The average first-year cost of Hearken or GroundSource is \$8,500. Grants ranged from about \$2,000 to more than \$16,400, and were determined based on a number of criteria including newsroom size, need, and plans for using the services.

How does Hearken work?

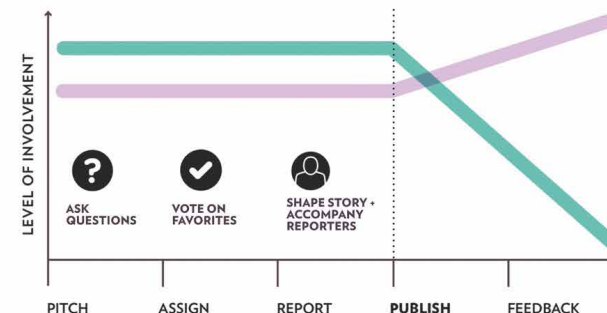
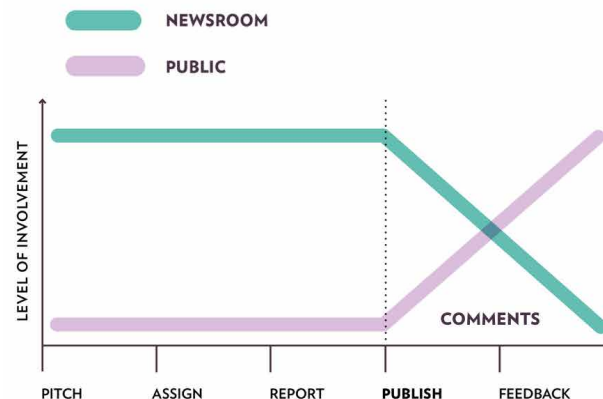
Hearken is designed to open up the reporting process and encourage audience members to have a say in story selection. It is an

annual subscription service that provides newsrooms with expert training, ongoing consulting, a proprietary Engagement Management System (EMS) that generates data reports, and membership in a community of best practices for creating engaging communities through journalism.

Newsrooms use Hearken's EMS to create embeddable modules that are inserted at the bottom or sidebar of a digital story. These allow readers to ask questions about a particular series, topic, or community concern. The questions are intended to serve as prompts for stories. Once questions are submitted, newsrooms can create voting rounds, in which they ask audiences which question is most fruitful to pursue for further coverage. Newsrooms can connect further with audience members by bringing them along to participate in the reporting process—

**CLEF subsidized
between 25
and 85 percent
of the first-year
costs**

Hearken opens up newsrooms by inviting audience members to weigh in on story ideas and take part in reporting



Hearken's approach to people-powered journalism.

for example, by conducting interviews with sources or reporting on community events. The embeds include checkboxes for audience members to subscribe to email updates.

A Hearken consultant partners with each newsroom to strategize on creating articles that reflect audience interest. Jennifer Brandel, co-founder and CEO, calls this “public-powered journalism.”

During the onboarding period, the engagement consultant disseminates overview

guides for Hearken processes, administers technical and reporter training calls, and defines who has ownership of the project within the newsroom. As newsrooms deploy embeds inside their stories, the engagement consultant coaches the project lead on what to do with audience responses, and which stories to further pursue. As clients of Hearken, newsrooms are included in a Hearken-administered Slack channel, as well as an expansive knowledge base with how-to guides, case studies, and general advice. About two months before the end of their

Hearken embed from Marfa Public Radio's "West Texas Wonders."

Ask here.

What have you always wondered about West Texas, the region or its people that you'd like us to investigate?

0/200

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

Name

Email address

Zip Code

Sign me up for updates from KRTS & KXWT!
 Please don't publish my name

Submit

subscription, newsrooms receive a progress report from the engagement consultant.

How does GroundSource work?

GroundSource invites audience members into the reporting and sourcing process by connecting with them via mobile phone and giving reporters tools for managing, ana-

lyzing, and advancing these conversations. Newsroom staff directly interact with audiences via SMS texting powered by GroundSource. The clear strength of the platform is the ability to build lasting, intimate, one-on-one relationships with users already accustomed to communicating via SMS. It is also a useful service for connecting with audience members who might have limited internet access. Audience interactions are initiated at events sponsored by a newsroom, during call-outs on air, or in articles online.



GroundSource does not text participants directly; it is built on top of another platform called Twilio for sending and receiving text messages. As a result, newsrooms can use GroundSource's content management system (CMS) to build and manage source lists, cultivate conversations with audience members, activate people with creative call-outs

GroundSource helps engage audiences via SMS and offers a backend for managing content and relationships

CLEF prompted
Hearken and
GroundSource to
beef up services
and respond to
newsroom needs

The screenshot displays the GroundSource backend CMS interface. At the top, there are navigation links for Home, Feed (with a notification icon), Workspace, and Sources. The user profile for Jessica Clark is shown in the top right. Below the navigation, there are three performance cards: Messages (Current: 1 messages exchanged, Goal: 2000), Relationships (Current: 1 sources engaged, Goal: 100), and Inbound Rate (100%, Proportion of messages inbound). A filters sidebar on the left includes sections for Search by Date, Search by Tag (with a search box containing 'dcs'), and Search by Phone Number. The main content area shows a message from Michelle Polyak and Jessica Clark, with a search box containing 'DCS' and a list of actions: Delete Response, Publish, Disable Source, Reply, Chat log, and View or edit source +1 336-749-1690. A green 'Support' button is located in the bottom right corner.

An example of GroundSource's backend CMS

at events or through stories, deepen one-on-one relationships, and build responsive services that can be monitored through GroundSource's dashboard and exportable data.

GroundSource has myriad use cases for newsrooms, and was originally built based on the experience GroundSource CEO Andrew Haeg had working within a large

public radio station. But over time the GroundSource team has discovered that strapped newsrooms aren't able to make investments on the editorial side. The GroundSource team is now positioning the service as a loyalty and marketing service with journalistic benefits.

