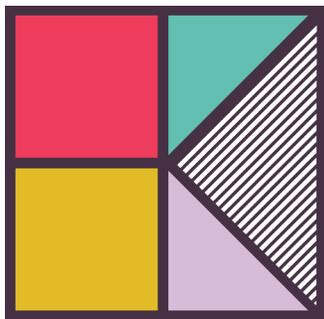


# THE CITIZENS AGENDA

A guide for generating more  
responsive, inclusive & useful  
news coverage for voters

**Written by:**

Jennifer Brandel, Joy Mayer, Jay Rosen,  
Bridget Thoreson, and Ariel Zirulnick



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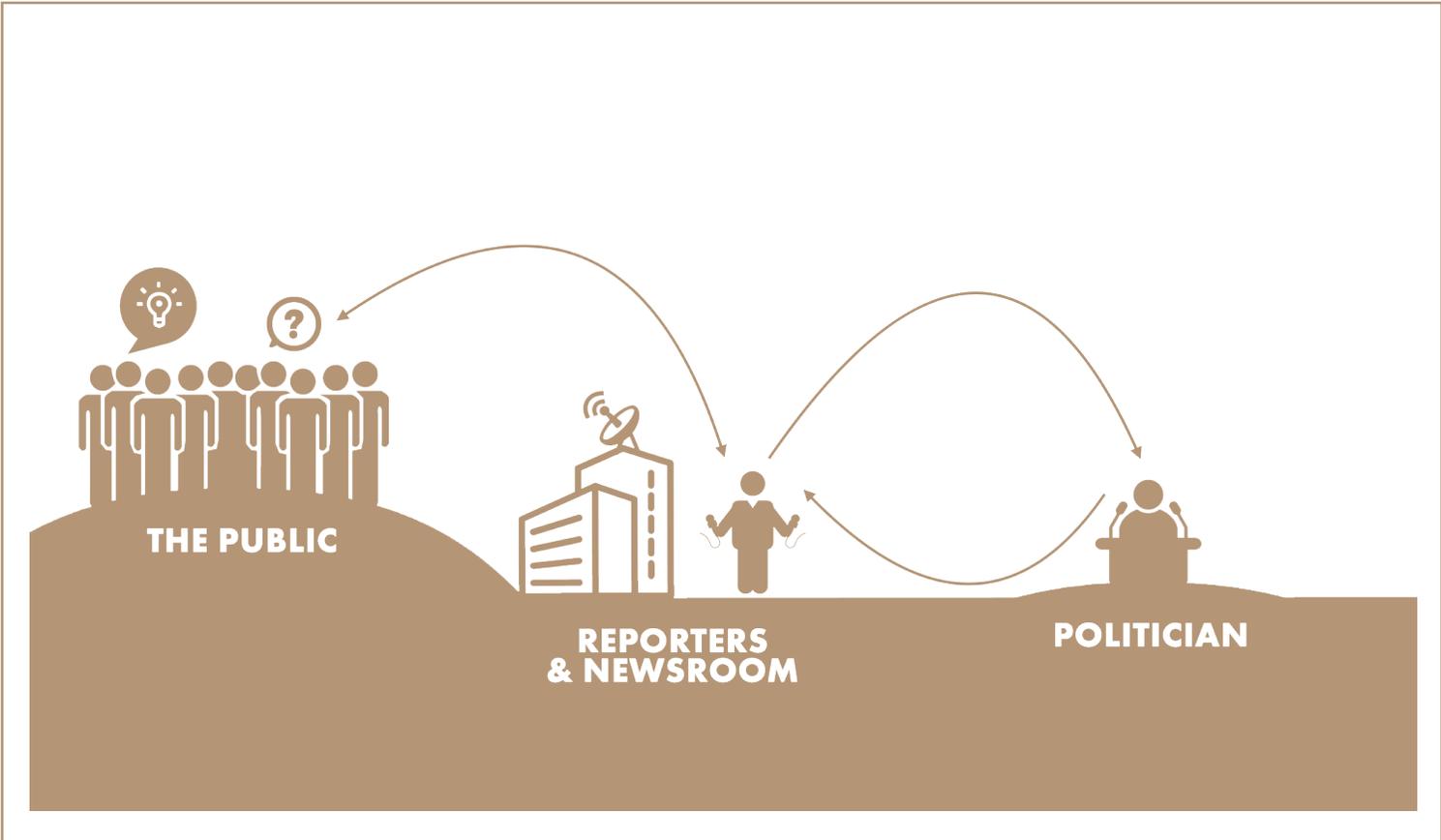
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# INTROD UCTION

