

NANNA HOLST

BETTER LISTENING

Shortcut to a more listening mindset



CONSTRUCTIVE
INSTITUTE



*Photo:
Peter Damgaard
Kristensen*

NANNA HOLST

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Need help with improving your listening skills? Contact me to learn more about the Better Listening Method.

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“Hearing is a physical ability, while listening is a skill.”

- Maribeth Kuzmeski, MBA, PhD, ‘The Connectors’

We often discuss how the public’s trust in news media is decreasing. We should really focus more on how the news media can show greater trust in the public. The Better Listening Method helps to achieve results by systematically involving and listening more to the people, we serve. So they can see the value in listening to us.

- **Nanna Holst**

Does better listening pay off? Yes.

There is a paradigm shift underway in media throughout the Western world. A movement that is changing the way editorial teams work and think. It is so new that the first-ever study proving the value of a more active and systematic listening approach is under peer review in the USA as I write these words. This tiny book is a condensed compilation of knowledge about listening better in the newsroom.

BETTER LISTENING

SHORTCUT TO A LISTENING MINDSET

LISTEN FIRST

Practical tools for a new culture

EVERYDAY HUMILITY

Keeping focus on the audience

TRUST IN THE POPULATION

Our thinking is our approach

LISTEN UP

We are constantly learning



The argument for better listening

If you need to convince yourself, your leaders, the newsroom ...

The value of better listening addresses important needs in the editorial departments, especially for old media which need to keep and reinvent their relevance in a new era. Listening better is a way to establish contact with new types of users and bring our target audience closer.

Media who listen actively and systematically receive:

- › Knowledge about what our target audience thinks about
- › Knowledge about what our target audience finds most relevant
- › An important mandate from our users to demand answers
- › Greater diversity in perspectives, stories, and people
- › Interest, engagement, and longer reading times for articles
- › More subscribers to newsletters
- › More people who pay for content or donate to the media

The Better Listening Method is a proven shortcut to a more listening mindset in the newsroom and an extension of the editorial process.



Photo: Cityside

Our guiding principle is “Listen First.” It is a way of thinking and a way of acting. We aim to bake it into everything we do. Listening is a core competency of our reporters. We listen carefully to the local community before launching new media, and we listen to a panel of locals who keep us accountable to our values.

Our economic sustainability depends on our close relationship with our community. As an independent non-profit organization, individual donations and contributions, small and large, are the core source of our funding. If we want people to support our work, we must create value through the journalism we deliver.”

- Tracey Taylor, Co-founder and Editorial Director, Cityside Media, Berkeley, California.

Cityside operates two popular local non-profit news media outlets, Berkeleyside and The Oaklandside. More are on the way.

Those who listen create results

When we as news media invite the 'silent majority' - those who are not in our inbox and who do not make themselves known on social media - into our journalism, something new happens.

5 advantages of better listening in our everyday work:

- › Closer contact with new and existing audiences
- › More direct relevance of what we produce
- › Stronger mandate as representatives of our users
- › More perspectives, diversity, and nuances in our journalism
- › Greater loyalty from readers and listeners, including financially

Shortcut to a more systematic listening culture

- › Follow the Better Listening Method
- › Increase the collective intelligence in the editorial rooms
- › Extend the editorial process by co-creation
- › Use both data and dialogue
- › Leverage the strong mandate from the audience



Photo: Ole Kaland

We want a cycle of constructive dialogue and editorial decisions that includes ideas and input from the audience. It is different from the traditional way of working, where we receive and request tips, but hold closed editorial meetings and have exclusive rights to journalism.

Audience dialogue is declared strategically important at NRK. But it is a bigger job to convince journalists and editors internally than it is to get the audience on board with the idea. Journalists and editors can easily see the meaning and value of citizen-generated journalism. The challenge is to change the journalistic process and the way journalists work.”

- Chris Carlsen, District Editor, NRK Oslo and Viken

The public does want to participate

People of all ages want to see, read, and hear news and stories that are based on their own curiosity, insights, and desires to be able to act in an informed way. They want to be involved in the process if news media invite them. I have proven this myself.

In just a few months, “Ask Us” at TV 2 Kosmopol became a popular opportunity for the population in the Capital Region to engage in the media outlet’s daily journalism on web, TV, and social media. Eventually, it became the way forward when the conversation around the dinner table, over the fence, or at the workplace ended in unresolved curiosity and frustration. The topics were of interest to others as well.