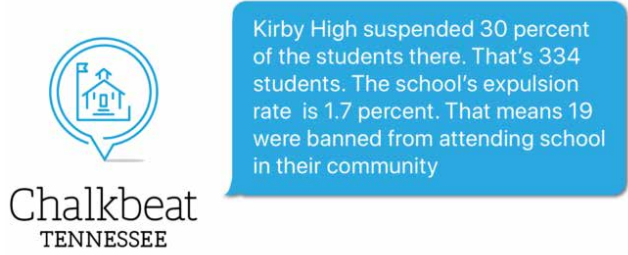
HOW CLEF NEWSROOMS USED HEARKEN & GROUND SOURCE

To better understand how newsrooms are using these services, we created the following brief profiles based on grant reports, interviews with newsroom staff, and presentations at the February 2019 grantee convening in Philadelphia.

Chalkbeat: *Chalkbeat*, a nonprofit news organization with multiple local publications focused on education, spent a year experimenting with how to best incorporate GroundSource—including listening tours and reader surveys—to reach more parents. The *Chalkbeat* team wanted to see what they could accomplish, and how the different newsrooms might pick it up, rather than setting artificial benchmarks for success at the outset.

Chalkbeat published two stories as part of a GroundSource project on student discipline in Tennessee. This GroundSource implemen-

tation aimed to make public data on schools more accessible to parents, including those in low-income areas. After publicizing the phone number provided by GroundSource, the team prompted parents to text “discipline” to the number and statistics for their district would be sent as a reply from *Chalkbeat*.



An example of the response folks received from *Chalkbeat's* discipline tool.

While this was successful, *Chalkbeat's* unique network of regional bureaus, along with staff transitions in key positions, made it difficult to drum up support and initiative to use GroundSource in each bureau, ex-

Chalkbeat used GroundSource to enable parents to obtain data on discipline policies in their school districts

The Colorado Independent used Hearken to involve readers in 2018 election coverage via its “Ask the Indy” series

plained Caroline Bauman, community editor of *Chalkbeat Tennessee*. Bauman ended up being the de facto engagement expert for the network, and suggested that what’s needed to make these services work is having a champion in the newsroom.

Chalkbeat successfully used GroundSource in Detroit to reach families as part of an investigation into enrollment instability in schools. This success can be attributed to working with local journalist Sarah Alvarez, who leads Outlier Media, as well as *Chalkbeat Detroit* reporter Koby Levin, both of whom are strong amplifiers of engaged journalism. If such champions weren’t involved in the process, Bauman suggested, reporters could feel that using GroundSource was just extra work, or perceive it as a “new kid on the block tool” that needed to fulfill grant expectations.

However, once *Chalkbeat* reporters at other bureaus saw how GroundSource fostered intimate connections between audience

members and the outlet, their desire to use it grew. In Chicago, *Chalkbeat* hosted a panel discussion on the future of schools in the city and the role of Chicago’s next mayor, using GroundSource to collect questions in real time and to follow up with attendees after the event. Bauman said that by creating intimate conversations between reporters and community members, “GroundSource helped us make large events feel really small.”

The Colorado Independent: The Colorado Independent, a nonprofit newsroom with a staff of six, started using Hearken in conjunction with the elections in fall 2018 with the goals of answering reader questions, stimulating engagement, and increasing transparency. The initial call for readers to participate was designed to shape 2018 election coverage by asking them what they wanted to know; readers responded with specific questions about candidates and issues. The paper published five “Ask the Indy” stories, which included the readers

in the reporting process. See, for example, [this article](#) about the details of a proposed school funding tax measure.

As the *Independent* continues to boost engagement, its metrics have moved from a focus on reach to one on collaboration, looking at measures beyond “time spent on page” to how deep readers went, and whether an article generated more questions. Managing Editor Tina Griego said that there are sparks of community engagement flying around—indicating that if the newsroom was consistent in the use of Hearken, it would catalyze building community among readers. Unfortunately, the *Independent’s* small staff size has left the newsroom with a capacity problem. The newsroom doesn’t have enough staff members to manage responding to questions and writing stories that promote a high level of dialogue.

The Dallas Morning News: *The Dallas Morning News* is a large daily newspaper cover-

ing the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas region. It has an existing infrastructure in place for audience development and works closely with the business team to collaborate on projects. Using GroundSource allowed for relationship-building between the newsroom and difficult-to-reach communities. For example, *Dallas Morning News* held community office hours in primarily Latinx neighborhoods to inform the “[Curious Texas](#)” series. The team also used GroundSource to answer questions in addition to those the team received through Hearken (however, use of Hearken was not funded through CLEF). At the end of each week, a weekly newsletter rounds up all of that week’s “Curious Texas” questions and answers. Some of the most popular “Curious Texas” articles have come out of questions received via text such as this one on [Dallas’ Bronco Bowl](#), an entertainment complex that once boasted one of the largest bowling alleys in the U.S. Other reader feedback centered on weather and upcoming local elections.

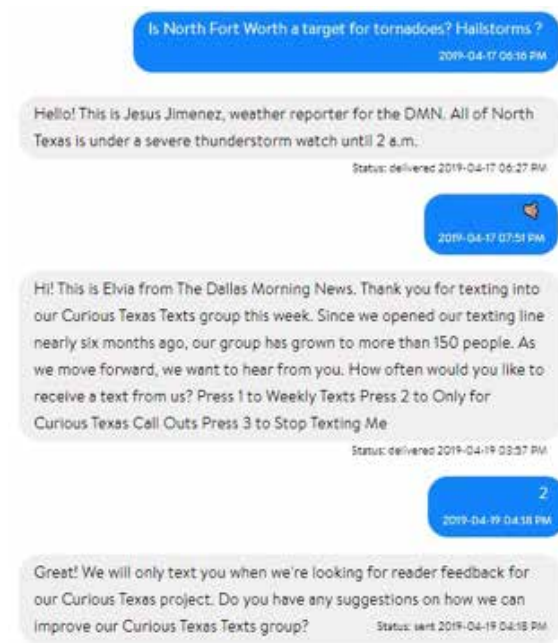
Dallas Morning News used GroundSource to build relationships in hard-to-reach communities

KPCC has gone all in and uses both Hearken and GroundSource

Elvia Limon, engagement editor, explained that experimentation with how to interact with audience members led to future successful interactions: “It’s been an ongoing changing project. We had an idea of how we would use GroundSource and then once we started executing it we kind of just adjusted it for what people were using it for.” Limon also conducted a survey with respondents asking how often they’d like to be texted. Initially, she sent messages out a few times a week but found that she had low volume of responses. Once she reviewed survey responses she found that people didn’t want to communicate that frequently, which caused her to shift the strategy around and ultimately led to less frequent—but deeper—conversations.

