

Our Chatham Since February:

Our Chatham has flipped the editorial model on its head and allowed the community to be the generator of news story ideas. We use the Hearken model to generate story ideas from readers and other curious residents of the county and its various towns, rather than having our editor think of ideas and simply assign a reporter to cover what we think might be important.

This way, we know what is important, and we are sure to engage readers with relevant information to them—not just us. And with each story, there is usually an enterprise follow up that develops for our reporters to chase down and give more context to an issue.

We have been having great success, and we want to thank you for allowing Our Chatham to restart. There is nothing we would want more than to continue the work that Our Chatham Product Manager Alexis Allston, Our Chatham Editor Eric Ferkenhoff and our reporters love doing—giving a voice to real people who are curious, from the everyday homeowner to influential people in town.

We started with six reporters, as well as Allston and Ferkenhoff in February, and we had 100 subscribers. We are now nearing 300 subscribers. One of our reporters, Trent Brown, had to stop part way through the semester to focus on his studies, but that didn't stop the work and momentum we have built. We now have five reporters: Brennan Doherty, Chloe Arrojado, Adrienne Clevon, Ari Sen and Brooklynn Cooper. All are stellar and all have raised their hands to continue working on this project, which we believe is making an impact on an area of North Carolina that gets sparse news coverage.

Each week since we began, we have sent out at least one story—and in some cases, two stories—and we regularly update the meetings section for notes on important county and town meetings. These stories have ranged from worries about deforestation to the urgency surrounding a Confederate monument that stands outside the entrance to the county's historic courthouse.

We have covered countless community issues with insightful, in-depth pieces. Brooklynn Cooper wrote about Latinx families being forced to move from a mobile home park taken over by a chicken plant, which dispersed the families and left some feeling disconnected. Other stories have dealt with the controversial Chatham Park development, and still others have delved into Internet access, school fees and other educational topics. These stories were all generated by questions from the curious Chatham County citizens who wrote to us seeking answers. And they were reported well, with great research as well as discussions with the question-askers, prominent officials and other Chatham residents who might be impacted by the story topic.

We have a Google sheet filled with countless questions we've been asked by the community: 50, to be precise. Since the relaunch, we have also written several enterprise stories which are not question based.

We have plenty of story ideas to power us through the summer and into the fall without problem; we only ask that we be given that opportunity. We love the area, the county, its people, the product

that Ryan created and the thrill of learning from such a fast-growing crowd of interested subscribers.

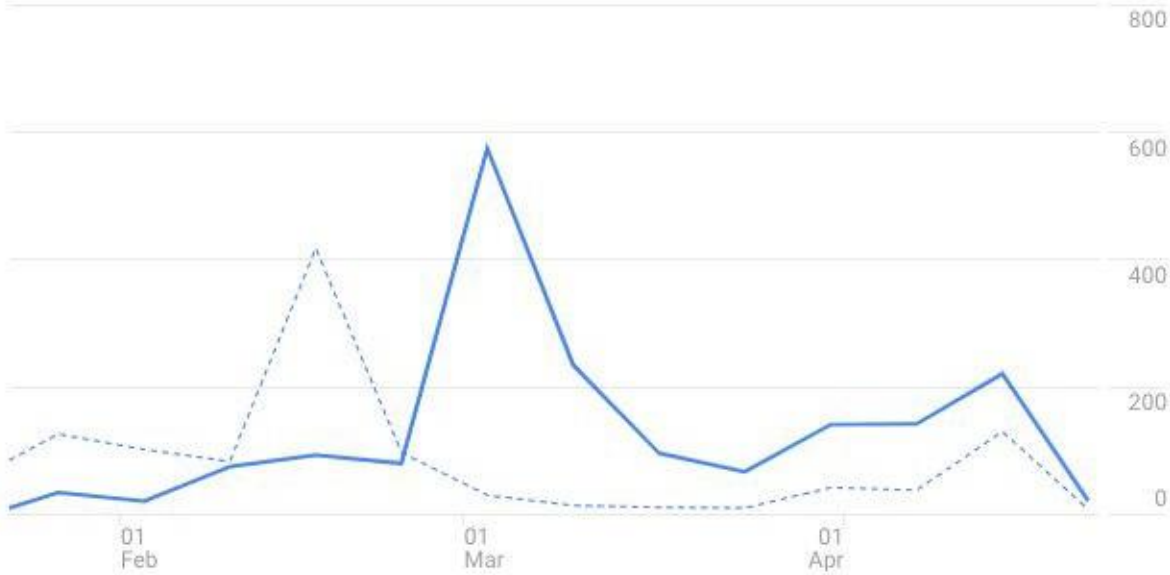
Thank you,
Our Chatham Product Manager, Alexis Allston
Our Chatham Editor, Eric Ferkenhoff

