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Partnering with the Public: The Pursuit of ‘Audience Engagement’ in Journalism

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Jacob L. Nelson

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Abstract

Partnering with the Public: The Pursuit of 'Audience Engagement' in Journalism

Jacob L. Nelson

Journalism professionals and researchers have recently argued that newsrooms adopt "audience engagement" as one of their chief pursuits. This term has many interpretations that stem from one underlying belief: journalists better serve their audiences when they explicitly focus on how their audiences interact with and respond to the news in the first place. Yet those who hope to make audience engagement normative must overcome news industry confusion surrounding how engagement itself should be defined and measured. Their efforts therefore present an opportunity to learn how journalism is changing, who within the field has the power to change it, and why they believe it should change.

This dissertation investigates two such efforts with ethnographic case studies of Hearken and *City Bureau*, organizations that aspire to make the audience a larger part of the news production process. An additional case study of *The Chicago Tribune* reveals how audience engagement advocates and legacy journalists differ in their assumptions about journalism and the public, and how they act on those differences. Although the staff of all three sites acknowledge that the news audience avoids political news, *Tribune* employees attribute this avoidance to a lack of audience interest, while those at *City Bureau* and Hearken attribute it to a lack of audience trust. This leads the *Tribune* to approach the news audience one way, and *City Bureau* and Hearken another.

Drawing on Giddens' structuration theory, I argue that the *Tribune* reproduces traditional notions of journalistic practice, while Hearken and *City Bureau* attempt to transform them. However, their attempts are constrained by the news industry's structure for monitoring and responding to the marketplace – its market information regime – which privileges measures of audience size rather than audience engagement. As a result, Hearken and *City Bureau* are unable to quantify the value of audience engagement to other journalism stakeholders. Instead, they rely on appeals to intuition. Their initial success suggests that that many in journalism innately believe the profession should improve its relationship with the audience. More importantly, it shows that the gut feelings of individual agents can prove more powerful than the structures constraining them, at least during periods of institutional uncertainty. This dissertation therefore illustrates what the future of journalism might look like should an audience-focused approach to news production become the norm, and exposes the obstacles that may prevent such a transformation from occurring.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Over the past few years, a growing number of journalism stakeholders and researchers have argued that newsrooms should make "audience engagement" one of their chief pursuits. This term has many interpretations that stem from one underlying belief: journalists better serve their audiences when they explicitly focus on how their audiences interact with and respond to the news in the first place (Batsell, 2015). As fears about journalism's sustainability and impact become an unwelcome fixture of the profession, calls for audience engagement have only grown louder and more frequent. The term is increasingly portrayed as a cure-all for the industry's ails – audience engagement will increase audience loyalty (Lischka & Messerli, 2016), build audience trust (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2013), and make journalists' work more relevant (Guzman, 2016). What remains to be seen is whether or not audience engagement will move beyond its current role as aspirational buzzword to become the criteria by which journalism succeeds or fails.

Those who hope to make audience engagement both normative and measurable face enormous barriers to success. They need to persuade other news industry stakeholders, each with their own interests and opinions, to rally around a novel interpretation of journalistic practice. They also need to settle an internal debate surrounding how audience engagement itself should be defined and evaluated. Because the term currently lacks an agreed upon meaning – let alone metric – it has become an object of contestation. The efforts to make audience engagement central to news production therefore present an opportunity to learn how journalism is changing, who within the field has the power to change it, and why they believe it should change.

This dissertation investigates two such efforts with ethnographic case studies of Hearken and *City Bureau*, organizations that aspire to make the audience a larger part of the news production process. Hearken is a for-profit company that provides audience engagement tools and consulting to newsrooms across the globe, while *City Bureau* is a local news nonprofit that cultivates collaborations between Chicago journalists and the communities they cover. An additional case study of *The Chicago Tribune*, one of the country's oldest and largest newspapers, reveals how audience engagement advocates and legacy journalists differ in their assumptions about journalism and the public, and how they act on those differences. Most notably, the staff of all three sites acknowledge that the news audience avoids political news; however, *Tribune* employees attribute this avoidance to a lack of audience interest, while those at *City Bureau* and Hearken attribute it to a lack of audience trust. In other words, traditional journalists sees the audience's lack of interest in public affairs news as a given, while audience engagement advocates see it as a failure of the press. This leads the *Tribune* to approach the news audience one way, and *City Bureau* and Hearken another.

I interpret these findings by drawing on Anthony Giddens' notion of structuration, which posits that agents and structures mutually reproduce the social world in which they reside (1984). The *Tribune*'s perception of the audience leads its staff to limit audience involvement in news production, thus reproducing a form of journalistic practice where news travels in one direction, from publisher to public. Hearken and *City Bureau*, on the other hand, are both attempting to transform journalistic practice so that the audience plays a more significant role throughout the news production process. To be sure, the *Tribune*'s staff includes editors, columnists and reporters who communicate with the paper's audience via social media and live events; however, they are the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, they pursue audience engagement as a means to larger audiences, while *City Bureau* and Hearken see engagement as an end in itself. In short, the *Tribune* is reproducing a social world where journalism is delivered as a lecture, while the people behind Hearken and *City Bureau* are attempting to turn it into a dialogue.

Yet their attempts are constrained by the news industry's structure for monitoring and responding to the marketplace – its *market information regime* (Anand & Peterson, 2000). Journalism's current market information regime privileges measures of audience size, which means newsrooms face economic incentives to pursue audience growth rather than audience engagement. Furthermore, though many engagement metrics exist, there is currently no industry-wide consensus surrounding which, if any, should serve as the *currency* by which newsrooms could compare their engagement performance to that of their competition. As a result, the employees of *City Bureau* and Hearken lack the ability to quantify the value of their approach to news production. And confusion throughout the news industry surrounding what audience engagement even means limits the ability of each of these organizations to persuade journalism stakeholders that this trait is valuable to begin with.

These organizations instead rely on appeals to intuition that strengthening the ties between journalists and their audiences will improve the quality of the news, which will lead to larger economic returns as well as more democratically impactful journalism. The initial success of both Hearken and *City Bureau*'s faith-based approach demonstrates that many in journalism innately believe the profession should improve its relationship with the audience. More importantly, it shows that the gut feelings of individual agents can prove more powerful than the structures constraining them, at least during periods of institutional uncertainty. This dissertation is thus an opportunity to explore what the future of journalism might look like should this audience-focused approach to news production become the norm, as well as the obstacles that may prevent such a transformation from occurring.

Dissertation plan

Chapter Two offers a review of relevant literature, focusing on prior studies of news audience perceptions among journalists. It also traces the evolution of "audience engagement," an increasingly common yet inconsistently defined term used throughout the news industry to refer to the relationship between journalism and the audience. Though this term may seem novel, it is actually an echo of the public journalism movement of the 1990s, which itself was an effort influenced by longstanding practices within community presses. This chapter also reviews structuration theory and market information regime literature to demonstrate that the form news production takes is not solely the result of its practitioners, but of the structures surrounding them as well.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach of this dissertation. It describes the sites included in the project, the amount of data gathered from each one, and the degree of access that each organization provided. Chapters Four, Five, and Six focus on the findings from each of the three organizations (Hearken, *City Bureau*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, respectively). The overarching aim of these chapters is to address whether each organization is attempting to reproduce or transform norms of journalistic practice, and how journalism's structures constrain or enable these attempts. Each chapter is divided into four sections that describe: (1) the way that the organization perceives the audience, (2) how that perception shapes its approach to journalism, (3) how that approach reckons with journalism's structures, and (4) the implications for the profession and the public. Finally, in Chapter Seven I summarize these findings, draw conclusions, and suggest future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

American journalism is now two decades into a period defined by instability and confusion. In an ever-expanding media environment where audiences increasingly consume content online, news publishers can no longer assume that their output will reach enough people to generate revenue or impact public policy (Hamilton, 2006; Prior, 2007; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Throughout this time, industry insiders and academics have suggested many solutions to save the profession from financial ruin and irrelevance. Some focus on increasing revenue, others on improving the craft. One increasingly common suggestion addresses both of these concerns: that journalists more actively pursue "audience engagement."

Audience engagement advocates argue that journalism must explicitly consider and communicate with its audience in order to better understand and meet their news media needs. Doing so will produce more collaborative news from a wider variety of viewpoints, which will return the large swaths of people to journalism who long ago abandoned it for more entertaining fare. The growing promise of "audience engagement" has brought it front and center to discussions about the future of journalism (Ingram, 2014; Knight, 2012; Marich, 2008; Steinberg, 2010), the purpose of the profession (Davis Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010; Rosentiel, Mitchell, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), and its role in American democracy (Graves & Kelly, 2010; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Though the term remains inconsistently defined, news researchers, publishers, and advertisers have increasingly embraced it as the measure by which journalism's success should be evaluated.

This chapter situates journalism's current fascination with its audience within a broader examination of how this relationship has changed over time. What follows is an overview of how journalists have engaged with audiences in the past, and the factors currently persuading them to change that approach. These shifting priorities can be understood as part of a larger movement from one "media regime" to another. Williams and Delli Carpini have used "media regimes" to isolate U.S. media history into periods with that comprise distinct conceptualizations of media, citizenship, and democracy (2011). This chapter similarly draws on "media regimes" to argue that the current open-arms approach to the news audience – and the ambiguity surrounding what this approach should look like and accomplish – is part of journalism's transition away from one rapidly disappearing model to one that is still emerging.

This chapter also offers a definition of audience engagement that synthesizes prior literature and contributes an important distinction between reception-oriented and production-oriented engagement. It then describes the way audience engagement has become widely embraced within local news, and how that embrace has presented itself as a revival of a civically minded form of news production called public journalism.

Finally, this chapter draws on Giddens' notion of structuration to address the most pressing question raised by the growing calls within journalism for more audience engagement: What structural constraints must audience engagement advocates overcome to transform the norms of journalistic practice? Using this theoretical framework, I outline the challenges audience engagement advocates face in their pursuit of a more audience-centered approach to news production, and the steps these advocates are taking to overcome them. I argue that the pursuit of audience engagement has been hampered not only by confusion surrounding the term, but also by journalism's market information regime, which privileges measures of audience size above all other traits. I conclude with the research questions that I drive this dissertation's case studies.

A narrow view of the audience

Most journalists have historically held a narrow view of their audience. Namely, they have written their stories for white, middle-class citizens. This has been observed in studies of different platforms of journalism (e.g., broadcast in Epstein, 1974; newspapers in Fishman, 1980; both in Tuchman, 1978) as well as in both national (Gans, 2004) and local news (Kaniss, 1991). Before online news and web analytics, journalists considered their audience monolithic: they chose stories for themselves and their editors, assuming everyone else would find them interesting, too. These journalists also assumed their stories would reach a wide audience, and saw the audience's role as a passive one. Audience feedback was rarely sought and hardly valued (Gans, 2004; Karlsson, Bergström, Clerwall, & Fast, 2015; Kormelink & Meijer, 2017; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015; Turow & Draper, 2014).

This limited view of audience worked in tandem with a narrow conceptualization of objectivity. Journalists reported stories by interviewing government officials and seeking bureaucratic records (Fishman, 1980), and tended to present these as indisputable facts. They less frequently interviewed non-official sources, and rarely developed sources in poverty-stricken neighborhoods (Tuchman, 1978). When journalists interviewed community activists or other non-official sources, they often considered their statements biased (Kaniss, 1991). The only journalists who truly questioned the way they collected and presented facts were investigative journalists, who carried the added burden of creating content they hoped would summon empathy and lead to change (Ettema & Glasser, 1998). In short, mainstream, daily journalism throughout the 20th century was a one-way conversation that privileged information gleaned from political elites and was mostly unconcerned with what many now refer to as "audience engagement" (Batsell, 2015; Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2012; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010).

Media regimes

Despite these consistencies, the meaning of journalism and the way it has been practiced has been far from constant. The industry's professional norms have stressed different attributes at different times, depending on political, economic, and technological circumstances. For instance, journalism included a much smaller diversity of sources but had a much larger reach during the "Golden Age of Broadcast News" in the middle of the twentieth century. Because there were few media options, most of the public could be counted on to tune in to the evening news broadcast (Katz, 1996; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). During this period, journalism cultivated a neutral tone since it was trying to reach a huge, ideologically mixed audience. With the advent of cable, more channels became available – news and otherwise. As audiences abandoned the nightly newscast for more entertaining programs, journalism that tried to appeal to everyone ceased to be as economically advantageous. The result is the current television news model, where partisan news broadcasts like those found on Fox and MSNBC are significant players (Prior, 2007; Webster, 2014). This transition reveals that understandings of what journalism looks like and how it is produced change periodically, shifting from one "media regime" to the next (B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 26).

These regimes are the results of political, economic, and social struggles that have definite winners and losers. For instance, the transition from the age of broadcast news to the age of cable meant good news for Rupert Murdoch, but bad news for the journalists who valued objectivity over partisanship (and for the companies that employed them). Media regimes, in other words, are the collision of stakeholders with different, often competing interests surrounding media production and reception. It is only during these moments of impact that these regimes cease to appear natural; however, soon after a resolution is reached, the new regime eventually becomes "naturalized until the next disjuncture occurs" (B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 283). We are currently in the midst of one such transition.

An industry in crisis

The last media regime began to crumble in the early 21st century with what scholars refer to as the newspaper crisis (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). A combination of economic, technological, and social factors caused the journalism industry to plunge into its current, dire state (McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Newspapers have long depended on ad revenue to maintain profitability, which declined sharply with the advent of the internet and the financial recession that began in 2008 (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). As Siles and Boczkowski note (2012), the newspaper crisis manifested itself in readership declines, newsroom staff cuts, and reductions in the amount of coverage a publication could provide. Advertising revenue evaporated with the arrival of websites like Craigslist, and print subscriptions plummeted.

The reluctance of traditional newsrooms to embrace the digital age compounded these issues by delaying industry innovation in the face of changing news consumption habits (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). However, as the popularity of online news consumption grew (and continues to grow), news production practices began to more intensely emphasize digital content creation (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Many news producers went bust, and the ones that survived slowly started investing online (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012).

In transitioning to digital, these publishers learned to embrace online audience metrics (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Petre, 2015; Tandoc, 2015; Webster, Phalen, & Licthy, 2014). Audience metrics have always been an important part of the relationship between media producers and consumers (Webster, 2014), but the advent of sophisticated measures available via digital technology combined with the increasingly dismal economic circumstances facing newsrooms has resulted in these measures playing a larger role in newsrooms than ever before (Anderson, 2011). Now, many major publications subscribe to multiple sources of online audience measurement (Graves & Kelly, 2010), despite their uncertainty about how to best incorporate these data into editorial decisions (Anderson, 2011; Usher, 2014). These measures can track the amount of time people spend on a site, the number of times a site is mentioned on social media, and the number of pages a person loads within a specific outlet (Kosterich & Napoli, 2015). Yet even with all of these metrics available, the most important measure within the news industry continues to be audience size, for reasons that I discuss next.

Market information regimes

When it comes to the economics of journalism – and media more generally – audiences are income. A majority of news publishers rely on advertising revenue, and advertisers use measures of audience size to quantify the value of media providers (Webster, 2014). Whether measured as tuning behavior for radio, program choice for television, or pageviews for the internet, audience size has historically served as a straightforward, easily captured stand-in for audience attention (Nelson & Webster, 2016). Even in a digital media landscape that offers far more sophisticated and varied audience metrics (Graves & Kelly, 2010), size continues to be the trait that matters most. As a result, while journalists may draw on any number of supplementary criteria to evaluate their work (e.g., impact and quality), the number of people their work reaches is impossible to ignore.

Audience size metrics therefore hold a privileged place within journalism's *market information regime*. This term refers to the socially constructed mechanisms by which industry stakeholders make sense of their field (Anand & Peterson, 2000). For a market information regime to exist, these stakeholders need to rally around a single measurement, typically provided by an independent supplier, which allows marketplace participants to compare their performance with that of their competitors. This measurement serves as the *currency* for the marketplace (Kosterich & Napoli, 2015). In legal education, for example, the currency is the ranked list of law schools assembled by

U.S. News and World Report (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). In the digital media environment, the currency is measures of audience size, provided by companies like Nielsen and comScore.

Because different marketplace stakeholders will inevitably have conflicting preferences for how they should be evaluated, the formation of a currency is a political and social process. For instance, when the music industry transitioned from evaluating album sales based on *Billboard* charts to more accurate counts provided by SoundScan, there was resistance from some who feared financial repercussions. The new metric revealed that more people were buying country music than the old system claimed, which resulted in music companies investing more heavily in country artists and stores making more of an effort to carry country albums (Anand & Peterson, 2000). In short, SoundScan made music industry stakeholders aware that they had previously overlooked a highly popular (and thus potentially highly lucrative) genre. In light of this new evidence, these stakeholders shifted their focus and turned country music into a mainstream musical force (Wawzenek, 2016). This illustrates another characteristic of the currencies found within market information regimes: they are reactive rather than neutral (Andrews & Napoli, 2006; Espeland & Sauder, 2016). As Webster points out, "The very existence of the measure can affect the thing being measured" (2011, p. 50).

In a market information regime where audience size is the currency, news sites dependent on advertising revenue have a strong incentive to publish content that will appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and less incentive to publish anything else. The outsize role that measures of audience size now play has forced news publishers to acknowledge that public affairs news is wildly unpopular (Boczkowski, 2013; Prior, 2007). This realization has meant that, within an economic model that relies on clicks and pageviews to generate necessary ad revenue, the news that most journalists consider "important" (i.e., necessary for a well-functioning democracy) is conspicuously unprofitable.

Some fear this state of affairs discourages journalists from publishing articles that may be of high civic importance but are unlikely to lead to a large number of clicks (Welbers, Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok, & Schaper, 2015). Others worry that news publishers will never escape financial instability, regardless of how large an online audience they attract, because digital ad prices are set so much lower than print.

These circumstances have left many scholars and industry stakeholders anxious about what's next for this shaken profession (McChesney & Pickard, 2011), its role in American democracy (Schudson, 2012), and its relationship with its audience (Singer, 2013). This anxiety has only intensified in light of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the concerns about "fake news" that accompanied it (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). At a moment when news public trust in journalism is at a record low (Swift, 2016), journalism stakeholders are increasingly interested in persuading audiences that *real* news is credible, and worth supporting. In light of these circumstances, a growing number of news industry professionals have suggested that journalism focus more on how people *engage* with the news instead of the number of people a news outlet attracts.

Engagement as a currency?

Audience engagement advocates argue that journalists should consider and communicate with their audiences throughout the news production process so that their output includes more collaboration and a wider variety of viewpoints. However, because advertising plays such a large role in journalism's market information regime, audience engagement is unlikely to become central to news production until it becomes a currency for the advertising industry (Nelson & Webster, 2016). For this adoption to occur, advertisers need to be persuaded that engagement is a valuable, measurable audience trait that should be treated either as a substitute or a supplement to measures of audience size. Alternatively, assuming the trend towards audience-supported revenue models like memberships and paywalls continues (Pfauth, 2016; A. T. Williams, 2016), news publishers simply need to see engagement as correlated with audience loyalty, thus circumventing the advertising industry's preferences altogether. In either case, a line needs to be drawn between audience engagement and revenue (more advertising dollars or subscriptions) in order for it to become a currency within journalism.

For now, this connection is impossible to determine, because there is industry-wide confusion about what audience engagement means, why it should be pursued, and how it should be measured. Audience engagement is not a two-sided issue – there is no contingent within journalism campaigning against it. However, many interpretations of audience engagement exist. Some who discuss engagement focus on tools and platforms available to measure audience attentiveness (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Nelson & Webster, 2016), while others focus on the techniques journalists can employ to make content more interactive or participatory (Davis Mersey et al., 2010). And for some,

engagement is not about how audiences attend to the news, but about how news encourages audiences to participate in civic life (Konieczna & Robinson, 2013).
The confusion surrounding how audience engagement should be defined has been accompanied by disagreement over what it can accomplish. Some believe that when news organizations engage with their audiences they can more easily provide content that aligns with their preferences, thus building audience loyalty (Davis Mersey et al., 2010). If a local newspaper's editors notice that readers are flooding to articles about the high school football team, or are requesting more coverage of its games and players in the comments section, they can assign more of those types of stories. Others believe that audience engagement can actually alter audience preferences. For instance, although many in journalism assume that audiences are inherently uninterested in public affairs news, some audience engagement advocate think that audiences would eagerly tune into these stories if they felt more included in the reporting process (DeJarnette, 2016; Hustad, 2016). They argue that if audiences experienced journalism more as a conversation and less as a lecture, they would be more excited about the end result, regardless of the topic. In short, audience engagement has become a term that means very different things depending on the context, and is likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future.

Defining 'audience engagement'

Consequently, any definition of audience engagement is likely to please some and frustrate others. Because this dissertation focuses on journalism specifically, it adopts Jacob Ørmen's conceptualization of audience engagement in relation to news:
"'Engagement' captures both how people devote attention to and interact with

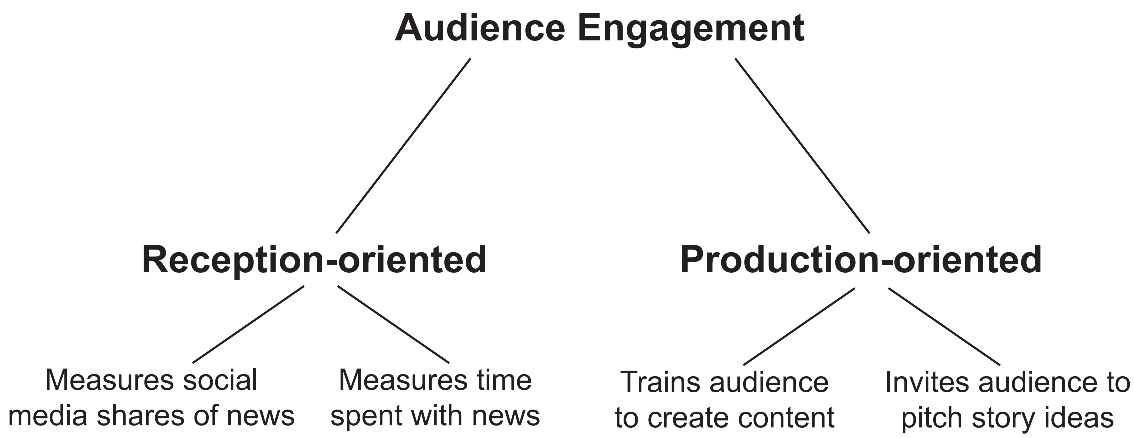
something," (2015, p. 25). Engagement thus comprises two aspects of media audiences typically of interest to researchers – consumption and participation. Audience engagement with news entails understanding "how people attend to information about issues of public concern, become aware of the intricacies of these issues, and address each other about such issues" (Ørmen, 2015, p. 18). To engage with news is to *undertake the news attentively*.