Southern California Public Radio (KPCC):

KPCC is a large public radio station that is devoted to deepening engagement with local communities under the helm of Director of Community Engagement, Ashley Alvarado. KPCC newsrooms had previously



Text exchange between an audience member and engagement editor Elvia Limon

used Hearken and GroundSource before applying to CLEF—thus allowing teams to work closely with the service providers in troubleshooting problems they experienced along the way. The CLEF grant funded the use of GroundSource.

One example of success in using both services was for KPCC’s [Human Voter Guide](#).

Reporters asked audience members to submit questions via Hearken and GroundSource. Then, through the continued use of GroundSource, audience members received text updates, reminders, and resources on the election. When voters found that they were not on the voting rolls, they felt comfortable enough texting Mary Plummer, the senior politics reporter who was operating the Human Voter Guide, to share their names and voting locations. This interaction led to **KPCC breaking the story that a printing error** led to thousands of names left off the voting rolls and miscommunication among poll workers on how to deal with provisional ballots.

Alvarado's higher ranking position inside the newsroom provides her with the power to include engaged journalism practices into each reporter's workflow. "One of the things that's really unique about our newsroom is that I'm a director, and that's something that's very intentional," she says. Because she works shoulder-to-shoulder with the manag-

ing editor, programming director, etc., staff can't dismiss engagement. "It's not optional, engaged journalism is an engine for our fiscal and journalistic future." She noted that KPCC's performance indicator for success is whether those who are engaged are both "loyal and local."

KPCC also hosted a successful event for a series on **Black Infant Mortality**. The engagement team set out a goal to have 50 attendees at their first event and they ended up having 200+ attendees, requiring an overflow room. A library in an area that was previously underserved by the station offered to partner with the station to serve as the venue for their second event in the series. By building a partnership with a community organization, KPCC hopes to grow connections with audience members in this region who otherwise are not avid KPCC listeners but are particularly interested in the series topic. When we spoke with them, the engagement team was planning to use GroundSource to

With audience tips via GroundSource, KPCC broke a story about how a printing error left thousands off of voters rolls

**Marfa Public
Radio went on a
road trip, using
Hearken to
engage listeners
for “West Texas
Wonders”**

create a texting hotline for African-American women of childbearing years following their second event in the series in late May.

One hurdle that Alvarado mentioned in regard to engagement services such as Hearken and GroundSource is the difficulty in connecting with other systems that the station uses. The systems themselves don't communicate with each other, so membership, engagement, and event campaigns may appear uncoordinated to their audiences. She said she sees systems integrations as the next phase of development for the field. “We want to smooth everything out so that people feel that we are aware of and grateful for their contributions, whether they are financial or not.”

Alvarado explained that the habits of reporters need to change so that GroundSource isn't simply used for project-based work. “We are trying to create all of the FOMO [fear of missing out] that we can,” she said. Instead,

she urges her staff to log on and use it every day for at least 15 minutes. “You have to build the habit both internally and externally,” she said. Moreover, through cementing engagement in their workflow, reporters can draw the connection between audience growth and building relationships with the community. The newsroom is moving towards having Hearken embeds for each reporter, underscoring the point that they are accessible to audience members. “We have a newsroom that now for the most part understands their role in driving membership. And that's something that you don't have anywhere,” she said.

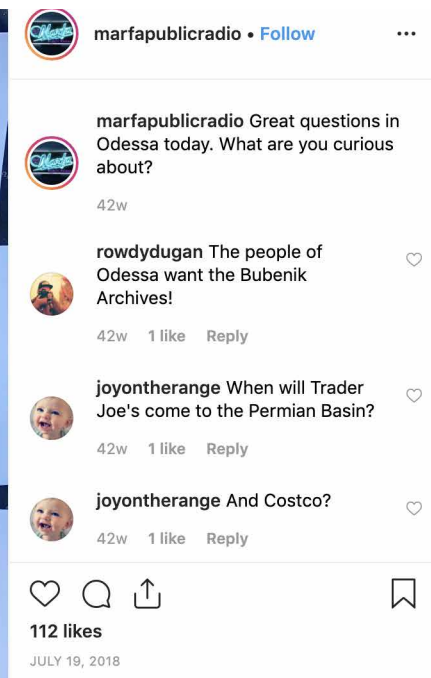
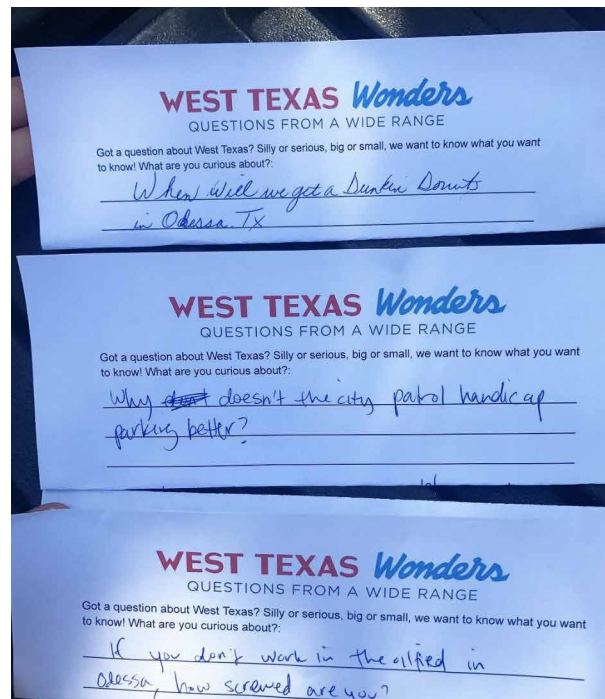
Marfa Public Radio: Marfa Public Radio, a small NPR affiliate that covers a vast regional area of West Texas, has used Hearken in a variety of ways across topic areas including energy, arts, and border issues. As many of the station's listeners are not on social media, the Marfa team went on a roadtrip of their coverage area, holding events to