First off: We're so happy you're reading this! You're joining journalism pioneers who recognize that the way things have been done before isn't a viable option, and you're embarking on a path to new and better things. We're not going to promise it's easy - but nothing worthwhile ever is. We will promise that you're going to learn, get opportunities to be creative and expansive, and that this effort is worthy. Thank you for wading into the unknown and learning about an approach to elections coverage that is designed to put power back in the hands of the people that politicians are meant to be serving. OK - let's dive in!



Take a look at each of these images and observe how information, power and access flows between the groups. Note the order in which information begins and travels, and the direction that information and feedback flows.

If you had to guess which model of reporting gave the public more power and better provided for their information needs, which one would it be? If you picked the bottom one, you're right. We won't get into the whole history of how positioning newsrooms as a gatekeeper between the people in power and the people they're meant to serve came to be; let's just retire the other model.

Let's consider the model in which the public is elevated: How might a newsroom

position itself to be the public's servant, a conduit and a translator between the public and the politicians they elect? And how could doing that build trust while making coverage more relevant and useful? That, friends, is the topic of this guide. We're going to present a 5-step model for how you can adjust the process of elections reporting to put the public in the power seat, and ensure they get the information they need about the topics that matter most to them from the politicians competing for their votes. We can't guarantee this model will cause more people to go to the polls on Election Day, but we do know that it helps people understand their choices better and have more power in the democratic process.

*A brief note about the word "citizen." It's a loaded word! Especially at this moment in history. We are using the word citizen to refer to the people who are not politicians and professionals working on campaigns, or journalists covering the election. "Citizen" is not meant to limit this approach to whether someone is documented or not, but rather refers to them as an inhabitant of a particular town, city or country.*

# WHAT TO EXPECT

The Citizens Agenda approach can work for any sized newsroom - from a small hyperlocal with a staff of two,<sup>1</sup> to a giant national newsroom with an entire desk devoted to political coverage. That being said, successfully doing this approach will require a few things:

- 1. Collaboration:** In order to embark on creating a citizens agenda, it'll require working with and listening to people! Not just other people within your newsroom, but with the public you're looking to serve.
- 2. Resources:** For each stage of the agenda, we'll provide tips around the amount of time, effort and resources it'll require to do each of the steps. This need not be an expensive endeavor; it may require adjusting how you deploy people's time.
- 3. Vulnerability:** This model requires listening to the public, sharing back, getting feedback, adjusting as you learn, and sometimes getting it wrong (and admitting it if and when you do!). Aka - this approach is best carried out when newsrooms are willing to acknowledge that they are full of human beings.
- 4. Iteration:** You're not going to get it perfect, because there's no such thing as a 100% accurate citizens agenda! You can't get perfect data on every human in a voting district and synthesize everyone's concerns, passions and hopes for their political future. But you can keep listening, adjust along the way, and build upon what you're learning.

# TIMING & EFFORT

Each step in the Citizens Agenda approach will vary in terms of how much time and effort it may take. Here are estimates so you can plan accordingly:

- 1. Setting Your Vision:** 1-3 hours active time
- 2. Identify:** 2-5 hours active time
- 3. Ask:** 1-2 weeks - mix of active and passive time
- 4. Synthesize & Solicit:** 1-2 weeks - mix of active and passive time
- 5. Use It:** Varies - weave it into your reporting
- 6. Reflect & Adjust:** 3-5 hours

Alright, onto co-creating your citizens agenda!

