The Print that Binds:
Local Journalism, Civic Life and the Public Sphere
by

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Abstract

In the current political climate in the United States, much attention has been paid to the role of
the press in our increasingly polarized society and to what extent it exacerbates or mends
divisions. While the majority of that analysis is focused on national politics and news outlets, the
role of local media and the crucial role it plays in civic life has been often neglected in the wider
debate. In this thesis, I argue that local journalism is critical as a tool for informing citizens so
they can be civically engaged and hold the powerful accountable, as well as keeping
communities together.

Methodologically, this thesis seeks to incorporate the worlds of both media theory and
journalism practice. To understand the role local news plays in society, I utilize various
theoretical frameworks, but particularly that of James Carey and his explanation of the
"transmission" and "ritual" functions of communication. In my more expansive understanding of
these theories, I suggest the transmission role encompasses the ways in which local journalism
informs citizens on matters of public interest so that they can participate in democracy and keeps
the powerful in check. The ritual model highlights the often-ignored but significant manner in
which local media serves a vehicle for community identification and maintaining societal bonds.

After explaining the decades-long economic decline of the local media industry, I survey the
various projects and experiments in the fields of journalism and philanthropy that are seeking to
revive or at least prevent local news outlets from disappearing. In the final chapter, which is
based on my field research and uses a style of journalistic reportage rather than academic
writing, I profile several new local news initiatives in West Virginia and Kentucky. While these
projects are too recent to yet offer any definitive results, I conclude with some initial takeaways
and a discussion of possible metrics to measure their success in the future. As a final note, I
argue that the various sectors working to save the news industry from economic collapse, restore
trust in the media and combat political polarization and strengthen democracy should consider
focusing their efforts on sustaining local journalism as a means to address all three.

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And finally, this thesis is dedicated to Javier Valdez Cárdenas (April 14, 1967 - May 15, 2017), my friend and one of the bravest and most dedicated local journalists I've ever known, who gave his life to deliver the news. *Por un eterno día de gracias*.

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Introduction

In the current political climate in the United States, much attention has been paid to the role of the press in our increasingly polarized society[1] and to what extent it exacerbates or mends divisions.[2] While the majority of that analysis is focused on national politics and news outlets (and a growing subsection to the spread of online disinformation), the role of local media and the crucial role it plays in civic life has been often neglected in the wider debate. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, for example, a series of think pieces questioned how the state of the current national media ecosystem, in which most reporters are clustered in the isolated enclaves of the liberal coasts, affected coverage in the "heartland" during the campaign.[3] Yet much less thought was given to the impact of the local reporting in those same communities. In journalism circles, meanwhile, news professionals have been cautioning for more than a decade what the economic collapse of the local news industry will mean for accountability journalism and, consequentially, the health of democracy.

In this thesis, I propose a framework through which I seek to connect the dots between the current, but usually separate, public debates about the role of media in keeping societies together (rather than tearing them apart) and the decline of the local news ecosystem. Central to

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[1] Boxell, Levi, Gentzkow, Matthew, and Shapiro, Jesse M., "Is media driving Americans apart?", *The New York Times*, December 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/opinion/is-media-driving-americans-apart.html

[2] Pew Research Center, "Political polarization in the American public," June 12, 2014, http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/

[3] See Shafer, Jack and Doherty, Tucker, "The media bubble is worse than you think," *Politico*, May/June, 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/25/media-bubble-real-journalism-jobs-east-coast-215048; Benton, Joshua, "The game of concentration: The Internet is pushing the American news business to New York and the coasts," NiemanLab, March 25, 2016, http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/03/the-game-of-concentration-the-internet-is-pushing-the-american-news-business-to-new-york-and-the-coasts/; and Massing, Michael, "How not to cover America," *American Prospect*, April 10, 2018, http://prospect.org/article/how-not-cover-america

my study is James Carey's theory of communication (and in this case, media consumption) as ritual—an enabling place for fellowship and dialogue where communities are formed and maintained. This is opposed to what he calls the transmission theory, a one-way mode solely understood as distributing information[4] (and in my reading, includes the ways in which journalism keep citizens informed about issues of public interest). Building on this conception of news as a vehicle for community dialogue and cohesion, I question whether we might view the disappearance of the local newspaper as a significant disruption to local life, in a similar (without implying equivalent) way, as the closure of the local factory? My interest in the societal role of ritual theory is not the pomp and circumstance of the "ritual events" explored by a field of media scholars-- the Olympics games and coronations and royal wedding that we use to create nationalistic identity—or even the unifying quality in media coverage of traumatic events like the assassination of President Kennedy or the September 11, 2001 attacks. Rather, I am referencing the small and intimate community building that happens at the hyperlocal level, the quotidian experiences represented in the community social column and coverage of the high school basketball team, where societies come to know themselves.

After analyzing the limitations of homogenous public square theory, I nonetheless question what societal interconnection and opportunities for conversation and fellowship are lost when a community no longer begins its day with the same morning prayer that, in Carey's memorable characterization, constitutes the reading of the local newspaper. If we agree that many of the central components to local news coverage—births, deaths and social events—are forms of community building, what might the impact be if that coverage should be gone? An

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[4] Carey, James W. *Communication as culture, revised edition: Essays on media and society.* Routledge, 2008.

ongoing body of research is examining how the fragmentation of the media landscape impacts

polarization.[5] If losing a shared commonality in sources of news about national politics might be

affecting our national psyche, does it matter to no longer be reading the same column about the

town school board? Is "local community" based on geographic proximity even still significant in

the era of Facebook groups, subreddits, and online "community managers?" Have the ritualistic

and affective qualities of discussing and exchanging matters of shared interest been forever

ceded to the digital gathering spaces of social media?

Many of these questions are provocations without answers and, as this thesis will show,

there are industries of people working hard to make sure local news, in whatever form, survives

so that we aren't faced with resolving them. But this thesis is also an attempt to reconcile the

two worlds that I currently straddle—that of media theory and journalism practice. Media theory,

in its efforts to problematize the way communication operates within societal dynamics, often

sidesteps the very concrete ways in which news functions in the world and the challenges

journalists face—be they business concerns, legal and government interference, and in some

parts of the world, violence. Nothing about ritual theory suggests that you or I might learn about

how our elected representative is misusing our public funds, or how journalists painstakingly

gathered that information, as we perform our morning rites and read the newspaper.

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[5] See Levendusky, Matthew. *How partisan media polarize America*. University of Chicago Press, 2013;
Stroud, Natalie Jomini. "Polarization and partisan selective exposure." *Journal of communication* 60.3
(2010): 556-576; Boxell, Levi, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro. *Is the internet causing political
polarization? Evidence from demographics*. No. w23258. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017;
Davis, Nicholas T., and Johanna L. Dunaway. "Party polarization, media choice, and mass partisan-
ideological sorting." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80.S1 (2016): 272-297; Duca, John V., and Jason L.
Saving. "Income inequality, media fragmentation, and increased political polarization." *Contemporary
Economic Policy* 35.2 (2017): 392-413

At the same time, journalists are often uncritical and indifferent to the ways in which they operate within wider mass media and communication phenomena. In their efforts to hold fast to professional standards established in the 20th century, they can be resistant to consider how their content is interpreted or processed after the moment of distribution/ transmission. Historically, many of them have also viewed local news solely through the schema of either trailblazing watchdog reporting or sensationalistic crime and fireman beat fluff. Neither fully captures what communities are losing when they lose local news.

Thus, while I am hardly the first to worry about and study what is happening with local news, I seek with this thesis to use my media studies training to place this dilemma at the center of the overlapping debates we are having about news and democracy. Today's political and socioeconomic climate is one in which we urgently need strong accountability journalism and are desperate to find areas of shared interest to keep our society together. In this thesis, I examine whether sustaining local journalism is one step we might take to address both.

Some of the news initiatives I profile are mining the ritualistic angle explicitly by convening social gatherings and welcoming the communities they cover into the newsgathering process. Other newsrooms, by engaging in conventional local journalism—covering the high school prom and church bake sale—are doing so implicitly. The final group of media outlets I study, those that are attempting to maintain their ability to practice traditional accountability journalism (which more generally falls under the transmission role), may be supporting the media's ritualistic role tangentially and accidentally, but still vitally. If local journalism is to be vehicle through which communities can come together, converse and participate, there is a vested interest in doing so around matters of public interest. In order to engage in informed discussion, they must be sufficiently informed. John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, whose

political and philosophical debates in the 1920s are examined later in this text, presented dueling metaphors of communication as hearing and seeing. I would argue engaged citizens need both their eyes and ears to successfully participate in democracy.

While social media, and particularly Facebook, has mastered the ritual communication role of enabling fellowship and community, it's made something of mess, we've come to see, of the traditional and still necessary model of information transmission. Meanwhile, the news industry (whether legacy outlets or emerging digital organizations) sees its transmission role of explaining and interrogating challenged by declining revenue, and its ritual role, the space where trust and affinity with the public is often built, eroding. In parallel fashion, it fights for continued existence on financial footing and continued relevance against allegations of elitism and disconnect.

Thus, I seek to 1) highlight the underexplored and little understood connection between local journalism's public service role (one element of the transmission mode) and its function as an expansive site for community building (ritual theory), and 2) reclaim geographic proximity at the local level as a site of civic engagement away from the communities of affect and interest that have occupied many communications studies in the era of the "global village." In doing so, I hope to bring together the many and distinct silos of conversation that have emerged around "saving local journalism" and "bridging divides and combatting polarization."

Luckily, a number of sectors are working through ways in which to do so. In the following chapters, I explain what has happened to the local news industry, why it matters and the many ways in which people are trying to save it. I will place these issues within the theoretical framework I have already mentioned. And lastly, as a case study, I examine how this dynamic is playing out in Kentucky and the adjacent Appalachia region. The area, often

generalized as "Trump country" in the national media, has been acutely affected by many of the socioeconomic phenomena that are at the center of the current political debate in the United States. Not coincidentally, it has also attracted interest from journalism funders and scholars and has become a testing ground for many of the ongoing debates and interventions in the field of local media and philanthropy. This chapter will look in detail at how these initiatives are playing out, what lessons may be gleaned from them in their early stages, and when applicable, try to imagine how they might fill the ritualistic void. And, most enjoyably for my purposes, it gives me the opportunity to shift gears and engage in some reporting and storytelling of my own. This chapter, which uses a somewhat different tone and stylistic conventions, was important for me to bring voices from a particular community into this text and bridge my own divide between the worlds of academia and journalism.

A notable limitation to this study is that while I am focused on the dialogic nature of ritual theory and the relationship between local news outlets and communities, the majority of information for this text comes from the producer side (meaning journalists) that dominates the transmission model of communication. While I conducted a handful of interviews with local residents about their media habits for my case study, the logistical realities of my research did not allow for anything close to resembling a fair sample size. A comprehensive reception-focused study of these same issues offers opportunities for future research. Nonetheless, trying to understand how journalists and journalism funders understand ritual and what steps they are taking to address it—even while using a different vocabulary—presents a first step in understanding how their readers might eventually respond.

Similarly, while the motivation for this research is found in some of the sweeping questions about the ties between the decline of local news and our increasingly polarized society,

the fact that I am chronicling an ongoing process means I am unable to offer any fully satisfying

or definitive answers. In this study, I hope to propose a useful framework for the future research,

both quantitative and qualitative, that I expect will shed some light. Indeed, a much-discussed

report published in *Politico* in the final weeks of my thesis writing attempted to do just that, by

using statistical analysis to tie the emergence of "local news deserts" to the successful election of

President Trump.[6] The findings of the study and the basis of its analysis were later seriously

questioned,[7] but I imagine we will see a wave of further and deeper research in this area in the

coming years. The same applies to the long-term success and sustainability of the various

categories of new media initiatives I describe in later chapters, many of which were just in their

infancy when I undertook my research.

Another important qualification when I write "local news," is that the "news" as an

industry is hardly monolithic. While I touch briefly on broadcast media, and go into more depth

about online news, newspapers occupy a significant portion of this thesis. My focus was largely

dictated by the case studies in my region, which says something to the persistent importance of

print media at the local level. Studies have also shown newspaper reporting is the basis for most

local news stories on broadcast media, and thus continues to hold significant agenda-setting

power even if readership has decreased. [8] Nonetheless, while viewership is declining, local TV

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[6] Musgrave, Shawn and Nussbaum, Matthew, "Trump thrives in areas that lack traditional news outlets," *Politico*, April 8, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/08/news-subscriptions-decline-donald-trump-voters-505605

[7] Benton, Joshua, "That Politico article on 'news deserts' doesn't really show what it claims to show," NiemanLab, April 9, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/04/that-politico-article-on-news-deserts-doesnt-really-show-what-it-claims-to-show/
and Bump, Philip, "Why you should take that 'news deserts led to Trump' story with a grain of salt," *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/04/09/why-you-should-take-that-news-deserts-led-to-trump-story-with-a-grain-of-salt/?utm_term=.5ee7260f1d57

[8] Pew Research Center Journalism and Media Staff, "How news happens," January 11, 2010, http://www.journalism.org/2010/01/11/how-news-happens/

news continues to be the most common source of news[9] and requires further study. A number of new initiatives from places like the Northeastern School of Journalism and the Knight Foundation are doing just that and will make important contributions to the field.[10] Talk radio is also an intriguing site for ritual theory analysis that I am unable to address here. Medium specificity and the different opportunities for community interaction and identification presented by radio and television, as opposed to print and digital, offer intriguing possibilities for future research.

An additional important note is to acknowledge my outsider status when approaching this topic. Not only was I completely unfamiliar with Kentucky and Appalachia before 2017, I had hardly any experience with US local news. As a Brooklyn, NY native, my local paper growing up was *The New York Times*. Having spent the last ten years working mostly on journalism, press freedom and human rights issues in Latin America, I've spent the majority of my professional life reading Central and South American news. I expected to continue working on these same issues when I started my master's program at MIT in 2016 but, like many people, found my expectations upended by that year's election results. How, I questioned, could I continue to work on journalism and freedom of expression issues in Latin America when I was so clearly disconnected from what was happening in these same fields in large swaths of my own country? As clichéd and modest as my efforts may be, this thesis is the result of my attempt to correct that.

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[9] Pew Research Center, "State of the news report," June 15, 2016, 45 http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf
[10] Knight Foundation, "Local TV news and the new media landscape," April 5, 2018, https://www.knightfoundation.org/reports/local-tv-news-and-the-new-media-landscape

The critical event that gave birth to this project and allowed it to take shape was my introduction to Sam Ford, a media consultant and MIT research associate, and most crucially for these purposes, Kentucky local. Sam has been practicing community journalism in Kentucky since middle school and after more than a decade working in various aspects of the media industry in other cities, returned home to study many of the same issues that appear in this thesis. Not only did Sam allow me to profile his work, which greatly inspired my own and appears in the case study, but he also introduced me to first the region on an unrelated trip for the MIT Open Documentary Lab, then his entire extended family (who pop up in the case study as well), and finally, his comprehensive rolodex. Without Sam as a "fixer," to use journalism parlance, much of this work would not have been possible.

Nonetheless, I recognize the serious limitations of an outsider parachuting in to do work about local news and community, particularly in a region like Appalachia, which has a long history of being misrepresented and ridiculed in national media.[11] While it is impossible to change the position I come from, I tried to represent the subjects of my case study as truthfully and fairly as possible.

And finally, a word about my subjects, the amazing journalists I met in Kentucky and Appalachia. Whether working in print or online, at the very beginning, middle or end of their careers, their commitment and devotion to local news in the face of serious financial obstacles was the greatest inspiration for this project. At a moment in which many people seek to blame most of our societal ills on the "media" writ large, it was utterly inspiring to meet Ken Ward and Caity Coyne (veteran and relatively novice journalists, respectively), both of whom are fighting

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[11] For a great history, see Stoll, Steven, *Ramp hollow: The ordeal of Appalachia.* Hill and Wang. A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

for the future of accountability journalism at the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, despite what was then a looming bankruptcy. Or Dustin and Lee Bratcher, the irreverent brother duo who carry on with their online community news website, the *Ohio County Monitor*, despite, at one point, having only $200 in their bank account, because if "we don't, no one will." And many more.

Much of the first decade of my career was indelibly marked by the unspeakably brave local Latin American journalists who risk their lives to deliver the news. This includes my dear friend, Mexican journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas, who was murdered one year ago this month for his reporting in the state of Sinaloa, and to whom this thesis is dedicated. Meeting these local American journalists, who risk their livelihoods to deliver the news at a moment in which the American public desperately needs to be well-informed, has been the greatest joy of my graduate school experience and one I will carry with me into the next phase of my career and for long after.

Chapter 1:
The Past and Future of Local News

i.   What we're talking about when we talk about local news

The local media ecosystem is vast and diverse and pinning down its confines is as

contentious as trying to define what the terms "local" and "media" mean in the 21st century.

Firstly, at the risk of sounding obvious, I define local as a term of geographic proximity. The

concept of community, as I explore in more depth in the following chapter, is one that has

evolved beyond the merely physical to include communities of practice,[12] that form around a

common trade or profession, and more recently, digitally enabled communities of affect or

interest, like participatory fan sites and the micro-niche markets algorithmically targeted by

Facebook.[13] But the geographically local as a marker of community and its more broadly defined

public, I argue in the following chapter, is still significant as a site of civic engagement and thus

vital as a place for information production, distribution and sharing.

News is also "more easily pursued than defined, a characteristic it shares with such other

enthralling abstractions as love and truth," in the oft-cited words of Bernard Roshco.[14] In

Interpreting the News, Graham Meikle considers a series of definitions put forth by media

scholars that include various aspects of timeliness, narrative, organization; news' position as a

particular product or text and its processes of production, distribution and reception.[15] Finally,

building on sociologist Charles Bantz, he concludes that to properly consider the full the breadth

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[12] Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
[13] Wellman, Barry. "Connecting communities: on and offline." *Contexts* 3.4 (2004): 22-28. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/ctx.2004.3.4.22
[14] Roscho, Bernard, *Newsmaking*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, 9.
[15] Meikle, Graham. *Interpreting news*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 6.

of what news is it should be defined as the organized and regular "production, distribution, and uses, of nonfiction drama."[16] I find most useful Michael Schudson's characterization of news as "what is publicly notable (within a framework of shared understanding that judges it to be both public and notable). It is also a machinery of notation, a social institution working within technological, economic political, and even literary constraints for recording and interpreting various features of contemporary life."[17]

These definitions illustrate how broad the scope of news is and new platforms have only extended those boundaries. What might constitute local news in 2018—from ambient media, to chat rooms, to Facebook statuses, to family WhatsApp text messaging groups-- is arguably far broader than the corpus of this text. All of these and many more platforms and media forms are vibrant and valid and worthy of further study. Yet I am choosing to focus on a more "traditional" classification of news as the product of media organizations (ranging from legacy outlets to emerging digital spaces) whose primary purpose is to inform on matters of current and community affairs. I am not including more specialized entities like agricultural reports, or spaces with other activities where people might inform themselves or exchange information as a secondary effect (like online fan communities).[18] The purpose of this study will be to examine the news as it exists, not cast value-based judgements on its quality, and the worlds of misinformation, disinformation, "fake news," branded content, public relations and the increasingly confused territory where they interact with news fall beyond its scope.

Unlike some scholars, I do not differentiate between the practices of journalism and news, and I include within the realm of this text information beyond what might be considered

[16] Meikle, 20.
[17] Schudson, Michael. *The sociology of news*. 2nd, W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, xviii-xix
[18] Jenkins, Henry. *By any media necessary: The new youth activism*. NYU Press, 2016

"publicly important."[19] While I will look at and stress the importance of these particular kinds of news--such as investigative, accountability and public affairs reporting--I will employ a broad conception of news that includes every section you might read in your local paper or every topic covered in the nightly broadcast, be it political reporting, sports coverage, obituaries or social columns. Nonetheless within these boundaries I have established exists a number of mediums that includes print, TV, radio, and the varied constellation of platforms and entities, big and small, that makes up the digital space.

A significant portion of these pages will be devoted to looking at newspapers in both their print and digital iterations. At the risk of being dismissed as reactionary or nostalgic, I do so because, paradoxically, both the transformation of the field has been so dramatic and its future is still so vital to local news, as will be explored in the case study portion of this text. Additionally, in the traditional media ecosystem, and still to this day as some narrowly focused studies have shown, newspaper reporting is the basis for most local news stories on broadcast media, and thus continues to hold significant agenda-setting power even if readership has decreased. [20] Social media and the extent of its impact on spreading disinformation and fueling polarization has captured national attention, but a number of studies suggest that its impact may be overblown and its reach overestimated.[21] While the numbers may be declining, the majority of Americans still get their news from television, and a good proportion of that is from local outlets.[22] While my research focuses heavily on the print, and to a lesser extent, digital realm, there is great

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[19] Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, 7.
[20] Pew Research Center Journalism and Media Staff, "How news happens."
[21] Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, "Is media driving Americans apart?"
[22] Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael and Shearer, Elisa, "Pathways to news," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/

opportunity for future research that examines the ritual theory elements of local TV and radio news.

Local news has proven particularly hard to define and historically was less often studied in part because, Phyllis Kaniss suggests in her 1991 book *Making Local News*, it encompasses so many different forms of media in so many different markets across the country.[23] Generally speaking for my purposes, local outlets are those that are based in the communities that they cover. This does not include the correspondents of national news outlets like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or CNN, based outside of New York City, D.C. and Atlanta respectively. Local news does not encompass journalists covering the White House or federal government, though it could include covering members of the US Senate or Congress acting in a local capacity or relating the dimensions of national policy to a local context.[24] But within this definition exists a broad gamut of outlets varying in scope, coverage and resources. These range from newspapers, TV and radio stations covering major metropolitan cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas, to those of smaller cities like Denver, Baltimore and Philadelphia, to small town papers and community access stations and hyper local blogs. The digital upheaval in the media landscape has greatly lowered the barrier to entry for some of these categories, while decimating the economic model of others.

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[23] Kaniss, Phyllis. *Making local news*. University of Chicago Press, 1991, 9.

[24] This category could include reporting on the local history of a national political figure or the local dimension of national policy issue. The economic challenges of the industry and cost cutting efforts, however, have made this more difficult. As of January, 2016, 21 states were without a single national DC correspondent from a local newspaper, according to a Pew Research Center report. See Lu, Kristine and Holcomb, Jesse, "In 21 states, local newspapers lack a dedicated D.C. reporter covering Congress," Pew Research Center, January 7, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/07/in-21-states-local-newspapers-lack-a-dedicated-reporter-keeping-tabs-on-congress/

### ii.	The End of Local News?

While it is hardly news to most, the health of the media industry in the 21ˢᵗ century is deeply concerning. This is particularly true of newspapers, which have been suffering a long and slow decline that accelerated rapidly in the digital era. According to the Pew Research Center's 2017 "State of the Media" report, weekday circulation rates[25] for newspapers continued to decline for the 28ᵗʰ consecutive year, while Sunday circulation rates were the lowest recorded since 1945. Advertising revenue, which over the past few decades has been decimated by Craigslist and the disappearance of classified ads, the collapse of the retail industry, cheaper rates of digital ads and Facebook and Google's command of the market, further deteriorated. According to Pew, total advertising revenue (including print and digital) dropped 10% in 2016 to $18 billion dollars, down from $49 billion in 2006.[26]

There has been a recent reversal in fortunes at some national outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which reported surges in digital subscriptions and circulation revenue after the 2016 election.[27] Overall revenue at the *New York Times*, the nation's most prominent daily, increased by nearly 8% in 2017,[28] a significant accomplishment considering overall revenue had declined by nearly 2% the year before despite the draw of election year

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[25] Circulation figures measure the average number of newspapers distributed on a daily basis and is a key metric for setting advertising rates.

[26] Barthel, Michael, "Despite subscription surges for largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall," Pew Research Center, June 1, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/01/circulation-and-revenue-fall-for-newspaper-industry/

[27] Doctor, Ken, "Trump bump grows into subscription surge -- and not just for the New York Times," *The Street*, March 3, 2017, https://www.thestreet.com/story/14024114/1/trump-bump-grows-into-subscription-surge.html

[28] *The New York Times*, "The New York Times Company Reports 2017 Fourth-Quarter and Full-Year Results," February 8, 2018, http://investors.nytco.com/press/press-releases/press-release-details/2018/The-New-York-Times-Company-Reports-2017-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-Results/default.aspx

coverage.[29]   It remains to be seen whether the increase in digital subscriptions is a fleeting trend

and if the new revenue can make up for the lost advertising dollars in the long-term. The

audience for native digital news sites is increasing, but even industry darlings like *Buzzfeed* and

Vice Media are struggling and missed their 2017 revenue goals by more than $100 million,

according to the *Wall Street Journal*.[30]   Print media employment between 1990 and 2016

declined by nearly 60%, according to US Bureau of Labor statistics.[31]

  This systemic economic crisis is even more acutely felt at the level of local print media.

The advent of TV news precipitated the continually shrinking newspaper readership over several

decades, as well as, in the case of metros, the movement of urban populations to the suburbs. But

newspapers and their monopoly on advertising (particularly in what were increasingly one

newspaper towns) continued to be a highly lucrative industry that commanded double digit profit

margins long after. Then, in the 1970s and 80s, family owned newspapers that couldn't survive

the costs associated with updating to higher quality color printers and intergenerational power

struggles, increasingly sold off their papers to publicly owned corporations and chains in distant

cities with deep pockets. With efforts to streamline operations and keep down expenses—which

usually targeted newsrooms--these corporations realized they could turn already profitable

entities into goldmines.[32]

[29] Barthel, Michael, "Despite subscription surges for largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall."

[30] Hagey, Keach, "Vice just had a big revenue miss, and investors are getting antsy," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/vice-media-confronts-tv-woes-amid-leadership-troubles-1518003121

[31] "Employment trends in newspaper publishing and other media, 1990–2016," Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 2, 2016, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/employment-trends-in-newspaper-publishing-and-other-media-1990-2016.htm

[32] This summary draws from Downie Jr, Leonard, and Robert G. Kaiser. *The news about the news: American journalism in peril*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

According to Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert G. Kaiser's *Losing the News*, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* in Kentucky, which is featured in later chapters, had a profit margin as high as 35% in the 1980s (for comparison, the profit margins of the S&P 500 between 1983 and 1990 ranged between approximately nine and 13 percent[33]). So flush were its coffers that the paper's softball team embarked on a tour of Russia.[34] Money was clearly flowing and this was even considering that its corporate owner, Knight Ridder, was known to be less profit obsessed than its competitors and invested more generously in newsroom costs.

Corporate ownership offered more security and resources to keep up with changing technology, and the centralized model was efficient for deploying content management systems (CMS) and metrics software needed in the digital age and for allowing group ad buys.[35] Despite the good times, however, new management began to deeply cut newsroom budgets in order to maintain the soaring profit margins and keep Wall Street happy with their quarterly earnings reports. This cycle of layoffs and budget cuts went into overdrive every time there was a national economic crisis, particularly when exacerbated by the debt incurred from buying more outlets. The first decade of the 21st century was particularly cruel for newspapers, which after surviving the burst of the dot com bubble in 2001 would have to face the digital onslaught and then the staggering economic losses of the 2008 financial crisis. Most newspapers migrated online in some form, initially offering much of their content for free in an effort to draw views and advertising dollars, but new revenue leveled off and could not make up for the losses in print

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[33]Lettieri, Marco, "U.S. equities: A historical perspective on S&P 500 profit margins," National Bank Financial Economy & Strategy Group, February 3, 2012, 4.

[34] Jones, Alex S., *Losing the news. The Future of the news that feeds democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2009, 159.

[35] Ali, Christopher and Radcliffe, Damian, "Small-market newspapers in the digital age," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November 15, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/local-small-market-newspapers-study.php

advertising. Over time it became clear that digital advertising and its efforts to capture users'

attention in the chaotic online landscape was worth considerably less than its print counterpart,

something Ethan Zuckerman, citing research by Don Marti, has characterized as "print dollars to

digital dimes."[36] In the decade since the Great Recession, even after the economy recovered,

newsrooms faced wave after wave of layoffs and buyouts. Many were forced out of business.

The next wave of owners swept in to snap up the struggling outlets, but this time they were

venture capital hedge funds and investment firms. Even more so than the previous newspaper

chains, these corporations were far removed both physically from the local communities and

philosophically from the ethos and mission of newsrooms. [37]

Companies like the much-reviled Alden Global Capital's Digital First Media and Fortress

Investment Group's Gatehouse were said to be on a perverse mission to "harvest" the outlets—

that is, rather than solidly invest in their future, wring them of any last profit before leaving the

stripped carcasses out to rot.[38][39] "The malign genius of the private equity business model," the

American Prospect wrote in an article on the subject, "is that it allows the absentee owner to

drive a paper into the ground, but extract exorbitant profits along the way from management

fees, dividends, and tax breaks. By the time the paper is a hollow shell, the private equity

company can exit and move on, having more than made back its investment."[40]

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[36] Zuckerman, Ethan, "The Internet's Original Sin," *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/08/advertising-is-the-internets-original-sin/376041/

[37] This summary draws from Jones, *Losing the news. The Future of the news that feeds democracy* and Downie Jr., Leonard, and Michael Schudson. "The reconstruction of American journalism." Columbia Journalism Review 19 (2009): 2009. https://archives.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php

[38] DeRienzo, Matt, "How do you support your local newspaper when its owners are destroying it?", *Medium*, January 30, 2018, https://medium.com/@mattderienzo/how-do-you-support-your-local-newspaper-when-its-owners-are-destroying-it-f9ce3136c6a4

[39] Jones, *Losing the news. The Future of the news that feeds democracy*, 162-63.

