

Bringing the Community to Journalism: A Comparative Analysis of Hearken-driven and Traditional News at Four NPR Stations

Mark Poepfel* & Jennifer Cox†

Hearken is a news engagement organization providing tools to help publications better provide community journalism by soliciting story ideas from citizens and taking them along on the reporting process. Hearken promises different types of stories that engage the community and boost revenues. This study examined all 2017 Hearken content from four U.S. public radio stations and compared it with a matching number of traditional content produced by those stations for a sample of 406 stories. This study revealed significant differences in the types of content produced and number and types of sources used, with Hearken content geared more toward local news on lifestyle/living topics reported using a high frequency of non-official sources. The results of this study show Hearken is fulfilling its community journalism objectives by engaging with citizens and providing valuable information that produces audience engagement.

Contemporary journalism is plagued with issues – falling revenues, online competition, audiences who cannot distinguish real from fake news. As a result, many newsrooms have looked to community journalism practices to engage, serve, and create relationships with audiences in hopes of generating revenue and building loyalty (Monson, 2017). Hearken is a news engagement organization providing tools to help organizations better provide community journalism. The company, comprised primarily of former radio news reporters, promotes a community journalism format that includes polling local citizens about stories they would like to see covered and working to include the individuals who ask questions in the reporting process. The goal is to bridge the role of source and journalist by having citizens question sources and also contribute as quoted sources in the story (How to, 2018). Hearken provides consulting services in order to share best practices learned from its network of providers (Hearken, 2018). In other words, it is more than a polling and engagement tracking platform. Hearken is a community of practice. Additionally, the company offers tools “to collect valuable data, emails

* Dr. Mark Poepfel is an associate professor at Southern Illinois University - Edwardsville.

† Dr. Jennifer Cox is an associate professor at Salisbury University.

and insights,” enabling journalists and news managers to measure impacts and judge the financial value of the “Engagement Management System (EMS)” (Hearken, 2018).

Hearken grows steadily at a time when news organizations are looking to build and track audience engagement. Companies with social media advertising experience have come to expect detailed data feedback on their ad buys, and nonprofit news organizations want to know whom they are reaching and how well they are engaging their audience as proof of performance for supporters (Lesniak, 2017). None of this is to suggest that “news engagement” is new or that Hearken offers a panacea. At heart, it is a straightforward engagement platform backed by consistent consulting help, a routinized approach to reporting the story, and the community of practice (Hearken, 2018).

Hearken aims to provide content that is different from the traditional publication; content that engages audiences and provides them the news they want to know and will tune in to hear. Although this is the organization’s stated mission, no study has determined whether Hearken is succeeding in its efforts to produce community-based content that differs from its traditional counterparts. The purpose of this study is to determine whether the content created using the Hearken model is different from that produced through traditional reporting processes. Researchers examined all Hearken content published in 2017 from four public radio stations located throughout the country – New Hampshire Public Radio, Chicago Public Radio, Milwaukee Public Radio, and Public Radio for Northern California. The content was compared with a sample of traditional content produced by those same stations to examine differences in story length, topic, geographic region, story type, and the use of sources.

Literature Review

“Engagement” is not a simple term to define in the scholarly sense. Community journalism scholars have been discussing versions of the concept for decades, long before it was a buzzword (Reader & Hatcher, 2012). Suffice it to say, niche newspapers in urban areas, small town newspapers, and local independent online news sites have a deep understanding about how to engage their audiences or they would not be able to survive (Reader & Hatcher, 2012). Lowrey (2012) notes that “neither big-city journalists nor many journalism scholars have tended to take community journalism seriously” (p. 87). One of the questions driving this research is whether Hearken is spreading community journalism practices in a tech-savvy and support-heavy kit. Hearken costs several thousand dollars per year to implement, and it partners with more than 100 newsrooms around the world. A \$650,000 round of grant funding awarded in 2018 (shared with related startup GroundSource) from journalism foundations, including the Lenfest Institute and the Knight Foundation, has helped to spread the Hearken gospel farther faster as the funds subsidize licensing costs (Bilton, 2018).

Support for Hearken comes amid efforts to improve journalist-audience relations at a time when it can be argued global liberal democracies need it most (Bilton, 2018). Even skeptical scholars who doubt that an audience engagement platform can help “save democracy” by bringing community journalism practices to major metropolitan and national news organizations might well consider it a meaningful line of inquiry to examine what kind of journalistic outcomes this platform can lead to. Its premise, promised practices and popularity demand study. One needs not be a “true believer” in communitarian journalism to note that a successful journalism services startup in the 2010s warrants attention and that the news stories produced ought to be analyzed, perhaps scrutinized. A reasonable question for community

journalism scholars to ask is how much of Hearken's success might be attributed to its adherence to core concepts and practices identified in this area of journalism scholarship years ago. The best follow-up question might then be: "In what ways does Hearken innovate beyond the tried-and-true?"