## Shaping the Conversation

The citizens agenda was tried in 1992 by the Charlotte Observer during the early years of the civic journalism movement. In this anecdote, the former editor of the Observer, Richard Oppel, recalls what happened when reporters went out to senatorial candidates with voters' questions, including questions about the environment:

*Terry Sanford, the incumbent senator, called me up from Washington and said, "Rich, I have these questions from your reporter and I'm not going to answer them because we are not going to talk about the environment until after the general election."*

*This was the primary. I said, "Well, the voters want to know about the environment now, Terry." He said, "Well, that's not the way I have my campaign structured."*

*I said, "Fine, I will run the questions and leave a space under it for you to answer. If you choose not to, we will just say 'would not respond' or we will leave it blank."*

*We ended the conversation. In about ten days he sent the answers down.<sup>2</sup>*

# 1. SETTING THE VISION

If you're reading this guide, there's a good chance that you or the public you serve aren't totally satisfied with the way elections have been covered by their news sources. Dissatisfaction is a very helpful emotion because it tells us things need to change! But it doesn't tell us how to change them or what the optimal future state looks like. That's where you come in! The following exercise is a "from-to chart" and it can help you identify where you are now and where you want to be, so you can know if and when you get there.

**Directions:** It's up to you if you'd like to take the first stab at filling in this chart by yourself, or involve your colleagues. Either way, you'll want to make sure the people who need to sign off on going through with a citizens agenda approach take a look and agree.

If you don't fill out every section, that's fine! This exercise is meant to help you consider what you'd like to change about the way things have been done before, and give you a starting vision for the new reality you're building. Hopefully it will help shake loose some insights around what is ripe to change, and where there's the most energy in your organization to make that change.

<b>Identify what has been missing or lacking previously</b>	<b>How would you like to change that?</b>
Who has your political coverage typically served?	
How did you know / could you tell that it served them?	
How has your newsroom decided which stories to cover on an election?	

<p>How has the public been involved in determining the coverage they get?</p>	
<p>Who has decided the topics and questions to ask politicians?</p>	
<p>How have you measured the success of your elections coverage in the past?</p>	
<p>How do you think your community would describe the goals of your election coverage?</p>	
<p>Free space: write any other things you have done before that you'd like to change</p>	

# 2. IDENTIFY

Who are you trying to inform with your elections coverage? The answer is not simply: “our audience,” or even, “the public.” Instead, there are multiple stakeholder groups, both within and outside your existing audience, that stand to benefit from a deeper understanding of the issues at play when they go to the ballot box.

Before you reach out to these citizens, you must understand who they are and how you are to reach them. The better you can identify “the people we are trying to inform,” the easier it will be to discover what they want covered.