[40] Kuttner, Robert and Zenger, Hildy, "Saving the Free press from private equity," *The American Prospect*, December 27, 2017, http://prospect.org/article/saving-free-press-private-equity

While the investment firms publicly deny this strategy, their purchase of money-losing newspapers is not likely altruistically motivated. Defenders argue that without these companies even fewer newspapers would still exist, while critics allege the endless steep newsroom cuts indicate little interest in the long-term health of the outlets.[41] Court documents filed as part of a lawsuit against Alden Global in March 2018 showed that the company was siphoning off hundreds of millions of dollars from its newspaper companies to prop up its other financially struggling investments, including a developer alleged to have committed the biggest real estate fraud in Mexican history, according to a *Bloomberg* report. At great length, the article compared the head of Alden Capital to the notoriously greedy character Gordon Gekko of the movie *Wall Street*.[42] Nieman Lab reported that while inflicting repeated cuts to its newsrooms, Digital First Media had recorded a "17 percent operating margin — well above those of its peers — in its 2017 fiscal year, along with profits of almost $160 million."[43]

Regardless of the motives, the impact of these financial strategies on newsrooms is clear. In the economically booming Bay Area, a quarter of the editorial staff of the Digital First Media owned *East Bay Times* accepted buyouts in January 2018, which were expected to be followed by layoffs. A year earlier, the paper had cut 20 staff positions merely weeks after its newsroom had won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Ghost Ship Fire.[44] In March 2018, Digital First

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[41] DeRienzo, "How do you support your local newspaper when its owns are destroying it?"

[42] Nocera, Joe, "Imagine if Gordon Gekko bought news empires," *Bloomberg*, March 26, 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-03-26/alden-global-capital-s-business-model-destroys-newspapers-for-little-gain

[43] Doctor, Ken, "Newsonomics: Alden Global Capital is making so much money wrecking local journalism it might not want to stop anytime soon," NiemanLab, May 1, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/05/newsonomics-alden-global-capital-is-making-so-much-money-wrecking-local-journalism-it-might-not-want-to-stop-anytime-soon/

[44] BondGraham, Darwin and Geluardi, John, "Buy-outs and Layoffs Hit Easy Bay Times and Other Bay Area News Group Papers," *East Bay Express*, January 30, 2018,

Media bought the *Boston Herald* and reduced staff from 240 to 175.[45] The *San Jose Mercury News*, which covers Silicon Valley, has a newsroom staff of about 40, down from 440 in the 1990s.[46] (The notable downsizing of the *Mercury News* is also closely linked to the losses suffered when the lucrative classified advertising for tech industry recruitment migrated online.)[47]

One of the most dramatic conflicts over Digital First's stewardship played out in Denver in early 2018. The company was excoriated in the press after inflicting yet another round of crippling layoff that would leave the newsroom of the only remaining daily in the thriving Denver metro area with fewer than 70 journalists, down from 184 in 2012.[48] "Is this strip-mining or journalism? 'Sobs, gasps, expletives' over latest *Denver Post* layoffs,"[49] *The Washington Post* asked in a memorable headline. Then, in a move dubbed an "open revolt" by the *New York Times*, *The Denver Post*'s staff published an editorial decrying the layoffs and pleading that, "As

https://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2018/01/30/buy-outs-and-layoffs-hit-east-bay-times-and-other-bay-area-news-group-papers

[45] Chesto, John, "Digital first Media completes acquisition of Herald, ending 24 years of local ownership" *The Boston Globe*, March 19, 2018, https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2018/03/19/digital-first-media-completes-acquisition-herald-ending-years-local-ownership/WUPtcESgbRVvyotwRDsFGP/story.html

[46] Benton, Joshua, "The Boston Herald's buyer is a vulture capitalist, *The Boston Globe*, February 15, 2018 https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2018/02/15/the-boston-herald-buyer-vulture-capitalist/miuJ6opA6TApR61bZEO1aM/story.html

[47] Shapiro, Michael, "The newspaper that almost seized the future," *The Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2011, https://archives.cjr.org/feature/the_newspaper_that_almost_seized_the_future.php

[48] DeCosta-Klipa, Nik, "Here's what the Boston Herald's new owner has done to other newspaper," *Boston.com*, March 27, 2018, https://www.boston.com/news/media/2018/03/27/digital-first-media-boston-herald-layoffs

[49] Sullivan, Margaret, "Is this strip-mining or journalism? 'Sobs, gasps, expletives' over latest *Denver Post* layoffs," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/is-this-strip-mining-or-journalism-sobs-gasps-expletives-over-latest-denver-post-layoffs/2018/03/15/d05abc5a-287e-11e8-874b-d517e912f125_story.html?utm_term=.ef9427ae46b3

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vultures circle, *The Denver Post* must be saved."[50] Other Digital First newspapers in California

followed suit with similar missives.[51] After widespread media coverage, a civic group in

Colorado announced they were lobbying investors to buy *The Denver Post* away from Alden

Capital.[52] In May, the paper's editorial page editor resigned after he was not allowed to run

another critical editorial.[53] While the Digital First Media and other corporate ownerships stories

are some of the most egregious examples, across the board, being a local journalist has become a

very difficult way to make a living and have a sustainable career.[54]

      According to a report by the School of Media and Journalism at the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill, there were 600 fewer local newspapers in 2014 than in 2004, and of the

remaining outlets many former dailies reduced printing to a weekly or biweekly schedule. More

than a third of the country's newspapers changed owners in this period, according to the report,

and the media market became increasingly consolidated. As of the report's October 2016

publication date, seven of the largest 25 newspaper owners were investment groups. In 2004, the

three largest investment companies owned 352 newspapers in 27 states, according to the report.

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[50] The Denver Post Editorial Board, "As vultures circle, The Denver Post must be saved," *The Denver Post*, April 6, 2018, https://www.denverpost.com/2018/04/06/as-vultures-circle-the-denver-post-must-be-saved/ and Ember, Sydney, "Denver Post rebels against its hedge-fund ownership," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/07/business/media/denver-post-opinion-owner.html

[51] Farhi, Paul, "As a secretive hedge fund guts its newspapers, journalists are fighting back," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/as-a-secretive-hedge-fund-guts-its-newspapers-journalists-are-fighting-back/2018/04/12/8926a45c-3c10-11e8-974f-aacd97698cef_story.html?utm_term=.449dddfd0cf0

[52] Ember, Sydney, "Colorado group pushes to buy embattles Denver Post from New York hedge fund," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/business/media/denver-post-alden-global-capital.html

[53] Healy, Jack, "Denver Post editor who criticized paper's ownership resigns," *New York Times*, May 3, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/business/media/denver-post-editor-resigns.html

[54] Hare, Kristen, "Let's stop talking about how we value local journalism and do something," *Poynter*, April 4, 2018, https://www.poynter.org/news/lets-stop-talking-about-how-we-value-local-journalism-and-do-something

By 2016, the seven largest investment companies owned 1,031 newspapers in 42 states.[55] Times

are hard even for major chains: Gannett, one of the country's biggest newspaper chains with

more than 100 papers in the US, has seen its stock price fall and ad revenue decline in recent

years.[56]

Within the ecosystem of local newspapers, metro dailies and alt-weeklies have been

particularly hard hit.[57] According to a 2018 report, metro dailies now make up less than two

percent of remaining newspaper and account for less than 30 percent of all print circulation.

Communities weeklies, however, make up 70 percent of all newspapers, and along with

community dailies, account for 62 percent of overall print circulation.[58] Smaller circulation

papers, defined in a *Columbia Journalism Review* report as papers with circulation under 50,000,

have been more resilient to industry changes, at least for now, "thanks in part to exclusive

content not offered elsewhere, the dynamics of ultra-local advertising markets, and an ability to

leverage a physical closeness to their audience," according to the *CJR* report.[59] Nonetheless, the

wider challenges of the industry, and particularly the impact of the collapse of the retail industry

on advertising, are looming. The end of 2017 saw the closure of Reed Print, a nearly 80-years old

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[55] Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the UNC School of Media and Journalism,
"The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts," 2016
http://newspaperownership.com/#
[56] Gannett 2017 Annual report, 24, 30-34.
http://investors.gannett.com/sites/gannett.investorhq.businesswire.com/files/doc_library/file/2017_Gannet
_Annual_Report.pdf
[57] Renkl, Margaret, "The Alt-Weekly Crisis Hits Nashville. And Democracy," *The New York Times*,
February 5, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/05/opinion/nashville-scene-weekly-democracy.html
[58] Reader, Bill. "Despite losses, community newspapers still dominate the US market." *Newspaper
Research Journal* (2018): 0739532918765467.
[59] Ali and Radcliffe, "Small-market newspapers in the digital age"

family-owned publisher of five weekly newspapers in Kern County in the Central Valley of California, to give just one example.[60]

Local broadcast media is healthier than print for now (local TV news historically enjoyed even higher profit margins than its print counterparts[61]) but also faces future challenges from technological change, in particular online and mobile streaming. Since 2007, according to the Pew Research Center, "the average audience for late night newscasts has declined 31%, while morning audience declined 12% and early evening audience fell 19%." Nonetheless, the majority of Americans (57%) still get their news from television, and of that group 46% are watching local TV news.[62] Revenue is generally stable. Elections are usually good for TV advertising revenue and the polemic 2016 election gave local stations an uptick in ad dollars.[63] Additionally, stations have seen an increase in retransmission fees from cable systems in return for carrying their programming.[64]

The industry is however experiencing serious ownership consolidation. Thanks to a decades-long trend of loosening F.C.C regulations, the five largest local TV companies owned 37% of all local TV stations in 2016, for a total of 443, up from 179 in 2004.[65] The year after the 2016 election saw this trend accelerate. In October 2017, the F.C.C voted to overturn long-

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[60] Mayer, Steven, "Publisher of small community newspapers to fold after decades of coverage," *Bakersfield.com*, December 18, 2017, http://www.bakersfield.com/news/publisher-of-small-community-newspapers-to-fold-after-decades-of/article_e1f50ef0-e451-11e7-80df-0f0db3b5612e.html

[61] Downie Jr. and Kaiser, *The News about the news*, 10-11.

[62] "State of the News report," Pew Research Center, June 15, 2016, 45. http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf

[63] Local TV News Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, July 13, 2017 http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/local-tv-news/

[64] Barthel, Michael, "5 key takeaways about the State of the News Media in 2016," Pew Research Center, June 15, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/15/state-of-the-news-media-2016-key-takeaways/

[65] Matsa, Katerina Eva, "Buying spree brings more local TV stations to fewer big companies," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2017 http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/11/buying-spree-brings-more-local-tv-stations-to-fewer-big-companies/

standing rules that prohibited local television stations and newspapers from sharing the same

owner and required radio and TV stations to maintain a primary studio in or near their local

community of broadcast signal.[66]

Earlier that year, the conservative-leaning Sinclair Broadcast Group reached a deal to buy

Tribune Media's 42 stations, which would enable the company to reach 70 percent of households

through TV affiliates.[67] The purchase alarmed many liberals and journalists, who reported that

Sinclair was pushing its acquired stations to advance a conservative right agenda, including

forcing them to air questionable segments produced by the company headquarters. One of these

segments featured the company's vice president for news accusing the national news media of

publishing "fake news stories."[68] The company later issued a mandate to air segments with local

anchors reading from a similar script, according to news reports.[69] The issue became a story of

national interest after the website *Deadspin* published of video that edited together dozens of

local anchors repeating the same script in a creepy montage.[70] The company's management

maintained it had no political agenda, but several employees expressed their discomfort with the

segments on and off the record in news reports and at least one anchor quit in protest.[71]

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[66] Finley, Klint, "The FCC says local media is thriving. That's not so clear," *Wired*, November 16, 2017 https://www.wired.com/story/the-fcc-says-local-media-is-thriving-thats-not-so-clear/?utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-3dc76a13ea-400108985&utm_content=bufferb9154&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

[67] Matsa, "Buying spree brings more local TV stations to fewer big companies."

[68] Ember, Sydney, "Sinclair Requires TV Stations to Air Segments That Tilt to the Right," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/business/media/sinclair-broadcast-komo-conservative-media.html?_r=0

[69] Stelter, Brian, "Sinclair's new media-bashing promos rankle local anchors," CNN.com, March 7, 2018, http://money.cnn.com/2018/03/07/media/sinclair-broadcasting-promos-media-bashing/index.html

[70] Burke, Timothy, "How America's largest local TV owner turned its news anchors into soldiers in Trump's war on the media," *Deadspin*, March 31, 2018, https://theconcourse.deadspin.com/how-americas-largest-local-tv-owner-turned-its-news-anc-1824233490

[71] Ember, Sydney, "Sinclair's boss responds to criticism: 'You can't be serious!'", *The New York Times*, April 4, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/business/media/sinclairs-boss-responds-to-criticism-

A 2018 study from Emory University concluded after studying a data set of local news broadcasts from 2017 that TV station acquisitions by Sinclair led to "1) substantial increases in coverage of national politics at the expense of local politics, 2) a significant rightward shift in the ideological slant of coverage."[72] (This increased focus on national news is not limited to TV. According to Nieman Lab, a soon to be published report has found that "When researchers analyzed the home pages of news sources including TV, radio, online-only outlets, and local newspapers in 100 municipalities around the U.S., they found that 20 of those communities saw no local news stories at all").[73] As of Spring 2018, the Sinclair merger was stalled as the Department of Justice considered whether the deal would violate antitrust laws[74] and the F.C.C Inspector General was investigating whether F.C.C Chairman Ajit Pai has improperly pushed for a regulatory change that would enable the sale.[75]

While the nationalization of news, and particularly the acute interest in the Trump presidential campaign and now White House, has contributed to a decline in local TV's lower viewership in recent years, local channels still out perform cable and network news programs.[76] Fifty percent of Americans get their news from television (down from 57% the year before), and

you-cant-be-serious.html and Stelter, Brian, "Sinclair producer in Nebraska resigns to protest 'obvious bias,'" CNN, April 4, 2018, http://money.cnn.com/2018/04/04/media/sinclair-producer-resigns-protest/index.html

[72] Martin, Gregory T.; McCrain, Josh. "Local News and National Politics," *Emory University Working Paper* March 2018. http://polisci.emory.edu/faculty/gjmart2/papers/localnews.pdf

[73] Wang, Shan, "How much of what local TV stations post to Facebook is actually local? For many, right around half," NiemanLab, April 26, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/04/how-much-of-what-local-tv-stations-post-to-facebook-is-actually-local-for-many-right-around-half/

[74] Kang, Cecilia and Ember, Sydney, "Sinclair Deal with Tribune Hits Complications in Washington, *The New York Times*, February 27, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/business/sinclair-tribune-merger-antitrust.html

[75] Kang, "F.C.C. Watchdog Looks Into Changes That Benefitted Sinclair," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2018, , https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/technology/fcc-sinclair-ajit-pai.html

[76] "Local TV News Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center

the majority of that group still watches local news, though the numbers are dropping.[77] In a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 46% of Americans said they often get news from local TV, compared with 31% for cable and 20% for print newspapers. However only 22% of viewers between the ages of 18 and 29 said they get news from local TV and are more likely to consume news online, suggesting the effects of the digital disruption will eventually be felt in local TV as well.[78]

Radio, according to a 2016 Pew report, is where 25% of Americans get their news.[79] While terrestrial radio is still most popular and has remained stable, monthly online radio listenership has more than doubled since 2010. Advertising revenue has been mostly stable.[80] NPR-affiliated public rations have seen an increase in total weekly listenership. Individual giving and underwriting combined accounted for a 6% increase in in revenue for local public radio from 2014 to 2015. Membership also slightly increased in that period.[81]

iii.   Communities lose without local news

Dwindling financial resources, distant corporate ownership and obsessive coverage of the partisan political climate in the nation's capital have all contributed to the nationalization of news coverage, so-called "news deserts"[82]and scarcity of local reporting. As a result,

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[77] Matsa, Katerina Eva, "Fewer Americans rely on TV news; what type they watch varies by who they are," Pew Research Center

[78] Matsa, "Buying spree brings more local TV stations to fewer big companies."
[79] "State of the News report," Pew Research Center, June 15, 2016
[80] "Audio and podcasting fact sheet," Pew Research Center, June 16, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/audio-and-podcasting/
[81] "Public broadcasting fact sheet," Pew Research Center, August 7, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/public-broadcasting/
[82] Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the UNC School of Media and Journalism, "The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts," 2016 http://newspaperownership.com/#

communities lose the valuable information they need to be civically engaged as well as a source of local identity. The value of local news to the public they serve is sometimes framed within the schema of a "watchdog" role vs. that of a "good neighbor."[83] The former category describes the role of the Fourth Estate to hold the powerful accountable and, like at the national level, has long been extolled as central to the primacy of the First Amendment and upholding American democracy. While national news stories and investigative exposés get the most attention as examples of public service journalism, reporters covering local politics, government agencies and the courts, where lower-level malfeasance can more easily avoid scrutiny, are crucial for bringing stories of corruption to light. Major metros like *The Boston Globe*'s famous "Spotlight" team and *The Chicago Tribune* have revealed all kinds of abuses ranging from pedophilia in the Catholic Church to faulty government regulation of defective car sets and cribs for children.[84] Newspapers in smaller cities, like the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* and the *Tampa Bay Times* exposed escalating violence and neglect in Florida's mental hospitals.[85] Small town papers like the *Advertiser Democrat* in Norway, Maine, uncovered appalling conditions in federally-supported housing in a small rural community.[86]

While local TV news is often dismissed as purely fluff entertainment, Houston's TV station KHOU's reporting led to nation-wide coverage of the fatalities involving Ford Explorers with Firestone tires and Salt Lake City's KIVX collaborated with two newspapers to reveal the corruption involved in the city's bid to win the 2002 Olympic games.[87] NBC Connecticut

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[83] Ali and Radcliffe, "Small-market newspapers in the digital age"
[84] See the 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner in Investigative reporting, Staff of *The Chicago Tribune* and the 2003 Pulitzer Prize winner in Public Service, *The Boston Globe*
[85] See the 2016 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Investigative Reporting, Leonora LaPeter Anton and Anthony Cormer of the *Tampa Bay Times* and Michael Braga of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*
[86] See the 2012 Pulitzer Prize Finalist in Local Reporting, A.M. Sheehan and Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling of *Advertiser Democrat*, Norway, Maine, a weekly
[87] Downie Jr. and Kaiser, *The News about the news*, 5-6.

uncovered widespread home foundation failures in 2016[88] and ABC15 Arizona exposed a group

of litigators who exploited the Americans with Disabilities Act for profit in 2016 and '17.[89]

Most recently, the *Indianapolis Star* revealed and then doggedly covered Dr. Larry

Nassar's sexual abuse of young female gymnasts long before it made national headlines in

2018.[90] The *Pinckneyville Press* in Southern Illinois—weekly circulation 1800—has exposed in

the past eight years "a police coverup involving a mayor's son, discovered high school teachers

hauling off air conditioners and desks that were intended for public auction, and caught an

employee from the county assessor's office stealing gas and hiding the cans behind his house,"

according to a *CJR* profile.[91] Increasingly however, as will be shown in later sections, a

significant amount of local accountability journalism is now coming from non-profit outlets and

digital news sites.[92]

As local news outlets go out of business and national ones have fewer resources to keep

local correspondents on the ground, these stories run the risk of going uncovered.[93] Beyond

exposés and revealing scandals, citizens are losing the basic reporting they need to make

informed decisions and be civically engaged. A Pew Research Center report found that the

number of fulltime statehouse reporters declined 35% from 2003 to 2014. Less than a third of

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[88] See NBC Connecticut "Crumbling Foundations,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chfv2iIDMJ4&list=PLF96EEDAB3D51BC6F&index=21
[89] See ABC15 series "Cash for Compliance," https://www.abc15.com/news/investigators/ada-lawsuits
[90] Victor, Daniel, "Belatedly, The Indianapolis Star Gets Its Due for Gymnastics Investigation," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/business/media/indy-star-gymnastics-abuse.html

[91] Spinner, Jackie, "What a hyperlocal investigative powerhouse looks like," *Columbia Journalism Review, Columbia Journalism Review*, June 13, 2017,
https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/pinckneyville-press-illinois-local-watchdog.php
[92] Stearns, Josh, "20 Of The Best Nonprofit News Stories Of 2017," *BuzzFeed*, December 26, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/jcstearns/20-of-the-best-nonprofit-news-stories-of-2017-20e3b?utm_term=.ufp4lBgwY#.jtGXQGMZd
[93] Warren, James, "New York Times editor: Local news is the biggest 'crisis' in journalism," Poynter, May 31, 2017 https://www.poynter.org/news/new-york-times-editor-local-news-biggest-crisis-journalism

newspapers and 14% of TV stations assigned a part or fulltime reporter to cover state capitols in 2014. Journalists from "nontraditional" outlets like news websites and nonprofit organizations are beginning to fill the void, the report said, but not yet at sufficient numbers to make up for the lost jobs print and TV jobs.[94]

A recent 2018 report in *Politico* made the case that a review of subscription data and election results showed a correlation between low newspaper subscription rates in places they designated as "news deserts" and Trump's success in the 2016 election. The authors claimed the "links were statistically significant even when accounting for other factors that likely influenced voter choices, such as college education and employment, suggesting that the decline of local media sources by itself may have played a role in the election results."[95] Follow-up articles in NiemanLab and *The Washington Post*, however, took serious issue and identified several deficiencies with *Politico*'s statistical claims.[96] But even in places that still have newspapers, the changing media landscape affects the content of the reporting that still exists and how focused it is on local issues, according to a UNC study. After examining the 2016 election reporting of five newspapers in eastern North Carolina, researchers found that the two independently owned newspapers covered state and local races in greater detail than their investment-owned peers.[97]

Elections results aside, the ability to inform oneself and access quality local news, unsurprisingly, is not always evenly distributed. The 2009 report of the Knight Commission on

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[94] Enda, Jodi, Matsa, Katerina Eva and Boyles, Jan Lauren, "America's shifting statehouse press," Pew Research Center, July 10, 2014, http://www.journalism.org/2014/07/10/americas-shifting-statehouse-press/

[95] Musgrave and Nussbaum, "Trump thrives in areas that lack traditional news outlets,"

[96] Benton, "That Politico article on 'news deserts' doesn't really show what it claims to show," and Bump, "Why you should take that 'news deserts led to Trump' story with a grain of salt."

[97] Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the UNC School of Media and Journalism, "Does a newspaper's owner affect its coverage of local elections?" December 14, 2017 https://www.cislm.org/does-a-newspapers-owner-affect-its-coverage-of-local-elections/

the Information Needs of Communities in a democracy concluded that the digital age was not

serving all Americans and their local communities equally.[98] And a 2015 study from Rutgers of

three New Jersey communities found that the local journalism produced in the richer

communities was substantially better than in the poorer ones, both in terms of quantity and

quality.[99] Even in places where the digital media ecosystem provides a multiplicity of news

options, they don't necessarily replace the role that mainstream, centralized local news outlets

used to play. A 2017 study that conducted six focus groups in three cities found that even those

participants that sought out local news online from multiple sources found the connections

between the sources "disjointed," "piecemeal," and "sporadic," "making it difficult to stay

updated on local issues and events."[100] Moreover, the study noted, these online news websites

for the most part did not reach the elderly or the poor.[101]

Local media can also be critical to stories of national interest. Follow-up reporting by

journalists in Alabama, for example, was crucial in corroborating and deepening *The Washington

Post*'s stories on the sexual misconduct allegations against Roy Moore, the Republican candidate

for Senate in Alabama in 2017.[102] The coverage of some of the biggest recent political legislative

stories—like efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act and pass tax reform--- is centered on

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[98] Knight Commission. "Informing communities: Sustaining democracy in the digital age." The report of the Knight Commission on the information needs of communities in a democracy (2009). https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/Informing_Communities_Sustaining_Democracy_in_the_Digital_Age.pdf

[99] Napoli, Philip M., et al. "Assessing the health of local journalism ecosystems." Rutgers School of Communication and Information (2015). http://mpii.rutgers.edu/assessing-the-health-of-local-journalism-ecosystems/

[100] McCollough, Kathleen, Jessica K. Crowell, and Philip M. Napoli. "Portrait of the online local news audience." *Digital Journalism*, 5.1 (2017), 108.

[101] McCollough, et al., "Portrait of the online local news audience," 104.

[102] Lima, Cristiano, "'We keep reporting': Alabama journalists resilient in face of Moore legal threats," *Politico*, November 20, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/20/alabama-journalists-roy-moore-coverage-250343

Washington, but often play out back home in local districts and on pages of their newspapers.[103]

And local journalists are the ones who carry out the sustained reporting on the aftermath of

national disasters or mass shootings, after the national media packs up and leaves.

Much of the mainstream coverage of the decline of local news has focused on the risk the

loss of "watchdog" accountability journalism poses to the health of democracy.[104] But in some

sectors thinking about the future of journalism—notably academic and philanthropic circles—

"the good neighbor" function has taken on special interest. That is, the role local news outlets

play in forging and sustaining community identity and ties. As local residents quoted in an article

about the closure of Reed Print stated, the weeklies helped with "'community building,' giving

residents a stronger sense that they're all part of the same whole. 'The kid gets to see his picture

in the paper…and his parents get to see his picture in the paper.'"[105] Facebook, whose business

model depends on transmitting the affective qualities of community in the digital space, was

surely seeking to capitalize on this quality when it tweaked its algorithm in January 2018 to

prioritize local news.[106] (That, and likely a desire to escape the polarizing political content

fueling its "fake news"-Trump-Russian propaganda public relations nightmare). A recent article

in *CJR*, however, suggests the efforts to algorithmically boost local news are not working well.[107]

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[103] Liberman, Trudy, "How local news sounded the alarm over the GOP's defeated health plan," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 24, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/how-local-news-sounded-the-alarm-over-the-gops-defeated-health-plan.php

[104] Sullivan, Margaret, "Tension between Trump and the media? That's nothing compared to journalism's worst crisis," *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/tension-between-trump-and-the-media-thats-nothing-compared-to-journalisms-worst-crisis/2017/09/29/0589a8ea-a50e-11e7-b14f-f41773cd5a14_story.html?utm_term=.b2b7eb546654

[105] Mayer, Steven, "Publisher of small community newspapers to fold after decades of coverage."

[106] Hardiman, Alex and Brown, Campbell, "News feed FYI: More local news on Facebook," Facebook.com, January 29, 2018, https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/news-feed-fyi-local-news/

[107] Brown, Pete, "Facebook struggles to promote 'meaningful interactions' for local publishers, data shows," *CJR*, April 18, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/facebook-local-news.php

The theoretical underpinnings of this framework, as will be examined in the next chapter, can be traced back as least as far as the early 20th century philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey. A 21st century study characterized the good neighbor role as "caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups in the community, understanding the local community, and offering solutions to community problems." In the same study, researchers conducted a survey in which participants were asked to prioritize different attributes of journalism. In their findings, it was the previous characteristics assigned to the good neighbor dimension, "not watchdog, unbiased and accurate, or fast" that represented the "dominant expectation."[108]

Part of the broader significance of the community role of local news is to foster interest in civic engagement and participation. In his blockbuster 2000 book *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*, sociologist Robert Putnam highlighted declining interest in both news readership and viewership as one of several correlating factors to the decline of community bonds--what he calls "social capital"—and civic engagement over the course of decades in the US. Causation is harder to determine, but according to his research, regular newspaper readers were 10-20% more likely when compared to demographically identical nonreaders to belong to more organizations, attend local meetings more frequently, vote more regularly, volunteer and work on community projects more often, and even visit more frequently with and trust their neighbors more.[109] "The evidence makes quite clear," he concludes, "that

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[108] Heider, Don, Maxwell McCombs, and Paula M. Poindexter. "What the public expects of local news: Views on public and traditional journalism," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82.4 (2005), 962-963.
[109] Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, 2000, 218 and endnote 4 on 479.

newspaper reading [and to a lesser extent TV news viewing] and good citizenship go

together."[110] A more recent study by the Pew Research Center had similar conclusions:

> The civically engaged are indeed more likely than the less engaged to use and value local news. But two particular aspects of civic engagement stand out as most closely associated with local news habits: a strong connection to one's community and always voting in local elections. Americans with one of these two attributes, the study finds, consistently display stronger local news habits across a range of measures: news interest, news intake (the number and types of sources they turn to) and news attitudes.