The population’s curiosity gave us original stories and angles. Their knowledge took journalism further. Our relationship and collaboration created more community, greater understanding, longer reading times, and ideas for follow-ups.

Both the media and the population became smarter. And happier.

BETTER LISTENING

SHORTCUT TO A LISTENING MINDSET

LISTEN FIRST

Practical tools for a new culture

Learn from the experiences of others and create success faster. Understand the lives of the users.

EVERYDAY HUMILITY

Keeping focus on the audience

When we listen to what concerns them, loyalty and willingness to pay increases.

TRUST IN THE POPULATION

Our thinking is our approach

Users know so much that we don't. They are willing to share their knowledge when we ask for it.

LISTEN UP

We are constantly learning

Even complaints are valuable. Our users help us understand what makes sense to them. And what doesn't.



Photo: Hearken

LISTEN FIRST

Practical tools for a new culture

Many media outlets feel like they are already listening, but they don't ask themselves: How are we listening? How do we make listening a regular practice?

There needs to be structure and a consistent practice, otherwise it will be forgotten. It must be a way of thinking and not just a project.

The media outlets that succeed in listening have a system for listening with the purpose of getting to know their users better and creating a closer relationship."

- Christian Hougaard
Chief Commercial Officer, Hearken Europe

There has not previously been a common language for systematic listening and co-creation (column one). The listening approach works for all journalistic genres, topics and formats.

	Listening mindset	News mindset	Investigative mindset	Constructive mindset
Time	Any time	Now	Yesterday	Tomorrow
Goals	Understand	Speed	Blame	Inspiration
Questions	How come? What is status?	What? When?	Who? Why?	What now? How?
Style	Puzzled	Dramatic	Critical	Curious
Role	Helper & Co-creator	Police	Judge	Facilitator
Focus	Answers & Nuances	Drama	Crooks & Victims	Solutions & Best practices

Source: Nanna Holst Source: Constructive Institute

Guidelines for better listening

The Constructive Institute has created an internationally recognized model for understanding the different journalistic purposes when working with news-oriented, investigative, and constructive approaches. The guidelines for the three approaches are described in the model (page 12). I have expanded the model with corresponding guidelines for working more consciously with listening and co-creating. Listening is not an extra task. It is a mindset and a prerequisite for understanding how we are relevant to our target audiences, regardless of journalistic approach, topic, or format.

The Better Listening Method will help keep the focus on and listen to what the population expects from us. The listening approach is timeless. Experience shows that people want help to understand what is happening now, what has happened in the past, and what we are facing.

Our editorial choices become both broader and more directly relevant to our target audiences when we listen to what they need us to investigate for and with them.



Photo: Ulrik Jantzen

The best way to find out what is important to other people is to let them ask their own questions.

You will not become a worse journalist by sharing your questioning power with someone who can create greater curiosity, responsiveness, and cohesion than you can. In fact, it is your duty as a watchdog of democracy to ask questions from the position that serves democracy best.

Even if you perceive yourself to be a critical journalist, you need to take seriously that there often is a need for other positions than your own. For example, you can ask as an “investigator” who is genuinely interested in finding out what precedes decisions. Or as a “messenger” who investigates issues that are important to the public.”

- Pia Lauritzen, Ph.D. in philosophy. Founder of Qvest.io.

BETTER LISTENING

Shortcut to a more listening mindset



5 considerations before you start

Just like a car has movable parts that can be adjusted, you can listen to and involve your audiences in many different ways.

It is the curiosity, the mindset, and the persistence that matters.

The Better Listening Method is developed based on knowledge of what is most effective in getting the newsroom to listen more actively and systematically, and what typically works against it.

The method begins with five considerations about your unique WHY for listening better:

1. What do you specifically aim to achieve by listening better?
2. How will you listen better? Digitally? Live? ...
3. What will be your measurable criteria for success?
4. What needs to change so that you can listen better?
5. What resources can you draw on?



Photo: Martin Ballum

Case: The value of personal ownership

Brian Holst is driving the transition to more constructive and engaging local journalism at Mediehusene Midtjylland: Midtjyllands Avis, Skive Folkeblad and Herning Folkeblad.

