



# Could News Bloom in News Deserts?

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## Key Points

- Due to the steady decline of print news in America, many Americans now live in news deserts, where there is no newspaper covering local issues. The absence of information on local news and local politics weakens our communities and our political process.
- Despite this trend, over 100 new papers or online local news sites have opened within the past several years. To stay in business, they have experimented with new approaches to staffing and funding.
- It may be time to expand the role of government or philanthropy in supporting local news, which produces countless benefits for communities but is rapidly disappearing.

The decline in local journalism in the US—specifically the sharp drop in the number of local newspapers and employed journalists—has been amply documented. Not only has the number of local newspapers declined but so, too, has the number of reporters at remaining news organizations. The profession, it can well be said, has been hollowed out. The consequences for the American model of democracy, which is based on local governance of cities, counties, towns, and villages, is self-evident. Lacking information about the debates and decisions of local officials, citizens are at a clear handicap. The decline of local newspapers puts at risk the social fabric of communities—social capital—that arises from the sheer awareness of local events and the initiatives that arise when local needs and problems become known.

These trends have prompted proposals for a variety of public policy interventions, including indirect tax subsidies for local news operations.

Less remarked on, however, is that even as a wave of local newspaper closings has crested, a smaller but not insignificant countertrend has emerged. Since 2016,

even as 216 local newspapers have closed, 112 local papers or internet-based, locally focused news sites have been established.

This report examines where such sites are located—geographically and socioeconomically—and discusses the sort of news coverage in which they engage.

For this project, the American Enterprise Institute relied on data widely viewed as credible from the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism's Local News Initiative, which has tracked the number of active local newspapers since 2004. The project has played a key role in calling attention to the decline in America's local journalism. It has also tracked the establishment of new local news operations, both in print and online.

According to Medill, 112 local news operations have been established since 2018. For the purposes of this report, each operation was sent an identical nine-question survey (included in Appendix A). We received completed surveys from 27 papers, and two papers (the Cary Citizen and the Sierra County Sun) responded to say they were now defunct. The results are not meant as a scientific

survey, but they are informative and revealing. On balance, they suggest the following.

First, local news operations may be moving to a new business model—one that relies on a mix of financial supports. These include advertising in print and online and, in many cases, subscriptions, grants, and donations, the latter enabled by a movement toward non-profit status. Of the 27 papers that completed the survey, 15 (55 percent) were funded by advertising, seven (25 percent) were funded by subscriptions, 17 (62 percent) were funded by donations, 12 (44 percent) were funded by grants, three (11 percent) were funded by local sponsorships, and three (11 percent) were funded by other means.

Second, reporting on local government is a focus for all but one of the new local news operations that responded to our survey. Stories about local government came up often when we asked sites which stories they were most proud of.

Third, a smaller group of news sites complement traditional daily news (which includes coverage of local government) with “enterprise reporting”—that is, stories based on reporter initiative. Eighteen (69 percent) of our respondents provided examples of such stories when asked about the stories they are most proud of.

Fourth, although the term “news desert” has become associated with rural settings, this framing can be misleading. Most of the papers that responded were located in counties containing a sizable city. In some cases, these papers served more remote areas adjacent to the city, but others reported on local news for some of the nation’s biggest cities. Put another way, the establishment of news sites in metropolitan areas suggests that their locations were underserved by larger news organizations—that they fill gaps in local news coverage.

Finally, 12 (46 percent) of the new local news sites that responded have partnered with local public radio operations in some way. Of the papers with such partnerships, four (15 percent) are for-profit, and eight (31 percent) are nonprofit.

## The Emergence of News Deserts

It’s worth reviewing, briefly, the growth and extent of news deserts. It has become commonplace—but accurate—to trace the decline of local newspapers to the growth of online advertising and social media,

which deprived local journalism of its economic lifeblood: advertising. More than subscriptions, display and classified advertising had supported local papers and their relatively extensive reporting staffs.

Between 2004 and 2019 alone, the country lost 2,100 newspapers, with the total number of papers falling by about a fourth in 15 years from 9,000 in 2004 to 6,700 in 2019.<sup>1</sup> That decline was matched, or indeed worsened, by a hollowing out of the staffs at remaining news operations. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics finds that employment in newspaper publishing declined from 455,000 employees in 1990 to just 137,220 in 2019—approximately a fourth of the prior level. According to a census conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the number of employed journalists declined from 55,700 in 1990 to 23,030 in 2019, a change of over half. The difference is even starker in terms of population: In 1990, there were 22 journalists per 100,000 people in the US, while in 2019, that figure dropped to just seven.<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that local news operations reported regularly on the activities and deliberations of governments at the local, county, and state levels, it is not hyperbolic to characterize the absence of that coverage as a crisis for democracy. The US has more than 100,000 units of local government, most with fiduciary roles. An absence of outside oversight and the information required for it is indisputably problematic.

## New Business Models

As reflected in the responses to the survey conducted for this report, if local journalism is to recover, it does not appear that a single financial model will emerge to replace the superannuated advertising-supported approach. Indeed, responses to survey questions (see Appendix A) indicate an almost equal number of respondents are pursuing for-profit (14) and nonprofit (11) models. The latter approach, by definition, makes it possible for the news sites to gain support through philanthropy and simple, tax-deductible donations. This model suggests that local journalism could become a community’s “good cause,” in the model of social service agencies supported through United Way.

