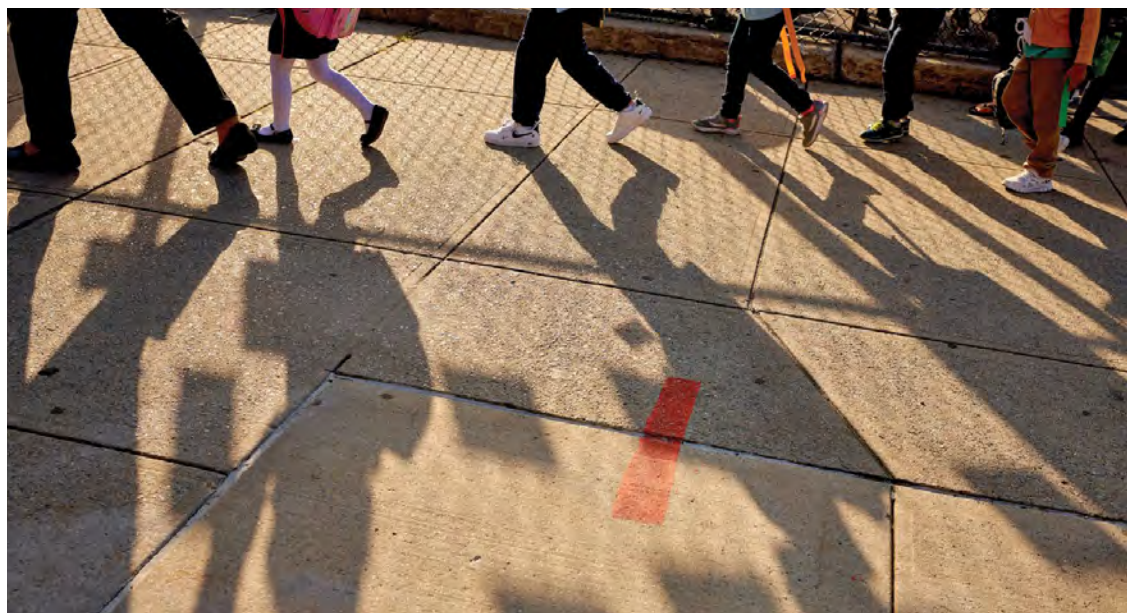# The ROADMAP for LOCAL NEWS

*An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs*

**Published February 2, 2023**

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The opportunity now is to shepherd and accelerate a transition to an emergent civic media system. This new ecosystem looks different from what it will replace: while the commercial market rewarded information monopolies, what is emerging now are pluralistic networks in which information is fluid, services are shared, and media is made in cooperation with the people it seeks to serve.

# Contents

# Executive Summary

Cities and towns across the United States are in an information crisis. Local news is collapsing or has collapsed. People don't have the basic information that they need to build functioning communities. Rampant disinformation is being weaponized by extremists. Democratic participation and representation are under threat.

This escalating information crisis has sparked a new practice that holds the possibility of restoring, and even improving, the civic health of our communities. This practice, which we call **civic media**, carries forward the most valuable traditions of American broadcast and newspaper journalism by dedicating itself to informing the public, elevating voices, and impacting public policy and the processes of self-government. But it also builds on that legacy by transforming who produces journalism and how they produce it, expanding journalism's forms, and sharpening the definition of what it is for.

Civic media seeks not simply to "inform" or "entertain," but to equip people with the information they need to make the places they live better: **civic information**.

A long-standing, long-deficient legacy news ecosystem is currently—and intractably—in decline. But networks of civic media practitioners—in digital news startups, grassroots community groups and think tanks, libraries and schools, and public media institutions across the country—are blossoming and poised for dramatic expansion.

Based on 51 interviews across the local news field, we recommend that a coalition of media practitioners, pro-democracy advocates, funders, and government leaders join forces to ensure that civic information rapidly becomes a ubiquitous asset in every community in the United States. To do this, this coalition will need to mobilize an immediate infusion of philanthropic resources that can catalyze lasting change by pursuing four strategies:

1. Coordinate work around the goal of expanding "civic information," not saving the news business;

2. Directly invest in the production of civic information;

3. Invest in shared services to sustain new and emerging civic information networks; and

4. Cultivate and pass public policies that support the expansion of civic information while maintaining editorial independence.

Of course, a report can't solve a crisis. But there is a growing, galvanized movement ready to step up, in unison, with rigor and speed, to address our deepening civic challenges. This work must include all those who care about and consume civic information: practitioners in legacy and emerging news systems, people who care about democracy, and people who value and crave civic information to power their lives. Each of us has a role to play in ensuring that every community in the United States has the civic information it needs to thrive.

