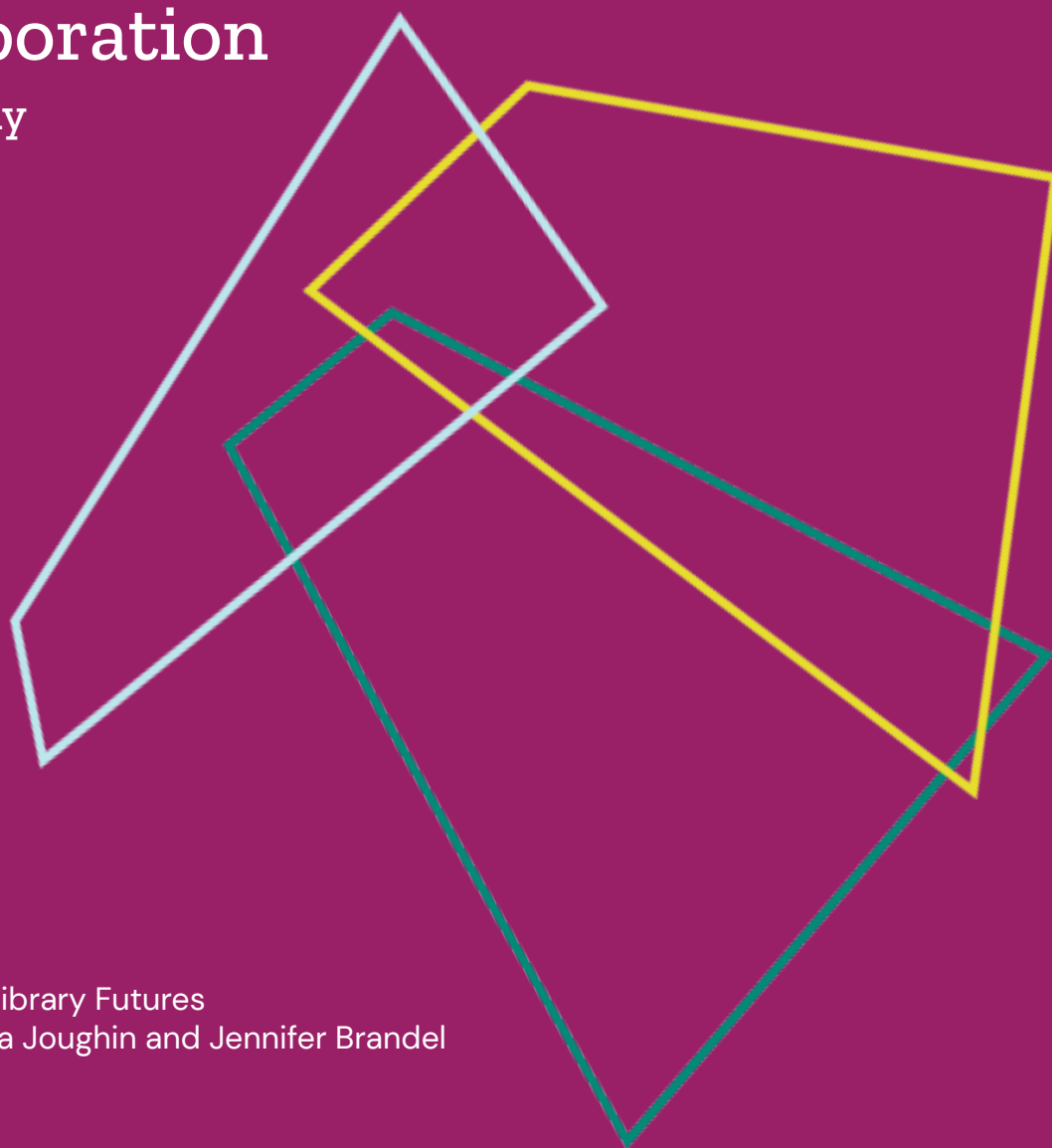# Improving Digital Access to Local News Through Library-Newsroom Collaboration

Case Study

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Prepared for Library Futures
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LIBRARY FUTURES   HEARKEN   MAKE WITH

About The Organizations

About Library Futures

Library Futures is one of the leading digital library policy and advocacy organizations and a crucial voice in the fight for balanced digital rights. A "think tank" for the future of libraries, we hold events, run programs in technology and access, write position papers and opinion pieces in the press, work on policy issues with our coalition, and partner with a variety of organizations to further our mission of equitable access to knowledge in the service of the public good.

About Hearken

Hearken drives people-first engagement workflows across industries. We help organizations better listen to and engage their stakeholders to build a sustainable community of supporters. We offer transformative and proven processes, training and technologies to help operationalize community engagement. Our goal is to help our partners learn from their stakeholders and turn that insight into more sustainable and successful services and growth.

About MakeWith

MakeWith is a queer-owned consultancy specializing in collaborative, equity-centered research, design, and strategy for a more just and democratic future. Our clients are organizations in the private, social, and public sectors that are working to create or reimagine our social and economic infrastructure in industries like education, journalism and media, public services, community and economic development, and more.

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Executive Summary

This is a case study of a pilot program of a 3-month collaboration between the Albany Public Library (APL) and Times Union (TU) news organization. The program focused on producing content in partnership with the public and each other using a specific reporting methodology called public-powered journalism. This pilot is the outcome of a larger project, initiated by Library Futures, with funding from the Google News Initiative and support from program design consultants at Hearken and MakeWith, whose aim was to explore possibilities for expanding equitable digital access to local news through library-newsroom collaboration with an emphasis on sustainable, low-tech solutions, library ownership of digital materials, and long-term relationship-building.

The decision to focus this collaboration on content production was made after completing a listening and co-design process conducted with the community and library stakeholders in the five months leading up to the pilot. This process combined desk research with surveys and listening sessions with 772 Albany residents, 21 Albany Public Library librarians, and other key stakeholders. The full report of initial findings can be found here. A combination of insights from this process and feasibility considerations led the project team to identify a public-powered content partnership as the best option from a list of possible pilot ideas.