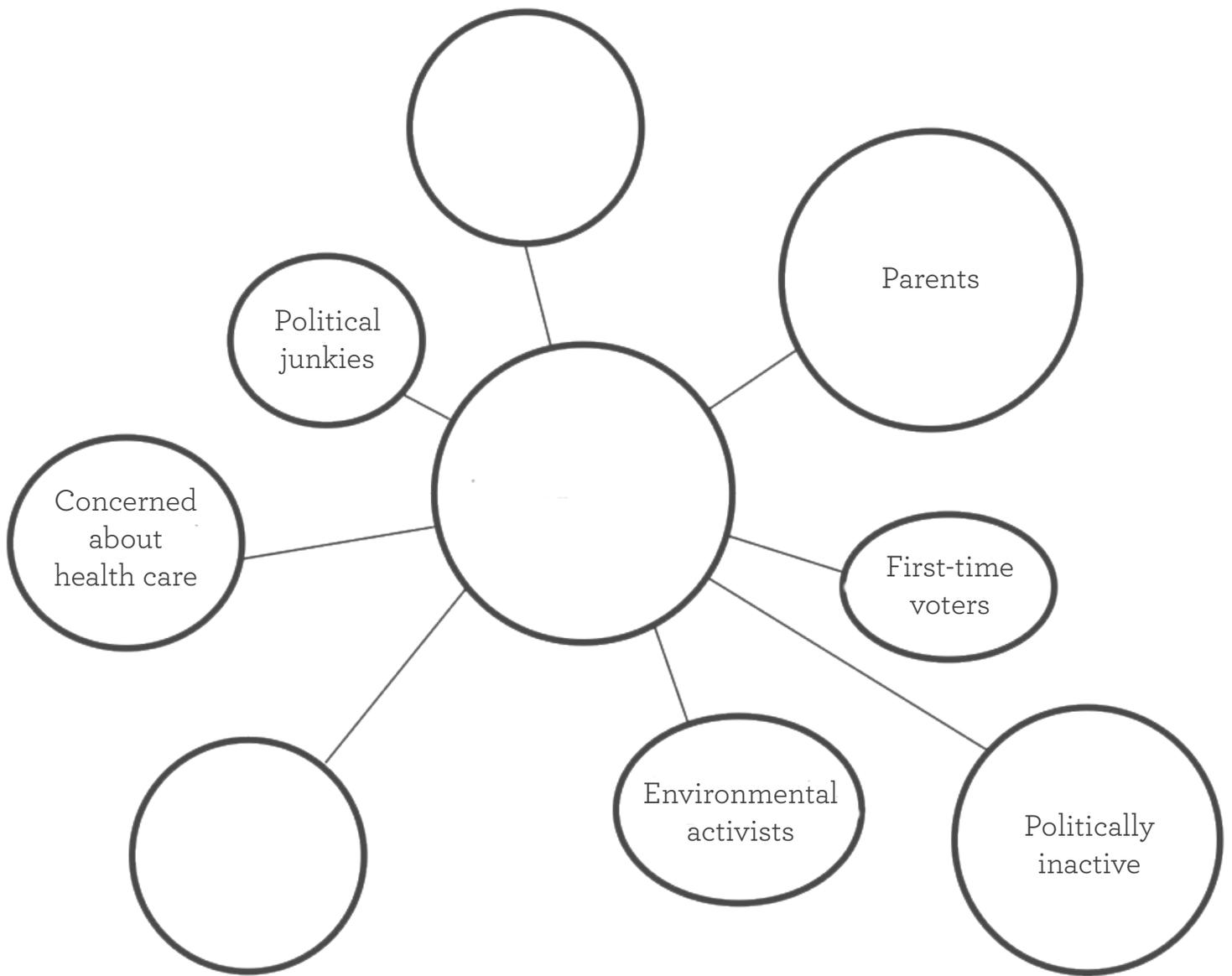
# STAKEHOLDER MAPPING EXERCISE

**Try This:** Get together a group of colleagues in the newsroom who will play key roles in your election coverage, and some people who aren't at all involved in your elections work.

At a whiteboard or posterboard, build out a stakeholder wheel. Put what you're covering in the center, and then draw different groups that are impacted by the event in some way around it. Those groups who are likely to be more closely following the news of the event, who are impacted by it most significantly, should be close to the center. Those who are less likely to closely follow the news and will be less impacted go further out.

How you choose to define these groups is up to you. You can make the circles larger or smaller based on the estimated group size. Once you've gotten to the end of your ideas, keep going. The most creative ideas come when you push yourself a little further than you're comfortable.

By the end of this exercise, you'll have a visual framework for the groups you are trying to serve. This can be flexible and adjusted over time. The important thing is now you have identified some people who can start helping you build the citizens agenda.



3. ASK

Go to your community and ask this exact question: **“What do you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes?”** This is a more expansive and inclusive question than “What are your top issues?” What people want the candidates to be talking about may not be framed as an election-year “issue” yet.

This is where the work you did identifying your community comes in, as it will guide your outreach strategy.

**Remember: To perform a public service, you must try to reach your entire public.** This means thinking beyond your traditional channels to identify new, unique opportunities to reach people.