Yet this definition focuses more on the audience than on the producers trying to reach them. To understand the way that different news publishers approach their relationship with their audience, "audience engagement" needs an additional distinction: *reception-oriented* and *production-oriented* (as depicted in Figure 1). Reception-oriented definitions of audience engagement focus primarily on the audience's reception of news: How much time did they spend with a story? How many times did they tweet about it or comment on it? These definitions are especially useful for for-profit news publishers who take a "market-driven" (Cohen, 2002; McManus, 1994) approach to journalism, meaning they view the news as a commodity and the audience as customers. Reception-oriented audience engagement definitions appeal to for-profit publishers because these definitions can translate into quantifiable measures that may eventually be deemed worthwhile by advertisers.

Production-oriented definitions, on the other hand, focus on news production: How many citizens participated in the creation of this story? How many diverse voices were included as sources? How much of the audience requested this story in the first place? These definitions matter more for outlets with audience-supported revenue models (e.g., public media), as these publishers are less concerned with ad revenue and instead want to measure their success by how much their audience feels included and empowered by their reporting.

This distinction is not absolute. As for-profit newsrooms increasingly look more towards revenue models based on subscriptions than on ads (Pfauth, 2016; Vernon, 2016; A. T. Williams, 2016), they are likely to incorporate production-oriented engagement tactics in hopes of building audience loyalty (Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2016). Furthermore, most news publishers want to produce journalism that creates an “impact,” an idealistic goal with an elusive meaning (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015; Nelson & Lewis, 2015; Tofel, 2013). Because impact is so difficult to define, let alone measure, publishers increasingly draw on both production- and reception-oriented engagement definitions to see what insight each can offer (McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2016). News nonprofits, for example, may focus more intently on production-oriented engagement definitions than on reception-oriented, and vice versa for market-driven publishers. However, the ease with which huge amounts of online audience data can now be collected and the uncertain state of the media regime means that, for the time being, publishers will take whatever they can get in hopes it will help them better understand and connect with their readers.

Figure 1. Reception-focused vs. Production-focused audience engagement



All eyes on local journalism

The cause of audience engagement has been taken up most fervently in the journalism subgenre of local news. Journalism at the local level inherently has a limited audience, and thus has suffered the most at the hands of the prevailing currency that privileges audience size. Ironically, many also see local journalism as the most democratically valuable form of news (Anderson, 2013; Kaniss, 1991; McCollough et al., 2016; Napoli, 2015; Tocqueville, 2012). Rasmus Kleis Nielsen describes local journalism as both *terrible* but also terribly important (2015, p. 1). It is far too vital to democratic engagement to continue limping along in its current state.

Consequently, a segment of journalism research has begun focusing on local journalism's role in society, the way its practitioners conceptualize and attempt to connect with their audiences, and how this subfield's reporting and production practices may or may not help national news organizations adapt to a more competitive media ecosystem (Anderson, 2013; Hindman, 2015; Kennedy, 2016; Knight, 2012; Lee, 2016; McCollough et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2015; Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005). Many believe that a renewed focus on local journalism that stresses audience engagement to connect with community members is an important step towards making the news industry both relevant and sustainable again (Ferrucci, 2015; Hatcher & Haavik; Knight, 2012; McCollough et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2015; Paek et al., 2005; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Kim, 2002; Singer, 2011). Specifically, many have pinned their hopes about the future of journalism on a novel form of news production that combines aspects of traditional reporting with collaborations between foundations, community activists, and data scientists (Konieczna & Robinson, 2013; Robinson, 2011, 2014; Robinson & DeShano, 2011).

This model often takes the form of the “digitally native news nonprofit,” a news organization with a skeleton staff that produces content for the internet (Ferrucci, 2015; Nee, 2013). These organizations seek funding from grants and donations rather than ad revenue, actively court audience participation, and frequently partner with a variety of civic organizations in addition to more conventional newsrooms (Fancher, Holman, Ferrier, DeVigal, & Susskind, 2016; Felle, 2016; Ferrucci, 2015; Konieczna & Robinson, 2013; Ognyanova et al., 2013; Pickard & Stearns, 2011; Rosentiel, Buzenberg, Connelly, & Loker, 2016; Wenzel, Gerson, & Moreno, 2016). News nonprofits are spreading quickly across the country: All but nine states in the U.S. have at least one (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Holcomb, Enda, & Anderson, 2013), and most are less than ten years old (Rosentiel et al., 2016).

The return of public journalism

News nonprofits bear a strong resemblance to the failed public journalism efforts of the 1990s, in that both focus on altering traditional journalistic norms in order to more effectively connect with local communities (Ferrucci, 2015). The goals of public journalism were to engage the community, give citizens the power to shape the news agenda, present the news in an easily understood format, and galvanize readers (Ferrucci, 2015; Nip, 2006, 2008). Public journalism advocates hosted town hall meetings and other participatory events in an attempt to turn news production from a one-way lecture into a two-way dialogue (Garden, 2014; Marchionni, 2013a; Nip, 2006). "Professionalized journalism lost touch with its community—a problem that the public journalism movement sought to resolve" (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 230).

The news nonprofit approach, recently dubbed *public service journalism*, is ostensibly the same, except when it comes to the news agenda (Ferrucci, 2015). Public journalism advocates wanted to yield complete editorial control to the audience. Public service journalists, on the other hand, want the audience to contribute to reporting from beginning to end, but also want to keep their news judgment "sacrosanct" (Ferrucci, 2015, p. 917). Another difference between the two is that public journalism was often found in for-profit newsrooms, while public service journalism so far has mostly been taken up in local news nonprofits.

Public journalism (sometimes called civic journalism) failed because it was difficult to implement in a pre-internet era, especially with newsroom staffs already stretched thin. And because it primarily occurred in market-driven newsrooms, it often ended up looking like a cheap marketing ploy rather than a sincere attempt to connect with communities. Even efforts in newsrooms that took public journalism seriously fizzled when employees invested in their success left the organization (Marchionni, 2013b; Nip, 2008). As a result, some see public journalism as the right idea that had the misfortune of coming along at the wrong time (Schaffer, 2015).

However, public journalism pushed newsrooms to connect with their audiences, inadvertently providing a roadmap for current efforts to bring audience engagement to the forefront of news production. Now that the internet allows newsrooms to more easily interact with and measure their audiences – and has left them financially desperate enough to prioritize doing so – many see public journalism's embrace of the audience as critical to the future of the industry (Batsell, 2015; Lewis et al., 2013; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2015; Stearns, 2015). Perhaps public journalism was not a blip in journalism's history, but a necessary step in a punctuated evolution.

Though both public journalism and public service journalism advocates believe the audience should actively shape the news agenda and play a part in telling their own stories (Charity, 1995; Ferrucci, 2015; Glasser, 1999; Merritt, 1995; Rosen, 1996), some believe the latter model has a stronger chance of survival because it does not depend on generating ad revenue for economic success (Ferrucci, 2017; Knight, 2012). Audience engagement within this model is production-oriented rather than reception-oriented, since it focuses primarily on tactics "meant to strengthen and galvanize the community" (Ferrucci, 2015, p. 916). Furthermore, this model's nonprofit structure allows it the flexibility to put market-driven interests aside and pursue these goals without worrying about anything outside the quality of their work and their ability to reach and advocate for their specific community.

Few public service journalism organizations have been around long enough to demonstrate their sustainability, but the fact that they have formed and have begun publishing original reporting is enough to have piqued the interest of journalism researchers and practitioners (Coates Nee, 2013; Ferrucci, 2015; Knight, 2012; Nee, 2013; Rosentiel et al., 2016). The pressure on these organizations is intense. Many believe they will not only provide a new model for journalism, but, by maintaining a focus on working alongside their audience, they will also spur a growth in civic engagement within the communities they cover. As Clay Shirky wrote:

> For the next few decades, journalism will be made up of overlapping special cases… Many of these models will rely on sponsorship or grants or endowments instead of revenues… Many of these models will fail… but over time, the collection of new experiments that do work might give us the journalism we need. (2011, pp. 43-44).

Implicit in these aspirations is the assumption that journalism has the ability to influence civic life. A positive relationship between journalism and political participation has long been observed, but as our understanding of the news audience grows more complicated, so, too, does the need to better understand the link between news and democracy.

News producers and public policy

Journalism offers a connection between citizens and the place they live, which can be defined as narrowly as their neighborhood and as broadly as their world (Gans, 2004; Janowitz, 1967). No matter the scope, there is an accepted understanding that journalism plays a pivotal role in encouraging political participation in democratic societies (Habermas, 1989; Tocqueville, 2012). Many scholars, for example, have observed a positive correlation between news consumption and civic engagement (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Nielsen, 2015; Ognyanova et al., 2013; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010; Shaker, 2014; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Political news enhances learning of political information (Cappella, 1997), so much so that when the journalism industry undergoes drastic changes or faces a crisis, many fear not only for the state of the profession but the implications for democracy (Katz, 1996; Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015; Prior, 2007; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012).

In addition to its connection with civic engagement, news production also mediates political and social realities for audiences (Baumgartner, 2008; Cappella, 1997; Lawrence, 2000). The ways stories are framed draws attention to certain features of a news event and away from other features (Tuchman, 1978). This is more than agenda setting, since in these instances reporters are telling the public *how* to think about an event in addition to *what* event to think about (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Yet, investigations into how journalists choose what events become news and which sources to include in the creation of these news stories often conclude that journalism is a conversation among reporters, editors, and political elites, without much regard for the actual news audience (Tuchman, 1978). Both public journalism and the more recent public service journalism explicitly attempt to bring the audience into these discussions (Charity, 1995; Ferrucci, 2015; Merritt, 1995; Rosen, 1996; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010). These attempts serve two purposes: first, to encourage more audience engagement with the organization's content, and second, to encourage a greater sense of political agency among the audience members themselves.

In their desire to increase audience engagement, many of these news organizations have begun using a combination of more inclusive reporting and more sophisticated audience awareness to tailor their content (Clark, 2016; Spinner, 2016). For example, many local news nonprofits hold "open houses" in specific communities where they welcome residents to stop in and pitch or discuss stories (Knight, 2012; Walker, 2016). These efforts embrace Benson's call for journalists to "self-consciously recruit journalists" who come from diverse backgrounds, and give them "greater freedom to express their class-based perspectives" (2013, p. 212). And, as described earlier, they illustrate what McCollough et al. refer to as the convergence of market-driven desire to generate higher circulation with public journalism's desire to meet the needs of the audience (2015).

How reporters conceptualize and approach news audiences is important because the way a news story is framed can have profound effects not only on the story, but on our understanding of the world we live in. There is a widespread belief in the news industry that in-depth investigative journalism forces the public to make a decision on what it is morally willing to tolerate in a society (Ettema & Glasser, 1998), and evidence within political science that supports it. For instance, when journalists began framing stories about wrongfully convicted inmates on death row as part of a systemic problem rather than a random occurrence, public opinion on the death penalty shifted from overwhelmingly in favor to overwhelmingly against (Baumgartner, 2008). A similar, more recent phenomenon has unfolded in the coverage of unarmed black men who have been killed by police, which has played a role in swaying public opinion towards more scrutiny of police departments across the U.S (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016; Kang, 2015; Stephen, 2015).

The journalistic frame is a powerful tool, yet how that frame is assembled often unfolds among a closed group of people that look little like the majority of the public they are trying to reach. That explains why, at least until recently, news stories about police officers using force have been overwhelmingly defined by the police rather than their victims (Lawrence, 2000). However, the newspaper crisis has incentivized news publishers to pay more attention to their audience, and digital tools have made it easier than ever for them to do so via social media, web analytic data, and online comments (Anderson, 2013; McCollough et al., 2015; Robinson & DeShano, 2011; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). As a result, in their embrace of the audience via public service journalism values, local news producers increasingly reach out to less obvious sources and more explicitly take their audience into account when creating their content. Though this may seem like a novel idea, it is actually a very old one borrowed from an even smaller brand of journalism called the community press.

The appeal of community news

Community presses have historically featured sources typically left out of national and metropolitan news sources (Cochrane, 2016; Janowitz, 1967; Kaniss, 1991). Scholars have found that national and metropolitan news sources tend to feature a narrow set of sources comprising those with the resources necessary to be in regular touch with reporters (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Kaniss, 1991; Tuchman, 1978). This leads to an emphasis on sources in official positions, because these sources have the time to reach out to reporters, and because their titles give their statements built-in credibility. In other words, the bureaucratic institutions they represent are "socially sanctioned schemes of interpretation" (Fishman, 1980, p. 63). For example, Fishman observed that news reporters relied on police departments for information about crime, to the detriment of the accuracy of their crime coverage (1980). Within this model of journalism, bureaucratic "facts" represent hard data, whereas accounts from non-bureaucratic sources represent little more than speculation (Fishman, 1980). Community and ethnic presses, on the other hand, attempt to focus on alternative voices in terms of the sources they interview, as a mechanism for creating a stronger bond with their audience (Kaniss, 1991). Rather than reach out only to elite sources, these presses highlight citizens within the community. Public journalism advocates attempted to bring this approach into national newsrooms in the 1990s, and now public service journalists are again emulating the community press' aspiration to speak with and to its audience.

As a result, many of the news nonprofits that have recently emerged echo this community news philosophy that privileges local residents over bureaucratic sources (Pickard & Stearns, 2011). In doing so, they have embraced what Gans refers to as a "multiperspectival" approach to journalism, in that they actively seek out as many perspectives as possible (Cochrane, 2016; Gans, 2004; Lichterman, 2016). Scholars and practitioners agree that journalism needs a more diverse set of voices, and audience engagement appears to be the method publishers are embracing to make that happen.

As illustrated by the case studies in the following chapters, this pursuit is both messy and endless, especially compared to the alternative. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, utilizes a reception-oriented approach to audience engagement. This comprises the collection of audience data after a story is published that is then used to assess how the story fared. Reporters and editors use these data to change what they report on and how they report on it (Anderson, 2011; Petre, 2015; Tandoc, 2015). *City Bureau* and Hearken, on the other hand, advocate a production-oriented approach to engagement, which means they believe engagement must begin with the reporting process to truly strengthen the relationship between audience and publisher. As Hearken's founder said, "Traditionally, the first opportunity the audience has to offer feedback for journalists and get involved is after a story is completed and published." She advocates for journalists to instead begin the reporting process "with questions the audience is asking" (Brandel, 2015).

Another important aspect of the community press approach that has been adopted by both public journalism and public service journalism is that the profession must become more advocacy-oriented and solutions-driven. Like community press editors, public service journalists believe that local news should not simply deliver facts to readers. Instead, it should become a mechanism by which voiceless citizens can feel politically empowered (Batsell, 2015; Ferrucci, 2015; Jarvis, 2015; Wenzel et al., 2016). This perspective suggests that the quality of journalism be defined as much by the consequences of its publication as the accuracy of its facts (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015). Publishers and researchers across the country are closely eying news publishers that embrace this approach to quality in order to see what these aspirations look like in practice, and determine whether or not they can be emulated elsewhere (DeJarnette, 2016; Spinner, 2016).

Changing methods, changing goals

Though journalists increasingly believe these more intensive efforts to connect with audiences will lead to better, more sustainable journalism, they have yet to make explicit what they believe "better" journalism actually means. Consequently, the impulse to publish stories that include more audience engagement stems from a deceptively simple question confronting journalism professionals and researchers: who should their work reach? Now that there appears to be no returning to the monolithic audience (which was never more than a myth in the first place), news publishers face the difficult challenge of deciding what groups they will prioritize trying to engage, and why they will decide to do so. As Anderson argues in his analysis of Philadelphia's local news ecosystem, "Journalists must begin the hard process of rethinking who they are, what they do, and who their work is actually for" (2013, p. 5). This "process of rethinking" has been predominantly focused on the audience's role in journalistic practice. Observing the various attempts to bring audience engagement to the forefront of news production is therefore one of the most valuable ways to understand this process as it unfolds.

Yet it is not enough to examine what these attempts look like – scholars also need to determine the likelihood that they will succeed. The term audience engagement is as fraught as it is increasingly popular. It continues to be discussed in scholarly journals, news industry presses, and at industry and research conferences alike by industry stakeholders, each with their own interpretation of what engagement means and how it should be pursued. These stakeholders are unlikely to make audience engagement part of journalistic practice unless they believe there are benefits to be gained by doing so. Therefore, how audience engagement is eventually defined, and thus how – or even if – it will leave a lasting mark on news production, depends whether or not its advocates can convince other journalism practitioners that their interpretation of engagement is valuable. To do so, they must reconcile the term with the profession's most prevailing structure: its market information regime.

Structurational framework

The pursuit of a shared definition of audience engagement is a question of agency: how much power do its advocates have to change what news production looks like? And how powerful are the structures obstructing their efforts? Giddens' notion of structuration (1984) provides a useful framework for understanding this underlying dynamic. This theory posits that the social world is not fixed, but is instead mutually reproduced and altered by agents and structures through the process of duality. For example, individuals begin their lives in a world structured to privilege a specific language. While these individuals are not required to adopt this language, most do. The result is the reproduction of the social world in which this language is privileged (Webster, 2011).

Giddens explains that "the flow of action continually produces consequences which are unintended by actors, and these unintended consequences also may form unacknowledged conditions of action in a feedback fashion" (1984, p. 27). This continuous process makes structuration a theory of power that is both participatory and deterministic. Structures may seem like forces of nature, but in reality are simply perpetuated by the individual agents within them. These individual agents are "knowledgeable and reflexive… capable of at least potentially acting in different ways than the structure suggests" (Larsson, 2012, p. 256). In other words, structures constrain alternative representations of the social world, but also enable them (Giddens, 1984). For example, Eide argues that economic structures can inhibit journalistic transformation, but professional values can encourage it (2014). And as Sjøvaag points out, agents can assume more influence over structures during periods of instability, which certainly describes journalism's current state (2013).

Though not originally applied to media systems, scholars have used structuration theory to study aspects of both media production and consumption in the past (Eide 2014; Larsson 2012; Sjøvaag 2013). Webster argues that the process of duality best explains patterns of public attention in the media environment, rather than media producers or consumers alone. Within Webster's conceptualization, the "agents" are individuals who comprise the audience and the "structures" are macrolevel constructs (e.g., daily routines, available media sources) that directly impact how audiences consume media. The process of duality plays out when, for example, television programs broadcast during "prime time" boast both larger audiences and more institutional investment. Because media companies know more people are available to tune in during these times, they devote more resources to the quality and promotion of the programming that airs during these slots. This increased investment often leads to more awareness of these programs on the side of the audience, thus perpetuating the popularity of the prime time lineup.

As this example reveals, audiences and media companies do not determine the way that public attention gets divvied up on their own. Rather, the interplay between the two takes the form of “a continuous process of reciprocal causation” (Webster, 2011, p. 51). Structuration thus illuminates the barriers that audience engagement advocates face in their quest to transform journalistic practice, but does so without removing the possibility that they might succeed. As individual agents, audience engagement advocates are attempting to change journalism so that, in one way or another, it increases its focus on the public. Yet they are challenged by journalism’s market information regime, a structure that impedes their ability to empirically demonstrate how a more collaborative approach to the audience would benefit news organizations, and also narrows the lens through which success within the field can be evaluated. Because the advertisers and measurement firms within journalism’s current market information regime have not adopted audience engagement as a currency, its advocates must pitch its appeal without a clear way to quantify its value. Additionally, because the profession’s current currency privileges measures of audience size, engagement advocates face pressure to argue that engagement is a means to larger audiences, rather than simply a means to better journalism.

This raises two important questions: First, if audience engagement advocates cannot rely on empirical measures to persuade news organizations to change their practices, what do they use instead? And second, how successful are these alternative arguments? By investigating these issues, the following case studies reveal how, or even if, those in favor of making journalism more audience-focused can transform the profession.

Research Questions

As this chapter has demonstrated, audience engagement is not a new issue, nor is it straightforward. Its emergence as a cause within journalism represents an embrace of community press and public journalism ideals as much as it does a growing sentiment that the profession needs to change in order to return to economically sustainability and democratically significance. However, as the following case studies demonstrate, changing the norms of journalistic practice is difficult when the profession's current stakeholders have yet to agree on audience engagement's meaning or value. Confusion throughout the news industry surrounding how audience engagement should be defined and measured has left audience engagement advocates like Hearken and *City Bureau* unable to quantify the benefits of their approach to news production. Instead, each organization attempts to persuade other journalism stakeholders to embrace their interpretation of audience using appeals to intuition. The employees of both organizations argue that their interpretation of audience engagement will lead to a better quality of journalism, which will inevitably result in increased audience revenue as well.

How these organizations present these arguments, as well as whether or not other news industry stakeholders accept them, have implications not just for Hearken and *City Bureau*, but also for the future of journalism and its role in society. If newsrooms embrace audience engagement solely as a means to revenue, be it advertising or subscriptions, they will likely be motivated to increase that engagement just to the point where that end is met. For instance, newsrooms might be willing to let the audience determine a small subset of story selection if they experiment and find that allowing the audience even more autonomy does not yield larger economic returns and instead simply diminishes their journalistic authority. Alternatively, newsrooms may never see a tangible tie between engagement and revenue and give up on the pursuit altogether, replicating the fate of the failed public journalism movement. If, however, the pursuit of a deeper audience connection becomes an end in itself, as many audience engagement advocates would like, then the transformation of journalistic practice could be much more significant.