Between February and May 2022, key stakeholders from Albany Public Library and Times Union worked together to solicit audience questions about the past, present, and future of Albany's Pearl St. and to report on the answers to these questions over the course of several stories. The content produced through this collaboration was made freely available to the public outside of the TU paymeter and co-owned by both the library and the newsroom.

Though the project team faced a variety of challenges and limitations in the execution of this pilot, it was ultimately a positive and successful experience for both the library and the newsroom. By recognizing their shared mandate to meet the public's information needs and working together on a specific, time-bound, and low-risk project, a foundation was established for future collaboration between the library, the newsroom, and the public.

This case study profiles some of the key decisions and activities of this pilot and is intended to serve as a replicable framework and/or jumping-off place for future experimentation and learning about the potential for collaboration between libraries and newsrooms.

Introduction

A healthy society requires the ability to respond to a community's news and information needs equitably and efficiently. Research has shown that the production and circulation of accurate, representative and trusted information can help individuals make more informed decisions, contribute to community cohesion, increase efficacy and decrease corruption in government, and more. In turn, community members who are able to access news and information that they find valuable can support providers with attention, engagement, and remuneration. This flow of mutual benefit in a healthy news and information ecosystem is propelled by trust and mutual respect between news and information producers, distributors, and consumers.[1]

Many communities rely heavily on two major contributors for access to accurate, fact-based, and trustworthy information — local newsrooms and local libraries. In general, the public places a high level of trust in libraries, making them increasingly important resources in the face of the growing mis/disinformation epidemic and decreasing trust in news sources.[2]

While historically local news outlets have been a staple of most communities, they have become increasingly less common due to a variety of economic factors, including a decrease in public funding in the news space.[3] This has led some communities to become "news deserts," which is a "community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level."[4] This can include communities with few or no local news outlets as well as those experiencing a reduction in the quality or quantity of editorial content and audience reach. Newsrooms' emphasis on generating profit through paywalling is one factor that can significantly limit their ability to reach audiences and provide the public with critical information. These limitations become especially pronounced in the relationship between for-profit local newsrooms and public libraries, which struggle to consistently and sustainably make paywalled digital news available to the wider public within the existing parameters of the newsroom–library relationship.

In order to ensure that communities (and society as a whole) can benefit from healthy and equitable news and information ecosystems, local newsrooms and libraries have much to gain from exploring new relationships with each other and to the production and distribution of digital news content. By working in collaboration, libraries may help increase newsroom capacity, editorial quality, audience reach, and even revenue, while newsrooms can help libraries provide their patrons with more credible, timely and relevant information. By rooting collaboration in their shared mandate to provide for the news and information needs of the public, everyone has the potential to benefit.

Deciding What To Pilot

The intention of this engagement was to experiment with a short pilot project focused on increasing equitable digital access to local news for residents of Albany, New York through library–newsroom partnerships. The initial assumption was that the pilot would focus on negotiating consumer–grade access to a different publication, the Albany Business Review, for APL patrons through an experimental financial/legal arrangement and/or technology solution. However, it was important to all partners that we test these assumptions through listening and research with the community before designing and implementing.

For the first five months, we worked to gain a deeper understanding of the current Albany news ecosystem and the experiences, needs, and desires of Albany residents when it came to accessing local news. We conducted discovery conversations with each of the project partners, reviewed selected reports and articles, and distributed two surveys, one to APL librarians and one to APL patrons and Albany residents through community partners. Surveys were distributed digitally and physically in both Spanish and English. We received responses from 21 APL librarians and 772 patrons and Albany residents, far surpassing our expectations and highlighting the importance of these questions to the community.

Several of the findings from this research led the project team to begin shifting assumptions and expectations about the pilot. First, we discovered that The Times Union (TU) was both the most used and most desired source of local news for APL patrons. Notably, 65% of people who did not use Times Union indicated that they were limited by lack of access. While APL provides access to TU in both print and digital formats through Newsbank, the PDF format is extremely cumbersome and features a different interface from the consumer–grade product that patrons would be most familiar with. It was clear from the number of requests for access by respondents that patrons are either unaware that APL provided access to TU or found the ways in which access was provided to be unsatisfactory.

Second, we learned about a variety of needs and desires when it came to accessing local news. Subscriptions were the most cited need for patrons to improve access, followed by requests for curation/aggregation, improved UX/UI, and more and better coverage. Several people identified gaps in coverage that were not being filled by any source, especially local events roundups and topics previously covered by independent weekly papers that had since closed. These insights and others were used to create a set of criteria for evaluating possible pilot ideas generated by APL and Library Future stakeholders in a series of facilitated design sessions.

Based on these criteria, as well as challenges related to library staff capacity and the COVID-19 Pandemic, the project team decided the best and most feasible course of action would be to pursue a content partnership with the Times Union based on a public–powered journalism model. This pilot would allow APL to leverage a limited, low–risk collaboration to begin developing a relationship with TU while creating the grounds to negotiate co–ownership of digital content and engaging the public in the editorial process to produce relevant high–quality content. By easing into collaboration on terms that were relatively easy to agree to for both parties, the groundwork was laid for deeper partnership and experimentation in the future.

Libraries, Newsrooms & Public-Powered Journalism

Unlike traditional news production, which starts with the assumption that the newsroom knows what information the public needs and proceeds to create it without input or validation, public-powered journalism starts from a place of curiosity. In this approach, the newsroom asks the public, "what do you not know that you'd like us to consider investigating?"

Newsrooms that use a public-powered journalism approach create multiple opportunities for the public to participate in the editorial process, including asking questions to the newsroom, voting on possible story ideas, accompanying reporters as they investigate selected stories, and sharing new questions that emerge after reading the published piece.

These opportunities for audience involvement in the journalism process enable the public to shape stories, facilitate relationships of trust between the newsroom and the public, and provide the newsroom with insights about their information needs. When newsrooms are able to transition from producing content to providing a public service, it becomes easier to see that libraries and newsrooms share the mandate of meeting public information needs.

That shared mandate creates a bridge for collaboration that supports both organizations and the public.