An important part of the change happens through workshops. Here, journalists develop concepts for listening to and involving readers. It creates personal ownership and ways of working that make sense and bring satisfaction to each individual. The ideas have been tested and collected in a format book. Each format has its recognizable logo in the newspaper, such as 'The newspaper seeks answers' and 'The path to a solution'.

"All formats contribute to lifting our journalism and making it more tangible for journalists to work on a daily basis with constructive and involving journalism. It creates a relationship between readers and the newspaper that we value highly."

- Brian Holst, Editor for News and Silkeborg, Midtjyllands Avis

5 common traits for successful listening media

1. Have enthusiastic leadership and strong facilitator

The top management wants it. A dedicated facilitator leads the process and is given time, also for direct dialogue with users.

2. Create systematic routines and priorities

Define together how, when, and how often you will listen and deliver. Align expectations: What can you promise?

3. Make it easy to deliver and easy to participate

Create manuals/formats for listening and delivering in the newsroom. Make it easy for users to participate and keep promoting the possibility.

4. Start small and learn along the way

A new mindset takes time. Mobilize interested colleagues. The power of habit is great. We easily fall back into old patterns.

5. Document and share results

Stand on good results and share them regularly. Inspire with the good stories and recognize colleagues who take initiative.

EVERYDAY HUMILITY

KEEPING FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE

1. Tuning down the noise to tune into the public

If we listen more to our audience, we have to listen less to something else. Fx, turn down the volume on professional communicators and those in power. They all have their own platforms today. The important everyday actors are your users, readers, listeners, and viewers.

2. Guidelines help focus on the audience's perspectives

Editorial guidelines/news criteria for listening and involving ensure that the audience is included in editorial meetings, daily priorities, the thinking of individual journalists and editors, in feedback, and post-critique.

3. Consistency creates predictability and commitment

Regularly scheduled interactions with the audience help them feel informed and knowing when to engage. Fixed deadlines help the editorial team to prioritize audience input.

TRUST IN THE POPULATION

OUR THINKING IS OUR APPROACH

There are regular surveys of the public's trust in the media.
There are no surveys of the media's trust in the public.
Even though trust is fundamentally a mutual feeling.

Something crucial happens when you shift your focus of trust. When news media invite listeners, viewers, and readers into their journalism, they are rewarded with curiosity, engagement, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to the community.

You can show trust by:

- › thinking of users as more than recipients
- › treating users as competent partners
- › reaching out and asking users for help and input

You can show trust by asking:

- › What questions do you need answers to that we can help find?
- › Which of these stories should we investigate?
- › What do you need answers to within this topic?
- › What are your experiences or knowledge here?
- › Do you know the solution?



Photo: Aarhus University

“ Danes don’t have declining trust in each other. They have declining trust in politicians and journalists. That’s important to keep in mind.

News media can exhibit trust by addressing serious issues with the understanding that there are competent individuals within civil society and generating a desire for active engagement. By challenging societal stereotypes, news media can inspire alternative thinking. For instance, many boys may disrupt the classroom but thrive in sports clubs. Is the problem then with the boys or with the school system? Being attentive to such nuances can lead to significant progress in trust building.”

- Christian Bjørnskov
Professor, Department of Economics, Aarhus University
Happiness researcher with a PhD in Trust

Greater mandate and significance

Legacy media has a unique ability to find answers through data, research, and access to authorities, companies, and those in power. An access that citizens, creators and other personal media channels seldom have. The importance of legacy media grows when we invite our audiences into our journalistic processes.

1. Media can give their audiences more authority

It is harder for authorities to dismiss inconvenient questions when they are grounded in the realities of real people.

2. Media can get more authority by sharing the editor role

It is also harder for authorities to dismiss inconvenient questions that several thousand readers have voted to be answered.

3. Media can create strong collaboration with audiences

If answers are not precise or comprehensive and leave new questions unanswered, users quickly come forward with new information and questions.

This provides a strong mandate to hold on to stories and demand new answers from authorities.

Align your intentions with your actions

Do what you say. Otherwise, you do more harm than good.