Hearken

Many journalism entrepreneurs attempt to enhance community engagement. Only one has created an audience engagement tool now used in more than 100 newsrooms (Simpson, 2018). Jennifer Brandel's Hearken is a platform for creating, managing, and measuring engaging news stories. She developed a version of the platform when working for WBEZ, Chicago's NPR affiliate, in 2012 (Tornoe, 2016). Brandel is now CEO of Hearken, LLC., which encapsulates consulting services, software access, installation and service, and the administration of a community of practice. Hearken has grown steadily since some of its early highlights wowed trade publications:

At KQED in San Francisco, Brandel says stories produced using Hearken's platform performed on average 11 times better than stories produced by the station's normal process (and [users spend] an average of 5.32 minutes engaged with those stories). At Detroit public radio station WDET, Brandel told Fast Company the first story produced by Hearken's platform broke their site's former page view record by more than double. And even though just two percent of the stories posted to WBEZ in 2014 were done through Hearken, Brandel says they made up nearly half of the top 50 stories of the year. (Tornoe, 2016)

Hearken defines what it provides newsrooms as follows: "Hearken partners receive expert training, consulting, our custom platform called the Engagement Management System (EMS), data reports and entry to our global community of best practices" (Hearken, 2018). Hearken is a community manager of community managers.

Déjà Vu for Communitarian Journalism?

The concept of engaging audience members in story selection is not new. Rosenberry and St. John (2009) documented more than a decade's worth of efforts in the public journalism, or communitarian journalism, movement in the 1980s and 1990s to bring local communities into the story selection process either to submit their own content or to contribute story ideas. The following may sound familiar to community journalism scholars:

The world is a fractured place. Community is broken. Journalists are in transition, trying to find their way in dealing with a fragmented society, a diverse audience. Among the experiments journalists and news organizations are undertaking is a re-examination of the traditional ideal of maintaining distance between themselves and the communities they serve. (Hodges, 1996, p. 133)

Black (1996) presents a dozen essays on the communitarian journalism movement and related debate that can be summed up like this: Supporters of the communitarian or public journalism

movement believe that social responsibility bordering on community advocacy can coexist in harmony with journalistic independence. Opponents vigorously do not:

Today, the communitarians sounding much like Rousseau, tell us that we need a more responsible media system, in which journalists, as members of the society, are willing to sacrifice their own freedom to the good of the whole...Increasingly, this rhetoric resembles what the old Soviet media managers meant when they talked of *freedom of the press*. (Merrill, 1996, p. 55)

But even Merrill (1989) recognized it was possible to be too strong an advocate for liberty to the detriment of journalistic responsibility. The question is not if there is a dynamic balance between freedom and responsibility in the journalistic field. The question is: When can a news organization be said to veer too far off in one direction or the other? Might the introduction of a community participation platform push a news organization into a position where it is beholden to its audience rather than responsible to it? Evidence of this might be seen in the sources journalists use in Hearken stories as opposed to “traditional” news pieces.

Journalists may not put up as much of a libertarian fight now as they did when organizations enjoyed strong profit margins. The wall between “church and state” in news organizations is weakening. Coddington (2015) calls it more of a “curtain” (p. 67). The push to enhance community engagement as a means to improve the bottom line by demonstrating good “audience metrics,” may serve as a force to encourage social responsibility journalism. Community engagement is no longer seen as something some newsrooms take seriously while other organizations use it for PR. Being better engaged is a financial necessity, as metrics examine not just what stories get clicks, but which types of news keep people sharing, commenting, and returning.

Trust and the Journalist’s Dialectic

The push with the communitarian journalism movement was to create trust and to reconnect with readers sick of detached, corporate media voices in order to improve the relationship between news organizations and their communities (Rosenberry & St. John, 2009). In its best practice, it was an effort to redefine the role of the news organization in the community to one where journalists opened up to learn what the community wanted to know about while still maintaining the responsibility that comes with journalistic authority. In scholarship the study of communitarian journalism was about conceptualizing a deep change where journalists shed some pretense and acknowledged their humanity—“the more accurate word or the actual human condition is neither dependence nor independence, but interdependence” (Hodges, 1996). This is a way of looking past the liberty versus social responsibility dialectic, which are both elements of the journalist’s agency. Instead, Hodges (1996) defined a sense of mutual dominion between audience members and journalists who allow themselves to be human.