pass out question slips at grocery stores and libraries. On the road, the team found out a lot about their listeners (the most-asked questions are about the **Marfa Lights**, a local folk phenomenon also known as “the ghost lights”). These questions flowed into a Hearken-powered initiative called “**West Texas Wonders**.” Over just a few months, the small team produced 11 stories using Hearken, experimenting with elements of levity; for example, by using Hearken on “The Rambling Boy,” a weekly Texas history segment by local historian Lonn Taylor and incorporating an impromptu tour of his home and writing space into the segment. The team also answered a fun question about a beloved 90-year-old DJ’s fitness routine.

The station commissioned a local artist to create a logo design for “West Texas Wonders,” which they printed on merchandise and sold on the road trip as well as at fundraisers. Elise Pepple, the station’s general manager, told us they wouldn’t have been

able to launch this initiative or experiment with engaged journalism had it not been for the CLEF grant. Their rural community is not population-dense, so local fundraisers can only support the station to a certain degree. Marfa Public Radio is also not typically supported by national foundations, so the CLEF grant is the first of its kind. The Marfa team hopes to gain momentum in fundraising by showing funders how Hearken enabled them

BELOW: Question slips collected from the road trip that the Marfa Public Radio team took to develop relationships with community members



Mother Jones
used Hearken to
invite readers to
submit examples
of disinformation
and offer
feedback on
breaking news

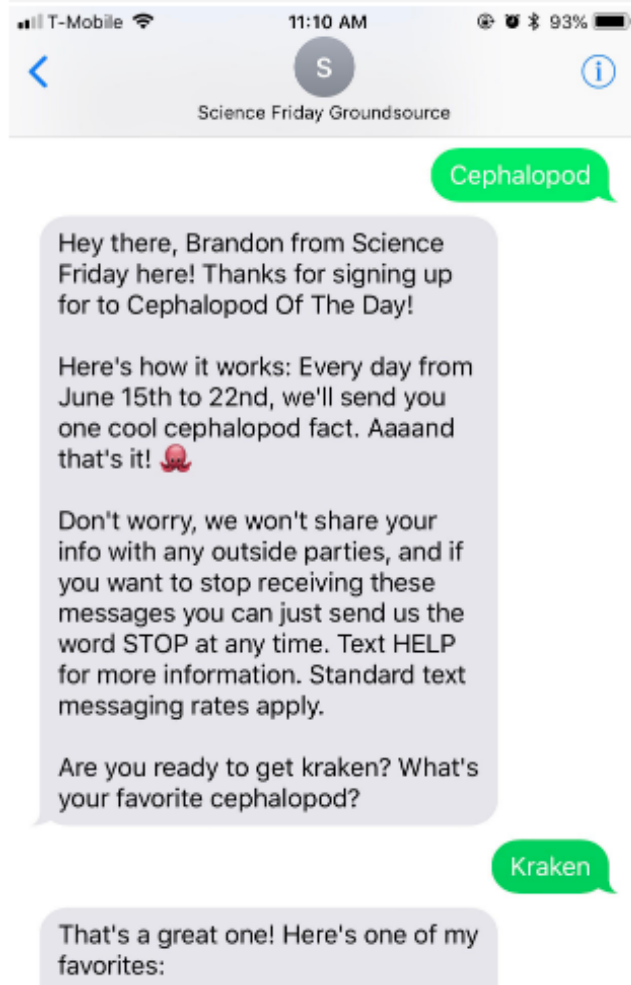
to connect with their audiences face-to-face and tell their stories. Pepple shared that in the spring membership drive, they also “sold merch with the West Texas Wonders logo, so we talked to members and funders to say, ‘Here’s a tool that we’re using to live the mission that you support. This is a great example of why you should support us.’ ”

Mother Jones: National progressive magazine *Mother Jones* aimed to help scale audience engagement, increase diversity in stories, and use audience callouts during breaking news. Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn, assistant editor for audience and breaking news, said, “Hearken helped us with scaling everything that we’ve worked on before and using the tech to look through responses to quickly spot themes more easily.”

For example, the team used Hearken for the digital version of its **cover story investigating public student loan forgiveness**. The team solicited reader questions online adjacent

to the piece, as well as on a **follow-up story** that included an interactive debt calculator. The *Mother Jones* team was able to feature more diverse perspectives by **asking readers about representation** and sharing responses from **black readers, transgender readers, and readers with disabilities**.

Mother Jones has also used Hearken as part of its disinformation beat, including an explainer that **asks readers to submit examples of disinformation from their own social media feeds**. In a breaking news example, the team was able to **gather deeply personal reactions** to Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court. Vongkiatkajorn explained, “We added the Hearken embed, along with a small block of text, to every major story we published about the hearing that day. Our CEO also linked to the call out in an email push to readers.” The visibility of the embed allowed them to collect a high volume of responses and publish the reactions in a timely manner.