Improving Digital Access to Local News Through Library–Newsroom Collaboration

While the public-powered journalism framework isn't a requirement for library-newsroom collaboration, it can be a helpful starting point for exploring some of the many benefits that libraries and newsrooms can bring to each other and their audiences, including

• **Improving Reach & Relevance:** By partnering with libraries, newsrooms increase their sourcing and resulting content's reach in terms of breadth and depth. Through the library, newsrooms are able to gather more and more diverse input resulting in news that's more relevant to more people.

• **Increased Trust:** By entering into partnership with libraries — institutions that consistently rank high for public trust — newsrooms are likely to garner greater trust and goodwill from the public through association.

• **Higher Quality Reporting:** Libraries are home to high-quality digital and physical collections. When newsrooms make use of library resources to ensure high-quality, nuanced, and factual reporting, they are increasing the value of the work they produce.

• **More Meaningful Engagement:** An invitation to the public to share their curiosity in a structured way can redirect energy that goes into unproductive commentary into thoughtful engagement. This can satisfy both the desire of the audience member to be heard and the need of the newsroom to be experienced as an organization that listens – once again deepening trust and relationships.

• **A More Participatory Journalism Process:** Libraries are free and open to the public, both digitally and physically, to a wide array of people. When newsrooms invite the community to participate in a public-powered journalism process through the library, a greater swath of the public gets access to and representation in the newsmaking process.

• **Expanding Access:** The current news publishing landscape creates significant challenges for libraries that are seeking to make news accessible to the public in a sustainable way. Collaborating with newsrooms to produce news opens up the door for co-ownership deals that benefit libraries and the public while still producing measurable benefits to the newsroom (through reach, trust, etc.)

• **Discovering Unmet Needs:** The ask/listen dynamic associated with public-powered journalism processes creates a new avenue for patron and community feedback that can sharpen the library's awareness of unmet or emerging community needs and unlock new program/service provision opportunities.

Designing & Implementing the Pilot

The following is a summary of the main decisions and activities that went into the design and implementation of the pilot, followed by takeaways and reflections. For those interested in pursuing a similar project in their own organizations, this summary can provide a high-level overview of the process and its essential components. However, each new project and collaboration will be different, with its own players, constraints, and opportunities. To plan and execute a similar project that is best suited to your specific organization and community, we recommend conducting a community listening and co-design process similar to the one we completed prior to designing our pilot.

Kicking Off The Collaboration & Defining Parameters

Aligning Around Mutual Benefit

The collaboration officially began when facilitators from Hearken and MakeWith reached out to TU's digital editor, Erica Smith, for an exploratory conversation about the possibility of collaborating on a public-powered journalism process. Over the course of 2–3 calls, the group was able to identify the key stakeholders for the collaboration, establish a shared "why" and identify where each organization's needs and goals overlapped.

The Shared Why: We are both in the business of providing information to the public

The Stakeholders:

Albany Residents

Library Staff
- Executive Director
- Head of Branches
- Branch Managers
- Communications Manager
- Social Media Manager
- Librarians

Newsroom Staff
- Editor
- Managing Editor for Digital
- Staff Reporter

Stakeholders Needs & Goals

Public Needs
- Access interesting and relevant news content behind paymeters, specifically from TU
- Access interesting and relevant news content through an improved UX/UI
- Access curated or aggregated news content

LF Needs
- Pilot a project/intervention to facilitate and expand access to authoritative, trusted digital local news through public libraries

APL Needs
- Fulfill its mission to "educate, entertain, and empower our community"
- Improve equitable access to local news based on community needs from the listening survey

TU Needs
- Improve coverage of and outreach to communities of color throughout the region
- Reinvent newsroom processes to make it a truly digital newsroom
- Engage with more young content consumers

Negotiating Ownership & Access

One of the most important criteria for this collaboration was that any content created in partnership would need to be co-owned by the library and made freely available to the public. We were unsure how the TU, a for-profit newsroom owned by Hearst, would respond to these criteria. However, the newsroom is in the midst of a digital transformation and expressed a strong willingness and openness to collaboration and experimentation.

This willingness was rooted in several factors including

- The perceived value of collaboration with the library, in the short and long term
- The perceived value in meeting TU's engagement goals
- The understanding that the content created was not likely to lead to significant monetary gains for any party
- An established practice of sometimes placing certain content outside of the pay meter

Under these assumptions, the TU agreed to co-ownership of content created with the library and to place all of the content created outside of the pay meter. While Library Futures worked to get contract language drawn up, the TU agreed to proceed with a handshake deal that outlined the following points

- **Ownership of the Hearken EMS and data:**
  This would be owned by APL, as they were paying for the EMS with their grant from Library Futures, but they would give the email addresses that were collected via the TU forms to the TU

- **Ownership of the content that's co-created:**
  APL and TU would co-own content, and be able to publish it on both of their websites and associated digital channels

- **Access to the content that's co-created:**
  TU would make all co-created articles in the series available to the public outside of the paymeter

"I never realized that community engagement of marginalized communities was a common goal for us both."
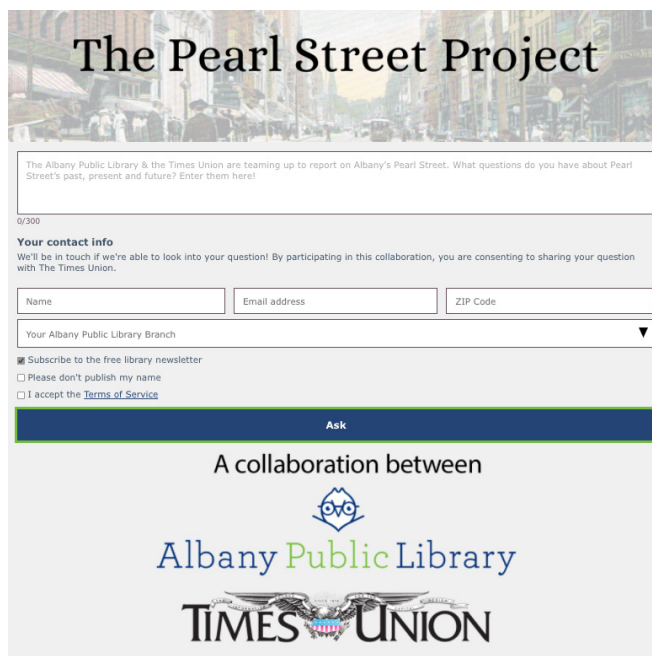
– **Deanna DiCarlo**,
Head of Branches
Albany Public Library

Identifying Themes & Prompts For Reporting

Because of the relatively short time frame for this collaboration, and to limit the overall effort required from both partners, we began by identifying themes around which each organization was already planning content and programming. We opted to leverage the public-powered process to support a story package that was already in production and was focused on the past, present, and future of a single street in Albany (Pearl Street) experiencing significant racial and economic disparities that impact Albany more broadly.

