

Resources

Engaged Elections Track Hearken Engagement Innovation Summit October 2019

From the local to the national level, elections offer an enormous opportunity to provide a public service to support an informed citizenry. But all too often the information that voters really need to know is buried under the talking points and horse-race polling that politicians and pundits push.

These articles, adapted from sessions in the Engaged Elections track at the 2019 Hearken Engagement Innovation Summit, put the spotlight back on the people who make the choice at the ballot box, so you can understand how your organization can best serve their needs leading up to Election Day.

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Session facilitators included Jay Rosen (pictured) and Ariel Zirulnick from Membership Puzzle Project and Geoff Dembicki from The Tyee

The Citizens Agenda: A Listening-Based Approach to Elections Coverage

The Citizens Agenda is a style in which election coverage can be done. It starts when you ask the people you are trying to inform:

“What do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes?”

Another way to define it would be, “all election coverage plans that proceed from this originating question.”

In order to do election coverage in the citizens agenda style, you have to figure out how you are going to listen to the people you are doing this for. Including people you want to reach but maybe don’t reach most of the time. Because the goal is not just to ask the question, “what do you want

the candidates to be discussing...” but to get good answers back.

Dive deeper:

These are the key steps in the citizens agenda approach, from Jay Rosen:

- Identify — especially to yourselves — the people you are trying to inform. Your community. Your public. Your crowd.
- Ask the people you are supposed to inform a simple question: what do you want the candidates to be discussing as they compete for votes?
- Keep asking it — what do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes? — as you find new

ways to explain the project, and new people to reach with it.

- Interpreting what you heard, and applying your knowledge as journalists, synthesize the initial results into a draft agenda, a priority list that originates in an act of listening.
- Test, question, and revise the agenda with the people you made it for, plus any help you can get from polling. “This is what we think we heard. How did we do?”
- When confidence permits, or circumstances require, you then publish the citizens agenda as a “live” product on your site. Launch and promote. Gather reactions. Synthesize and improve.
- Now, turn the citizens agenda

The Tyee: 'It provided a North Star'

Jeanette Ageson, Publisher, The Tyee

The Tyee, an independent, online newsmagazine based in Vancouver, BC, is increasingly funded directly by our readers. For that reason, we're motivated to keep close tabs on what our readers want to see, what questions they want us to pursue. Responding to the biggest stories during the election is a good way to get a ton of pageviews, but we are more focused on providing true value for our readers, enough so that we can make a good case for why they should support us with a financial contribution, even though we don't have a paywall.

In the spring we were considering (a) how we were going to cover the Canadian federal election in the fall and (b) the theme of our spring fundraising drive. We learned about the Citizens Agenda approach and it seemed like a fantastic method that helped solve both problems – we would co-develop our election reporting plan with our readers, and then ask them to fund it. This gave us a really great way to know in advance that our reporting would be appreciated and gave us a good story for fundraising.

Putting an open text box on an article page, just throwing the doors open like that, did feel a little bit

daunting at first. We had no idea how many people would take part and if they would submit any good ideas. The results were very heartening – over 600 people submitted ideas, with many people submitting several ideas. It was a good exercise to leave it open like that because it revealed an area of reporting (health care) that we don't often focus on that our readers would like some more reporting on. Nearly two thousand people voted on our list of story ideas (sourced from answers to the first survey) to help us arrive at a final list of 6 questions to pursue.

The list of questions was very helpful in our reporting. It allowed us to assign out the questions fairly far in advance so the reporters could do a thorough job and pursue the question across several stories. That put us in the driver seat much more so than if we were just reacting to the news cycle during the election. And it provided a North Star when the news cycle was really heating up and we had to make decisions on where to put our limited resources.

To anyone wanting to try it – just try it! If nothing else, you'll learn a lot about your readers, and you create an opportunity to build some trust with your audience and stand out from other publications.

into instructions for campaign reporting that connects with the issues people care most about. Around the top priorities you can do in-depth journalism. Given a chance to ask questions of the people competing for office, you can turn to the citizens agenda. And if you need a way of declining the controversy of the day, there it is. The agenda you got by listening to voters helps you hold to mission when temptation strikes to ride the latest media storm. At every

turn, you can ask yourself, "How does this align with our citizens agenda?"