> "*To me, no solution can be imposed on a community; it has to emerge out of that community. It has to come from a diverse plurality of groups coming together around challenges.*"
>
> **MANOLIA CHARLOTIN, STORYTELLER AND STRATEGIST**

# FIELD ENGAGEMENT

From June to September 2022, seven interviewers spoke with a diversity of thought leaders and practitioners from across the country. These interviews included 51 individuals from:

- Nonprofit and commercial media across all forms of distribution—print; radio; broadcast; digital; SMS;

- Leaders of member organizations and news networks; and

- News funders and researchers.

We asked interviewees a series of questions to get their perspectives on what was required to fulfill the civic information needs of all Americans. That data was synthesized and grouped into common themes by the authors and authoring committee.

In October 2022, these themes were shared with all interview participants for feedback. Four group discussions were convened to solicit more input to the themes and flesh out more details. A majority of the interviewees attended, where they shared ideas, respectfully debated, and provided perspective on the direction of this roadmap. This feedback was incorporated into the final report.

The individuals who were interviewed throughout this process are:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Ashley Alvarado | Simone Coxe | Kevin Merida |
| Sarah Alvarez | Sue Cross | Stefanie Murray |
| Nicole Avery Nichols | Adeshina Emmanuel | Michael Ouimette |
| Stewart Bainum | Jim Friedlich | Tom Rosenstiel |
| Madeleine Bair | Alison Go | Julie Sandorf |
| Christopher Baxter | Joe Goldman | Janine Scott |
| Alicia Bell | Andrew Golis | Evan Smith |
| Amanda Bennett | Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro | Robin Sparkman |
| Sarabeth Berman | Andrea Hart | Jodi Rave Spotted Bear |
| Carroll Bogert | Victor Hernandez | Ann Stern |
| Lolly Bowean | Ken Herts | Matt Thompson |
| Jim Brady | Nadine Hoffman | John Thornton |
| Tracy Brown / WBEZ | Mukhtar Ibrahim | Doug Ulman |
| Paulette Brown-Hinds | Katy Knight | Sonam Vashi |
| Heather Bryant | Chris Krewson | Steve Waldman |
| Manolia Charlotin | Wesley Lowery | Lauren Williams |
| Neil Chase | Rashad Mahmood | Kinsey Wilson |

# Glossary of Terms

- **Civic Information:** High-quality, verifiable information that enables people to respond to collective needs by enhancing local coordination, problem-solving, systems of public accountability, and connectedness.

- **Civic Media:** Any practice that produces civic information as its primary focus.[1]

- **Civic Information Practitioner:** Any individual who informs, engages, and equips communities to engage in deliberative democracy and self-determination.

- **Civic Information Network:** Any coalition of individuals, organizations, and/or institutions that work to operate shared services, deploy field support, and strengthen point-to-point connections among members—including collectives, cooperatives, communities of practice, conservancies, consolidations, and other forms of collective action.

- **Information Ecosystem:**[2] The sum total of people and products that produce, verify, and distribute civic information in a geographic area, maintaining civic infrastructure that is as vital to the healthy functioning of a community as clean air, safe streets, good schools, and public health.[3]

- **Community:** A social group with common interests and a sense of belonging; can be geographic, identity, and/or more.

*We want to acknowledge that some of the terms we use in this report, like "civic media" and "civic information," have been used previously. We hope this report builds upon previous work and can be used to better define the characteristics of this emergent system. While we understand the challenges involved in labeling a growing and evolving field—especially terms in "civic language"[4]—we believe that the need for mobilization in the field of civic media is greater than ever, and necessitates a rallying flag.*

# Introduction:
# Out of Crisis, an Opportunity

The path out of this crisis starts with telling a new story—one that begins with catastrophic decline, but heralds the emergence of an unprecedented opportunity.

As the internet grew, local newspapers suffered precipitous declines. Between 2002 and 2020, news publishers lost $24 billion in annual revenue.[5] Two thousand five hundred papers shuttered outright.[6] Many that remained became known as "ghost newspapers," publishing mostly on national news with very little original reporting on their local communities. During this time, more reporters lost their jobs than coal miners.[7]

As a result, more and more people lived in news deserts, with no way to get to know their neighborhood schools, state legislature, local arts scene, or even their own neighborhoods. At the same time, addictive social media feeds and bombastic cable news chyrons became filled with increasingly polarizing, and sometimes outright false, national stories.

As polarization and information chaos set in, the value of what had been lost became painfully clear. For over a century, local newspapers had served as singular institutions in American life, exposing tax fraud in San Francisco, pension padding in Milwaukee, improper relationships in Detroit, and wasted public resources in Miami, to name just four of the thousands of news stories that led to reformed institutions, rewritten laws, jailed officials, and a more informed public.[8]

Local newspapers were "the fourth estate," an independent check on opaque, consolidated financial and political power. And unlike talking heads on cable news or anonymous viral Twitter accounts, local newspaper reporters adhered to professional standards of fairness, worked with editors, and checked their facts.