One philanthropic program was mentioned by multiple papers as a revenue source: the NewsMatch program, an initiative mounted by a new organization, the Institute for Nonprofit News. This national effort

relies on foundation funding to provide grants that, as the name implies, must be matched by local contributions. Such support is limited to those new sites that are incorporated as nonprofit enterprises. NewsMatch is a serious new undertaking. It reports that since its establishment in 2016,

the number of national funding partners supporting newsrooms with matching funds has grown from 1 to 18 in an individual campaign year. Over 350,000 individuals have donated to support a newsroom for the first time during NewsMatch. In 2022, newsrooms secured an additional \$5.5 million in matching funds from nearly 800 major donors, local foundations, and small businesses, surpassing the total amount of matching grants from national partners for the first time in the program's history.<sup>3</sup>

Of those that replied to our survey, two newspapers, the Hoptown Chronicle (Kentucky) and the JOLT (Washington state), report getting the vast majority of their funding from a combination of the NewsMatch program and local donors.

There are several additional philanthropic projects seeking to fund local news, such as the American Journalism Project, Report for America, and the Fund for Local Journalism (administered by the Local Media Foundation). The papers we surveyed rely on large grants and local support: 11 (42 percent) of the papers we surveyed were funded by grants and 16 (61 percent) by donations. At least seven (26 percent) of those were funded solely by philanthropy and did not charge any money to news consumers.

However, accessing donations and grants is not always easy for local news organizations. George Custer, interim editor of the Highway 58 Herald (Oregon), says, "I am also the primary grant writer. We have recently received some small grants that are keeping us afloat, barely. . . . I'm continually writing grants, though. I have never done grant writing before The Herald."<sup>4</sup>

Many of the papers in our survey have limited administrative staff, and some papers are operated by a single full-time employee. Many do not have any personnel with grant-writing experience. Even "bigger" publications can struggle, such as New Jersey Urban News, with a staff of six, which has made preparations to receive grants but has yet to apply for any.

Philanthropy may also support for-profit news operations linked to a nonprofit "sponsor," which can raise funds to support select aspects of news-gathering. New Jersey Urban News is such a site and has hopes of accepting "grants and donations from foundations."<sup>5</sup> Bucket List Community Cafe is fiscally sponsored by the Local Media Foundation, a national nonprofit that acts as a fiscal sponsor to papers across the country and works together with LION Publishers, an organization supporting local news entrepreneurship.

Notably, some operations are undecided as to which financial model to follow. NowKalamazoo reports that although it, too, has a fiscal sponsor and is "gearing up" to become a freestanding nonprofit, it is, at the same time, "torn between whether [it] should do that or go the for-profit route."<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, even those news operations pursuing a for-profit approach no longer confine themselves to traditional revenue sources. For example, the Philomath News (Oregon) offers three tiers of "voluntary memberships" that are paid as a monthly or weekly fee but, unlike subscriptions, do not provide any additional access to content. Both the Philomath News and the Arkadelphian (Arkansas), another for-profit paper, tell us they accept non-tax-deductible donations.

Given the community support for local news, even these for-profit papers have been able to bring in revenue from philanthropic goodwill. Mackenzie Clark, founder of the Lawrence Times (Kansas), another for-profit paper that offers voluntary subscriptions, explained:

We operate more like a nonprofit, and we never expect to be particularly profitable. We don't charge anyone to read, and we provide other services such as free obituaries and a free events calendar. I'm taking as little as possible to get by. We're funneling revenue back into growing and expanding the publication. . . . We do not have a paywall, and we do not use programmatic ads. We launched with the belief that community members do value local journalism, and that they would pay for it, even if we didn't make them. So far, we've been correct. (To be clear, we are an online-only publication. We would not be able to afford regular print editions, nor do I see that as a valuable use for our limited resources.)<sup>7</sup>

A fascinating example of a multi-revenue-source approach can be found in a five-newspaper group in rural Kentucky and neighboring West Virginia. The *Appalachian News-Express*, founded in 2007 by publisher Jeff Vanderbeck, has since expanded to include additional newspapers in Hazard, Kentucky; Mingo, West Virginia; Pike County, Kentucky; and Johnson County, Tennessee. According to Vanderbeck, the profitability of this for-profit enterprise relies on not only subscription revenue and local advertising but revenue from a printing plant that takes in work from local grocery store circulars and apartment rentals in buildings in part dedicated to the news operations.

In an effort to extend coverage but control costs, several new newspapers have established partnerships with colleges and universities. The Bowie Sun (Maryland) has done so with the University of Maryland Philip Merrill College of Journalism's Local News Network,<sup>8</sup> as has Colorado's *Ipswich Local News* with the University of Colorado Boulder and the Metropolitan State University of Denver. Both complement small paid staffs (in the case of the Sun, a single owner and reporter) with college interns. Custer, interim editor of the Highway 58 Herald, sees the paper's connection to the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communications (SOJC) as a lifeline:

Student reporters are our first goal. That is, until the stipend money runs out. . . . Ultimately, we would hope that the SOJC would take on The Herald as a project, keeping a local Board of Directors and managing editor in order to keep the local flavor of the site. My research led me to discover that this has happened at a number of universities across the country.<sup>9</sup>

To some extent, new local journalism sites are staffed by idealistic volunteers. The Asheville Watchdog (North Carolina), reacting to a reduction in local coverage by the established local newspaper, is such a site—and describes itself as a mission-driven organization: “We believe that high-quality, independent local journalism is essential for a healthy and successful democracy. . . . We started *Asheville Watchdog* because local news is in crisis.”<sup>10</sup>

## Where News Sites Have Opened

Although the term news desert suggests a remote setting, many of the new sites responding to our survey can be found in underserved portions of larger metropolitan areas.<sup>11</sup> The New Jersey Urban News (tagline: “a voice for the voiceless”) covers New Jersey areas such as Bergen, Essex, Passaic, and Somerset counties, all within the New York City metro area but unlikely to be covered by New York City newspapers. So, too, with the LymeLine.com (Connecticut), located in the far northern fringe of the New York metro area, and the *Indianola Independent Advocate* (Iowa), based 14 miles south of Des Moines, the state's largest city. One might also include the Asheville Watchdog, whose goal is to complement, not compete with, other local media in its major regional area of western North Carolina.