It might seem like a bridge too far bring up the “human condition” in a manuscript about tools and networks for community journalism, but community journalism scholars do not shy away from the concept. Lauterer (2003) writes:

At their best, community newspapers satisfy a basic human craving that most big dailies can’t touch, no matter how large their budgets—and that is the affirmation

of the sense of community, a positive and intimate reflection of the sense of place, a stroke for our us-ness, our extended family-ness and our profound and interlocking connectedness, what Stanford's Nadine Cruz calls "the big WE." (p. 14)

Merrill (1996) blanches at the thought of swaying this far to the side of social responsibility, but community journalism scholars note, particularly when thinking of cyberspace communities, that it is interpersonal relationships not geography that make community (Reader & Hatcher, 2012, p. 95). Thus, the researchers looked for elements of humanity and interpersonal connectedness in Hearken story selection. It is important to note that the way Hearken works audience members submit ideas and vote on them, but in most cases journalists still have a say in which questions to select and how to frame the coverage. When multiple people ask the same question, the journalist selects whom to bring into the story. There can be layers of autonomy even in interpersonally connected, more "human" news collaborations.

Reciprocity

For Lewis et al. (2014), human interdependence is essential to the nature of the "community" side of community journalism: "Community journalism is thus about connectedness and embeddedness. It articulates and emphasizes the 'local' in both geographic and virtual forms of belonging, using its rootedness within a particular community to sustain and encourage forms of 'human connectivity' within that environment" (Robinson, 2013, p. 232). An essential role of journalists is to connect people within a geographical or online community in meaningful ways. "Meaningful" is subjective, but for Lewis et al. (2014), the watchword is "reciprocity," an exchange that is mutually beneficial (p. 229). Journalists are catalysts for meaning making in communities. Perhaps in an era of cable news propaganda the countervailing force is that of reciprocal, human-centered journalism defined not by two aspects of the journalist's nature but by the mutual dominion of journalist and individual audience member.

The Principles of Community Journalism

On a more pragmatic level, there are core principles of community journalism that may be injected into news processes that should be examined in sourcing and content of Hearken stories as opposed to "traditional" news. Ninety-seven percent of newspapers in the U.S. can be classified as community newspapers, according to Lauterer (2006). Dozens of additional local online news sites dot the country as community journalism goes digital. "Beyond its pervasiveness, scholars are clear about what differentiates community journalism from other types—an intense focus on the local" (St. John III, Johnson, and Nah, 2014, p. 198).

Community newspapers have an historical advocacy bent (Lauterer, 2006; Reader and Hatcher, 2012). Thus, community journalism is geographically ubiquitous, especially if one considers that urban niche news outlets and suburban news websites continue to serve their niches. When this concept of geographical community melds with the interpersonal nature of online community, a host of niche interest sites and email newsletters qualify as community news. This study will look for narrowly-focused coverage, topics of interest that are geographically and culturally bound as they pertain to this brief look at major topic areas in community journalism.

Local NPR

It is particularly important that this study focus on local NPR news. As nonprofit organizations relying on donor support, they are and have been community-oriented for decades. Their reason for existence is to provide socially responsible journalism. The separation of financial concerns and news reporting, to reference the proverbial “church and state” again, breaks down somewhat when the local anchor/announcer is the same one running the pledge drive a few times each year. With relatively small staffs, radio stations in general have served community niches since the rise of popular television (Reader & Hatcher, 2012, p. 35-36).

All radio is community radio, and although not all NPR content is local, of course, the local coverage that one does find can be expected to focus on community if not to advocate the way other community news outlets might. Much community journalism research is newspaper and online news research. By looking at the web archives of local NPR affiliates, the researchers intended to study reporting from news outlets that did not have so far to go, so to speak, to buy into such a community-oriented product. Should the content differ in NPR coverage between their regular reporting and Hearken stories, it might make the case that Hearken content is even more robustly community focused than one might first imagine.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do *news stories* produced using the Hearken model, which incorporates citizens into the news process, compare with those produced exclusively by newsroom journalists?

RQ2: How do the *sources* used in news stories produced using the Hearken model, which incorporates citizens into the news process, compare with those produced exclusively by newsroom journalists?

Method

Hearken content aired on 38 U.S. radio stations in 2017, ranging from one to a high of 61 news stories. Four stations containing the highest frequency of Hearken stories during 2017 were selected for this study. New Hampshire Public Radio (NHPR) aired 61 stories; Chicago Public Radio (WBEZ) aired 52 stories; Public Radio for Northern California (KQED) aired 48 stories; and Milwaukee Public Radio (WUWM) aired 42 stories. All of the stories generated by these stations were used in the study, totaling 203 items.