- Press the candidates to address it. When they do, tell the voters. In a way, you have "won" at campaign journalism when this happens.
- Build your voters guide around it. Down the left side of the grid, the candidates for office. Across the top, the items on the citizens agenda. Fill in the grid with what the candidates have done, said, or proposed;

that's a public service.

- Keep listening for revisions to the agenda until the campaign ends. I called it a published product. I also said it was live. That means you change it when the ground shifts, or choices narrow. Maybe there's a few per election cycle, or a new one every Monday.

Resources:

[Download The Citizens Agenda guide](#)



Solution Set Live: Chi.Vote, a Collaborative Election Guide

By Mia Sato, Engagement Editor, Better Government Association

In September of 2018, Chicago residents and media were hit with shocking news: Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced he wouldn't seek re-election the following spring. It would become only the fourth open race for mayor in almost a century, and at one point, more than 20 people were campaigning. When the February 2019 elections finally came, voters saw 14 names (!) on their ballot for mayor.

My team at the Better Government Association knew we wanted to produce a voters guide, especially at this pivotal juncture. In the past, our guides consisted of a candidate questionnaire for open races, an FAQ section, and other key infor-

mation like dates and polling locations. But this time, with all 50 wards, plus the offices of mayor, treasurer and city clerk open, we knew we had to step up our game. And we quickly realized we'd be able to better meet voter needs if we partnered with other local newsrooms and civic organizations in Chicago.

Enter [Chi.Vote](#), a collaborative voters guide we envisioned as a one-stop shop for everything a Chicago resident needed to make an informed choice.

Dive deeper:

The founding members of the Chi Vote Collective are the BGA, Daily Line Chicago, Block Club Chicago, The Chicago Reporter and The Triibe; these groups were responsi-

ble for the designing and creation of the Chi.Vote platform. In addition we had Outreach & Information partners: Chalkbeat Chicago, City Bureau, Reform for Illinois, South Side Weekly, and Univision. These groups are additional contributors of content and outreach efforts.

When we set about designing and creating a truly useful tool, we began with audience needs. Many voters said they couldn't tell the candidates apart from one another, so we created a comparison view of where candidates stood on key city issues.

We also knew that voters would likely have questions we didn't over on the FAQ page. For that, we incorporated a Hearken widget for any and all election questions. I led

this effort and answered dozens of questions, whether [through reported stories](#) or quick email responses.

The structure of Chi.Vote made sense for the Chicago elections — if Emanuel had sought re-election, our tool would look very different. Our partners, too, helped to determine the structure of the tool; successful partnerships are mutually beneficial and should meet the goals of everyone involved.

One point I tried to emphasize was that it's important for journalists to be thoughtful about the kind of elections coverage they provide. With Chi.Vote, we wanted to assure voters that no information was too basic, and that when it comes to something as important as voting, there are no "stupid" questions.

One of the most-visited pages on Chi.Vote was the FAQ page, and in past voter guides, I found that many of the Hearken questions I received were about the actual mechanics of voting, not the horse race political reporting that we often otherwise see. We provided many entry points into Chi.Vote: the [Ask Us Anything](#) tool, a [fun quiz](#), a [ward look-up](#) tool and more.

At the Engagement Innovation Summit, my part of the Solution Set Live session focused on designing your own audience-driven election guide, from choosing and recruiting collaborators, to pooling resources, to determining the success of your work. I created [this worksheet](#) to help you think through your own project step-by-step.

We also brainstormed how this framework might work for other collaborative projects around other civic topics, like the 2020 Census.

- If your newsroom wanted to provide a comprehensive, informative tool people can use as we prepare to answer the census, what might that look like?
- What is the current political/social/cultural landscape like with regards to the census?
- What are the specific questions your audience might have about the census?

We used versions of these questions to build Chi.Vote, but as you can see, they would be great start-

ing points for other topics as well.

Successful partnerships (around election topics or otherwise) will hopefully lead to future opportunities for newsrooms to work together in the public interest. Since Chi.Vote, the BGA has frequently collaborated with the newsrooms we partnered with during election season. We announced Lens on Lightfoot, a [seven-newsroom](#) partnership to cover Mayor Lori Lightfoot's first year in office — you'll recognize many of the names from the Chi Vote Collective!