Text exchange between audience member and digital managing editor, Brandon Echter, regarding the Cephalopod series

Science Friday: Science Friday—which produces a radio show, digital videos, and educational science resources—launched several ambitious projects during the grant period. “**Cephalopod of the Day**” was the first test case of GroundSource. During the annual Cephalopod week, one of its most popular series, Science Friday broadcast the GroundSource phone number on-air, on the website, and on social media. The Science Friday team asked audience members if they wanted to receive text messages with daily factoids about cephalopods. The team set a goal of 500 sign-ups and by the end of the series they received 800 sign-ups. The result was an overwhelming 60 percent higher responses than anticipated.

The “Dark Skies Challenge” was specifically created for a live broadcast event in Salt Lake City. The Science Friday team spent a week sending out daily tips for reducing light pollution to the 673 people who signed up to receive texts. This allowed

Science Friday used Ground-Source to offer users facts about cephalopods and participate in a “Dark Skies Challenge”

Science Friday
used Ground-
Source to build
individual
relationships
with audience
members

the Science Friday team to both provide its audience with useful information and better understand the audience through data collection. The team found that GroundSource is particularly useful for building prolonged, individualized relationships through the personal context of SMS texting. Ariel Zych, education director, explained, “We can drill down and have many individual discussions over a particular topic, which we weren’t able to do in other platforms.”

Science Friday also partnered with [Flu Near You](#), which tracks the spread of the flu across the country. This illuminated some of the limitations of the platform. This project had to be shifted due to concerns with how well GroundSource aligns with HIPAA privacy regulations. The project was able to include [a radio interview with experts from Flu Near You](#), but, rather than submit information directly through GroundSource, users were directed to the Flu Near You website. Ground-

Source served as a [vehicle for reminders](#). The GroundSource audience was particularly engaged in this project, with a full half of them [reporting symptoms to Flu Near You](#).

“The project changed our expectations for the scale, frequency, and duration of audience input,” said Zych. “It provided a proof-of-concept for supporting longer-running topic coverage as part of our journalistic strategy.” The Science Friday newsroom found that the service was more powerful and versatile than producers initially expected, but that the cost was prohibitive. In the team’s final reports to CLEF, Science Friday asked for additional funding to further explore the capabilities of the service.

Zych emphasized that “there’s a huge amount of untapped potential for Groundsource to be a tool for impact beyond dashboards.” She continued: “All of these interactions are about a learning objective...You can learn what kinds of information people want,

what stuck with them, in a way that's more accessible, less expensive, and more meaningful than what you're going to get with a stupid survey."

The Seattle Times: *The Seattle Times'* "Project Homeless" series used Hearken to collect questions as part of an initiative called "Ask Project Homeless." Before the CLEF grant, one part of the series had already encouraged readers to email a designated newsroom account their questions about solutions to homelessness. Working with Hearken allowed editors to formalize this process. Because of the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that many of the questions were research-intensive, Scott Greenstone, engagement editor, said he did not invite readers to come along for the reporting ride. However, the team invited everyone who'd asked a question or voted on a question to *The Seattle Times* building for coffee and conversation. Ninety-four people said yes, although only about half of them attend-

ed. Originally the *Times* team thought they would use GroundSource to create a council of homeless people, but discovered in practice that email or Facebook might be better for such a purpose due to the difficulty of maintaining consistent phone service. Instead, the *Times* team used GroundSource for another project where team members held text message conversations with audience members interested in the plight of endangered local orcas. In addition to sending links to orca-related stories, editors experimented with sending "reporter's notebook" details and behind-the-scenes photos from journalists out in the field.

The Seattle Times collected questions for its "Ask Project Homeless" project

CLEF NEWSROOM INSIGHTS

Newsrooms reported increased engagement as a result of participating in CLEF

As the examples above demonstrate, CLEF includes a rich cross-section of newsrooms—from large commercial newspaper networks, through thriving urban public media stations, all the way down to tiny nonprofit startups. Different locations, audiences, business structures, purposes, and needs make comparison across the board challenging. In addition, newsrooms are using the services in various ways, including engagement around existing projects, engagement around very specific topics, in-person community events, and asking for general input and feedback from audiences. That said, clear themes emerged in key areas: audience engagement, newsroom culture, challenges with the services, and newsroom needs.

Audience engagement

- Newsrooms generally reported increased levels of engagement and high

er-quality conversations with audiences. Nearly all of the grant reports we reviewed reported increased engagement. Lenfest’s internal analysis of CLEF from July 2018 found that engaging community members in reporting results in them engaging longer with newsrooms and more with public-powered stories, and spending a longer time on the page than average. Embedding these engagement services on their websites also led to an increase in newsletter subscribers. However, while some larger newsrooms were able to add dozens or more new subscribers, overall these conversion rates have been inconsistent. Newsrooms had a hard time linking increased engagement to increased revenue. (For more details, please see “Tying Engagement to Revenue” below.)

- Newsrooms also generally reported that

the services provided new avenues for reporters to include audience members earlier in the process to shape stories. More than a quarter of newsrooms in Cohort One who used Harken alone or Harken and GroundSource together reported new story selection processes based on audience participation. Particularly successful efforts focused on elections and local history.

- Newsrooms also reported that the services help give reporting a longer life, rather than disappearing in social media or in the churn of digital headlines. This allowed newsrooms to resurface and repackage older content that addresses community questions and needs. There were many reports of requests for explainers, or answers to basic questions that news organizations had addressed in previous coverage. This is a powerful lesson in meeting audiences where they are (rather than expecting them to sift through archives) and may be a way for

newsrooms to save money on constantly producing original content.

- While newsrooms have prioritized reaching new and diverse audiences, it's unclear from the data whether this has been successful. There are a few isolated reports of reaching new, underserved groups, but almost no hard numbers available.
- Moving to a community-centered approach does not happen overnight. Newsrooms need more time to build trust with their audiences, as well as more time to experiment with the best ways to use the services to build relationships.