In order to compare Hearken content to regular news content from those organizations, the researchers created matching samples of regular news for each local affiliate. Here, “matching” means the same number of news stories from the same year, randomly selected, covering local or regional issues. Each station’s website has either a news archive page or a general local news show with its own archive. What gets posted to these archives are stories reported locally by the affiliate and the occasional wire story with a local angle. The researchers determined an archival page range for each station covering January 1, 2017, through December

31, 2017. They counted the total number of stories published to each station's local news archive in 2017, and then divided that total by the number of news stories needed to match the number of Hearken stories from that particular station. The resulting number provided an ordinal for selection from the sample. For example, NHPR published about 2,400 news stories to its local archive in 2017 (six or seven stories per day). To create a sample of 61 stories, the researchers selected every 39th article, starting with a random story on the January 1, 2017, archival page. The researchers reviewed headlines and bylines to ensure they were analyzing local and regional content by local reporters or the local staff, e.g. stories that appear to be rewrites of wire copy credited to "WBEZ Staff." Each article was assigned a number pertaining to this study. The final sample contained 203 Hearken items and 203 traditional news items.

Two coders – one of the authors and an undergraduate research assistant – were trained on the variables below using a codebook developed by the researchers. The coders conducted a pilot test using 40 items – about 10% – not included in the study. Coders worked together to get agreement and revised the codebook accordingly. A pre-test and a final reliability test were conducted using about 10% of the sample items selected at random. Simple agreement ranged from 81 to 100% for all variables. For individual variables, Krippendorff's alpha was used to calculate agreement (Neuendorf, 2002). The coders divided the remainder of the sample evenly for final coding.

The unit of analysis for this study was the radio story. Coders listened to or read a transcript of each story. Variables were developed from previous content analysis research and adapted based on the needs of the study (Cox, 2012). Five key variables were included: geographic focus, item length, story topic, timeliness, and source type. Additional variables, including day of publication, organization name, and reporter gender, were also recorded. Comparisons between Hearken and regular news content were made using chi square for each variable.

Geographic focus. Each story was coded based on its primary area of focus. Options included local, state/regional, national, or international. For example, a story about two U.S. sports teams would be considered "national." However, if one of those sports teams was based in the same state as the organization, it would be considered a state/regional story. If the sports team was based within the station's listening area, it would be considered "local." (Krippendorff's alpha = .86).

Story topic. Topic was defined using common general news categories based on previous research (Cox, 2012), including disaster/accident/public safety, economy/business, education, entertainment, environment/science/technology, governance, health, law/crime, lifestyle/living, politics, religion, sports, and transportation. Descriptions and methods for identifying topics were adapted from a study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2013). (Krippendorff's alpha = .83).

Timeliness. Items were divided into one of three categories to determine their timeliness: spot news, time peg, and evergreen. Spot news items included unexpected news events deserving immediate coverage, such as random acts of violence or sudden disasters (Shoemaker, 1996). Time peg items were those containing reactions to or previews of news events, such as press conferences or planned activities, or those timed to a specific date or event, such as stories about breast cancer awareness in October. Evergreen items were those without a specific time connection that are on any date, such as business profiles or informational pieces. (Krippendorff's alpha = .89).

Source type. Coders counted the number of human sources used in each news item. Each source was identified as either an “official” or “non-official” source. Official sources are those with “power” and “authority.” (Bennett, 2013), including elected representatives, organization heads and spokespeople, and law enforcement officers. Non-official sources include those with less access to platforms for making their voices heard, including affected citizens, teachers, witnesses, victims, and suspects. (Krippendorff’s alpha = .83).

Findings

Hearken stories were posted most frequently on three days: Thursday (24.6%), Friday (33.5%), and Sunday (19.7%). These three publication days made up 77.8% of all Hearken postings. The traditional stories sampled were divided nearly equally during the Monday-Friday work week, ranging from 15.3% to 23.2%. Very few items in the sample were posted during the weekend (6.4%). More than half of the Hearken stories were published by women (54.7%) and 15.8% were published by men. Almost half of the traditional articles sampled (45.3%) were published by women, and 23.2% were published by men. Coders could not determine the gender of about one-third of both the Hearken (29.6%) and traditional (31.5%) articles.