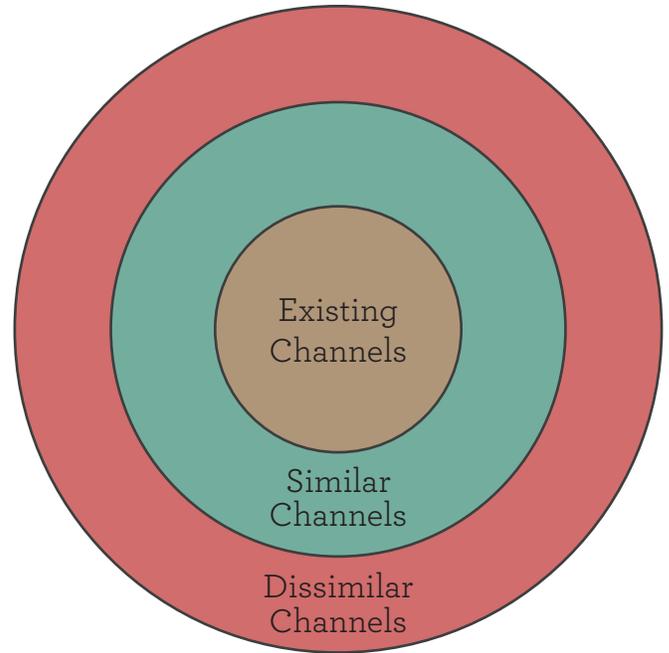
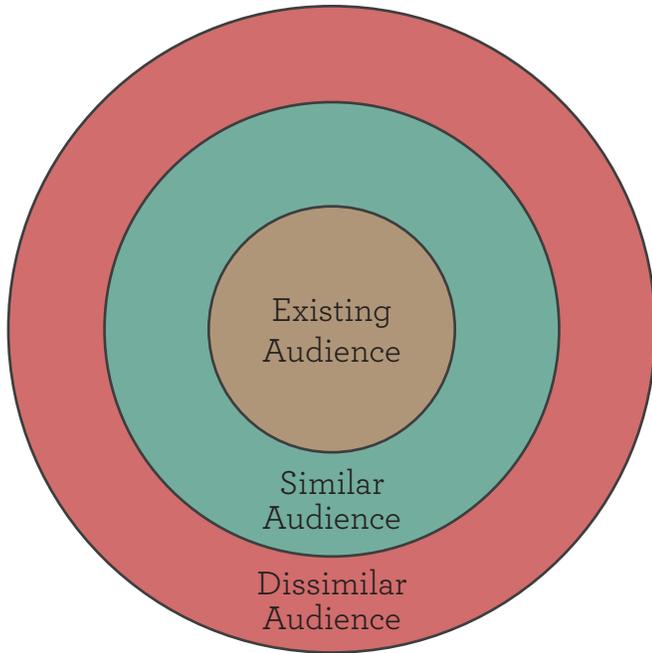
If your newsroom covers a certain geographic area, start by looking at the demographics. What are the major identities of the people who live there? Look at income level, ethnicity, age, and any other vectors that can help paint a picture of who comprises your community and who the elected officials will be responsible for serving. Compare that with what you know about your newsroom's audience. Then figure out ways to close the gap.

One method is to learn what sources of information the

people you aren't serving are using. And then determine how you might be able to partner and provide a service to those organizations with your work. Here are just a few ideas for potential partners to consider working with to better listen to and serve underrepresented audiences:

- Ethnic media organizations
- Niche media organizations
- Community institutions (farmers markets, festivals, block parties)
- Public information hubs (libraries, cultural institutions, schools, bulletin boards)

Remember, don't be an "askhole"<sup>3</sup>: be clear with potential partners about your goals for the project and what they will get out of it. If you ask for feedback but it doesn't actually inform what you do, or people don't know that it did, you're undermining the process and you're likely to lose the trust that's gained from listening.



<b>Who you're asking</b>	<b>Where to ask</b>
Existing audience	Owned channels: Website, email, broadcasting platforms or print publication, existing social media accounts
People who closely match the media habits of your existing audience	Similar channels: Organizations with websites, email services, publishing and broadcasting platforms or social accounts that you can put out the call on
People from underserved or underrepresented communities who do not closely match the media habits of your existing audience	New channels: In-person outreach, community centers and libraries, hubs of information within the communities

When you ask your audience, you must be clear on the following points:

**What** you are asking them for. Don't be vague about "issues." Be ready to give examples for what you're looking for.

- E.g., We're losing our young people to big cities. It's painful to think about the people who were raised here not staying here and investing in this community long-term. As an elected official, how are you going to make this region more attractive to young people?
- E.g., My son is experiencing mental health issues and we can't afford the level of medical support he needs. How are you going to ensure the residents in your district are able to get mental health resources at an affordable price? We can't count on GoFundMe as an answer to medical crises.
- E.g., The local water supply shows lead levels are three times the EPA's safe drinking water levels. How are you going to make sure residents know this and don't drink the water, and how are you going to fix it?