In some cases, the image of a remote news desert does apply. The *Harpswell Anchor* covers a small section of the Maine coast (Harpswell Neck) but also three offshore islands: Bailey, Great Island, and Orr's. To underscore, like the others mentioned here, the *Harpswell Anchor* is a recently established local news site. (It also publishes a monthly print edition.) The *Carter County Times* (Kentucky) is technically in the Huntington, West Virginia, metro area, but much of its coverage area is more than an hour away from that city and, of course, governed by a different state government. The Arkadelphia, in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, covers a southwest Arkansas town of some 10,000 and an outlying readership in the surrounding Clark County, which has a total population of 21,000.

## What They Cover

Our survey, complemented by additional interviewing, makes clear that these new local journalism sites do indeed emphasize local news as their calling card—and employ reporters to do so. Each of the 26 news sites and newspapers that responded answered affirmatively to the question of whether they include local content. Much is classic local newspaper material. Cardinal News (Virginia), a nonprofit, offers free obituaries and events calendar listings.

But survey responses show a consistent focus on local and regional government. Cardinal News assigns reporters to three specific regions of Southwest

Virginia—Bristol, Danville, and Martinsville—and a reporter in the state capital of Richmond to cover issues that affect its home regions. NowKalamazoo reports that it covers “a half dozen local governments and school boards.”<sup>12</sup> The New Bedford Light (Massachusetts) covers such distinctly local issues as the offshore wind and fishing industries but also notes that it covers “local government and politics.”<sup>13</sup> The *Carter County Times* (Kentucky) reports that it covers “city government in two communities of Olive Hill and Grayson,” the “Carter County Fiscal Court,”<sup>14</sup> and county offices generally. (Grayson is the county seat.)

## Staffing and Partnerships

One must take care not to conclude that the establishment of local news sites will quickly, or sustainably, begin to replace the reporting corps that has been lost. Four of the news sites that responded to the survey are single-person operations. Others are larger but rely on volunteers. Many rely on freelance writers. These models may be hard to sustain. Moreover, they may not provide the sort of long-term local institutional memory that historically characterized local newsrooms.

Some of the respondents, however, do report having significant reporting staffs. The Arkadelphian has four writers for its small circulation area. The Border Belt Independent employs three full-time reporters to cover four rural North Carolina counties. The New Bedford Light employs full-time reporters—who cover public health and safety, housing, environment and climate, education, wind and fishing, and local politics and government—a visual journalist, and arts and culture writers.

In addition, several of the respondents report working with local public radio stations and other media outlets to share content. Because public radio license holders are established nonprofits, this approach may prove to be a source of content and, indirectly, funding.

Notably, the Asheville Watchdog is specific about such content-sharing. Its statement of purpose reflects a belief that it is fulfilling a public purpose in ways shared by many of the local news startups:

Our mission is to inform and engage the citizens of Asheville and surrounding communities by providing fair, factual and reliable in-depth news stories about local government, institutions, issues,

and people. . . . We do not compete with existing media, but rather try to complement and expand the critical services they provide. Our reporting is offered without charge to *The Asheville Citizen Times*, WLOS-TV, Blue Ridge Public Radio, *Mountain Xpress*, *The Urban News*, the *Biltmore Beacon*, *Smoky Mountain News*, and other local publications and broadcast stations.<sup>15</sup>

The Watchdog, among other publications, was founded and staffed by volunteer journalists who had previously worked in larger “legacy” newspapers—and its staff boasts impressive experience. Sally Kestin, investigative reporter and cofounder, was previously employed as a reporter by the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, the *Tampa Tribune*, and the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. Peter Lewis, its executive editor, is an alumnus of the *New York Times* and *Fortune* magazine.<sup>16</sup>

Other sites are staffed by paid, experienced journalists who had reported about the same areas a new site is serving. Cardinal News, “serving southwest and Southside Virginia,” makes clear that its founding was directly sparked by reporter staffing cutbacks on area local newspapers: “Cardinal News was created in the summer of 2021, as legacy newspapers throughout Southwest and Southside Virginia suffered additional devastating staff reductions brought on by an out-of-state corporate owner.”<sup>17</sup>

As impressive as such credentials and local experience are, they inevitably raise a sustainability question. Will these experienced journalists, some working as volunteers like those in Asheville, be able to mentor younger colleagues who will follow in their footsteps in professional careers? Will the operations themselves prove financially sustainable?

## Content

The extent of original local reporting varies widely among the sites we surveyed. The limits of one-person operations, such as the Bowie Sun, are reflected by the relatively small number of original stories, virtually all written by the founder and editor.

A number of other sites, however, are providing a robust range of new and varied stories. These sites include both for-profit and nonprofit sites. By no means is all this content focused on major issues.