What follows is an analysis of these three case studies that uses a structurational framework to examine how Hearken and *City Bureau* interpret audience engagement, and how they then attempt to bring these interpretations to the forefront of journalism. Within this framework, the agents are journalism workers and stakeholders – including Hearken and *City Bureau* employees, and the editors and reporters they pitch their services to, while the structures include the market information regime they inhabit. The final case study of the *Chicago Tribune* presents a news organization largely wedded to journalism's current market information regime. Contrary to the Hearken and *City Bureau* case studies, this study of the *Tribune* thus demonstrates the way that individual actors reproduce their social world. With that, the research questions are:

RQ1. How do audience engagement advocates and traditional journalists perceive the news audience?

RQ2. How do these perceptions shape their approaches to news production?

RQ3. How do these approaches attempt to maintain or transform the norms of journalistic practice?

RQ4. What role do journalism's structures play in constraining or enabling these attempts?

Chapter Three: Method and Research Sites

This chapter introduces the case studies that comprise the rest of this dissertation. The first section provides background information about each organization studied – Hearken, *City Bureau*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. The second offers an explanation of the data collection and analysis.

Research sites

Hearken

Hearken is a for-profit company founded in 2015 that offers audience engagement tools and consulting to about a hundred news organizations worldwide. Hearken's primary tool is an online platform that invites audiences to submit story ideas, allowing these outlets to explicitly bring the audience into the reporting process. This tool typically takes the form of a graphic on the publisher's webpage with a textbox where audience members can type a question as well as their contact information. Once audience members submit questions, Hearken provides newsrooms with an additional, online platform that allows the audience to vote on whichever question they think is the most interesting. Then, the idea is that a journalist from the newsroom will set out to answer the most popular question, and might even take the person who submitted the question along for the reporting. In interviews and public appearances, the company's CEO and Co-founder Jennifer Brandel has argued that inviting audiences into the reporting process at the very beginning will lead to substantive stories that will garner a larger reception than stories reported without public input.

Hearken's platform is seen by many as being one of the most promising opportunities for folding audience engagement into news production (Brandel, 2015; DeJarnette, 2016; Lumb, 2015). Though it is a for-profit company, Hearken eagerly presents itself as the embodiment of public service journalism values. The company frequently partners with other organizations to host conferences and events designed to connect more local news publishers with the communities they cover. In interviews and public appearances, the company's founder has argued that inviting audiences into the reporting process at the very beginning will lead to substantive stories that will garner a larger reception than investigative stories reported without public input. Many journalism researchers and professionals wonder if Hearken's approach to news audiences will become the new normal. "Hearken's success — or its failure — could tell us a lot about where the journalism industry is going" (DeJarnette, 2016).

Hearken is one of a growing number of organizations involved in the commodification of audience engagement. Some attempt to measure audience engagement (e.g., Chartbeat), others to cultivate it (GroundSource), and still others to teach best practices for pursuing it (the Agora Journalism Center's Gather project and platform). Hearken's revenue model is based on providing its services to newsrooms for an annual subscription fee, which averages about $8,500. Therefore, in order for Hearken to survive financially, it needs to accomplish two things: first, it needs to persuade the news industry to embrace its approach to audience engagement. Then, it needs to convince newsrooms that Hearken's offerings are a necessary ongoing expense. As a result, Hearken's employees frequently write blog posts, give interviews, and attend journalism conferences in order to make the case for their brand of audience engagement to potential news organizations, as well as to present themselves as experts within the field.

City Bureau

The local news nonprofit *City Bureau* is a collective of news professionals that seeks to provide “responsible” and “responsive” reporting to minority communities in Chicago ("About,"). *City Bureau* began in early 2016 with a grant from the McCormick Foundation. Its model involves a core staff that oversees a rotating group of reporters as they produce investigative stories focused primarily on Chicago’s South and West Side communities – areas that comprise an overwhelming portion of Chicago’s black and Hispanic citizens (the South Side is over 90% black, and the West Side is 80% black or Hispanic) and that *City Bureau’s* founders believe to be underreported by bigger name Chicago presses like the *Tribune*. *City Bureau* editors then partner with other outlets to co-publish these stories. *City Bureau’s* reporting has appeared in traditional news publications like *The Chicago Reader* and *The Guardian*, as well as smaller, community presses like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Reporter*.

City Bureau has a stated interest in redefining “what local media means to a community” ("About,"). Similar to Hearken, *City Bureau*’s novel approach to journalism and the audience has garnered it quite a bit of attention from other industry stakeholders. Since it was founded, *City Bureau* has won prestigious journalism awards, and, like Hearken, has been profiled in journalism blogs like *Niemanlab*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *Mediashift* (Dalton, 2015; Lichterman, 2016; Spinner, 2016). Most recently, *City Bureau's* staff successfully raised over $10,000 to build a "public newsroom" on Chicago's South Side and expand its operations, and received a $50,000 grant from Democracy Fund. Other local news nonprofits exist in Chicago, but *City Bureau* has by far made the biggest name for itself as a result of its police misconduct reporting. Because of these early successes, many other foundations and journalists have begun reaching out to *City Bureau* employees in hopes of emulating their approach.

As a small nonprofit, *City Bureau* has only four principal staff members, all of whom are also founders. Two work for *City Bureau* full-time – Editorial Director Darryl Holliday and Community Director Andrea Hart – and two are part-time – Editor Bettina Chang and the Operations Manager Harry Backlund. All four worked in local journalism prior to starting *City Bureau*: Hart covered suburban Chicago for Patch.com, Holliday covered Chicago for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *DNAinfo Chicago*, Backlund is the founding publisher of a community newspaper on the city's south side, and Chang still works fulltime as a web editor for *Chicago Magazine*.

The Chicago Tribune

The final case study is of *The Chicago Tribune*, the 11th largest daily paper in the country (Lipinski, 2016). As the most traditional and oldest news outlet in the sample, the *Tribune* also has the kind of tumultuous past that is typical of a print newspaper. It filed for bankruptcy in 2008, implemented a paywall in 2012, and has undergone many rounds of layoffs and buyouts amidst multiple bouts of ownership changes. Its experiments with attracting online audiences have sometimes very publicly backfired, as was the case in 2012 when it partnered with a Chicago-based content provider to help bolster its online suburban coverage, only to soon back out in the wake of a fake-byline scandal (Lipinski, 2016). In 2016, it was the subject of a brutal tirade by *Last Week Tonight* host John Oliver, who picked on the *Tribune* for renaming itself "tronc" in what many consider a misguided effort to rebrand the company as more digitally focused (Alpert, 2016; Doctor, 2016). Regardless of their success, these efforts indicate that the newspaper is trying to adapt to a changing news media landscape. Comparing these efforts with those undertaken by *City Bureau* and Hearken therefore provides an opportunity to observe how journalism stakeholders from various circumstances differ in their approaches to news production.

More specifically, a case study of the *Tribune* offers the opportunity to compare news production within an organization attempting to reproduce journalistic practice with organizations like Hearken and *City Bureau* that are instead attempting to transform it. Although the *Tribune's* journalists are not following the exact same playbook they were before the newspaper crisis, their routines still overwhelmingly stem from traditional notions of journalism's relationship with its audience. For example, while sitting in on a *Tribune* newsroom meeting in the process of securing their approval for this dissertation, I noticed that the editors discussed the amount of time their audience spent on a story without noting any contributions made by the audience to the production of the story. This suggests that the *Tribune's* overall approach to audience engagement is in line with that of a traditional newsroom, meaning it is reception-oriented.

Including this case study thus allows this project to compare this approach with the more production-oriented approach to audience engagement pursued by *City Bureau* and Hearken. Such a comparison allows this dissertation to explore the differences in audience interpretations underlying these approaches, as well as the way these approaches are enabled or constrained by journalism's institutional structures.

Data collection

The data collection for this project included three ethnographic case studies that unfolded between November 2016 and June 2017. This approach was inspired by both classic and contemporary newsroom ethnographies (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2004; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Kaniss, 1991; Petre, 2015; Tuchman, 1978; Usher, 2014), which used a combination observation of and interviews with the editors, reporters, and managers at news organizations to draw conclusions about newsroom culture and journalistic norms. As these previous studies have demonstrated, ethnographic methods are ideal for uncovering cultural aspects that are difficult to identify using more quantitative methods.

The interviews were an especially integral piece of data collection for two reasons. First, as Coddington observed in his own ethnographic work, journalism professionals spend most of their time staring silently at computer screens (2015). Interviews therefore offer the opportunity to learn from participants what cannot be inferred simply by observing them. This project's interviews were recorded, and ranged in length from thirty minutes to over two hours. The recordings were transcribed. In total, I spent about 500 hours interviewing and observing throughout the course of the data collection process. I noted my observations in field notes, which totaled about 200 single-spaced pages by the end of data collection (not including interview transcripts).

During my interviews, I asked a variety of questions to better understand how my subjects perceived the news audience, how they conceptualized audience engagement, and how their interpretations of both played into their overall approach to news production. I also used these interviews as opportunities to explore how (or if) my subjects attempted to persuade other news industry stakeholders to adopt their interpretation of audience engagement and its role in journalism. Because I interviewed many of these participants multiple times over the course of this study, I was able to ask them both more abstract questions about their views of journalism and the audience, as well as more specific questions that stemmed from my own observations of the way they did their jobs.

Although the methods for the data collection were consistent across each case study, the number of interviews conducted and hours spent observing differed depending on the site. The employees at both Hearken and City Bureau, for example, allowed me to come to their office daily, granted me access to their shared documents and internal messaging channels, and consistently made themselves available for interviews. *The Chicago* Tribune's management, on the other hand, limited my access to one week of observation, though they allowed me to interview any employee who agreed to participate. In short, some sites were more welcoming than others.

Originally, all three sites agreed to the same conditions, which was more or less total transparency. When I first engaged the *Tribune* for this project, for example, the editor I corresponded with agreed to grant me the ability to observe the newsroom, sit in on editorial staff meetings, and conduct interviews. This editor also agreed to share daily online audience data reports. However, at the end of my first week conducting observation and interviews, I was summoned by this editor to their office, where he told me that another senior editor had reported being uncomfortable with my presence. As a result, my access from then on was limited solely to staff interviews.

This discomfort with allowing outsiders to peer into the news production process was notably absent when it came to both Hearken and *City Bureau*. Each of these organizations allowed me to sit in on meetings, observe their daily routines, and see internal documents and correspondence. Unlike my experience with the *Tribune*, at no point during data collection from Hearken and *City Bureau* did these circumstances change. As the case studies themselves reveal, this difference in degrees of access were consistent with each organization's more general approach to the news audience. While Hearken and *City Bureau* seek to make news production a transparent, collaborative process, the *Tribune* maintains a more guarded approach.

What follows is a more detailed explanation of the access I was provided at each site, placed in the order in which the data collection ensued. All of my subjects allowed me to use their names and titles, except in one instance during my fieldwork at the *Tribune*. Northwestern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempted all research involving human subjects in this study.

The Chicago Tribune

Between November 2016 and January 2017, I interviewed 26 *Tribune* employees, including its associate editor, digital editors, section editors, columnists, and investigative and beat reporters. I also interviewed two members of the *Tribune*'s marketing team, which conducts internal audience research to persuade advertisers to partner with the paper. Table 1 shows the names and titles of the people I spoke with, as well as the amount of time the interviews lasted. One *Tribune* employee asked to remain unnamed, and is not included in the table. The total time spent interviewing *Tribune* employees was about 33 hours.

Table 1. Interview Details for *Chicago Tribune* Staff

Title	Name	Hours Recorded
Associate Editor	Colin McMahon	1.0
Associate Managing Editor, Features	Amy Carr	1.3
Associate Managing Editor, Metro	Mark Jacob	1.3
Associate Managing Editor, Sports	Joe Knowles	1.1
B2B Marketing Manager	Robert Smolik	1.25
Beer and Travel Reporter	Josh Noel	0.75
Blue Sky Editor	Andrea Hanis	0.7
Blue Sky Reporter	Meg Graham	0.7
Columnist	Heidi Stevens	1.0
Columnist	Rex Huppke	0.9
Columnist	Steve Chapman	0.9
Creative Director, Tribune Marketing	Robin Gruen	0.5
Deputy Editorial Page Editor	Marie Dillon	1.0
Digital Editor	Randi Stevenson	1.5
Digital News Editor	Brandon Howard	1.5
Digital News Editor	Charlie Johnson	0.85
Digital News Editor	Tom Palmer	3.6
Digital News Editor	Joe Ruppler	3.6
Investigative Reporter	Michael Hawthorne	1.7
Police Reporter	Jeremy Gorner	1.0
Reporter	Dawn Rhodes	1.75
Reporter	Grace Wong	1.0
Senior Digital Editor	Kurt Gessler	1.0
Senior Technical Producer	Destiny Gdalman	1.0
Social Media Assistant	Randi Shaffer	1.0

I also spent one week observing *Tribune* employees (about 40 hours). During this time, I was placed in a cubicle in a pocket of the paper's editorial offices that included a number of other staff reporters who I would eventually interview (e.g., Dawn Rhodes, Michael Hawthorne). I was also allowed to sit in on morning editorial meetings, where decisions were made regarding online story placement for the rest of the day. Most importantly, I was invited to spend hours sitting with the digital news editors, who were generous enough to walk me through their daily routines and field my questions regarding their approach to the paper's audience as well as their own responsibilities. Although my ability to observe the *Tribune* was cut short, I was able to gather incredibly rich data during the two days I spent observing the paper's digital editorial staff and interviewing them about their work.

Hearken

I then spent January through March of 2017 observing and interviewing Hearken employees in their office space in downtown Chicago. I went to Hearken an average of three days a week, and also attended Chicago journalism events where Hearken employees were invited to speak about their tools and services. The total time spent observing was roughly 250 hours. I spent about half of this time in my cubicle in Hearken's office, where I monitored Hearken's Slack channels (its internal messaging service), which included a general channel as well as separate ones for each team (e.g., sales, consulting). I was also given access to internal memos (typically in the form of Google docs) that covered everything from meeting agendas to brainstorms for pitches Hearken would eventually give to prospective clients. A portion of my remaining time was spent in conference rooms throughout the building, where I sat in on staff meetings. These meetings touched on everything from routine status updates to longer, more open-ended discussions about the company's long-term vision. I also occasionally attended meetings between Hearken staff and news publishers that use the Hearken platform.

Finally, I interviewed Hearken employees. At the time of my data collection, there were seven employees in the Hearken office (two other employees were web developers who worked remotely): a CEO and co-founder, a CTO and co-founder, three "engagement consultants," a director of business development, and a business operations manager. As Table 2 shows, I interviewed all seven multiple times throughout this three month period.

Table 2. Interview Details for Hearken Staff

Title	**Name**	**Number of Interviews**	**Hours Recorded**
CEO/Co-Founder	Jennifer Brandel	5	3.75
CTO/Co-Founder	Corey Haines	2	2.2
Engagement Consultant	Ellen Mayer	2	2
Engagement Consultant	Julia Haslanger	1	1.4
Engagement Consultant	Summer Fields	5	3.3
Director of Business Development	Anna Thomas	2	1.65
Business Operations Manager	Remy Schwartz	1	1.25

City Bureau

My data collection concluded with *City Bureau*. From April through June 2017, I observed and interviewed *City Bureau* editors and reporters. *City Bureau* has an unconventional organizational setup, which made observation was less straightforward than it had been at Hearken. For example, only two of *City Bureau*'s four managers work for the organization full-time. The other two split their time between *City Bureau* and other responsibilities (e.g., one has a full-time job at *Chicago Magazine*). Consequently, their work routines were not as predictable as they would be if they were simply coming to the same office each day. This meant that data collection often unfolded in cafes, apartments, and restaurants as much as it did in *City Bureau's* South Side newsroom.

Furthermore, *City Bureau's* reporting staff is constantly changing. The organization's news production model centers on its reporting fellowship program, wherein its editors bring together a group of journalists and oversees them as they pursue investigative reporting projects over the course of ten weeks. Typically once the ten weeks end, these reporters move on to other opportunities. As a result, although many people are involved with *City Bureau*, few work for the organization full-time. In short, observation typically occurred in evenings or on weekends.

Despite this slightly more perplexing set of conditions, I still managed to collect about 180 hours of observation data from *City Bureau*'s four founding managers, as well as from the ten journalists they chose for the Spring 2017 reporting fellowship. Over the course of three months, I observed the weekly newsroom meetings held every Wednesday evening, where *City Bureau* managers would bring this group of journalists together to check in on their progress and provide them with some sort of journalism workshop. I also sat in on meetings held between these journalists to hear about the projects they were pursuing and how they were pursuing them. Finally, I frequently sat in on *City Bureau* meetings held among its founding managers. These meetings touched on everything from day-to-day logistical issues, fundraising possibilities, programming questions, and long-winded discussions about *City Bureau's* aspirations, the purpose of journalism, and its role in society.

I also interviewed everyone who was directly involved with *City Bureau* during this three-month span of data collection (see Table 3). This included the four founding managers as well as the ten journalists participating in the reporting fellowship. I interviewed each of these journalists once; however, I interviewed each of the founding managers several times throughout these few months – sometimes individually, and sometimes as a group. In total, I spent about 22 hours conducting interviews with *City Bureau* managers and journalists.

Table 3. Interview Details for *City Bureau* Staff

Title	**Name**	**Number of Interviews**	**Hours Recorded**
City Bureau Founding Managers	All Founding Managers	2	2.65
Community Director	Andrea Hart	2	2.25
Editor	Bettina Chang	2	1.25
Editorial Director	Darryl Holliday	5	4.68
Operations Director	Harry Backlund	1	1.9
Reporting Fellow	Adeshina Emmanuel	1	1.15
Reporting Fellow	Carolina Cruz	1	0.5
Reporting Fellow	Reuben Unrau	1	0.85
Reporting Fellow	Sarah Conway	1	0.85
Reporting Fellow	Sierra Council	1	1.0
Reporting Fellow	Justin Williams	1	0.75
Reporting Fellow	Martha Bayne	1	1.15
Reporting Fellow	Darien Boyd	1	0.85
Reporting Fellow	Amber Colón Núñez	1	1.0
Reporting Fellow	LaCreshia Birts	1	1.0

I was also granted access to *City Bureau's* Slack, which included a channel for the journalists participating in the reporting fellowship, a channel for journalists who had participated in past cycles, as well as other channels reserved for *City Bureau's* founding managers. These channels provided the founding managers venues to discuss different aspects of the organization (e.g., its finances, its reporting fellowship, and its public newsroom events). Finally, *City Bureau's* founding managers shared internal documents with me, which included programming plans, grant applications, and budgets.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, I took a constant comparative approach, where I examined my data as I collected it while simultaneously reviewing relevant academic literature in an attempt to see how my findings could be contextualized by existing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This approach has been utilized in prior newsroom ethnographic work (Coddington, 2015).

This analysis began during data collection, and consisted of a three-step process. Step one involved reading field notes and interview transcriptions to search for recurring themes surrounding how the employees of each organization perceived the news audience and how these perceptions informed their approaches to news production. The analysis involved paying close attention to the efforts made by these organizations (Hearken and *City Bureau* especially) to bring audience engagement to the forefront of journalism, the obstacles they faced, and their perceived likelihood of success. Alternatively, as frequently occurred within the *Tribune*, it involved noting the efforts made to maintain traditional norms of journalistic practice.

For the second step, I scheduled follow up interviews with both Hearken and *City Bureau* employees to ask about these themes. Because I only was able to interview my *Tribune* participants once, I instead would occasionally pose follow up questions via email. I also often added questions to the list that I drew on for my *Tribune* interviews that were informed by prior interviews with other *Tribune* staff. Although this follow up process did not unfold the same way for all three organizations, it allowed me to confront each organization's employees with my initial findings, and provided them with the opportunity to agree with them or argue alternative interpretations.

Finally, I went through the raw data, my initial themes, and the employees' reaction to those themes to determine what these findings revealed about each organization's perception of the audience, how these perceptions informed their approach to news production, and how these approaches reckoned with journalism's market information regime.

Researcher credibility and reflexivity

Because this dissertation uses ethnographic methods, the quality of the research depends on my ability to accurately recognize and represent the settings in which I gathered my data. As a result, the credibility of this work depends not only on the rigor of the data collection, but also on whether or not my own interests and biases played into the process by which the data were collected. My interest in journalism and the profession's relationship with the audience stems from working as an editor for an online news site for three years, during which time audience awareness and engagement were increasingly emphasized. I believe these experiences simply informed the questions I thought to ask my interview subjects, and neither affected how they responded or how I shaped those responses. My prior experiences have left me genuinely interested in the practice of journalism and the role of the audience, but that interest is driven by curiosity, not a passion for any particular outcome. In other words, I've pursued this project to examine how different stakeholders attempt to solve a problem, not because I want to take a side in the pursuit of a specific solution.

Ethnographic research also requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher. While in the field, I often wondered how my personal background and professional experiences affected my interactions with people at each of the three sites. For instance, many of the people I interviewed during my case studies of *City Bureau* and Hearken explicitly described the need for the news industry to replace the number of white men in positions of power with people of color. I often wondered if the research participants said these things with hesitation, or if there were other participants who did *not* say these things, because I am a white male. In these instances, however, the impression I got was that my internal reaction was overly sensitive. All the participants who made these claims did so with total confidence. I never caught any glances from my interviewees that indicated they were checking to see whether or not they had offended me. This was a relief from my perspective, as it indicated that my participants saw me as an interviewer above all else, and felt comfortable giving me totally honest answers.

There was one other notable instance where reflexivity came into play. A *City Bureau* editor described how the organization's reporters might pursue a project that culminates in a live event rather than any published piece of media. At first, I was confused by this response, and asked if this live event would eventually be recapped in an article or video. The editor casually responded that it might but it also might not. Then, when he saw that my brow had furrowed, he gave me a look that indicated he didn't understand why I was having such a hard time with this. I told him that my conception of journalism was one where a reporter's effort always culminated with an article – that was the finished product – and that I was struggling to understand this alternative conception where the published piece is beside the point. My experience in journalism had led me to consider the end goal of news production one way, and to assume that was something that would not change. However, by (eventually) becoming reflexive enough to acknowledge this bias, I was able to engage in a conversation to learn about how *City Bureau* was actively attempting to change not just journalistic practice, but the form journalism takes altogether. As a result, although this discussion initially hit a wall due to my own biases, it ended up being an important part of discovering how *City Bureau* perceives the audience, and how that perception shapes its efforts to transform journalistic practice.