**Why** you are asking, and how this information will be used. If there's an end date to the project, say so. Be clear about the value of the audience participation and why it's worth their time to help shape your agenda.

**Who** is involved, and who should be involved. This includes both the reporters working on the stories and the audience members you are hoping to reach.

**How** people can participate. Be clear on what they should expect after they contribute to your organization. Should they expect to be contacted for follow-up? How will you decide what you will pursue, and how will they know if you choose their suggestion?

**Ask early, ask often.** Repeat and vary your requests to your audience any way you can. This helps ensure you receive a full and diverse spectrum of responses that you can build your citizens agenda on.

## Newsroom Example

*From now until November 6, I want your questions on how to navigate civil life in New York City, including questions on voting and elections. My goal is to demistify the processes for civil participation, and tell the story of other New Yorkers trying to get involved. To be clear, I'm not here as an expert. I'm working for you for the next two months, investigating the answers. I'll likely pull in some of my colleagues to help.*

*Let's start by casting the net wide: **What questions do you have about civil life in New York City that you'd like us to answer?** Share them in the prompt below and we'll work to answer as many as we can.*

*WNYC's **Ask A Reporter**<sup>4</sup> series clearly outlines the goals for their project and how audience information will be used.*

### **Resources on asking:**

- Why should I tell you? A guide to less-extractive reporting<sup>5</sup>
- Don't be an Askhole: Toward an ethical framework for engagement<sup>3</sup>
- Empathy Fieldguide<sup>6</sup>



### **Trust Tip: Use this outreach to earn trust**

Many people don't see journalism as a public service.



In fact, the public is divided pretty evenly on whether the news media protects democracy, hurts democracy or neither protects nor hurts democracy (American Press Institute 2018)<sup>7</sup>. In addition, only 20 percent of people 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<sup>8</sup>. Be ready to answer complaints<sup>9</sup> about political bias and questions about how you decide what stories to cover<sup>10</sup>. Tell them earning their trust is important and ask how you could do better<sup>11</sup>. If you're meeting people in person, take a printout with information about your newsroom<sup>12</sup>. (Ask your marketing department if they have something. At the very least, give them your website so they can learn more about what you do.)

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.

**4. SYNTHESIZE  
AND SOLICIT  
ACTIONABLE  
FEEDBACK**

It's not enough to simply identify broad topics for the citizens agenda - you need actionable assignments that reporters can take to the politicians, and clear priorities that will shape your election coverage. Don't stop at the label for a topic area - those are merely containers for the real, concrete questions people have. That's why it's key to dive deeper on the initial topics identified by your outreach to find the underlying information needs - the questions people have about those topics.

Topic (less specific)	Question (more specific and actionable)
Health care	How would you address the rising health care costs that are forcing many of us to face a financial crunch?
Economy	What will you do to prevent our jobs from being automated or moved overseas without another way for us to find new jobs?
Infrastructure	What is your plan to address the backlog of transportation projects that is preventing us from commuting quickly and safely to work?

You can synthesize the agenda a number of ways: put topics and questions up for a vote, reach out to people who initially submitted topics for more information to discover the questions they have, narrow your focus on topics that generated a lot of initial interest and ask the public for their questions on said topic. In every case, you're returning to your audience for more information, and the same guidelines from the Ask section apply.

As you identify common themes, work to revise the agenda with the people you made it for: "This is what we think we heard. How did we do?"

**When you feel you have a draft agenda that addresses key information needs of your public, publish it.** This is not the final word, but the beginning of a conversation. It's essential to continue gathering feedback throughout the process to have a relevant agenda to inform your coverage.

“IT HAS TO BE: ‘HERE IS WHAT WE WANT THE CANDIDATES TO BE DISCUSSING BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT WE’RE WRESTLING WITH.’”