Geographic Focus

The majority of stories in both Hearken (78.9%) and the traditional story sample (82.8%) were focused on local or state/regional issues. [See Table 1] However, there were significantly more local stories in Hearken content (42.4%) than in the traditional sample (16.3%), $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 33.39, p < .001$. Conversely, the traditional sample contained significantly more state/regional stories (66.5%) than did Hearken (36.5%), $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 36.69, p < .001$.

Table 1

Geographic Frequency by Content Provider

	<u>Hearken</u>	<u>Traditional</u>	χ^2
Local	42.4%	16.3%	33.39***
Regional/state	36.5%	66.5%	36.69***
National	19.2%	14.3%	1.77
International	2.0%	3.0%	.41

***p < .001

Story Length

Hearken stories were not widely distributed, as 70.9% ranged from 4:01-5 minutes, whereas stories in the traditional sample were more scattered across the spectrum. [See Table 2] Stories in the traditional sample were both significantly longer and shorter than Hearken stories. Only 0.5% of Hearken stories lasted 0-2 minutes, compared with 13.8% of traditional stories, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 27.07, p < .001$. Nearly half of the stories in the traditional sample (46.8%) were longer than 5 minutes, compared with 8.4% of Hearken’s, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 75.02, p < .001$.

Table 2*Story Length Frequency by Content Provider*

	<u>Hearken</u>	<u>Traditional</u>	χ^2
0-1 minute	0.5%	9.9%	18.13***
1:01-2 minutes	0.0%	3.9%	8.16**
2:01-3 minutes	12.3%	12.3%	1.00
3:01-4 minutes	5.9%	9.4%	1.71
4:01-5 minutes	70.9%	11.8%	146.22***
> 5 minutes	8.4%	46.8%	75.02***

Note: Only audio times listed.

p < .01, *p < .001

Story Topic

More than one-third of Hearken's stories (36.5%) were on lifestyle/living topics, while those in the traditional sample spanned a greater range. [See Table 3] The two content types differed significantly on four topics. Stories in the traditional sample contained higher frequencies of law/crime and political stories, making up 28.6% of all content compared with 11.3% of Hearken content, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 18.89, p < .001$. Conversely, lifestyle/living and transportation stories accounted for 45.8% of the Hearken content and 17.2% of the traditional sample, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 38.38, p < .001$. Both Hearken and traditional stories covered governance topics relatively frequently. Governance ranked most-frequent among traditional stories (21.2%) and second most-frequent in Hearken stories (14.3%). Other public affairs topics, including economy/business, disaster/accident/public safety, education, and health were featured more frequently in traditional stories, though the differences among the providers were not significant. Notably, neither entertainment nor sports topics were covered frequently in either case.

Table 3*Story Topic Frequency by Content Provider*

	<u>Hearken</u>	<u>Traditional</u>	χ^2
Disaster/accident/ public safety	2.5%	3.4%	0.56
Economy/business	4.4%	6.4%	0.77
Education	4.9%	6.9%	0.71
Entertainment	2.5%	2.0%	0.11
Environment/science/ technology	9.9%	8.4%	0.27
Governance	14.3%	21.2%	3.31
Health	3.4%	5.4%	0.93
Law/crime	4.4%	15.3%	13.42***
Lifestyle/living	36.5%	14.8%	25.03***
Politics	6.9%	13.3%	4.56*
Sports	1.0%	0.5%	0.34
Transportation	9.4%	2.5%	8.68**

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Story Type

The content in Hearken and the traditional sample revealed significant differences across all story types. About one-half of traditional stories focused on news items containing a time peg (50.7%) compared with 16.3% of Hearken stories, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 54.18, p < .001$. About one-third of traditional stories also contained spot news (36.5%), whereas Hearken stories rarely did (3.0%), $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 71.98, p < .001$. Hearken stories primarily focused on evergreen items (80.8%) compared with 12.8% of traditional items, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 188.40, p < .001$.

Sources

Stories in the Hearken sample had a higher average number of sources per story at 2.97 compared with stories in the traditional sample, which averaged 1.81 sources per story. Hearken stories frequently used between 1-4 sources (71.4%), compared with 61.1% of stories in the traditional sample, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 4.86, p < .05$. [See Table 4] The traditional sample contained a significantly higher number of stories with no sources (30.5%) compared with Hearken stories (7.9%), $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 33.58, p < .001$.