The *Appalachian News-Express*—a for-profit paper based in Pikeville, Kentucky, which calls itself “the conscience of Eastern Kentucky”—reliably includes coverage of crime (notably, drug-related arrests in an area plagued by overdose deaths), high school student activities, profiles of local business leaders, local sports, and obituaries.<sup>18</sup>

The Arkadelphian provides similar coverage, including that of the local planning commission’s approval for the opening of a new local beauty college and a dispute as to whether a takeout restaurant should be permitted to open in a residential neighborhood. The value of such coverage in providing a sense of community—and useful information—should not be minimized. The Arkadelphian provides a weekly feature on local history, which reinforces a sense of community.<sup>19</sup>

Other sites, notably nonprofit operations, are providing extensive enterprising journalism. Cardinal News provides detailed and knowledgeable coverage of local state legislative races, city council debates about rail service, the impact of a new local casino, and the prospect for expanded broadband service in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> It promises ongoing coverage of politics, culture, education, economy, and sports, complemented by local opinion writing.

Local enthusiasm for its work is reflected by its range of foundation and business funders, including a major utility company (Dominion Energy), an area community foundation (Danville Regional Foundation), and an area health care provider (Ballad Health). A founding grant from the Secular Society was substantial (\$100,000).<sup>21</sup>

Another nonprofit, locally funded site is similarly robust. The New Bedford Light, based in southeastern Massachusetts, covers bread-and-butter issues affecting the local economy, notably daily fish catch prices. Such reporting is complemented by enterprising efforts, such as stories on local police not publicizing misconduct reports, the IRS investigating local fishing fleets for unpaid taxes, and offshore wind turbines threatening the fishing industry.<sup>22</sup>

Like Cardinal News and the Asheville Watchdog, this nonprofit news site is working to respond to the emergence of news deserts:

We seek to inform and nourish the civic culture of New Bedford and surrounding towns by providing in-depth, fact-based journalism and

a broad platform for diverse community voices. Through our innovative Journalism Incubator Project we promote media literacy and educate the public about the vital role of a free press in bolstering our democracy. . . . We are not dependent on traditional newspaper advertising, which has dramatically declined in recent years and left many legacy news outlets struggling to survive.<sup>23</sup>

## “Stories We’re Proud Of”

As part of our survey, we asked newly established local journalism enterprises for examples of stories they are proud of. Here follow summaries of some such stories—none of which, of course, would have been published absent local journalism and reporters.

Cardinal News cites the impact its stories have had on local political awareness. Executive editor Dwayne Yancey said,

Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell County, credited our coverage of a bad flood in his district with raising awareness enough that he was able to secure \$11.4 million in state funding for flood relief—even though the state is not traditionally in the flood relief business. Del. Sam Rasoul, D-Roanoke, credited our coverage of his proposal to convert an aging state mental hospital (often on the chopping block) into an addiction recovery center with him being able to get bipartisan support for that conversion. We were the first to report that one state legislator had sworn out assault charges against another. We are also the first to report that another state legislator had been charged with malicious wounding. He also discussed how Cardinal News reported on the economic revitalization of struggling towns that were “re-inventing themselves,” like Danville, Virginia.<sup>24</sup>

Editor Jeremy D. Wells of the *Carter County Times* cited several stories, including two that concerned local political issues. One concerned a prohibition on additional users of the city’s sewer system due to maintenance issues and involved the paper talking to sources from the state’s division of water to resolve a dispute of fact among a small-business owner, a mayor, and a previous mayor.<sup>25</sup> Another story had the paper

speaking to a group of whistleblowers, one of whom had previously spoken to a local paper called the *Ashland Daily*, about an alleged property tax fraud carried out by a state tax administrator.<sup>26</sup>

Crosstown founder Gabriel Kahn pointed us to articles that included Crosstown's extensive data-driven coverage of Los Angeles transit issues, such as analysis of how free bus fares changed ridership<sup>27</sup> and an article breaking down the data on rising auto collision deaths in the city.<sup>28</sup>

The Dallas Free Press founder Keri Mitchell highlighted a story about a local church's proposal to expand the zoning for one of its buildings and the dynamics around class and race in the community meetings that followed.<sup>29</sup>

J. W. Oliver, editor of the *Harspywell Anchor*, said,

The Anchor is proud of its accurate, objective, day-to-day coverage of town government; its extensive coverage of the demise of a 10-year-old charter school, which will close at the end of this school year;<sup>30</sup> its coverage of a turbulent public school system, fraught with administrative turnover, board conflict, and political division; its timely coverage of local elections; its reporting on cellular service, which led to the nation's largest carrier reversing a decision not to invest in a new site;<sup>31</sup> its coverage of the working waterfront and the impacts of climate change on a community with 216 miles of waterfront; and numerous features that share the stories of the people and businesses of the Harpswell community.<sup>32</sup>

Interim editor Custer explained that the Highway 58 Herald was established to bring attention to a local government story:

The previous local paper had shuttered its doors nearly a year prior. Word was out that the sitting city council at that time was planning to oust the city administrator so that they could bring in an inexperienced yes-man crony. There was no other watchdog over governmental affairs. Our founders had been preparing the site for launch. With this news, however, we felt it necessary to alert the public of the actions the council planned to take. With no coverage of city meetings, there would be

little to no resistance. Our site hit the web with a front page call of attention. The subsequent outpouring at the meeting put a wrench in their plan. Our first big coup.<sup>33</sup>

The Hoptown Chronicle editor Jennifer Brown said that

our coronavirus coverage, mainly from 2020 to 2022, was the most comprehensive local source on the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> We also focus on local election systems and voter education, in addition to downtown development, local government, the arts and history.<sup>35</sup>