- Jay Rosen

## Newsroom Example

We have been truly amazed at the level of engagement. The result is the **Tyee’s Reader-Powered Election Reporting Plan**.

Here are the top five questions, as voted on by the Tyee readers.

1. Do you agree Canada should be on an emergency footing regarding climate change, and if so what actions will your party take?
2. What are the tax loopholes in Canada, how have other countries closed them, what are candidates willing to do to assure the rich pay their fair share and reverse the widening wealth gap?
3. How do we transition to a green economy without causing mass unemployment and upheaval?
4. What would you do in the next 36 months to improve housing in and provide potable water to remote First Nations communities?
5. What would it mean to include dental care and pharmacare as part of government-funded health care, and where do candidates stand?

The Tyee outlines the top questions<sup>13</sup> from their readers that will be an editorial focus in their elections coverage.

**5. USE IT!**

Ok so now that you have a collection of topics, and hopefully some really great questions about those topics sourced from the public, you're ready to put the citizens agenda into action!

# MESSAGING: TO CANDIDATES

You've likely noticed an unfortunate strategy that some politicians use to deflect questions. It goes something like this:

**Reporter:** "Candidate Jones, how do we transition to a green economy without causing massive unemployment and upheaval?"

**Candidate Jones:** "Why what a ridiculous question. I can't believe you'd even ask that. Let me tell you about ..." (moves on to another topic and doesn't answer the question).



It's important to message to the candidates why you're asking these questions, and on behalf of whom. Imagine *this* scenario:

**Reporter:** "Candidate Jones, we've asked thousands of voters in your district what their most important questions are for candidates like you as you compete for their vote. One of their top questions was this, "How do we transition to a green economy without causing massive unemployment and upheaval?"

**Candidate Jones:** "Well that's a great question, and an important one. I think that ..."

See how by sharing with the candidates that the people they need to win over have a question, it can shift the dynamic?

As newsroom brands become attacked and weaponized by politicians, a Citizens Agenda approach positions the newsroom as the messenger - and as the saying goes, don't shoot the messenger.

Candidate Jones may also deflect and ask you "Which voters did you ask, and how do you know they were representative?" Here you have an opportunity to share how you did your work, and generate more trust from the public by being transparent with your process. And you can then ask the candidate right back: what's their method for listening to the people they represent? Likely yours is better, and more representative.

*Additional resource: Want to be good for democracy? Be better at democracy.<sup>14</sup>*

**A CITIZENS AGENDA APPROACH  
POSITIONS THE NEWSROOM AS  
AN ADVOCATE FOR THE PUBLIC IN  
GETTING *ITS* NEEDS ADDRESSED.**

# TRUST TIP: TELL YOUR AUDIENCE WHAT YOU'RE DOING

A big part of using the agenda is also letting the public know why you're reporting what you're reporting (because they asked for it, and you're their servant!) as well as how they can get involved.



Journalists are often surprised at how little the public understands about their purpose and their process. We wish we were given more credit, but we don't talk about our work very often.

At least some people in your community probably think that you are driven by a political agenda, that you sensationalize stories to get more money or that you don't really care about getting the facts right. Don't believe us? Take a look through comments and feedback you've gotten on recent coverage. Jot down some of the themes. Try to see past the tone used and instead identify real information gaps — things people incorrectly assume about your work.

So, what are you doing to correct the record?

As you invest in public outreach and in being of the best possible use to your community, please don't assume people will notice it and applaud your efforts. You need to communicate throughout the process. That involves showing that you're listening and explaining how and why you do what you do.

Think about the mission of your election coverage. Why is it important? What do you hope to achieve? Why should people believe it? Take a look at your newsroom's mission statement for ideas. Get inspiration from these reporter mission statements

from KPCC<sup>15</sup>, or even from industry resources like SPJ's Code of Ethics<sup>16</sup> or The Journalist's Creed<sup>17</sup>.