Table 4

Sourcing Frequency by Content Provider

	<u>Hearken</u>	<u>Traditional</u>	χ^2
0 sources	7.9%	30.5%	33.58***
1 source	23.6%	27.6%	0.83
2 sources	19.2%	12.8%	3.10
3 sources	14.8%	10.8%	1.41
4 sources	13.8%	9.9%	1.51
5 sources	7.4%	4.4%	1.60
6 sources	6.4%	0.5%	6.51*
7 sources	2.5%	-	2.71
8 sources	2.0%	0.5%	4.04
9 sources	1.0%	0.5%	0.37
10 or more sources	1.5%	1.5%	1.00

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Stories in the traditional vein contained more official sources; however, there were no significant differences revealed when compared with their Hearken counterparts. [See Table 5] Almost two-thirds of stories in the traditional sample did not contain non-official sources (62.6%) compared with 18.7% of Hearken stories, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 80.87, p < .001$. Hearken stories contained a higher frequency of non-official sources across the board, and 45.8% of those stories contained 1-2 sources, compared with 26.6% of those in the traditional sample, $\chi^2 (1, n = 406) = 16.22, p < .001$. Stories in the traditional sample rarely used five or more sources. Notably, when Hearken used more than five sources, they were almost always primarily non-official sources.

Table 5*Official and Non-Official Sourcing Frequency by Content Provider*

<u>Number of sources</u>	<u>Hearken official</u>	<u>Traditional official</u>	χ^2	<u>Hearken non-official</u>	<u>Traditional non-official</u>	χ^2
0 sources	53.7%	47.8%	1.42	18.7%	62.6%	80.87***
1 sources	29.6%	25.1%	1.00	24.6%	18.7%	2.09
2 sources	9.4%	15.8%	3.79	21.2%	7.9%	14.46***
3 sources	4.4%	5.9%	0.45	14.3%	4.4%	11.61***
4 sources	2.5%	3.9%	0.72	10.3%	3.4%	7.52**
5 or more sources	0.5%	1.5%	1.01	10.8%	3.0%	9.82**

*p<.05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Discussion

The results of this study indicate Hearken is meeting its goals of aiding in the production of communitarian journalism. Journalism assists audiences in creating meaning, especially in community settings. However, Hearken’s content goes a step beyond toward reciprocity, encouraging audiences and journalists to assist each other in creating meaning and value. The story types frequented in articles using the Hearken model reflect community issues that affect peoples’ everyday lives, largely because the community is involved in the early reporting stages. Journalists use their gatekeeper role to designate events as “news” based on a number of factors, including their own individual influences, the media routine process, and extramedia and ideological influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Through this process, they can lose touch with issues affecting community members outside the newsroom. Hearken’s model, inviting community members to suggest story ideas and go along on the reporting process, appears to be pushing reporters outside of their traditional boundaries into new types of stories that garner engagement and make an impact. However, this process does not diminish journalistic autonomy as critics of communitarian journalism have suggested (Merrill, 1996). Reporters are still responsible for selecting story ideas, choosing their sources, and producing the story. In fact, reporting different types of stories than they traditionally have may even be improving journalists’ story-telling abilities, as Hearken article regularly used more sources for stories and more non-official sources they may not have connected with otherwise.

This study revealed significant differences in content selection, reporting, and presentation between stories produced using the Hearken model and those produced for the traditional radio news broadcasts. Stories in traditional publications focused more on spot news and time sensitive items affecting their region and state. Those stories frequently covered topics associated with those time pegs, including law/crime, political stories, and governance, that do not always impact people directly but have larger implications for society. Examples of these were revealed across the publications, such an article broadcast on WBEZ in Chicago, titled “Former Congressman Schock asks court to toss corruption case” (Tarm, 2017), and another from WUWM in Milwaukee titled “Trump administration’s DACA decision will affect Wisconsin students” (Morello, 2017).

Hearken stories provided a different look at communities, focusing more on evergreen content that affects listeners’ daily lives, including a large number of lifestyle/living topics. Coders noted trends emerging among Hearken stories, with many focusing on topics people are

often curious about, such as food, local history, and geography. Participants in stories wanted to find ways to represent their communities, often asking versions of the question: “What makes our town unique?” One example of this is a Hearken story from NHPR on one local town, which simply asks “What does Northwood N.H. have to do with Thanksgiving?” (Gutierrez & Prescott, 2017). Transportation topics, such as traffic, public transit, and parking, were also popular among Hearken stories. This is not surprising, as these issues are major sources of stress and consume people’s time, especially those living in larger cities, such as ones included in the study (Texas A&M Transportation Institute, 2015). For example, a Hearken story from KQED in Northern California addresses whether it is legal to park on the street after a street sweeper has passed (Nelson, 2017), which could be helpful information for residents in that area.

