HEARKEN–CURIOUS CITY

AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR "PUBLIC-POWERED" JOURNALISM

Local That Works: Public Radio Case Study No. 2

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HEARKEN
Your public's interest

public media futures
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LOCAL THAT WORKS

The premise of these four case studies, prepared for the Eastern Region Public Media PUBLIC RADIO SUPER-REGIONAL CONFERENCE (Oct. 25–27, 2016): stations need and want to be "more local." The evidence we have collected suggests they will succeed in doing so by filling gaps in local news coverage and playing a larger role in the daily life of their communities.

It is safe to assume that all stations would do more of this—except for the fact that "being local" takes a good deal of money and staff. In an era of declining tax support, rural and small-market stations are getting squeezed. Through no fault of their own, their long-term prospects are being eroded by a combination of forces, including the inherent financial limits of a small local audience and small local economies; increasing ease of access to national program material; and increasing costs associated with multiplatform service.

This is not a new problem. The "large/small" divide has permeated system politics. Meanwhile, the growing "capacity gap" between smaller and larger stations—in membership, staffing and digital tools—has been well documented by the PUBLIC MEDIA FUTURES FORUM.

If public broadcasting is to retain its NEAR-UNIVERSAL REACH, the system will have to develop ways to sustain the service of small-market, especially rural, stations, and find ways to empower them to be both sustainable and more local.

The LOCAL THAT WORKS project involved three elements. We were looking for locally managed activities with

(1) wide applicability across a range of small and large stations,
(2) repeatability—meaning a program, feature or engagement effort could be reapplied over and over with continuing value—and
(3) content or service output that could be delivered across several media platforms.

The case studies in this series look at local stations that meet these criteria. All have found ways to THRIVE AND CONNECT with their audiences in new and innovative ways despite trying market conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Built on a foundation laid by the CURIOUS CITY project at WBEZ-Chicago, HEARKEN provides an audience-driven news-reporting platform using digital tools and engagement strategies.

CURIOUS CITY emerged from an unusually powerful mix of individual initiative from founder Jennifer Brandel, and was supported by the rich culture of programming innovation nurtured by then WBEZ GM Torey Malatia, who played a guiding role in developing StoryCorps, *Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!* and *This American Life*. It is one of very few projects that have taken advantage of contemporary digital tools to put the "public" back in public media.

Through HEARKEN, listeners, viewers or readers propose news story leads, often in the form of questions about community and news topics. Audience members then rank and shape proposed topics.

How does the model compare with the traditional story cycle? The HEARKEN website illustrates the difference:
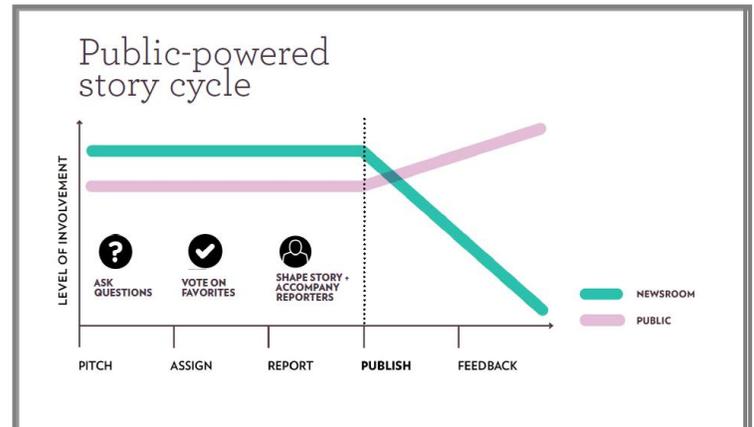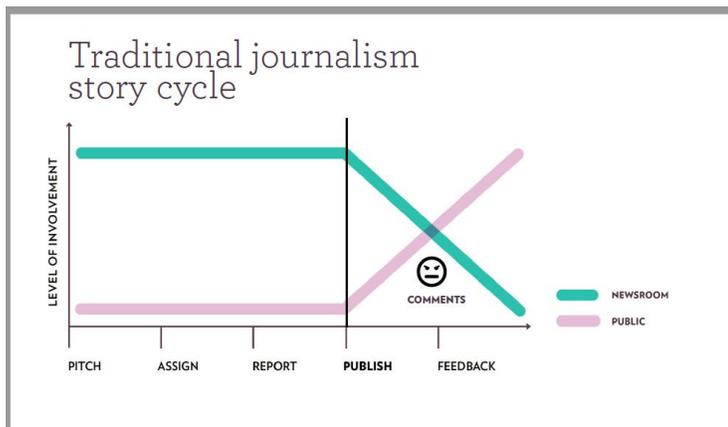
THE BACKSTORY

The interactive platform Hearken, Inc., a Chicago-based for-profit start-up founded in 2015, was developed by Jennifer Brandel, a senior producer at WBEZ-Chicago.