Then make a list of what you want people to know about your work. Work on your list with your colleagues. You might include things like:

- We strive for fairness. That means we go into our reporting with an open mind and follow where information leads us.
- Our journalists have no affiliation with or influence from advertising or sponsorship dollars, corporate interests, or political parties and campaigns.
- Our agenda is to be useful and help you make decisions.
- We focus on issues, not arguments. We will follow day-to-day campaign activities, but we won't just repeat what's said. We will work to move the story forward.

You might be surprised how easy it is to include messages like these in your journalism. Everywhere people might encounter your work is an opportunity to earn trust. Slide one of these messages into your anchor intro or a social media post. Put it in italics at the top of a story. Include it in a newsletter. Talk about it in person. Get ideas for what that can look like here.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, remind people continually that your coverage is based on their priorities. Develop language you will insert into each piece of coverage that links to the full agenda and invites feedback with an embedded form. It could look something like this:

Citizens Agenda: Our election coverage is based on what you told us you want the candidates to be talking about as they compete for votes. See that public-powered agenda at [newscompany.com/citizensagenda](https://newscompany.com/citizensagenda), and let us know how we're doing and what you would add.

It might feel repetitive to you, but most news consumers will see just a fraction of what you publish. And if you want it to sink in that you aim to be of the best possible service to them, you need to remind them of that as often as possible.

REFLECT  
& ADJUST

The citizens agenda is a process, not a product. As a result, it will shift and change over time. With every story you produce, invite your audience to weigh in on the agenda. Update and adjust the agenda to reflect new information you receive.

Return often to the vision you established at the outset of the process. Ask yourself who you may not have reached yet, and how you can reach them. Hold politicians accountable for the aspects of the agenda that they address, and those that they don't.

## Traditional Newsroom Operating System

**OPTIMIZED FOR SPEED, EFFICIENCY AND DISTRIBUTION**

Format and platform-centric

**“WE HAVE ALL THESE BEASTS TO FEED!”**



Public is shut out of the process & decision-making.

Public treated as a consumer from which to extract value.

This is a new process for many newsrooms - one that prioritizes the public over feeding the beasts, and puts their concerns at the center of coverage. No longer is the news organization standing at the top of the hill, displaying their expertise to the public by trying to win the prediction game.

## ➔ Emerging Newsroom Operating System

**OPTIMIZED FOR LISTENING, RELEVANCE AND TRUST**

Public service-centric

**“WHAT CAN WE HELP THE PUBLIC UNDERSTAND OR DO?”**



Public is engaged in the process & decision-making.

Public treated as a partner for which to create value.

# LET'S DO THIS! & WE CAN HELP.

After reading this guide, you might be thinking, “Now I know what to do.” Or you might be thinking, “How are we going to pull this off?”

We are here to help. The organizations that collaborated on this guide: Hearken, Trusting News and The Membership Puzzle Project, all do this work because we want newsrooms to succeed.

If you'd like to get coaching, support and / or technology to help bring a citizens agenda to life, reach out to: [info@wearehearken.com](mailto:info@wearehearken.com) and we'll set up a time to connect.

And if you end up adopting a citizens agenda approach on your own, please let us know! We'd like to check it out and amplify your work.

## LET US KNOW YOU'VE ADOPTED THE AGENDA.

*Email us at [info@wearehearken.com](mailto:info@wearehearken.com) or tweet [#citizensagenda](https://twitter.com/citizensagenda).*

*And if you need another reason, we want to give you a special citizens agenda badge (a JPEG) that you can use on your reporting to let your communities know that you're listening, and taking their concerns, ideas and questions not just seriously, but more importantly taking them to the politicians competing for their votes.*

*We will publish case studies and best practices that emerge out of this reporting process for industry peers at [www.thecitizensagenda.org](http://www.thecitizensagenda.org).*

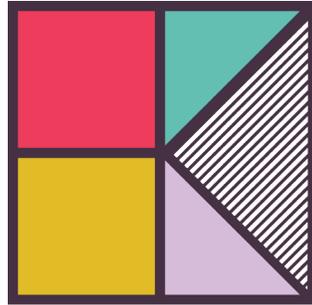
*Reach out with your reporting - we'd love to feature you and your work, and for you to inspire others to do more public-powered reporting.*

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