The word about Our Chatham is spreading fast.

We've observed large amounts of growth within the past few months since the project has been up and running after winter break.

This graph displays a few basic statistics about the users visiting Our Chatham's website. Our web users have increased by 50% in the last 90 days, and the amount of time people spend on our site has also increased by 10% since that same date.

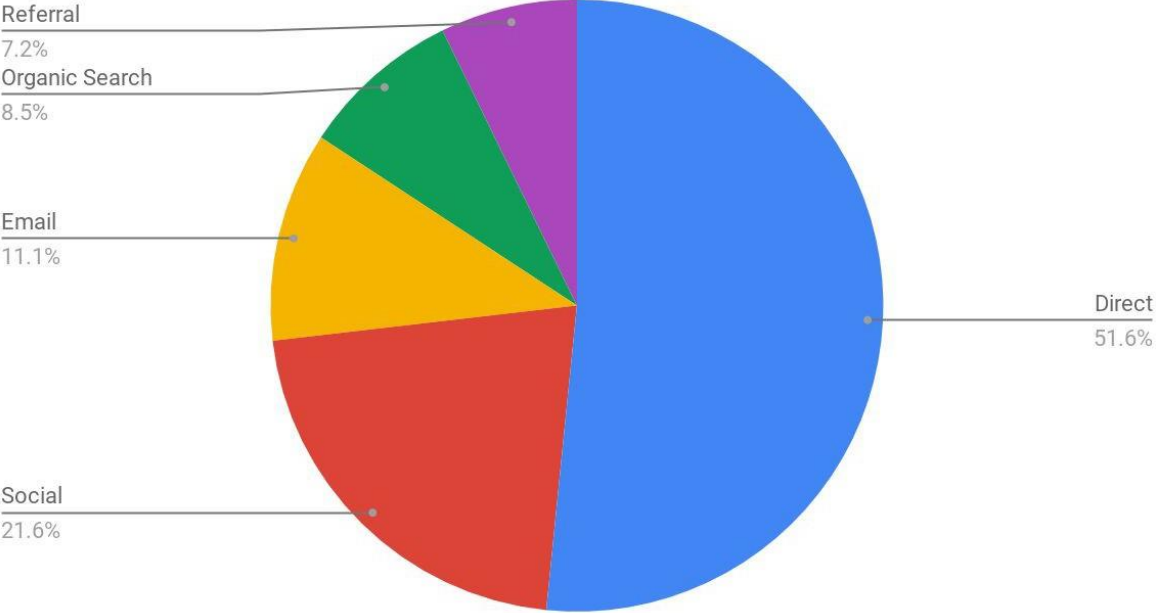
Users	Sessions	Bounce Rate	Session Duration
1.6K	2.1K	70.22%	1m 16s
↑48.2%	↑60.6%	↓12.8%	↑10.8%
vs last 90 days			



How do we acquire users?

We have had great success in attracting users through direct traffic channels. When a user reaches Our Chatham’s site through a direct traffic channel, that means the source they found our link from is unknown — seems like it doesn’t mean much, but it’s actually a very good thing! This means that users are obtaining our site URL from private sources, like an email or text from a friend. In other words, Our Chatham attracts most website users from friend referrals. From this, we can infer that we’ve gained a sizeable amount of interest and trust in the Chatham County community for personal recommendations to be our main source of web traffic. Many users are also directed to our site through our social media or our email newsletter.