Amy Duncan, publisher of the *Indianola Independent Advocate*, said that she is most proud of the paper's "government coverage, which is extremely thorough." She added, "A number of people have said they didn't really understand their local government, but now when they read our stories, they feel like they're there and it all makes sense."<sup>36</sup> For example, a recent story gives detail on the retirement of a long-serving county auditor and the process to replace her.<sup>37</sup>

The JOLT editor Jeremy D. Wells shared a story from the paper about an upcoming hearing in which community members could comment on the formation of a local fire authority, which had been created by two city councils in the area to provide fire protection and emergency medical services in both cities.<sup>38</sup> The authority was formed in response to high emergency-call volumes and slowing response times in the areas, and community members were able to comment on the proposed change, which was set to go to voters.

Limestone Post publisher Ron Eid cited the paper's series on housing,<sup>39</sup> which

is a collaboration with WFHB [a local community radio station<sup>40</sup>] and funded by a grant from the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County, which might use this project as a springboard for more funding of local media. We've also done several solutions journalism stories on opioids, Alzheimer's disease, education, rural cancer care, and other pressing issues. We've also teamed with the

League of Women Voters on a series of articles on civic engagement.<sup>41</sup>

LymeLine.com publisher Olwen Logan explained that

we played a major role in publicizing the Amtrak proposal to route its new Northeast Corridor line through the center of Old Lyme. After a major public outcry, the proposal was ultimately abandoned.<sup>42</sup> All our stories are profoundly local involving one or both of our two little towns (Lyme:- pop: 1,800 & Old Lyme:- pop. 7,500). We reported COVID case numbers for both towns on an almost daily basis. These were not publicized anywhere else and drew substantial interest. We cover success stories, tragedies, weather events, town controversies, local celebrations and more in a way that no other publication aspires to do because our towns are simply too small. We publicize what is happening in each town on a daily basis—you cannot find that information anywhere else.<sup>43</sup>

The New Bedford Light editor Barbara Roessner described how

our ProPublica collaboration produced an investigation revealing that foreign private equity is taking over the fishing industry, and local fishermen are suffering and, in some cases, being put out of business. New Bedford is home to the top-grossing fishing port in the country. Fishermen are chronically marginalized; we gave them voice.<sup>44</sup>

NowKalamazoo publisher Ben Lando cited the following:

Our cheerleader coverage, which highlights community members we are proud to call neighbors but without veering into hero worship or press release journalism; our watchdog stories about public policies; our coverage of gun violence which is about to expand thanks to a grant; our coverage of the upheaval in summer of 2020 (Proud Boys, BLM, 2020 election); and our very first journalism which was a pop up magazine

about the homelessness crisis and the lack of local leadership and strategy.<sup>45</sup>

## What's Next?

The decline of local advertising-sponsored newspapers can obscure the fact that such enterprises had survived for a long period—in some instances, for more than a century before closing. Little Rock's *Arkansas Gazette* published from 1819 to 1991, Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* from 1859 to 2009, and the *New York Herald* (later *Herald-Tribune*) from 1835 to 1966. Thus, it is an open question as to whether the for-profit approach to local news can be adapted in the digital era, even with multiple revenue sources, and whether the nonprofit model, based on philanthropy and individual charitable contributions, can prove able to support the staff required to provide the core element of local journalism: coverage that is both reliable and routine.

To guard against the possibility of these approaches faltering, public officials—themselves the subjects of ongoing reporting—may have to decide whether to provide some form of financial support, either direct or indirect, for local news operations. Federal legislation toward that end has been proposed but not enacted in 2020 and 2021. The Local Journalism Sustainability Act would support local newspaper payrolls through a potential \$25,000 tax credit for reporter salaries, provide up to a \$5,000 tax credit for businesses that advertise in local journalism outlets, and allow a tax credit to cover up to 80 percent of a newspaper subscription.<sup>46</sup>

Similar legislation has been proposed at the state level in New York. The federal bill may be reintroduced in 2023.<sup>47</sup> It would help not only the sort of new operations described in this report but also remaining “legacy” newspapers. It raises the question of whether news reporting suffers from what economists call positive externalities—that is, gains realized by the community but not captured in the newspaper's revenue stream. The classic result in economics is that a subsidy is required to compensate producers of the positive externality, or else that benefit will not be adequately provided, just as local news coverage has lapsed as papers fail to make a profit and close down. As the US ponders how to sustain a dynamic democracy, the future of local journalism must be part of the discussion.



## Appendix A. Survey Email

The survey we carried out involved sending this email to 112 local news sites or newspapers:

To the publisher of [Paper Name]:

This is to seek your assistance in an American Enterprise Institute study of the American news industry. Much attention has been paid to the emergence of so-called “news deserts”, where local journalism has withered. Much less has been paid to the extent, role and health of news start-ups such as your own. Our study seeks to learn more about businesses such as yours. Thanks in advance for taking the time to respond to the questions below.

We plan a study and a Washington, DC panel discussion based on our findings.

Does [Paper Name] employ reporters to cover local news in a specific area?

If so, were there any newspapers or news websites covering local news in this area before [Paper Name] started doing so?

Has the number of newspapers or news websites in the area changed since [Paper Name] was founded?

Does [Paper Name] cover local government?

Is [Paper Name] a for-profit business?

How big is the staff of [Paper Name]?

Does [Paper Name] work at all with local public radio or other publically funded media?