Chapter Four: Hearken

This chapter investigates Hearken, a company that offers audience engagement services to news outlets worldwide. My case study reveals Hearken to be an organization explicitly focused on bringing production-oriented audience engagement into journalistic practice. In fact, its very survival as a company depends on its effectiveness accomplishing this task. However, due to news industry confusion surrounding how audience engagement should be defined and measured, Hearken is unable to quantify the benefit of its offerings within journalism's current market information regime. Instead, Hearken's pitch to newsrooms relies primarily on appeals to intuition. Drawing on Giddens' structuration theory, this chapter argues that Hearken's initial success demonstrates the powerful role gut feelings can play in allowing individual agents to overcome structural constraints as they attempt institutional transformation.

A dissatisfied, distrustful news audience

Hearken sees the news audience as a group of people who are frustrated by their powerlessness when it comes to journalism. Its staff believes that people want a more egalitarian and transparent relationship with news organizations. This conceptualization is evident by Hearken's approach to audience engagement: Hearken sells a platform that gives newsrooms the ability to solicit questions from the audience, in an attempt to make the news production process more collaborative. They also believe the audience wants to be made more explicitly aware of how the news production process takes place, as evidenced by Hearken's most recently released tool, which allows reporters to share their notes about an article before the finished product is published. In short, Hearken sees the audience as dissatisfied with journalism in its current form, and eager for it to become something more collaborative and transparent.

This conceptualization differs from the traditional outlook on the audience in that it assumes that *journalists* are the reason investigative stories fail to attract large numbers of readers because they fail to explicitly bring the audience into the news production process. Traditional journalists believe that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the way they report and publish political news stories, and that it is unfortunate but unavoidable that a large portion of the news audience will always find the topic dull or unappealing. Over the course of my fieldwork, I heard Hearken's staff explicitly tell me that this idea is completely wrong, and that traditional journalists are blaming the audience for a problem of their own making. According to Hearken's staff, the audience wants public affairs journalism; however, they only want it if it reflects who they are – meaning it should incorporate their diversity of experiences and voices into the final product.

Engaging the public, and representing them, too

Another reason Hearken employees believe the audience tends to disregard investigative reporting is because it is produced by a homogenous group of journalists who do not reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the people they are trying to reach. Newsrooms have traditionally attracted white, middle class men, and Hearken employees believe the lack of other kinds of representation results in repelling the news audience. As Fields explained,

> If you're going claim to be public and for the public, you need to represent the public you are in. You can't do that if your newsrooms are homogenous and not

> representative of the population you're in. You can't have the stories without a diversity of voices contributing to that.

In other words, Hearken's interpretation of the news audience is based on an underlying assumption that the audience avoids political news stories out of dissatisfaction with their presentation rather than a lack of interest in their subject matter. The news audience feels ignored, and has grown distrustful as a result. To get the audience to click on these types of stories, according to Hearken Business Development Director Anna Thomas, news organizations need to "Prove to your audience that it's not just you and your thoughts and your perspectives but you care about other people too." The next section explores how Hearken's staff attempts to put this philosophy into practice, by providing journalists the tools and skills necessary to more explicitly communicate with their audiences.

Making journalism transparent and collaborative

Hearken's perception of the audience as dissatisfied and alienated by journalism has motivated the company's employees to transform news production so that audiences play a more central role in the process. From their perspective, the news audience feels neglected because newsrooms tend to be "optimized for speed," as Hearken Co-founder and CEO Jennifer Brandel put it, rather than optimized for trust. What she means is that news organizations typically prioritize getting many stories published quickly because doing so increases the changes of bringing in more readers, which leads to more ad revenue. In a nutshell, Hearken employees believe audiences avoid journalism because they don't trust journalists. That lack of trust stems from a lack of clarity about how news production works, as well as a distinct feeling that their voices are being ignored.

As a result, Hearken's approach to audience engagement is based in the assumption that if news organizations listen to audiences more explicitly, they will increase audience trust, and thus garner more audience interest in and understanding of the news itself. As Haslanger explained,

> The benefit for the public is that you are not alienated by your news. You're able to feel a part of your community and a part of the information that you are getting. You spend less mental energy trying to figure out is this trustworthy, where did this come from, who are these people, if you sort of are able to build a relationship with a newsroom and if you're able to ask questions and participate and see the process, see the transparency.

Brandel put this hypothesis more succinctly in one of our interviews: "Engagement builds trust, and since we build engagement, we help build trust."

Journalism as a conversation

Hearken's employees feel that journalists should pursue an interpretation of audience engagement that would render news production and consumption more conversational than transactional. For example, Hearken's staff believe that newsrooms get better, more thoughtful contributions from the audience when they solicit questions as opposed to story ideas or comments, and often made this distinction to journalists they were either pitching their product to or already partnered with. Hearken's staff argue that when journalists solicit comments to a story that has already been published, they are valuing their own reporting above the audience's input. Similarly, they argue that when journalists solicit the audience for story ideas it comes off simply as the newsroom putting their workload onto their readers. Hearken Engagement Consultant Julia Haslanger touched on this while recapping a presentation she had given to a newsroom that had just signed up to use Hearken:

> This is about doing stuff for our audience not them doing stuff for us … this is a system to give voice to the people who aren't able to reach you in other ways, which was another way to reiterate this is a way for people who don't have access to you to be heard.

According to Hearken's staff, questions also change the dynamic of the conversation between the journalists and the audience. During an interview, Summer Fields, another engagement consultant, simply stated, "I believe in the power of questions." She elaborated that questions

> give your audience a chance to come to you from a place of curiosity, openness and wonderment. They start conversations in a way that asserting and opinions do not.

In addition to this question-soliciting platform, Hearken has also recently unveiled a tool intended to allow news reporters to share their notes about stories they are currently working on, so that audience members could chime in with questions or suggestions as a story was being reported on and written. The logic underlying this type of engagement is that journalists cannot serve their audiences without a more explicit dialogue. As Haslanger explained during one of our interviews:

> [Hearken] gives them a very clear, determined way to make sure that they are serving their audiences and to build relationships with those audiences in a way that a lot of just talking about ideas in newsrooms doesn't accomplish.

Haines similarly explained that this approach to audience engagement was designed to address the news audience's feeling of exclusion from the editorial process:

> Just that idea of bringing the audience into the editorial room and giving them that seat, and listening to them and really partnering, and having the public be really part of the reporting process through all the phases, not just the end.

In short, Hearken's staff takes a production-oriented approach to their interpretation of audience engagement that stems from their assumptions about what audiences want and are currently missing from contemporary journalism. They see audience engagement as a process by which journalists deliberately and sincerely bring the news audience into the news production process. Hearken's products are consequently designed to do exactly that, by providing an online interface and consulting services that encourages news organizations to solicit questions from audience members about whatever topic or news story they might be interested in, and invites the audience to witness and participate in news production.

However, Hearken's approach to the news audience is not entirely idealistic. In interviews, Hearken employees were quick to temper their optimism about the news audience with a potent dose of skepticism about people. For example, while its employees believe that the audience feels neglected by and is distrustful of journalists, they also believe that not everyone necessarily *should* be listened to in the first place. As Haines explained,

> I believe that as a whole people are stupid. I think at an individual basis they're not. And so being able to listen to individuals, like our core belief is everyone deserves to be heard. I don't believe everyone deserves to be listened to, but I believe everybody has the right to be heard and that's on an individual basis, bringing that in.

In other words, Hearken employees do not believe that all individual input is equally valuable. A racist should be able to tell a reporter what kinds of stories he or she would like investigated, but the reporter can use his or her discretion when deciding how or if to respond. The news audience comprises different people with different perspectives, and journalism should encourage these viewpoints to be expressed, without necessarily promising to act on them.

Increase engagement, increase the audience?

A less obvious theory shared by some at Hearken is that increasing audience engagement will also increase audience size. The logic underlying this belief stems from the idea that when one audience member poses a question to a news organization, he or she is likely speaking for others who did not speak up and may not be regular readers of the news; however, once that story is published, these people may suddenly decide to tune in. It could also be that, in soliciting questions, journalists demonstrate that they would like to do something for their audience, and this act in and of itself might be interpreted as an act of goodwill that lures more people to the organization. Finally, it could stem from the fact that when news organizations publish stories that began as audience questions, they often highlight the person who asked the question in the story. Brandel wonders if this may lead people to be more interested in the story because of the novelty of seeing a normal person included rather than because of any innate interest in the topic. As she explained,

> It’s a natural phenomenon that when people are paid attention to by institutions or people with more power than them, it's exciting. It makes us all feel validated and like we matter, and that's a fundamental thing that newsrooms could do a better job recognizing and capitalizing on… Right now the news is more – I call it a funhouse mirror where it's only about extraordinary people whether they're extraordinarily great or extraordinarily terrible.

Hearken’s employees also believe that the adoption of their interpretation of audience engagement will lead newsrooms to cultivate more audience loyalty. They believe that once audience members see that a news organization is willing and eager to hear what they think and is producing news stories based on their input, they will become much more devoted to that organization. As Brandel said during an interview,

> I’ve gotten used to being able in a sales environment to say you’d be surprised that your audience will have great questions, if you don’t believe in them. It’s not because they’re terrible. It’s because they've had a poorly designed relationship dynamic with you up until now.

Finally, Hearken’s employees believe that journalism that reflects its audiences more accurately and thus makes them more engaged news consumers, will help improve democratic participation. As Brandel explained,

> I don’t think journalism can take all the responsibility for making democracy happen, but I think it’s like when journalism doesn’t work, it’s not even like the wheels need greasing from something else. It’s like the machine stops working in a really dangerous way as we're seeing right now… The more [journalism] can reflect regular every day people making change and doing things, the more I think people will be asking themselves a question. Everyone else is doing this. Why aren’t I doing something? … What we’re ultimately trying to do is strengthen the fabric of civil society, and journalism is a really good method.

In summary, the employees at Hearken agree with traditional journalists that the news audience does not tune into certain kinds of content – most notably public affairs news. However, Hearken’s employees attribute this to a failure on the part of journalists to actively seek audience collaboration in the news production process. As a result, employees of Hearken attempt to make news stories more compelling to the audience by inviting the audience to participate in their production. Doing so, they believe, will lead people to trust journalism more, which will encourage more of them to tune in.

Selling the appeal of engagement to newsrooms

Because Hearken’s success depends on whether or not news publishers embrace its interpretation of audience engagement, the company maintains an enormous focus on pitching this interpretation to newsrooms. This section explores Hearken’s pitching process by describing how Hearken pitches the value of audience engagement to potential clients, the obstacles that prevent Hearken from quantifying that value, and the implications of those obstacles for how journalistic practice might or might not be changing. These findings draw on Giddens' theory of structuration to portray Hearken's employees as individual agents attempting to transform news production despite the structural constraints posed by journalism's market information regime.

Hearken's pitch

Hearken staff were aware that understandings of audience engagement varied throughout the news industry. As a result, they would begin their pitches by first determining how the potential client conceptualized engagement and its role in news production. During a staff meeting focused on assembling the exact phrasing of the questions that would be used to gather this information, Brandel wondered about the best way to ask newsrooms how they evaluated the performance of their stories. She suggested, "How do you measure if your stories are relevant to your audiences?" Thomas commented that the question should be broader, so it did not presume that newsrooms were already thinking about how their audiences *felt* about the news. They agreed to go with, "How do you measure if your stories are successful?"

Hearken employees would typically ask this question before pitch meetings with newsrooms that might potentially become clients. The answer to this question indicated to Hearken staff how much work they needed to do to move the newsroom to *its* definition of engagement, and to persuade the newsroom of its importance. While nearly all the newsrooms participating in the pitch meetings I observed immediately pointed to pageviews as a primary indicator for story performance, some did so more sheepishly than others. For example, one journalist from a west coast, daily newspaper responded, "We look at pageviews… but we don't apply a measuring stick to too many things. We're trying to look at the big picture." These responses indicate the significance of the current audience currency within journalism's market information regime, as well as the ambivalence some journalists feel towards it.

The next priority for Hearken employees during these calls would be to learn what the newsroom hoped Hearken's services would help them accomplish. In many instances, the newsroom representative would cite a desire to grow the organization's audience. However, Hearken's employees have not explicitly set out to help news publishers find larger audiences, but to help publishers form better relationships with their audiences. Their underlying motivation stems from their belief the public feels alienated by journalism in its current form. Therefore, when Hearken staff would pitch their services, they would first try to convince potential clients that a small news audience was not their primary problem, but a symptom of their failure to adequately engage the public. Because the claim that news organizations are struggling to attract large audiences is easily verified by journalism's currency, it goes all but unquestioned throughout the news industry. Hearken's claim that the solution to this problem is to increase audience engagement, on the other hand, is more or less based entirely in the intuition and experiences of Hearken's founder and staff.

In fact, Hearken exists not because of an obvious, empirically demonstrated problem, but because of a gut reaction its founder experienced when she first began working as a professional journalist. Brandel told me the following anecdote during an interview, and would paraphrase it during pitches:

> One day I never had any power about what news my community would get, and the next day I did, and I thought, "That's awesome!" And then I thought, "That's fucked up!" … It was amazing to suddenly have permission to do things I was interested in with the assumption that if I was interested, other people would be, too. But it bothered me that I had that power just by being on the inside.

Brandel's start in journalism made her keenly aware that journalists hold an overwhelming amount of authority when it comes to which stories get reported and which do not. She believed this imbalance likely discouraged the public from becoming loyal news consumers, and argued as much during her presentations to newsrooms.

Hearken's staff could not cite an engagement metric to demonstrate the impact of its tools and services because no such metric that has industry-wide backing currently exists. Instead, the company's employees would draw on anecdotes that similarly functioned as appeals to intuition. Brandel, for example, often drew upon her experiences with Curious City, which was ostensibly the first iteration of Hearken that she began at Chicago's public radio station:

> When I was a journalist, I was able to see it directly in my newsroom, and it's all anecdotal, but it's like you have enough anecdotes and you start to see a pattern. You wonder if there's something to it, and intuitively it feels like there is, so I haven't like gone to get data beyond my own experience, and the experiences I'm hearing from other reporters who are having these relationships, but from my experience as a reporter, getting to work with a member of the public was really meaningful for them.

Hearken's employees drew on these anecdotes to argue that its offerings were both a means to better journalism, as well as a means to economic returns. I observed PowerPoint presentations that included slides about how some of the news publishers using Hearken's services reported more pageviews or an increase in memberships or subscribers. Presenting these claims was tricky for Hearken's employees, who knew they were more circumstantial than empirical, but also understood how influential they could be in winning a potential newsroom over.

More often, however, Hearken's staff utilized anecdotes to focus less on the company's financial benefits and more on abstract notions of what journalism should look like and accomplish. Hearken's underlying argument in support of its interpretation of audience engagement is that when news publishers meaningfully connect with their audiences, they become better qualified to serve them. To persuade journalists that they could facilitate these connections, Hearken's employees would point to results from a survey they had given to its partnering newsrooms that made positive claims about how Hearken helped them "serve their organization's mission" and "solve problems of audience engagement."

The challenges to quantifying engagement

These observations reveal the structural constraints that individual actors like Hearken face when their market information regime's currency has little to do with the services they aspire to provide. Even within a news media landscape that includes a variety of empirical data about audience behavior, there is currently no public measure that can prove (or disprove) that the audience wants more control of and say in the way that journalism gets produced. If an engagement metric already existed as an audience currency, Hearken's efforts to first discover whether or not newsrooms care about engagement, as well as how they measure it, would be largely unnecessary. However, within the current market information regime, Hearken staff must not only convince newsrooms to pay for their help improving engagement, but that the pursuit of engagement is worthwhile to begin with.

These observations also expose Hearken's two data deficiencies. First, there is a lack of empirical data corroborating that journalism's ails stem from a lack of audience engagement. While surveys show that the public is distrustful of the news (Swift, 2016), and the economic model for the news industry is increasingly viewed as unsustainable, no clear-cut, quantitative study has established that these circumstances exist because audiences feeling excluded from journalism in its current form. Maybe Brandel is right, and audiences do not trust journalism because they do not feel its production includes their voices or represents their views. But perhaps the opposite is true, and journalism's attempt at a detached, neutral tone is one of the few things preserving what little trust is still has.

This leads to the second data deficiency: Because Hearken is unable to prove that a lack of audience engagement is the root of journalism's problems, the company is also unable to quantify the effect of an increase in audience engagement on journalism's overall condition. Engagement Consultant Ellen Mayer acknowledged this lack of empirical data during one of our interviews:

> The only data that we have, that we, like, own, you know, is how many questions are they getting, how many votes are they getting, which I don't actually think is that important, honestly.

This data gap means, among other things, Hearken struggles to show that audience engagement can lead to more revenue. One news organization recently attempted to empirically prove this connection: Bitch Media's staff dug into its analytic data and found that readers who signed up for the company's email list after reading a Hearken-prompted story were more likely to become paying members of the publication than those who signed up for emails after seeing a non-Hearken related piece of content (Lesniak, 2017). However, the process by which Bitch Media's staff made this discovery was onerous, which is likely one of the reasons it has not been replicated.

As a result, Hearken's success depends on its staff's ability to persuade potential clients to more or less have faith that audience engagement will help them in some indispensable way. This was especially evident when staff held post-pitch debriefings. After these presentations, Brandel and her team would wonder if the newsroom "got it" or not, meaning did they accept Hearken's argument that the news audience wants to be more involved in news production. This emphasis on philosophical persuasion without the aid of empirical evidence left Hearken overly dependent on advocates in the newsrooms it partnered with. When those advocates left their newsroom for other jobs, Hearken often lost their former newsrooms as clients.

In short, the news industry's current market information regime, which privileges measures of audience size and lacks an industry-wide measure for engagement, leaves Hearken in a precarious position. First, it makes it impossible for Hearken to ignore what it is also unable to empirically demonstrate: that increasing its interpretation of audience engagement will yield economic returns. As a result, Hearken's ability to convince newsrooms that they should pursue its interpretation of audience engagement depends on whether or not those newsrooms instinctively believe that audiences are likely to consume more journalism when they are invited to play a larger role in its production.

Implications for journalistic practice

These findings illustrate the power dynamic at play in determining journalistic practice by revealing how dominant market information regimes constrain attempts by individual actors to transform the institution in which they reside. This power dynamic, however, is not entirely skewed towards journalism's structures. Although Hearken has been unable to prove that it can deliver on its claims, the company has found many newsrooms that are willing to pay for its offerings regardless. Over the course of my fieldwork, I noticed that even publishers struggling for economic survival agreed to partner with Hearken because they thought its conceptualization of the audience fit their intuition. For instance, while recapping a pitch she gave to a large, daily newspaper, Haslanger described how its reporters and editors grew visibly excited during her explanation about why audience engagement would strengthen the bond between journalists and the audience:

> The slide they were most excited about was benefits to their reporters of feeling fulfilled – you're talking to someone who appreciates the work that you're doing, you feel like you're serving your audience… they seemed to like that a lot.

And during a separate conversation, Mayer explained that Hearken's mission resonates with journalists' sense that there is indeed a troubling distance between news producers and consumers that more explicit engagement can help bridge:

> Everybody's like, "We think this is important, we believe in what you're doing, we don't need to be convinced, you know, of the model or the process, we just want to hear, like, how – what's the best way for us to do it where we're at?"

In fact, Hearken is no longer even the only organization proselytizing its interpretation of audience engagement: In early 2018, The Lenfest Institute announced a $650,000 grant to subsidize nonprofit newsrooms interested in using Hearken's services (Bilton, 2018). Some Hearken employees assumed that newsroom adoption of the Hearken platform despite the company's inability to empirically measure its worth stemmed from desperation within the news media landscape to find a more financially tenable model of news production. As Brandel said:

> I don't know any newsroom that doesn't on some level feel desperate, even if it's not like – even if their newsroom is doing okay, no layoffs, everyone feels okay, just the marinade of the industry right now is one of extreme shit-your-pants fear… So I do think there's a combination between, "I know that relationships and engagement are important" and "ad revenue is continuously dropping."

In other words, Hearken has tapped into journalists' uncertainty about what they should do to help their publications survive, as well as their gut feeling that improving the relationship between news producers and the audience is likely to be a step in the right direction. As a result, newsrooms have partnered with Hearken despite its incompatibility with journalism's market information regime. There is so much confusion within the current news media landscape that Hearken's pitch of "Journalism's relationship with the audience is broken. We can help you fix it," ends up having a profoundly effective appeal. As Brandel put it during one of our interviews, "We have to try something."

Their initial success notwithstanding, some Hearken employees are concerned that their struggle to provide proof diminishes the likelihood that their company will endure. Sometimes Brandel seemed exasperated by what she saw as the news industry's focus on metrics at the expense of common sense. In our final interview, she asked, “What things should we just say, ‘You know what? There doesn’t need to be data. We all know this to be true.’” To Brandel, the need for journalism to improve its relationship with the audience was so intuitive, its benefit so obvious, that the question of measures like audience size seemed to be a counter-productive distraction.

Summary

Hearken’s interpretation of audience engagement pushes newsrooms to solicit questions from the audience, in an attempt to make journalism more collaborative and transparent. This production-oriented approach stems from an assumption that the news audience is dissatisfied with journalism’s detached, one-way format. While traditional journalists assume the news audience is inherently uninterested in specific kinds of news, the people behind Hearken believe that journalists are actually the ones to blame for low turnout for public affairs reporting. They therefore want to make news production more collaborative and transparent, because they believe doing so will make journalism more relevant to the public.

There are significant structural obstacles undermining Hearken’s attempt to make journalistic practice more audience-focused. As these findings reveal, journalism’s market information regime constrains Hearken’s ability to provide evidence that its interpretation of audience engagement will benefit newsrooms. Yet the company’s initial success, despite appealing primarily to journalists’ intuition, reveals a capacity among individual agents to disregard these constraints if they fly in the face of their gut instincts. Many journalism stakeholders innately believe that if news publishers pay closer attention to understanding and communicating with their audiences, they will find revenue they desperately need while providing impactful, public service journalism. Their efforts to make this belief a reality suggest that the push towards more audience-focused journalism might last, even if Hearken does not.