"The next 10 or 15 years in this country are going to be a halcyon era for state and local political corruption," former *Baltimore Sun* reporter and creator of *The Wire* David Simon told a Senate panel in 2009. "It is going to be one of the great times to be a corrupt politician."

Simon's dire predictions have come true. In towns that lost their newspapers, researchers have chronicled a toll on democracy itself. Communities with less local news experienced increased polarization, more government corruption, fewer people running for office, lower attendance at public meetings on community issues, a declining sense of belonging, and a decline in rates of voting. (One study showed that reading a local newspaper made someone 13 percent more likely to vote.[9])

These devastating losses, though, have also sparked rebuilding and reinvention. In communities across the country, people have stepped up to fill the gaps being created by the decline of newspapers. Inside local papers that remained—from big-brand dailies to smaller hyperlocal and ethnic papers—publishers and reporters alike have brought a renewed sense of mission to serving their

> " *This lack of information contributes to an onslaught of social, educational and economic ills that are plaguing our communities.*
>
> **JODI RAVE SPOTTED BEAR, INDIGENOUS MEDIA FREEDOM ALLIANCE**

"*Reimagining journalism starts by recognizing what you don't know. We at newsrooms no longer sit on thrones and act as gatekeepers.*"

**VICTOR HERNANDEZ, WBUR**

communities. Many public media stations have scaled up their local news and reporting efforts and built, bought, and partnered with digital news outlets to reach new audiences.[10] And all across the country, in small towns and big cities and state capitals, journalists have joined forces with philanthropists and concerned local residents to start new organizations devoted entirely to serving their communities' civic information needs.

To write this report, we spoke to 51 leaders in the field that has emerged from the ashes of the devastated local news industry. These practitioners are mobilized by a common mission to build and scale civic media that serves these local community information needs.

Our conversations with them make clear that this community constitutes a movement in the making, one that is not merely adapting to a challenged business model but reimagining the work of local journalism itself. We call the work this movement is producing **civic information**, and the practice of creating it **civic media**.

The business story of the collapse of newspapers has been well-documented within the industry, as has the need for and emergence of new funding models being pioneered by civic media. The public goods being produced by the newspaper business model—civic information that benefited even those who didn't pay for it, like coverage of local government, courts, and schools—were being subsidized by consumer and advertiser demand for coverage of sports, entertainment, weather forecasts, and classified listings. Competition from new sources and services on the internet for those commercial parts of the newspaper bundle extinguished those subsidies.



PHOTO COURTESY: CITY BUREAU

In response, civic media organizations have adopted, innovated, and expanded revenue models that have long sustained organizations producing civic and cultural public goods. Some commercial newspapers converted to nonprofits or began soliciting donations to supplement ad and subscription revenue. Many public media organizations made their investments in original local reporting and programming a key element of their traditional pledge drive messaging and expanded their listener and donor support. Many created new non-profit organizations altogether. Others experimented with B Corps, co-ops, and other mission-driven commercial structures.

*"Look at the asset base in your community and how do you build on it? It looks different in each community. How do you grow it and sustain it?"*

**JULIE SANDORF, CHARLES H. REVSON FOUNDATION**

*"In the next 10 years, we will see a new ecosystem of independent and interconnected news media, a mix of nonprofit and for-profit that each serves a distinct audience but works in consortium with others at the local, state, and national level."*

**SUE CROSS, INSTITUTE FOR NONPROFIT NEWS**

But civic media practitioners aren't just changing the business model: they're changing the work itself. The changes they are making represent needed change from historical practice. From the 1968 *Kerner Commission Report*[11] to the last American Society of News Editors survey in 2018,[12] study after study affirms the professional media workforce is, and has been, disproportionately white, male, able-bodied, and cis, and made up of people who are significantly more wealthy, educated, and politically left than the people in their coverage areas, resulting in harmful coverage. In response, civic media makers have examined and corrected past common editorial practices that created and amplified fear and bias, like prioritizing coverage of sensationalized street crime or labeling schools as "failures." They prioritize people that regional newspapers rarely focused on—and sometimes actively harmed—including Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), non-English speakers, people experiencing economic poverty, and rural and small-town communities. They are often founded by, and prioritize the leadership of, people from groups long marginalized in newsrooms and within the community those newsrooms were supposed to serve.

Civic media practitioners also use digital tools to invite their communities into their work, making assigning, reporting, and even editing into more transparent, participatory acts. In the hands of civic media practitioners, the very technology that imperiled newspapers has become a conduit to include more people in the process of understanding what communities need to know, working with them to find it out, and delivering the answers.