What are the stories of which [Paper Name] is particularly proud?

Does [Paper Name] rely on revenue from advertising, subscriptions, or some combination?

Feel free to add anything you feel is relevant, especially anything that you think would help us understand your business model.

Thank you in advance!

Each paper was contacted individually, with “[Paper Name]” replaced with the name of the particular paper wherever it appears in the above. Some papers, instead of providing contact information, only provided text entry forms on their “contact us” pages, so in those cases, the text of the email above was entered as a message through the website.

## Appendix B. News Sites Contacted

Table B1 includes all the papers that responded to our survey and the *Appalachian News-Express*, which was interviewed but did not complete a survey.

**Table B1. Respondent News Sites**

| News Site Name                        | Respondent Name         | Website   |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| <i>Appalachian News-Express</i>       | Jeff Vanderbeck         | <a href="https://www.news-expressky.com">https://www.news-expressky.com</a>                   |
| <i>Arkadelphian</i>                   | Joel Phelps             | <a href="https://arkadelphian.com">https://arkadelphian.com</a>                               |
| <i>Asheville Watchdog</i>             | Peter H. Lewis          | <a href="https://avlwatchdog.org">https://avlwatchdog.org</a>                                 |
| <i>Border Belt Independent</i>        | Les High                | <a href="https://borderbelt.org">https://borderbelt.org</a>                                   |
| <i>Bowie Sun</i>                      | Catherine Hollingsworth | <a href="https://www.bowiesun.com">https://www.bowiesun.com</a>                               |
| <i>Bucket List Community Cafe</i>     | Vicky Collins           | <a href="https://www.bucketlistcommunitycafe.com">https://www.bucketlistcommunitycafe.com</a> |
| <i>Cardinal News</i>                  | Dwayne Yancey           | <a href="https://www.cardinalnews.org">https://www.cardinalnews.org</a>                       |
| <i>Carter County Times</i>            | Jeremy D. Wells         | <a href="https://cartercountytimes.com">https://cartercountytimes.com</a>                     |
| <i>Cary Citizen</i>                   | Lindsey Chester         | <a href="https://www.carycitizen.com">https://www.carycitizen.com</a>                         |
| <i>Crosstown</i>                      | Gabriel Kahn            | <a href="https://xtown.la">https://xtown.la</a>   |
| <i>Dallas Free Press</i>              | Keri Mitchell           | <a href="https://dallasfreepress.com">https://dallasfreepress.com</a>                         |
| <i>Freedom Pursuit</i>                | Angie Griepentrog       | <a href="https://thefreedompursuit.com">https://thefreedompursuit.com</a>                     |
| <i>Harpwell Anchor</i>                | J. W. Oliver            | <a href="https://www.harpwellanchor.org">https://www.harpwellanchor.org</a>                   |
| <i>Highway 58 Herald</i>              | George Custer           | <a href="https://highway58herald.org">https://highway58herald.org</a>                         |
| <i>Hoptown Chronicle</i>              | Jennifer Brown          | <a href="https://hoptownchronicle.org">https://hoptownchronicle.org</a>                       |
| <i>Indianola Independent Advocate</i> | Amy Duncan              | <a href="https://www.indianola-ia.com">https://www.indianola-ia.com</a>                       |
| <i>Ipswich Local News</i>             | John Muldoon            | <a href="https://thelocalnews.news">https://thelocalnews.news</a>                             |
| <i>JOLT</i>                           | Danny Stusser           | <a href="https://www.thejoltnews.com">https://www.thejoltnews.com</a>                         |
| <i>Lawrence Times</i>                 | Mackenzie Clark         | <a href="https://lawrencekstimes.com">https://lawrencekstimes.com</a>                         |
| <i>Limestone Post</i>                 | Ron Eid                 | <a href="https://limestonepostmagazine.com">https://limestonepostmagazine.com</a>             |
| <i>LymeLine.com</i>                   | Olwen Logan             | <a href="https://lymeline.com">https://lymeline.com</a>                                       |
| <i>MiWisconsin</i>                    | Alejandro Riano         | <a href="https://www.miwisconsin.org">https://www.miwisconsin.org</a>                         |
| <i>New Bedford Light</i>              | Barbara Roessner        | <a href="https://newbedfordlight.org">https://newbedfordlight.org</a>                         |
| <i>New Jersey Urban News</i>          | Penda Howell            | <a href="https://www.njurbannews.com">https://www.njurbannews.com</a>                         |
| <i>NowKalamazoo</i>                   | Ben Lando               | <a href="https://nowkalamazoo.com">https://nowkalamazoo.com</a>                               |
| <i>Philomath News</i>                 | Bradley Fuqua           | <a href="https://philomathnews.com">https://philomathnews.com</a>                             |
| <i>Roanoke Rambler</i>                | Henri Gendreau          | <a href="https://www.roanokerambler.com">https://www.roanokerambler.com</a>                   |
| <i>Sierra County Sun</i>              | Diana Tittle            | <a href="https://www.sierracountysun.org">https://www.sierracountysun.org</a>                 |
| <i>Wayne Weekly</i>                   | Mary Ellis              | <a href="https://www.thewayneweekly.com">https://www.thewayneweekly.com</a>                   |
| <i>West Seattle Blog</i>              | Tracy Record            | <a href="https://www.westseattleblog.com">https://www.westseattleblog.com</a>                 |

Source: Author.

Table B2 includes newspapers we contacted that did not respond.