Chapter Five: *City Bureau*

This chapter examines *City Bureau*, a local news nonprofit that shares Hearken's public service journalism ideals. As this chapter and the previous one reveal, the people behind both organizations believe that traditional journalism fails its audience by not including them in the news production process. As a result, audiences distrust journalism and feel unmotivated to consume it. Both Hearken and *City Bureau* pursue institutional change to journalistic norms in hopes of making news production more transparent and collaborative. In other words, both aspire to make journalism a profession that meaningfully embraces production-oriented audience engagement.

As this chapter shows, however, Hearken and *City Bureau* differ in the application of these ideals, especially in the way each reckons with the constraints imposed by journalism's market information regime. Because Hearken is a for-profit company selling its interpretation of audience engagement to newsrooms, the company focuses primarily on persuading other journalists that its conception of engagement is valuable and worth adopting. The company therefore devotes much of its resources to finding ways to frame its offerings in a way that will resonate with other journalism stakeholders struggling to find economic sustainability. *City Bureau*, on the other hand, is a news generating organization, so its day-to-day operations include training journalists to produce work where this kind of engagement plays a central role. *City Bureau* then partners with other presses that publish this journalism so that it finds specific audiences. *City Bureau's* founders believe that the organizations publishing this work and the journalists involved in its creation will become convinced that this more community-focused approach to news production is valuable, and worth increasing. In short, while Heartken attempts to lead by persuasion, *City Bureau* attempts to lead by example.

A 'damaged' and 'misrepresented' audience

City Bureau's founders believe that the audience they are focused on – Chicago's South and West Side community members – have been misrepresented by traditional journalists and unfairly left out of the stories told about them. These communities comprise a majority of the city's black and Hispanic residents, and *City Bureau*'s staff believes the stories told about these people far too often focus on the negative aspects of their communities (e.g., drugs, gun violence) than anything else. As a result, they tend to cast these communities in an inaccurate, two-dimensional light. As *City Bureau* Editor Bettina Chang said, "Those communities, which mostly have black and brown residents, are damaged by media coverage."

As is the case with the other two organizations in this dissertation, *City Bureau's* audience perception stems from a combination of data and intuition. In interviews, its founders drew on audience data and their own experience working in Chicago's news media ecosystem to conclude what seems to go all but undisputed by other journalism stakeholders in the city: that Chicago's South and West residents do not tune into news stories about their communities. However, unlike *Chicago Tribune's* editors and reporters, who attribute this observation to the audience's lack of interest in or awareness of this reporting, *City Bureau's* editors believe that it's the journalism itself that is to blame. They argue that the approach to news production taken by traditional journalists leave the residents of these communities with little reason to trust them. Chang explained,

> There's not enough trust between communities and journalists, and oftentimes these minority communities, because of the fact that they feel misrepresented, they feel like they're being harmed, and they feel like the people who are producing this journalism don't look like them, don't understand them.

City Bureau's founders attribute these circumstances in large part to the demographic composition of traditional newsrooms. Journalism has historically attracted mostly white, middle-class employees (Clarke, 2014), and *City Bureau's* founders are convinced that these white journalists likely live on Chicago's North Side and therefore cannot report a story set in the city's South Side community as well as someone who actually lives there. As *City Bureau* Operations Director Harry Backlund explained,

> It just means something for a white reporter to go into a black neighborhood and write about violence, and it doesn't matter how sensitive you are or how carefully you listen, there is a level of damage that you're going to do just from your presence.

Everyone I interviewed that was affiliated with *City Bureau* shared this explanation, including its four founders and the ten reporters that comprised its spring 2017 cycle. They argued that white journalists living on the city's North Side could not escape their own assumptions, nor could they overlook their editorial staff's bias towards reaching a majority white audience (two claims supported by prior newsroom studies (Gans, 2004; McChesney & Pickard, 2011)). As *City Bureau* Reporter LaCreshia Birts said,

> Journalists tell stories in a way that intrigues white people. I feel like a lot of people of color are even tuning out of traditional mediums of journalism because they feel like their voices are not being uplifted. Issues that they might feel important or like I might feel important, I don't feel like news agencies do a good job of covering it.

In other words, South and West Side audiences are bound to be disappointed by journalism so long as journalism stems from people who don't look like them working at organizations that don't feel part of their community. *City Bureau* Reporter Sierra Council put it more succinctly: "When you read enough stories and don't see yourself in the stories, that's the first sign of, 'My experience is not represented here.'"

From one, many

One assumption that underlies *City Bureau's* audience perception is that there is not one mass audience, but many distinct audiences, and that treating the audience as one homogenous group is bound to leave pockets feeling excluded or mistreated. As Holliday explained, "If you talk about mass media… you cannot understate what mass means, and that it meant white people, and it meant rich, white people." *City Bureau* instead assumes the audience comprises one large, mostly white audience that benefits from traditional, mainstream journalism, and then other, mostly non-white audiences in desperate need of more direct news media attention.

City Bureau's approach is a reaction against commercial journalism "mass audience" approach to news production, where reporters and editors assumed a neutral, detached tone in order to appeal to as many people as possible (Webster, 2014; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). This resulted in reporters and editors focusing predominantly on their own demographic: educated, white, middle-class males (Epstein, 1974; Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). As a result, news organizations have struggled to address women, minorities, lower-income groups, and those "on the fringes of society" (Clarke, 2014; Hess, 2015; McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Mersey, 2010, p. 129; Nadler, 2016; Richards, 2012). News ethnographies throughout the twentieth century portray this oversight not as a malicious attempt to exclude specific populations, but as an unintended consequence of the news industry comprising a mostly homogenous group of people and treating its audience as a similarly homogenous mass (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978).

Public service journalists, on the other hand, often explicitly acknowledge the existence of distinct audiences and express concern for what they interpret as mistreatment of these audiences by traditional news publishers. For example, many of the *City Bureau* reporters and editors I spoke with pointed to descriptions of gun violence in Chicago's largest, daily newspapers (e.g., *The Chicago* Tribune, *The Chicago Sun-Times*) as an example of how traditional journalists perpetuate ideas about a community while also maintaining their distance from it. As *City Bureau* reporter Ruben Unrau explained, "Some of these people on the South and West Sides, the first time they interact with a reporter or journalist is after a shooting on their most horrific day of their life." The implication within Unrau's remark is that journalists are unlikely to be out reporting in these communities for reasons unrelated to violence, which means these residents will only be portrayed by the tragic events surrounding them if they get portrayed in the press at all.

When the voice from nowhere is actually from somewhere

City Bureau's editors and reporters audience perception also calls into question the notion of journalistic objectivity, because it suggests that what one journalist considers an accurate story might actually be framed in a way that some portion of the audience will feel is a misrepresentation. For instance, traditional journalism tends to privilege elite sources (e.g., public officials, academics, business leaders) over community voices because journalists assume there is an implicit expertise associated with the former that may not exist with the latter (Gans, 2004; Marchionni, 2013a; Nip, 2008). Additionally, community voices are typically harder to come by for journalists who may not actually live in or know much about the community. In either case, these elite sources and community voices may both have fact-based insights into an unfolding story; however, what they choose to focus on may lead to an overarching difference in the way the story is eventually framed.

From the perspective of *City Bureau's* editors and reporters, these circumstances are exacerbated by the fact that journalism has traditionally not invited audiences into the news production process, nor has it been transparent about what that process entails. As *City Bureau* Editorial Director Darryl Holliday said, "[People] don't know how stories are created, how they're constructed. They see the end result." So *City Bureau* believes that audiences not only feel misrepresented by journalism, but also confused about how journalism is even assembled in the first place. From *City Bureau's* perspective, this uncertainty is just more reason for audiences to be wary of news organizations.

In short, *City Bureau* believes that there is no single, mass audience, but that people instead comprise smaller, separate audiences, and some receive more media attention than others. *City Bureau's* editors and reporters are specifically focused on the audiences that comprise Chicago's black and Hispanic communities, who they believe have been misrepresented and unfairly treated by the city's traditional journalists. Though these conclusions stem in part from audience data, they primarily draw from *City Bureau* founders' collective experiences in journalism and their innate sense of what audiences want and what they are not getting from news. Furthermore, *City Bureau* believes that these audiences would likely trust and tune into the news if they felt more explicitly included in the news production process, and more honestly portrayed in the end result. Holliday summed this philosophy up during one of our interviews: “Let’s make the media more diverse, more inclusive, more reflective of people – how they live, more equitable in terms of how we portray certain communities, that that will increase trust.”

Focusing on community engagement and a diversity of voices

Because *City Bureau’s* founders have embraced this audience perception, their approach to news production focuses predominantly on efforts to make its South and West Side audiences feel more included in the journalistic process and more accurately represented in the finished product. Its managers often described their approach to news production as an attempt to “democratize” journalism. The organization utilizes several methods to tackle this pursuit: first, it maintains its reporting fellowship, a ten-week cycle that involves a mix of people of varying professional reporting experience who come together to work on long-form pieces of investigative journalism. These pieces eventually get published in small, community focused publications (e.g., *The South Side Weekly*) or larger, more traditional presses that partner with *City Bureau* (e.g., *The Guardian*). By and large the group of reporting fellows tends to comprise people of color, especially those who grew up or live in the South and West Side neighborhoods they have set out to cover. As Chang explained, “We try to choose people who have a very direct connection to the South and West Sides, because we think that in terms of the media ecosystem that's where it’s most lacking.”

City Bureau's reporting fellows meet as a group one evening each week to discuss the projects they're working on as well as to participate in workshops that, taken together, basically formed an introductory course to public service journalism. During my fieldwork, these workshops sometimes focused on fairly conventional aspects of journalistic practice (e.g., advice from an investigative reporter, guidance for digging into big data sets); however, other workshops were far more obviously focused on increasing the reporters' reflexivity when it came to their interactions with their community sources. For example, one workshop focused on how people deal with collective trauma. It was apparent that *City Bureau* reporters were already primed to be sensitive towards the communities they aspired to cover, and these sorts of workshops seemed designed to get them thinking about how best to apply that sensitivity to their work.

From *City Bureau's* founders' perspective, the reporting fellowship serves two purposes. First, it results in journalistic output made by people with a more personal connection to the audiences they're covering. In the short-term, they hope this causes some South and West Side residents to feel more positively about journalists than they would have otherwise, simply due to their interactions with *City Bureau's* staff or their reactions to their stories. And second, it gives these journalists a professional boost they can use to make themselves more attractive as job candidates at more traditional (i.e., more white) news organizations, thus increasing the diversity of voices in their reporting staffs. As Holliday explained:

> You can't get people into these newsrooms, to like embody these things that we think should happen, if like they are not hirable or if they're not, like, desirable candidates. So, like, the bylines and the connections with these publications that we know – that to me is kind of coopting the system in order to like get what I

> want in the end, which is reporters who really, truly embody the spirit of what it means to be civically engaged, active journalists, and to create products and reports that allow others to be more informed and civically engaged.

In other words, *City Bureau's* founders' approach to news production also functions as a two-pronged effort to influence journalistic practice, by setting an example with its own output as well as by attempting to help the journalists that share their philosophy about the audience and news production find their way into newsrooms that might not otherwise consider hiring them.

A novel philosophy, a traditional application

The fact that *City Bureau's* managers have all worked in traditional journalism, combined with the fact that they frequently partner with other, more conventional publications, may explain why the actual day-to-day reporting and editing *City Bureau* oversees is far more aligned with traditional journalistic norms than its audience perception might otherwise suggest. Although *City Bureau's* mission is in many ways a reaction against what its founders see as issues with traditional journalism, the *City Bureau* news production process is in many ways similar to what unfolds in most newsrooms. The editors listen to pitches and decide what stories should ultimately be pursued. The reporters interview sources and collect data. They write drafts, which *City Bureau* managers edit. To be sure, *City Bureau* editors are explicitly focused on pursuing stories that they believe more accurately reflect the South and West Side communities, and encouraged their reporters to spend more time in these communities than they would have been able to if they were writing for other publications. However, the actual practices involved in assembling *City Bureau* stories appeared to involve the same skills and activities as traditional news making. As Report Adeshina Emmanuel explained:

> I think that the only thing that's different is that, if I'm doing something like this… in the neighborhood, we're embedded there, and we're also folks—so, I think we understand these communities better than the average publication. But I think, in approach, it's not that crazy—I mean, it's not that different… it's the same thing, I'd say, in a lot of ways.

One key difference is that *City Bureau* managers and editors are open to a story changing its form along the way, not only in focus but also in format. A reporter may begin assuming their story will be a written article, and decide to instead turn it into a photo essay or comic. "We still have the traditional journalism process but we're not tied to how the story looks," explained Community Director Andrea Hart. "We're still like the *Tribune*… except the Tribune you know you're handing in a 500 word story and that's it." Such a turn occurred when one group of reporters realized, after weeks of speaking with residents, that the West Side community did not care much about their story topic. "It's not something that a lot of people I've spoken with have been terribly concerned about," Reporter Martha Bayne said. As a result, her group decided not to assemble the long-form investigative expose that she had been excited to write but it seemed few people wanted to read. "I'm making peace with that, that I'm not going to get my sexy byline out of this project."

When I asked for an example of what news produced in this way actually looks like, and how it differs from traditional journalism, many of the *City Bureau* journalists pointed to a series they assembled about Chicagoans living in neighborhoods of the city that had high levels of lead. In addition to simply revealing an unexposed health issue, these stories also included oral histories and photo essays of families within these afflicted areas. *City Bureau* Reporter Darien Boyd, a DePaul undergraduate who grew up in Chicago's South Side, explained that this series inspired him to apply to be a *City Bureau* reporting fellow. "It was kind of like multidimensional," he said. "It just wasn't a typical news story."

Time to meander

City Bureau's organizational structure is designed to give its reporters ample time to explore communities, ideally in order to eventually assemble these sorts of layered pieces of journalism. As a nonprofit that partners with other publications to publish the stories its reporters produce, *City Bureau* does not face the same intense pressure as editors at for-profit news organizations to monetize their output. For instance, *City Bureau* is not expected to publish news daily, nor does it need to in order to stay economically viable. As a result, *City Bureau* reporters reported having more flexibility to pursue story ideas that may lead to an article, or a community event, or nowhere. This flexibility often meant reporters spent more time somewhat aimlessly exploring the communities they were interested in reporting in and about. As Unrau explained,

> You tell a more full and comprehensive picture of the community really by getting in and talking with them, rather than, say, finding two community organizers or an alderman and a policeman who works in that neighborhood. You get a more like nuanced, I think, and detailed image of what the community looks like on our end. And on their end, they get to interact with media.

Sometimes, this extended amount of time available for reporting could backfire. For example, Council wanted to write a story about African immigrants who worked at a hair braiding shop on the city's West Side, but she didn't want to formally interview them until she'd spent time with them, a plan she assumed would make them more comfortable. However, these immigrants were confused by the fact that Council was hanging around so much, and grew convinced she was lying about being a reporter. Before she could do her interview, they told her to leave and not come back. Council explained:

> They were basically like, "We don't want to talk to you anymore." That's basically what it came down to…. "We don't even know who you are." She straight up told me, she being the owner of the shop, "If you want to come in here as a sister, and you want to hang out, that's fine, but as a reporter, you're not welcome."

Emmanuel recalled a similar, though less dramatic experience of a potential source seeming surprised to be talking with a reporter. He said, "People – in a lot of these communities – are not used to reporters being there and actually walking around." In short, *City Bureau's* focus on creating a more intimate bond between journalists and the communities they are covering has resulted in a news production model where its reporters have time to meander in order to cultivate community connections that may lead to journalism that this audience will trust more and also feel more accurately represented by. This is an opportunity the journalists involved appreciate, even if it occasionally bewilders some of the South and West Side community members they ultimately are attempting to cultivate closer relationships with.

Targeting specific audiences

In interviews and meetings that I observed, *City Bureau*'s core staff explicitly and frequently discussed how they target distinct audiences with their content. *City Bureau*'s founders described their potential news audience as split between the minority South and

West Side communities that tend to be overlooked by Chicago's established news outlets, and the political elites whose attention must sometimes be summoned so that wrongs within these communities can be corrected. Holliday put this separation bluntly by referring to Chicago's media ecosystem as "a segregated industry."

Because of *City Bureau*'s unique publishing and nonprofit structure, it has the ability to partner with different publications without considering which will bring in larger audiences or more revenue. Instead, these decisions are made primarily in terms of which community should the story reach. As Holliday explained, while there are some instances where *City Bureau* editors would like a story to reach the global, mass audience pursued by a publication like *The Guardian*, there are other instances where they would prefer a story to reach a narrower community of people more easily reached by a small community press like *The Chicago Defender*:

> We did a story about West Side churches moving into West Side streets ... you can't make a commercial corridor if you have like 15 churches on a block… That story is not a *Guardian* story… It's a story that like people in the neighborhood pick up and they say like, 'Oh, this is my block… Now we can talk about this.' That wouldn't work in *The Guardian*. It wouldn't be the same impact… And there are some times where we're trying to like call the mayor, the police chief to attention, you know, like we're trying to call accountability for people to leverage whatever power they have… Those stories, that's a *Guardian* story.

In other words, *City Bureau* editors are quick to acknowledge that the news audience within these communities differs from the news audience outside of them. As a result, their reporting and publication decisions are based on first finding underreported stories about the South and West Sides of Chicago, and then determining if those stories should be directed at the people who live in these areas, or the people who live outside those areas. In short, *City Bureau's* unconventional approach to publishing allows it the unique flexibility to choose its intended audience on a story-by-story basis.

Because *City Bureau* editors are so focused on reaching specific audiences, it is important that they know which local news publications reach which Chicago communities. This knowledge stems from a combination of intuition, personal experience, and audience data. For instance, *City Bureau* editors have seen Chicago Public Radio's audience research, so they know that outlet can be tapped to reach a mostly white, North Side audience. When *City Bureau* editors want to target Chicago's political elites, they partner with the *Chicago Reader* because, as Holliday explained, "We know that in the mayor's press box every day he gets the *Reader*." When they want to reach the city's South Side, they publish in the *South Side Weekly*, a print, nonprofit newspaper that is distributed on the South Side. And when they want to reach a mass audience, they partner with Chicago Public Radio or *The Guardian*. More often than not, however, *City Bureau* focuses on smaller, community presses like *South Side Weekly*, *The Chicago Defender*, and *Austin Weekly News*.

Engaging underreported communities

City Bureau draws on a number of means of building strong, collaborative relationships with its South and West Side audiences. First, and most notably, the organization hosts events, like its weekly Public Newsrooms, that invite community members to hear from and interact with *City Bureau* journalists as well as other news media professionals. *City Bureau* managers hold these events because they assume that when audiences are more included in the news production process, they not only feel more accurately represented, but are subsequently more likely to accept the credibility of the news as well. As Backlund said,

> Nobody can come to the public newsroom and participate and create a story and then call it fake news. Like, I don't even want to engage that debate, but it's just like—it's just nonsense, you know? It's like, 'The door is open and, hey, go see how it's made.'

Because *City Bureau's* newsroom is located in the South Side neighborhood Hyde Park, these events occur within one of the communities that *City Bureau* is attempting to engage with and report on. Additionally, when *City Bureau* publishes an article, its staff also works with the reporters of the story to coordinate events within the community the story is focused in an attempt to oversee an in-person conversation about the story's topic. Holliday summarized *City Bureau's* community focus in this way:

> What stories look like when they involve the community I think is – it involves being in person and it involves having a meeting, a workshop, an event and say, like, 'Please come. Here's what we're doing, but how can you affect that? How can you influence it? Who do you know that we should be talking to? Should we be talking to you, your neighbor, the guy who's a complete – no journalist has ever spoken to, but like who everybody on the block knows?' … How can you really bring people into the process as opposed to just laying out the agenda and saying, 'Well, this is what we're going to do in perpetuity.'

City Bureau's Public Newsrooms are intended to reach out to and empower community members who feel disconnected from the stories told about them and their neighborhoods by other news organizations. *City Bureau* staff described their hopes that these events would lure out South and West Side residents who had previously been disengaged with civic life and were interested in changing that. However, as Chang pointed out, so far this has not been the case. Instead, attendees tend to be people who are already very engaged in public life on behalf of these communities:

> We definitely right now get the people who are hyper-engaged. We get a lot of people who work for nonprofits or in the social/public sector kind of stuff. Every once in a while we do get someone who is like, 'I just came. Somebody told me to come. My sorority sister told me to come, so I'm here.' We're really hoping to get those people involved. We've gotten really good feedback from those people because I think they expected the least, but they got the most.

In other words, for now it seems that *City Bureau's* attempt to build a more collaborative relationship with its audience is more likely to succeed with those already invested in *City Bureau's* mission and the communities it has chosen to focus on. Expanding the audience to include disengaged citizens poses a more difficult challenge.

Public newsrooms and documenters

In addition to these public events, *City Bureau* also offers two training initiatives meant to both increase community awareness of the organization and teach aspiring journalists how to contribute to the news production process. The first of these initiatives partners *City Bureau* reporters with a nonprofit that offers media production education to South and West side young people. The second, called Documenters, offers community members basic journalism training needed for them to attend public meetings (e.g., school board meetings, police board meetings, city council meetings), and live tweet or blog about them. As Hart explained, "It's really true to the sort of public journalism school model of like, 'Okay, you have an interest in civic issues in your neighborhood – let's help you build that out.'"

Finally, *City Bureau* maintains an online presence and communicates with its audience via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Taken together, these efforts reveal *City Bureau's* approach to news production to be primarily focused on explicitly building a strong, collaborative relationship with a small subset of Chicago residents. Editors at *City Bureau* believe that a disconnect exists between Chicago's traditional, established journalism brands and its minority communities, and seek to address this disconnect by reporting on issues that affect these communities specifically, and then utilizing a novel publishing model to point these stories either at the audiences within these communities or at audiences outside of them. However, publishing stories is only one piece of *City Bureau's* audience outreach. The other, equally laborious pieces of this process include live events, journalism training, and online interactions. Because *City Bureau* is not a daily news operation, its staff is able to devote much of its time to planning and executing these more audience-focused initiatives. And because *City Bureau* is so explicitly focused on specific communities within Chicago, determining who its staff should target with both their news coverage and audience interactions is a relatively straightforward process.