However, as with Putnam, causation is harder to establish and the study is inconclusive as to

whether local news interest triggers civic engagement, or whether it is the other way around.[111] A

growing body of academic research has expanded on Morris Janowitz's classic 1950s study[112] of

the role of urban community newspapers in forging neighborhood ties and identity to test his so-

called "community integration hypothesis" in a number of different contexts. While definitive

proof of causation is elusive, in sum they suggest at least bidirectional correlation between local

media use and community involvement.[113] An experiment conducted by researchers from

Harvard University with small to mid-size publications and published in 2017 found that

"exposure to the news media causes Americans to take public stands on specific issues, join

national policy conversations, and express themselves publicly—all key components of

democratic politics—more often than they would otherwise."[114] Similar connections, if not

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[110] Putnam, 218.

[111] Barthel, Michael et al, "Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits," Pew research Center, November 3, 2016 http://www.journalism.org/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/

[112] Janowitz, Morris. *The community press in an urban setting*. Free Press, 1952.

[113] Hoffman, Lindsay H., and William P. Eveland Jr. "Assessing causality in the relationship between community attachment and local news media use," *Mass Communication and Society*13.2 (2010): 174-195.

[114] King, Gary, Benjamin Schneer, and Ariel White. "How the news media activate public expression and influence national agendas." *Science* 358.6364 (2017): 776-780.

causal relations, have been found in several studies about the relationship between declining news coverage and civic participation.[115] These papers have drawn links between declining local coverage and rates of voter turnout, and one concluded that "citizens exposed to a lower volume of coverage are less able to evaluate their member of Congress, less likely to express opinions about the House candidates in their districts, and less likely to vote."[116] Another study suggested that a decline in civic engagement in Denver and Seattle--which it defined by using indicators such as contacting a public official, participating in a boycott, and being active in a community association or civic organization—could be connected to the closure of local newspapers in both cities.[117] More research about the connection between news consumption and political efficacy is needed to move from assumptions about correlation to proving causation.

iv.   **From passive observer to good neighbor? Creating community, building trust, and combatting polarization**

This link between local media, community life and civic engagement has proven to be an intriguing site of intersection and intervention for philanthropic foundations operating in all three spheres as well as other sectors thinking about the future of news. The media's vision of and relationship with the public has also evolved over the past century. It has changed from the one-size fit all conception in the post-war period heyday of mass media, to the commercially focused

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[115] See Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer L. Lawless. "As local news goes, so goes citizen engagement: Media, knowledge, and participation in US House Elections," *The Journal of Politics,* 77.2 (2015): 447-462; Shaker, Lee. "Dead newspapers and citizens' civic engagement." *Political Communication* 31.1 (2014): 131-148; and Schulhofer-Wohl, Sam, and Miguel Garrido. *Do newspapers matter? Short-run and long-run evidence from the closure of The Cincinnati Post.* No. w14817. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009.

[116] Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer L. Lawless. "As local news goes, so goes citizen engagement: Media, knowledge, and participation in US House Elections," 447.

[117] Shaker, Lee. "Dead newspapers and citizens' civic engagement."

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"market-driven journalism" movement that began in the 1980s[118] and in different iterations

continues to this day, to the push for a civically-oriented "public journalism" in the 1990s,[119] and

the emergence of citizen journalism and "user-generated content" in the first decade of the 20th

century.[120] At one point—and, depending on your perspective, either cynically or sincerely—

focusing on building relationships between media outlets and the public was principally seen as a

potential way to bring back audiences. As an article by media scholars Damian Radcliffe and

Christopher Ali in Nieman Lab counseled, smaller newspapers needed to "commoditize one of

their most unique selling points: the value of place. By bringing people together — both literally

and figuratively — newspapers can help create and reflect a sense of community that larger

publications may struggle to replicate." Citing the survey that found that publics expected the

media to adopt the role of the good neighbor, media outlets should abandon the passive observer

stance, Radcliffe and Ali wrote, if they want to survive.[121]

While Radcliffe and Ali clarified in the article that this evolution did not require

"abandoning critical perspective," the good neighbor language alone is cringe-worthy to many

traditional journalists. This reaction is not motivated solely by the time-worn debate on the role

of objectivity in journalism, though that is an important part, but also a fear that "engagement"

journalism loses sight of the press's most fundamental role. The news, as a report by the former

Washington Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. and media scholar Michael Schudson[122]

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[118] McManus, John H., *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* Sage Publications, 1994.
[119] Rosen, Jay. *What are journalists for?*. Yale University Press, 1999.
[120] Rosen, Jay, "The people formerly known as the audience," Pressthink.org, June 27, 2006, http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr_p.html
[121] Radcliffe, Damian and Ali, Christopher, "If small newspaper are going to survive, they'll have to be more than passive observers to the news," Nieman Lab, February 2, 2017, http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/02/if-small-newspapers-are-going-to-survive-theyll-have-to-be-more-than-passive-observers-to-the-news/
[122] In other writings, Schudson has been more supportive of an engagement approach. See chapter 2, "Six or seven things news can do for democracy," of *Why democracies need an unlovable press*. Polity, 2008

defined it, "means telling citizens what they would not otherwise know." And it's not just purely delivering information, the authors wrote, but "news judgment oriented to a public agenda and a general audience."[123]

In Downie's earlier book on what happened to the media industry, *The News about the news*, he and his co-author Robert Kaiser profiled the effects on the Louisville Kentucky *Courier-Journal* of a program launched by the newspaper chain Gannett in the 1990s. "News 2000" called on its outlets to "break the habit of running newspapers according to the instincts and interests of their editors," according to Downie and Kaiser and, in the words of the initiative's authors at Gannett, allow the newspaper to be "driven by the community and by its customers: readers." The results, according to the book, were "inevitably, less aggressive, less revealing about their communities…Gannett headquarters' goals may have been to quote more 'local' voices and speak more directly to local concerns, but it did not include deep reporting on complex local subjects, arguably the most useful and rewarding form of local news."[124] Moreover, they wrote, "No newspaper has soared in popularity as a result of such changes."[125]

Alex S. Jones, in his book, *Losing the news*, makes a similar case that the push towards "hyper-localization" was a gimmicky fad of companies desperate to regain audience, at the expense of diluting the quality of their product. The Tennessee *Greeneville Sun*, he writes, may have passionately believed that in order to best serve its community they should be covering local T-ball games with the same passions that major metros devote to major league franchises. But if "T-Ball is getting far more hits, the [shrinking] newsroom resources are almost irresistibly

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[123] Downie Jr., and Schudson, "The reconstruction of American journalism."
[124] Downie Jr. and Kaiser, *The News about the news*, 90-91.
[125] Downie Jr. and Kaiser, *The News about the news*, 97.

going to be directed toward T-ball" at the expense of "things that readers may find boring, such as coverage of water boards and county commissions."[126]

"Newspapers as deliberate community booster make us uncomfortable," Downie Jr. and Kaiser complained. "In fact a good newspaper, without making any special effort, does boost its community enormously, by giving all its residents a rich diet of useful information about what is happening around them."[127] This "eat your vegetables" view of the role of journalists may strike readers as either vital to democracy, or, conversely, paternalistic. In the later report co-authored with Schudson, the view of collaborating with the public on reporting – what they call "adjunct journalism," or in former *Guardian* editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger's terms, "mutualized news" – had notably softened. But the concern about how reporting priorities are set is a pervasive one.

To complicate matters, studies in this area can be conflicting. Despite the "good neighbor" results cited previously, in a 2018 Gallup poll, 50% of Americans said having the media hold leaders in politics accountable (essentially the "watchdog" role) is critical to democracy, while only 30% said it was critical that the media make residents feel connected to their community. (If you added together the results from people who found these goals "critical" and the next highest category, "very important," the watchdog role was listed for 83% of participants and the making residents feel connected was answered by 75%).[128] Crucially for the purposes of this text, the poll does not appear to have distinguished between national and local media.

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[126] Jones, *Losing the News*, 165-167.
[127] Downie Jr. and Kaiser, *The News about the news*, 98.
[128] Knight-Gallup survey on Trust, Media and Democracy, January 2018, http://news.gallup.com/poll/225470/media-seen-key-democracy-not-supporting.aspx and https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/pdfs/000/000/242/original/KnightFoundation_AmericansViews_Client_Report_010917_Final_Updated.pdf

In the philanthropic world, however, foundations became increasingly interested in the first decades of the 21st century in looking at community-focused journalism not only as a strategy to win back audiences, but as a way of combatting growing levels of societal polarization and distrust in media. In 2014, at least two years before the public was seriously considering a Donald J. Trump presidency, a Pew Research Center report found that Americans "are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades."[129] Relatedly, when it came to political news consumption:

> Liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust. And whether discussing politics online or with friends, they are more likely than others to interact with like-minded individuals.[130]

After the 2016 election, concerns about these same dynamics became issues of overwhelming national interest and importance. A Hewlett Foundation-supported literature review about social media, polarization and political disinformation concluded that "the prevailing consensus in political science is that elite behavior, rather than communication is driving political polarization." In other words, the media is not causing polarization, but is likely symptomatic of it. The report concluded in another instance that distrust of the media is "fueled by the increasing

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[129] Pew Research Center, "Political polarization in the American public," June 12, 2014, http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/
[130] Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Kiley, Jocelyn and Matsa, Katerina Eva, "Political polarization & media habits," Pew Research center, October 21, 2014, http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/

flow of negative messages about the press from elites"[131] (a result that President Trump has said publicly he sees as an accomplishment).[132]

For example, a 2018 Pew report found Americans are deeply polarized along partisan lines--more so than any other nation--when it comes their views of whether their news media cover political issues fairly.[133] A 2017 Pew survey that asked about support of the media's watchdog role of elected officials found a 47-percentage point difference between Democrats (who overwhelmingly said yes) and Republicans (of whom more than half said no). Merely a year earlier, the difference between both group had been three percentage points. The 2017 divide was by far the most dramatic Pew has recorded since it began asking the question in 1985 (the previous high was a 28-point difference during the George W Bush administration).[134]

(Mis)trust of the media and perceptions of bias are closely tied to questions of polarization. In general, confidence in most institutions has been declining for years, according to annual Gallup surveys.[135] The 2017 annual report from the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford found that the US was 28th in a ranking of 36 countries that have overall trust in

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[131] Tucker, Joshua A. et al, "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature", Hewlett Foundation. March 2018 https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Literature-Review.pdf, 40, 53.

[132] Burke, Cathy, "Trump 'so proud' he's able to 'convince people' on Fake News," *Newsmax*, October 25, 2017, https://www.newsmax.com/politics/fake-news-mainstream-media-trust-public/2017/10/25/id/822143/

[133] Mitchell, Amy, Simmons Katie, Matsa, Katerina Eva and Silver, Laura, "Publics globally want unbiased news coverage, but are divided on whether news news media deliver," Pew Research Center, , January 11, 2018, http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/01/11/publics-globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver/

[134] Barthel, Michael and Mitchell, Amy, "Americans' attitudes about the news media deeply divided along partisan lines," Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/2017/05/10/americans-attitudes-about-the-news-media-deeply-divided-along-partisan-lines/

[135] Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," http://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx

media.[136] And the 2018 Knight-Gallup survey reported that only 28% of participants believed the news media was currently supporting democracy.[137] Yet a related study found that despite this perception of the overall media environment, a greater number of Americans do, however, still trust whatever news they themselves are consuming – suggesting that it may not necessarily be that Americans mistrust the media as a whole, it's that they mistrust the media being consumed by whomever they disagree with.[138]

At the level of national news, these polarized fault lines have been clearly drawn. Despite widespread initiatives to be more transparent about the newsgathering and fact-checking process as a way to increase trust, it seems likely that never the twain shall meet between a hardcore devotee of *The Washington Post* (or MSNBC) and an ardent consumer of Breitbart (or Fox News). But at the local level the picture is more complex. At one point, there may have been a conservative and liberal daily newspaper in every town, but those days, for the most part, are long gone. Despite the flowering of online news websites, in many places, everyone, regardless of their political views, may be getting the majority of their local news from the same place out of necessity and scarcity. The implications of how that affects a community's vision of the news and it the role it plays in that community is an area of much interest and ripe for further study. Increasingly, many parts of the U.S. are already polarized along geographic lines, meaning that within any given community there may be a certain homogeneity of political views to begin with.[139] Nonetheless, the question of what ties exist between local news consumption and

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[136] Newman, Nic, et al. "Reuters institute digital news report 2017." (2017).
http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2017/overview-key-findings-2017/
[137] Knight-Gallup survey on trust, media and democracy, January 2018.
[138] American Press Institute, "'My' media versus 'the' media: Trust in news depends on which news media you mean." May 24, 2017, https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/my-media-vs-the-media/
[139] Bishop, *The big short: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008.

polarization (or the lack of) is an area of emerging research[140] that I will touch on in the case study chapter of this thesis and deserves to be further developed on a deeper and more sustained level.

Unsurprisingly, in the past year and a half these issues have taken on special urgency for funders and a number of new initiatives such as the News Integrity Initiative at CUNY University, The Ethical Journalism Network's report *Trust Factor*, the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy and the Trust Project at Santa Clara University commissioned studies and experiments. A report that looked at the work of these initiatives noted that there is no conclusive evidence about how trust in media is built or lost, but that these initiatives were focusing on the principles of transparency and participation.[141]

The opportunities for participation, along with several studies that have indicated that people have more trust in local news,[142] are some of the characteristics that make the space such an appealing one for funders in the current political climate. As Josh Stearns, who has been involved in funding local news at the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and now at the Democracy Fund, put it: "We should see local news as a critical starting place, a laboratory, and a leverage

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[140] Wenzel, Andrea and Ford, Sam, "Lessons on overcoming polarization from Bowling Green and Ohio County, Kentucky," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 15, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/polarization-public-sphere-lessons-from-bowling-green-ohio-county-kentucky.php

[141] Schiffrin, Anya et al, "Bridging the gap: Rebuilding citizen trust in media," Open Society Foundations, February 2018, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VRIMmdmvsRp2r2q7ttexe3Ccn36hc3oz/view

[142] Graham, Edward, "Poll: Voters trust local news outlets more than national ones," Morning Consult, August 17, 2017, https://morningconsult.com/2017/08/17/poll-voters-trust-local-news-outlets-national-ones/ ; Mitchell, Amy, Gottfriend, Jeffrey, Barthel, Mcihael, and Shearer, Elisa, "Trust and accuracy," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/trust-and-accuracy/; Knight Foundation/Gallup, "American Views: Trust, media and democracy," 2018, p. 8 https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/pdfs/000/000/242/original/KnightFoundation_AmericansViews_Client_Report_010917_Final_Updated.pdf

point for rebuilding trust across other democratic institutions…. Local news can help us building

a strong foundation for a more healthy and trusted democracy.[143]

At the Knight Foundation, which was founded by the newspaper publisher brothers John

S. and James L. Knight, the organization's mission has long made the connection between

informed and engaged communities at the local level, the foundation's VP of journalism,

Jennifer Preston, said in an interview.[144] The foundation has pockets of funding for both

journalism and civic participation and a review of their current grants sees a clear line between

the two. As far as back as 2008, Knight launched the Community Information Challenge, which

encouraged other place-based foundations to back more than 100 projects that addressed the

growing news and information crisis in places across the country as a result of the decline in

local journalism.[145] This connection between the health of local news and the communities they

serve has continued to be a focus of the foundation's funding. "We think of local as the

community and their information needs and what are the different ways their information needs

may be filled," Preston said. "Human centered-design is a big part of our work."

Across the field foundations are similarly focused on what Stearns described as the need

to "open up to our communities and invite them into the process of journalism, engage them in

how and why we do the work we do."[146] Knight, the Democracy Fund and the MacArthur

foundation joined forces in 2017 to build up NewsMatch, which matches donations to nonprofit

newsrooms to help equip them with new tools, technology and training to better engage their

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[143] Stearns, Josh, "Local news is a building block to rebuild trust," Medium, February 14, 2017, https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/local-news-is-a-building-block-to-rebuild-trust-fab8752f3659

[144] Telephone interview with Jennifer Preston, March 28, 2018

[145] Outing, Steve, "Foundations take on projects to improve local news and information," Knight Foundation, October 30, 2014, https://www.knightfoundation.org/articles/foundations-take-projects-improve-local-news-and-information

[146] Stearns, "Local news is a building block to rebuild trust," Medium

communities and cultivate donors. Since then a number of other donors and foundations have

signed on. A coalition of mostly the same funders announced a "Community Listening and

Engagement Fund" in January 2018 that is "dedicated to helping news organizations better listen,

engage, and produce more relevant content for the communities they serve."[147]

Writing for the Local News Lab, which is funded by the Democracy Fund, journalists

Andrea Hart and Molly de Aguiar wrote in December 2017 that nonprofit news had become:

> [A] powerful watchdog — but also a vital convener, public advocate, fact-checker and
> community bulletin board. It matters greatly who works in these growing newsrooms and
> who is represented in their reporting. Trust in news cannot and will not be rebuilt unless
> newsrooms fully represent people from all backgrounds.[148]

The initiatives that are coming out of this wave of funding of community-focused journalism,

which are explored in more detail in later chapters, include participatory reporting projects, block

parties, coffee sessions and town hall events.

While the tendencies may have been building for years, the present focus on interaction

between newsrooms and the public as a means to combat societal polarization and mistrust is

inextricably linked to the current political climate in the era of President Trump. The impulse,

however, can be traced to a long history of media theory that sought to complicate and expand

our understanding of communication from a one-way mode of information transmission, to

something that more resembled dialogue and fell into the category of ritual. The next chapter will

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[147] Waters, Paul, "A New fund aims to put the public back into the public square," The Democracy Fund, January 23, 2018, https://www.democracyfund.org/blog/entry/a-new-fund-aims-to-put-the-public-back-into-the-public-square

[148] Hart, Andrea and De Aguiar, Molly, "Why we need to build the capacity of newsroom that reflect and represent the whole community," Local News Lab, December 29, 2017, https://localnewslab.org/2017/12/29/why-we-need-to-build-the-capacity-of-newsrooms-that-reflect-and-represent-the-whole-community/

unpack this media theoretical framework to provide context and offer a new perspective on these

current trends in journalism funding and development.

Chapter 2: Concentric circles: Communication studies, public square theory and news sociology – a literature review.

i.   The Church of News

In the previous chapter, I explored the many ways in which news, and particularly local

news, keeps citizens informed and enables them to be civically engaged and connected to their

communities. But for media scholars looking to understand the powerful relationship between

the news and the public, the "ritual theory of communication," first explained by James Carey in

1989, offers an alternative, and what has proven to be a particularly influential, adaptable and

enduring theoretical framework. In his landmark text "A Cultural Approach to Communication,"

Carey proposed that:

> Two alternative conceptions of communication have been alive in American culture since
> this term entered common discourse in the nineteenth century. Both definitions derive, as
> with much in secular culture, from religious origins, though they refer to somewhat
> different regions of religious experience. We might label these descriptions, if only to
> provide handy pegs upon which we hang our thought, a transmission view of
> communication and a ritual view of communication.[149]

To explain the differences between these two approaches, Carey, in a series of essays

published together in the book *Communication as Culture*, drew upon what is now commonly

referred to as the "Dewey-Lippmann Debate." The debate in question was between the renowned

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[149] Carey*, Communication as Culture*, 12.

public intellectuals John Dewey and Walter Lippmann who published respective manifestoes in the 1920s about the relationship between citizens, the press and democracy.[150]

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann analyzes what he viewed as the average citizen's inability to fully grasp the complexities of and participate in democracy in the modern age.[151] Similarly, he argued, the press mostly disseminates "stereotypes" rather than adequately represent reality. As a remedy, he proposed a specialized bureau of technocrat experts tasked with analyzing data and whose results the press would dutifully present to the public.[152] In this view of mass media, Carey concluded, communication is understood as and limited to the role of transmission. Some later media theorists have argued that Carey was too dismissive of Lippmann, and that in fact his description of the ways in which political elites, experts and the media operate together to inform the public and influence policy decisions is not dissimilar from today's media ecosystem.[153] I argue in favor of both the ritual and transmission models and believe that the latter role is still vital to keep citizens informed on matters of public interest and hold the powerful accountable.

Five years after Lippmann's influential treatise, Dewey's *The Public and its Problems* was published in response. In this text, Dewey offered a passionate defense of the citizen's

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[150] Whether this antagonistic debate actually occurred in their lifetimes, or whether it was posthumously framed as one by Carey and other media scholars has become a point of contention. See Rakow, Lana F. "Family Feud: Who's Still Fighting about Dewey and Lippmann?." *Javnost-The Public* 25.1-2 (2018): 75-82.

[151] Lippmann, Walter, *Public Opinion*. *Vol. 1*. Transaction Publishers, 1946.

[152] Critics have alleged that in the Lippmann world view, journalism is relegated to stenography, rather than reporting, and that the public is made passive and depoliticized. Later defenders have argued that Lippmann has been unfairly smeared as an elitist out to eliminate the role of the public. In actuality, they argue, his model of a democracy that relies on expert opinion to inform most decision-making on increasingly complex issues (think outside interest groups) is a logical one that has over the course of the past century been widely adopted. See Michael Schudson, "The 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate' and the Invention of Walter Lippmann as an Anti-Democrat 1986-1996." *International Journal of Communication 2* (2008): 12.

[153] Schudson, "The 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate' and the Invention of Walter Lippmann as an Anti-Democrat 1986-1996." *International Journal of Communication 2* (2008): 12.

central and active role in participatory democracy, insisting that the appropriate metaphor for communication in society is hearing instead of seeing, or rather conversation, in lieu of transmission. Knowledge, he argued, is not imparted from above by a designated group of experts. It results, he wrote, from the collective experiences and exchange of ideas between all sectors of society, including the press and the public:

> "Logic in its fulfillment recurs to the primitive sense of the word: dialogue. Ideas which are not communicated, shared and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought.…[T]he cumulative and transmitted intellectual wealth of the community which may render nugatory the indictment of democracy drawn on the basis of the ignorance, bias and levity of the masses, can be fulfilled only in the relations of personal intercourse in the local community.[154]

While the majority of Lippmann and Dewey's texts are focused on the role of the public, Carey, like many subsequent media scholars, paid special attention to the role of the press in their respective visions of society. In Lippmann's view, according to Carey, "The newspaper serves its democratic function when it transmits [correct] representations to individual members of the public." For Dewey, Carey wrote, "News is not to be judged, in such a view, as a degenerate form of science trading in stereotypes but as the occasion of public discussion and action—another voice to be heard…The purpose of news is not to represent and inform, but to signal, tell a story, and activate inquiry."[155]

These two lines of thought have been formative to the field of media studies since they were first expressed 90 years ago, but Carey's particular take on the issue has proved especially significant. While Carey acknowledges that Dewey's vision of public life is "naïve because in retrospect he seems so innocent of the role of class, status and power in communication," he

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[154] Dewey, John, *The public and its problems: An essay in political inquiry.* Penn State Press, 2012, 160.
[155] Carey, 62.

concludes that "a critical theory of communication must affirm what is before our eyes and transcend it by imaging, at the very least, a world more desirable."[156] Most critically, he builds upon Dewey's articulation and rejection of the "transmission" view of communication to formulate his concept of the "ritual form of communication."

Under the long-dominant transmission view "communication was viewed as a process and a technology that would, sometimes for religious purposes, spread, transmit, and disseminate knowledge, ideas and information farther and faster."[157] This framework, implicit in Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" doctrine, has frequently been employed in the past to study the Internet and other changes in media and technology. A ritual view of communication, however, according to Carey, is directed not toward the "act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."[158] If the ritual theory derives its name from religion, he says, drawing on the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim,[159] the inspiration is that of the prayer, chant and ceremony, rather than the sermon or admonition.

For media scholars, the ritual view of communication alters the protagonist in the press-public relationship as well as the motivation. Under this theory, reading the daily newspaper, Carey famously wrote, is viewed less as "sending or gaining information and *more as attending a mass* [emphasis my own], a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one."[160] Implicit in the metaphor of the mass is not just the habitual nature of the act, but the collective experience it evokes. The daily routine of newspaper readership

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[156] Carey, 67.
[157] Carey, 14.
[158] Carey, 15.
[159] See Durkehim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. [1912]. na, 1912
[160] Carey, 16.

plays a societal function, but of greater interest is the conversation, fellowship, sharing, participation and association it engenders.[161] In this reading, participating in the daily mass of reading the newspaper is an act of sustaining community bonds and identity. It is this emotional and affective quality of news that social media, and particularly Facebook, so successfully engage, and that many media organizations are struggling to replicate, as I will examine in more depth in later chapters.

The ritualistic significance of media consumption, as opposed to merely informative, can be seen in scholarship conducted even before Carey articulated this affective relationship between the press and the public. In a classic study about a strike that halted newspaper delivery in the 1940s, sociologist Bernard Berelson showed that the local community's "ritualistic and near-compulsive" connection to their newspapers and distress over the strike was caused less by the loss of information and more to the disruption of their daily schedules and public discourse in the community. [162] The neighborhood felt unmoored by both the disturbance of the daily routine *and* the interruption of an important social rite—essentially chatting about the news with one's neighbors.

Since Carey, the ritual construct has been widely employed to look at what various aspects of media usage tell us about underlying social values. Just as the reading of the morning newspaper is akin to attending mass, watching the evening news, for example, "can be part of ritualistic transition of the work of the day to the leisure of the evening, or from a period of family separation into individual activities to a period of greater togetherness."[163] And years

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[161] Carey, 18.
[162] Berelson, "What missing the newspaper means." *Communications Research 1948-1949* (1949): 111-129. See also Bentley, Clyde H. "Make my day: Ritual, dependency and the habit of newspaper reading", Diss. University of Oregon, 2000, which revisits Berelson's study in the new media environment.
[163] Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: from Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, Sage Publications, Inc., 1998, 83.

before social media and the 24/7 news cycle, Carey wrote, "each medium imposes its own distinctive temporal order on its audience, it confirms the steady stream of ongoing reality… within a particular organization of time…'You give us twenty minutes and we'll give you the world.'"[164]

Another area of scholarship has emerged to look at the ritualistic customs around "media events"[165] that affirm and forge collective identity—ranging from the Olympics[166], to press conferences, State funerals, coronations, and royal weddings[167]-- as well as those that Carey summarizes as "explicit rituals of degradation and excommunication," like Supreme Court nominations and Senate hearings.[168] Other scholars have applied the ritual view of communication to topics like the formation of the contemporary Tea Party political movement[169] and the construct of selfhood in the digital space.[170] Most recently, researchers looking at the phenomenon of misinformation surrounding the 2016 election identified the ritualistic function of communication as being central to why people share so-called "fake news."[171] Distributing and publicly posting false information in this context is less about affirming its content, media

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[164] Carey, "Political ritual on television: Episodes in the history of shame, degradation and excommunication," *Media, ritual and identity* (1998): 44.
[165] See Dayan, Daniel, Elihu Katz, and Susan G. Davis. "Media events: The live broadcasting of history." Library Quarterly 63.1 (1993): 129-130.
[166] See Rothenbuhler, "Media Events, Civil Religion, and Social Solidarity: The Living Room Celebration of the Olympic Games." (1986): 2476-2476.
[167] See Rothenbuhler, *Ritual communication: From everyday conversation to mediated ceremony*.
[168] Carey, "Political ritual on television: Episodes in the history of shame, degradation and excommunication," 45.
[169] See Novak, Tim. Media, Ritual, and Identity: *A Critical Examination of the Tea Party Movement and the Battle over What It Means to Be an American*. Diss. The New School, 2013.
[170] See Sen, Biswarup. "Information as Ritual: James Carey in the Digital Age. *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies* (2016): 1532708615625687.
[171] Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan. "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making," 7.

scholar Judith Donath has claimed in a similar conclusion, and more about proclaiming "affinity with a particular community" as a "marker of identity."[172]

In a critical intervention, media scholar Nick Couldry, who popularized the term "media rituals"[173] in a book by the same name, signals Carey's inattention to the structures of power that define our mediated experiences. He insists that any ritual view of communication must examine how the "social world is 'mediated' through a media system that has very particular power effects, and how the actions and beliefs of all of us are caught up in this process."[174] Couldry goes on to dismantle the unifying thread of community running through Dewey, and some of Carey's work, and that he traces back to Durkheim's emphasis on religious ritual as a form of social integration. Declaring that he is "post-Durkheimian,"[175] Couldry dispels what he calls the "'myth of the mediated centre': the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks 'for' that centre. This myth underlies our orientation to television, radio and the press (and increasingly the Internet) as a social centre, and our acceptance of that centre's position inner lives as legitimate."[176]

Couldry's critique of this romanticized notion of social cohesion via a mediated center and the lack of attention to unequal power structures is a crucial one. However, his 2003 takedown of the ideal of a unified mediated center reads differently in 2018. In a post-Brexit, post- 2016 US presidential election reality, countries around the globe are desperately looking

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[172] Donath, Judith, "Why fake news stories thrive online," CNN, November 20, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/20/opinions/fake-news-stories-thrive-donath/
[173] Couldry defines media rituals as "formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests a connection with, wider media-related values," 59.
[174] Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, Psychology Press, 2003, 1-2.
[175] Couldry, 7.
[176] Couldry, 2.

for ways to keep increasingly polarized societies together and are questioning the implications of our fragmented media landscape. In this inquiry, I will be taking a different approach than Couldry, examining the way in which the media has historically and, perhaps, can still, create connection and community. Couldry's points remain valid and vital, but the current context and motivations has changed. The center, many of us are hoping, can still hold.

ii.   **Where was the center to begin with? Critiquing the Public Sphere**

Most discourse around polarization, the fragmented media landscape, and threats to democracy usually at some point invokes the pervasive, but elusive, concept of the "public sphere." Yet despite many recent think pieces to the contrary, the public sphere did not dissolve after the political events of 2016[177] but rather in the late 19th century, at least as it was originally imagined by the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,[178] Habermas defines the public sphere as a metaphorical space--but also physical (think cafes and public squares)—in which Western European citizens came together to discuss issues of "rational-critical" debate, which then formed notions of public opinion that could be fed into the government. He traces the origins of this place through history and explains the social, economic and political reasons for why it reached its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries and subsequently eroded. Throughout this analysis, the press plays a critical role. While Habermas views the growth of the press as crucial to the formation of the public sphere--thereby inserting journalism into the realm of political

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[177] While the debate around the erosion of the public sphere has picked up steam in light of recent political events, scholar Todd Gitlin wrote in an essay published as far back as 1998 that "the public sphere is agreed that the public sphere is in trouble." See Gitlin, "Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?", *Media, ritual and identity*, 168.
[178] The book was not translated into English until 1989.

theory--he sees its commercialization during the period in which capitalism consolidates and is

ascendant as central to the downfall of the public sphere's era:

> The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only[179]…
> Whereas formerly the press was able to limit itself to the transmission and amplification
> of the rational-critical debate of private people assembled into a public, now conversely
> this debate gets shaped by the mass media to begin with. In the course of the shift from a
> journalism of private men of letters to the public services of the mass media, the sphere
> of the public was altered by the influx of private interests that received privileged
> exposure in it--although they were by no means representative *eo ipso* of the interests of
> private people *as* the public.[180]

Habermas's critique of the corrupting commercialization of the media is still resonant.[181]

Other aspects of his argument have been rightfully interrogated. Media scholar Michael

Schudson, for one, sees scant evidence that this period of "rational-critical discourse" and wide

participation in public affairs in that time period, if it did truly exist in Europe, ever made its way

to America.[182] A persistent line of criticism has been the question of who exactly had the right to

be part of this mythologized public sphere (essentially white, male literate property holders, a

fact acknowledged in the text by Habermas himself). In her essay, "Rethinking the Public

Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," critical theorist Nancy

Fraser argues that "subaltern counterpublics" have long existed and that "an adequate conception

of the public sphere requires not merely the bracketing, but rather the elimination, of social

inequality… [and] a multiplicity of publics is preferable to a single public sphere both in

stratified societies and egalitarian societies."[183] Expanding upon Fraser for her own conception of

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[179] Habermas, Jürgen. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society.* MIT press, 1991, 171.
[180] Habermas, 188-89.
[181] Michael Schudson argues Habermas downplays the fact that this period of commercialization results in the simultaneous professionalization of journalism. See Schudson, *The sociology of news*, 2nd, 62.
[182] Schudson, *The Power of News*, Harvard University Press, 1995, 192.
[183] Fraser, Nancy, "Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy," *Social text* 25/26 (1990), 77.

alternative public spheres, Catherine Squires discusses how these closed off groups can be important spaces for marginalized groups to safely discuss and exchange their own ideas without fear of interference or being silenced by more dominant voices.[184]

The ideal metaphor is probably less one of a single, hegemonic sphere, and rather that of many overlapping, concentric circles. It is certainly not my intention to wax nostalgic for an era in which the tenor and content of conversation was controlled by white men or to dismiss the importance of alternative spaces of conversation for marginalized groups. But nonetheless, the original concept has proven to be a sturdy and useful one and continues to evoke the image, as Fraser articulates it, of a "theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk."[185] Thus any references to a public sphere in this text will be as a generic framework or notion of a metaphorical space where all citizens can learn about and debate issues important to daily and civic life.