**Table B2. Nonrespondent News Sites**

| News Site Name              | Website   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Atlanta Civic Circle</i> | <a href="https://atlantaciviccircle.org">https://atlantaciviccircle.org</a>           |
| <i>Axios Charlotte</i>      | <a href="https://charlotte.axios.com">https://charlotte.axios.com</a>                 |
| <i>Beacon</i>               | <a href="https://www.thebeaconnewspapers.com">https://www.thebeaconnewspapers.com</a> |

|                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Bloomfield Information Project</b> | <a href="https://bloomfieldinfo.org">https://bloomfieldinfo.org</a>                       |
| <b>Boulder Reporting Lab</b>          | <a href="https://www.boulderreportinglab.org">https://www.boulderreportinglab.org</a>     |
| <b>Canopy Atlanta</b>                 | <a href="https://canopyatlanta.org">https://canopyatlanta.org</a>                         |
| <b>Capitol News Illinois</b>          | <a href="https://www.capitolnewsillinois.com">https://www.capitolnewsillinois.com</a>     |
| <b>Chemical City Paper</b>            | <a href="http://chemicalcitypaper.com">http://chemicalcitypaper.com</a>                   |
| <b>Cicero Independiente</b>           | <a href="https://www.ciceroindependiente.com">https://www.ciceroindependiente.com</a>     |
| <b>City</b>                           | <a href="https://thecity.nyc">https://thecity.nyc</a>                                     |
| <b>Clayton Crescent</b>               | <a href="https://claytoncrescent.org">https://claytoncrescent.org</a>                     |
| <b>Columbus New Mexico News</b>       | <a href="https://cnm-news.com">https://cnm-news.com</a>                                   |
| <b>Corner Post</b>                    | <a href="https://www.cornerpost.org">https://www.cornerpost.org</a>                       |
| <b>Current Georgia</b>                | <a href="https://thecurrentga.org">https://thecurrentga.org</a>                           |
| <b>Delaware Independent</b>           | <a href="https://www.delawareindependent.com">https://www.delawareindependent.com</a>     |
| <b>Eden Prairie Local News</b>        | <a href="https://www.eplocalnews.org">https://www.eplocalnews.org</a>                     |
| <b>Edgeville Buzz</b>                 | <a href="https://edgevillebuzz.com">https://edgevillebuzz.com</a>                         |
| <b>El Paso Matters</b>                | <a href="https://elpasomatters.org">https://elpasomatters.org</a>                         |
| <b>Epicenter-NYC</b>                  | <a href="https://epicenter-nyc.com">https://epicenter-nyc.com</a>                         |
| <b>Everything Greendale</b>           | <a href="https://patch.com/wisconsin/greendale">https://patch.com/wisconsin/greendale</a> |
| <b>Fallon Post</b>                    | <a href="https://www.thefallonpost.org">https://www.thefallonpost.org</a>                 |
| <b>Flatwater Free Press</b>           | <a href="https://www.flatwaterfreepress.org">https://www.flatwaterfreepress.org</a>       |
| <b>Fort Worth Report</b>              | <a href="https://fortworthreport.org">https://fortworthreport.org</a>                     |
| <b>Gig Harbor Now</b>                 | <a href="https://www.gigharbornow.org">https://www.gigharbornow.org</a>                   |
| <b>Gothenburg Leader</b>              | <a href="https://www.gothenburgleader.com">https://www.gothenburgleader.com</a>           |
| <b>Grafton Common</b>                 | <a href="http://www.graftoncommon.com">http://www.graftoncommon.com</a>                   |
| <b>Greenup Gazette</b>                | <a href="https://www.greenupgazette.com">https://www.greenupgazette.com</a>               |
| <b>Grice Connect</b>                  | <a href="https://griceconnect.com">https://griceconnect.com</a>                           |
| <b>Hastings Journal</b>               | <a href="https://www.hastingsjournal.news">https://www.hastingsjournal.news</a>           |
| <b>Henrico Citizen</b>                | <a href="http://www.henicocitizen.com">http://www.henicocitizen.com</a>                   |
| <b>Idaho Capitol Sun</b>              | <a href="https://idahocapitalsun.com">https://idahocapitalsun.com</a>                     |
| <b>Indiana Citizen</b>                | <a href="https://indianacitizen.org">https://indianacitizen.org</a>                       |
| <b>Isthmus</b>                        | <a href="https://isthmus.com">https://isthmus.com</a>                                     |
| <b>Jersey City Times</b>              | <a href="https://jcitytimes.com">https://jcitytimes.com</a>                               |
| <b>Key Biscayne Independent</b>       | <a href="https://kbindependent.org">https://kbindependent.org</a>                         |
| <b>Kingston Wire</b>                  | <a href="https://kingstonwire.com">https://kingstonwire.com</a>                           |
| <b>Knock LA</b>                       | <a href="https://knock-la.com">https://knock-la.com</a>                                   |
| <b>Knock Publishing Company</b>       | <a href="https://www.doorcountyknock.org">https://www.doorcountyknock.org</a>             |
| <b>Lake Cumberland Current</b>        | <a href="https://www.lakecumberlandcurrent.com">https://www.lakecumberlandcurrent.com</a> |
| <b>Land</b>                           | <a href="https://www.thelandcle.org">https://www.thelandcle.org</a>                       |
| <b>Logan-Hocking Times</b>            | <a href="https://www.loganhockingtimes.com">https://www.loganhockingtimes.com</a>         |
| <b>Lookout Santa Cruz</b>             | <a href="https://lookout.co/santacruz">https://lookout.co/santacruz</a>                   |
| <b>Mahoning Matters</b>               | <a href="https://www.mahoningmatters.com">https://www.mahoningmatters.com</a>             |
| <b>Milwaukee Record</b>               | <a href="https://www.milwaukeeerecord.com">https://www.milwaukeeerecord.com</a>           |