Newsroom culture

- While there were challenges with implementing the services, especially at first, many newsrooms made mention of an internal shift in thinking around audience engagement that came out of the process of experimentation. Simply using the services—even *when they didn't*

Engagement can boost time spent with stories and archives, but building new relationships does not happen overnight

Using the services led to cultural shifts, but newsroom capacity remains an issue.

work as intended—led to cultural shifts in the newsroom. These are difficult to quantify, but we found many mentions of “culture shift,” “changing how we do business,” “new mindset,” “new approach to stories,” etc. in the reports. This is a critical point and something CLEF funders may consider probing more explicitly in future reports.

- Staff capacity is a major issue. A majority of the reports we reviewed mentioned challenges with not having enough staff capacity. Even the newsrooms who are growing rather than shrinking mentioned difficulties with staff turnover and leadership changes.
- Who’s working in the newsroom can also affect how the services are adopted, with some newsrooms reporting resistance from management or veteran journalists. Approximately a fifth of Cohort One newsrooms reported challenges with staff buy-in. Some of this related to staffing changes, some to seasoned journalists

resisting new ways of doing things, and some to the perception that using these services is too time-consuming. One team reported being feeling “drained by the constant experimentation.”

- Across the newsrooms, a key theme is the importance of “engagement superstars”—staff members who not only take on the responsibility of leading engagement internally, but are also vitally involved in the national conversation about engaged journalism. Fostering this type of talent inside of organizations and connecting them to the larger conversation will help to build the field of engaged journalism at large.

Challenges with the services

- In general, learning to use the services was much more time-consuming than most newsrooms expected. Newsrooms would benefit from examples of how to best integrate the services into existing workflows.

- Newsrooms reported needing more time for initial set-up (universities in particular had drawn-out issues with contracting), followed by experimentation and onboarding, then time to institute clear workflows and consistent processes for using these services within their organization.
- Workflow challenges differ depending on the newsroom type. Notably, investigative reporting outlets struggled with the tension between audience engagement and the need for secrecy while investigating, as well as the time it takes to formulate in-depth responses to complicated questions. Several newsrooms reported challenges with pacing and continued communication with audiences: how soon to answer questions, how to follow up with question-askers, etc.
- Some newsrooms found the cost of the services and related staffing prohibitive and were unclear as to whether they would be able to continue to use them

after the grant period ended. As one grantee put it, they “can afford either the tool or the dedicated staffing for it, but not both.” However, as of May 2019, seven of newsrooms have signed up to continue to use the services after the grant period ended.

- Newsrooms reported difficulties with using the services themselves, and reported the need for improved interfaces for both services.
- Newsrooms struggled to use both services at once and requested support for how to use the services together.

Newsroom needs

- The biggest request from grant reports was clear: Newsrooms want best practices around how other newsrooms are successfully using these services. This could take the form of case studies of successful projects, regular webinars and convenings, or a more formal connection between specific newsrooms.

Workflow challenges differ depending on the type of newsroom

**Newsrooms
want to know
how others use
these services,
how to tie them
to revenue, and
how to track
impact**

In general, newsrooms want more guidance, more examples of how other newsrooms successfully used the services, and examples of how to communicate with audiences.

- Newsrooms also want best practices around tracking impact, with nearly a quarter of Cohort One newsrooms specifically citing this challenge. This concern is especially apparent for smaller, under-resourced newsrooms that do not have the capacity to devote to tracking metrics.
- Newsrooms also need help in understanding how this engagement ties directly to increased membership and revenue. This relates to the issue of staff buy-in, as staff would be more likely to embrace the services if they could see packaged “results.”

TYING ENGAGEMENT TO REVENUE

Little data is currently available from CLEF participants' reports that connects use of these services with increased revenue or membership. The majority of newsrooms did not report seeing any evidence of increased revenue within the time frame of the CLEF initiative, but there were exceptions. One grantee reported: "The content that comes from our Hearken content absolutely converts to paying [subscribers]. We have both actual and anecdotal evidence."

Several respondents mentioned that the use of the services was appealing to funders and investors and several reported receiving related grants. One newsroom's investors found Hearken "intriguing," while another newsroom's direct public offering investors mentioned Hearken as part of the reason for their support. Another newsroom noted: "We are using data insights from our Ground-

Source campaigns to argue for additional support from major funders, and are providing our GroundSource communities with opportunities to donate."

Several organizations reported increased sponsorship, as well as revenue generated through events and merchandise.

Other respondents said they could see how using Hearken and Groundsource could eventually lead to revenue increases:

"It increased engagement with our podcast audience, which in turn likely increased membership [subscribers], or donations. It also increased engagement with members, which may have increased retention and recurring revenue."

"In reference to Hearken, we cannot make a direct link for subscriptions,

While some participants connected engagement to fundraising, the tie to revenue is still murky

Some newsrooms found that the services provide results that appeal to funders and members

although more interesting content means people will come back more often and have a better chance of hitting our paywall.”

“We haven’t been able to confirm a direct link between our use of GroundSource and our membership/ small donor program, but do believe it a valuable platform to be leveraged for engagement with our community in a way that supports our membership efforts.”

“I would say at this point it is not explicit, but it is having an impact. Our Hearken project is something people can point to as a project they are proud of that is produced locally . . . We do have people feel that this project is part of how we are serving them and motivates their membership.”

Others pointed out any increases in revenue needed to be weighed against the cost of the services and the staff time involved in learning and implementing them:

“We weren’t able to scale our work to reach a sellable opportunity. We did slightly grow non-paying subscribers, but the time invested outweighed the value of this subscriber acquisition channel.”

“[T]here is an opportunity cost. Would this money be better spent elsewhere, potentially on something that makes money as opposed to simply paying for itself?”

Some newsrooms were unable to provide information because of the disconnect between the newsroom side and the revenue side of their organizations. This is one of the areas in which grantees requested support, as they too want a clearer picture of how engaged journalism ties into increased revenue or membership.

IMPACT MEASUREMENT CHALLENGES

A lack of clarity on measuring revenue among CLEF grantees mirrors confusion across the larger journalism field. Questions about how to measure the impact of journalism go hand-in-hand with questions about how to attribute revenue to engagement experiments.