When media decide to listen more actively and systematically, they must be consistent. It takes time to build trust with users that their questions and concerns are being taken seriously and treated like the editorial team's own ideas. If the newsroom forgets to listen and falls back into old habits of thinking "we know best," then engagement and trust quickly disappear. The public feels deceived if we reach out for their input and then ignore it. This has been documented in research on Social Innovation:

"Just as citizen participation can strengthen democracy, poor experiences with participating can lead people to lose heart and interest in participating over the longer term. Staying away, becoming disillusioned, frustrated, cynical, and losing patience are common outcomes of poorly planned and executed attempts to engage citizens."

Engaging Citizens in Social Innovation: A short guide to the research for policy makers and practitioners. (Davies, A and Simon, J 2013)

When we listen up, our users help us

LISTEN UP

WE ARE CONSTANTLY LEARNING

1. Timing

The public often wonders about something before journalists do because they lead different lives. The one who listens picks up on trends and gets a 'hook' to tell the story – just because someone asked. When media listen up, they get to publish stories first and own the search for trending user generated questions.

2. Learning

Messages from users help optimize workflow and content.

Better listening is not a campaign or a project. It is a mindset that can be trained and learned. Audiences help us do that.

3. Conversation

The dialogue with our audiences has value in itself.

We build relationships when we listen and respond to those who put energy into writing to us. Even the angry ones teach us something. If we listen to understand, the conversation usually ends up in a constructive place.

More co-creation in the editorial room

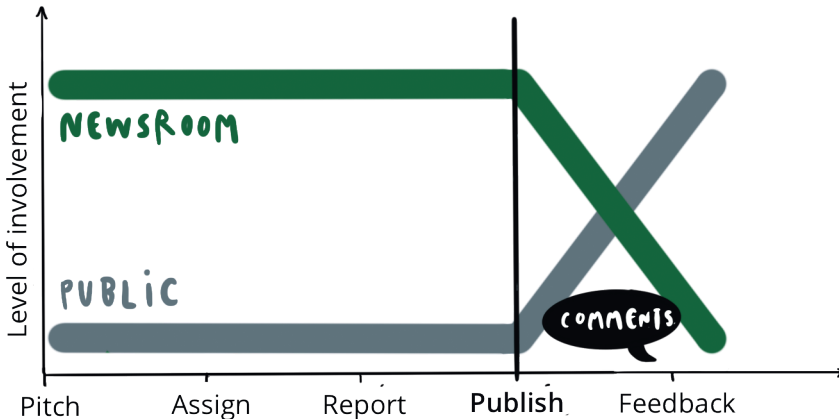
Journalists typically develop ideas and stories together with other journalists at editorial meetings. Based on the media's own sense of what is important to cover, as well as the professional press releases and other inquiries and suggestions that come to the newsroom. Users play a secondary role as recipients.

Of course, there is interaction along the way with sources, experts, professional communicators, those in power, those who want the media to cover something, and those who want the media's help in changing their situation. But those who should want to see, hear or read the content are rarely involved in the process from idea to content.

The public typically has the opportunity to jump on board only when the media publishes the content. Now audiences want to interact, but the news journalist has usually moved on to another story and is no longer that interested in the 'old' story.

The traditional workflow

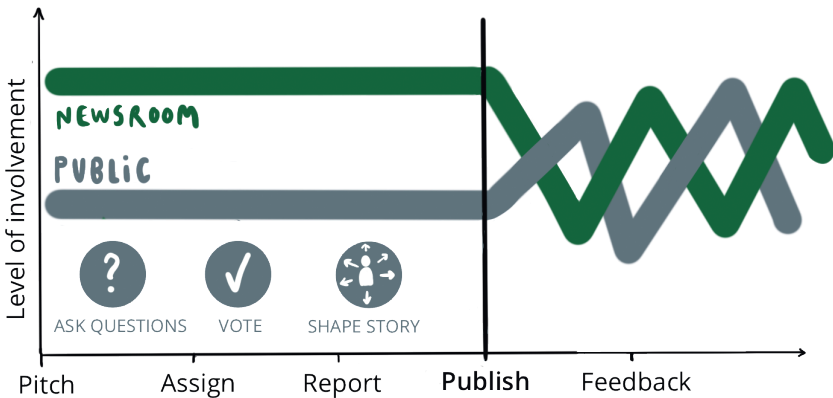
The international organization Hearken has developed a technology that fosters closer dialogue between the public and the media during the journalistic process. The organization describes here how the media and the target audience are typically separated throughout the editorial process:



Source: Hearken

The more listening, engaging workflow

An increasing number of media outlets are actively involving and collaborating with their target audience throughout the entire editorial process. The listening approach emphasizes closer alignment between media and audience throughout the editorial process as described by Hearken here:



Source: Hearken

5 ways of prolonging the dialogue

Before:

1. Finding out what the audience wonders about and needs answers to. For example, include a box under articles or ask in live broadcasts: “What can we help you find out?”
2. Letting users help prioritize what the media should look into. It’s easy for readers to participate, for example by clicking on a poll about which of the week’s selected audience questions should become content. Many people want to be involved.

During and after:

3. Reaching out and asking audiences for knowledge and solutions they have to problems that the media is addressing. The collective intelligence and knowledge is greater than that of the editorial teams.
4. Listening up to audience input after publishing. There are often stories with new perspectives in the audience feedback.
5. Answering everybody. When people engage, they give us their time and attention. Showing respect for that and them.



Photo: Mads Dalegaard

It is in our journalistic DNA to work for cohesion and democracy in the local community. What could be more in line with that than listening to local citizens? It makes a lot of sense to invite them into the journalistic process.

With their curiosity and questions, they can help influence what we write about - and do so at an early stage in the process. At the same time, they connect with us and feel taken seriously. We have always received tips and questions from readers, but having a listening system has helped us set up a framework and maintain a sustained and more systematic focus on listening.”

- Lene Vestergaard
Editor in Chief, Horsens Folkeblad

We need both data and dialogue

Dashboards in newsrooms typically show the ongoing number of online users, what they click on and how long they dwell. The editorial staff can test which headlines are most engaging. Analysis can show which articles lead to greater loyalty and new subscriptions. Data is important for understanding preferences.

The problem with data is that much of it is retrospective. Many journalists do not understand how to read the future through data, or what users want news media to focus on tomorrow. Users typically get to react to the content that the media has chosen to publish. They get the opportunity to respond to the editorial agenda and what journalists find important. Data does not make the public part of the content.

Listening proactively leads to greater originality. We gain new perspectives and more diversity when we listen to understand what is important to the target audience. Dialogue gives a sense of being seen, heard, and understood that data cannot provide. Hence, we need both data and dialogue.

You are now ready to get started!

“When was the last time you really listened to another person? And when was the last time someone really listened to you?”

Kate Murphy, Author, “You’re Not Listening: What You’re Missing and Why It Matters”

We build stronger connections when we listen to other people to understand their realities, perspectives, and needs. This applies both in our personal and professional lives. Is it difficult for media to listen? No, not with the necessary systematic approach. Does it compete with other things that demand our attention in the newsroom? Absolutely. Can we afford not to listen continuously to the people, we serve? It is hard to imagine. Unless the media world believes that it can be the only industry that is not dependent on a close relationship with its customers.

So let’s go out there and listen better – for Heaven’s sake!

- Nanna Holst

The The Better Listening Method was developed during the fellowship of 2022-2023. The The Better Listening Study - of which this book is a condensed version - can be read on my website nannaholst.dk

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The Core Principles of Constructive Journalism

The Better Listening Method is founded in the constructive approach to journalism. With the core message that it pays off to listen proactively and systematically.

“This guide is part of a series on constructive journalism created by fellows at the Constructive Institute. They explore different fields or approaches to journalism that aim for more than mere reporting.

Together, they are built on the fundamental principles of constructive journalism, which the Constructive Institute in Aarhus has helped define and formulate. Constructive journalism is bridge-building, critical, and balanced, with a forward-looking and future-oriented focus. It is fact-based and often addresses important societal issues.

Constructive journalism is not about promoting heroes, governments, or civil society organizations. It is not about simplistic, trivial, or feel-good news, and journalists should never become advocates for one solution over another.”

- Constructive Institute

The three pillars of constructive journalism

Journalism for Tomorrow

The Ambition

To contribute to democracy through critical, constructive journalism

Focus on Solutions

Not only expose the problems, but also look for possible solutions

Cover Nuances

Strive for the best obtainable version of the truth.
See the world with both eyes

Promote Democratic Conversation

Engage and facilitate debate, including people in the community

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