The role of the press has been cited as critical in other foundational texts about societal cohesion and community. In his celebrated book about the theoretical and historical origins of the concept of nationalism, Benedict Anderson explained how the invention of the novel and the newspaper "provided the technical means for "re-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation."[186] As Schudson explains, Anderson's "community" moves beyond Habermas's conception of a "public" to focus on shared identity and fellowship (in the vein of Carey's ritual theory) rather than just the exchange of ideas. In this interpretation, news is not

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[184] Squires, Catherine R. "Rethinking the black public sphere: An alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres." *Communication theory* 12.4 (2002): 446-468.
[185] Fraser, 57.
[186] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* Verso Books, 2006, 25.

merely the "raw material for rational public discourse but as the public construction of particular images of self, community and nation."[187]

Beyond serving as a platform for transmitting collective narratives, Anderson identified the ritualistic role of media consumption as vital to the collective act of imagination that allows dispersed countrymen and women to identify with one another. With rich literary detail Anderson evoked the idiosyncratic pleasures of newspaper reading and its wider significance:

> The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing…this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction. We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that. (Contrast sugar, the use of which proceeds in an unclocked, continuous flow; it may go bad, but it does not go out of date.) The significance of this mad ceremony— Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers— is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life."[188]

The mass media is also crucial in creating the "consensus narratives" that serve as a basic foundation upon which to build civic life.[189] The very editorial conventions and quirks with which the news is communicated, the ritualistic performance of "news as a narrative genre," is important in and of itself as a form of building "public culture," according to scholar David

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[187] Schudson, *The Sociology of News,* 2nd, 61-62.
[188] Anderson, 35-36.
[189] See Roger Silverstone's explanation of "consensus narratives" in literature: "Its 'assignment'--so to say—is to articulate the culture's central mythologies, in a wide accessible 'language,' an inheritance of shared stories, plots character types." Silverstone, Roger. "Television myth and culture." *Media, Myths and Narratives, Television and the Press. Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research* 15 (1988), 47. For a similar take, see Alexander, Jeffrey C., and Ronald N. Jacobs. "Mass communication, ritual and civil society," *Media, ritual and identity (1998)*, 23-28.

Chaney.[190] In explaining the significance of considering news as narrative, Elizabeth Bird and

Robert W. Dardenne emphasize that while the facts and names that make up the news change on

a daily basis, "the framework into which they fit—the symbolic system— is more enduring. And

it could be argued that the totality of news as an enduring symbolic system "teaches" audiences

more than any of its component parts."[191] [192]

In the current climate, however, very few people seem to agree on what constitutes the

consensus narrative of this historical moment.[193] Writers across disciplines have been sounding

the alarm about the societal impact of rising polarization in the US, online and off, for some

time. In 2008, sociologist Bill Bishop used presidential elections results to make the case in his

book *The big short: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart*, that over the

course of the past 50 years American society had geographically rearranged itself along mostly

ideological lines. This decision to only live among like-minded people had the effect, he argued,

of exacerbating divisions and increasing polarization.[194] At roughly the same time Cass Sunstein

warned, in his book *Republic.com 2.0*, that the infrastructure and characteristics of the Internet

were having a similar effect online, resulting in isolated echo chambers that imperil civic

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[190] Chaney, David C. *Fictions of collective life: Public drama in late modern culture*. Routledge, 1993, 138.
[191] Bird, S. Elizabeth, and Robert W. Dardenne. "Myth, chronicle and story." *Social meanings of news: A text-reader* (1997), 69.
[192] While it is not the focus of my research, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky famously argued that the commercial values of the U.S. mass communication system dictate that the media serves a propagandistic function, and that part of the didactic role of the media towards the public is to "manufacture consent." See Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Random House, 2010
[193] While I am focusing on the current political climate, the end of a belief in "metanarratives" was identified as being central to "the Postmodern condition," in Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 book of the same name
[194] Bishop, *The big short: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart*

discourse.[195][196] Several years later, in *Digital Cosmopolitans: Why we think the internet connects us, why it doesn't, and how to rewire it*, Ethan Zuckerman explained how while technology allows us access to more information and to communicate more widely, it does not guarantee contact with a greater diversity of perspectives or ideas.[197]

Now, in 2018, the fear that the repercussions of that isolation are a risk to democracy has reached a fever pitch. Despite a flurry of research in this area in the past year and a half, it is critical to note that this field is nascent, ongoing and results are far from definitive (and, in fact, often contradictory). One recent study noted that there is not yet even a consensus on the terms of the debate, with no commonly agreed-upon criteria for what defines an online political conversation or echo chamber.[198] Research from various groups at the MIT Media Lab and Harvard Berkman Klein Center of social media data and mainstream media coverage suggests the polarization of the media ecosystem may be asymmetrical. The researchers found evidence that in the lead-up to the 2016 election, conservative online conversation and media consumption was more insular and removed from the center than that of liberals.[199]

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[195] Sunstein, Cass, R. *Republic. com 2.0.* (2007).

[196] In his 2006 book *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yochai Benkler argued that the growing concentration of attention on the Internet to a selection of dominant voices/platforms (this is the early days of social media but he speaks of Google), was the real threat to the public sphere, rather than Sunstein's vision of echo chambers and ensuing polarization. That is to say he feared the Internet would come to resemble the offline mass media market, rather than a new world of Internet-enabled, fractured filter bubbles; that there would be fewer and less diverse voices, rather than too many, competing for attention. See Benkler, Yochai. *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom.* Yale University Press, 2006. http://www.benkler.org/Benkler_Wealth_Of_Networks.pdf , 232-241.

[197] Zuckerman, Ethan. *Digital cosmopolitans: Why we think the internet connects us, why it doesn't, and how to rewire it.* WW Norton & Company, 2013

[198] Tucker, Joshua A. et al, "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," 55.

[199] Faris, Robert M., Hal Roberts, Bruce Etling, Nikki Bourassa, Ethan Zuckerman, and Yochai Benkler. 2017. Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Research Paper, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33759251;

Regardless, an affective perception of societal malaise, if not yet conclusive scientific results, suggest an ever more acute fear that, in journalist Megan Garber's words, "the notion of a master narrative itself—the communal melody that, even in its exclusivity, also binds us together in its tunes and tones—is slowly dissolving into white noise."[200]

The fear that society is losing is that "communal melody" runs the risk of being construed as a critique of the democratization of information or the importance and boon to society of having access to previously ignored voices. Like with the slippery notion of a public sphere or Dewey's romanticized vision of a "Great Community", any invocation of "consensus" or "cohesion" in the 21st century will rightfully be suspect as regards to which groups are excluded from the collective vision, namely already marginalized communities. The existing backlash to this vision has dubbed it cluelessly nostalgic at best—what media scholar Jeff Jarvis called the "Cronkite-era myth of mass media"—to downright discriminatory at worst.[201] While I think it is safe to assume that the story of a historical perfect public sphere where all were welcome and everyone shared the same reality is apocryphal, there is validity to the desire to have people from different groups in discussion with one another and in agreement on a core basis of understanding. More and diverse voices are needed—but ideally they need to be speaking to one another. In 2006, Internet and legal scholar Yochai Benkler argued that the networked public sphere not only allows for a broader intake of voices and subjects than the commercialized mass media, but it also opens up the space for participation and debate so that "statements in the public

Thompson, Alex, "Parallel narratives: Clinton and Trump supporters really don't listen to each other on Twitter, *Vice News*, December 8, 2016, https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/d3xamx/journalists-and-trump-voters-live-in-separate-online-bubbles-mit-analysis-shows

[200] Garber, Megan, "Common Knowledge: Communal News in a Fragmented World," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 8, 2009 http://archives.cjr.org/the_news_frontier/common_knowledge.php

[201] Jarvis, Jeff, "Death to the Mass(es)!", *Buzz Machine*, December 29 2017, https://buzzmachine.com/2017/12/29/death-to-the-masses/

sphere can now be seen as invitations for a conversation, not as finished goods."[202] The question

now is who is participating in which conversation and do they ever overlap?

That possibility for broader discourse, these scholars have noted, is being eroded by the

fragmentation of information in our media landscape. As Garber suggests, rather optimistically,

"In learning about our fellow citizens, we come to see their lives as they are: inextricably linked

to ours. News begets empathy—and, in that, social capital." Citing the work of sociologist and

journalism scholar Todd Gitlin by way of Habermas she quotes:

> Perhaps the great genius of the newspaper was not simply in the invention of reporting
> but in the paper's ability to serve as the great aggregator, so that something of a public
> sliver or even a polygon if not a sphere was created by the sum of all papers, as incidental
> readers accumulated into functional publics.

Looking at the history of the press in the formation of the United States she concludes:

> Mediated knowledge, in other words, united the country. Not by whitewashing
> differences among its consumers, but rather by giving those consumers a baseline of
> shared information and discourse that, eventually, transformed an awkward amalgam of
> loosely connected states—the experiment—into the United States. The nation.[203]

The Internet and digital spaces, as has been repeatedly noted, have replaced the mythical café as

the public sphere of our time. But increasingly, it appears, these are really many different public

spheres that are not engaging in "rational-critical" discourse with one another. While Dewey's

idealistic vision of a "Great Community" may have always been out of reach, we are now losing

the shared information that serves as the basis for the conversation that to him was equally

crucial. In both Habermas and Dewey's writing, according to media scholar Peter Dahlgren, the

public "exists as discursive interactional processes." Carey himself believed that a public is a

[202] Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, 180.
[203] Garber, "Common Knowledge: Communal News in a Fragmented World."

"group of strangers that gathers to discuss the news."[204] "Atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes," Dahlgren cautions, "do not comprise a public."[205] Or, as Gitlin asked 20 years ago:

> Does Democracy require a *public* or *publics*? A public sphere or separate public sphericules?...What is not clear is that the proliferation and lubrication of publics contributes to the creation of *a* public—an active democratic encounter of citizens who reach across their social and ideological differences to establish a common agenda of concern and to debate rival approaches.
>
> If it be argued that a single public sphere is unnecessary as long as segments constitute their own deliberative assemblies, such an arrangement presumes a rough equivalence of resources for the purpose of assuring overall justice. It also presupposes that the society is not riven by deep-going fissures which are subject to being deepened and exacerbated in the absence of ongoing negotiation among members of different groups. In current conditions… I think these assumptions are unwarranted—even foolhardy.
>
> To put the matter crudely, then: I suspect that we continue to travel away from the public square, circling and circling in centrifugal motion.[206]

The changing models and manifestations of what we consider to be the public sphere reflect the realities and needs of the given historical moment. Ethan Zuckerman, citing research by Paul Starr,[207] has argued that while coffee houses may have been well suited to facilitate the emerging power and organization of the bourgeoisie in monarchical Europe, the founding of the United States required a different forum for civic participation. The 18th Century Post Office Act and earlier policy by Benjamin Franklin that allowed newspapers to be mailed cheaply across the colonies was crucial in forming what in the United States would become a "distributed public sphere of newspapers and letters. For a nation that spanned the distance between Boston and

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[204] Carey, James. "The press, public opinion, and public discourse." Public opinion and the communication of consent (1995): 373-402.

[205] Dahlgren, Peter. "The public sphere: Linking the media and civic cultures." in Rothenbuhler, Eric W., *Media anthropology*. Sage Publications, 2005, 321.

[206] Gitlin, "Public sphere or public sphericules?," 173.

[207] Starr, Paul. *The creation of the media: Political origins of modern communication*. Basic Books, Inc., 2005.

Charleston," Zuckerman writes, "a virtual, asynchronous public sphere mediated by print made more sense that one that centered around physical coffee houses."[208] The decentralized composition[209] of the digital public sphere of the 21st century mirrors the era of globalization. And the "theory of the interlocking public" argues society is made up of several different, rather than one monolithic, public, each with its own interests and areas of expertise. Rather than portraying a dichotomy between the informed and uninformed, these diverse publics, and the dispersed media that informs them, indirectly aggregate their distinct areas of knowledge, resulting in a wiser society.[210]

But if the algorithmic architecture of today's digital public sphere invisibly enables and potentially accentuates our human inclination towards homophily,[211] the question becomes how to encourage diverse communities to "discuss and debate," as Donath writes, "to choose not to build walls against the Other, but to engage and persuade."[212] Discourse among citizens, as Dewey insisted, is critical as a form of civic engagement and stepping stone to civic participation, and discourse among citizens of diverse opinions and backgrounds, is necessary for the mutual understanding and collective vision that keeps societies together.

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[208] Zuckerman, Ethan, "Ben Franklin, the post office and the digital public sphere," My heart's in Accra, February 26, 2016, http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2016/02/26/ben-franklin-the-post-office-and-the-digital-public-sphere/

[209] As previously noted, the Internet has become increasingly consolidated in the last decade with the rise of conglomerates like Google, Facebook etc., but Yochai Benkler warned of this incipient centralization of gathering spaces and corporate power as far back as 2006. See Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, 232-241.

[210] See the "Theory of the interlocking public," American Press Institute, https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/theory-interlocking-public/, which draws upon Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel, *The elements of journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect*. Three Rivers Press (CA), 2014, 24-25.

[211] Zuckerman, "Ben Franklin, the post office and the digital public sphere."

[212] Donath, Judith, "Why fake news stories thrive online," CNN, November 20, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/20/opinions/fake-news-stories-thrive-donath/

iii.   Localizing the public sphere

Central to Dewey's vision of a "Great Community" was a, perhaps naïve, vision of local communal life in an era in which rural populations were significantly bigger. "Unless local communal life can be restored," he counseled, "the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself."[213] This renewed local life, he wrote, would have to be more varied, flexible and less isolated.

In the networked age, however, the concept of community can be traced along multiple lines of fellowship, affect and shared interests that are no longer inherently tied to geographic proximity.[214] Earlier, more optimistic, analysis celebrated the Internet as the ultimate realization of McLuhan's vision of the "global village." Scholars excavated all the ways in which it has brought people together[215] and allowed them to explore other identities[216] in ways they could not in offline, traditional communities. People could now connect in "individualized and flexible social networks" rather than in "fixed and grounded groups."[217] Media scholar Henry Jenkins in particular describes how the convening and participatory culture facilitated by the Internet has encouraged and enabled the formation of online societies, often around matters of popular culture, that create their own interventions in cultural and grassroots political activity.[218]

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[213] Dewey, 159.

[214] Rheingold, Howard. *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. MIT press, 2000.

[215] See Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*.

[216] See Turkle, Sherry, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Simon and Schuster, 2011.

[217] Wellman, Barry, "Connecting Communities: on and offline," 22.

[218] See Jenkins, *By any media necessary: The new youth activism*; "Superpowers to the People! How Young Activists Are Tapping the Civic Imagination in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge, 2012.

But later analysis of the Internet and online communities questioned whether all this digital interaction and communication was really causing more, rather than less, alienation.[219] And putting aside any value-based judgement of online relationships, has the physical and political notion of the 'local' really been fully superseded by digitally enabled communities of affect or interest? My argument is that everything we have learned from recent worldwide political events both here in the US and across the globe, including the rise of a specific form of populism tied to the rejection of globalization and multiculturalism, is that it has not. As important as studies of online disinformation and algorithmic filtering are, I believe we ignore communities of place at our own peril.

Katherine J. Cramer makes a similar case in *The politics of resentment: rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*, her 2016 book about the growing urban-rural divide. The "rural consciousness" that she explores in Wisconsin, she writes, is an "identity rooted in place and class…Place matters because it functions as a lens through which people interpret politics."[220] I would argue that place colors our perspective of the world beyond merely the realm of politics to include a broader notion of culture and identity. Media scholar Christopher Ali, in his book *Media Localism: Policies of Place*, similarly makes the case that local media tied to a community of place is still necessary for a healthy democracy, even as the traditional means of consuming that media, particularly in his case, broadcast, have changed.

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[219] See Turkle, Sherry, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, Hachette UK, 2017.

[220] Cramer, Katherine J. *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walke*r. University of Chicago Press, 2016, 12. Interestingly, Cramer concludes from a study she does of local newspapers that the "politics of resentment" that dominates the conversations of the residents with whom she speaks is not directly reflected in local news coverage (106-110). From this conclusion Cramer extrapolates that "some aspects of public opinion are not directly absorbed from mass media but, rather, are cultivated through good old-fashioned face-to-face socialization "(109).

If the local as a geographic designation is then still meaningful as a marker of identity and community, I argue that Carey's conception of ritualized communication and media consumption and Dewey's call for a society with more active conversation between citizens, the press and the government is most manifest at the local level. Hyper-local media (the success of the high school sports team, coverage of church events etc.) is as much about building community as it is strictly providing information. It is also where opportunities for interaction between those providing the news and those consuming it can be greatest—think of the clichéd anecdote of the local newspaper editor getting harangued by his neighbor for an unpopular stance at the supermarket. And the conversation it generates, the routine and ritualistic conversations about goings-on at the gas station, strengthens the network of community that builds the platform of trust upon which more pointed civic discourse can occur.[221] This hypothesis is supported by findings of the previously mentioned study that conducted six focus groups in three cities about online local news consumption. The participants, according to the study, continued to rely heavily on "interpersonal networks" as the "hub of connection and distribution of [local] information for community members." And this exchange of local news through interpersonal networks, in a manner familiar to any reader of James Carey and ritual theory, was a central element to the simple neighborhood goings-on that make up community life: "daily activities such as walking the dog or getting coffee [were cited] as times to interact with neighbors and thus exchange information."[222]

While the study is limited in scope, the stress on interpersonal, face-to-face networks is notable, for it is exactly this connective ritual function that social media (and mostly Facebook)

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[221] Comments from Thesis Advisor William Uricchio, 12/17.

[222] McCollough, et al., "Portrait of the online local news audience," 111.

has so successfully mastered in the digital realm. In the context of my theoretical framework, it is the confusion between the ritual and transmission functions on social media—Does a personal Facebook status constitute news? Do people share "fake news" out of conviction for its truthfulness or as a marker of identity?—that has become such an issue of contemporary debate. The argument for why Facebook's algorithmic and individually-tailored filtering has wreaked havoc on the transmission model of news has been widely made elsewhere and earlier in this chapter—the world of polarized filter bubbles, misinformation, unverified user-generated content etc. On the ritual side, however, social media has excelled at facilitating communities of affect and interest. For certain purposes, it can serve local communities of place looking for information or conversation in the form of curated Facebook pages or other online neighborhood platforms, like the Front Porch Forum in Vermont.[223] But these spaces are no replacement for professional news organizations, at any scale, for the kind of information citizens need to stay civically engaged. And while social media has served well as a place in which people can "ritualistically" interact with one another about the news, I would argue the digital realm ideally works in tandem with the physical. The decline of local media outlets has coincided with the disappearance of many of the public places—parks, libraries, schools—that similarly shaped and forged local life. I think it is no coincidence that a new wave of hyperlocal news experiments, which are described in the following chapter, emphasize public events and opportunities for gathering.

    iv.   **In summary, media theory and the role of news in everyday life**

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[223] See https://frontporchforum.com/about-us

Building on the supposition of Robert Park (a student of Dewey) that "the function of news is to orient man and society in an actual world,"[224] fellow sociologist Morris Janowitz suggested in the 1950s that that role is felt particularly acutely at the local level, where the media shapes how local communities forge their identities. "The imagery of the community newspaper in the mind of its readers, which is built on and in turn contributes to local social solidarity," he wrote, "is a significant underlying element in accounting for its impact."[225] These local identities then feed into the larger national project much like Russian nesting dolls, or in this case, nesting public spheres.[226]

In the current climate explored in the previous chapter, in which the news industry is fighting for economic survival, what happens to these local public spheres when the local media ecosystem collapses? And what implications does their loss hold for the nation? I have framed my argument for the centrality of local news to democracy within a decades-old, dual theoretical framework because I find it useful as a way in which to talk about the different roles local journalism plays in society. My research, and particularly my later case study, focuses on news organizations and the practice of journalism, but implicit to my perspective is the service they fulfill to the public. Media scholars like Michael Schudson have articulated as many as seven "things news can do for democracy,"[227] but in my vision for this text these purposes can be distilled to two broad categories. The first is to inform the public about events of public interest so that they are able to hold the powerful accountable, be civically engaged and take political action—all of which I include in my more expansive understanding of the aims of the

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[224] Park, Robert E. "News as a Form of Knowledge: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge." *American Journal of Sociology* 45.5 (1940), 685.
[225] Janowitz, The Imagery of the Urban Community Press 1." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15.3 (1951), 606.
[226] Campbell, Cole C. "Journalism and public knowledge." *National Civic Review* 93.3 (2004), 5.
[227] Schudson, *Why democracies need an unlovable press*, 12.

"transmission role." The second is as the vehicle through which a community comes to know itself, shapes its identity and is woven together--the "ritual" function of media. At a moment in which national politics and culture have become so stagnant and polarized, I see local news as critical for both keeping citizens informed and engaged about civic matters in which they might be able to make a concrete difference, as well as a form of keeping communities together.

Media has drastically changed in the decades since these theories were shaped and the traditional broadcast model of production, distribution and reception of the news has been fundamentally altered. The role of citizens in creating their own media and asserting agency over the circulation of news, a model Zuckerman has likened to "feedback loops,"[228] has created a profound shift that is rightfully the focus of much recent and ongoing research. But while the model of the ecosystem has changed, my argument is that the democratic and societal purpose has not, an area in which these 20th century theories are still quite relevant.

In this vein, while the language is different, I believe this theoretical framing is the invisible scaffolding that is underneath, consciously or not, much of the current funding impetus around community-focused media, trust and polarization. Keeping this framework in mind, in the following chapter I will look more closely at some of the interventions and initiatives that are attempting to revive, or at least maintain, the industry, and particularly those that emphasize a community-oriented approach.

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[228] Zuckerman, Ethan, "Four problems for news and democracy," Medium, April 1, 2018, https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/we-know-the-news-is-in-crisis-5d1c4fbf7691

Chapter 3: Where to from here?

i. Experimenting with revenue models and seeing what sticks

As news professionals and companies struggle to adapt to this changing media landscape,

multiple industries, think tanks, conferences, dedicated groups and studies have emerged to

search for ways to save the industry at the national and local level. News outlets across media

forms have fought their way into the digital space with varying degrees of success. In a 2018

report by the Local Media Association, according to Poynter, a media executive compared

attempts at digital transformation to "mowing the yard when the house is on fire."[229]

Yet the Internet has seen a flourishing of independent, digital native local news sites, like

the more than 150 members in 37 states that make the industry association group LION

Publishers.[230] Successful examples include *Berkeleyside*, an online news site that covers the city

of Berkeley, California. The site has won a number of journalism awards, including recognition

from the Society of Professional Journalists Northern California chapter for its coverage of

homelessness in Berkeley, and is supported by readers and advertising.[231]

Despite the challenges and continuing technological transformation of the ecosystem, the

print and online industry continue their quest towards a model of financial sustainability that

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[229] Hare, Kristen, "Report: Efforts at digital transformation feel 'like mowing the yard when the house is on fire,'" Poynter, February 5, 2018, https://www.poynter.org/news/report-efforts-digital-transformation-feel-mowing-yard-when-house-fire

[230] DeRienzo, Matt, "In many communities, best local journalism is not coming from print," Medium, April 17, 2017, https://medium.com/lion-publishers/in-many-communities-best-local-journalism-is-not-coming-from-print-9abf4f5fe07f

[231] See http://www.berkeleyside.com/about-berkeleyside

doesn't rely on advertising revenue. This has included testing subscription models,[232] hard and soft paywalls, micropayments, memberships,[233] digital commerce, events, branding and merchandise. In April 2018, Google launched with the newspaper chain McClatchy "Subscribe with Google," a tool meant to simplify the subscription process by allowing people to sign up through a two-step process with their Google accounts.[234] Big companies have experimented with mobile-oriented outlets (Gannett's Spirited Media Company) and an umbrella organization that operates hundreds of local and hyperlocal news websites (AOL's newly profitable Patch). Tech-inspired entrepreneurs have tried any number of innovative approaches including using artificial intelligence,[235] blockchain,[236] concise explainers for election ballots,[237] and various iterations of quirky online news sites.[238]

A new class of media moguls has emerged dubbed the "benign billionaires" (and those not so benign) who have bought money-losing local newspapers in places like Boston and Los Angeles, either out of a sense of civic obligation, quest for power and influence, or some

[232] Manjoo, Farhad, "A Crazy Idea for Funding Local News: Charge People for It," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/technology/funding-local-news-charge-people-money.html

[233] Rosen, Jay, "Introducing Join the Beat, a force multiplier for beat reporting," Membership Puzzle, March 7, 2018, https://membershippuzzle.org/articles-overview/join-the-beat-h3n28

[234] Moses, Lucia, "Google rolls out new subscription tool with McClatchy newspaper sites," Digiday, April 24, 2018, https://digiday.com/media/google-rolls-new-subscription-tool-mcclatchy-newspaper-sites/

[235] Keohane, Joe, "What news-writing bots mean for the future of journalism, *Wired,* February 16, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/02/robots-wrote-this-story/

[236] Schmidt, Christine, "DNAinfo Chicago will be reborn as Block Club Chicago, relying on blockchain and subscriptions instead of billionaires," Nieman Lab, February 8, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/02/dnainfo-chicago-will-be-reborn-as-block-club-chicago-relying-on-blockchain-and-subscriptions-instead-of-billionaires/

[237] Wang, Shan, "This site explains local issues to people who fell guilty they don't know them well," Nieman Lab, March 12, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/03/this-site-explains-local-issues-to-people-who-feel-guilty-they-dont-know-them-well/

[238] Schmidt, Christine, "Live life like a local: Whereby.Us adds two more cities to its growing roster," Nieman Lab, March 19, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/03/live-life-like-a-local-whereby-us-adds-two-more-cities-to-its-growing-roster

combination of the two.[239] In Western Massachusetts, local owners bought the *Berkshire Eagle*

back from loathed Digital First Media, though the long-term sustainability of the move remains

to be seen.[240] A consortium of public radio stations, including WNYC in New York, WAMU in

Washington DC, and KPCC in Southern California, banded together to save *The Gothamist*, a

network of local news websites in eight cities, after its billionaire owner abruptly shut down the

site in November 2017 in the wake of a staff vote to unionize. Its sister site, DNAinfo, which did

more original reporting, unfortunately is not to be revived.[241] This last example partially

illustrates what has been the most transformative move for local news, which has been to

embrace the non-profit sector.

ii.   Non-profits shape the field

As mentioned in previous chapters, many journalists are looking at the nonprofit model—

both financial support from foundations and as the operating structure of news outlets

themselves—as the most viable path to sustainability. Some of the most successful non-profit

media outlet ventures to date, like *ProPublica* at the national level and the *Texas Tribune* at the

state level, have lured major journalistic talent to their newsrooms and succeeded with big

scoops and deep investigative reporting. Following their example--as well as that of the *Voice of*

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[239] See Kennedy, Dan. *The Return of the Moguls: How Jeff Bezos and John Henry Are Remaking Newspapers for the Twenty-First Century*, University Press of New England, 2018 and Arango, Tim, and Ember, Sydney, "L.A. Times's new owner plans big moves. First up, relocating to the suburbs," *The New York Times,* April 13, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/us/los-angeles-times-patrick-soon-shiong.html

[240] Wang, Shan, "Local owners bought this newspaper back from a cost-cutting national chain. Next step: Bringing back the readers," Nieman Lab, January 29, 2018, http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/01/local-owners-bought-this-newspaper-back-from-a-cost-cutting-national-chain-next-step-bringing-back-the-readers/

[241] Bilton, Ricardo, "Here are a few details about WNYC's Gothamist revival (and one big question)," Nieman Lab, February 26, 2018 http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/02/here-are-a-few-details-about-wnycs-gothamist-revival-and-one-big-question/

San Diego, the first, and widely admired, local digital news nonprofit--dozens, if not hundreds, of nonprofit news sites have emerged across the country focusing on local or thematic issues. Nonprofit news has been particularly critical in filling the void of accountability journalism created by newsroom budget cuts and layoffs.