Often the business or fundraising departments don't talk to those working on the editorial side. Additionally, the software or services used to collect data might not connect. Some newsrooms use custom content management systems, while others use off-the-shelf solutions such as WordPress. Metrics tools range from the widely available Google Analytics to more expensive and complex services such as Parse.ly or Chartbeat. Making meaningful observations requires customizing metrics tools such

as Google Analytics so that they can track engagement stories as a subset of content, and then draw further conclusions about how those stories entice audience members to further support the outlets. This requires a level of technical expertise that some of the smaller newsrooms may not have.

Some more mission-driven newsrooms also track social impact outcomes—for example, *Chalkbeat* has its own solution, called Measures of Our Reporting's Influence (**MORI**), and some newsrooms use the Center for Investigative Reporting's **Impact Tracker**. However, often the outcomes of engagement projects fall somewhere between the hard numbers associated with digital reach and the hard news outcomes associated with investigative journalism. Instead, they happen somewhere in the middle of the “conversion

Methods for evaluating the social impact of engaged journalism are still a work in progress as well

Hearken and GroundSource are collecting data on the connections between engagement, conversion, and revenue

funnel,” where readers become sources, commenters, ambassadors, and fans before becoming members or customers.

Hearken and GroundSource are working to find ways to make the connections for customers between engagement, conversion, and revenue. In a 2018 post on Medium, Hearken founder Jennifer Brandel shared data showing that stories produced via Hearken outperform others in terms of reach and time spent with the pieces, and that news consumers engaged via Hearken become paying subscribers, members, and donors.

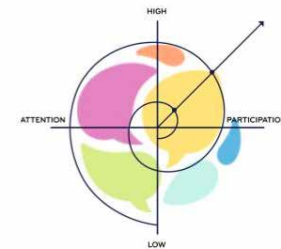
Making the business case for engaged journalism might not hinge on proof that such approaches produce direct revenue, but also that they save costs, create new efficiencies, and increase newsroom morale. Engaged journalism projects can attract more volunteers and partners to the table, raise visibility and goodwill, help reporters and editors debug relationships with problematic constitu-

encies, and offer reporters new creative and satisfying opportunities.

LOYALTY ISN'T TRANSACTIONAL...
the goal isn't to speed people
through a funnel



...IT'S RELATIONAL
it's about encouraging engagement & participation
over time



Here's a depiction of how GroundSource is rethinking its value proposition

THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES

Overall, in CLEF's first year, the creation of a collaborative funder coalition signaled a strong message of support to the field at large. Newsrooms noticed, and applied. This mission-driven fund provided validation from powerful stakeholders (as well as dollars), and consequently spurred momentum in the growth of the audience engagement services involved in the fund. Given the experimental nature of the fund, the fact that more people across the field now recognize the emerging practice of engaged journalism is cause for celebration.

However, as is to be expected, there were challenges with implementing a multi-level experiment with many moving parts. Of particular concern were challenges with timing, staff turnover, impact metrics collection, and the uncertainty of continued funding. This uncertainty affected not only the newsrooms

but those running the businesses providing engagement services. While the project on the whole has raised the profile of engaged journalism and the multiple tools and services available to help conduct, promote, and evaluate it, it's unclear how sustainable the effects will be, given the overall instability of the industry.

As another cohort comes on board, funders and newsrooms may wish to continue following these outcomes at the [Lenfest Institute for Journalism](#).

Support for engaged journalism is a work in progress, challenged by journalism's volatile economics

APPENDIX A: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further work is needed to understand how users interact with engaged journalism

With such a rich array of data, there are multiple avenues to continue to explore. This white paper is focused on qualitative evidence due to the time constraints involved with collecting, streamlining, cleaning, and analyzing numerical data across the many staggered projects.

However, with more resources, using existing reports, researchers could investigate:

- Do readers spend more time on stories that use Hearken or GroundSource?
- What percentage of new subscribers/donors interacted with Hearken or GroundSource stories, and did this increase over time?
- Do users who have engaged with Hearken or GroundSource content remain engaged?
- Are there connections between various

newsroom characteristics (budget, staff size, etc.) that correspond to higher levels of engagement?

Additionally, future research could use existing reports to compare variables across newsrooms (organization size, newsroom demographics, budget, etc.) to success with the services. Qualitative evidence suggests that well-resourced organizations are not necessarily more likely to have greater success with these services. In fact, one of the organizations most consistently reporting successful endeavors was Marfa Public Radio, which operates with a small staff and budget. Further research could explore whether there are any traits that appear to be linked to positive results. What organizational characteristics influenced this success? Perhaps smaller organizations are

more nimble or less likely to have resistance from entrenched staff? Perhaps specific locations are more amenable to this type of journalism? One pattern we identified is that newsroom leaders who are part of the larger national conversation about engaged journalism and news innovation make for more effective and creative ambassadors for these services in their newsrooms. Could cultivating such staff members make the difference? Further research is needed.

Should CLEF wish to more deeply examine relationships between analytic data and revenue, more quantitative metrics are required. Collecting additional metrics would allow researchers to examine whether users who interact through Hearken or GroundSource are more likely to convert to subscribers and to investigate whether those who have interacted with the services are generally more active or have a higher lifetime value than those who haven't. However, keeping in mind that some grantees

already find metrics collection burdensome, funders should consider the value of supporting these efforts directly.

Finally, one perspective has been largely left out of research to date. To truly understand how audiences are interacting and engaging with these projects, we would need to speak directly with audience members. Specific audience research, including interviews, surveys, and demographic tracking information could answer the question: How are these services changing relationships between newsrooms and users? More specifically, researchers could investigate whether users report trusting the outlets more, if they are more likely to become contributors or volunteers, and whether the outlet is attracting new audiences.