Leading by example

Like Hearken, *City Bureau* also must reckon with journalism's structures – namely its market information regime – in order to pursue its version of journalistic practice. Both organizations seek to make news production a process that provides more transparency and agency to the audience via explicit attempts at production-oriented audience engagement. As a result, the people behind both Hearken and *City Bureau* consistently appear at journalism conferences and write pieces or give interviews for trade presses in order to spread their approach and explain its underlying motivation. However, whereas Hearken needs to convince other journalism stakeholders that its interpretation of audience engagement is worth adopting in order to survive, *City Bureau* is able to operate with less explicit pressure to plead its case to the news industry.

Instead, *City Bureau* attempts to transform journalistic practice by way of example. Its managers have set out not only to establish the value of their audience-focused approach to news production. They are also trying to demonstrate to those within the industry that this approach can lead to monetary success as well, despite the fact that it seems to have little to do with the expectations of the current market information regime. They do so for the most part by maintaining low expenses, securing grants from funders, and pitching the benefits of their work to news organizations that ultimately publish it. As this section reveals, *City Bureau's* initial success focusing on narrowly defined, specific audiences, despite existing within a marketplace that privileges the pursuit of a large, mass audience, has garnered the organization notice from other journalism stakeholders unsure what the future holds.

The appeal of the news nonprofit

One reason why *City Bureau* has been able to succeed as a news organization thus far, despite its narrow audience focus, is because it is a nonprofit. As a result, *City Bureau* can solicit revenue from foundations that are increasingly eager to support news organizations (Knight, 2012; Napoli, Stonbely, Friedland, Glaisyer, & Breitbart, 2012; Scott, Bunce, & Wright, 2017) rather than from digital advertising dollars. Because *City Bureau* depends on foundation funding, I frequently observed its staff discussing grants they were applying for as well as how to best to present their case to funders. Similar to Hearken, where staff wondered how the company would survive if news publishers decided they were no longer interested in audience engagement, *City Bureau's* managers sometimes wondered when foundations currently interested in putting money into journalism experiments would decide to move that funding into a different kind of organization. For now, however, that concern seems unnecessary: In the span of three months, *City Bureau* was awarded $100,000 by the Voqal Foundation, $75,000 by McCormick Foundation, and $50,000 by Democracy Fund and Knight Foundation.

City Bureau has also monetized its close ties with its audience. For example, in 2016, the organization launched a Kickstarter and raised $13,000 from about 700 people to pay for the space it now uses for its public newsroom events. More recently, *City Bureau* made an effort to incorporate membership into its model. The membership is presented in a way that echoes public media: though the news they produce and the events they hold remain free and available to anyone, people who pay between $8 and $50 per month to receive swag and some additional access to *City Bureau* journalists and events. And similar to public media, *City Bureau's* pitch to audiences to pay for membership relies primarily on an appeal to the sense of civic responsibility of its audience. The online page where *City Bureau* posted it membership details reads:

> If you believe in the power of journalism—the kind that gets citizens involved and makes people proud to live in their communities—then we hope you'll make a financial commitment as well.

City Bureau's efforts to build an economically viable journalism organization on audience-supported revenue are unfolding at a moment when many in journalism are wondering if these revenue models are worth pursuing (Myllylahti, 2017; Pfauth, 2016; Vernon, 2016; A. T. Williams, 2016). The organization's continued success therefore serves as an example of how news production that does foregoes attempts to pursue the largest audience possible can find alternative means to survive.

Qualitative and quantitative appeals

Similar to Hearken, *City Bureau* must struggle to demonstrate the value of their work in a market information regime that lacks a measure for what it is they're most focused on accomplishing. However, unlike Hearken, *City Bureau* is not attempting to sway individual, for-profit news outlets to change their ways, which means its managers do not need to pitch the appeal of its model in the language of the current market information regime – audience size. Instead, *City Bureau* must persuade foundations to support the organization's work by demonstrating that increasing diversity in journalism will lead to some positive "impact." Because impact – like engagement – lacks an agreed-upon meaning or metric throughout the news industry, *City Bureau* often draws on appeals to intuition to make its case. As Backlund explained:

> So much of the change we look for is qualitative. I feel like a lot of it is about being a support to self-determination in a way that we can't really understand, even, like, by definition, or really take credit for. I know that's what we would say first, but it's also the hardest thing to measure. We often cite anecdotes.

The fact that *City Bureau* has been able to fundraise as much as it has during its short existence demonstrates that foundations, which play an increasingly an important part of news production, have accepted *City Bureau's* claims that there is a lack of diversity in news production and that this organization's approach makes it uniquely qualified to address this issue.

Not all of *City Bureau's* appeals are based around qualitative claims or appeals to intuition. For example, when *City Bureau* attempts to partner with a publication in order to find a specific audience for its journalism, its managers draw on audience data to argue that their work will help reach different, more engaged audiences. As Holliday explained when describing conversations he's had with publishers he's pitching *City Bureau's* work to:

> I say, if I look on Facebook and just like see our post versus other posts, more times than not, our stories are doing better and I can see it visibly. They have more life. They have more comments. They have more engagement. The stories are doing well just on a metric level, just like, you know, page views, uniques… this is good for your bottom line. If you want more audience that you have not been reaching, you want good stories that we're going to like make your front page look good, you should be working with us.

In short, *City Bureau's* model requires the organization to seek revenue from foundations and partnerships with other publications. However, *City Bureau* is limited by a market information regime that makes it difficult for the organization to prove the impact of its work. As a result, its managers, like those at Hearken, rely primarily on appeals to intuition when it comes to seeking foundation funds. When it comes to their pitches to other publications, *City Bureau* managers combines these qualitative claims with actual audience measurement data to make the case that their work is worth paying for.

Maintaining a lean, nimble operation

These findings show that there are journalism stakeholders who innately believe *City Bureau's* pitch – that newsrooms lack diversity and are disengaged from specific communities. This acceptance has surely helped *City Bureau* find success despite its pursuit of an unconventional model that is in many ways incompatible with the news industry's current market information regime. However, in interviews, *City Bureau* staff argued that an equally important element of the organization's monetary success was its cost-effective approach to operations. *City Bureau* included only two full-time employees during my fieldwork (Chang has since left her full-time job to become full-time at *City Bureau*). Each reporting fellow works for a stipend for a ten-week period.

As Backlund explained:

> So much of the discussion in journalism is on innovation and new economy models … 'How are we going to monetize, how are we going monetize?' And there has been so little attention on operations, figuring out new efficiencies or making better journalism more cheaply and … more comprehensive and better and in a way that opens up the possibility of a kind of journalism that engages people and different kinds of people. That's where we're coming at it. We are hitting—I just have this rant, a specific rant on our business space, when they ask, like, "What is your revenue model?" And it's like, we take it seriously. We sell content, we have individual dollars, we get grants, and we do consulting, and I know we're going to keep hammering on this, but nobody—none of those are original. Everybody else is doing at least one, and in some cases all of those. What we're doing differently is on the other side of the cost equation, of cutting costs and just being leaner and more efficient.

In other words, *City Bureau's* case that its model is worth replicating does not solely rely on its approach to news production and revenue, but on its approach to expenses as well.

City Bureau's lean structure appears to allow the organization to maintain its managers' casual attitude towards what form its reporters' projects eventually take. A more traditional news outlet hopes the resources its put into a news story pays off with a large audience, leading to revenue either in the form of subscribers or digital adverting dollars. *City Bureau*, on the other hand, puts a relatively small amount of monetary resources into these journalistic investigations, which eases the pressure on its managers might otherwise feel about whether or not these investigations find a large audience. As Bayne explained, "I feel like *City Bureau* is really nimble in what it does, and that translates in the final product in some unquantifiable way."

Implications for journalistic practice

These findings reveal what the application of a production-oriented approach to news production looks like in practice, and how that approach can exist – and perhaps even thrive – in what would otherwise appear to be an incompatible market information regime. Towards the end of my fieldwork, *City Bureau's* managers were taking trips to Detroit, where they were in discussions with journalists about replicating their model. The question moving forward is therefore what might journalism practice become should it gradually embrace a *City Bureau* approach to news production? Additionally, how likely is it that *City Bureau's* values will be embraced by the news industry more broadly?

During my fieldwork, there were a few observations that struck me as hints of the more complex conversations that *City Bureau's* approach to news production invites. For instance, *City Bureau's* approach emphasizes that South and West Side community members are both the source of stories and the audience for those stories. The result of this way of thinking is that *City Bureau* journalists placed as much (if not more) weight on how their sources felt about the story they were reporting as they did on how the audience might respond to its eventual publication. On the one hand, this approach appeared to encourage a level of sensitivity towards these sources *City Bureau* staff felt was sorely lacking from more traditional reporters. On the other, it suggested that, should *City Bureau's* model spread, certain stories that sources disapprove of could go unreported, replaced instead by stories that cast a community in a more positive light. As Council explained,

> The whole point of community-centered journalism is I'm supposed to be doing something for the community. If the community doesn't want me to cover this story, then who am I doing it for? Am I just doing it for myself? Am I doing it for the mainstream readers?

In other words, *City Bureau's* focus on the fact that distinct audiences exist makes it impossible for journalists to overlook the harm that their stories might bring to one group of people even as it benefits another. This consideration is something that the mass audience perception allowed traditional journalists them to overlook. The awareness of distinct audiences will be accompanied by the introduction of difficult questions in the news production process about what groups of people the news should benefit, and at what cost.

On the other hand, many aspects of *City Bureau's* approach to news production emulate traditional norms of journalistic practice. Its journalists draw on their experiences working in professional newsrooms to report and edit stories in many ways that align with how journalists in traditional newsrooms approach their work. The biggest differences are that *City Bureau* journalists begin with a more personal connection to the communities they are covering, attempt to be more collaborative with the audience throughout the process, and are not bound to a typical written article as the end result. However, the fact that these journalists report, write, and edit in ways that overlap with traditional news organizations suggests that the spread of its model will not drastically change the way that journalism produced.

Specifically, *City Bureau* managers argued that a more collaborative news production process should not diminish the important role of the reporter. Should the *City Bureau* model spread, journalism may become more democratic, but journalists will still play a vital part in news production. The difference, however, is that this role will be available to a broader swath of people. As Backlund explained,

> We still need the figure of a reporter, right, even if we're sort of divvying up that role and breaking it down and reorganizing it… I kind of feel like everybody should have the right to interact with the city in that way. And the right and also sort of the responsibility… there's real irony in the fact that that experience of talking to people has been so narrowly accessible.

In simplest terms, then, *City Bureau's* model is ostensibly the same as Hearken's. Both seek empower the audience in the storytelling process.

Should *City Bureau* continue, and should its reporting fellows successfully find work in more traditional newsrooms, the news industry as a whole may slowly begin to include more diversity within its newsrooms. The implications of this development for journalistic practice are more difficult to predict. A newsroom that hires reporters of color to fill a quota will likely utilize that diversity differently than one that places reporters of color in positions of real power. As Backlund explained:

> I think there's sort of a damage that's done when journalistic outlets are looking for that kind of diversity when they're doing a head count, because you lose that lower level of, like, 'Do you actually care what I say and think, or is it about checking the boxes, basically?'

In other words, assuming *City Bureau* continues training its journalists to find fulltime work in the news industry, the organization will continue to play a part in increasing news industry diversity. How that actually affects news production, however, remains to be seen.

Summary

Like Hearken, *City Bureau* is an organization that has embraced public service journalism ideals and is attempting to apply them with an approach to news production where production-oriented audience engagement plays a central role. However, *City Bureau's* founders and reporters are not interested in increasing audience engagement for *all* audiences. Instead, they focus on improving the connection between journalism and minority citizens they believe have been dismissed and disregarded by mainstream, traditional news production practices.

Specifically *City Bureau* editors and reporters believe that traditional journalism has failed Chicago's black and Hispanic communities in a number of key ways, all of which stem from a lack of regard for these audiences. They argue that mainstream newsrooms tend to comprise mostly white, male staffs who lack the knowledge necessary to find sources for stories that would accurately represent and interest minority residents, as well as the insight necessary to determine what those stories are in the first place. The result, according to *City Bureau*, is a profession that reports on communities in ways that strike those communities as disconnected from how they understand themselves. This situation leaves the residents of these communities with little reason to consume journalism, and even less to trust journalists.

As is the case with Hearken, this philosophy stems from audience data as much as it does gut instinct. *City Bureau's* founders have all worked in professional journalism and are aware – from audience data and their own experiences in the field – that Chicago's largest presses primarily reach North Side, mostly white audiences, leaving out the black and Hispanic residents on the city's South and West Sides. Like Hearken's employees, *City Bureau's* editors believe that these audiences are tuned out not because of any innate lack of interest in journalism, but because of how the journalism about them has been produced and presented. In short, *City Bureau's* founders believe that South and West Side residents don't recognize themselves in news stories about their communities.

Because both Hearken and *City Bureau* aspire to transform journalistic practice, both face obstacles in the form of journalism's structures. For instance, like Hearken, *City Bureau* has no obvious metric by which to demonstrate that its interpretation of journalism's problem, and therefore cannot prove that its approach is the solution. However, like Hearken, *City Bureau* has found initial success regardless. *City Bureau's* nonprofit structure coupled with its unconventional publication model allows the organization to sidestep the obstacles imposed by journalism's current market information regime, which privileges measures of audience size. Furthermore, at a moment when many within journalism are beginning to consider audience-supported revenue models, *City Bureau's* emphasis on working with and for its audience has a growing appeal. The organization has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in a short amount of time from foundations and individuals, and is consistently sought out by journalism stakeholders interested in replicating its model. This chapter has thus provided another opportunity to explore how individual agents are attempting to transform an institution, how they reckon with the structures constraining their attempts, and what the implications of their approach suggests for the future of news production.

Chapter Six: The Chicago Tribune

This chapter explores *The Chicago Tribune*, a news publisher attempting not to transform the news industry, but endure it. As the oldest news organization in this dissertation, the *Tribune* is also the most traditional. Compared to *City Bureau*, the *Tribune*'s approach to news production contains a limited (though increasing) number of explicit attempts at transparency and collaboration with the audience. While some at the paper believe they should engage with their audiences in production-oriented ways that parallel the approaches taken by Hearken and *City Bureau*, others consider that outside of their responsibilities. Furthermore, the paper's larger, more varied readership makes the paper's efforts to pursue a more participatory relationship with the audience less intuitive and often more frustrating. In short, the *Tribune* has historically kept the audience at arm's length, and in many ways continues to do so.

The *Tribune's* approach to news production stems from its employees assumptions about the audience, as well as from their desire to succeed within journalism's current market information regime. As this chapter reveals, managers at the *Tribune* perceive the audience as fundamentally uninterested in political news. They also understand that the advertising revenue they need to survive depends on whether or not they can attract large audiences. Editors and reporters therefore attempt to subsidize the public affairs news they expect few people to tune into but are ideologically compelled to provide with a variety of lighter, more entertaining fare (e.g., sports, dining, lifestyle) they believe their audience is more likely to embrace.

This strategy places the *Tribune* under intense pressure to make its soft news reach as many people as possible. As a result, when the *Tribune* pursues audience engagement, it does so in hopes of bolstering exposure to these types of stories. In other words, while *City Bureau* and Hearken see audience engagement as a mechanism for bringing public service journalism ideals into news production, the *Tribune* sees it as a potential asset in the pursuit of revenue. On one hand, the fact that the *Tribune* is pursuing audience engagement at all suggests that even traditional news organizations are not impervious to change. However, the *Tribune's* market-driven engagement perpetuates two of journalism's most enduring assumptions about news audiences: that they inherently dislike public affairs news, and that they have no place in its production. In light of these findings, I conclude that the *Tribune* deliberately and incidentally reproduces traditional journalistic norms by approaching a news production strategy that reinforces the value of measures of audience size as well as long-standing opinions of the news audience.

A loosely connected mass audience

In general, interviews indicated that *Tribune* employees perceive the audience as one loosely collected mass of people living in or around Chicago. Reporters and editors I spoke with rarely described the audience in terms of specific demographics unless I pried for those details. When I did, the most common answer was that the audience comprised a combination of Chicagoland residents from both the suburbs and the city. The suburban audience was more likely to read the paper in print, while the urban audience was more likely to read it online. But, as Deputy Editorial Page Editor Marie Dillon pointed out, the audience might include anyone who stumbles onto a Tribune article online, including people who live outside of the Midwest:

> You used to think it was your subscribers – the people who paid for your paper and wanted to read what you had. But it's so much broader than that now. Almost anyone who sees a link to anything in your paper is going to react to it, and engage with it, and maybe share it.

The fact that the *Tribune*'s employees generally perceived its audience as including a potentially wide range of demographics seemed to discourage reporters from visualizing their readers as any group in particular. When pushed to explicitly envision who they wrote for, reporters drew from their own experiences to describe the types of people they believed the paper's audience comprised. As Watchdog Reporter Michael Hawthorne explained,

> I want [my reporting] to be understandable to a layperson… I want it understandable to a dear old aunt of mine who ran a hair salon out of her front porch in a tiny town in central Illinois, and my uncle who ran a small grocery store and a lumberyard and is a consumer of news, but is kind of an everyman kind of person. And, so it's understandable to people like that, but also understandable to people who are the subject of the article, but then also clear in purpose to elected leaders, corporate leaders who have a chance to make the situation different than it is.

This perspective appeared to give *Tribune* employees a way out of reckoning with criticisms that have been lodged against the organization. For instance, some journalism stakeholders within Chicago – including *City Bureau's* staff – have publicly suggested that the largely African American and Hispanic communities in the city's South and West Sides are excluded from the *Tribune's* coverage; however, this rarely came up during interviews, except for with the paper's metro editor as well as Marketing Manager Robert Smolik. "I think our audience is overwhelmingly white," Jacob said. "I'd like it to be less so." Smolik agreed, "Our audience is large but it's very limited." In most cases, however, audiences were discussed in terms of size rather than socioeconomic traits. By not focusing on specific types of people who were included in the *Tribune's* audience, its employees were able to overlook those who may have been left out.

Print vs. online audience

When reporters and editors did get more specific about the audience, their distinctions were based on how the audience interacts with the *Tribune* rather than on audience traits independent of news media consumption. Most often, *Tribune* employees would divvy the audience up into print or online categories. For example, columnist Rex Huppke said that he realized that there was a definite difference between the print and online audiences when he observed that some of his columns would garner tons of online exposure but elicit little in the way of emails or letters, while other columns would attract few online online, only to then elicit tons of feedback from print subscribers:

> I could write a column that's a hit, so to speak, on the web. And then it goes in print – and I don't hear a peep. Then other times I'll write a column that is a complete flop online. Like it just does nothing in terms of shares and anything. But then it runs in the next day's paper and I get like 50 emails from people who loved it.

Distinguishing the audience into print and online groups allowed *Tribune* employees the opportunity to make assumptions about why certain stories attracted more online readers than others. Within this logic, a story that garnered a small online audience could still be reaching an influential group of readers in print. Associate Editor Colin McMahon referred to this combination of empirical data and subjectivity as the "science and art" of understanding how the *Tribune's* audience responds to its coverage:

> Science and art, right? So, the science part is, "Well, how's it doing online?" … 'Cause the print readership is different readership than the online readership, so how do we skew that? Do we think that people expect that from us? Are we getting anecdotal information that people expect that from us? Because anecdotal information from important constituencies in the communities is valid, even if it's anecdotal.

McMahon's "science and art" remark demonstrated an underlying theme in the *Tribune's* audience perceptions, which was that they stemmed from a combination of online audience measurement data and individual intuition, rather than one or the other. For most *Tribune* editors and some reporters, the "science" came from a daily email to the newsroom that contains a report of how many clicks the most popular couple hundred pieces of content received the day before. Monitors set up throughout the newsroom displayed even more granular audience behavior data, such as the number of people on specific stories at that exact moment and what sites the majority of the audience was navigating to the *Tribune* from. These demonstrations of the paper's explicit focus on audience measurement are consistent with a majority of recent newsroom studies that observe that audiences understandings increasingly include quantifiable data (Anderson, 2011; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Graves & Kelly, 2010; Petre, 2015; Tandoc & Jenner, 2016; Vu, 2013). However, these data complemented, rather than replaced, the opinions of the *Tribune's* staff.

The intersection of data and intuition

Though employees looked to these audience metrics to understand how the *Tribune's* audience, they were also aware of the fact that these data required their own interpretation. Data from online audience firms like Chartbeat can tell reporters and editors who logged onto the site and how long they spent with a story, but cannot explain what motivated the audience to make these decisions. This is where the "art" McMahon mentioned comes in. As Associate Managing Editor Joe Knowles explained when asked to describe the *Tribune's* audience:

> I see our web numbers, I don't know how to put them into context… Who are these people? It's hard to know. So I wish I could give you a clearer answer, but the best I can say is based on a little bit of experience, some science, and a lot of instinct, I guess.

The most significant example of intuition playing into audience perceptions was the assumption that low audience turnout for a story meant low audience interest in the topic, as compared to issues with the way the story itself was reported. For example, editors and reporters frequently pointed to the lower unique visitors for political stories relative to other types of stories as evidence that the news audience is less interested in public affairs reporting than in other types of news. This conclusion is certainly reasonable; however, as the preceding chapters have shown, there are alternative interpretations where the fault lies with the how the story was covered rather than how audiences innately feel about a subject. This gets at an important distinction between the *Tribune* and organizations like *City Bureau*: journalists at the former assume there is ostensibly only one way to report a news story, while those at the latter believe there are multiple. This distinction leads *Tribune* reporters to blame the audience for low turnout for certain types of stories, whereas *City Bureau* reporters are more likely to blame the reporters for presenting these stories in a way that did not appeal to the audience.

There were other instances where audience interpretations inadvertently gave the *Tribune's* reporting a pass. For example, when Jacob admitted that the *Tribune* reaches a mostly white, North Side audience, he suggested it was because the paper had fallen short in distributing its coverage with Chicago's black community:

> Well, it's hard because you can publish a lot of stories that they don't read. And so they haven't read *The Tribune* their entire lives, and you might be publishing great articles that they would want to read, they just don't know that they want to read them. So that's hard… And that was mostly our fault. That's not them being closed-minded. That's us not having good outreach, not really trying to be everyone's newspaper.

This interpretation assumes that Chicago's black residents would value the *Tribune's* coverage of them if only they would tune in.

