

**“We don’t need to save local news...
we need to build something better.”**

**A MANIFESTO FOR
GREATER
COMMUNITY
MEDIA**

**the
CHURCHILL
fellowship**

**By Rhiannon J Davies,
Churchill Fellow 2020**



POSSIBILITIES

OF THE WORLD.

SPREADING GOOD WORDS

GOOD VIBES

BE MORE yourself

Make today Worthy

EVERY DAY IS A NEW BEGINNING

The future of journalism is Visual

IT'S ABOUT EMBRACING WHAT'S NOW. BUT ALWAYS WONDERING. what's next?

REVOLUTION NOW!

The future of JOURNALISM

Be positive, productive, patient, and persistent

RADIATE Positivity

UNITY BUILDING

THE Best IS YET TO Come

Who Gets to Tell the Story Matters

The future of journalism is equitable

Make a FRIEND

Life is better when you are Laughing.

THING LOOKED OVER. THING OVERLOOKED.

PEOPLE

PRODUCT UPDATE

centuries-old practice whose time may soon be up!!!

Collaborative Journalism is a VIB

PICK YOUR

WE STAND TOGETHER #BLM BLACK LIVES MATTER

beyond the USA BORDERS

Board created at the Collaborative Journalism Summit, a display at the Centre for Cooperative Media.

#BLM

PROTECT you

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About This Manifesto

I spent six weeks from 1 September 2023 to 16 October 2023 visiting innovative local news projects in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Denver, Boulder, Chicago, Vancouver Island, and Vancouver. This research was funded by the Churchill Fellowship.

This manifesto draws out the key lessons I heard from the conversations I had with over fifty practitioners, working at all levels of the media ecosystem; publishers, journalists, funders, policy advocates, organisers and academics. I am grateful to all of those who took the time to share their thoughts and reflections.

Aims

I have three main aims with this report:

1 Help to delineate and make visible the community-led journalism – or civic media – approach.

2 Provide inspiration and support to UK-based media practitioners and potential practitioners.

3 Show UK-based funders how funding journalism can align with aims around strengthening communities, building stronger democracies and facilitating voice-led transformation.

Terminology¹

- Civic media: any form of communication that strengthens the social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement among its residents.
- Information ecosystem: the sum total of people and products that produce, verify, and distribute civic information in a geographic area.
- Community journalism: journalism produced with and for communities.
- Accountability/watchdog journalism: investigative journalism that uncovers wrongdoing and holds power to account.
- Service journalism: or ‘news you can use’ is giving audiences practical advice to make their lives easier.
- Solutions journalism is rigorous, evidence-based reporting on responses to social problems.
- Constructive journalism: a type of journalism that focuses on progress and positive developments rather than solely on problems, conflicts, and negative events, embracing nuance and prompting democratic dialogue.
- Co-creational media: combines the traditional journalistic commitment to epistemic (knowledge-related) norms such as accuracy with a greater commitment to public participation and social inclusivity.

¹ Many of these definitions are taken from those explained in the following documents:

<https://localnewsroadmap.org/>

<https://civic.mit.edu/index.html%3Fp=26.html>

<https://agorajournalism.center/research/redefining-news-a-manifesto-for-community-centered-journalism/>

<https://constructiveinstitute.org/why/>

<https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/post/co-creational-media-committing-to-truth-and-public-participation>

Context

USA

Exploring the renewed interest in funding local journalism, the interviewer told me how for years many of those with wealth have lived comfortable lives in the US. But now the bedrock on which those lives are based – a functioning democracy – is being shaken by political changes. The national media, in particular the right wing broadcast media, contributes to the polarisation of society and is seen to be harming democracy by playing fast and loose with the truth in favour of clicks and ratings – driven largely by commercial imperative. This topic feels even more urgent with the prospect of Trump returning to the White House looming large.

There is a renewed interest in funding initiatives which bring stability, and local news is seen by some as playing a part in this. As Steve Waldman of Rebuild Local News put it in a piece entitled 'How high school sports coverage can save democracy': 'In addition to the watchdog function, local news – of a different sort – has a community cohesion role. Obituaries, high school sports, school board meetings, the new economic development plan, the amateur theatre production, a couple's 50th wedding anniversary – these types of stories teach neighbours about each other, provide basic information on community problems and create a sense of shared interest. In fact, the decline of local reporting has helped fuel polarisation, misinformation and the growing tendency for Americans to demonise each other. If we have any hope of addressing those democracy-crushing problems, we have to dramatically strengthen local news.'²

Local media in the US has a problem with hedge fund owners dismantling newsrooms. The 2023 report on the State of Local News³ found that there are 204 counties with no local news provision, and of the 3,143 counties in the US, more than half have either no local news source or only one remaining outlet – typically a weekly newspaper. According to journalism researcher Marc Edge, hedge funds have bought up newspapers, buying their debt and kept them going to earn income off the interest. The trend of large corporate media consolidating newsrooms and cutting staff has been even more acute in the US than in the UK. An employee at one such newsroom told me that, as they see it,

owners are trying to extract what they can while they can. Whatever the motivations, when corporate needs are put above those of a community, local publications exist to serve shareholders rather than readers.