The Connecticut Health Investigative Team [C-HIT], for example, produces in-depth journalism on issues of health and safety in Connecticut, including healthcare issues faced by veterans. A kickstarter campaign by journalists and editors formerly of *DNAinfo Chicago* to start a forthcoming nonprofit neighborhood news site called *Block Club Chicago* in February 2018 raised nearly $184,000. Sustained reporting by *VTdigger*, an investigative news website in Vermont, led to fraud charges against one of the state's most important businessmen.[242] Thanks to its rigorous reporting, as well as savvy business and resource decisions and strategic expansion efforts, "in the second least populous state in the country, *VTDigger* is averaging nearly 300,000 monthly users, has a staff of 19 full-time employees and an annual budget over $1.5 million," according to a recent case study.[243]

Philanthropic foundations have been playing an active role in the field as supporters for over a decade. Dedicated journalism foundations, like those of Knight and MacArthur, as well as a growing number of family and other industry foundations, have funded both research and training around adaptation to the digital age and innovation, as well as supporting many local media ventures. The Knight Foundation's Media Innovation Initiative, in particular, pledged $100 million in 2008 to fund "new ways to meet community information needs in the digital

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[242] Huseman, Jessica, "The Breakthrough: How a small news outlet brought down the state hero," *ProPublica,* August 11, 2017, https://www.propublica.org/podcast/the-breakthrough-how-a-small-news-outlet-brought-down-the-state-hero
[243] Griggs, Tim, "VTDigger: A rising star in nonprofit news," Institute for Nonprofit News, May 21, 2018, https://inn.org/2018/05/vtdigger-a-rising-star-in-nonprofit-news/

age."[244] That fund has supported a variety of projects, ranging from the MIT Center for Civic Media to recent research about the current state and digital future of local TV news.[245]

Foundations have also played a critical role in supporting the decade-long wave of journalistic collaboration that has flourished as nearly every major news organization has decided that the realities of resource scarcity and the needs of big data journalism require an "all hands on deck" philosophy.[246] To give one example, "Electionland," which has been billed as the largest ever collaborative journalism project, was supported by a number of entities including journalism schools, the Craig Newmark Foundation and the Google News Lab. The project partnered hundreds of local newsrooms across the country with national heavy weights like *ProPublica* and CNN to cover voter problems during the 2016 election. Collaboration between newsrooms has become so pervasive that the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University was formed with support from Knight, Democracy Fund and The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and has been compiling an extensive database of collaborative journalism projects from around the world.[247]

Jennifer Preston of Knight explained in an interview how their funding has shifted and evolved over time from supporting local journalism education, to innovation and sustainability, and now includes research projects on topics like media, trust and democracy. The Democracy Fund, a newer foundation established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, uses data visualizations like "systems mapping," to trace the "intersecting forces that shape the markets, missions, and

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[244] "Primer on new Knight Foundation Media Innovation Initiatives," Knight Foundation, June 27, 2008, https://knightfoundation.org/articles/primer-on-new-knight-foundation-media-innovation-initiatives

[245] "Local TV news and the new media landscape," Knight Foundation

[246] See this report from the Center for Cooperative Media to learn more about collaborative journalism. The center is currently creating a comprehensive database with information about collaborative journalism projects from around the world.

[247] Rafsky, Sara, "Collaborative journalism sidebar," Forthcoming co-creation report for the MIT Open Documentary Lab

practices of those providing news to inform participation and democratic decision-making in cities and states."[248]

These funders have also pooled resources to fund the creation of industry bodies like the Institute for Nonprofit News, an organization of more than 100 North American nonprofit media groups that shares best practices and enables collaboration. More recently, they have financed sweeping initiatives meant to cover the voids and reporting gaps in the local media ecosystem. In October 2017, to give one example, the Knight Foundation and The Lensfest Institute for Journalism announced $4.8 million in new funding to expand a project that helps advance digital transformation at local news organizations across the country.[249] In April, 2018 Knight announced another $500,000 grant to launch "Reveal Local Labs," in which the Center for Investigative Reporting would "foster local news collaborations and advance community-focused, in-depth, investigative storytelling."[250] The prestigious Nieman Fellowship for journalists at Harvard University also announced in late 2017 the creation of an additional fellowship specifically for local investigative journalism. Since 2010, a network of public and philanthropic funders has been supporting Localore: Finding America, an independent public media venture that embeds skilled producers with public radio and television stations working on innovative projects across the U.S.[251]

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[248] See https://www.democracyfund.org/local-news-participation
[249] See here for more information https://knightfoundation.org/press/releases/digital-transformation-of-local-news-organizations-focus-of-new-4-8-million-investment-from-knight-foundation-and-the-lenfest-institute-for-journalism

[250] "The Center for Investigative Reporting to launch local news collaboration initiative in U.S. cities with $500,000 from Knight Foundation," Knight Foundation, April 25, 2018, https://www.knightfoundation.org/press/releases/the-center-for-investigative-reporting-to-launch-local-news-collaboration-initiative-in-u-s-cities-with-500-000-from-knight-foundation
[251] See https://findingamerica.airmedia.org/about/mission/

Relying solely on philanthropic support, however, entails its own set of complications. It can be challenging for news organization to work towards a goal of financial sustainability while also satisfying the requirements of philanthropic operations that measure "impact" and "outputs." As was sometimes feared with commercial advertisers and investors, media outlets run the risk of shaping their news agenda not to the needs of the public or their own judgement, but rather that of individual funders' priorities. And while funders may elect to provide seed money to news ventures, or fund certain reporting projects, that does not ensure sustainability when funding patterns and trends change.[252] This is particularly true of the current moment, in which the political climate has made news "fashionable" in philanthropic circles where it wasn't previously funded. The resulting gold rush likely won't last forever. Moreover, nonprofit support can't guarantee immunity from the realities of the industry. Even after the announcement of one million dollars in grants from its nonprofit owner, the Lensfest Institute, the Philadelphia Media Network faced a round of buyouts that outpaced new hires in October 2017.[253]

iii.   The Community Engagement model[254]

Following the philosophy of the networked age, many media outlets, both non and for profit, have decided they must be interactive and collaborative to thrive. The concept of "engagement" in newsrooms was long associated with a commercially-oriented, analytics and

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[252] Benson, Rodney. "Can foundations solve the journalism crisis?." *Journalism* (2017): 1464884917724612.

[253] Hare, Kristen, "In Philadelphia, buyout offers show digital transformation is still a bloody business," Poynter, October 13, 2017, https://www.poynter.org/news/philadelphia-buyout-offers-show-digital-transformation-still-bloody-business

[254] Portions of the following section will be found in Rafsky, Sara, "Collaborative journalism sidebar," Forthcoming co-creation report for the MIT Open Documentary Lab

metrics-obsessed view of social media interactions and amplification.[255] While that understanding of engagement is still widely-employed and valued in many media organizations, in other circles the concept has evolved into a practice of more regular and sustained two-way communication with publics, both online and off.

These new ventures are experimenting with a number of nontraditional media forms in their attempts to reach distinct communities. In what he calls "postcard journalism," for example, Jorge Caraballo distributes postcards to the homes of residents in East Boston, a largely Latino community, with information about the current housing crisis and available resources for assistance.[256] *The Outlier*, an online news outlet supported by the Kellogg Foundation, communicates with readers over text message and Facebook messenger and provides them with personalized information about back taxes and inspection data for their rental homes in Detroit.[257]

While news outlets may view these efforts as creative searching for new revenue streams, and non-profit foundations may assess them as opportunities for achieving "impact," in another context they could easily be understood as the implementation of the theoretical frameworks of Dewey and Carey. Many of these initiatives have been designed to bring communities into more regular contact with the journalists who cover them, as well as with each other. These efforts have included entering a co-op model,[258] publishing galleries of prom and homecoming photos,[259]

[255] See Baym, Nancy K. "Data not seen: The uses and shortcomings of social media metrics," *First Monday* 18.10 (2013) and Napoli, Philip M. *Audience evolution: New technologies and the transformation of media audiences*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

[256] Caraballo, Jorge, "What is Postcard Journalism?" Medium, April 18, 2017 https://medium.com/@jorgecaraballo/what-is-postcard-journalism-50901a649ee3

[257] For more information see https://outliermedia.org/what-is-outlier/

[258] See the Banyan Project

[259] Hare, Kristen, "You can make money off homecoming pics and 9 other simple ideas to borrow from local news," *Poynter*, November 1, 2017, https://www.poynter.org/news/you-can-make-money-homecoming-pics-and-9-other-simple-ideas-borrow-local-news

holding game nights, listening tours,[260] storytelling events,[261] speed-dating,[262] town halls, trivia

sessions on civic-related issues, block parties, coffee sessions,[263] and virtual and in-person

"office hours."[264] Some projects specifically take on the issue of polarization by creating

meeting spaces—physical and digital—for people of diverse backgrounds to meet, a practice that

has already been dubbed "dialogue journalism."[265] "Breaking Bread," from Colorado Public

Radio, for example, brought together six people from six different walks of life and political

viewpoints to have dinner together.[266] Spaceship Media has developed a series of "dialogue"

projects that range from working with a group of news outlets to convene 150 people from

around the country to discuss guns, to partnering with the Alabama Media Group to moderate a

Facebook group for women in Alabama who voted for Donald Trump to converse for two

months with women from the San Francisco Bay Area who voted for Hillary Clinton. At the end

of the AL-CA conversation project, according to Spaceship Media, the majority of the

participants created their own Facebook group to continue the discussion.[267] The Agora

[260] Loker, Kevin, and Kang, Ashley, "'Focused listening' can help address journalism's trust problem—here are four examples," American Press Institute, January 30, 2018, https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/focused-listening-trust/

[261] See Hare, Kristen, "Gannett's Storytellers Projects has spread to 21 cities (and it's making some money), *Poynter*, July 24, 2017, https://www.poynter.org/news/gannetts-storytellers-project-has-spread-21-cities-and-its-making-some-money and Sacramento Capital Public Radio's "Story Circles," http://www.capradio.org/news/the-view-from-here/2017/08/11/community-voices/

[262] Reynolds, Ross, "KUOW uses speed-dating format to help people understand each other," *Current*, March 6, 2018, https://current.org/2018/03/kuow-uses-speed-dating-format-to-help-people-understand-each-other/

[263] See Civil Beat Events in Honolulu, http://www.civilbeat.org/upcoming-events/

[264] Hare, Kristen, "Local Edition: Postcards, game nights and other real ways journalists can connect with their communities," Poynter, July 5, 2017, https://www.poynter.org/news/local-edition-postcards-game-nights-and-other-real-ways-journalists-can-connect-their

[265] Low, Tiffany, "Why 'dialogue journalism' is having a moment, *Mediashift*, February 15, 2018, http://mediashift.org/2018/02/why-dialogue-journalism-is-having-a-moment/

[266] Dukakis, Andrea, "Breaking bread: Can Coloradans sit down and figure each other out?", Colorado Public Radio, May 24, 2017, http://www.cpr.org/news/story/breaking-bread-can-coloradans-sit-down-and-figure-each-other-out

[267] See http://spaceshipmedia.org/projects/

Journalism Center at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism has funded a grant cycle

to support this kind of engaged journalism called "Finding Common Ground."[268]

Even if not articulated as such, this emphasis on dialogue, fellowship and shared

experience would seem to step away from the sole transmission view of communication as

imparting information, and seek to bring back to local journalism the ritualistic function of media

that have been so expertly assumed by social media. In an intriguing 2018 reader survey of seven

hyperlocal news websites, the researchers found that "more readers share hyperlocal news in

person than through email or social media. Higher neighborhood involvement and education tend

to characterize readers who share hyperlocal news." [269] While the scope of these results may

clearly be limited, they speak to a wider field effort to broaden this inclination and see if local

news organizations might be best positioned, in comparison to their national counterparts, to

reclaim some part of their role in shaping and facilitating the community articulation that so

often now solely exists in the realm of social media. As one book about "saving community

journalism" explained:

> In the pre-digital age, the newspaper created and aggregated content and defined
> community around geographic or political boundaries. In the digital age, large search
> engines and social networking sites have supplanted the aggregation function and
> redefined community around special interests…Newspapers in the digital age need to
> think of themselves as the "glue that binds" multiple communities to one another – the
> geographic community and the others built around shared passions and affiliations. To
> build loyal and passionate reader engagement across multiple platforms (print, digital and
> mobile), editors must take a very expansive view of their responsibility to nurture not
> only a traditional geographic sense of community, but also communities defined by
> shared passions and affiliations. As a bonus, these newspapers are able to offer

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[268] Devigal, Andrew, "Announcing Finding Common Ground awardees," *Medium*, March 22, 2018, https://medium.com/finding-common-ground/announcing-finding-common-ground-awardees-80ca5203742
[269] Bobkowski, Piotr S., et al. "Who Gets Vocal About Hyperlocal: Neighborhood involvement and socioeconomics in the sharing of hyperlocal news." *Journalism Practice* (2018): 1-19.

advertisers the ability to target a message to an engaged audience that cares passionately about a certain subject[270]

As the last sentence of that paragraph suggests, to some extent this is being approached from a business perspective. But on a greater level, as discussed in the previous chapter, non-profit funders and supporters in this space also see these measures as directly tied to efforts to strengthen trust in media, community and participatory democracy. "This is not a question of simply listening to audiences as consumers and responding to their desires in a populist sense," cautioned one report in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. "Rather, by engaging communities directly in dialogue and offering them ways to participate, media can act as a facilitator and mobilizer in shifting narratives toward the problem-solving people told us they want from their news."[271] The hope is that a more responsive and interactive local news ecosystem will encourage citizens to be more invested in their communities and civically engaged.

Actors in this space also see the opening up of the journalistic process as key to ensuring that the voices and needs of diverse and marginalized communities are heard.[272] While these groups may be underserved in local news coverage,[273] the hunger for information is apparent. A 2015 study from the Pew Research Center of local media use in three cities found that black and Hispanic communities were more invested in following local news stories than white

[270] Abernathy, Penelope Muse, "Book excerpt: Saving community journalism," *American Journalism Review*, May 9, 2014, http://ajr.org/2014/05/09/book-excerpt-saving-community-journalism/
[271] Wenzel, Andrea, Nadler, Anthony, Valle, Melissa and Lamont Hill, Marc, "Listening is not enough: Mistrust and local news in urban and suburban Philly," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 26, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/mistrust-and-local-news-urban-and-suburban-philly.php
[272] Stearns, Josh, "Closing the gaps in local news: New Pew research funds gulp between people's hunger for local news and their satisfaction with local media," Medium, March 5, 2015, https://medium.com/the-local-news-lab/closing-the-gaps-in-local-news-6f3d6b9039e4
[273] Knight Commission. "Informing communities: Sustaining democracy in the digital age," and Napoli, Philip M., et al. "Assessing the health of local journalism ecosystems."

communities, and were at least twice as likely to feel they could have a big impact on their respective cities.[274]

Other community engagement initiatives have moved beyond mere dialogue and shared experiences to directly involve publics in various steps of the newsgathering process. These projects have embraced to varying degrees "user-generated content" (incorporating material like photos, observations or commentary, often from social media into a journalist's reporting),[275] "participatory reporting projects" (in which the public actively is involved in selecting editorial priorities or the reporting process itself), and what is being championed as "solutions journalism" (in which rather than merely present both sides of an issue and the let the public decide, the journalist proposes a specific solution).[276] These projects have involved challenging long-held journalism assumptions and ideological positions around objectivity, authorship and deeply-held ethical principles in many circles about the relationship and necessary separation between journalists and their sources.

Despite the traditional editorial obstacles, the advent of citizen journalism in the era of social media worked to blur those lines and now many media projects are embracing what Andrew DeVigal, the Chair in Journalism Innovation and Civic Engagement at the journalism school at the University of Oregon's Agora Journalism Center, has dubbed a "continuum of engagement."[277] This model explains the transition from the traditional "transactional"

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[274] Pew Research Center, "Local news in a digital age," Marah 5, 2015, http://www.journalism.org/2015/03/05/local-news-in-a-digital-age/

[275] For a more sophisticated version of this process, see "Reinventing the Rolodex: Why we're asking our 60,000 members what they know," *De Correspondent*, April 13, 2018, https://medium.com/de-correspondent/reinventing-the-rolodex-why-were-asking-our-60-000-members-what-they-know-9be6a857c340

[276] See the Solutions Journalism Network for more information https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/

[277] DeVigal, Andrew, "The Continuum of Engagement," *Medium*, October 3, 2017, https://medium.com/lets-gather/the-continuum-of-engagement-89778f9d6c3a

engagement most media outlets do to get their public to see and share their content, to the embrace of a more "relational" approach, which ranges from opening up the process of receiving input for story ideas, to participatory reporting to joint authorship with subjects.

The Seattle Times Education Lab, for example, has held community brainstorming sessions with parents, students, teachers and education advocates and experimented with new ways to feature community voices, including live chats, reader questionnaires and regular guest columns. "Sandy Storyline," an online participatory documentary project, used storytelling platforms like Vojo and Cowbird to collect audio, video, photography and text from residents and citizen journalists to create a "community-generated narrative of the Hurricane."[278] The Chicago-based public radio station WBEZ created Curious City, a crowdsourced news platform where listeners suggested and voted on ideas story ideas and sometimes contributed to the reporting itself. [279]

Another Chicago-based initiative, City Bureau, calls itself a "civic journalism lab" that brings journalists and community members of the South Side of Chicago together in a "collaborative spirit to produce equitable media coverage, encourage civic participation and hold powerful forces to account." Their mission statement elaborates:

> We believe that the power of journalism comes from the community. Not only should media coverage be in the interest of the people, it should be fully responsive to their needs and desires, opening pathways for community members to effect change in their communities. That comes from meaningful outreach and sustained relationships—and that's what we're building in Chicago. This, to us, is what it means for journalism to be a public good.[280]

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[278] For more information see https://www.sandystoryline.com/
[279] The previous two paragraphs comes from Rafsky, "Collaborative journalism sidebar," forthcoming report on co-creation for the MIT Open Documentary Lab
[280] See https://www.citybureau.org/our-mission/

One of the outlet's programs, called "The Documenters," pays local residents to attend and document public government meetings.[281]

Projects in Ohio and New Jersey have explicitly designated civic engagement as a goal of their reporting. For "Your Vote Ohio," a consortium of media and academic organizations worked to deliver coverage of the issues that communities had deemed important in the 2016 presidential election and inspire civic participation.[282] Out of this initiative came "Your Voices Ohio," in which 42 Ohioan news outlets, both urban and rural, are using feedback from statewide polls and community events to cover the opioid epidemic and future of work and the economy in the state.[283] For the collaborative reporting project "Voting Block," 25 newsrooms worked together to convene community events and jointly report on the 2017 New Jersey gubernatorial race, which had at the time sparked little news coverage and local interest.[284]

The Local News Lab, a multi-year pilot project first conducted in New Jersey by the Dodge Foundation and since expanded by the Democracy Fund, experiments with how to create "sustainable, connected and collaborative local news ecosystems," and prioritizes community engagement. The pilot project involved outfitting New Jersey news outlets with Hearken, a platform and editorial framework that builds on the success of Curious City to enable journalists to better partner with the public for each step of the reporting process, and the Listening Post, a project that uses "cell phones, public signs, and roving recording devices to capture and share

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[281] See https://www.citybureau.org/documenters-about

[282] See https://jefferson-center.org/ic-akron/?utm_source=Gather+Newsletter&utm_campaign=72f297e17c-Gather+Newsletter+-+December+6%2C+2017&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_09c336c497-72f297e17c-68462807

[283] Coibanu, Mădălina, "Your Voice Ohio's take on collaborative journalism starts with community events," journalism.co.ok and "Your Voices Ohio," https://yourvoiceohio.org/

[284] Reveal staff, "How to launch Voting Block for your 2018 state or local election," Reveal, February 7, 2018, https://www.revealnews.org/article/how-to-launch-voting-block-for-your-2018-state-or-local-election/

voices, information, and opinions."[285] In 2018, The Lensfest Institute and a coalition of other

major journalism funders announced the Community Listening and Engagement Fund, which

subsidizes the costs for 34 newsroom of using Hearken and GroundSource, another tool that

facilities conversation with communities via mobile messaging and voice, to help them "better

listen to their communities and create more inclusive, relevant, and trusted coverage for the

diverse audiences they serve."[286] Community journalism projects building on this model are

being funded and tested in places like Pennsylvania, North Carolina[287] and, as will be explored in

more depth in the following chapter, Kentucky.

In April 2018, a *Columbia Journalism Review* article sparked a controversy when it

questioned how companies like Hearken empirically measure success, declaring: "It's not always

clear what audience engagement is, or how it benefits newsrooms, but a growing number of

people are selling it. And many news organizations are buying."[288] Hearken CEO Jennifer

Brandel responded in a letter to the editor that the article had used research that was over a year

old and that the company had since gathered "considerable evidence of measurable success."[289]

In a follow-up Medium post, Brandel wrote that, beyond facilitating ways to reach new

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[285] De Aguiar, Molly and Stearns, Josh, "Lessons from the local news Lab: Building a more connected and collaborative news ecosystem," February, 2016, https://speakerd.s3.amazonaws.com/presentations/794c0afd58b74377a581f83ece4c1499/DodgeLocalNewsLabLessonsLearned.pdf

[286] "Community listening and engagement fun awards first round of grants to 34 news organizations," Lensfest Institute, April 11, 2018, https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/news-posts/news-integrity-initiative-democracy-fund-knight-foundation-lenfest-institute-award-grants-34-news-organizations-part-community-listening-engagement-fund/

[287] See Free Press, "Local journalism plays a critical role in our communities," https://www.freepress.net/issues/future-journalism/local-journalism and Wenzel, et al., "Listening is not enough: Mistrust and local news in urban and suburban Philly"

[288] Nelson, Jacob L., "The audience engagement industry struggles with measuring success," *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 30, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/audience-engagement-industry-struggles-measuring-success.php

[289] Brandel, Jennifer, "Letter to the Editor: Hearken's audience engagement model," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 3, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/mailbox/hearken-brandel-audience-engagement.php

audiences, the evidence included bigger traffic and many awards for "Hearken-powered" series,

as well as instances in which they had held the powerful accountable. These successes, she

claimed, make it easier for newsrooms to attract advertisers and non-profit grants. Two media

outlets recorded that readers of Hearken-supported stories were more likely to convert into

subscribers, according to Brandel.[290]

 Thomas R. Schmidt, a postdoctoral fellow at the Agora Journalism Center, which has

been supporting engagement journalism models, said that more research was needed but

defended Brandel by writing:

> We also believe that the debate about 'measuring success' calls for a broader
> conversation about how we define empirical evidence…Hearken can point to promising
> data that is more than circumstantial and anecdotal, though not all of it meets academic
> standards of systematic evaluation. We don't yet have enough studies that would meet
> quantitative researchers' demand for 'validity' nor qualitative researchers' demand for
> 'trustworthiness.' More fundamentally, however, what this debate really illustrates is the
> difficulty of analyzing an emerging practice in an early stage of development and the
> challenge of quantifying it.[291]

Seeking to better assess community journalism projects, the Agora Journalism Project

launched Gather in October 2018, a platform—which requires organizer permission for access--

that brings together those working in the field to share resources, case studies, and best

practices.[292] While most evidence is anecdotal so far, emerging lessons include the benefit of

collaboration, both with others news organizations and existing community-based civil society

organizations, and a willingness to listen and experiment.[293] Practitioners in this space say these

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[290] Brandel, Jennifer, "Looking for evidence that audience engagement helps newsroom? Here you go," Medium, May 3, 2018, https://medium.com/we-are-hearken/receipts-1bc3d35a88bf

[291] Schmidt, Thomas R., "Studying emerging engagement," Medium, May 8, 2018, https://medium.com/lets-gather/studying-emerging-engagement-278d80d08403

[292] Mayer, Joy, "It's time to Gather, and we hope you'll join us," Medium, October 1, 2017, https://medium.com/lets-gather/its-time-to-gather-and-we-hope-you-ll-join-us-85700c4a9fe3

[293] See for example, De Aguiar, Molly and Stearns, Josh, "Lessons from the local news Lab: Building a more connected and collaborative news ecosystem," Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation; Bair, Madeleine,

initiatives have resulted in fresh perspectives on long-term stories, the identification of new priorities for future reporting and, in some cases, they may helped profitability.[294] There are some encouraging signs that membership models can offer media outlets an important revenue stream as well as building community engagement and buy-in with the news.[295] Hopefully in the long-term, these advocates of community engagement journalism say, these initiative can improve and sustain trust and support for local media.[296]

One of the most successful examples so far has been the previously mentioned online news site *Berkeleyside*, which has experimented with a wide of array of measures to both involve communities *and* fortify their business model. These efforts have included holding a series of popular house parties and launching a direct public offering--essentially allowing readers to buy shares and become literally invested in the success of the organization.[297] The project, which raised one million dollars from 355 investors,[298] would seem to represent the perfect embodiment of using the ritualistic characteristics of media –shared participation, fellowship—and engagement tactics to both serve the information needs of a community so that its residents can be civically active and shore up the bottom line.

"Deep listening to map a community's information needs," Medium, March 29, 2018, https://medium.com/@madbair/deep-listening-to-map-a-communitys-information-needs-17da9daffc8a and "Highlights from 6 months of Hearken case studies," Hearken, July 6, 2017, https://medium.com/we-are-hearken/highlights-from-6-months-of-hearken-case-studies-585627d8928d

[294] De Aguiar, Molly and Stearns, Josh, "Lessons from the local news Lab: Building a more connected and collaborative news ecosystem."

