

# Lessons from The Listening Post

Stop parachuting and start building relationships in your communities

Jesse Hardman, Internews

On the morning of the 2016 election, I met up for coffee in New Orleans with a source. We'd been trying to get together since the summer, when she reached out to share her thoughts about the police shooting of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She'd left a raw audio message with my community media project, The Listening Post, that was urgent and insightful. The crux of her response was why Black Lives Matter is a necessary movement. "When you're born, your self-esteem is already crumbled," she said, talking about the specific hurdles black people face as they grow up.

We finally met in person months later, just hours before the country was transformed by Donald Trump's presidential victory. I asked her if she'd had a chance to vote yet, and she replied that she was not planning to cast a ballot despite having the day off work. As a young, black, Southern woman, she said not enough had changed under Barack Obama, whom she had voted for twice, to make her feel like voting mattered. A college graduate, she still had her same overnight shift at the post office, and she still had a stack of medical bills she struggled to pay. By the end of the conversation, I felt like I had a small window into why around 40 percent of Americans did not vote at all, a story that received scant attention while most of the media scrambled to document the Trump voter.

I wasn't after some traditional scoop from this source about malfeasance in the police department or missing campaign funds from a candidate's coffers. My goal was to investigate what it's like to be this woman, in this city, at this time.

For the past four years, I've been probing everyday life in New Orleans through a community engagement media project called The Listening Post. I create opportunities around the city for people to connect to news topics via text message and community recording devices called "listening posts" that are stationed at libraries, businesses and civic centers.

The goal is to expand the reach of news to communities that are left out of the media conversation — to make sure they get



The Listening Post project put up 100 signs in neighborhoods across New Orleans with simple questions that people could answer via text message. (Jesse Hardman / The Listening Post)

important information, yes, but also to provide opportunities for them to share what they know. The stories and tips I get go into a public radio segment on New Orleans Public Radio and get posted online at [listeningpostnola.com](http://listeningpostnola.com) and on Twitter at @LP\_Nola as part of a digital community billboard.

### Here's an example of how this works:

Last year, I looked at affordable housing in New Orleans — a hot-button issue in a city that has seen its post-Katrina population swell with wealthier newcomers. I did my due diligence and interviewed a local housing expert and a real estate agent. I also shared questions around the city using posters and listening posts, asking residents which neighborhoods they lived in and what percentage of their monthly income went to housing (30 percent is the affordability threshold according to the federal government). I also asked people what they'd miss about their current community if they were priced out and had to move.

People recorded answers to these questions via my public recording posts at a library, a

grocery store and a health center.

People shared answers via cell phone text messages, too:

- From Mid-City/Tremé: Yes, rent is outrageous in the city. I spend about 60 percent of my income on housing, sadly. I would miss the community, the melting pot of neighbors and the bike lanes. I would miss the spirit of the city.

- From Magazine Street and Napoleon Avenue: Rent is 40 percent of my monthly income. I cannot afford to move. I'm terrified even to look as I will be 35 and needing to find roommates. I don't complain about any repairs to my apartment for fear that the landlord will raise the rent. I feel fairly safe here and love my neighborhood. I have no doubt I will be chased out soon due to soaring rents and Airbnb.

- From New Orleans East: We own our house. The mortgage is 80 percent of our income. I'd miss the location of my church, a park with a pool and the library.

That last text message caught my eye despite being less anecdotal than some of the almost 100 others that came in from nearly every



The Listening Post project partnered with the New Orleans Museum of Art in 2015 to collect audio anecdotes tied to an exhibit on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Visitors recorded answers to questions like, “How do you commemorate a disaster?” and “How do we decide when to preserve and when to let go?” (Jesse Hardman / The Listening Post)

neighborhood in the city. New Orleans East is a neighborhood that mainly gets covered for shootings and other violence. Sitting on the periphery of the city, it’s also rumored to be the area families are being pushed into due to affordability issues in their traditional neighborhoods. Seeing a church, library and swimming pool as things someone would miss let me know that residents were invested in a neighborhood that much of the city considered a place to avoid.

I called that respondent and a week later we met on her porch for an interview. She’d joined my project after hearing me on the radio and she occasionally responded to my news text messages and questions. “I want to participate. I want to be a part of making New Orleans great, and I think this is a great way to do it,” she told me. We talked for an hour, and she explained that New Orleans East was a place where she could afford a house on a teacher’s salary. She explained how flooding from Hurricane Katrina had devastated her street and that some homeowners never returned. She said leaving was not an option for her family, as their savings were tied up in the home. So, despite flood damage and a termite problem, they stayed put.

Parachuting into a neighborhood would not have led me to these sources. These women would have been needles in a haystack. Yes, I likely would have found other voices for the story. But there is an important difference in the fact that they chose me. They heard me on the radio, or saw a community ad for my project, and were motivated to respond. I’m not

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knocking on their doors; they’re knocking on mine.

Here are a few tips I’ve learned about the best ways to create a news conversation with your community and expand your list of potential sources.

**Be intentional.** Which neighborhoods or populations in your community are covered by the media in a one-dimensional way or not at all? Which areas are accustomed to journalists parachuting in, extracting a few quotes and leaving? These are the neighborhoods that most need news they can use, sustained engagement and a platform to voice concerns, needs and goals.

**Establish relationships** with people in the community who share your vision for sharing information. Learn from them how best to connect with community members.

**Visit and listen.** Go for a walk in the neighborhood, but leave your microphone or notebook behind. Pay attention to where people hang out and how information is shared in popular locations like churches, grocery stores, libraries, community centers and government

offices. Sit down at a restaurant, strike up a conversation and look for local signs posted in the neighborhood. Search for community bulletin boards. The point of all of this is to capture the daily flow of information.

**Gather some data.** To get a deeper understanding of how local information flows, craft an information-needs survey to explore how people access and share information, which local sources they trust and which issues they feel most passionate about. Find a partner in your community to help you collect the data and share the results with them.

**Craft questions.** Make sure you set aside some quality time to focus on what you want to know from the community you’re engaging. Your goal is to make questions simple, inclusive and relevant to the experiences of residents. You’re going for, “What’s your experience?” as opposed to, “What do you think?”

**Engage with community members.** Now it’s time to get back out into the neighborhood and ask your questions. Get creative, get offline and make sure people have a way not only to answer your questions but also to get in touch. We’ve had success with public signs bearing questions and a New Orleans phone number people can text message or call.

**Create content.** The questions, comments and experiences you hear from your community are a great source of reporting ideas. Use community feedback to identify new leads or new angles on trending issues — or ones lacking media attention — and produce items for your outlet that speak to the concerns and questions you’re hearing.

**Keep the conversation going.** Stay in touch with your citizen networks. Make it a priority to provide them with information on the topics they said mattered most. Providing feedback is a key step to building trust and sustaining a conversation. The community needs to see that their contributions are utilized.

**Follow up with your most active participants.** Get coffee with them and establish their interest in being an ongoing source. They can help you expand your project and alert you to important things happening in the community.

**Be patient.** Community engagement doesn’t happen overnight. It takes relationship building, trust, consistency and time. Not everything is going to work, so don’t be afraid to experiment and try new ways to get information out to your community.

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