This story package especially appealed to the library because of its place-based and community focus and its emphasis on elucidating some of the historical factors that have led to the present reality. Additionally, one of APL's branches is located on S. Pearl St. and will be reopening after renovation later in 2022, creating additional opportunities for collaborative programming with TU. For the library, inviting public participation into these stories while contributing to and promoting them among patrons was a promising opportunity both to connect with patrons around locally relevant news and to potentially uncover insight into the community's experience and needs as they relate to the services libraries provide.

Once the theme was determined, the group worked to generate prompts for inviting the public to share their questions. For this engagement, we made use of a technology tool created by Hearken for this specific purpose called the Engagement Management

System (EMS). The EMS allowed each partner to create custom forms (see above) that could be embedded on their websites and to view response data on a shared backend. While the Hearken EMS is designed to make public-powered journalism processes and follow-up with participants as easy as possible for partners, it is possible to engage the public in a similar process using other tools and workflows.

The prompts

• **Prompt 1:** What questions do you have about Pearl Street's past, present, and future?

• **Follow-Up Question:** (displayed after responding to the first question): Do you live or work along Pearl Street? We want to hear from you!

What are your hopes and dreams for Pearl Street? What's needed for every block on Pearl Street to thrive?

Additionally, the form asked submitters to share their name, email address, and zip code as a proxy for demographic information, and encouraged sign-ups for each organization's newsletter. Each organization then created a "home" for the prompt on its existing websites that provided additional context about how the public-powered process would work. In order to make the opportunity more accessible to those without home internet access, APL also created paper forms for patrons to submit questions in person at their branches (which would then be entered into the Hearken EMS by a library staffer or volunteer).

Defining Success & Developing Metrics

Before launching the public-powered process, we made sure we identified what each party believed would constitute success for this collaboration. Our overall goal was to design & pilot a sustainable, low-tech intervention to facilitate and expand access to authoritative, trusted digital local news through public libraries. One of our key assumptions was that we could achieve these benefits to the public by facilitating collaboration between a library and a newsroom in a way that was mutually beneficial to both organizations.

To determine the benefit to all three parties (library, newsroom, and public) we identified the quantitative and qualitative metrics below. Given the short timeframe of the collaboration and the limitations of each organization's existing tracking systems, we were not able to track all of these metrics effectively. However, we share the full list of desired metrics in hopes that future collaborations will develop more effective ways to track them.

Quantitative Metrics:

- Story performance (especially in comparison to stories that aren't public-powered
- Engagement in the public-powered process (questions submitted, votes on story ideas, etc)
- Lead generation (new emails in the CRM or newsletter signups)
- Conversions (audience members who participated in the public-powered process and then became a paying subscriber)
- Perception/Trust (best measured in comparison to a benchmark and over a long period of time)

Qualitative metrics :

- Increased diversity in story sources/subjects
- New or stronger relationships with community, other organizations, etc
- Buy-in for longer-term collaboration or integration of public-powered approach into organizational operations
- Attract a funder / sponsor to support future collaborations
- Feedback that increases awareness of unmet community service or information needs
- Feedback that demonstrates members of the public feel heard, are deepening trust or goodwill towards either organization, or gaining deeper understanding of the value of either organization

Project Targets vs Actual Metrics

Metric	Target	Actual
# of audience questions	TU: 25 APL: 10	TU: 26 APL: 15
% of questions from story-related zip codes	No target identified	16 out of 41 = 39% were from affected zip codes
# of newsletter signups	TU: 10 APL: 25	TU: 14 APL: 9
# of new emails in CMS	TU: 50	TBD

Inviting Community Questions

Both APL and TU made use of their websites and other platforms and regularly posted to promote the prompts and stories. Some of these locations and platforms include

Times Union

- Digital homepage
- Dedicated "article page"
- Footer of relevant stories
- Spot in podcast
- Email newsletters
- Blurb in print version
- Outlet and reporter's personal social media accounts

Albany Public Library

- Library homepage
- Dedicated page on library site
- Email newsletters
- Direct emails to community partner organizations
- All social media channels
- Announcements in person at community meetings
- Print "worksheet" copies at all brances

Improving Digital Access to Local News Through Library–Newsroom Collaboration

The public did respond to this call-to-action with valuable submissions. This far exceeded the expectations of the TU, as they have historically struggled to solicit thoughtful feedback from the public. They agreed that the design choice to ask for questions, rather than comments or story tips, helped contribute to productive engagement. Some examples of questions that were asked by the public include

- Where did the name Pearl Street come from? Were oyster shells used for paving, or was it a family name, or simply copied from New York City's Pearl Street? Did Albany ever consider gem-themed street names (as it did with bird and tree street names)?

- What impact did the Empire State Plaza and 787 construction have on South Pearl Street? When did South Pearl Street begin its decline?

- What about when the Times Union was on Beaver Street, just off of South Pearl? I was 5 years old, my Dad worked there, and it looked like all was well in Albany. My buddies and me would take in a movie at The Strand orThe Palace. Was the Times Union moving out a cause or an effect of the decline?

- Has Pearl Street ever had strong local government representation to fight for them? Or has it historically been corrupt politicians who only assisted the wealthy? Would be curious to learn the political overlay of the city council, common council, and those stakeholders/players.