Civic media has proven that its work does not need to be commercial to be sustainable. It has also proven that, unbound by commercial revenue models and embracing the strategies and tools that have built this country's $1 trillion nonprofit sector,[13] it can produce civic information in more dynamic, innovative, and focused ways.

Too much time and energy has been spent propping up and mourning the declining legacy systems.

The opportunity now is to shepherd and accelerate a transition to this emergent civic media system. This new ecosystem looks different from what it will replace: while the commercial market rewarded information monopolies, what is emerging now are pluralistic networks in which information is fluid, services are shared, and media is made in cooperation with the people it seeks to serve.



PHOTO COURTESY: CHALKBEAT

# The Emergent System: Defining the Field of Civic Media

Civic media practitioners are united by a vision of a world in which people everywhere are equipped to improve their communities through abundant access to high-quality information, on urgent health and safety emergencies, the environment, the people and processes of local government, and daily social services like healthcare, education, and transportation.[14] In this vision, the community librarian facilitating conversations around authoritative, trusted digital news is as celebrated as the dogged reporter pursuing a scoop.

A key distinguishing feature of the civic media movement is that it arises from an understanding of the essential interconnectedness of every local civic ecosystem, rather than a false and damaging belief in separation between journalists and their communities.[15] Civic media seeks to understand, honor, and convey people's life experience, embracing their complexities rather than flattening them into actors within a predetermined narrative. Instead of holding journalists apart as "neutral" bystanders, civic media producers embrace an active mission of serving people's information needs.

As advocates for the public good,[16] civic media practitioners work to identify and curtail extractive reporting methods that take more from people and communities than they give back.[17] While these harmful approaches to newsgathering are not unique to commercial media, they have been honed within incentive structures that prioritize profit over community health.

Civic media delivers civic information, a necessary ingredient for responsive and effective democratic systems. But what does this new work look like, and how do the new civic media ecosystems work?

## Practitioners

Civic media practitioners are journalists, educators, facilitators, organizers, community members, and other actors who produce and shape high-quality civic information. Sometimes within organizations and sometimes as individuals, every day within local communities they:

- Inform the public through the production and verification of original, verifiable, high-quality news and civic information;

- Engage communities and individuals in the journalistic process, from ideation and reporting to sharing, reflection, and impact analysis; and

- Equip people with the information production and verification skills needed to participate in deliberative democracy.

> *"The path of building trust with the community is not just about the journalism itself, it's about the reporter's personal interactions with people in the community."*
>
> **STEVE WALDMAN, REPORT FOR AMERICA, REBUILD LOCAL NEWS COALITION**

*"Explore more ways to interact with people, not just cover them."*

**KEVIN MERIDA,** *LOS ANGELES TIMES*

# Products

Civic information products often merge traditional journalism practices with innovative uses of technology and community engagement, and often emerge from unique institutional collaborations. They often go beyond traditional text and broadcast media, and prioritize story forms and production and distribution models that most effectively reach and engage their community and its critical information needs.

Examples include:

- An SMS services, backed by beat reporting, that sends text message reminders and answers questions about local school board meetings in Indianapolis (Chalkbeat);[18]

- A multilingual COVID-19 resource finder that allowed Chicagoans to find verified local services and support during the pandemic (City Bureau);[19]

- A WhatsApp group that provides immigrant communities with curated information on local social services (Documented);[20]

- Community events that bring residents and journalists together to identify information needs and produce stories to meet them (Free Press News Voices);[21]



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- Coverage of the first year of a new mayor guided by a survey of the concerns and questions of the community (KPCC/LAist);[22]

- Open office hours and a pop-up newsroom at a local library (Honolulu Civil Beat);[23]

- An effort to centralize information about the Houston Budget and allow for easier engagement in the budget process (#HouBudget);[24]

- An interactive analysis of more than 240,000 allegations of misconduct involving more than 22,000 Chicago police officers over a 50-year period (Invisible Institute);[25]

- Local news podcasts from public radio stations that bring daily local news and context to audiences on audio platforms like Spotify and Apple Podcasts in places as varied as Oklahoma, Vermont, and the Bay Area (KOSU, KQED, VPR, KQED);[26]

- A participatory analysis of bus lines and transportation needs in Detroit, conducted by a local newsroom and resident Detroiters (Outlier Media);[27]

- An online memorial of those who died from the coronavirus—and a way for local residents to help tell the stories of thousands more (The City);[28] and

- A print publication, circulating free of charge in hundreds of prisons and jails across the United States (The Marshall Project);[29]

# Networks

In addition to the creation of products that serve local information needs, the civic media movement is developing collaborative networks. These civic media networks foster relationships between aligned people and organizations that lead to

resource-sharing, knowledge-development, and coordinated practices.