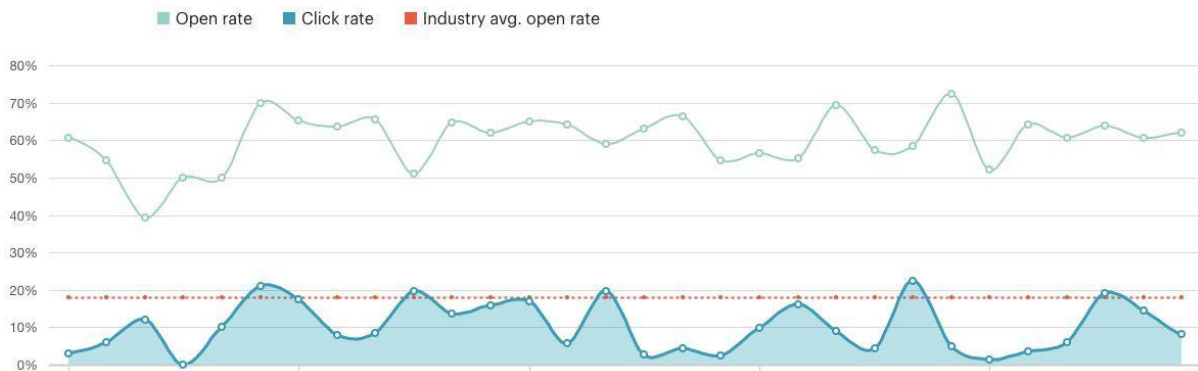
Top Channels



How’s our email newsletter doing?

The short answer: excellent; our subscribers have grown by more than 150% since we restarted. The long answer: we have had open rates consistently higher than 60% for the past month, and have never dipped below 50% opens since the beginning of 2019. As you can see, our open rate is well above the average open rate for other newsletters in the news industry.

While other news organizations are averaging at 20% opens for their email newsletters, we are averaging at 60% opens for our email newsletter. This is a clear demonstration that our audience engagement strategy thus far has been effective, as our readers are paying close attention to the content we publish.



Hearken voting rounds have engaged and involved readers in story ideation. We ran a voting round which gave Our Chatham readers the opportunity to choose, out of four questions, which one they'd like us to answer in our next story. We had **117 total votes**, which is a huge slice of our 250 email newsletter subscribers. That means **47%** of our audience cared enough about what Our Chatham writes about to vote for our next story. Not only that, but the voting round gave us valuable insight about what issues Chatham County residents care about most. The questions with the most votes were asking about the environment. Two questions of the four nearly tied for first place; the winning question, "What is the county doing to stop the silt pollution coming from the construction on 15-501 next to Fearington Village?," surpassed the second place question by just *one vote*. The second place question also conveyed concern for the environment. This reader asked, "Is there a state or federal agency that can assist with removal of large, heavy objects from the Haw River?".



We're focused on student development.

We provide our student reporters with the opportunity to step out and practice reporting outside of the Chapel Hill bubble, an experience that many students don't have before graduating. Not only that, but we teach an entirely different way of reporting that puts the audience's interests above the journalist's when it comes to storytelling. This is a vital skill in the new media world, where people have infinite choices about what to read. How can journalists make their content the most appealing choice? By communicating with readers, learning what they care about, and writing about those very topics.

Our Chatham teaches students at the School of Media and Journalism to directly engage their readers by simply communicating with them, a skill that will be invaluable as our reporters move forward from college into their first job. Here's what our six reporters had to say about how they've been impacted by working on Our Chatham, and the benefit the work has had on their journalism education.

Brennan Doherty:

“A couple of months ago, Eric Ferkenhoff approached me and asked if I would be interested in doing some reporting on local news in Chatham County. He explained how we'd be writing stories about local issues that matter and are of interest to the community.