Resource:

[Chi.vote: How to plan, build and execute collaborative voter guides](#)

Solution Set Live: Three Election Case Studies

[Solution Set](#) is a weekly newsletter from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism. Every Thursday, we take a solutions-focused look at innovative and interesting ideas in journalism and try to offer replicable lessons and best practices. Each issue has six sections that break down how a publisher is tackling a challenge. We also always start each issue with the TLDR — short for Too Long; Didn't Read — that summarizes the key takeaways. The Solution Set Live! presenters have produced their own TLDR below. Each includes a [Trust Tip](#) from [Joy Mayer](#).



Ellie Mejía, City Bureau Program Support Coordinator, and Joseph Lichterman, Lenfest Institute

City Bureau's elections and accountability coverage in Spanish and English

Ellie Mejía, City Bureau Program Support Coordinator

The Challenge: Finding basic information about elected officials in Chicago — and knowing how to apply this information to advocate for your and your community's needs — can be a laborious process. We wanted to make it easier, not just in English but in Spanish, too.

The Strategy: City Bureau teamed up with community organizations to host a month-long series of neighborhood-specific workshops.

The Numbers: 112 Chicagoans from 22 different community areas attended our series over the course of five workshops in five different neighborhoods, two of which were conducted in both

Spanish and English. Throughout the project we partnered with four community organizations and one city-wide nonprofit.

The Lessons: Hosting these workshops affirmed that people want resources that are transparent, instructive, and digestible. It also taught us a lot about the limits of our own working capacity.

The Future: We want to continue to host neighborhood-specific workshops with a civic literacy lens, but next time we will give ourselves more time. Developing a curriculum, building relationships in any given neighborhood, and interpreting and translating are long-term investments.

Trust Tip from Joy Mayer: Only 20 percent of US adults have ever spoken with a journalist — and that number goes down the less white,

rich, educated and old someone is. So each time you interact with someone, it could be their first time talking to a journalist. With that in mind, go in ready to be an ambassador for the profession.

Don't assume they know that you're there to help and that you aim to be fair. Be ready to answer complaints about political bias and questions about how you decide what stories to cover. Tell them earning their trust is important and ask how you could do better. If you're meeting people in person, take a printout with information about your newsroom.

Remember, when people think of journalism — especially political journalism — their minds are probably going to ratings-driven cable news coverage. That's a fair association. You have an opportunity to explain how you're different from that.

KPCC Human Voter Guide *Ashley Alvarado, Southern California Public Radio Director of Community Engagement*

The Challenge: Southern California Public Radio (KPCC and LAist) audiences wanted to better understand the basics of voting — and not just the nuances of elections.

The Strategy: Through what's been dubbed the "Butterball Turkey Talk-Line for voting," the [Human Voter Guide](#) team provided direct answers via text message, email, in person, on-air, and online.

The Numbers: Since launching in 2016, they've answered more than 900 questions.



The Lessons: When we listen to the information needs of audiences, we can engage and serve them more deeply.

The Future: More Human Voter Guide. Plus introducing a [Citizens Agenda](#) approach.

Trust Tip from Joy Mayer: Many people don't see journalism as a public service. In fact, Americans are pretty divided when asked whether journalism protects democracy or hurts democracy. Yet most journalists in your newsroom probably got into the field because they think it makes America a better place.

Communities need access to information. A project like this is so clearly a service project. Don't just hope people notice that. Tell them. This is why we're here. If we're not useful to you, we're not doing our jobs. Remind them of that in each piece of content. Put it in italics at the top or bottom of each story or answer. Put it in newsletters and in social posts. Say it on air.

Meedan's collaborative election coverage

Tom Trewinnard, Meedan Director of Business Development

The Challenge: Viral mis- and disinformation creates a noisy and confusing information ecosystem that limits the public's access to reliable information on which to base democratic decisions in elections.

The Strategy: We build large-scale monitoring and publishing collaborations to find and debunk viral misinformation, and distribute debunks and credible content to diverse audiences. We engage audiences in the process by setting up mechanisms for them to send our initiatives content and claims they want to

be checked and verified.