These networks can emerge as powerful "systems of influence"[30] that enable scale and replication any one organization or effort alone could not achieve.

Examples include:

- A collaboration between Appalachian Free Press, West Virginia Public Broadcasting, and The Center for Rural Strategies, dedicated to local and regional untold stories of Appalachia (100 Days In Appalachia);[31]

- An annual conference that connects mediamakers, artists, activists, and organizations rooted in Detroit (Allied Media Conference);[32]

- A full-service, public access TV center, contemporary art space and community hub in downtown Brooklyn (BRIC);[33]

- A multi-state network that trains members of a community to attend, document, and share information on local public meetings (Documenters Network);[34]

- A collaboration between NPR and public radio stations in Alabama (WBHM), Mississippi (MPB), and Louisiana (WWNO and WRKF) dedicated to strengthening reporting on the Gulf States (The Gulf States Newsroom);[35]

“*What we're doing is working. It's inspired other people.*”

**MADELEINE BAIR, EL TÍMPANO**

# New Roles to Play

The health of a community's communication infrastructure affects the community's ability to handle societal problems.[49] But information isn't useful just because it exists—many people and institutions are involved in the production, verification, and distribution of critical information, and its consumption. To maintain healthy information ecosystems, we must map this network of people and organizations and identify the roles they play—and can play—in serving their community.

**Practitioners:** These innovators have led the way in developing and refining models that are now ready to replicate and scale to communities across the U.S.

**Stabilizers:** These individuals and organizations are part of the dominant, legacy systems of media production, but can play a critical role in ensuring its best practices and features are incorporated into the emerging civic media system.

**Champions:** Individuals and organizations who are amplifying the case for system reform and supporting the emerging system, from funders, philanthropists, and policy makers to librarians, educators, and other local leaders.

**Networks and communities of practice:** Innovators develop networks, organize communities of practice, and form broad-based coalitions that include stabilizers and champions. Together, they establish new systems of influence.

- A group of "ecosystem builders" coming together to share best practices on building local networks, rooting work in local needs, and experimentation (Ecosystem News);[36]

- A support association for more than 400 independent, nonprofit news organizations dedicated to public service (Institute for Nonprofit News);[37]

- A cooperative fund overseen by New Jersey community outlets to support participatory media in underserved communities (New Jersey Community Media Collective);[38]

- A collective that develops civic media and power-building resources for places in the U.S. that have been historically excluded from news and information systems (Listening Post Collective);[39]

- A network of Black and Brown media organizations that shares content, distribution, and other resources, with for-profit and nonprofit members (URL Media);[40]

- An organizing space for journalists, allied researchers, and media justice organizers to build power to win transformative civic information policies (Media Power Collaborative);[41]

- An incubator that helps public radio stations develop local audio-based news products (The PRX Journalism Podcast Accelerator);[42]

- A nonprofit that works with communities to catalyze the capital, new ownership structures, and business model transformations needed for established local and community news organizations to thrive and remain deeply grounded in their communities (National Trust for Local News);[43]

- A pooled fund housed in a community foundation that's building a sustainable and inclusive news and information ecosystem in North Carolina (North Carolina Local News Lab Fund);[44]

- An editor corps launched as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Public Media Journalists Association);[45]

- A coalition of locally-owned and nonprofit news organizations that advocates for local news public policies (Rebuild Local News);[46]

- A partnership that provides the tools, resources, and commonwealth of knowledge to help people build sustainable news organizations that reflect and serve their communities (Tiny News Collective); and[47]

- A collaboration of the nation's leading Black-owned commercial news publishers (Word in Black).[48]

Innovations like these have led us to a watershed moment for local news and information. We have a variety of tested and proven models, common principles, and best practices, and many overlapping civic media networks, ready for expansion to communities across the U.S.

Now we need to mobilize leaders in journalism, business, education, government, and philanthropy to take these innovations nationwide.