The pilot project for HEARKEN was CURIOUS CITY: Let's Get Answers, a Localore project funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and organized by the Association of Independents in Radio (AIR).

In early 2013, WBEZ became the base for CURIOUS CITY, which aimed to open up the WBEZ newsroom by soliciting questions from Chicagoans and then partnering the "winning" questioner with a reporter who would develop and produce the story. An interactive subsite on the WBEZ website allowed participants to follow investigations from initial proposed query to broadcast, web publishing and beyond.

Over the next 18 months, CURIOUS CITY became a fixture at WBEZ, producing some of the most-viewed story pages on the station's website and becoming a widely popular scheduled on-air feature, supported by a stream of podcasts.

This initial success confirmed the intuition of Brandel, who believed the model she was creating could have the potential to make an impact on newsrooms beyond the borders of WBEZ.

Others agreed. In late 2013, WYSO-FM, a small station in Yellow Springs, Ohio, became the first to launch their own version of the model, appropriately named WYSO Curious. Interest spread, and by the end of 2014, there were seven other public radio stations experimenting with their own versions of CURIOUS CITY, including NPR news powerhouse KQED in San Francisco.

Armed with this interest, Brandel went after new funding to take the model nationwide, securing $110,000 from AIR's New Enterprise Fund for StoryMakers, which was created to meet just this kind of need. The capital allowed Brandel to incorporate and launch her own company in early 2015 (originally named Curious Nation, later rebranded as HEARKEN).

The StoryMakers investment allowed Brandel to upgrade the capabilities of CURIOUS CITY and transform it into a software platform, which she now provides as the subscription-based HEARKEN. The company has meanwhile worked aggressively to improve the ease of use, attractiveness and functionality of its cloud-based software systems.

The HEARKEN publishing platform has five key components:

▶ A curiosity module helps the station's newsroom and journalists solicit a fresh stream of story ideas via audience questions. For example, KQED's "Bay Curious" application asks "What do you wonder about the Bay Area, its culture or people that you want KQED to investigate?" A simple form allows participants to fill in and submit their question, name and email address.
▶ A voting module allows newsrooms to curate the best questions and gives interested site visitors the opportunity to vote on, and thus determine, which story to report.

- An optional question display module showcases questions audience members submit via the curiosity module. Newsrooms can determine if the module shows all questions, or a selection (e.g., only answered questions, only questions about a topic, etc.)
- An engagement management system ties these public-facing tools together in one place. The system enables the station to organize, manage and assign questions to reporters, as well as surface trends within the data and send email addresses to a station's customer relationship management (CRM) system to sign up for newsletters or become members.

In late 2016, HEARKEN will introduce an interactive reporter's notebook, a tool to show work in progress by journalists as they report and further engage communities. It is also optimized to collect email addresses that connect to a station's CRM.

HEARKEN subscriptions include one-on-one coaching from experienced journalists who help newsrooms design and implement successful engagement strategies. Coaches send out quarterly reports and connect HEARKEN journalists to one another via a community of best practices.

Once in place, HEARKEN generally becomes a standard component of daily newsroom operations, with decisions about presentation format, publishing date and other considerations being made just as they would be for more traditional stories.

Why wouldn't stations just do this for themselves? In an interview, Brandel explains the value of her service this way:

> *On the digital front, we're trying to provide a scalable and easy solution—easier than building it yourself. On the strategy front, we're hoping to add value in the supporting and philosophical materials we have collected, as well as the community of best practices we're building.*

Client experience has expanded the types of journalistic settings where the HEARKEN method can be applied. For example, HEARKEN was adopted by the Center for Investigative Journalism to generate story ideas focused on the California drought and mass shootings.