The Numbers: Mexico: 90 partners, 5 million unique visits to Verificado.mx, 200,000 followers on Twitter and Facebook, 10,000 subscribers on WhatsApp, more than 400 posts and more than 100 visuals published by the project and shared by partners. India: More than 150,000 messages sent to our tipline, and more than 80,000 unique requests for checking.

The Lessons: There's a real audience for this kind of work, and collaboration can be extended to the audience in a productive and high-impact way.

The Future: We're bringing lessons from Mexico and India to the

US 2020 elections with Election Exchange, where our goal is to build equitable transactions between voters and media.

Trust Tip from Joy Mayer: When we asked news consumers how they feel about fact-checking efforts, they told us it depends on who's doing the fact-checking. Of course that's true — we still need to trust the integrity of the messenger. So what do people need to know about this effort? How do you find and select claims to debunk or verify? How do you decide which sources to trust as verified information? How do you make sure what you're doing is accurate? People don't automatically give you credit for your good intentions. You have to earn the right to be found credible.



Session facilitators Morten Ro, Harken, and Ulla Pors, TV 2 Denmark

Making a Scandinavian Democracy Festival

Within the past decade, Democracy Festivals have blossomed in Northern Europe as yearly events that gather key figures from all parts of the national landscape of power-holders and influencers to meet and interact with the public through events, debates, speeches and happenings in a vacation-like setting. These have become institutional arenas in the political and societal agenda through extensive media coverage and widespread public participation.

This article examines the engagement strategies behind the concept and how this allows media companies to create unique events. This is illustrated by TV 2 Denmark's one day spinoff during the 2019 national election, designed to facilitate dialogue between the public and powerholders.



Locations of Democracy Festivals in the Nordic Baltic Region, via democracyfestivals.org/about

Democracy festivals: Setting the agenda in Nordic politics

Over the past decade, Nordic and Baltic countries have begun setting up their own democracy festivals modeled on the Almedalsveckan started in Sweden in 1968.

The International Democracy Festivals Association describes the mission of these events is to “foster active civic engagement, a culture of discussing and critical thinking as a response to the alarming rise of authoritarianism and nationalism in our geographic neighbourhood.”

In Denmark, Folkemødet is a 4-day event that has been held every year since 2011. Funded by sponsors and partners, it is managed by a dedicated organization and attracts 55,000 unique visitors and 100,000 entries.

Central to the idea of a democracy festival is the “festival” - this is a casual, fun environment where politicians and the public can interact in a relaxed way. This can include sing-a-longs, cooking contests, music and more.

They also include more typical political fare, including debates.

What engagement strategies can journalism learn from these festivals?

These festivals share certain characteristics:

- They are either national or tied

to a specific region or municipality

- They are open to all, with free admission
- Attendees are working to support participatory democracy and benefit society
- The focus is on participation, conversations and interaction
- Festivals can have particular themes or target groups
- The atmosphere is festive

In 2019, TV 2 Denmark held its own democracy festival event for the national prime minister election. It was in part a response to the bitter, divisive nature of the previous election in 2016.

Ulla Pors, head of events and innovation at TV 2 Denmark, shared their lessons from hosting their own festival:

- Plan, plan, plan. Over the course of the event, the station hosted more than 100 debates. The planning spreadsheet for coordinating all the debates was taller than Pors when unrolled. Months of planning went into the event.
- The unexpected will happen. From weather to unanticipated guests, part of the planning has to involve preparing for the unexpected. The station hired a contingent of security guards, and staff kept in close communication throughout the day.
- Consider how content travels across your network. The debates generated hours of content that TV 2 then used in the run-up to the election across

multiple platforms, including a streaming channel devoted to airing the debates.

- Know your goals. For TV 2 Denmark, creating a dialogue that was more constructive than the divisive politics of the previous election was crucial. The last time around, debates would devolve into shouting matches where no one could be understood. The difference this time was extraordinary. During one debate, two candidates who previously had been at each others’ throats actually danced.

Resources:

- [Democracy Festival Introduction](#)
- [Democracy Festival Design Dimensions](#)
- [Democracy Festivals Association](#)



The planning spreadsheet for coordinating all the debates. Over the course of the event, TV 2 Denmark hosted more than 100 debates.