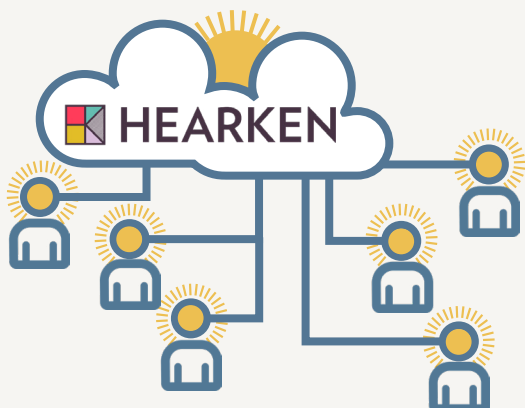




Participatory journalism

■ WHAT IS IT?

Vermont Public Radio's [Brave Little State](#) is a monthly podcast powered by [Hearken](#). The show investigates listener questions, inviting people to participate in the reporting. In 2017, Brave Little State won four [Champion of Curiosity Awards, including the award](#) for Best Participation by a Question Asker. Winooski resident Mike Brown traveled the state for every interview for his suggested story (on [aging water and sewer systems](#)). Host Angela Evancie said his questions "made the episode SO much better."



■ WHO'S BEHIND IT?

Hearken, [launched in 2015](#), seeks to advance [public-powered journalism](#). Working with more than 100 news organizations, the company [cites](#) numerous examples of increased user engagement and trust, which often accrues to financial well-being through membership or subscription programs, underwriting and advertising. Founder Jennifer Brandon pioneered the approach (Hearken means "to listen") at WBEZ Chicago's [Curious City](#) program. Vermont Public Radio [launched](#) Brave Little State in 2016 with support from members and the VPR Journalism Fund.

■ DOES IT WORK?

Like other Hearken-powered programs, Brave Little State sees high levels of user engagement than other content. For engagement time, the top four Vermont Public Radio stories so far in 2018 are from Brave Little State. More generally, [research](#) shows that engaging the public in setting coverage priorities and helping with reporting builds trust in the journalism that is produced. [The Community Listening & Engagement Fund](#) periodically offers subsidies to news organizations that want to use Hearken.



■ HOW TO DO IT

Brave Little State embeds a Hearken "curiosity module" in its stories to solicit questions. It also invites them on the show's [home page](#). The community votes, and the winning questions are investigated by VPR. Often, the question-asker participates. The resulting story is featured in the monthly podcast. "Don't just source questions," Evancie says. "Do everything you can to involve your audience every step of the way."