- Could you discuss the history of the previous trolley system that existed between Albany (running straight down Pearl St.)–Troy-Schenectady and beyond and how similar transportation could improve access to downtown, the waterfront, and its impacts on getting people closer to businesses?

- I'd like to know more about the cultural history of Pearl street- particularly Black history (both during slavery and reconstruction and after the great migration), Jewish history, and Italian history.

"I think [the public-powered process] allows us to ask a very targeted question versus a comment box... so seeing positive feedback, good questions and thought-provoking responses to our questions coming in...means a lot because it's just something that we're not used to seeing."

– **Erica Smith**, *Digital Editor, Times Union*
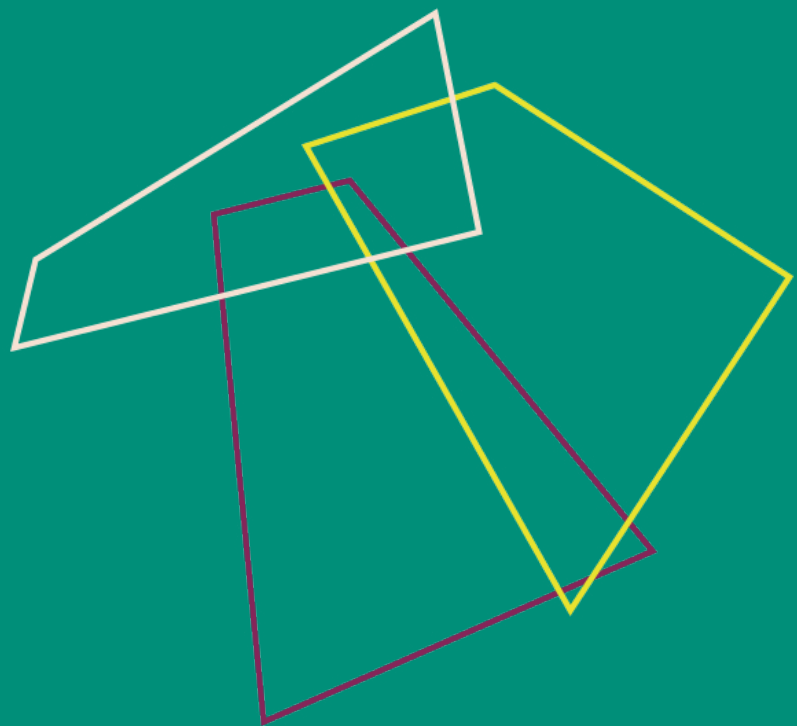
"At the onset of this project I was trying to bolster my engagement with community members specifically...and it was after our partnership with the library that we really got more responses... it just shows the power that libraries have in communities."

– **Lee Colon,** *Reporter, Times Union*
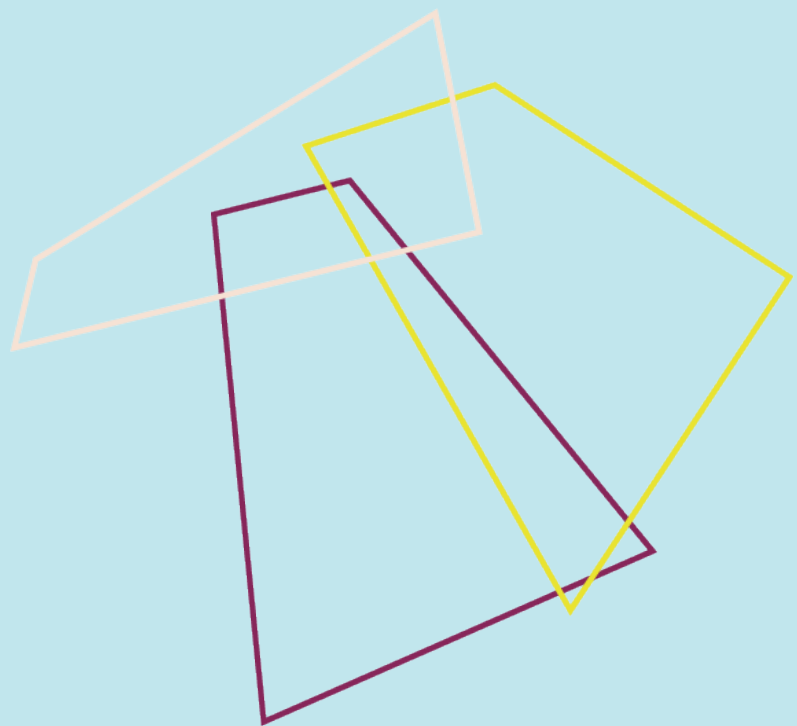
Engaging Question Askers, Creating Content, Publishing & Promoting

For this engagement, our goal was for reporters and librarians to select and respond to several audience-generated questions in order to produce a minimum of two pieces of news content. Because the public-powered process was introduced to a pre-planned story package, several of the articles in which were already in production by the time questions were solicited. This created challenges for working with audience questions and engaging question-askers in the story production process. In an ideal scenario, the public participation would be part of the story design and production from the get-go, rather than be an add-on.

We were able to address these challenges by incorporating audience questions in a variety of ways and places. For example:

- After the initial question period, the TU reporter for this package revised or added content answering public questions to stories prior to publication.
- A selection of questions were collected and responded to in a roundup article, written in collaboration with librarians.
- Several questions were slated to be answered in a column outside of the story package based on their relevance to that column's focus. As of the writing of this report, this story is still in production.
- The last story for the package, which was meant to focus on community responses to the prompt about their hopes and dreams, was planned but wasn't able to be produced and published for logistical reasons (the reporter was a short-term newsroom fellow and moved on to a new job).

Evaluating Success & Reflecting on the Process

As the stories series came to a close, the project team gathered to evaluate the success of the project and reflect on the experience of collaboration. Below are some of the key takeaways from each phase of collaboration.