To me, it sounded very similar to what I had done the semester before in my MEJO 253 course on public affairs reporting that I had taken with Ferkenhoff —only this time I would be compensated for my work and it would be published.

Both of those things are music to a student journalist's ears. But beyond getting paid and the satisfaction of seeing your byline after working hard, the value of the Our Chatham project is obvious to me.

Personally, I've always been a big believer in community journalism, but especially since I took Jock Lauterer's course on community journalism over a year ago. No matter where you go, there are topics and issues that matter to the people who live there, and they deserve news outlets to report on what matters to them. In my experience, Our Chatham is a leading example on doing just that. By utilizing the Hearken model to engage the community and turn the traditional editorial-meeting style of story budgeting on its head, we are not only covering stories that other news outlets aren't, but we're also inviting community members to come along for the ride.

At the moment, I'm working on a story on how Chatham County Schools is planning to hire the number of teachers needed to keep pace with the expected growth associated with the massive Chatham Park development. It's a good topic, one brought up by a Chatham resident named William Rosenfeld. Upon receiving the question, I exchanged emails with him, a process that gave more more context about the topic at play and sparked new storylines to follow.

In a nutshell, Our Chatham has combined aspects of some of the traditional journalism fundamentals (attending public meetings, getting familiar with your coverage area, talking to strangers) and newer trends (alternative story formats, greater transparency in the reporting process and better community engagement).

Both are necessary for any journalist to do well, but it's especially helpful for students attempting to break into the field.

When assessing the future of Our Chatham, please contemplate the following: This is a project that is both helping a local community and journalists within the School of Media and Journalism. Thanks to the hard work of several individuals, momentum surrounding Our Chatham is building, and a full commitment to the project will only make it stronger.”

Brooklynn Cooper:

“The first story I wrote for Our Chatham was on something that I had never covered: public transportation. At face value, it sounded boring to me. However, after my initial call with the question-asker, Jon Darling, I realized that people care about logistical issues like this, especially when access to the service is limited. His passion for the subject taught me that there will always be people who care about the stories we write. Not just for Our Chatham, but in any publication. In the case of Our Chatham, the community depends on us for in-depth answers to questions that they can’t find elsewhere, and it’s gratifying to know that I’m filling a void.”

Adrienne Clevon:

“For the past two semesters that I’ve worked with Our Chatham, I’ve had the opportunity to serve the Chatham County community while honing my skills in photography, public affairs reporting and marketing. Keeping Our Chatham up and running through this summer, and into the next school year, is crucial to keep our presence and gain more trust throughout Chatham County. We have big plans in the works, including partnering with local high schools, other publications in the community and other UNC students.”

Chloe Arrojado:

“When I joined Our Chatham, my perceptions completely changed on what the word ‘journalism’ actually entailed. It meant engaging with the public, for the public. I was amazed to see my peers spark dialogue about important issues in the community from their stories. Because of the project, I realized that I loved journalism because I loved interacting with the community. My experiences with Our Chatham have since kept me in the journalism field, with a desire to become a local journalist. Our Chatham has pushed me to think beyond what it takes to be a journalist; It showed me why journalism matters and how I can make a difference. I don’t know what the journalism field is going to look like in the future. But I believe that this project can help other students develop the abilities to become effective journalists, no matter the shape of the industry.”

Trent Brown:

“Working with Our Chatham on the Chatham Park story was very helpful in gaining a better understanding of local news and the community's perspective on journalism. I was told multiple times that people were really hoping that Our Chatham would help the county a lot with real, investigative journalism and it was good to hear that. This also helped me in getting more experience in business journalism, which I will be doing in my first job at the Salisbury Post. Ferk and the rest of the team have done great work this semester and I think it can be very beneficial for students and the Chatham County community in the future.”