[295] Outing, Steve, "To strengthen local news and information, community engagement is at the core," Knight Foundation

[296] See for example, De Aguiar, Molly and Stearns, Josh, "Lessons from the local news Lab: Building a more connected and collaborative news ecosystem"; Bair, Madeleine, "Deep listening to map a community's information needs," Medium; Brandel, Jennifer, "The curious formation of a new kind of nation," Medium, February 18, 2015, https://medium.com/we-are-hearken/the-curious-formation-of-a-new-kind-of-nation-c59695ace9b4

[297] Hare, Kristen, "Berkeleyside has raised $556,000 of its $800,00 goal. Here's how it's turns fans into funders," *Poynter,* July 6, 2017, https://www.poynter.org/news/berkeleyside-has-raised-556000-its-800000-goal-heres-how-its-turning-fans-funders

[298] See http://invest.berkeleyside.com/

Nonetheless, the inevitable questions loom: Will these strategies prove to be sustainable in the long-term? Will communities lose interest once the novelty fades or if enhanced engagement does not translate into specific social change or signs of impact? Will engagement really lead to increased revenue, either through subscribers, grants or advertisers? Will non-profit funders shift priorities? And will efforts to "scale" and replicate projects rooted in the specificity of a particular place prove fruitful? Berekely, CA, for example is home to both a world class university and adjacent to the beating economic heart of Silicon Valley. In the following chapter I examine how similar projects are being rolled out and experienced in a very different community context.

iv.   **Looking for the future of local news in Kentucky and West Virginia**

In the next chapter, as a case study, I explore several new local news initiatives currently unfolding in the state of Kentucky and the adjacent Appalachia region that touch on a number of the tendencies described so far. These include two major initiatives announced in late 2017 that at least initially appeared to illustrate a schism between "top-down" and "bottom-up" strategies by national funders. Report for America, which aims to create a public service army of reporters in the model of Teach for America or the Peace Corps, is beginning to send reporters to embed for a year in the newsrooms of several local news organizations. *ProPublica*, which has seen an influx of donations in the wake of the 2016 election, is funding reporters already working in local outlets who have proposed a specific project. Included in the first iteration of both initiatives is the newsroom of the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* in West Virginia, known for its in-depth investigative reporting in the region, and which stunned supporters in 2018 when it announced it was filing for bankruptcy. The next chapter also profiles the efforts of the

Community Stories Lab, an initiative led by media scholar Andrea Wenzel and media consultant Sam Ford to test a series of pilot projects aimed at building trust in the media and reviving community journalism in the region. Finally, it touches on how these new initiatives coexist with some of the remaining traditional media outlets in their local communities and the media habits of a handful of residents.

Chapter 4. Sustaining local news in Kentucky and West Virginia

i.   A table where the chairs point outwards

Over the course of the past few chapters, I have sought to make the case that local news is an essential part of what builds and binds local communities, as well as keeps them informed on issues of public interest and allows them to hold the powerful accountable. I have explored some of the strategies news outlets and funders are experimenting with in their efforts to offset the industry's economic decline. On the page however, these concepts can come across as abstract, or even Norman Rockwell-esque naïve, idealized or nostalgic. It was important for me to understand, as well as convey in this text, what these practices look and feel like in action. The following case study, which is presented as a series of profiles of various new journalistic initiatives and placed in context among some existing news outlets in Kentucky and West Virginia, aims to do just that.

My fortuitous introduction to media consultant and Kentucky native Sam Ford was what first brought me to Kentucky in September, 2017 for an unrelated workshop on the future of work with the MIT Open Documentary Lab. While journalism was not the focus of the event, it was there I first met some of the journalists featured in this chapter and was immediately impressed by their dedication to news in a multifaceted and complex political and economic context. After a series of new journalistic initiatives and experiments were announced in the region that same fall, and with the help of many of the contacts from that first trip, I decided to focus on the area as the case study for this project. The majority of the following interviews were conducted during a week-long trip to Kentucky and West Virginia in late February, 2018, as well as some additional phone interviews the following months.

Geographically defined, the boundaries of the area where my study took place are porous and to some extent arbitrary. This looseness is consistent with the context of the region, however, where community identity is far more specific than state lines and national political representation can convey. Kentucky's state identity, as Ford pointed out to me several times, is best illustrated by the metaphor of a table where all the chairs are pointed facing outwards in the direction of the seven states that share its borders, rather than inwards. This fractured assemblage is even denoted at the level of logistics and infrastructure. To reach eastern Kentucky, I flew into an airport in Charleston, West Virginia. The land on both sides of the border make up of parts of Appalachia, whose vast and distinct geography and regional identity has long been oversimplified in the national imagination and defies easy characterization.[299] When traveling in and out of Bowling Green, which in central Western Kentucky has a distinct southern feel (think Bourbon, Bluegrass and barbeque), the nearest airport was in Nashville, Tennessee. The prosperous cities of Louisville and Lexington in the northern parts of the state that I did not visit, in close proximity to Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, are said to share more in common with the Midwest than the rest of Kentucky. Local residents stressed to me that geographic identification is most strongly felt at the level of the state's 120 counties—the fourth highest number of counties of any state in the country, despite being the 37th more extensive and 26th most populous.[300] Thus the initiatives and news outlets I profile are in keeping with the reality of the region – they represent distinct pockets that make up a part rather than a whole, bleed across state boundaries, and have conflicting relationships with one another.

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[299] See Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*.
[300] "List of counties in Kentucky," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky and "Kentucky," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky

One shared characteristic across these distinct areas is the impact felt by the forces of globalization and technology that have upended local economies long based on manufacturing, coal mining and agriculture. According to several different rankings of economic health, Kentucky and West Virginia both place in the bottom ten of the 50 states.[301] As with many other demographically similar areas, the Opioid epidemic has hit this region hard. West Virginia led the nation with deaths due to drug dose per capita in 2016 and Kentucky was 5th, according to the Center for Disease Control.[302] Both states voted overwhelmingly for Trump[303] in the 2016 election, even in places that not long ago had voted solidly democratic (including for Clinton's husband).[304] Not insignificant to the candidate's success was his vow to "put coal miners back to work"[305] after President Obama's alleged efforts to "kill coal" (which is disputed by those who point out the rise of natural gas likely played as much or a bigger role than increased federal regulations[306]).   More recently, the area has made national headlines for issues that speak to

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[301] See "Best States 2018," US News & World Report, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings ; Desjardins, Jeff, "Ranked: The best and worst state economies," Visual Capitalist, April 19, 2018, http://www.visualcapitalist.com/ranked-best-worst-state-economies/; Kiersz, Andy, "Every US state economy ranked from worst to best," *Business Insider*, March 15, 2018, http://www.businessinsider.com/state-economy-ranking-q1-2018-2 ; Sauter, Michael B, Stebbins, Samuel and Comen, Evan, "Economic climate: The best (and worst) states for business," *USA Today*, March 5, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2018/03/05/economic-climate-best-and-worst-states-business/376783002/

[302] Drug Overdose Death Data, Center for Disease Control, https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html

[303] "Kentucky results election 2016," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/kentucky and "West Virginia results election 2016, *The New York Times*, August 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/west-virginia

[304] Chinni, Dante and Rivera, Matt, "West Virginia: How the bluest state became the reddest," NBC News, December 18, 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/west-virginia-how-bluest-state-became-reddest-n697491 and Fischer-Baum, Reuben, "A Kentucky county ended its historic Democratic streak to vote for Trump," *FiveThirtyEight*, November 10, 2016, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/a-kentucky-county-ended-its-historic-democratic-streak-to-vote-for-trump/

[305] McGill, Andrew, "Coal miners are political canaries," *The Atlantic*, May 20, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/coal-miners-americas-political-canaries/483491/

[306] Roberts, David, "Once and for all: Obama didn't crush US coal, and Trump can't save it," Vox, January 30, 2018, https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2017/4/28/15465348/obama-trump-regulations-coal

larger current debates, including state-wide teachers' strikes; [307] the travails of Senate majority leader and Kentucky senator Mitch McConnell; and the controversial Senate candidacy of a Trump-style, divisive West Virginia coal baron (who spent a year in prison for his role in the safety violations that caused an explosion that killed 29 coal miners in 2010).[308]

In short, the region has become emblematic of many of the issues that came to the forefront of debate in the aftermath of the 2016 election and has caught the nation's attention. Numerous think pieces reflected on how poorly and scarcely the national media covered this region and linked that reporting deficit to broader country-wide divisions.[309] Many local residents and journalists have long believed the national media exclusively covers negative stories in the region and portray them as stereotypes.[310] Meanwhile, the local media ecosystem is experiencing many of the previously explored wider issues plaguing the news industry and includes the fight for survival of a Pulitzer prize-winning daily newspaper and the myriad struggles of rural journalism. These combined factors have made the area ripe for the

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[307] Rossman, Sean, "Teachers are striking all over. What is going on?" *USA Today*, March 30, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/03/30/teachers-striking-oklahoma-west-virginia-arizona-kentucky/472742002/ ; Bowden, John, "Kentucky teachers' strike closes schools across the state, *The Hill*, March 30, 2018, http://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/380981-kentucky-schools-closed-as-teachers-protest-pension-overhaul; Greenhouse, Steven, "The West Virginia teacher strike was just the start," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/opinion/teachers-west-virginia-strike.html

[308] Tumulty, Karen, "If 2018 were a season of 'The Apprentice,' we'd already have a front-runner," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-west-virginia-candidate-whos-trumpier-than-trump/2018/04/25/6202a0d0-47da-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html?utm_term=.1250280da0dc

[309] See Shafer, Jack and Doherty, Tucker, "The media bubble is worse than you think," *Politico* and Benton, Joshua, "The game of concentration: The Internet is pushing the American news business to New York and the coasts," NiemanLab and Massing, Michael, "How not to cover America," *American Prospect*

[310] See Stoll, *Ramp hollow: The ordeal of Appalachia* and Branscome, Jim, "Review: New book on Appalachia takes J.D. Cance behind the woodshed," *The Daily Yonder*, February 19, 2018, http://www.dailyyonder.com/review-new-book-appalachia-takes-j-d-vance-behind-woodshed/2018/02/19/23893/ and Brashear, Ivy, "Why media must stop misrepresenting Appalachia, *Huffington Post*, April 10, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/i-am-appalachian-too-a-response-to-hillbilly-elegy_us_58ebe93ae4b081da6ad006be and

intervention of philanthropic and journalism sectors working at the intersection of political polarization, community building and the health of local news ecosystems. The initiatives profiled in this chapter are in mostly in their infancy and are meant to serve as a snapshot in time of emerging trends and to suggest some indication of where the field may be headed. These news organization range from metro dailies, to small town weeklies, to digital publications in rural counties. Together, they represent the broad role that local news plays for the public—from the watchdog to good neighbor, thorn in the side of the powerful to community cheerleader. Hopefully, we can begin to deduct some lessons from these experiences and future research will determine the extent of their success.

ii.   Two models for saving local accountability journalism

The Charleston Gazette-Mail

If you were searching for one story to represent the conundrum of local news, the simultaneous heights of its opportunity for public service glory and the lows of its financial and management confusion, the recent history of the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* would be a good place to start. The West Virginia paper has long produced the kind of hard-hitting, independent reporting-- dubbed "sustained outrage" by the paper's former publisher William E. "Ned" Chilton III--that Hollywood movies are made from. Its critical reporting was so relentless that one former governor, Arch A. Moore Jr., refused for years to use the newspaper's name at press conferences, calling it the "morning sick call." (The governor later went to jail on corruption charges).[311] The newspaper's exposés of corruption and ineptitude have targeted government and

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[311] Kabler, Phil, "3-term West Virginia Gov. Arch Moore dies," *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, January 7, 2015, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/politics/term-west-virginia-gov-arch-moore-dies/article_9e7d7d69-8d83-5cbc-8e50-75138fd73a18.html

business alike, making it an enemy of the powerful coal industry for its reporting on poor safety

and environmental practices.[312] Most recently, reporter Eric Eyre won the 2017 investigative

reporting Pulitzer Prize for "courageous reporting, performed in the face of powerful opposition,

to expose the flood of opioids flowing into depressed West Virginia counties with the highest

overdose death rates in the country."[313]

The February 21, 2018 print edition of the Charleston Gazette-Mail. The paper won
a 2017 Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Opioid crisis, including exposing 'pill mills.'/Sara Rafsky

Yet the paper has faced tumult in recent years that goes beyond the typical advertising

revenue woes of other daily metros. Its current troubles began over a decade ago when the

Chilton family that, until last month, owned the left-leaning *Charleston Gazette* for over 100

years took out a major loan to buy the city's other daily newspaper, the conservative *Charleston*

Daily Mail. That acquisition eventually resulted in an anti-trust case brought by the Department

of Justice, which set off a series of financial issues, including legal bills, additional lawsuits

brought by the former owners of the *Daily Mail* and more accrued debt. These problems

continued to plague the paper even after it combined newsrooms in 2015 and became the

[312] Musfoni, Steven, "A West Virginia newspaper is in bankruptcy. The powerful coal industry celebrates," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/a-west-virginia-newspaper-is-in-bankruptcy-the-powerful-coal-industry-celebrates/2018/02/16/f0e3d4e4-085c-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html?utm_term=.109cbb8eb40b

[313] The 2017 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Investigative Reporting, http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/eric-eyre

Charleston Gazette-Mail. (In practice, according to news reports, very little of the *Daily Mail* remained except its editorial page, which resulted in the alienation of some of the state's conservative readers. While the more liberal daily would prevail in the merger, in an intriguing attempt at community unification, the *Gazette-Mail* continues to print two editorial pages side-by-side that are meant to represent the views of the two papers).[314] Faced with the industry-wide decline in advertising revenue and with weekday circulation at 32,000 (down from about 54,000 twenty-five years ago),[315] the former daily was forced to eliminate its Monday print edition. In an attempt to monetize its growing online readership, the paper recently reinstated a metered paywall that allows ten free articles per month and is hoping for an uptick in digital subscriptions.

The *Charleston Gazette-Mail* is such a reference point and example of high quality local journalism that two separate non-profit initiatives announced in 2017 set their sights on bolstering its newsroom. The first, Report for America (RFA), seeks to take the national public service model of the Peace Corps and Teach for America to encourage a new generation of journalists. Founders Steve Waldman, who wrote a major 2011 FCC report on the "Information Needs of Communities," and Charles Sennott, a former journalist and founder of the non-profit media organization The GroundTruth project, announced their goal of placing 1,000 talented,

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[314] For the history of what has happened at the *Gazette-Mail* see The Associated Press, "Justice Department sues to undo Gazette-Daily merger," May 22, 2007, https://www.denverpost.com/2007/05/22/justice-department-sues-to-undo-gazette-daily-mail-merger/; Dickerson, Chris, "Sale of Gazette-Mail to HD Media could be done by end of the month," *West Virginia Record*, March 9, 2018, https://wvrecord.com/stories/511359286-sale-of-gazette-mail-to-hd-media-could-be-done-by-end-of-month ; Chokshi, Nikraj, "A West Virginia Newspaper won journalism's top award. Now it's filed for bankruptcy," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2018; Adams, Steven Allen, "Charleston Gazette-Mail bankruptcy goes beyond news industry woes," Medium, February 4, 2018, https://medium.com/@stevenadamswv/charleston-gazette-mail-bankruptcy-goes-beyond-news-industry-woes-bcb120e1dfd7
[315] Interview with Executive Editor Rob Byers, February 21, 2018

young journalists in local newsrooms across the country by 2022.[316] With support from the usual suspects of journalism funding—The Knight Foundation, the Google News Lab etc.---RFA would subsidize one half of the journalist's salary for a year, and a lesser share should the "corps member" choose to stay on for a second year. The selected journalists are also expected to carry out a public service activity, such as teaching journalism or media literacy at a local school, and at the end of the year produce together a final, collaborative "capstone" project. [317]

Merely a few weeks after the September 2017 RFA launch, the non-profit digital investigative journalism heavy weight *ProPublica* announced a new Local Reporting Network. On the heels of its creation of a ProPublica satellite in Illinois,[318] the national outlet would fund seven investigative journalism projects in existing newsrooms across the country. The local news organizations would pitch specific projects and, if selected, *ProPublica* would pay one year of the reporter's salary so that he or she could focus solely on digging deep into the subject. After receiving editing, research, crowdsourcing, data and design assistance from *ProPublica*, the resulting investigations would be published by both news outlets for maximum amplification.[319]

In late 2017 both programs separately announced the first group of winning applicants to begin in January, 2018. RFA would be placing three journalists in newsrooms in Appalachia, one in Kentucky and two in West Virginia.[320] *ProPublica* had selected six newspapers and one public radio station in cities ranging in size from Orlando, FL, to Vale, OR and covering topics

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[316] The formation of something like Report for America was a recommendation of Waldman's 2011 FCC report, but the idea and name date back as least as far as 2009, when former newspaper publisher Martin Langeveld proposed it in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. See Langeveld, Martin C., "First read: report ignores web's nimble nature," October 19, 2009, https://archives.cjr.org/reconstruction/report_ignores_webs_nimble_nat.php

[317] See https://www.reportforamerica.org

[318] See https://www.propublica.org/illinois

[319] "Join ProPublica's new project to work with local newsrooms," *ProPublica*, October 5, 2017, https://www.propublica.org/article/join-propublicas-new-project-to-work-with-local-newsrooms

[320] See https://www.reportforamerica.org/corps-members-2018/

that included housing, mental health care, criminal justice and workplace safety.[321] The

Charleston Gazette-Mail, in a matter of happenstance, was to be included in both.

This timely coincidence brought into relief both the promise and potential limitations of

the two programs. RFA was playing the long game and seeking to fortify the future of

journalism. Like its models the Peace Corps and Teach for America, the creation of a journalistic

service corps seeks to both fulfill a community need but also touches on more sweeping goals of

cultural diplomacy and professional development. Yet it risked the pitfalls for which those same

models, particularly TFA, have been frequently criticized—namely, the practice of parachuting

young, inexperienced people into underserved communities with minimal training, and then

pulling them out a year or two later.[322] In a September 2017 interview with NiemanLab,

however, Sennott pointed out that beginning in local newsrooms before moving to bigger

organizations, "was once something that a whole generation of journalists got to do to start their

careers. Sadly, we've seen it disappear. We want to restore that tradition." He said at the time

that he hoped to have half the corps members come from the communities that are being

covered, and the other half come from the outside, because there is a "huge opportunity in

someone not from that place, seeing it for the first time, and getting to know a different part of

the country. That's a good skill for a journalist: You come with really fresh eyes, but you also

have to know that you're going to into a community to serve the community. We're trying to

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[321] "ProPublica Local Reporting Network selects seven newsrooms across U.S.," *ProPublica*, December 8, 2017, https://www.propublica.org/atpropublica/propublica-local-reporting-network-selects-seven-newsrooms-across-u-s

[322] Strauss, Valerie, "Big trouble at teach for America?," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/03/22/teach-for-americas-diversity-paradox/?utm_term=.4577011a2411

toggle between the two."[323] To their credit, the RFA founders followed through on this promise.

The selected inaugural group was not made up of Ivy League graduates swooping in from the

Northeast, but rather three young journalists who all had varying degrees of pre-existing ties to

the region. One of the journalists, who I did not interview, was eager to come back and cover her

home state of West Virginia after years working elsewhere.[324] The other two, who are featured

later in this chapter, had previously attended college in West Virginia and Kentucky.

  The Local Reporting Network, on the other hand, had chosen the opposite route. Rather

than select emerging reporters or even fund its own journalists to travel and more aggressively

cover local issues, it took the unusual step of converting itself into a funder that would support

and elevate local journalists and their expertise. According to the program's guidelines, "the

reporters will still work in and report to their home newsrooms, but they will receive extensive

support and guidance from *ProPublica* throughout 2018."[325] The generosity and seemingly

hands-off approach was admirable, but *ProPublica* deputy managing editor Eric Umansky said

in an interview with NiemanLab that the program's goals were not merely altruistic. The project

would allow the outlet to reach communities it couldn't access on its own and experiment with

new forms of collaborative journalism. *ProPublica* has been at the forefront of the evolving

practice of collaboration between newsrooms for years and as one of the pioneers of online, non-

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[323] Owen, Laura Hazard, "Report for America wants to place (and help pay for) young reporters in local newsrooms that need them," NiemanLab, September 19, 2017, http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/09/report-for-america-wants-to-place-and-help-pay-for-young-reporters-in-local-newsrooms-that-need-them/

[324] The third RFA corps member and most experienced journalist, Molly Born, who I did not interview, was living in and covering Mingo County in the WV southern coal fields for West Virginia Public Broadcasting. After years working elsewhere, Born wanted to "give something back to a place that has given a lot to me," she told the *New York Times* in an article about RFA. See Bowles, Nellie, Report for America supports journalism where cutback hit hard," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/15/business/media/report-for-america-service.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur

[325] "Join ProPublica's new project to work with local newsrooms," *ProPublica*

profit news is no stranger to experimentation. Nonetheless, it was easy to imagine that

collaboration in which one newsroom was footing the bill might bring unique challenges and

how different editorial practices and questions about chains of command could potentially clash.

As to the broader question of reviving local news, funding one project, of course, could not

sustain a local newsroom's investigative work over the long term. As with any short-term grant,

the question looms of what happens to the participants afterwards.

The issue of sustainability came crashing to the forefront when in late January 2018,

mere weeks after both programs had officially launched and eight months after winning a

Pulitzer Prize, the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* suddenly announced it was filing for bankruptcy.

The Chapter 11 filing included an ominous WARN notice of the potential for layoffs exceeding

50 of the newspaper's 206 employees.[326] There was no telling yet who would sweep in, if

anyone, to buy the paper and to what extent the new ownership would continue to support

investigative accountability journalism. The announcement came three weeks before I was

scheduled to head to West Virginia and interview the newspaper's editor and journalists about

the RFA and Local Reporting Network, and I frantically scrambled to figure out what was

happening and the viability of both programs. Everyone involved at the newspaper, RFA and

ProPublica pledged to me the initiatives would continue but were vague on details. In an email

to the *Washington Post*, ProPublica's editor in chief Stephen Engelberg wrote, "No matter who

ultimately takes control, we look forward to working with Ken Ward [the selected *Charleston

Gazette-Mail* journalist] on what we think is a very important story."

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[326] "Gazette-Mail declaring bankruptcy; Wheeling Newspapers is planned buyer," *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, January 29, 2018, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/gazette-mail-declaring-bankruptcy-wheeling-newspapers-is-planned-buyer/article_5a0e1ede-29aa-5866-ab47-7b9655a0d3bb.html

With extreme graciousness, the *Gazette-Mail*'s Executive Editor, Rob Byers, welcomed

me into the newspaper's neoclassical building in downtown Charleston on an overcast morning

several weeks later. The building was notably quiet, the atmosphere in the newsroom subdued,

and many of the rooms I peered into appeared to be empty. Considering the circumstances, it was

hard not to project a sense of gloominess as I walked the long, harshly-lit and empty hallways, or

despair at encountering a hand-made sign offering to help employees brush-up their résumés.

Besides potentially having to reapply for their own jobs, the paper was already beginning to

hemorrhage staff—the digital content manager was working his last day, leaving the newsroom

for a job with the governor's office. Despite the tenseness of the situation, the *Charleston

Gazette-Mail* staff very generously spoke with me as candidly as they could about future projects

that were now marked by uncertainty.
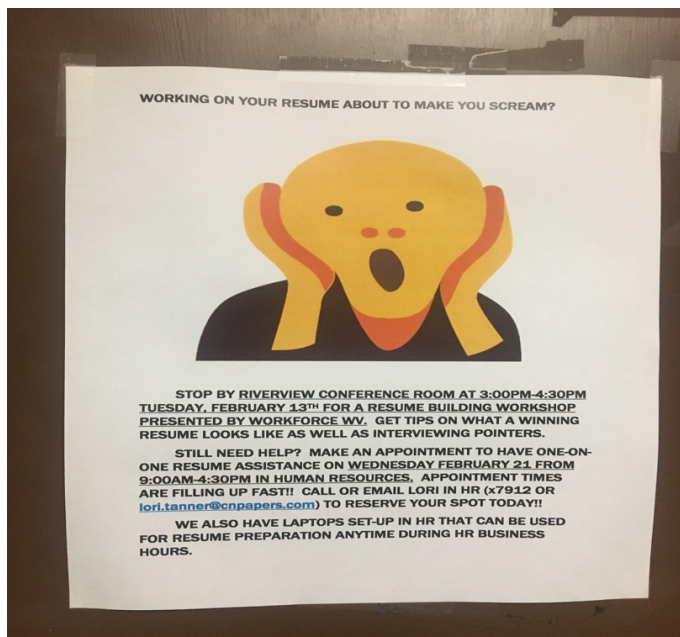
Sign offering résumé help at the Gazette-Mail/ Sara Rafsky

The precariousness of the situation would be difficult for anyone, but it was heightened

by the fact that several of the senior members of the newsroom have worked together since their

college days as student reporters at West Virginia University nearly 30 years ago. Byers and Ken

Ward Jr., the star reporter selected for the ProPublica project, both interned at the *Gazette-Mail* in college and have worked there since graduation. Their entire careers have been wedded to the paper, in good times and in bad. After walking me through the long, complicated history of the newspaper's legal and financial woes, Byers mentioned as an aside that, "meanwhile the newsroom is going great guns. We're winning the Pulitzer Prize and doing all these things. But apart from us, everything's going to hell basically."

The primary focus of the newsroom's work has been to fulfill its watchdog role and Byers didn't have much patience for those who would dismiss the paper's coverage as being too liberal for what has become a very "red" state. "People have gone to jail because of our reporting, and people have basically run out of the state because of our reporting," he says. "We're not afraid to take on institutions like the coal industry, and if that's liberal, then so be it." Ward echoed this sentiment and cautions how concepts like "engagement journalism" can be misused to smear a news outlet as out of touch with the community for reporting on unpopular subjects:

> If it's a red state that means we shouldn't be writing stories about how Black Lung is killing thousands of coal miners? It's kind of where that logic gets you… It's okay for local news organizations to be champions for their community, and to want good things for their community. To want their community to have good jobs, and a vibrant economy, and clean water, and clean air, and not have people dying of workplace diseases….[If] a local news organization needs to be its community's best friend, that involves telling them really painful things that they don't want to hear."

West Virginia has a handful of network TV stations, a public broadcasting TV and radio network, a state-wide radio with an online news site called Metro News, and a number of local newspapers, but none of them, according to Byers and other local journalists, does the same level of state-wide investigative reporting. "The people of West Virginia have depended on us as an advocate for them for a long, long time and we've been able to do that because of a robust staff

and local ownership," he said. Whether the new ownership would adhere to these values remained unclear.

In the meantime, Byers was doing whatever he could to maintain the newsroom's capacity. While he had mixed feelings about embracing industry buzzwords like "solutions journalism" and "engagement journalism," he jumped at the chance to receive outside help from RFA and *ProPublica* to subsidize public service and investigative reporting. It was Ward who first suggested to him they apply for the *ProPublica* grant because he thought it would be a good opportunity for the younger staff to gain exposure to the wider world of journalism and mentorship. Byers, believing they would have a better shot at being accepted with a more experienced journalist, prevailed upon Ward to put himself forward as candidate.

Ward, a WV native who cut his teeth as a college intern covering the 1989 coal miners' strike, had made a name for himself as a top-notch reporter in his decades of covering environmental issues with a focus on the coal and chemical industries and workplace safety. His investigations in the paper and on his blog "Coal Tattoo" on issues like contamination in the state water supply and the resurgence of Black Lung disease had won him awards and national attention.[327] For *ProPublica*, he proposed a year-long investigation and series of articles on the rise of the local natural gas industry, what it can learn from the decline and mistakes of the coal industry and its impact on the state.

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[327] Cunningham, Brent, "Sustained Outrage," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2011, http://archives.cjr.org/feature/sustained_outrage.php
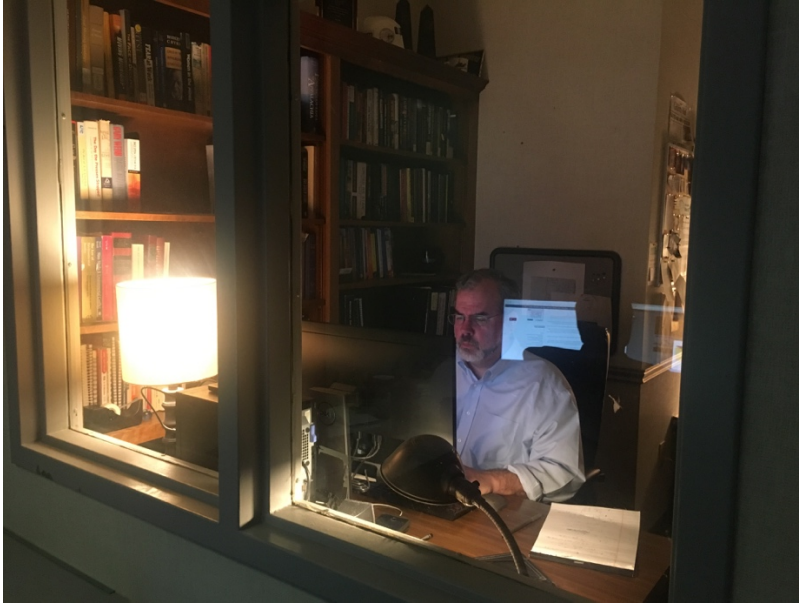
Reporter Ken Ward Jr. in his office at the Charleston Gazette-Mail/ Sara Rafsky

At the time of my visit in late February, the project had only just recently gotten

underway. Besides, Ward said, alluding to the bankruptcy announcement, "there have been a lot

of distractions here," and things were understandably moving slowly. But Ward was enthusiastic

about his interactions with the *ProPublica* team so far, which was being led by Pulitzer Prize

winning journalist and senior editor Charles Ornstein, and eager to take advantage of the superior

resources. According to Ward, the *Gazette-Mail* is a "reporter's paper," where he has mostly free

rein to pursue stories of his choosing with minimal oversight. *ProPublic*a, according to his

observation so far, is "more hands on and their process of editing starts earlier." But rather than

bristle at having to answer to new levels of management, Ward said he was looking forward to

experiencing a closer reporter-editor relationship, something he said is often lacking in under-

resourced small local news organizations where people are pressed for time. At the time of my

visit, he'd met with Ornstein once in person during his visit to Charleston. He'd also had a few

telephone conversations with other *ProPublica* staff, including one with a Local Reporting

Network-dedicated research assistant and an engagement fellow who urged him to think more

deeply about how to tap into local social media networks. The fellow even encouraged Ward to

embrace some participatory and ritual theory-friendly tactics like asking readers to send in

information about their experiences with the natural gas industry.