Kicking Off The Collaboration & Defining Parameters

- One of the most valuable elements of this engagement was having a third party (Hearken) make contact with the newsroom and the facilitation of these initial meetings. Both organizations understood themselves as sharing a mission and had discussed the value of collaboration internally but hadn't made contact with one another prior to this moment.
- We believe that approaching the newsroom with a proposal for a specific, time-bound project to collaborate on rather than a general request for partnership or the negotiation of access was a significant contributing factor to the willingness of the TU to engage.
- Some of the qualities we believe contributed to both parties being willing to enter into collaboration are a commitment to public service, an equity orientation, a culture of curiosity and experimentation, and organizational and individual flexibility.
- The value of collaboration was perceived as worth the potential risks of co-ownership and open access. This is likely true for many more newsrooms. The willingness and ability to navigate these risks will likely be dependent on the newsroom's sense of its own mission, its short and long-term goals, the personalities of the people involved, and the effective communication of the potential benefits of collaboration.

"I think the introduction [of the library and the newsroom] was a big win. We were both in our own little corner saying, 'you know what, partnership with the other would be really interesting.' But then, you know, nobody has the time... So this [project] kind of forced that [connection] to happen and in a way that I think we'll be able to reap some benefits down the road... [it's] not just a one and done..."

– **Erica Smith**, *Digital Editor, Times Union*
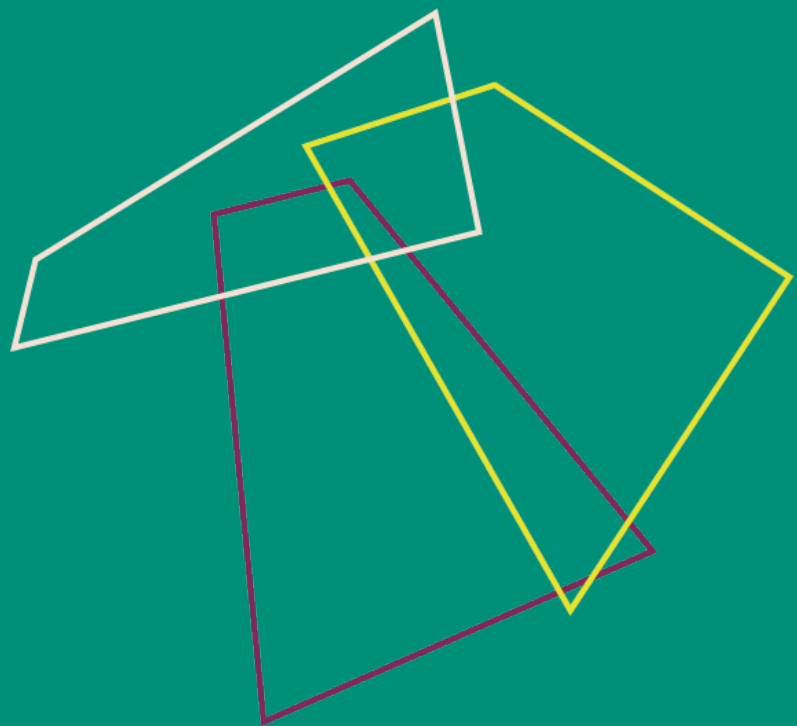
Identifying Themes & Prompts

Different themes and framing for collaborative public-powered processes will yield different results. While centering the collaboration around the Pearl St. package produced distinct benefits, including expediency and relevance, there were challenges associated with introducing the public-powered process to a pre-planned package. Experimentation with different themes, prompts, and processes will lead to greater clarity about what works best for this type of collaboration.

In the future, it is recommended that the public-powered process is introduced well before story planning and writing begins, to ensure reporters will be able to develop the package in response to community questions and more thoroughly engage and represent question-askers in the reporting process.

Defining Success & Developing Metrics

Determining and tracking performance metrics, both quantitative and qualitative, was one of the biggest challenges of this collaboration. Each organization was prepared to track some things but not others. Some metrics would have required benchmarks against which to measure performance that didn't exist already. For future collaboration, it will be important to make sure each organization has the capacity to track metrics at the appropriate level of specificity.

That said, the process of working together to set and keep track of performance metrics as a group was a great way to engage individuals within the organizations who do not typically participate in these processes, helping build alignment and awareness.

"*Working in this way brought some processes that normally happen in the dark to the light for different members of the newsroom - specifically setting different types of engagement goals for stories. This [public-powered] process worked better, but is also a bit harder to adopt.*"

– **Erica Smith**, *Digital Editor, Times Union*

Inviting Community Questions

- Inviting the public to share their questions was an enriching experience for all parties. For the newsroom, it helped unlock a higher quality of engagement and illuminated ways of thinking that couldn't have been anticipated. Specifically, an invitation to the public to share their curiosity in a structured way addresses some of the issues associated with news comments sections. For the library, it helped shed light on community needs and open up a new channel for communication between librarians and patrons.

- Many of the public's questions were focused on history, but that doesn't mean they are irrelevant to the news. Both the library and the newsroom recognized that understanding how and why something happened in the past can lead to a deeper understanding of the present, and sometimes be a catalyst to change the future. The emphasis on history questions also created opportunities for both organizations to engage community members who act as keepers of local history in ways that make them feel valued.

"The thing I like about this type of reporting and why I'm a fan of it, is that… you'll learn all the different ways [your readers] think about things. Even something really broad like Pearl Street provided such varied questions… I don't think we would have tackled most of those things on our own"

– **Erica Smith**, *Digital Editor, Times Union*

"When a library is doing its job, we engage all neighborhoods in meaningful ways, and sometimes that means showing up to listen and learn at community and grassroots organizations' meetings. Our South End branch manager tells us that folks at a meeting he attended were excited about the project, and hopes that it will shine a brighter light on the rich history and challenging present state of this community. Several specifically mentioned that 'journalists have tended to publicize only the negative aspects, in ways that appear to blame the neighborhood and without offering solutions,' and that this [reporting] was a clear departure from that. While that is hard to hear, it is important. This project helped us learn more about two communities we can better serve."