> "*We're talking about networks... The point being that I think we have to be way more comfortable with decentralization and with smaller things that are filling needs in many places.*"
>
> **SONAM VASHI, CANOPY ATLANTA**

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# Recommendations to Bring Civic Media to Scale

Making civic information a ubiquitous asset in every community will take significant resources. Estimates of the annual cost of meeting community information needs at scale range from $1 billion (the cost of employing the roughly 21,000 newspaper reporters lost between 2005 and 2019, the post-millennial peak of journalist employment)[50] to $10 billion (based on the more ambitious goal of employing at least 100 reporters per US congressional district, with more reporters for more populous districts).[51]

We have already seen remarkable progress toward this goal, as the amount of philanthropic support devoted to local news has steadily expanded since 2009.[52] More philanthropy inspires more corporate giving, and even nascent opportunities for public support. In 2021, the nonprofit news sector grew to an estimated $400 million in total annual revenue. And there is powerful evidence that more resources have translated to more community information needs met.[53]

The next step is to mobilize a new level of investment to the civic media field. While investments over the last 15 years focused on experimentation, the next phase of investment must focus on rapid expansion. The people, organizations, networks, and public policy innovations that make civic information available today are reaching just a fraction of the communities they need to serve. But catalytic investment can ensure that they reach many more in the near term. Expansion will not only serve information needs; it will also position the civic media field well to recruit the new and diverse sources of support that will be necessary to reach full scale over time.

To maximize the potential of catalytic investment, we recommend that leaders in philanthropy, journalism, and democracy pursue the following four actions:

## 1. Coordinate work around the goal of expanding "civic information," not saving the news business

In many of our interviews, we heard a clear desire for more coordination among both supporters of civic information and people practicing it. A movement is emerging; reaching the next phase of growth will require leaders to work together to prioritize action, assess progress, learn from experience, mobilize support, and allocate resources.

Coordination should happen in support of a clear and ambitious shared goal. The goal should not be to save legacy businesses that remain in decline, but instead to meet the civic information needs of all individuals and communities.

We need to shift our measurement, philanthropic investments, and public policy focus accordingly. For example, an annual census of the



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health of the local news business tracking newsroom employment and advertising revenue is less helpful than asking, on an annual basis, the extent to which communities' information needs are met in each community, state, and region, across key demographic groups, within key government bodies, and regarding the top issue areas that affect communities.

Coordination will also mean finding ways to help the civic media field and its supporters learn together about what is working, what isn't, and what they still need to figure out. Coordination will also mean telling a story together in a campaign to make the case for the importance of civic information in a democracy.

To start, we recommend:

- Establishing a coordinated effort to develop, test, and invest in ambitious research, pro-democracy movement-building, and "sensemaking" efforts that raise public awareness of the importance of local civic information, including local organizations, and practitioners; and

- Establishing a common impact measurement system for critical information needs that allow for data assessment, equity measurement, and power analysis in coordination with communities.

Questions to explore:

- What is the right balance of impact evaluation, public awareness campaigning, thought-leadership, and other forms of "sense-making?;"

- How can the burden-of-proof be lifted off of organizations and individual practitioners that produce civic information while benefiting individual entities and the field at large?; and

- How can a common impact measurement system balance the need for standardization across a range of media models with the race/class/power lens needed to ensure inequity isn't replicated in the emergent system?

## 2. Directly invest in the production of civic information

Civic information practitioners across the field were clear in our interviews: what they need to deepen and expand their work is simply more people.[54]

More reporters, yes, and also more people to run operations, build community, market their brands, and help secure financial resources. Time and again we heard from interviewees that they need more people to help implement new tools and tactics, to address growing coverage gaps, and to meet expanding needs. Small professional development grants and workshops about adapting to doing-more-with-less are insufficient. What is needed is general operating capacity.

While civic information providers can be legacy or new, commercial or not, the emerging models best meeting these information needs tend to be non-commercial, work within existing community networks, and operate differently from traditional news providers.

From the small number of new providers that have successfully grown beyond a startup phase, we have already seen that general operating support can be catalytic, at the right scale and duration. It lets providers expand the scope and quality of their service, which in turn creates more evidence of their value to the community. This invites new and more diversified support from other philanthropists, as well as from corporate and even government entities. Not every provider will successfully maintain growth, but enough will to justify a broad-scaled investment in many providers who focus on civic information.

To start, we recommend:

- A dramatic increase in general operating grants for legacy, new, and emerging local news organizations that prioritize critical information, including conversion of project-based funds to general operating support; and

- Identify and invest in non-media civic infrastructure organizations that directly equip local residents with tools and skills to produce civic information.

Questions to explore:

- What are the most effective and genuine ways to prioritize service of BIPOC and non-English speaking communities, people experiencing economic poverty, and people living in small towns and rural communities, and other marginalized groups, especially in cases where local philanthropic and corporate resources are weaker?;

- How can we adopt governance models for resource allocation that include peer-led and field-participatory approaches?;

- How can national organizations leverage their funds and reach, so resources are deployed that are aligned with local needs, efforts, and opportunities?; and

- How do we build the capacity for the emergent civic information system in a way that mitigates ongoing harm from the loss of local news, to both legacy outlets and the communities they serve?