IMPACT AND REACH

In the 20 months since its launch, HEARKEN has grown steadily. As of September 2016, the platform has more than 50 subscription-paying customers worldwide, including 30 U.S. public broadcasting stations and the BBC, which purchased five subscriptions.

The impact of Curious City–Hearken includes:

- ► Data from WBEZ-Chicago show that, in 2014, Curious City stories—which comprised just 2 percent of the online news stories at WBEZ.org—formed 41 percent of the top 50 stories of the year.
- ► Other evidence comes from KQED San Francisco, which found that the "audience-powered" series Bay Curious outperformed the average online KQED news story by a factor of 11 to 15 times (measured by pageviews).
- ► Michigan Radio took home its first regional Edward R. Murrow award in 2106 for investigative journalism generated by Hearken. In this case, a citizen asked a question about a long-forgotten pipeline under Lake Michigan, which led to six stories and a Murrow award for reporting on the state of the pipeline.
- ► Hearken is a "hot" topic in the world of media. Brandel has been interviewed multiple times, with published stories in *Current*, *The Washington Post*, Politico and *Fast Company*, among others. She was awarded the 2016 Media Changemaker Prize from the Center for Collaborative Journalism, and Hearken took home the prize for Best Bootstrap Company at South by Southwest in 2016.

COLLABORATION STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONAL MODEL

Hearken, Inc., a Delaware-chartered C corporation, has attracted outside investors, who as of September 2016 have put up more than $700,000 to support its growth. Brandel has structured these investments to maintain control as majority corporate shareholder.

According to Brandel, Hearken's modules and engagement management system can usually be installed and set up in a few hours. Ongoing support resources depend explicitly on the frequency and depth of the stories a station wants to carry, which vary from newsroom to newsroom. Some stations use Hearken for one story per month, while others generate weekly or even more frequent stories. The license fee for the current platform runs about $400 per month for any size station.

WBEZ provides the highest staffing, with three FTEs assigned to Curious City. Other newsrooms have reporters spend 10–20 percent of their time reporting stories in this model.

One possible barrier to use is the need for adequate newsroom and support staffing. While some stations appear to be using Hearken as an add-on to existing newsroom story-generating systems, the two most successful examples come from large-market stations. Few stations can apply three FTEs, as we see at WBEZ; still, lower levels of staffing, as at WYSO, have proved to be sufficient.

Unique Features

HEARKEN may have revenue-related benefits. The interactive platform is designed for email lead generation, which encourages interacting audience members to become supporters of their local newsroom. A study at WBEZ in 2014 showed that, of the thousands of email addresses collected by CURIOUS CITY, 56 percent were not otherwise in WBEZ's membership system. HEARKEN partner WFDD in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, found all of their "Carolina Curious" participants became new members or increased their membership after participating in the HEARKEN process.

HEARKEN is also designed with space to insert digital underwriting, and public media partners have secured grant funding and local underwriters alongside this technology.

Key Lessons

- ▶ HEARKEN's ease of implementation appears to be a significant benefit. Several stations have taken steps to develop their own version of CURIOUS CITY, but those projects require a substantial investment in planning, website and software design, and testing. In our short review, we found that stations looking to replicate the CURIOUS CITY model using their own self-developed applications (principally built using Google Docs) had more challenges than those implementing the fully structured HEARKEN platform. As a result, many of the stations with self-developed systems either already have or are now planning to move over to HEARKEN.
- ▶ In our study "Collaborations that Worked," developed for the Public Media Business Association, we found that (a) every major innovation we studied could be partly explained by the presence of strong leadership, and (b) collaborations were generally facilitated or enabled by an outside funder providing working capital or reducing the financial risk of change. CURIOUS CITY is clearly an example of both. CURIOUS CITY emerged as a "natural" result of founder Brandel's individual efforts, supported by strong leadership at WBEZ. In addition, CPB/AIR Localore funding provided the seed money to launch the initial effort, and, later, CPB/AIR funds allowed for the development of the full-featured platform.
- ▶ We view HEARKEN as one of the very few projects that have taken advantage of contemporary digital media to put the public back in public media. In an age where many other public institutions are transforming to invite more bottom-up participation, the HEARKEN model stands out as replicable methodology to encourage active, constructive local engagement that supports both the editorial process in the newsroom and the business goals of stations.