In late April, Ward published his first report[328] on how, in a move reminiscent of the

early days of coal mining, West Virginia officials had moved quickly to allow gas developers to

operate with broad latitude, weakening environmental and public safety rules. As a companion

piece to the article, *ProPublica* published a personal essay by Ward about his long history

covering the coal industry, which, as the engagement fellow had suggested, ended with an appeal

to readers to share their experiences with both industries.[329] In a follow-up phone interview after

the article was published, Ward said he enjoyed the editing process with the *ProPublica*, who,

because they aren't overloaded with the grind of chasing daily coverage, can focus on the

storytelling. After months of living under the shadow of uncertainty and stress associated with

the bankruptcy announcement, he also couldn't help but notice with admiration "they're all very

excited about what they are doing."

It was these resources and enthusiasm that he hoped to share with the rest of the *Gazette-

Mail* staff, to "siphon off knowledge... so that this just wasn't about me spending all year kind of

messing around, and doing our big project. It would be about us incorporating some of their

lessons to make us better beyond the end of 2018."

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[328] Ward Jr., Ken, "The coal industry extracted a steep price from West Virginia. Now natural gas is leading the state down the same path," *ProPublica*, April 27, 2018, https://www.propublica.org/article/west-virginia-coal-industry-rise-of-natural-gas and Ward Jr., Ken, "Coal extracted a steep price, now gas is taking WV down same path," *The Charleston Gazette-Mail*, April 27, 2018, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/wv_troubled_transition/coal-extracted-a-steep-price-now-gas-is-taking-wv/article_bfdbafbd-d2cc-5c1c-8a2c-a6a3b090d9d6.html

[329] Ward Jr., Ken, "Covering West Virginia's long history of broken promises," *ProPublica*, April 27, 2018, https://www.propublica.org/article/covering-west-virginias-long-history-of-broken-promises

In keeping with this thinking, Ward insisted that the paper hire a young reporter to fill his shoes on the daily beat, even though it would cut into the savings the *Gazette-Mail* pocketed from the *ProPublica* money. "I produce a hell of a lot of copy," Ward said. He wanted to make sure the day-to-day developments of legislative bills and lawsuits and court decisions were still being covered so he could more easily focus on his longer-term stories. He was also drawn to the idea of paying forward the mentorship he would be receiving from *ProPublica* to become a better mentor himself, something he saw as crucial to the health of a small paper that has high staff turnover and young reporters. The paper ultimately hired Kate Mishkin, who left her job as a reporter a daily in Virginia for the opportunity to work at the paper and be mentored by Ward for a year. When the bankruptcy announcement broke during the two-week notice period at her previous job, Byers said he "gave her every opportunity to back out… I admire her tenacity for wanting plow forward and take on this challenge."

The bankruptcy announcement of course cast a shadow over the project no matter how enthusiastic the staff was about learning from the *ProPublica* team. And in Ward's case, it had the simultaneously comforting and uncomfortable effect of providing him with extra support. While he was deeply worried about who the new owners would be and what kind of journalism they would want to produce, he would remind himself that "*ProPublica* kind of has my back…[but] lots of my colleagues don't have that."

The risks associated with the bankruptcy were not lost either on Caity Coyne, the Report for America corps member placed at the *Gazette-Mail*. But while she acknowledged that the situation was "challenging" and that "everything's been a little crazy and chaotic," the garrulous and energetic 22-year old reporter didn't seem phased to be beginning her career in journalism under such precarious circumstances. A San Diego native, Coyne attended college at Western

Virginia University (WVU) knowing very little about the state and on something of a whim, she readily admits, because she wanted to leave home and try something new. Like Byers and Ward, she worked on the college newspaper and spent the summer before her senior year interning at the *Gazette-Mail*. Byers encouraged her to apply for RFA and a month after graduating college she was back in the Charleston newsroom.   Coyne said that she had long been torn between her love of newsgathering—the appeal of reporting and writing and the "rush you get when you discover something"-- and her interest in advocacy work in order to "stand up for people" and "make a difference." She said the explicit public service goals of RFA spoke to her desire to combine elements of both, without being forced to leave behind journalism.

RFA corps member Caity Coyne framed by historic moments in
Gazette-Mail coverage/ Sara Rafsky

The program began with an orientation session for the three corps members, which included a road trip through Appalachia with the three senior RFA staff and culminated in a training session at the WVU campus in Morgantown with experts from places like the Solutions Journalism Network, the Google News Lab, and a crash course in financial reporting. (Coyne was enthusiastic about exploring solutions journalism but diplomatically realistic about the

limitations of some of the technology displayed by Google in the rural counties she would be covering. Speaking about the satellite and online maps tools they were shown she said, "those services are really great and cool and I appreciate them, but they're not the most useful" in areas that don't even have cellular service, let alone WiFi).

After the orientation, the three corps members dispersed and Coyne was back in Charleston. Unlike the two other journalists, Will Wright and Molly Born, Coyne was not living in the communities she was assigned to cover. Based in Charleston, her beat was to be the WV southern coalfields, a wide geographic area made up of a number of counties ranging from a 45 minute to two and a half hours drive away. Byers had insisted on this point because, while he wanted to have someone covering what had long been underserved communities, he thought it was important that Coyne be enmeshed in the newsroom. Not only was he worried about her being secluded in a far-flung and impoverished county, but he thought she should also have the experience of most young reporters at a small newspaper who, whatever their beat, get dispatched to other areas when there is breaking news or someone's on vacation and a story needs to get covered. Both she and Byers were conscious of how a privileged position like her's on staff could potentially inspire resentment. Byers said he purposely set her salary on par with the other entry level reporters and they both think the fact that she had previously interned there and was known to the staff helped prevent any problems.

Another perk of being in the Charleston newsroom is taking advantage of the institutional and regional knowledge of people like Byers who have been there for decades, and being mentored by Eric Eyre, the paper's Pulitzer Prize winner. Beyond being a master journalist, Eyre knows the area well and they've gone out on some reporting trips together, Coyne said. Otherwise, despite the challenges of distance, Coyne is using basic shoe-leather journalism

practices to get to know her beat communities and help them get to know her. Beyond staying on top of the news and reading local publications, she says she tries to make on average two trips a week out to the coalfields and makes a habit of regularly calling the secretaries at the local government buildings to check in and see what's new. The week before my visit, she had written a feature about a once-booming coal town that may be forced to dissolve as a municipality[330] and was hoping to find new angles on systemic issues like the water supply and lack of broadband access. In keeping with Byers's prediction, our interview got cut short so she could rush out and cover the unrelated but breaking story of the state-wide teachers' strike.[331] The teachers' strike had also complicated the journalism teaching that is part of the public service requirement of RFA, Coyne said, but she hopes eventually that project can move forward. By teaching children about the work that actually goes into making a newspaper and demystifying the reporting process, she says, maybe they can help create greater respect for and trust in the profession.

Coyne knows she is coming as an outsider into communities that are often mistrustful of journalists with reason, considering the long history of reporters parachuting in to do "poverty porn" stories. She says that while she first fell in love with the state as a college student, the relatively liberal college town of Morgantown is a far step away from the Appalachian southern coalfields and it's now up to her to get "down in the dirt familiar with" her beat. She says she's slowly and diligently cultivating sources and doing as much research as possible so that she "knows what I'm talking about" and as a sign of respect to her subjects. The most useful advice she's been given by *Gazette-Mail* staff, she says, is not to make any assumptions about the

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[330] Coyne, Caity, "Once a booming town, Keystone struggles to hold on," *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, February 18, 2018, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/once-a-booming-town-keystone-struggles-to-hold-on/article_fc44b588-61be-5e11-a6cf-04262135dd21.html

[331] Coyne, Caity, "WV students stand in solidarity with school employees," *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, February 21, 2018, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/education/wv-students-stand-in-solidarity-with-school-employees/article_5d9e658c-be2a-5f3c-aced-7b5a963bf7f8.html

people she is covering. "I think when people come here and talk about 'Trump country' and all these honestly stupid names they have for Appalachia, they go in with a certain story that they're trying to tell... They'll ignore the parts that don't back that story up," she said. "I don't think it's necessarily conscious" or a willful ethical violation. "I think it's just easy to fall in to that trap. [But] no one here is a stereotype."

She herself admits to have become somewhat enamored with the people of West Virginia and Appalachia. "The amount that people here have gone through and persevered," she said, "it's amazing… it's worthy of a lot of respect." Acknowledging that she's only at the very beginning of her career and can't predict the future, she said she'd like to stick around for at least a couple more years. "I owe a lot to this paper. I owe a lot to this city and this region," she said. Coyne said she feels deep gratitude towards the *Gazette-Mail* as the place that's nurtured her career and encourages the kind of journalism she is passionate about—that is if the bankruptcy doesn't interfere.

Five weeks after my visit to Charleston, the *Gazette-Mail* was sold to HD Media, which owns seven other WV newspapers, in conjunction with a group of local investors that includes one public official.[332] Efforts by the public to rally to the newspaper's defense were apparently what had allowed the local investors to scare off a circling "vulture" buyer whose bid had had been favored to win the sale.[333] HD Media laid off 11 employees, which was significantly fewer than the more than 50 threatened by the WARN notice. But Rob Byers, who began as a college intern with Ken Ward and ended decades later as the Executive Editor who gave Caity Coyne her

[332] Pierson, Lacie, "Local investors part of new Gazette-Mail ownership group, *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, April 14, 2018, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/local-investors-part-of-new-gazette-mail-ownership-group/article_35ba91eb-370d-54fc-adef-3b5c20916015.html
[333] Byers, Rob, "Only you have the power to save your local news from corporate vultures," *Time*, April 14, 2018, http://time.com/5239841/local-news-denver-post-digital-first-media-sinclair-broadcasting/

first job, was among them. He was to be replaced by his managing editor, and college friend of more than 30 years, Greg Moore.[334] Citing Byers' legacy at the newspaper and his role in setting up the *ProPublica* project, Ward said: "Any stories that come out of [the ProPublica project] are as much Rob's as mine."

The Lexington Herald-Leader

Far removed from the comradery and the frustrations of a newsroom, Will Wright, another RFA fellow, is learning how to set up shop as a correspondent on his own. Wright was assigned to the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Kentucky's second largest newspaper with a daily circulation of around 49,000[335] and based in the central-north city of Lexington. The *Herald-Leader*, as mentioned in the earlier chapter on the state of local news, has a long history of producing award-winning journalism but has suffered many of the financial pains faced by mid-size newspapers. The paper was formed as the merger of the *Lexington Herald* and the *Lexington Leader* in 1983 under its then owner the Knight Ridder corporation (who had bought the two newspapers a decade earlier) and in 2006 was sold to the McClatchy corporation.[336] Wright, according to the RFA press materials, was tasked with reopening the daily's Pike County bureau covering Eastern Kentucky, which had closed under economic pressure in the 2000s.

Located in the eastern most part of Kentucky near the border with West Virginia, Pike County, known as one of the sites of the famed historical "Hatfield-McCoy feud," is a large and mostly rural area that is a significant producer of coal and natural gas. The booms and busts of

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[334] Pierson, Lacie, "Moore named Charleston Gazette-Mail executive editor," *Charleston Gazette-Mai*l, March 29, 2018, https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/moore-named-charleston-gazette-mail-executive-editor/article_2ec0a654-5386-5217-9c18-8cfe2a864e6e.html

[335] McClatchy 2017 annual report, 7

[336] Wikipedia, "Lexington Herald-Leader", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lexington_Herald-Leader

the coal industry have played an outsized role in shaping its history. Current initiatives, like the inspiring company Bit Source I visited that teaches former miners how to code and be software developers, are looking to develop a post-coal economy. But the industry continues to loom large in the region, as I witnessed firsthand on my trip. After a long, picturesque drive from Charleston, WV through the Appalachian Mountains, my fixer and I stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of Pike County. As I waited to pay, I glanced over my shoulder and saw a young fair-haired man, probably in his 20s, at the cash register next to me. He was covered, head to toe, in soot, his face nearly pitch-black. As if sent by messenger, the meaning for me was clear before I even stepped foot in Pike County: "we're not done with coal in this county just yet."

The economic and political story unfolding in Pike County and the surrounding areas of Eastern Kentucky is a fascinating one, and it was understandable why the *Herald-Leader* would be eager to reestablish a foothold. When setting up my interview with Wright, he suggested I meet him at a local restaurant in the county seat city of Pikeville, where he was based. I asked whether it would be possible for me to stop by the office afterwards because I was eager to see the newly re-opened bureau. The "bureau," he wrote me back, was actually "a desk in my apartment." Wright, it became clear, was completely on his own in Pikeville, about a two-and-a-half-hour drive away from his editors in Lexington.

Ultimately, I met him at a city council meeting, known in Kentucky as "fiscal court," at a former courthouse in downtown Pikeville. Despite the generalizations of Appalachia as impoverished and in postindustrial decline, Pikeville has been doing relatively well in recent years thanks to its local university and a recently opened optometry school. The Main Street area was quaint and well-kept, with freshly painted storefronts interspersed between the copious number of law firms that are the legacy of the workers' compensation litigation industry wrought

by the coal era. The stately building was across a tidy plaza from the local county historical

museum, which to my confusion, I learned when I tried to enter, doubled as the town jail.

During a break from a debate about government workers' compensation at the meeting,

Wright told me that while he was originally from southwestern Pennsylvania, he had gotten his

start in journalism while a student at the University of Kentucky working on the college

newspaper and in internships at newsrooms including the *Herald-Leader*. A year after graduating

from college, during which time he hiked the Appalachian Trail, his former *Herald-Leader*

editor urged him to apply for RFA. He had moved to Pikeville in January and was covering

approximately 13 counties in eastern Kentucky. Like Coyne, he said he tries to drive out to the

other counties a few times a week and was making progress cultivating local sources. He said he

had pretty free rein to choose and find the two to four stories he filed per week, which included

stories about the coal industry and one about rising electricity rates that was critical enough to

provoke an angry call from the energy company's spokesperson.

RFA corps member Will Wright at the Pikeville, KY historic courthouse/ Sara Rafsky

Most notably, in the first weeks of his position in January, he wrote a series of articles

about how citizens in Marin County had gone days without running water after the pipes had

frozen and the general contamination in the water supply.[337] The official overseeing the water

supply in the region entered "early retirement" shortly thereafter and the state government found

money in the budget to address the problem. Waldman and Sennott, the RFA founders, wrote in

an op-ed about the program:

> The articles Wright wrote…were not months-long investigations. He attended community meetings in this usually under-covered part of the state and interviewed residents. His articles illustrate an often neglected point about journalism today: The key solution is not technology. It's having more reporters — a lot of them — on the scene.[338]

[337] Wright, Will, "Five days later, these Eastern Kentucky residents have no running water," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, January 12, 2018, http://www.kentucky.com/news/state/article194459549.html
[338] Waldman, Steven, and Sennott, Charles, "The crisis in local journalism has become a crisis of democracy," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-crisis-in-journalism-has-become-a-crisis-of-democracy/2018/04/11/a908d5fc-2d64-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4_story.html?utm_term=.9132aeff02c8

Besides the veteran *Herald-Leader* Eastern Kentucky reporter Bill Estep, who is about a three-hour drive away and with whom Wright corresponds and occasionally sees, Wright doesn't have much contact with other local journalists, though in a follow-up email in May he said that had improved. He's in touch with his editor every day, who he said told him he should come to Lexington whenever he needed to and, he joked, "just to make sure you're alive kind of thing." Despite an uptick of younger people in Pikeville thanks to the university, meeting people to hang out with has not been easy, he admits, but he's enjoying all the outdoor activities.

While figuring out how to be an independent correspondent has been challenging, particularly in the early days of trying to find stories, he says, he doesn't feel any tension or resentment from local residents or other media outlets. In his own personal essay about the water supply articles, Wright noted that, counter to the "Trump country" stereotype of Appalachians being untrusting and hostile towards outsiders and the media, in this case, reporters had worked closely with local activist and citizen groups desperate to get the story out. "I have been greeted in this region with far more hospitality than distrust or resentment," Wright wrote. He continued:

> People of all backgrounds and political beliefs want, at the very least, to be heard and to be taken seriously… Report For America's mission is to place reporters in areas that deserve more and better local news coverage, and that in doing so, we might restore some trust in journalism. In at least one rural Kentucky county, the strategy seems to be working.[339]

When asked, Wright is honest about the fact that he doesn't know what opportunities the future might bring and can't promise to be loyal to this region for the rest of the career. But so far, he's enjoying it and would like to stick around at least for a bit. "It's a sweet gig," he says. "There's a lot to cover. Basically, you can report on whatever you think is important. I cover an

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[339] Wright, Will, "During a water crisis, residents embrace reporters as allies," GroundTruth Project, April 10, 2018, http://thegroundtruthproject.org/water-crisis-residents-embrace-reporters-allies/

enormous area. I get to drive around. I live and work in an area that I like. So, I think I have it pretty good right now and it's possible if I were to leave, I'd be like, "Goddammit, why the hell did I leave?!"

The Appalachian News-Express

While Wright's experience with the community so far may have been positive, his presence has not been welcomed by all. RFA's decision to use its program to allow the *Herald-Leader* to reestablish its local presence was not warmly received by Jeff Vanderbeck, the publisher of Pike County's local newspaper, the thrice weekly *Appalachian News-Express*. Vanderbeck told me that when the RFA founders visited Pikeville and explained their idea for the initiative, he said to them: "That's great and fine. The problem is the *Leader* hates Eastern Kentucky."

Vanderbeck has the direct, no-nonsense manner of a man, in his own characterization, from the "ghetto" of Patterson, New Jersey, a trait that was frequently noted to me by himself and other Pike County residents. After working in the advertising business for many years in the northeast, he and his wife came to Pikeville in 2000 and he started working at the Lancaster Management-owned *Appalachian News-Express* shortly thereafter. After a series of promotions, he became the publisher in 2007 and grew the company's assets, which includes a printing business and now a handful of other local newspapers in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia.
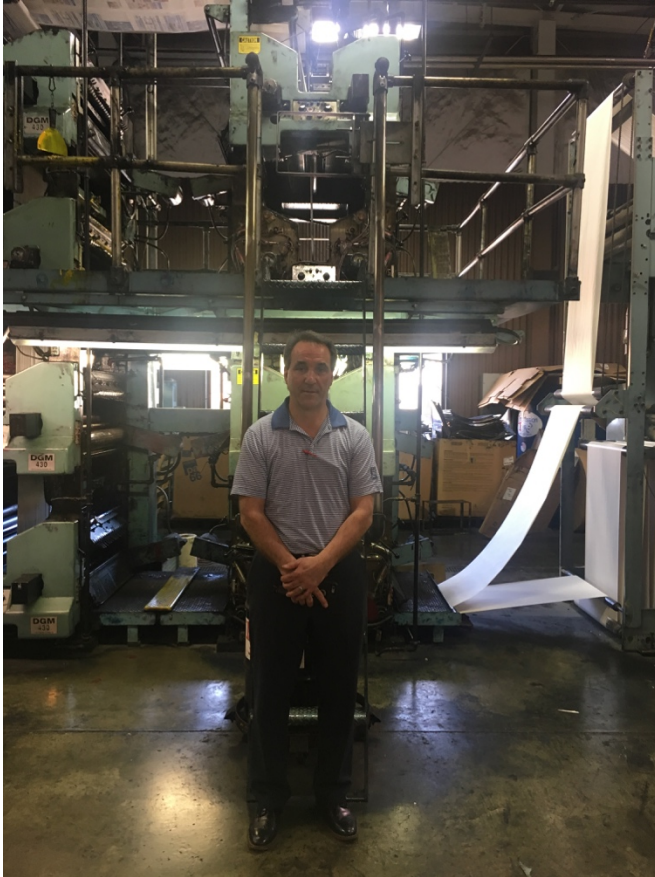
Appalachian News-Express Publisher Jeff Vanderbeck at the paper's printing press/ Sara Rafsky

Like any good newspaper man, he's got a competitive spirit. He's proud that the

company has expanded and seen recent increases in revenue and subscription rates under his

leadership, and did not take kindly to the sudden appearance of a competitor on his home turf.

And particularly not a competitor like the *Herald-Leader*:

> They think the people in Eastern Kentucky are a bunch of no good hillbillies. They ridicule Eastern Kentucky, there's never ever good stories about this region printed in there...I said [to them], you want to fund journalism in rural parts of the world? Don't go to Charleston, don't go to Lexington, if you're going to embed somebody in Pikeville… embed them here… Make it a *News-Express* project…The *Leader*'s a very liberal paper, and you know, that's good for them, I love them. But you know, that's not a real true depiction of what's happening in Eastern Kentucky.
>
> And so, if next year, Report for America is expanded and now they have five kids, you know, 22-year-old kids they're bringing from all over the country who aren't necessarily, maybe don't know this region for example…If they want to partner with me and me only

then, yeah. But if they want to take the stories that are coming out of my backyard and send them outside the region? …That's what I told the guys when they were here, when I found out they were going to put the *Herald-Leader* guy here. I got pretty…I was not happy with it.

When asked about Vanderbeck's criticism, Sennott told me in a phone interview that he greatly respected the work of the *Appalachian-New Express*, but had chosen the *Herald-Leader* because of its "record of excellence in journalism, statewide reach, tradition of strong mentorship, thorough editing process" and the fact that it is a daily. Nonetheless, he said he had invited the *News-Express* to republish all RFA stories and to apply to participate in the next round.

Whether motivated by a desire to defend local pride in his adopted home or to protect his monopoly on local scoops, the ways in which Vanderbeck distinguished the *News-Express*'s coverage from that of the *Herald-Leader*'s also speaks to the different conceptions of the role of local news. Sennott said he believes any good local news organization must combine accountability and community journalism, but based on the short-term nature of RFA and the Local Reporting Network and the applicants they are attracting, both seem best designed to preserve watchdog reporting. Vanderbeck, while he used a different vocabulary, described something more akin to the "good neighbor" ritual role of local media explored in previous chapters. "Whether it's somebody in the church, somebody at the boy scouts, somebody at the school level, or a new family who moved here who doesn't have much support and they've got two or three kids…that has a story," he said. "If it's important to somebody, it's important to us, and we make sure that people get their story told." Vanderbeck was proud of a recent investigative piece the newspaper had published about corrupt practices at a high school basketball team and its coverage of a white nationalist march that occurred weeks before the large-scale clashes in Charlottesville, VA. But he said the most crucial responsibility of community journalism was to "help the community thrive." By doing so, he suggested, the local

media created a bond with the public in a way in which the national media had failed. "I don't care who you are," Vanderbeck said, young or old, liberal or conservative, "if you've made it in the local newspaper, that's credibility." Or as another Pike County resident put it to me: "Everyone wants to know who went to jail, who died, and whose kids are in the paper for sports."

Vanderbeck's negative view of the *Herald-Leader*'s past coverage of Eastern Kentucky (though he said he thought Bill Estep was a great reporter), as well as other outside media outlets, was echoed by a few other Pike County residents with whom I spoke. But a cursory review of Wright's reporting for the *Herald-Leader* so far does surface a handful of feel-good community stories, like a profile of a teenage fisherman with an enormous YouTube following,[340] or at least feel-good*ish*, like an article about a group of middle schoolers who won $150,000 for inventing a device that safely picks up Heroin needles[341] and a job training program for out of work miners.[342] The rest of the stories—about the teachers strike, local corruption, the water crisis etc.--- whether construed as negative or representative would seem to fit the public service needs that RFA was designed to fill.

But to some, the *Herald-Leader*'s past coverage gets lumped in with Louisville, KY native Diane Sawyer's Peabody-winning 2009 "Mountain Dew mouth" story about how the soda was causing tooth decay among Appalachian children,[343] and J.D. Vance's bestselling memoir

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[340] Wright, Will, "Not your average fisherman. He's 17 and his YouTube channel has 34.5 million views," *Lexington Herald–Leader*, February 7, 2018, http://www.kentucky.com/news/state/article198796124.html

[341] Wright, Will, "Kentucky students invented a way to safely pick up dirty needles. They won $150,000," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, April 11, 2018, http://www.kentucky.com/news/state/article208595169.html

[342] Wright, Will, "Finding a future for unemployed miners. This program has big plans for Eastern Kentucky," Lexington Herald-Leader, March 9, 2018, http://www.kentucky.com/news/state/article204324104.html

[343] Gray, Keturah, and Diaz, Joseph, "Mobile clinic treats 'Mountain Dew mouth'," ABC News, February 13, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=6863173

about his childhood in Appalachia, *Hillbilly Elegy*, into a notorious trifecta of Kentuckians who have perpetuated stereotypes of Appalachia to outsiders, in their view, for the sake of awards and profit. Even Wright in his short time in the region noted how when outside media organizations eventually picked up his and other local outlets' reporting on the water crisis,[344] their coverage was looking for ways to tie the story back to Trump's infrastructure plan and whether the president would let down his supporters. "I don't think anybody [in Marin County] is thinking about how Donald Trump is going to save the day with their water district," Wright said. Those reporters would be eager to somehow relate every story to national news, "but local issues are often local issues," he said, and take precedence for people over the big political stories that consume national reporters. (In one of the more refreshing journalism stories of 2018, Wright said that when his father visited and asked him "Who do you think [Robert] Mueller is going to indict next?", he had to confess he'd been so consumed by local news, "I haven't been following that at all.").

The combination of the historical baggage associated with coverage of Appalachia and the new national interest in placing the region into a wider narrative about Trump, inspired an entirely different kind of local news project that spoke to a distinct audience.

iii. **Local journalism as cultural diplomacy: explaining Appalachia to the nation**

Scrolling through her Facebook feed in the weeks after the 2016 election, journalist and West Virginia University (WVU) media professor Dana Coester was getting frustrated with the

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[344] See Jarvie, Jenny, "The water runs milky and can feel like fire. In this impoverished county, Trump's $1.5trillion infrastructure plan may not help," *Los Angeles Times*, http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-kentucky-water-20180212-story.html

ever-increasing number of articles from national and international publications about Appalachia. "When they got it wrong, I wanted to rebut it. And when they did it well, I was like, 'why didn't we write that?'," she told me in a phone interview. "That's our story to write," according to Coester, who says she grew up "rural and poor" in the Ozarks in Southern Missouri before ending up at the local state university, which happened to include the famed Missouri School of Journalism. "We can do it with skill and gravitas and credibility and authenticity."

Coester had already been speaking about doing a collaborative project with journalists at West Virginia Public Broadcasting and the *Daily Yonder*, an online publication hosted by the non-profit Center for Rural Strategies in Kentucky and Tennessee. At the time, they imagined some kind of blog called "Beyond Coal" that would chronicle how the region was being transformed during what would likely be a Clinton presidency. Instead, as it turned out, they put together "100 Days in Appalachia," an online "pop-up publication," as it was originally intended, that would cover the first 100 days of the Trump presidency from the Appalachian perspective. The project was hosted by the WVU Reed College of Media Innovation in Morgantown and funded with seed money of more than $150,000 from the Knight Foundation, The Benedum Foundation, Democracy Fund, and individual donors.[345] When the project proved more successful than they had imagined, they decided to continue beyond the original time period and look at thematic issues like white nationalism and the 2018 mid-term election, as well as issues pertaining to food and culture. The publication has a wide network of local journalist contributors, a number of dedicated staff members and student interns, and produces about one story per day, Coester said.

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[345] Lichterman, Joseph, "More than just a pop-up: How the collaborative newsroom 100 Days in Appalachia has grown," Solution Set, The Lensfest Institute, April 19, 2018, https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/solution-set/2018/04/19/100-days-appalachia-donald-trump/

Unlike the other initiatives profiled here, "100 Days in Appalachia" was specifically designed to reach national journalists and policy makers outside Appalachia, providing them with more nuanced context about the region and elevating local voices.[346] "We didn't want to compete with the regional outlets, because they're struggling," Coester said. "We wanted to partner with them and be sort of the bridge to external audiences." Beyond having their articles inform national coverage, Coester said they encourage media outlets to call them when they are reporting stories in Appalachia to get the local perspective. In the future, she hopes, national media outlets will be even more open to collaborate on reporting and producing stories together with them.

Collaboration in general is key to the project which operates on an open source model with several regional media organizations that allows them to share content with one another and republish directly from the "100 Days" online CMS. While the target audience is outside the community, the publication's reporting practices share affinities with some of the more community-based, engagement projects described in earlier chapters. "We're doing physical things in physical places with people that are very low key," she says. Coester is devising a plan to form what she calls an "editorial advisory board," of people chosen by the "100 Days" team who the national media can call upon when they need to vet context for their stories. "Regular folks who care about their community and are informed," about what's happening, Coester says. Not the "usual suspects" but "ministers and the cab driver who listens to talk radio all day and has a lot he wants to say about political news."