## 3. Invest in shared services to sustain new and emerging civic information networks

Sustainability is not just about money (though a lot of it is). It's also about creating an infrastructure to allow for continued success. One of the resounding themes from our interviews was that emerging civic information networks require investment in shared services and infrastructure, including legal support, bookkeeping and accounting, market research, compliance and risk management, fiscal sponsorship, talent recruitment, and more common needs. While many of these services are offered piecemeal by intermediaries and consultants, that work is diffuse, uncoordinated, and not the primary role of any one institution.

As much as possible, services should be organized in a network rather than hub-and-spoke manner, so that organizations collaborate in mutual learning and exchange rather than passively receiving support from separated, hierarchical providers.[55] This approach will take a variety of shapes, formal and informal, long-standing and time-bound, regional and national, centralized and decentralized. Given their collaborative nature, civic information networks can also leverage existing community assets and organizations like universities and libraries to support their growth and sustainability.

The goal should be to allow civic information providers to focus on what they do best—meeting the information needs of their communities—by coordinating the business and operations components of their work across the network.

" *We need to put together constructive alliances of different types of media organizations who are serving different communities. That partly addresses issues of scale, helps spread the cost and maybe equalize things better.*"

**KINSEY WILSON, NEWSPACK**

*"I think to preserve community journalism we have to have conservancies in every state in the country. Like immediately."*

**ELIZABETH HANSEN SHAPIRO, NATIONAL TRUST FOR LOCAL NEWS**

To start, we recommend:

- A centralized, common operations system or systems that provide no/low-cost shared services to civic information providers, including health care, policy-writing, legal services, physical infrastructure, fundraising support, and best practices/standards;

- Development of the technology stack(s) needed to more efficiently produce and scale civic information and engaged journalism, prioritizing technologies that meet people's local information needs that are open-source and/or free-to-use with no/low barrier to access; and

- Support for conservancy and consolidation efforts that keep existing local news outlets in local hands and prevent the political weaponization of local news infrastructure by working directly with communities to catalyze capital, new ownership structures, operational services, and business model transformations.

Questions to explore:

- How could a transition away from "hub-and-spoke" models (traditional intermediaries) and toward "point-to-point" models (networked support structures) produce more cooperative, collaborative relationships and coordinated action among members (not simply one-directionally from member to hub)?; and

- How might a "public media center" approach to civic media integrate local civic information models with existing civic infrastructure like libraries, public broadcasting stations, public schools and universities, post offices, nonprofits with physical community centers and other local community-based sites?[56]



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*"Collaborative infrastructure is what we still lack… we don't have the infrastructure to actually facilitate that in a way that is not based on social networks. Like who you know."*

**HEATHER BRYANT,
TINY NEWS COLLECTIVE**

"*[There] cannot be a news organization in every community... let's centralize business operations while allowing editorial departments to be local.*"

**MICHAEL OUIMETTE, AMERICAN JOURNALISM PROJECT**

# 4. Cultivate and pass public policies that support the expansion of civic information while maintaining editorial independence

The structure of our current media system—who owns it, how it's paid for and produced, and how it's accessed—is the result of choices made through public policy. This includes historical government support for the postal service, the public media system, PEG stations, and favorable policies for commercial media outlets at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

Recently, there has been a flurry of policies designed to support local news in innovative ways. New York City[57] and Chicago[58] are dedicating half of their government advertising spending to community media. States are directly funding the production of civic information and protecting against undue political influence, such as through the creation of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium (NJCIC)[59] and UC Berkeley's statewide journalism fellowship program.[60] At the federal level, efforts to support local news organizations through payroll tax credits and expanding the Community Reinvestment Act have gained



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> **"In the last 20 years, nonprofits have grown so rapidly. It would be great to build on or duplicate the model of [Corporation for Public Broadcasting] with both federal and state funding for independent nonpartisan nonprofit news organizations."**
>
> **MUKHTAR IBRAHIM,** *SAHAN JOURNAL*

significant traction.[61] Many of these policies were enacted as the result of public advocates, philanthropy, and policymakers working together to mobilize needed political, human, and financial capital.

Civic information is a public good that market forces and philanthropy alone cannot support at the scale needed to enable healthy information ecosystems across the country. And for all the good produced by our public broadcasting system, it has also been chronically underfunded especially in comparison to other democratic countries.[62]

Just as public policy created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to fill gaps left by the commercial market, public policy will be needed to bring the emerging civic information system to scale. It will require investing significantly more into our current public media system, creating new forms of public funding, and passing a suite of other policy solutions at all levels of government to create the conditions for local civic information to thrive.[63]

Those interviewed largely agreed with the necessity of direct and indirect public funding, given that civic information is a public good and underproduced by the commercial market. Equally important, interviewees said public funding should be directed toward marginalized communities where need is highest, and benefiting nonprofits and small publishers as opposed to the large media corporations and hedge funds who have contributed so much to the local news crisis. When discussing the challenges and opportunities that public funding presents, interviewees spoke of the importance of creating proper firewalls between government and those being funded to protect editorial independence. Our existing public media system at the federal and local level, as well as newer initiatives in California and New Jersey, provide lessons on the importance of implementing and maintaining such firewalls.