The *Tribune's* digital desk editors also assumed that low audience turnout resulted from poor distribution. In interviews, the paper's digital desk editors argued that aesthetic details like an unclear headline or unexciting photo were often to blame for *Tribune* stories that failed to attract large audiences. Much of their work included revising headlines or replacing photos in order to help *Tribune* content attract more clicks and social media shares. In other words, *Tribune* employees drew on a variety of reasons for why their audience might not congregate on something they publish; however, unlike *City Bureau and Hearken*, these reasons rarely included that the story simply was not told the way the audience wanted it to be told to begin with.

In short, the *Tribune's* employees perceive the audience as a loosely connect mass. They audience trait that most interests *Tribune* employees is how they interact with *Tribune* content, which is reported by online audience data and mediated by their own intuition. Metrics, according to McMahon, are " tool," for understanding the audience, but they are not the only tool, nor are they a substitute for instinct. When the data show that audiences do not tune into certain stories, *Tribune* employees draw on their instinct to blame superficial details (e.g., how the story was placed online, whether or not it was effectively distributed) or an inherent lack of audience interest in the topic. In the next section I discuss how this perception results in an approach to news production that hews closely to traditional norms of journalistic practice, even when it includes attempts at audience engagement.

A traditional, "broccoli and junk food" approach to news production

In general, the *Tribune* reinforces journalism's current market information regime, by privileging audience size as the most important currency for the profession. Because the *Tribune's* reporters and editors see their potential audience as incredibly broad, their approach to news production focused primarily on tapping that potential. Maximizing the online audience especially has become an important goal as the *Tribune* continues to struggle for economic survival. Evidence of this focus was littered throughout the paper's office. For example, the digital team, comprising a group who oversee story placement on the paper's homepage and social media platforms, took up a sizable block of cubicles near the center of the office. A line graph posted in the editorial meeting room charted out the flow of online traffic throughout a typical day, and editors would use Post-Its to indicate what stories to publish at different peak times in hopes that the paper would capture more online traffic by posting new stories at opportune moments.

To pursue as large an audience as possible, *Tribune* employees described reporting and publishing what they think will appeal to people living in and around Chicago. For some, that's as specific as it gets: as Digital News Deputy Editor Kurt

Gessler said, "I'm targeting more a geography than demographic." Because the *Tribune's* staff saw the potential audience as being so vast, they often relied on some combination of their own news judgment and online audience data to determine what and how to report, rather than on what they believe would appeal to specific groups. As Travel Reporter Josh Noel said, "To me it's just like, is it a good story? Tell me a good story. As a consumer of news that's what I look for." This is consistent with prior newsroom studies that have found that news story selection overwhelmingly to be the purview of the reporters and editors (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Kaniss, 1991), and contradicts more recent studies that suggest online audience data may replace editorial judgment (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013; Uscinski, 2014). Although there were some instances where editors explicitly referred to covering certain topics less or more because of online audience data (most notably when it came to soft news topics), more often it seemed that the journalistic authority of the *Tribune's* staff steered story selection more than any other variable.

Approaching news production in this way appeared to lead reporters and editors to overlook the interests of minority communities, which is also consistent with prior research into mainstream, traditional approaches to journalism (Clarke, 2014; Mersey, 2010; Nadler, 2016). This occurred because the *Tribune* was more focused on growing audiences than it was on appealing to *specific* audiences. Digital News Editor Randi Shaffer touched on this while discussing how the *Tribune* approaches coverage of Englewood, a South Side, mostly black neighborhood:

> For us on the web team, metrics are huge. They let us know what people are interested in, they let us know what we should report more on. And we're not on

> the ground. We're not out talking with the community. And I think it's interesting, because my boyfriend is a photographer for the *Tribune*. And so he has an entirely different perspective than me, because he's the one that's down in Englewood. He's the one that is taking photos of crying moms on the sides and I'm the one that's counting all of the clicks as people report it. And so … he'll see this is a big deal, this is important news. And I'm staring at my numbers and I say, "Well, you think it's important, because you're there, but the people don't think it's important, because they're not clicking on it."

Shaffer's observation reveals one of the consequences that results from the *Tribune's* focus on finding success within journalism's current market information regime. By maintaining the value of audience size, the *Tribune* inadvertently disregards other audience traits – mainly, which audience subsets their stories reach, and which are left out. By prioritizing content that will appeal to a large, mass audience, *Tribune* editors sometimes overlooked the preferences of distinct subsets within that audience.

Reconciling conflicting goals

Because *Tribune* editors assumed that low turnout for their public affairs stories indicated the audience's lack of interest in that type of reporting (as opposed to the way those stories were reported or ultimately presented), they often referred to the ongoing struggle to tow the line between giving the audience "what they need" (e.g., watchdog journalism) and "what they want" (e.g., celebrity gossip). As Associate Managing Editor for Features Amy Carr explained,

> The people who manage our homepage try very much to be objective and post things on there that are both the news that we want to read as well as the things that will perform well… There has to be a balance for that right? It's like if we want to be relevant in people's lives then we should give them things that they need but also the things that they want or else they're not coming back.

Others at the paper have their own way of describing the logic behind privileging public affairs journalism that they believe will not appeal to a mass audience. Jacob calls this "good for the brand." McMahon suggests doing so builds goodwill with the audience. "I think that that sends a lot of good messages to our audience." This framing of journalism's obligation to the public is enduring (Boczkowski, 2010; Kaniss, 1991; Mersey, 2010) and its implication is clear: for public affairs news production to persist, journalists must maintain a paternal attitude towards the audience, who left to their own devices would exclusively choose celebrity gossip and sports stories instead.

This distinction was further illustrated in the way that *Tribune* employees evaluated the success or failure of the content they published. For example, *Tribune* reporters and editors often discussed looking at online audience measurement data to learn the number of unique visitors a story received, and how long those visitors spent on the page, and would use these measures to evaluate different kinds of stories. Stories that "do well" were those that garnered large audiences. Stories that "do good," on the other hand, were those "what the audience needs" stories that shined a light on an injustice or righted some sort of political or social wrong even if they drew in smaller clicks and pageviews.

When it comes to producing the "what the audience wants" stories, audience measurement data played an important role. Jacob explained drawing on these data to determine what his audience wanted to read about, and thus what stories he would assign to his reporters:

> In order to be useful to people, you have to know what they care about. And you have to pay attention. And so I feel like there has been an evolution in that I think that the internet has been really good at forcing the journalists to give a crap about the general public… We're trying to survive. And in order to survive, you've got to please the customer because there's a lot of other places they can go.

Jacob wasn't the only one who took this approach. Knowles described devoting more resources to Cubs coverage rather than Sox coverage, because readers tuned in more for the former than the latter. In general, editors seemed much more likely to look at audience data to make news selection choices for soft news stories (e.g., sports, dining, entertainment) than for public policy stories, since it was assumed the latter would draw small audiences no matter what.

The appeal of the niche audience

Tribune managers' belief that their public affairs journalism will never be a robust source of revenue for the paper, combined with their drive to produce exactly that kind of news, left them constantly searching for ways to subsidize their watchdog reporting. As a result, the efforts by *Tribune* editors to pursue distinct audiences were consistently designed for market-driven reasons. For example, McMahon noted that the *Tribune* "underperformed" when it came to women, something he wanted to see corrected "from a business standpoint." He and other *Tribune* editors also discussed the paper's pursuit of specific audiences in the form of special sections. Editors described one recently launched section called Blue Sky, which targets Chicago's growing community of tech entrepreneurs. The decision to pursue this community stemmed from rigorous audience research, including focus groups attended by the paper's editors. Smolik explained that Blue Sky's focus on this niche audience of affluent venture capitalists was a strategic business decision, as this group has a high appeal among advertisers. As Blue Sky Editor Andrea Hanis explained, "It's definitely a different audience. I mean, I hope it is. That was kind of the goal, right?"

Editors were quick to point out that sections like Blue Sky are conceived to support, rather than displace, the *Tribune's* watchdog journalism, which they saw as fundamentally less appealing to the audience. McMahon indicated during our interview that the *Tribune*'s business model dictated it accomplish three things to maintain sustainability – produce content that joins and adds context to whatever big story the majority of the online audience is discussing on any given day, provide utility in order to bring audiences back on a daily basis, and provide "mission journalism," which he defines as "the watchdog journalism, the covering the city events, the covering – making sure that people aren't getting screwed over." As he put it:

> There's not enough people reading those stories – or buying those stories, even – to make – to keep us where we are now. There just aren't. They don't exist. The money does not exist there. So, you cannot keep doing that if you don't have these other two things. And so, to me, the more I can build up these other two things, the better this watchdog, investigative, daily journalism, mission journalism – Big J Journalism, we sometimes say – can thrive.

In other words, when *Tribune* editors deviated from the mass audience approach to target niche audiences, they did so with the hope that it would improve the paper's ability to financially support the watchdog journalism that typically fails to bring in much ad revenue but that they feel duty-bound to produce. This is a notable distinction from the motivation underlying *City Bureau's* focus on niche audience, which is to empower communities of people they feel have been left out of traditional journalism.

How a mass audience impedes an engaged one

The *Tribune's* focus on pursuing a large, mass audience had negative consequences for its pursuit of audience engagement, though for less obvious reasons than one might think. As this section reveals, the *Tribune's* fixation on finding success within journalism's current market information regime did not preclude its staff from pursuing more transparent and collaborative discussions with the audience via production-oriented audience engagement. Some *Tribune* reporters and editors spoke explicitly about the importance of cultivating an ongoing dialogue between journalists and the audience. However, many of those same people also described attempts to engage the audience that left them discouraged. Because of the paper's large audience, when journalists tried to listen to their readers, the only voices they heard belonged to the loudest, angriest, and cruelest of the crowd.

Inconsistent opinions and approaches

Though the *Tribune* employees I spoke with were fairly consistent in their perception of the audience, they were much more mixed in their opinions about engaging the audience. While some at the paper believe reporters and editors should communicate with and listen to the audience, others – specifically the investigative reporters – considered that outside of their responsibilities. These reporters suggested that the effort required to expose hidden truths for the public good was time-consuming and demanding enough without the added work of interacting with the audience. Furthermore, some argued that interacting with the audience throughout the reporting process could lead to getting scooped by other outlets or possibly open the reporters up to questions about their objectivity. Finally, the *Tribune's* management offers little guidance about how engagement should be defined and when it should or shouldn't be pursued. As a result, many either described practicing their own variation of audience engagement, or avoiding it altogether.

The uncertainty with which editors and reporters defined and discussed audience engagement revealed an underlying tension between the *Tribune* staff's desire to not seem overly stuck in traditional ways of doing things and an inability to reinvent the paper as a fundamentally different and much more audience-focused news organization. For instance, although Dillon described closely watching audience metrics and reading audience comments to better understand the *Tribune's* audience, she did not have an answer when asked to define what audience engagement meant. "I had that same question for you," she replied. "I'm not sure."

When Dillon settled on a meaning for audience engagement, it more or less took the form of a reception-oriented approach. She defined engagement as the idea that the *Tribune* should publish material that audiences "want to read." Carr said something similar during our interview, defining audience engagement as a catchall for publishing content that attracted readers. McMahon was more specific, and similarly reception-oriented. He separated audience engagement into different types as reflected by different measures of audience data: pages per visit (i.e., how many stories a person clicks on while visiting the *Tribune*), bounce rate (i.e., how quickly upon loading the *Tribune's* website a person exits the page), and pageviews (i.e., the total number of visits to the *Tribune's* website).

What these definitions of audience engagement leave out is the back and forth conversation between news producers and readers that comprises the production-oriented approaches pursued by organizations like Hearken and *City Bureau*. "I feel like engagement to me is interaction, although not necessarily I say something, you say something, and I say something, and you say something," Dillon explained. Carr made this distinction implicitly, when she described how she encourages her reporters to promote stories they write on social media, but did not say that she encourages them to use social media platforms to have actual conversations with the audience:

> It used to be you'd report your story. You wrote your story. You sent it in to your editor and then done. And in some cases people still feel that way. But now – And then I tell my writers this. I'm like, 'Your job is only starting at that point. Then you have to promote it.'

In other words, *Tribune* editors conceptualized audience engagement in a way that fit their more traditional perspective on the news publisher-audience relationship generally. They want to create news that audiences will look at in large numbers and for large periods of time, but they're less interested in hearing what the audience has to say about it.

When engagement becomes 'enragement'

However, not everyone at the *Tribune* saw audience engagement this way. Some, like reporter Dawn Rhodes or columnist Heidi Stevens, felt that engagement meant actually conversing with readers. Stevens explained that, to her, audience engagement means more than using social media to spread your writing to the world. It is also a way to answer reader questions about the writing they just read:

> It's a waste of the potential to tweet your stuff and Facebook post your stuff and then not go in there and answer people's comments and questions. It's like having a room full of people who just listened to your conversation and then being like, 'I have nothing else to say to you people.' It's like you're saying stuff to me. Now I'm going to say stuff back. My Facebook page, under any of my columns, it's a conversation.

Sometimes, however, journalists described interacting with the audience, only to be scared or disturbed by the interaction. In an increasingly digital media environment, the ease with which audiences can reach out to journalists can have frightening consequences, as Huppke learned firsthand. He described how a political column he'd written inspired the ire of ideological extremists, who came across the article when it was relinked on a fringe, partisan blog. They responded by aggressively bombarding Rex and with vitriol, and even threatened his family. Huppke felt compelled to go to the police when he saw the threats, and it was obvious during the interview that he was still grappling with the lingering effects of the experience:

> It can make you gun shy sometimes. Because you're like, "Do I want to walk into this shit storm? This is going to suck." … I don't know that you had to consider that before when you were writing and only the *Chicago Tribune* audience was reading you. I don't think you had to worry quite so much. There's always nuts, but there's not a nation full or nuts … And it's still like a tiny number of people in total. But when they all come after you at once … it kind of gives you the chills a little bit.

This anecdote gets at a disconcerting and often overlooked consequence of what happens when news organizations make it easier for the audience to contact journalists, and a reason why journalists writing for publications with a large, widespread readership may not want to interact with the audiences who are reading their work. As Rhodes explained, drawing on her own experience interacting with angry readers via Twitter, "We're kind of fighting this, almost like fighting a mob in a way."

Even when the audience isn't threatening, they can still be crude or vile enough to discourage more interactive engagement. Both Stevens and Huppke mentioned feeling ambivalent about reading comments to their articles or responding to readers because they so often were discouraged by just how angry people were. As Huppke said, "There's engagement and then there's enragement." He touched on this topic while explaining his reluctance to converse more with readers on social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter:

> I'm not tremendously interactive on social media. I am a little bit, but more only with people that I kind of have gotten to know who are funny and whatever. Like I don't at reply a lot, for a couple of reasons. One, I don't have time. That's the number one reason, really. Because I could do that, but I would literally – that could consume my every waking moment. Two, because I think it can lead down some really bad roads. It's very difficult to engage in any kind of actual cogent or sensible or thoughtful conversation like that, because stuff is misinterpreted and it just becomes hell on earth. And because a lot of times you're just dealing with assholes who are trolls, so it's not worth acknowledging them.

Because the *Tribune's* economic success within the current market information regime depends on the paper reaching a huge audience, its staff produces news with the intention of appealing to the mass audience that they have conceptualized. This approach does not require – or even obviously benefit from – explicit attempts at production-oriented audience engagement; however, several of the paper's reporters and columnists described making efforts to partake in such activities regardless. These efforts were often frustrating, sometimes frightening, and rarely encouraging.

A lack of institutional guidance

The fact that Huppke and Stevens can decide on their own accord when to respond and when to ignore readers was indicative of a lack of top-down guidance when it came to how journalists should engage with readers in general. Reporters I spoke with said this was especially notable throughout the political campaign leading up to the 2016 presidential election, when online audiences were ramping up mean-spirited and sometimes violent language. As Stevens explained:

> During the campaign, when the hate mail was really ramping up, I never got death threats, but I certainly would read about lots of journalists getting death threats. I read a story about this campaign to bully journalists into killing themselves. I thought, 'It'd be great to hear from a higher up some guidelines, like best practices.' At the same time, I respect that they respect us enough to let us do what makes us feel comfortable and not make us do what makes us uncomfortable. So, I get why they don't and I appreciate that. But there are days where you're like, 'Should I reply? Should I delete? Should I report? What should I do with this thing?' … I don't feel like I have any guidance on it other than what I've tried that has worked or not worked.

Dillon said that the guidance for how *Tribune* staff should interact with the audience is "evolving." Sometimes, this guidance comes after the fact, as Huppke described:

> I did get an email from one of the editors one time because they said I had responded – a lot of times if I get a really crabby email, I'll send a smartass response of some sort. And I got an email one time saying, "Please don't pick fights with the readers." It was like, "He started it."

This lack of guidance may also be the result of disagreements at top levels of the *Tribune* surrounding how much or how little journalists should be sharing with the audience in the first place. For example, the *Tribune* hosts a variety of in-person events meant to bring audiences and reporters together in real life. In some instances, *Tribune* staff members have bristled at efforts during these events to share with readers what actually goes into news production, some at the Tribune bristle. Carr touched on this while describing an event the *Tribune* hosted after the Cubs won the World Series. She wanted to share with attendees what the front page of the paper would have been had the Cubs lost, but faced some resistance from other editors when she pursued the idea:

> This is behind the scenes, peeling back the curtain. Well we're not used to that. We're used to just we put it out there and let people see what we did. We don't

> talk about it. This is how we did it. It's like the sausage was made. Eat it right? That's all we need to know. And so I asked the designer – he did the front page. I'm like, 'Do you have the other pages you designed? Because I know there's a page when it comes last. And do you have that one still? Do you have a page for the rain delay?' We had a rain delay. That page had actually gone out and was on the press. Copies of that were made because we thought we were going to not be able to resume and get it done. And then he said that [Managing Editor] Peter Kendall had a ton of, you know, mockups from the early days, and all these notes on them. And he had – I don't know – 100 different headlines. I'm like, 'Awesome.' So I go to Peter and it's like, 'We need this for our event.' I said that's the kind of stuff people will want. And Peter was like, "Well I don't know if I want to share that." He was nervous about it. And so he came around. He thought about it and he's like – He wouldn't want to tweet it out although he knew some people probably would take pictures of it. And he acknowledged that in the program. He's like, "You know I haven't shown this to anybody." … So that's kind of the – We've always controlled the flow of the information.

In other words, management at the *Tribune* did not think much about audience engagement, and when they did their chief concern was ensuring that the paper's employees neither angered current readers nor shared too much information about how news production within the organization occurred. When I asked Amy if she saw that guardedness receding over time she laughed and said, "No. Not really."

Yet, while the managing editor may be wary of a more transparent approach to the audience, Jacob described feeling completely different. He believes that pursuing this sort of engagement in the name of transparency will make a huge impact in rebuilding public trust in journalism. For example, Jacob hopes the *Tribune* will begin more explicitly explaining how put their investigative stories together within the actual stories. He thinks journalists have traditionally assumed readers will trust that they did the legwork for their stories honestly and diligently, but that this trust no longer exists. He believes journalists need to show their work to readers:

> This whole era of "just trust me" journalism is over – that investigative stories – when we reach a conclusion, the reader has an expectation, seeing in the story all the facts that we used to draw that conclusion – that we had to prove it out, almost like a geometry proof. We can't just say, "Look, this is really hard. There's a bunch of big numbers, and we total them all up, and it's fine. Just trust us." I don't think we can do that anymore. I think we have to really stand behind what our conclusions are.

This again illustrates just how inconsistently *Tribune* employees approached audience engagement. The more traditional members of the paper's staff believe audience engagement should merely include posting stories to social media platforms to increase their reach and reading audience comments in emails and online to understand what is and is not resonating with them. This echoes their overall view of the audience as a mass group that should be kept at arm's length in the news production process. There are others, however, like Jacob and Carr, who have embraced the more novel approach to audience engagement, wherein news producers have conversation with the audience either online or during real-life events. There was evidence that the desire to make the relationship between the *Tribune* and its audience more collaborative and transparent was having leading to some significant changes for the organization. For example, shortly before my data collection began, the *Tribune* had introduced the Hearken platform onto its Blue Sky section. Months later, the paper expanded the tool to its dining section as well.

Those at the *Tribune* who feel that this sort of production-oriented audience engagement is important and worth pursuing are more or less operating in the dark when it comes to top down instruction or guidelines. As a result, they are experimenting and learning from trial and error. Some have grown disgusted by what they see as the vile behavior of the online audience. Others have been inspired by the enthusiasm the news audience shows for what news production looks like behind the scenes. Taken together, these different approaches within this one large but struggling institution reveals the ways that the *Tribune* is trying to reconcile hundreds of years of tradition with an overwhelmingly difficult set of circumstances that call for things to drastically change.

The appeal of targeted audiences

One important caveat to my findings about audience engagement at the *Tribune* is how differently this engagement unfolded when the audience itself was more deliberately curated. Interactions with the audience were less stressful for *Tribune* staff when confined to specific, niche audiences. For example, editors described one recently launched section called Blue Sky, which targets Chicago's growing community of tech entrepreneurs. The staff involved with this section regularly host or attend events in Chicago where they interact with Blue Sky readers, who comprise people in the Chicago startup community. Hanis put her audience strategy simply: "We talk to people… all the time." And unlike Huppke and Stevens, Hanis seemed to have only positive things to say about these sorts of audience exchanges. Most notably, she described using social media to hear from or communicate with her audience with much less ambivalence than the *Tribune* columnists writing for much larger audiences:

> I actually use Twitter a lot for ideas. I think when you're covering a niche audience, it's a fantastic way to find out what they're talking about and what they care about, so I find that to be a really good source of ideas.

My interviews with Blue Sky's staff indicated that the pursuit of a more collaborative relationship with the news audience, while ill suited for a traditional mass audience approach to news production, goes more smoothly when these interactions unfold with limited, carefully chosen audience.

Implications for journalistic practice

These findings reveal that a stronger journalist/audience relationship is a goal that is being pursued not just by news industry innovators, but by more traditional news brands as well. Though *The Chicago Tribune* and *City Bureau* are drastically different in many key ways – including size, age, circulation, and mission – employees within both expressed a desire to communicate with audiences in order to improve both the quality of news each organization provides, as well as to benefit those for whom these news stories are provided. These findings suggest that the distinction between how innovative news nonprofits and more traditional news organizations pursue and consider the audience has begun to blur. To be sure, some *Tribune* editors and reporters still seemed interested in keeping the audience at arm's length; however, others described an increasing interest in using live events and digital technology to establish a more conversational relationship between news provider and consumer.