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[346] Bryant, Heather, "'100 Days in Appalachia' nears one-year mark in telling untold stories of rural America," Mediashift, December 8, 2017, http://mediashift.org/2017/12/beyond-100-days-collaboration-supports-100-days-appalachia-nears-1-year-mark/

Coester remains frustrated with the way the national media pinholes Appalachia. Firstly, she said, the region is far bigger and more diverse than people realize. The publication has profiled Muslim residents,[347] for example, and explored the areas of Appalachia that fall outside West Virginia and Kentucky (Appalachia spans from parts of Western New York through Northern Mississippi). Despite the talks of "Trump nation," one article looked at soy farmers in Ohio Valley who stand to lose from the president's proposed trade war with China.[348] Like the *Appalachian News-Express*, another "100 Days" story explained how Pikeville successfully avoided chaos when white nationalists came to town in the weeks before the deadly events in Charlottesville.[349]

Most crucially, she said, journalists at national news organizations fail to understand the fluidity and complexity of Appalachian voters, whose political views they adapt to fit their own narratives. "When I'm reading a piece about the teachers' strike in *New York Times* and every other place, and they've framed it as a liberal, progressive uprising in West Virginia--which it's not," she said, "I'm like, 'Should have talked to us. I've got people on the ground. We could have helped you get a more complex story than that.'" By failing to understand the long history of labor strikes in the state, for example, and framing everything as a simplistic Republicans/Trump vs. Democrats story, the media, in her view, is not only misinforming, but also perpetuating polarization.

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[347] Coester, Dana, "We ask a Muslim-Appalachian with Kurdish roots her response to Immigration ban," 100 Days in Appalachia, January, 2017, https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2017/01/28/ask-muslim-appalachian-kurdish-roots-response-immigration-ban/

[348] Erwin, Nicole, "Trade war fears have Ohio Valley soy growers nervous," 100 Days in Appalachia, April, 2018, http://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2018/04/13/trade-war-fears-have-ohio-valley-soy-growers-nervous/

[349] Adams, Mason, "Policing white-supremacist rallies: Lessons from small-town America, *100 Days in Appalachia*, October, 2017, http://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2017/10/18/policing-white-supremacist-rallies-lessons-small-town-america/

But Coester also blames Appalachians for falling into the trap, including some local journalists who on social media are "really adversarial to people outside the region. It's this very us versus them thing, almost as a badge of honor," she said. "I get it, but how is this helping?...We said we wanted to bridge cultural divides. That means we have to talk to people outside the region and telling them all how stupid they are and how much we hate them probably isn't going to do that." The challenge, she says, is that the very nature of the media ecosystem rewards this kind of framing. "If we publish something that's sort of more divisive, it gets so much engagement," she says. "So I totally see the impetus for media to engage with that. But it's not our mission."

Next up is the mid-term elections, when the national media will likely take interest in Appalachia once again. In the meantime, Coester and the team will be looking for new sources of funding, perhaps beyond non-profits, to extend the publication past 2018. Long term financial sustainability is a pressing issue, but seeing as 100 days have now surpassed 360 and are approaching 500, she's optimistic.[350]

iii.   **What does community journalism look like in the 21st century?**

The Community Stories Lab

In the same time period in which "100 Days in Appalachia" was explaining its region to the outside world, a pilot project in Western Kentucky sought to revitalize the kind of local journalism that has long existed in small communities using a variety of digital and face-to-face measures. "The Community Stories Lab" is a multicomponent project of media consultant Sam

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[350] Lichterman, Joseph, "More than just a pop-up: How the collaborative newsroom 100 Days in Appalachia has grown."

Ford and Temple University media professor Andrea Wenzel, both fellows at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. The lab is looking at how "political polarization and urban-rural divisions are impacting the lives of residents on a local level and processes for building/fortifying stronger local civic communication networks."[351]

In the project's first and second phases, Ford and Wenzel researched and then analyzed the media habits of local residents in Bowling Green (a diverse, college city of approximately 65,000) and Ohio County (a rural county of 24,0000 people spread out across 600 square miles) through a series of focus groups, interviews and media diary assignments. They also asked them questions about how local news affected their relationship with the local community, for example, if their "reading of the news affects how they engage with neighbors of different political persuasions."[352] The report highlighted "how local news outlets might be a potential point of intervention amidst that increased polarization, noting: 'Many participants shared that, while they could no longer talk about national politics with their neighbors or coworkers, or even many friends, they were generally still able to talk about local news and issues.'"[353] Based on this research, Ford and Wenzel devised a series of experiments and pilot projects with local media outlets that included aspects of community engagement and participatory journalism as a means to strengthen local newsrooms as well as residents' trust in local media.

Ford's interest in the issue, he told me, stems from his own childhood in a town of 400 people in Ohio County, where got his start in rural journalism in middle school helping his

[351] See https://samford.wordpress.com/my-projects/

[352] Wenzel, Andrea and Ford, Sam, "Lessons on overcoming polarization from Bowling Green and Ohio County, Kentucky," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 15, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/polarization-public-sphere-lessons-from-bowling-green-ohio-county-kentucky.php

[353] Ford, Sam, Wenzel, Andrea, Bratcher, Lee and Bratcher, Dustin, "Innovation from a 'Rural Journalism Lab'", Medium, March 9, 2018, https://medium.com/@TowCenter/innovation-from-a-rural-journalism-lab-6b280634c858

grandmother with her weekly newspaper society column. The society column would carry

dispatches from different small towns spread out across the large rural area and included

personal announcements of birthday, marriages and deaths; descriptions of local events; and

documentation of out-of-town visitors. And no matter what, according to Ford the column almost

always ended with the phrase: "A good time was had by all."

When his grandmother developed health issues, Ford ended up taking over the column at

age 12. This led to various journalistic endeavors in the local paper like a pro-wrestling column

and popular serialized private investigator series while still in middle school, and eventually

journalism school and a career in media. After years working elsewhere with national media

organizations, Ford ended up back in Kentucky after the 2016 election with a desire to research

the connection between local communication ecosystems, people's relationship to their

communities and with their local news outlets. Later, when he and Wenzel developed their pilot

project phase, Ford wanted to see if could bring back some version of the society column. His

interest was not just nostalgic, he said, but rather he saw them as an important space for rural

communities to stay connected to their neighbors--the ritualistic role of local media that had

appropriated by social media sites that can favor polarization, rather than unity, like Facebook.[354]

The Rural Journalism Lab

The first of these pilot projects, which Ford and Wenzel called the "Rural Journalism

Lab," conducted a series of experiments to see what might drive deeper engagement with and

support of local journalism. The vehicle for this experimentation was the *Ohio County Monitor*, a

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[354] Ford, Sam, "Before Facebook, society columns provided news—and community," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 25, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/facebook-society-columns-community.php

hyperlocal digital news website started by the brothers, Dustin and Lee Bratcher. Ohio County, a large rural area where many families had traditionally worked in tobacco farming and coal mining and 20% of the population lives in poverty, was currently served by just one weekly newspaper, the *Ohio County Times-News*. The *OC Monitor* sought to make local news more "cost-effective, accessible and timely," Ford and Wenzel wrote in a case study about the project for *CJR*.[355] After determining they could not survive on advertising revenue, the Bratcher's turned to a subscription model in 2017. The lab tested various strategies like podcasting, livestreaming, sponsored posts on Facebook, and events at the local library to see if any might drive subscriptions.

In the small back room overflowing with old computer equipment that serves as the *OC Monitor* headquarters, the Bratcher brothers told me their pathway to being digital journalism entrepreneurs was somewhat accidental. Dustin had started his career laying out the sports page at the *Times-News*, before eventually picking up other responsibilities, but got tired of the grueling schedule and needed more flexibility to take care of their ailing father. Perceptive about digital trends, he could see early on what the Internet was doing to media. Considering the low overhead costs to get started, Dustin saw an opening in 2012 to cover local news with the timeliness and regularity that the digital age required and that the county newspaper couldn't replicate. He brought in Lee, who had a background as a radio DJ and who both brothers consider to be the better writer, and sold off a piece of family farmland to underwrite the initial costs.

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[355] Ford, Sam and Wenzel, Andrea, "Sourcing innovation from a 'rural journalism lab,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 14, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/sourcing-innovation-from-a-rural-journalism-lab.php

Dustin and Lee Bratcher/ Sara Rafsky

Lee said they stick to the a "just the facts, ma'am approach" and mostly aggregate the

day's news from press releases and the like. But where the brothers shine is in extensive

coverage of city and county meetings and legislative sessions, "stuff that will affect Ohio County

people," Dustin said, and whose timeliness and thoroughness, "you'll never see in the paper."

Like any good journalist, they lament the popularity of crime stories and wish more people

would read the occasional, longer features articles and accountability stories about issues like

how the community pays to repair potholes.

The brothers abandoned the project for a few years to work for a bigger regional news

site, but then returned full time to the *OC Monitor* in 2017. By the time they switched to a

subscription model as a means to generate desperately needed revenue, the site had close to

10,000 Facebook likes and was getting, on average, between 30,000 and 40,000 unique monthly

visitors.[356] The *OC Monitor* instituted a soft paywall system, except for what they consider to be public services and make free: obituaries, public safety coverage, and community events. Subscriptions cost $5 a month or $48 per year. The brothers, who when together have the verbose and cutting banter of a comedic duo, minced no words when summarizing the response of the community to the new system: "Go to hell," Lee said. "Literally, one of them told us to 'go to hell.'" The brothers said despite willingness to pay for the local newspaper, many people are unfamiliar with the digital ecosystem and had trouble understanding what differentiated them from a free Facebook page, which is what drives most traffic to the site. Other residents had difficulty navigating how to sign up for a subscription.

With Ford and Wenzel's help, they experimented with a number of strategies to see what might inspire local community members to pay for news that, by and large, they seemed to like reading. Facebook ads were not successful, increased livestreaming suffered from rural connectivity issues and a podcasting series did not take off. The most promising approaches, Ford and Wenzel wrote in the *CJR* case study, were pilot projects that focused on repurposing and reinventing community traditions. These programs included a community contributor program modeled on Sam's beloved social columns, where five local residents wrote columns on topics of their choosing. Another was a 'liars table tour,' in which Ford and the Bratchers got up at the crack of dawn to travel to convenience stores around the county. These spaces are some of the only remaining public spaces in many rural towns and where people tend to gather there and chat about goings-on.[357]

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[356] Ford, Sam and Wenzel, Andrea, "Sourcing innovation from a 'rural journalism lab,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*
[357] Ford, Sam and Wenzel, Andrea, "Sourcing innovation from a 'rural journalism lab,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*

Success at the end of this period of experimentation from October 2017 through January 2018 was decidedly modest: the *OC Monitor* netted 39 subscribers to the approximately 100 it already had.[358] A public event at the local library titled "How Does a News Business Work?" attracted exactly one person--the local mayor. But 15 people attended an event about the community contributor system and a third of the new subscribers were during the 12-day period in which the site ran the columns, whose traffic rivaled crime coverage. Ford and Wenzel interpreted this as a sign that increased engagement with the community, "ritual"-evoking events that brought communities into the fold, were the most promising. Only the local mayor was interested in the inside baseball of how the *Monitor* worked, apparently, but at least a small group of people were intrigued by the possibility of getting involved themselves. And while the population interested in participating in the community columns for the most part skewed towards people who were already civically involved in some way and more invested in local news, Ford noted, the 'Liars Table tour" allowed the Bratchers to reach and interact with a sector they might not have otherwise.

The brothers have plenty of dreams of what they would like to do with the *OC Monitor* if the business takes off: Dustin is fascinated by livestreaming and would like to start broadcasting local sports games and more county meetings if the area's poor connectivity allows for it; Lee dreams of some kind of long-form documentary project that interviews the area's elderly citizens about the county's history. By living at home with their mother and keeping costs low they've been able to get by for now, despite at one point having as little as $200 in their bank accounts, but no one knows how long they'll be able to keep going. "You can't eat integrity," Lee said. As

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[358] Ford, Sam and Wenzel, Andrea, "Sourcing innovation from a 'rural journalism lab,'" *Columbia Journalism Review*

Ford and Wenzel concluded, "the question remains, though, whether the slow process of community engagement, trust building, and media literacy that will be required to build the base for a subscription model will hit the point where it becomes sustainable for Dustin and Lee to maintain The *Ohio County Monitor* as their primary job."

In the meantime, the brothers are "trying not to look too far ahead," Lee said. "You know that light at the end of the tunnel? Sometimes it's a train." Dustin said he is motivated to keep providing community news despite the lack of recognition by local residents of the service they provide and their financial struggles, because, "if we don't do it, no one will." His biggest fear, he said, "is we're about three to five years too early." All they need, according to the brothers, is around 1,500 subscribers to make the business viable. Three thousand would be a dream. If only "3,000 people would say, 'I like what they're doing. I want to support those guys," Lee mused. "Then we could go out and do some cool stuff."

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The Ohio County Times-News

To get a clearer sense of the ecosystem in which the Bratcher brothers are working, I visited the offices of the weekly *Ohio County Times-News*, which along with its in-house radio talk show, is the only other media outlet based in Ohio County. The *Times-News*, which is the product of a merger between the two county newspapers, has been around in various iterations since the 19th century. It is also the paper where Ford got his start as a social columnist, a practice his mother continues to this day, though the total number of weekly columns has now dwindled to two. The paper has a circulation of approximately 7,436 and is available for a yearly subscription of $25, or digitally as a downloadable PDF. Advertising, particularly political ads and legally required public notices, provides most of the revenue.

When longtime editor David McBride retired in 2016 at age 82, the paper turned to a fresh face to take over the reins: then 25-year old Seth Dukes, who had worked for three months at the *Times-News*'s sister paper, the *Leader-News*, in the near-by Muhlenberg County where he grew up. (The local Andy Anderson Corporation owns the two newspapers as well as a state-wide online news website, MyKynews.com, and a printing company). Dukes, who was fresh out of Western Kentucky University with an English degree and had no journalism experience to speak of, was originally hired at the *Leader-News* for a typist position. "I had never even looked at an AP style book," he told me. He says he was quickly given more responsibilities, however, and in his three months at the paper was soon writing articles, taking photographs and helping with the lay-out.

In August, 2016, Dukes took over as editor at the *Times-News*, joining a staff that consists of a graphic designer, an ad manager and a receptionist. He does all of the reporting, writing, editing, and some of the lay-out himself. Dukes, whose office is decorated with a poster of the Kramer character from the TV show Seinfeld and has a bookshelf lined with Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu's writings on photography, loves taking photographs for the paper and profiling quirky artists and poets he has found in the community. He also makes an effort to attend as many city council and fiscal court meetings as he can. The county is so large, however, he says it's impossible to cover everything. He encourages local residents to send in photos with captions of local events and will occasionally pay someone to go record a government meeting he can't attend. When I ask him his views on journalism buzzwords like "community engagement" and "dialogue journalism," he said, pointing to these kinds of practices and his own personal relationships with people in the community, that they just reflect the kind of journalism that has always been practiced in small towns.

Seth Dukes, Ohio County Times-News editor, with the paper's archives, left and in his office, right/ Sara Rafsky

The *Times-News* continues to serve a significant constituency, he said, who because of age (younger people are increasingly leaving rural areas) or the county's poor connectivity, can't access digital news. For this reason, he doesn't see the Bratchers, with whom he is friendly, as competition. But he is also trying to use all means, personal and digital, to interact more with the community. Dukes said he answers almost all messages sent to the paper's Facebook page, whose activity he has significantly increased, no matter what time of the day or night. He also tries to get out into the community as much as possible, which was less frequent under the paper's previous elderly editor. "People have gotten used to seeing me," he said.

Dukes, like the Bratchers, stressed the straight factual nature of his reporting and the efforts he takes to keep any whiff of opinion out of the newspaper. All three journalists said this was the kind of reporting people wanted to read, but it also seems tied to the realities of covering a small community in which they live. Dukes said his interactions with local officials are mostly positive and he gets along well with the residents of Ohio County. He has, however, had a few

people storm out of the newspaper's offices when he refused to withhold their name from an arrest report.

Dukes said he views his first responsibility as keeping people in a dispersed rural area informed about matters of public interest. But he also wants to provide an outlet to show off the accomplishments of the community and sees both perspectives as performing a public service. Ohio County residents' mistrust of many national news outlets runs high, but "when they say, 'the media' in a negative sense," according to Dukes, "they're certainly not talking about us. I think people appreciate us."

The Bowling Green Civic Assembly[359]

For its second pilot project, the Community Stories Lab turned its eyes back to Bowling Green, the third most populous city in Kentucky. While it is located in the reliably Republican-voting Warren County, the faculty and students at Western Kentucky University and the fact that the city has resettled more than 10,000 refugees over the past 35 years makes it a diverse and multifaceted city.[360] Ford and Wenzel partnered with the daily newspaper the *Bowling Green Daily News*, as well as the public policy institute, American Assembly at Columbia University, and the civic tech company, Pol.is, to conduct an experiment in participatory democracy called the "Bowling Green Civic Assembly." The three-part initiative included a "virtual town hall," followed by a face-to-face town hall event and a follow-up community workshop the next day. The virtual town hall used pol.is's participatory survey software to curate a 10-day period in

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[359] Much of the following section will also be published in an upcoming report on co-creation by MIT's Open Documentary Lab

[360] Wenzel, Andrea and Ford, Sam, "Lessons on overcoming polarization from Bowling Green and Ohio County, Kentucky," *CJR*

which Bowling Green residents proposed topics based on the question "What do you believe should change in Bowling Green/ Warren County in order to make it a better place to live, work and spend time?" The participants then voted to what extent they agreed with the various topics proposed by the other participants. 2,025 people voted on 607 statements (culled down through a process of moderation from 897). Pol.is's software then surfaced where the most common points of agreement fell. The technical and philosophical framework of the survey is meant to illuminate points of consensus within a community, rather than the sites of division.

From there, the coordinators convened an in-person town hall hosted by the *Daily News* in an elegantly decorated event space in downtown Bowling Green in late February, which I attended. Roughly 250 local officials, political candidates, community leaders, journalists, and local residents gathered to discuss the most frequent topics raised in the survey: quality of life; crime/policing/drug enforcement & addiction; and education/workforce. For each section, local officials were given the opportunity to present their positions on the issues that were raised in survey and then the floor was opened up to the event's attendees to comment. The Community Workshop the next day was billed as an opportunity for community leaders and citizens to work together on solutions to the problems raised. Throughout this process, reporters from the *Bowling Green Daily News* would be covering the events, and more purposely, taking note for future reporting priorities based on the concerns raised by local citizens.

While the organizers were pleased with the rates of virtual participation and physical turnout and the number of topics covered was ambitious, the two face-to-face events were about as messy as community organizing meetings, both low and high tech, tend to be. How deeply the *Daily News* journalists follow up on the concerns raised by the Bowling Green residents remains to be seen. But Joe Imel, the director of media operations at the *Daily News*, told me that he saw

the Civic Assembly as being in line with the newspaper's core mission to report on and engage with the community, "to be a good partner and a good steward of information in this town." While Imel said he didn't see the *Daily News* inviting local residents into the newsroom for participatory reporting projects anytime soon, he did believe the initiative was important to put journalists and the communities they cover into more direct conversation about the topics citizens care about like road projects and broadband access, rather than just "reporting on events after they happen." He also saw the in-person events as a formidable opportunity for the newsroom to flex its power as a convener and put citizens in direct contact with the people who can help them and wield power over their lives. "I haven't seen that many movers and shakers in Bowling Green and Warren County in one room in a long time," he said. After one local resident expressed his frustration over such classic community issues as garbage collection and dog poop, Imel made sure the concerned citizen and a local official had each other's phone numbers afterwards.

The Civic Assembly is just one strategy Imel is exploring to keep the *Daily News* relevant. Originally a photographer (he was Ford's photojournalism teacher in college), Imel capitalized on his digital and media savvy to work his way up to a senior management role at the paper. While he does a little bit of everything--he says he has a toe in operations, tech, editorial, and business--Imel is particularly focused on the modernization of the legacy news outlet, which is still run by the Gaines family that has owned it since the late 19th century. His interest in updating old news practices for the 21st century is exemplified in the hobby that has made him some of a local celebrity: @joeimel, the twitter feed he uses to post everything he hears on his police scanner and has 49,000 followers.

Bowling Green Daily News Director of Media Operations, Joe Imel, with a sign of his eponymous twitter handle/ Sara Rafsky

Like most metro dailies, the *Daily News* has seen its circulation numbers decline and has not had the influx of digital subscriptions it had hoped for, Imel said. Things aren't so bad however, the newsroom still has 22 employees, down from around 32 at its height, more than any other newsroom "between Louisville and Nashville," according to Imel. Beyond the reduction in readership and technological transformation, Imel says the levels of polarization in the community have also worsened over time. While it's always been a conservative area, he said now he has had readers complain the daily is becoming too liberal when it has published wire articles from the AP or the *Washington Post* as filler pieces if there is extra space in the paper, a common practice that has occurred for decades. Still, he said:

> We are the paper of record and at the end of the day when historians look back for facts, they won't go to Facebook, they won't go to Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat. They will go to the local paper because nobody else is going to have them. Nobody else is going to have that taxes went up or that there was an investigation into misappropriation of funds in some place or who died, who was born. When newspapers are gone, people will realize what they meant to them.

At least one Bowling Green resident who participated in the Civic Assembly seemed to take that message to heart. Claudia Haynes, a retired school teacher, told me after the community workshop that she watches MSNBC religiously, but had ended her subscription to the *Daily News* years ago because she was frustrated by its conservative editorial page.

Claudia Haynes, retired school teacher, attended the Civic Assembly/ Sara Rafsky

"I lost touch with what was happening locally and I lost touch with my community," she said. Haynes said the Civic Assembly experience was useful because the pol.is results had indicated that the issue she is most passionate about, LGBTQ rights, was among the most divisive in the survey. "It just shows me that there's still a lot work to do," she said. Moreover, it made her see the value of being engaged on local issues, that it was possible to engage in civic discourse locally in a productive way, and maybe even re-subscribe to the *Daily News*. "I have

an incentive now to reconnect with my local news and follow what comes next and how they report on this initiative."

Whether the experience of the Civic Assembly is a one-off or continues, it was an interesting attempt at specifically and physically manifesting the civic engagement and participatory democracy role that is often abstractly assigned to the press. Imel succinctly described the extent of most people's personal interactions with their local paper as: "There are birth announcements, there are death announcements, and then there is the arrest report." If the *Daily News* continues on this path, perhaps there will be a few more.

In Conclusion – Questions for Moving Forward

Over the course of this thesis, I have made the argument that the current national debates about the role of media in democracy, polarization and bridging divides could learn much from focusing on the local. Local politics is where many of the policies that are most likely to impact people's lives occur and local community life is where many of the greatest opportunities for civic action take place. Local journalism is essential for informing citizens about the former and keeping citizens connected to their communities to participate in the latter.

My goal with this text is to position local media as a tool for informing citizens so they can be civically engaged and hold the powerful accountable, as well as keeping communities together. This can only happen if 1) we recognize local accountability journalism as being as critical to participatory democracy as the widely celebrated reporting currently coming out of Washington, and if 2) we value local news's cohesive societal role as a vehicle of fellowship and community identification, rather than view it as an afterthought. I've chosen in this text to frame and contextualize these characteristics with 20ᵗʰ century media theory, in particular James Carey's delineation of the transmission and ritual roles of communication. But the purposes of both these models, in my more expansive reading, remain relevant even in the altered media ecosystem of the 21ˢᵗ century. Entire industries of activism, philanthropy and academia are being geared towards saving the news industry from its economic collapse, restoring trust in the media and finding ways to combat political polarization and strengthen democracy. Combining these efforts and channeling them towards local news might, proverbially speaking, offer the most bang for their buck.

In that case, what lessons can we learn from the examples currently underway in Kentucky and West Virginia? My research in the region illustrated the many functions of local

news in society. I found classic examples of local investigative and accountability journalism that challenged the powerful and kept citizens informed so they could participate in civic life. And I saw small town and rural news organizations, in print and online, weave individual moments—births and deaths, triumphs and defeats—into community stories.

Their contributions to local life was apparent, but how long they will survive the climate of financial uncertainty was less clear. Future research will judge if the new initiatives profiled in the case study have been successful, but there is first the question of deciding on the metrics. The question of longevity and sustainability is of course central. Under its new ownership, will the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* still be producing hard-hitting investigative reporting five years from now? What happens to Ward when the *ProPublica* project has been completed? Does the predilection of non-profit funding for "impactful" stories skew journalistic activity towards long-term, sexy projects at the expense of necessary daily reporting? As Ward told me, "Show me a foundation that wants to give me a million dollars to cover Charleston city council or Kenawha County Commission. If you show me that, then that's a foundation that's committed to local news."

Report for America sees its corps of young, dedicated journalists as exactly the people who should be filling that void of daily reporting. Sennott told me they will be measuring success by quantifying if coverage has increased in places where there was previously little, and if the selected candidates, newsrooms and communities are happy about the process. Nine more corps members are to be deployed in June and if the pilot phase is successful, he says, the total number will double in 2019. In 2020--funding willing, of course--he hopes to scale up to 250. Sennott doesn't include in those metrics the question of whether any of these young journalists choose to stay in the region afterwards. But Ward, when reflecting on the experience, said to me

that he felt the philosophical impact on the corps members was equally important. He wanted Caity Coyne to come away with the impression that "You can go work in Iowa or Kentucky or West Virginia, and do really rich journalism, and make a decent living, and have a good life. You encourage people that this isn't just your gig that gives them some clips to go work at the *New York Times*." Based on early indications from my time with her, at the end of this year Coyne will have had an invigorating experience doing on the ground journalism in a newsroom filled with people she deeply respects and admires. But she also will have seen her first journalism mentor, Rob Byers, a man who joined the same newsroom when he was her age, lose his job eight months after steering the paper towards a Pulitzer Prize. It's hard to say what the impact of both of these experiences on her career will be in the long-term. Pike County has already seen the benefits of Will Wright's impressive reporting on the water crisis. Will the "bureau" stay open after he leaves? Can RFA and the *Appalachian News-Express* work together as a unified front in advancing Sennott's vision of "local news as a binding agent for community?"

And as to the sustainability question, what happens when the funding dries up? The increase in local news funding has occurred, paradoxically, as a byproduct of the national soul searching around the election of Donald Trump. If this moment passes, will the funding of RFA and even *ProPublica* disappear as well? The Community Stories Lab's niche experiments with for profit funding strategies offer intriguing examples of using community traditions as a spark for engagement, though the preliminary results on the viability of subscription models for hyperlocal news websites were not overwhelmingly positive. Ford said one of their research questions was whether experimentation on hyperlocal outlets, where the operating costs are so low, could be useful on a broader level from a funding and investment perspective. But he also

raised the question, however, of whether a successful initiative to improve local media and community, something rooted in the specificity of place, can ever really be designed to scale in the first place.

I am concluding, as I warned at the beginning, with more questions than answers and more proposals for conceptual frameworks rather than paths of action. Yet while the case studies and phenomena I am researching are too nascent to provide any prescriptive solutions, there are some general takeaways that have crystallized from my time in West Virginia and Kentucky. Local journalism is often romanticized as courageous investigative reporting or dismissed as sensationalistic fluff. While both of these exist, and the former is essential, this dichotomy ignores the broad and necessary scope of news that lies in-between. Will Wright's reporting on the water crisis in Eastern Kentucky was not the result of leaked documents or a deep data dive, rather just showing up. Merely having boots on the ground, to use a metaphor in line with RFA's service corps philosophy, can often deliver accountability journalism and keep the powerful in check (and it may be cheaper). The long-term success of industry buzzwords and funding trends like "engagement" and "dialogue journalism" remains to be seen. In many small towns, however, the practice of building local relationships and accepting reporting from volunteer contributors has long existed—it's just called "journalism." Keeping funders interested in supporting this kind of local news once these terms go out of fashion may be a challenge. But while it may be less exciting and demonstrably "impactful" as big investigative stories (which need more funding as well), it is crucial in order to keep communities—and therefore the country—together. In this vein, funders and people working to strengthen local journalism will have to be thinking about ways to incentivize reporters to stay local as part of the process. RFA is admirably putting talented young reporters like Caity Coyne and Will Wright in the region, but it cannot alone

figure out how provide the financial security necessary to ensure a future generation of veteran local journalists like Ken Ward Jr.

Whether viewed through the lens of political and media theory, or seen up close on the ground in local newsrooms, in the course of researching and writing this thesis it's become ever more apparent to me that local journalism, in whatever medium or form it might take, is a vital civic institution. It is critical to ensuring governments continue to work in the interest of the public, and that communities stay together and dedicated to the idea of engaged citizenry. What is not clear is whether market forces will be able to sustain it, whether the political appetite will ever exist to financially support it through public subsidies, or whether non-profit foundations are willing to commit their resources to maintaining it in the long-term. It is beyond the scope of my expertise to advocate for a specific remedy, but it is my hope to underscore to all parties the urgency of doing so quickly. The stakes of keeping communities together and governments honest in the political and social climate of 2018 are quite high. When local journalism is gone, to paraphrase the *Bowling Green Daily News*'s Joe Imel, people will realize what it meant to them.

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