Multi-stakeholder coalitions at the local, state, and national level have been created in recent years that have built public support, mobilized constituencies across the social and political spectrum, and advanced and enacted bold public policies. Additional resources will be needed in order for these coalitions to grow—and new ones to flourish—to have the political power necessary to challenge entrenched interests.

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To start, we recommend:

- Further developing of bold local, state, and national policy ideas to directly fund and support the production and accessibility of civic information. Policies should center community need, ensure independence from the state, account for the history of exclusion and harm of marginalized individuals and communities, and create conditions for expansion of civic information;

- Building and strengthening civic information policy coalitions at the local, state, and national level that invite a variety of stakeholders to participate and take action, including local communities, funders, media workers, and lawmakers; and

- Taking a "laboratories of democracy" approach, where local and state governments experiment with different policies and public funding models, laying the groundwork for federal action to have more impact.

Questions to explore:

- What are the short-, medium-, and long-term policies we need to get us to robust public funding for civic information, and how can we protect against the dangers of political influence?;

- How can multi-stakeholder coalitions build the cultural and political power needed to overcome entrenched interests and legacy and corporate media lobbies?;

- How can civic information policy, and the coalitions needed to pass it, work with and within existing community networks and pro-democracy efforts?; and

- How can a federal public funding mechanism or body direct support to local efforts for maximum impact?

# Conclusion

We developed this report because we have seen firsthand the amazing projects, people, and institutions that make up the civic media movement, and we believe their work deserves more attention.

What became clear along the way, in all our interviews, is that we are witnessing a historical moment, one where the window for opportunity will not be open forever. If it closes without ensuring the success of this emergent system, we fear that our communities will experience further harm and democratic decay—and that the consequences of large-scale information inequity will continue to fall hardest on BIPOC, immigrant, rural, and low-income communities.

But in all our interviews, it was also clear that practitioners, philanthropists, publishers, public broadcasters, policymakers, and members of the public are ready to act. We have more in common than we may realize. In many ways, we share a vision. If we seize that vision and work together to make it real, we are convinced we can meet civic information needs better than this country ever has in its history.

The final note we want to strike is that it matters "how" the work gets done. Like the people we interviewed, we believe our local and social communities generate their own best solutions. The way we work together in our communities should inspire the way we operate together as a field. The answers are in the room.

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**Darryl Holliday** is a journalist, civic technologist, and media organizer. In 2015 he co-founded **City Bureau**, a Chicago-based civic media lab, where he designs participatory programs, projects, and platforms like the Documenters Network, a nexus for community members committed to covering local public meetings. A former local beat reporter, Darryl knows that journalism can create the conditions for change. He's collaborated with colleagues around the world on reporting practices that inform, engage, and equip communities toward civic action. He's an Ashoka Fellow, Studs Terkel Award-winner, and a proud "Leader for a New Chicago."

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# Thank You and Acknowledgements

Elizabeth, Darryl, and Mike would like to thank the many individuals who contributed to the conceiving, drafting, and publication of this report.

First, thank you to the 51 individuals who contributed their ideas and perspectives during this process. This report is indebted to your innovative work, which serves as a guiding light for the communities you serve.

Thank you to our contributing authors, Andrew Golis, Hala Harik Hayes, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, Kary Perez, Sierra Sangetti-Daniels, and Matt Thompson. You led engagement with the civic media field, provided critical feedback that challenged us, brought this document to life, and sharpened our ideas. Your insight and support were indispensable during this process.

Thank you to Tim Isgitt for championing this report. You have connected with so many to bring this report to life, and provided an important sounding board for us.

Thank you to Chalkbeat for spearheading this project and to City Bureau and Free Press for enthusiastically collaborating.

Thank you to the American Journalism Project, Democracy Fund, Ford Foundation, the Knight Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation for financial support, and thank you to Aspen Digital and the Lenfest Institute for joining forces with us to strengthen the effort. Your support (along with so many others) for this emergent field has been critical to the important moment in which we find ourselves.

We want to thank all those who provide their communities with civic information. Your work, whether past or present, inspired us in the creation of this report. Much of what you do is hard and invisible, and we want you to know that you are valued and seen.

Finally, we want to thank the individuals and communities the authors have had the privilege to serve through our collective work. We do this work with and for you, and hope we can continue to all strive to learn together and leave the world a better place than we found it.

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