| <b>Mississippi Free Press</b>         | <a href="https://www.mississippifreepress.org">https://www.mississippifreepress.org</a>   |
| <b>Mountain State Spotlight</b>       | <a href="https://mountainstatespotlight.org">https://mountainstatespotlight.org</a>       |
| <b>New York Focus</b>                 | <a href="https://www.nysfocus.com">https://www.nysfocus.com</a>                           |
| <b>News TN</b>                        | <a href="https://www.thenewstn.com">https://www.thenewstn.com</a>                         |
| <b>NJ Spotlight</b>                   | <a href="https://www.njspotlightnews.org">https://www.njspotlightnews.org</a>             |
| <b>Nuestro Estado</b>                 | <a href="https://www.NuestroEstado.com">https://www.NuestroEstado.com</a>                 |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Ocala Gazette</b>                                | <a href="https://www.ocalagazette.com">https://www.ocalagazette.com</a>                                 |
| <b>Oshkosh Examiner</b>                             | <a href="https://www.oshkoshexaminer.com">https://www.oshkoshexaminer.com</a>                           |
| <b>Palo Pinto Press</b>                             | <a href="https://www.palopintopress.com">https://www.palopintopress.com</a>                             |
| <b>Parsippany Focus</b>                             | <a href="https://www.parsippanyfocus.com">https://www.parsippanyfocus.com</a>                           |
| <b>Peekskill Herald</b>                             | <a href="https://peekskillherald.com">https://peekskillherald.com</a>                                   |
| <b>Planet Detroit News</b>                          | <a href="http://www.planetdetroit.org">http://www.planetdetroit.org</a>                                 |
| <b>Port City Daily</b>                              | <a href="https://portcitydaily.com">https://portcitydaily.com</a>                                       |
| <b>PW Perspective</b>                               | <a href="https://www.pwperspective.com">https://www.pwperspective.com</a>                               |
| <b>Rainy Lake Gazette</b>                           | <a href="https://www.rainylakegazette.com">https://www.rainylakegazette.com</a>                         |
| <b>Record North Shore</b>                           | <a href="https://www.therecordnorthshore.org">https://www.therecordnorthshore.org</a>                   |
| <b>Richmond Observer</b>                            | <a href="https://richmondobserver.com">https://richmondobserver.com</a>                                 |
| <b>Rio Linda Messenger</b>                          | <a href="https://www.riolindamessenger.com">https://www.riolindamessenger.com</a>                       |
| <b>Saco Bay News</b>                                | <a href="https://sacobaynews.com">https://sacobaynews.com</a>   |
| <b>Salish Current</b>                               | <a href="https://salish-current.org">https://salish-current.org</a>                                     |
| <b>San José Spotlight</b>                           | <a href="https://sanjosespotlight.com">https://sanjosespotlight.com</a>                                 |
| <b>Santa Cruz Local</b>                             | <a href="https://santacruzlocal.org">https://santacruzlocal.org</a>                                     |
| <b>Shasta Scout</b>                                 | <a href="https://shastascout.org">https://shastascout.org</a>   |
| <b>Sherman County Gazette</b>                       | <a href="https://www.shermancountygazette.com">https://www.shermancountygazette.com</a>                 |
| <b>Sioux Falls Simplified</b>                       | <a href="https://www.sfsimplified.com">https://www.sfsimplified.com</a>                                 |
| <b>SJV Water</b>                                    | <a href="https://sjvwater.org">https://sjvwater.org</a>   |
| <b>South Cass Tribune</b>                           | <a href="https://the-south-cass-tribune.business.site">https://the-south-cass-tribune.business.site</a> |
| <b>Southern Maryland Chronicle</b>                  | <a href="https://southernmarylandchronicle.com">https://southernmarylandchronicle.com</a>               |
| <b>Spotlight PA</b>                                 | <a href="https://www.spotlightpa.org">https://www.spotlightpa.org</a>                                   |
| <b>Summerland Advocate-Messenger</b>                | <a href="https://www.summerlandadvocate.com">https://www.summerlandadvocate.com</a>                     |
| <b>This San Francisco</b>                           | <a href="https://www.thissanfrancisco.com">https://www.thissanfrancisco.com</a>                         |
| <b>Trenton Journal</b>                              | <a href="https://trentonjournal.com">https://trentonjournal.com</a>                                     |
| <b>Underscore News</b>                              | <a href="https://www.underscore.news">https://www.underscore.news</a>                                   |
| <b>Village Sun</b>                                  | <a href="https://thevillagesun.com">https://thevillagesun.com</a>                                       |
| <b>Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism</b> | <a href="https://vcij.org">https://vcij.org</a>   |
| <b>VoxPopuli</b>                                    | <a href="http://www.wintergardenvox.com">http://www.wintergardenvox.com</a>                             |
| <b>Waller County Express</b>                        | <a href="http://wallercountyexpress.com">http://wallercountyexpress.com</a>                             |
| <b>Watershed Voice</b>                              | <a href="https://www.watershedvoice.com">https://www.watershedvoice.com</a>                             |
| <b>West View Media</b>                              | <a href="https://www.westviewmedia.org">https://www.westviewmedia.org</a>                               |

Source: Author.

## About the Author

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# Notes

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