To truly understand how audiences are engaging with these projects, we need to speak directly with them

APPENDIX B: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Cohort One

Newsroom	Service Used	Newsroom Type
Better Government Association, Chicago, IL	Hearken & GroundSource	Topic-based
Bitch Media	GroundSource	Topic-based
Center for Public Integrity	Hearken	Topic-based
Chalkbeat	GroundSource	Topic-based
Christian Science Monitor	Hearken	National
Daily Nebraskan, University of Nebraska-Lincoln	Hearken	Student
Dallas Morning News	GroundSource	State
Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester	Hearken	Local
El Tímpano	GroundSource	Local
Illinois Public Media	Hearken & GroundSource	State
Kansas City PBS - KCPT	GroundSource	Local
KCBX, Inc., KCBX Central Coast Public Radio	Hearken	Local
KJZZ	Hearken	State
Marfa Public Radio	Hearken	Local
Mother Jones	Hearken	Topic-based
NUVO	GroundSource	Local
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	Hearken & GroundSource	Local

Newsroom	Service Used	Newsroom Type
Religion News Service	Hearken	Topic-based
Richland Source	Hearken	Local
Science Friday Initiative	GroundSource	Topic-based
Searchlight New Mexico	GroundSource	Topic-based
Seattle Times	Hearken & GroundSource	Local
Southern California Public Radio (KPCC)	GroundSource	Local
Spirited Media	Hearken	Local
Temple University, Klein College of Media and Communication	Hearken & GroundSource	Student
The Bellwether, Jefferson Center	GroundSource	Local
The Ferret	GroundSource	National
The Hechinger Report	Hearken & GroundSource	Topic-based
The Trace	Hearken & GroundSource	Topic-based
The Virginian-Pilot	Hearken	Local
Voice of San Diego	Hearken & GroundSource	Local
WFIU / WTIU News Team	Hearken	Local
WhereBy.Us	Hearken & GroundSource	Local
WUWM 89.7 FM - Milwaukee's NPR	GroundSource	Local

Cohort Two

Newsroom	Service Used	Newsroom Type
City Limits	GroundSource	Local
Ensia at the Institute on the Environment	Hearken & GroundSource	Topic-based
Iowa State Daily	Hearken	Student
Issue Media Group	GroundSource	National
Orb Media	GroundSource	National
Racine County Eye	GroundSource	Local
Resolve Philly	Hearken	Local
Sonoma West Publishers	Hearken	Local
The Chronicle	Hearken	Student
The Colorado Independent	Hearken	State
The Daily Tar Heel	GroundSource	Student
The Day	Hearken	Local
The Reading Eagle	Hearken	Local
WHYY	GroundSource	Local
WKSU	Hearken	Local
WWNO	GroundSource	Local

APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Read what's next
for Hearken in
founder Jennifer
Brandel's
"Hearken is
Evolving: Here's
How"

Theory and Research

- [The 32 Percent Project: How Citizens Define Trust and How Journalists Can Earn It](#), Lisa Heyamoto and Todd Milbourn, Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication
- [Building Engagement: Supporting the Practice of Relational Journalism](#), Regina G. Lawrence, Eric Gordon, Andrew DeVigal, Caroline Mellor and Jonathan Elbaz, Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication
- [Civic Journalism, Engaged Journalism: Tracing the Connections](#), Geneva Overholser, Democracy Fund
- [Communities of Practice: Lessons for the Journalism Field](#), Angelica Das and Jessica Clark, Democracy Fund
- [Editorial Innovation in News](#), David Caswell, BBC News Labs
- [The Effects of Journalistic Transparency on Credibility Assessments and Engagement Intentions](#), Alexander L. Curry and Natalie Jomini Stroud, *Journalism*
- [Engaged Journalism: Practices for Building Trust, Generating Revenue, and Fostering Civic Engagement](#), Lindsay Green-Barber and Eric Garcia McKinley, Impact Architects
- [Journalism for Democracy and Communities: A New Framework](#), Peggy Holman, Yve Susskind, Michelle Ferrier, Mike Fancher, and Stephen Silha, *Journalism That Matters*
- [Local News in a Digital World: Small-Market Newspapers in the Digital Age](#), Damian Radcliffe and Christopher Ali, Columbia University Academic Commons
- [More than Eyeballs: How Journalism Can Benefit from Audience Engagement](#), Emily Goligoski, *Global Investigative Journalism Network*

**Read what's
next for
GroundSource
in founder
Andrew Haeg's
"A Chrysalis
Moment for
GroundSource"**

- [Pathways to Engagement: Understanding How Newsrooms are Working with Communities](#), Angelica Das and Jessica Clark, Democracy Fund
- [Post Industrial Journalism: Adapting to the Present](#), Emily Bell, CW Anderson, and Clay Shirky, Tow Center for Digital Journalism at the Columbia Journalism School
- [Public Media 2.0: Dynamic and Engaged Publics](#), Jessica Clark and Pat Aufderheide, Center for Media & Social Impact at American University
- [Time to Step Away From the 'Bright, Shiny Things'? Towards a Sustainable Model of Journalism Innovation in an Era of Perpetual Change](#), Julie Posetti, Reuters Institute's Journalism Innovation Project
- [We Spoke to Hundreds of Independent News Supporters Over the Last year. This is Their Member Manifesto](#), Emily Goligoski, David van Zeggeren, Jessica Best, Gonzalo del Peon, and Leon Postma, Membership Puzzle Project

Case Studies and Guides

- [City Bureau's Community Engagement Guidelines](#), City Bureau
- [Directory of Engagement Experiments](#), Engaged Journalism Accelerator
- [Don't Just Engage. Organize!](#), News Voice Project, Free Press
- [Engaged Journalism Lab](#), Democracy Fund
- [Gather on Medium plus Gather Case Studies + Featured Projects](#)
- [Resources](#), Journalism That Matters
- [Year of Listening](#), News Integrity Initiative

Engagement Services Updates

- [Hearken is Evolving: Here's How](#), Jennifer Brandel, Hearken
- [A Chrysalis Moment for GroundSource](#), Andrew Haeg, GroundSource