– **Deanna DiCarlo**,

Head of Branches,
Albany Public Library
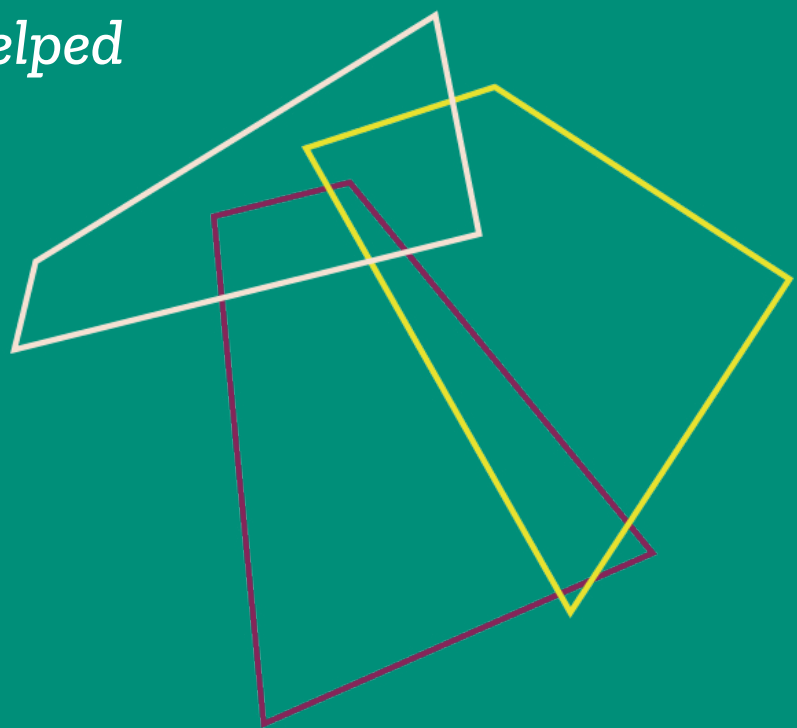
"Something I think worked really well was the collaboration with the library, and how it allowed us to maximize the audiences. We reached communities who traditionally didn't feel heard by newspapers or felt as though the Times Union was inaccessible and are now okay with reaching out to us and sharing what's going on."

– **Lee Colon,** *Reporter, Times Union*

Engaging Question Askers, Creating Content, Publishing & Promoting

- Including the public's questions and collaborating with the library allowed TU reporters to increase the depth, breadth, and nuance of their reporting.

- Though we were able to identify many different ways to engage question-askers and respond to their questions, staff capacity and logistics related to production represented a real challenge to execution. Furthermore, newsrooms do not typically see themselves in the customer service business, and the type of follow-up, follow-through and focus on participant satisfaction takes time to infuse into a newsroom's incentive structure and values.

- The project team expressed a desire to deepen engagement in future public-powered collaborations by inviting questions in person in collaboration with the library. This could both deepen the relationship between the public and both organizations, as well as help reach those who are affected by the digital divide.

- A major highlight and success of the reporting process was the support that APL librarians were able to provide to the TU reporter and editor. APL staff used their local history room and their reference librarians were able to pull archival material and historical records that added richness, context and valuable information to a variety of articles in the series. APL was also able to point TU readers to assets that are housed at their local branches, should the readers want to go deeper on any topic that was reported on.

"There are some important pieces of information that I gained from the library that I don't think I would have been able to get otherwise. Especially when we're trying to be authoritative, [the librarians] help us provide the evidence for a lot of things even if it's not through physical documents... because [libraries] have that relationship with community stakeholders, [they] serve as a liaison or a reference point."

– **Lee Colon,** *Reporter, Times Union*

Conclusion & Opportunities

Experiments in library–newsroom partnerships like the one established in this pilot are essential for building the relationships of trust and mutuality necessary for more ambitious collaborations. By weaving in listening and emphasizing relationship building at all levels of this process, we were able to build a foundation on which these organizations and the public they serve can continue to build. And that building is already happening. At the pilot's conclusion, both APL and TU were eager to discuss possible future collaborations including

- Collaborating on branch events, including a special event for the re-opening of the S. Pearl Street Branch, complete with broadsides printed of the stories in the Pearl Street package for attendees

- Using the library as a location for in-person reporting

- Introducing the newsroom to the library resources (E.g., hosting a brown–bag lunch for the newsroom with librarians detailing the resources that reporters and editors can call on for reporting support)

- Negotiating free access to consumer-grade versions of The Times Union on library computers. Currently, digital patron access is limited to viewing via NewsBank, which is a service that provides PDF versions of the newspaper.

Though there were limitations to what we were able to accomplish in such a short timeframe, including challenges related to staff turnover and the COVID–19 Pandemic, the openness, commitment, and curiosity of the people involved ultimately made the pilot a success. We hope that this success inspires other newsrooms and libraries around the country to explore what they can accomplish when they come together around a shared mandate to serve the public and a commitment to mutual benefit.

Interested in exploring what library–newsroom collaboration could look like in your community? Want to learn more about our work? We'd love to hear from you!

LIBRARY FUTURES

Library Futures

✉ info@libraryfutures.net

🐦 @library_futures

HEARKEN

Hearken

✉ info@wearehearken.com

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MAKE WITH

MakeWith

✉ info@makewithcollaborative.com

🐦 @makewithco

Appendix: Project Snapshot

The Stakeholders

Albany Residents

Library Staff

- Executive Director
- Head of Branches
- Branch Managers
- Communications Manager
- Social Media Manager
- Librarians