Ari Sen:

“The Our Chatham project is simultaneously pushing the edge of journalism and returning it to its roots. As I’m sure you are aware, we operate by taking questions from community members and reporting the answers to those questions in addition to doing enterprise work. When I first heard about this way of reporting, I was fascinated by it. Since my freshman year of high school, I’d been writing inverted pyramid news stories, which I just hoped someone would find useful. But under this model, we don’t have to just hope the community will find our reporting useful—we know it does.”

Earlier this month, I went to one of the largest meetings at the Chatham County Agricultural Center, where the public and the commissioners discussed the fate of a Confederate statue in downtown Pittsboro, something of great interest to me since the time I began reporting on Silent Sam. After the meeting was over, I went to speak to one of the commissioners, and she mentioned that she was a subscriber and had seen my byline on several stories. Others during the meeting came up to talk to me and seemed very interested in the project.

They aren't the only community members who have started to take an interest in the work we are doing. In the past few weeks, I've watched our spreadsheet fill up with more questions than we have reporters to answer. On Friday, we will travel to Northwood High School to speak about the program to the students who staff the school's newspaper, after being invited by the school's adviser.

I strongly think that if Our Chatham stopped, or took a lengthy break, we would let the community down. I, and a number of my colleagues, plan on staying in Chapel Hill this summer and we are eager to continue this work.”

We've gotten positive feedback from readers.

Diane Birch, avid Our Chatham reader and question-asker, lives in Fearington. Here's what she had to say about us.

"I appreciate your journalism. You're doing a good job. Chatham is a very disconnected community. We just have a single media source, so having anything that helps us see the whole county as one is, I think, important and it can make a difference. So thank you all for what you're doing, because I think it can help.”

We've received several other positive comments from readers, too.

“Looking forward to more articles.”

—Diana Hales, Chatham County
Commissioner

“I'm a former UNC boy who appreciated (way back then) and still appreciates the unbiased from the UNC School of Media and Journalism. Know we appreciate you. Tell me how I can promote you here.”

—Ron Hatley, Our Chatham reader

The Hearken method has proved effective.

The method of sourcing our stories from reader questions has proven extremely effective. Bridget Thoreson, our personal Hearken consultant, has also been incredibly helpful in advising us on how to best engage our readers. She has been there to help us publicize our voting rounds, recruit more newsletter subscribers, and increase our question collection. Our Chatham would not be as successful as we are without Bridget's, and Hearken's, help.

We have a healthy partnership with The Chatham News + Record.

From the beginning of the relaunch, we have worked closely with publisher Bill Horner on a number of fronts. First, he has picked up nearly a dozen of our stories and run them in his paper, with our byline and ourchatham.com prominently displayed, including a tagline with information on the reporter and explaining what Our Chatham is. This has led to most of the stories being posted on his website, as well. In addition, we have run two advertisements - for free - in the paper and online. Bill has been most helpful in engaging readers with our students' content, as well as brainstorming ways to grow.

We've got big plans for what's ahead.

We've given a lot of thought to how Our Chatham will continue to grow as a community resource in the future. We will never stop striving to improve, which is why we've come up with several initiatives to increase Our Chatham's engagement with our readers.

On May 15, we will host a community forum event in Chatham County complete with expert panelists who will participate in a Q+A session.

In partnership with the Chatham News + Record, we've managed to bring four involved community members on board to speak on our panel. The forum will be called "One Chatham", with the theme being economic disparity between the east side and the west side of Chatham County. The audience will have the opportunity to submit questions pertaining to this theme throughout the event, and we, as the moderators, will pick questions to ask the panelists. This event provides an open opportunity for education and discussion, further building up Our Chatham's brand as one that provides resources to the community that no other organization has.

Bill Horner of the Chatham News + Record has agreed to feature a tab for Our Chatham on the up-and-coming Chatham County information app. Of course, this will do wonders to increase Our Chatham's exposure in the Chatham County community.

We're building partnerships left and right. We have also spoken with Eric Braun, vice chair of Pittsboro's Planning Board, and he has agreed to help us set up partnerships with the Chatham County Line and Chatham Magazine. These tentative partnerships would allow us access to a wider audience in Chatham County that we haven't been able to reach on our own.