The *Tribune* is not alone. Many newsrooms now encourage their reporters to interact with readers via social media platforms or live events. In fact, a growing number employ "engagement editors" tasked with corresponding with readers on social media platforms (Powers, 2015). Furthermore, traditional news outlets like the *The Washington Post*, the BBC, and NPR are also increasingly adopting audience engagement tools like Hearken, Groundsource, and Coral Project, which allow these organizations to solicit questions and comments from readers to help determine what stories get reported. The motivations for this pursuit may vary: organizations like *City Bureau* focus on increasing collaboration with minority communities in order to improve their agency in the stories told about them, while *Tribune* editors and reporters in some cases seek to cultivate a sense of community among Chicagoans working in a similar industry in an attempt to garner more revenue.

These findings also show that, regardless of the underlying motivations, pursuing a more collaborative relationship with the news audience is ill suited with a mass audience approach to news production. *Tribune* columnists and reporters complained about the vitriol and mob mentality they faced when attempting to engage with audience members online, while the *Tribune's* Blue Sky team reported no such qualms. This observation has important implications for both journalism and the public.

Deliver us to segmentation?

Two decades ago, Katz sounded the alarm for what audience segmentation would do to democratic society. He worried that increasing media choice would lead to the disappearance of a shared cultural space where citizens could gather to hear and discuss the same information (Katz, 1996). Yet, my findings suggest that segmentation might be the key to building strong bonds between news media providers and the audience. *Tribune* columnists and reporters writing for the paper's general readership faced disappointments and frustrations when attempting to interact with a mass audience, while both the *Tribune's* Blue Sky editor reported positive exchanges of story ideas and information when communication was confined to specific, niche groups. Furthermore, confining conceptualizations of the audience to narrowly determined communities freed

Blue Sky journalists to pursue story ideas that would most likely resonate with these distinct groups without worrying if others would find them interesting.

If the *Tribune* continues attempting to endure journalism's current market information regime, it faces less incentive to improve its audience bonds via these types of engagement. However, if the paper finds ways to monetize its Blue Sky audience in a way that makes its engagement efforts worthwhile (e.g., via subscriptions or paid events), then the goal of building stronger bonds with the audience may continue to grow. Should this occur, the result would likely be that news publishers like the *Tribune* would face more incentive to segment their audience into distinct groups rather than pursue the audience as one loosely connected mass.

This raises an important question: What would civil society lose if journalism's understanding of the public were to change to one that is more narrow, involved, and community focused? On the one hand, there are some who believe this change will restore public trust in journalism and give agency to marginalized communities who until now have felt excluded from their own news stories. Doing so, however, might further polarize society by leaving citizens no opportunity to interact with those of differing backgrounds or perspectives. Extreme political polarization already exists within the U.S. and across the globe, with liberals and conservatives disagreeing not just about policies, but about "basic facts" (Bump, 2016; Doherty, Kiley, & Johnson, 2016), despite the fact that a few news brands still comprise an overwhelming majority of the news audience. If all news media becomes targeted at specific groups, will public life grow even more fragmented and polarized? Many assume that improving the relationship between journalism will have nothing but positive consequences for civic engagement and democracy. The truth may be more complicated.

Summary

This case study has shown what it looks like when a news organization attempts to endure journalism's current market information regime. Because the news industry continues to be one where measures of audience size matter most, *The Chicago Tribune* continues to maintain a mass audience approach to the news audience. This leads to the privileging of stories that appeal to a large audience, rather than a specific audience. It also leads the paper's managers to judge audience interests based on what they do and do not click on. Most notably, this leaves managers convinced that audiences are inherently uninterested in public affairs journalism, rather than willing to consider alternative hypothesis (e.g., these public affairs stories are not reported in a way that appeals to the audience). As a result, the *Tribune's* managers find themselves in a familiar conflict, where they must strike the right balance between providing audiences with stories that they "need" because they are of vital democratic importance, and that they "want" because that's what will pay the *Tribune's* bills.

A side effect of this approach to news production is that it leaves the *Tribune's* managers unsure how to approach audience engagement, and confused about whether or not engagement is a worthwhile pursuit. This often means that engagement is limited to reception-oriented methods (e.g., tracking audience behavior). In the few instances when production-oriented audience engagement is taken up at a senior level (e.g., the paper's Blue Sky section, its live events, and its use of the Hearken platform), it is done in order to increase the paper's audience to its soft news. In other instances, reporters or columnists driven by an innate desire to engage with their readers take it upon themselves to do so.

Yet, the paper's focus on maintaining a mass audience in order to succeed within journalism's market information regime leads to frustrating and sometimes frightening consequences for those *Tribune* writers attempting a more collaborative or interactive relationship with the audience. These writers described facing angry or threatening readers who expressed unreasonable and seemingly uncontrollable rage via social media. *Tribune* staff working for sections that deviate from the mass audience approach to target niche audiences (e.g., Blue Sky) report a more communicative, less disdainful relationship between themselves and the small, intentionally chosen audience they are pursuing. This complicates the argument audience engagement advocates make in support of expanding its role in journalism. If production-oriented audience engagement depends on confining interactions to a small, carefully curated group of people, then its pursuit is incompatible with a market information regime where audience size is the currency.

A note about generalizing

As the largest site in my sample, the *Tribune* comprises hundreds of employees, making generalizations about the paper difficult. During my interviews I found that for every three people who said one thing about how they approach or consider their audience, there was another who said something completely different. In fact, there were inconsistencies throughout the office about everything from who the paper's audience is to how journalists should engage them. Some reporters and editors thought about and communicated with the audience much more than others. For example, two columnists said they often avoided looking at comments to their writing, because these comments were often vitriolic or outright threatening. The deputy editorial page editor was stunned when I pointed this out to her, and said that not reading comments was “insane.” And while some reporters and columnists actually went to great lengths to converse with readers about their stories, they did so with little guidance or encouragement from their superiors. Similarly, while some editors and reporters kept an eye on the audience metrics data to see how their stories performed, others had no idea that these data were even available for them to look at. In general, there was little consensus about what role, if any, audience metrics data played in the way *Tribune* reporters were evaluated by their editors, an observation that illustrated a larger lack of top-down direction when it came to how the paper’s staff should engage with and consider the audience.

When asked why these incongruities existed within the paper, many suggested it was because the paper had gone through several ownership changes and would likely soon undergo yet another. Because the paper is in such a constant struggle for survival, there appears to be little in the way of time or resources to devote to reconciling these differences. A comprehensive, top-down philosophy seemed like a tall order at a place where resources were barely strong enough to maintain the day-to-day structure. As McMahon explained,

> The economics have just been brutal… I remember talking to somebody on the business side about, I don't know, maybe about 7 or 8 years ago, and he said that like, 30 years ago, they had all these different scenarios, right, about where revenue could go. And they had a scenario in which if revenue hit this low, they'd

> probably have to shut down. And he said, "We blew past that like, two years ago."

As a result, while the *Tribune* in many ways encapsulated a traditional newsroom perspective on news production and audience interaction, it harbors plenty of differences of opinion within its offices. In light of this situation, my findings have attempted to illustrate the overarching trends I noticed at the paper, despite the fact that these trends had detractors not just from within the institution but in some cases from within the same department.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This dissertation has explored how those who hope to make audience engagement normative within journalism have attempted to incorporate their interpretations of engagement into news production. In doing so, it has revealed how individual actors within journalism attempt to navigate the profession's structural constraints in order to transform journalistic practice. Though journalists at all three organizations expressed at least some interest in engaging with their audiences, those at Hearken and *City Bureau* were much more explicitly focused on this relationship than those at the *Tribune*. These findings suggest that an interest in understanding and communicating with the audience is spreading throughout the news industry. However, what role that interest ultimately plays in news production, and to what end, will depend on which – if any – of these organizations' perception of the audience and interpretation of engagement becomes the industry norm.

The findings from each of these case studies have been discussed at length in the previous chapters. What follows in this conclusion is instead an exploration of what these findings reveal for how journalism as a profession is and is not changing. To that end, this chapter begins by examining the role of intuition in driving journalism's embrace of these different interpretations of audience engagement. Many believe that news production is moving towards a "rationalized" future where hard data will inform all decisions; however, my findings suggest otherwise. This chapter then draws on Giddens' theory of structuration to explore how each of the interpretations of audience engagement examined in this dissertation may play out within the profession. Finally, it acknowledges this project's limitations, and explores opportunities for future research.

The false promise of a 'great rationalization'

Journalism professionals and scholars have grown increasingly convinced that the news industry is in the midst of a "great rationalization." They believe that two factors have led news publishers' to a more scientific and data-driven conceptualization of the news audience: financial necessity, caused by plummeting subscription and ad revenues; and technological opportunity, in the form of sophisticated online audience measurement tools (Anderson, 2011; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). As news consumption increasingly moves to digital platforms, news producers and advertisers can see not only how large their audience is, but also what content they look at, how much time they spend with it, and whether or not they comment on it or share it with others. These additional data have arguably resulted in a more complete portrayal of the news audience, which journalists can draw on to determine what sorts of stories to report on and publish.

Yet, this perspective assumes that audience data and intuition are mutually exclusive, when in reality they blur together. Even the most sophisticated measures of audience behavior are ambiguous and thus require interpretation. These interpretations are likely to reveal underlying assumptions about who journalists think the audience is and what journalism itself can and should aspire to accomplish. As these case studies have demonstrated, audience conceptualizations are neither consistent across organizations, nor wholly data-driven. Instead, journalists interpret audience metrics in ways that justify their preconceived notions about the audience and their own approaches to news production. In other words, journalists use observed audience data, which reveal what audiences *do*, to make educated guesses about what audiences *want*. These guesses reflect journalists' assumptions about the audience more than they do the actual audience.

This blurring of audience data and intuition is most notable when it comes to public affairs journalism. Employees of all three sites point to metrics like pageviews and unique visitors as evidence that the audience avoids political news, yet disagree on the underlying cause of this avoidance. Legacy journalists at the *Tribune* assume the audience is and always will be fundamentally uninterested in political news. The innovators at Hearken and *City Bureau*, on the other hand, assume that the audience feels alienated by and distrustful of mainstream political journalism's impersonal and detached approach. They believe that the audience would consume more political news if these stories included more "audience engagement," which they define as explicit attempts to bring the public into in the news production process. In short, the traditional journalists sees the audience's lack of interest in public affairs news as a given, while the innovators see it as a failure of the press. Taken together, these case studies have shown that the news media environment does not comprise one objectively determined conceptualization of the news audience, but at least two competing conceptualizations that stem as much from gut feelings as they do from empirical data.

The way news organizations conceptualize the audience influences how they pursue the audience. Though the subjects of this dissertation unanimously agree the news industry has a problem attracting audiences to certain types of journalism, they disagree about both the problem's source and, consequently, its solution. Because *Tribune* editors and reporters assume the audience finds watchdog journalism inherently unappealing, they attempt to subsidize this genre with a variety of lighter, more entertaining fare (i.e., soft news) they believe the audience is more likely to embrace. Hearken and *City Bureau* employees, on the other hand, are convinced that what drives the audience away from investigative journalism is not their interest in the topic, but the way in which those topics are presented. They believe that the lack of audience involvement in and representation throughout the reporting process repels potential audiences from the final product. As a result, these organizations aspire to make "audience engagement" a more prominent part of news production, by inviting the public to participate in and contribute to news stories both online and off. This dissertation has explored what these attempts at audience engagement look like in practice, how these attempts reckon with the news industry's structural constraints, and what their outcomes reveal about the future of the profession.

Journalism's process of duality

In other words, this dissertation has shown how certain journalism stakeholders imagine their field, and how they act on that imagining. In doing so, these case studies have illuminated the tension between what Giddens refers to as "something which 'happens'" and "something which is 'made to happen'" (1984, p. 346). The news industry's growing emphasis on measures of audience size results in journalists pursuing larger audiences, which then perpetuates the profession's focus on basic traffic metrics. However, the field also includes a minority of individual actors like the people behind Hearken and *City Bureau*, whose aspirations are aligned with an altogether different journalistic goal – to make the news more collaborative. Both groups are reacting to economic and technological circumstances currently confronting the broader media industry – what Giddens refers to as “elements which that actor neither helped to bring into being nor has any significant control over” (346). What this dissertation demonstrates is just how inconsistent these reactions can be: some journalism stakeholders continue to focus on growing news audiences, while others are attempting to change how journalists conceptualize the news audience in the first place. The former is an attempt to reproduce journalistic practice; the latter is an attempt to transform it.

Hearken’s employees might assume that publishers who embrace their goal will likely grow their audiences as well, but their focus on this assumption in their pitches to newsrooms reflects the news industry’s focus on this metric more than it does their own normative approach to journalism. *City Bureau’s* focus, on the other hand, is placed primarily on addressing specific audiences that its managers believe have especially been mistreated by traditional journalism. Their appeal to foundations and newsrooms relies on the argument that increasing diversity in journalism and democratizing the news production process will improve the quality of the work and the amount of trust community members feel towards the profession. And finally there is the *Tribune*, an organization that maintains its pursuit of a large, mass audience, yet includes editors and reporters who are determined to engage with audiences despite the frustrations they face and the lack of a clear benefit for doing so.

These differences get at an important point about attempts at institutional transformation: the outcome is not binary. Journalism’s transition to a more audience-responsive profession is not a yes or no question, but one of degree. If newsrooms continue to see the connection with their audiences as a means to revenue, be it advertising or subscriptions, they will likely be motivated to improve that connection just to the point where that end is met. For instance, newsrooms using Hearken's services might be willing to let the audience determine a small subset of story selection if they experiment and find that allowing the audience even more autonomy does not yield larger economic returns and instead simply diminishes their journalistic authority. If, on the other hand, the pursuit of a deeper audience connection becomes an end in itself, as many audience engagement advocates would like, then the transformation of journalistic practice could be much more significant.

More subscriptions, more engagement?

The findings from my case study of Hearken suggest that, for now at least, many newsrooms see engagement as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This comes as no surprise considering journalism has historically maintained a transactional approach to the news audience, whereby journalists have provided the news and audiences have paid for it. As a result, audience engagement is unlikely to become even a small piece of news publishing unless it becomes a currency within the profession's market information regime. Whether or not this occurs likely depends on if the news media environment continues its shift towards business models dependent on subscriptions and memberships (Pfauth, 2016; A. T. Williams, 2016). Such a transition would mean news organizations could survive and even thrive with the support of small, loyal audiences, which would likely make engagement a more valuable commodity (Nelson, 2018).

City Bureau is an organization explicitly making the case that an audience-supported revenue model can work. By combining foundation funding with membership revenue and income from partnerships with other news organizations, *City Bureau* has been able to maintain its focus on small, distinct audiences in a market information regime that privileges audience size. This model is drastically different from traditional news outlets: it includes a lean staff, emphasizes live events and educational components, and maintains an inconsistent publishing schedule. As a result, *City Bureau's* model may be harder for news publishers to emulate, even if they accept that its one that can succeed.

The difference between experimenting and surviving

When discussing differences between traditional news outlets like the *Tribune* and nonprofit or experimental news organizations like *City Bureau* and Hearken, it is impossible to avoid the visible differences in atmosphere that separates one from the other. *Chicago Tribune* interviews took place in or near the paper's desolate newsroom, littered with empty cubicles. Shortly after I finished my fieldwork, the *Tribune* sold its historic Tribune Tower a developer (Channick, 2016). One *Tribune* editor told me that, during the heyday of the newspaper business, the paper's staff filled the entirety of this iconic skyscraper. When I was there, it was down to just two floors. A reporter I spoke with kept a canister of Raid on her desk because she had noticed roaches.

These circumstances bled into the demeanor of the newspaper's staff. Some described the rounds of layoffs they had witnessed and the troubling sight of coworkers packing their things and walking out the door for good. Others pointed to the many empty cubicles and warmly described the people who once worked in them. The employees I spoke with told me these things with an "I've seen it all" chuckle, which often gave way to looks of genuine concern.

City Bureau's founders, on the other hand, have experienced countless reasons for optimism. Not long after its inception, the organization quickly fundraised over $10,000 to open a newsroom. *City Bureau's* founders have gone into the nonprofit news business at a moment when many view this form of news production as the future of the news industry (Ferrucci, 2015; Mayur & McLellan, 2012; Konieczna & Powers, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2013). Since *City Bureau* started, it has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants from established foundations, thousands in donations from community members, and glowing write ups in industry blogs. Its articles have been published in a variety of high-profile outlets and have garnered several journalism accolades. Its founders have even been invited to discuss their model at conferences and foundations across the country. Furthermore, its lean size and nonprofit status has meant its editors were not beholden to commercial interests, and thus could afford not to think about conventional markers of media success like pageviews and ad revenue.

Hearken has experienced similar success during its brief history. The company has generated a large amount of buzz since its founding in 2015. Its been profiled by popular presses like *The Washington Post* as well as trade presses like *Nieman Lab* and *Columbia Journalism Review*, and its co-founder and CEO Jennifer Brandel is a mainstay at journalism research and industry conferences. And its success shows: Hearken is based in a skyscraper across the street from the scenic Millennium Park, overlooking Chicago's Lake Michigan. It is housed on the 26th floor of the Aeon Center, which hosts Microsoft and other corporate giants. Right now, Hearken's employees take up a small amount of the sprawling space available to them. However, they're hiring, which would mean utilizing the many empty cubicles on the north side of their floor.

I point this distinction out because I believe it should not be overlooked when considering the differences in how Hearken, the *Tribune*, and *City Bureau* approach their work and their audiences. The core staff of both Hearken and *City Bureau* exhibited an excitement about the reporting they were publishing, and an enthusiasm to experiment with traditional journalistic practices. The *Tribune*'s staff, on the other hand, appeared in a perpetual state of uncertainty about the future of their trade, their newspaper, and their very jobs. To *City Bureau* and Hearken, the unknown meant opportunity; to the *Tribune*, it meant distress, if not outright dread.

Absent this context, my results might suggest the *Tribune* has chosen not to explicitly pursue marginalized communities out of disregard for the citizens living within them. But things aren't that straightforward. *Tribune* editors focus on the tech community not because they don't care about the South Side, but because they think doing so will generate the revenue necessary to cover the South Side more effectively within a market information regime where larger audiences are the goal. *City Bureau*, due to its size and nonprofit status, can sidestep this decision altogether. And Hearken's continued success depends on how effectively the company can persuade journalists to embrace its argument that increasing audience engagement will positively impact a news organization's bottom line. This contrast reveals how different missions and revenue models lead to different calculations when it comes to news production. As *City Bureau* and Hearken's production-focused interpretation of audience engagement continue to spread, and commercial news outlets continue to face profound challenges, understanding the implications of these differences will only grow more important.

Future research

Of course, whether or not journalism transforms in such a way also depends on whether or not engagement is something that audiences want. Perhaps they do, as the people behind Hearken and *City Bureau* believe. But perhaps audiences trust journalists *because* of their detachment, rather than in spite of it. This gets at the primary limitation of this study. Since I focused on news organizations rather than news audiences, I was unable to examine how audiences actually respond to these attempts to cultivate engagement. Research that investigates what audiences want from journalism would be helpful in corroborating whether or not the gut instincts compelling publishers to partner with organizations like Hearken and *City Bureau* are supported by evidence. Other scholars have already begun pursuing this work (e.g., Wenzel, 2017). Hopefully more will follow.

This gap presents an opportunity not just for scholars, but for audience measurement firms as well. There are countless conversations about audience engagement that occur annually at a variety of journalism practice and research conferences. These conversations tend to include editors, reporters, and publishers, but rarely include employees of companies like comScore and Nielsen who are in the business of understanding how audiences behave. What makes this omission confounding is the fact that these firms are having *their own* conversations about audience engagement. The fact that these conversations are taking place shows that the major players within the news media environment believe that how audiences engage with media is worthy of consideration. On the other hand, the fact that these stakeholders with disparate interpretations of audience engagement have yet to come together reflects just how convoluted the term has become.

In addition to studying whether or not audiences actually want to be engaged, future research should further explore the faith-based approach that organizations like Hearken and *City Bureau* have utilized to persuade newsrooms of audience engagement's value. As this dissertation has revealed, the confusion surrounding engagement has challenged its supporters' ability to empirically demonstrate its benefit. The result is an environment where audience engagement advocates deal in beliefs rather than evidence. In other words, if audience engagement is one of journalism's new religions, this study has examined a few of its preachers. So what is motivating people to join the choir? And what about the skeptics who have chosen to stay outside the church doors? Research that focuses on the newsrooms that do and do not decide to pursue audience engagement will reveal how audience perceptions vary across the field, and how those perceptions shape the debate around what role audiences should ultimately play in news production.

Future research should also investigate the role that elitism and paternalism play in the pursuit of audience engagement. Both are increasingly seen as "undesirable" concepts that should be excised from news production (Thomas, 2016, p. 88). In interviews, both Hearken and *City Bureau* employees lamented what they saw as traditional journalism' elitist approach to the news audience, where reporters and editors assumed they knew best what audiences wanted to see covered. However, the belief that audiences want to be engaged is just a different assumption that journalists have made about their audiences, rather than an escape from assumptions altogether. In either case, journalists are deciding they know best what sort of news their audiences want, and that they as news professionals are uniquely qualified to provide it. Finally, at a moment when populism has surged across the globe and many distinct demographics appear to be feeling alienated from society, it is worth exploring who exactly engagement-focused newsrooms choose to engage with, and who gets left out.

In closing, Hearken's and *City Bureau's* effort to spread their interpretations of audience engagement are just one piece of an ongoing public contest to determine journalistic practice. Other actors throughout the news industry have their own ideas and opinions about what role the audience should have in news production, if any. Maybe one of these interpretations of audience engagement will become the norm, or maybe that honor will fall to another. Perhaps in a few years the term "audience engagement" will vanish altogether and be replaced by a new journalistic pursuit. Regardless, the outcome will have consequences not just for how journalists produce the news, but also what they expect of public – as well as what the public expects of them.

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