Hearken stories appeared to have similar rhythm across publications. News stories in the traditional sample ranged across the spectrum in length, from short snippets lasting fewer than 1 minute to pieces airing well-beyond 5 minutes. However, the majority of Hearken stories across all publications fell into a very specific time range, with more than 70% lasting exactly 4:01-5 minutes. Coders noted a formulaic style in many Hearken pieces – a community member submits a question, a reporter visits appropriate sources to answer it, and, often, the reporter follows up with the question-asker to make sure he/she is satisfied with the answer.

Hearken represents itself as a platform for community journalism, and both the format of its stories and use of non-official sources lends credence to that claim. Story ideas always originate from community members. When possible, reporters include question-askers in the story, bringing them in as a non-official, quoted source and taking them along on the reporting process. However, listeners do not always want to get involved with the process, and, in those cases, their question is read and reported by the journalist, which explains why 18.7% of Hearken stories have no non-official sources. While Hearken stories did use official sources in answering questions, they also often used significantly more non-official sources in their reporting, widening the scope of journalism beyond legislators, officers, and organizational representatives. Their stories often included experts, who could represent information without agenda rather than speaking in an official capacity on behalf of an organization or issue. They also spoke to unofficial local leaders and people impacted by the news, again putting the focus on the community and its people rather than larger regional and state policies.

This community service style of reporting differs from traditional reporting, which is often reactionary (Gans, 1998). A majority of stories in the traditional sample (58.1%) had no sources or only one source, and they contained more spot news and time sensitive items. Coders noted many of these were stories cultivated from press releases or wire services, where little original reporting was conducted. These briefs typically had little to do with the community served by the radio station.

The content produced using Hearken’s community journalism approach revealed differences from traditional content that appear to be in line with the organization’s primary goal: “To meaningfully engage the public as a story develops from pitch through publication” by cultivating “deep audience engagement” (Hearken, 2018). Their work to get citizens involved in the journalism process aims at creating more community stories and fewer statehouse policy stories. The organization also tries to transform listeners from passive news recipients to active information seekers, getting them civically engaged, which can lead to community improvement (Adler & Goggin, 2005). These efforts reflect the qualities of community journalism, which Lauterer (2006) defined as publications that serve and have an impact on their communities. This study revealed much of Hearken’s content aligns with producers’ desires to perform community

journalism and get listeners civically engaged through their emphasis on local content aimed at addressing issues that are important to listeners in that area.

Hearken's promotional pitch to newsroom partners extends beyond producing better citizens through community journalism. On its website, Hearken (2018) also promises high-performing content, valuable audience data, and new revenue streams. CEO Jennifer Brandel reported Hearken content on WBEZ comprised only 2% of the network's total stories but accounted for about 50% of the top stories in 2017 (personal communication, December 15, 2017). Lauterer (2006) also argued community journalism is not just altruistic; it's profitable, because it includes stories people care about and want to consume.

A deeper analysis of the popularity of Hearken's stories compared with others is needed to determine whether the organization is meeting its goals promised to partners. Evergreen stories, such as many of those produced by Hearken, tend to have longer lifespans, attracting audiences long after the initial publication date (Kirkland, 2014). A longitudinal study could be used to track both the immediate popularity of articles, as well as their continued success over time.

Both Hearken and traditional stories frequently published items on governance topics. The coders noted anecdotal differences in tone among the stories. Those in traditional publications focused more on broader governance issues, including city, state, and national lawmakers and policies. Hearken stories often reflected questions about how government works and both its daily and historical impacts on the community. Future qualitative research could analyze these stories and provide a more nuanced look at the differences between Hearken and traditional items. Similarly, greater examination into source types – beyond “official” and “non-official” – could provide insight into the different processes used in traditional versus Hearken reporting.

Works Cited

- Adler, R.P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by “civic engagement?” *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(3), 236-253.
- Bennett, D. (2013). *Digital media and reporting conflict*. New York: Routledge.
- Bilton, R. (2018, January 23). A new \$650K grant will help pay for newsrooms to adopt tools like Hearken and GroundSource. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/01/a-new-650k-grant-will-help-pay-for-newsrooms-to-adopt-tools-like-hearken-and-groundsourc/>
- Black, J. (Ed.). (1996). *Mixed News*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Coddington, M. (2015). The Wall Becomes a Curtain: Revisiting Journalism's News-Advertising Boundary. In M. Carlson & S. C. Lewis (Eds.), *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation* (67-82). New York: Routledge.
- Cox, J.B. (2012). *From ink to screen: Examining news definitions in newsprint and online* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from UF Digital Collections. (UFE0044979)