Newsroom Staff

- Editor
- Managing Editor for Digital
- Staff Reporter

Time & Resources

Support
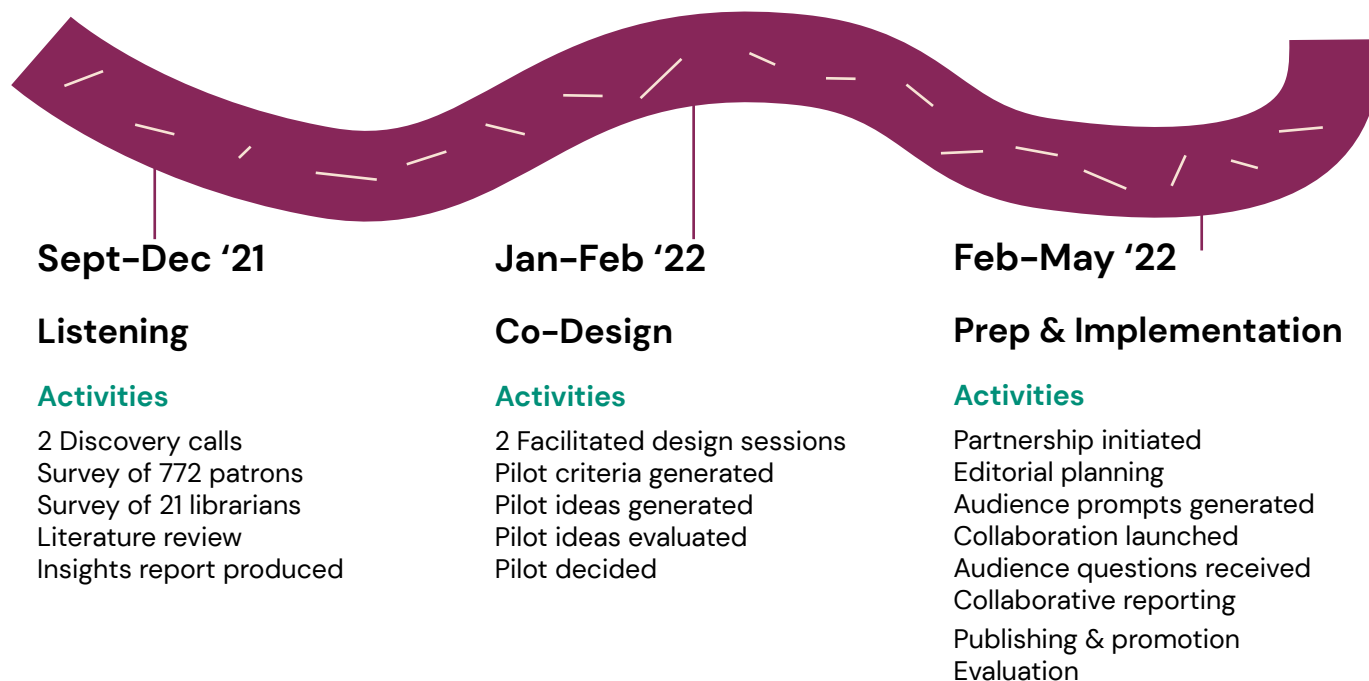
- Dedicated design partners & facilitation

Time Commitments

- 6–12 months
- Weekly team meetings, 1–hour
- 2–5 hrs/week of labor for org leads
- 2–3 90–minute design sessions

Budget

- $77,400 to staff & facilitation
- $20,000 to APL
- $6,475 to technology

Timeline & Activities

Sept–Dec '21

Listening

Activities

2 Discovery calls
Survey of 772 patrons
Survey of 21 librarians
Literature review
Insights report produced

Jan–Feb '22

Co–Design

Activities

2 Facilitated design sessions
Pilot criteria generated
Pilot ideas generated
Pilot ideas evaluated
Pilot decided

Feb–May '22

Prep & Implementation

Activities

Partnership initiated
Editorial planning
Audience prompts generated
Collaboration launched
Audience questions received
Collaborative reporting
Publishing & promotion
Evaluation

Pilot Criteria

• **Is it mission-aligned?** APL Mission: "strives to educate, entertain, and empower our community."

• **Could it increase equitable access to information?** Meets stakeholder needs, incorporates patron/stakeholder input, brings value, addresses externalities

• **Is it sustainable?** Maximizes current infrastructure and processes, budgets for the work, easily explainable/teachable, not over-engineered

• **Is it usable?** Easy to access/explain, implementable at all branches, user-friendly and accessible regardless of location, device, OS, internet data/speed

• **Is it measurable?** Success can be measured for things like reach, access, value to publishers, interest, and impact

• **Is it replicable/generalizable?** Can be extended to other libraries, can grow and expand

• **Could it increase access to high-quality, local news?** Content that is produced or made available is reliable, diverse, trusted and inclusive

Outputs – Content

- [Pearl Street, a once-humming cityscape struggles to thrive](#)
- [The two sides of Pearl Street, in photos](#)
- [Stereotypes and decades of disinvestment bruised Pearl Street](#)
- [Neighbors oppose the Capital City Rescue Missions expansion plans](#)
- [Contrasting two businesses on Pearl Street and the challenges they face](#)
- [How investments are affecting Pearl Street communities](#)
- [Downtown Albany community members focus on uplifting South Pearl Street](#)
- [Answers to 5 Questions About Pearl Street's Past](#)
- Getting There Column (incomplete)
- Hopes & Dreams for Pearl St. (incomplete)

Outputs – Metrics

Metric	Target	Actual
# of audience questions	TU: 25 APL: 10	TU: 26 APL: 15
% of questions from story-related zip codes	No target	16 out of 41 = 39% were from affected zip codes
# of newsletter signups	TU: 10 APL: 25	TU: 14 APL: 9
# of new emails in CMS	TU: 50	TBD

Endnotes
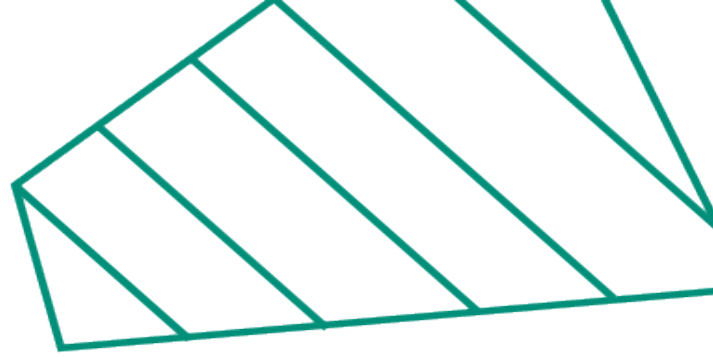
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