- Gans, H.J. (1998). What can journalists actually do for American democracy? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 3(4), 6-12.
- Gutierrez, J., & Prescott, P. (2017, November 17). You asked, we answered: What does Northwood N.H. have to do with Thanksgiving? *New Hampshire Public Radio (NHPR)*. Retrieved from <http://nhpr.org/post/you-asked-we-answered-what-does-northwood-nh-have-do-thanksgiving>
- Hearken. (2018). A new model for journalism. Retrieved from <https://www.wearehearken.com/hearken-overview-about/>
- Hodges, L. W. (1996). Ruminations about the communitarian debate. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 11(3), 133-139.
- How to work with your question asker. (2018, February 15). Retrieved from <https://help.wearehearken.com/article/100-how-to-report-with-your-question-askers>
- Kirkland, S. (2014, July 28). Should publishers be taking better advantage of evergreen content in their archives? *Poynter*. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/news/should-publishers-be-taking-better-advantage-evergreen-content-their-archives>
- Lauterer, J. (2003). *Community journalism: The personal approach* (2nd ed.). Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.
- Lauterer, J. (2006). *Community journalism: Relentlessly local* (3rd ed.). North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Lesniak, K. (2017, May 16). Bitch Media: Turning readers into funders. *INNnovation*. Retrieved from <https://innovation.inn.org/2017/05/16/turning-readers-into-funders/>
- Lowrey, W. (2012). The challenge of measuring community journalism. In B. Reader & J. A. Hatcher (Eds.), *Foundations of community journalism* (pp. 87-104). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: 10.4135/9781483349527.n9
- Merrill, J. (1989). *The Dialectic in Journalism: Toward a responsible use of press freedom*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana University Press
- Merrill, J. (1996). Communitarianisms's Rhetorical War Against Enlightenment Liberalism. In J. Black (Ed.), *Mixed News*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Monson, R. (2017). Journalism is community as a service. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/12/journalism-is-community-as-a-service/>
- Morello, R. (2017, September 5). Trump administration's DACA decision will affect Wisconsin students. *Milwaukee Public Radio (WUWM)*. Retrieved from

<http://wuwvm.com/post/trump-administrations-daca-decision-will-affect-wisconsin-students>

- Nelson, P. (2017, August 31). Parking after the street sweeper passes: Legal or not? *Public Radio for Northern California (KQED)*. Retrieved from <https://ww2.kqed.org/news/2017/08/31/can-you-park-after-the-street-cleaner-has-gone-by/>
- Neuendorf, K.A. (2002). *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2013). Internet overtakes newspapers as news outlet. Retrieved March 15, 2018, from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1066/internet-overtakes-newspapers-as-news-source>
- Reader, Bill. (2012). Community Journalism: A Concept of Connectedness. In *Foundations of Community Journalism*, B. Reader & J. A. Hatcher, (Eds.), 3–20. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Reader, B. & Hatcher, J. A. (Eds.) (2012). *Foundations of community journalism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: 10.4135/9781483349527
- Robinson, S. (2011). “Journalism as process”: The organizational implications of participatory online news. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 13(3), 137-210.
- Rosenberry, J., & St John, B. (Eds.). (2009). *Public journalism 2.0: The promise and reality of a citizen engaged press*. New York: Routledge.
- Shoemaker, P. J. (1996). News and newsworthiness: A commentary. *Communications*, 21(1), 105-111.
- Shoemaker, P.J., & Reese, S.D. (1996). *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers.
- Simpson, A. (2018, January 13). Media funders launch initiative to restore audience trust through engagement. *Current*. Online. <https://current.org/2018/01/media-funders-launch-initiative-to-restore-audience-trust-through-engagement/>
- St. John III, B., Johnson, K., & Nah, S. (2014). Patch.com: The challenge of connective community journalism in the digital sphere. *Journalism Practice*, 8(2), 197-212.
- Tarm, M. (2017, April 20). Former Congressman Schock asks court to toss corruption case. *Chicago Public Radio (WBEZ)*. Retrieved from <https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/former-congressman-schock-asks-court-to-toss-corruption-case/c6978c72-63b9-4c2d-8f7a-cbf8aa81ea61>

Texas A&M Transportation Institute. (2015). Traffic gridlock sets new records for traveler misery. Retrieved March 28, 2018, from <https://tti.tamu.edu/news/traffic-gridlock-sets-new-records-for-traveler-misery/>

Tornoe, R. (2016, July 21). Digital Publishing: Newsrooms should invite readers to give input on story ideas. *Editor & Publisher*. Retrieved from <http://www.editorandpublisher.com/columns/digital-publishing-newsrooms-should-invite-readers-to-give-input-on-story-ideas/>