Philanthropy has always played a huge part in civil society in the US, in part due to the wealth and tax breaks that accompany charitable giving, but also due to the fact that the state has traditionally taken a less interventionist role than in the UK. During my time in the US, the Press Forward fund was announced; a \$500million fund to support local media across the US over a five-year period. The announcement was seen as a starting point, and the hope is that other funders, particularly local, place-based funders will join the initiative to increase this pot.

Canada

In some ways, the context in Canada is much more similar to the UK. They don't have the large amounts of cash that flow from American philanthropy. They have a handful of large corporate media corporations who own a lot of the local media. They also have a small but flourishing group of inspiring independent media outlets doing things their own way.

Perhaps most prominent in Canada, certainly at the time of my visit, was the ongoing battle with Big Tech. At that time, Meta had blocked news from appearing on its platforms in response to a law requiring tech companies in the country to pay news publishers for using their content. Google was threatening the same. Publishers reliant upon digital traffic were worried.

There were also some glimmers of hope. The Canadian Government had introduced the Local Journalism Initiative to fund roles of journalists covering underserved communities. In the US, a group of journalism leaders from independent media had come together to form a coalition called Press Forward (separate to the US philanthropy initiative, and they had the name first) to advocate for policy that supports independent media. No one else was.

² <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2023/high-school-sports-coverage-can-save-democracy/>

³ <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2023/>



Some of the titles owned by Colorado Community Media, part of the Colorado News Conservancy, which aims to keep local newspapers in the hands of the locals.

Introduction



On the beach in Coney Island on the first day of my trip.

When I applied for this Fellowship in 2019, I wanted to learn about the methods that emerging forms of civic media was using, how practitioners were engaging with audiences in different ways – and why. I wanted to learn about the impact that this work was having on people and communities. And I wanted to understand how this could help to plug the democratic deficit created by the decline in local news media coverage.

The reason I wanted to know all this was so that I could learn what can be brought into practice in the UK. My ultimate aim was to establish something similar in the UK.

Because of travel restrictions put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I wasn't able to travel until 2023. In the four years between submitting my application and being able to travel, a number of these emerging organisations I had been following in the US and Canada matured, developed, shifted focus, and given rise to new spin-off organisations. The delay in my travel meant that I had been closely following some of these organisations for four years before meeting with them.

“I WAS STRUCK BY HOW A MOVEMENT WHICH SEEMED EMERGING AND INNOVATIVE IN 2019 HAD BECOME SO WIDESPREAD.”

In the time between applying and actually being able to travel for my Fellowship, I had also launched my own non-profit media company, Greater Govanhill CIC, which has grown to include: an award-winning hyperlocal community magazine, community media hub and a collaborative of 22 independently owned, community-based publications. This meant I had more to share with the places I visited.

One of the key differences between how I imagined the Fellowship would play out versus the reality of travelling in 2023, is that many of the organisations now encouraged remote working. Some no longer had newsrooms or offices, and when they did, they were not well used by whole teams. This meant that there were more one-to-one conversations and less observational, ethnographic research.

However, I was able to visit seven newsrooms, have conversations with over 50 people, drink a lot of coffee, attend around 10 events or public meetings, cover nearly 6,000 miles across the continent and walk an average of 10,000 steps each day.

I was inspired by so many of the people I met and grateful to them for being so generous in sharing their time and reflections. I was struck by how a movement which seemed emerging and innovative in 2019 had become so widespread. I was impressed at how funders were recognising the work that was being done and getting behind the innovators to enable it to happen.

I found it encouraging to meet so many people who saw the crisis in the decline of traditional local news as an opportunity to build something better; activists, entrepreneurs and innovators who saw that the stakes are high and who set out to create something new, something which benefits the whole community.

This manifesto highlights the lessons learned by the sector in the US, and how, for the good of local communities, they could be implemented here.

1 Journalism should begin by understanding a community's needs

“Journalism should be about meeting a community's needs, not providing ‘journalism’ with a capital J.”

This quote really resonated with me. It came from meeting with the team at Documented, an organisation set up to ‘break the cycle of extractive immigration reporting’ by relying ‘heavily on listening to New York’s immigrant communities’. Their work is informed by these insights, in response to needs. This includes original reporting and investigations, but a large part of their website is also dedicated to providing useful links, guides and resources.

They produce guides in different languages that help people to navigate the challenges of daily life in a new country, and meet people where they are – whether that’s through a WhatsApp channel, or by handing out leaflets at shelters. Through providing these basic services, they also build trust, meaning that people are willing to share their stories with them to highlight injustices and hold power to account.

Mazin Sidahmad, cofounder of Documented said: “We want to be a primary news source that’s both meeting people’s information needs and doing good accountability journalism... We want to be read by migrants across the city, so that politicians are as afraid of us as they are of the Post.”

This move away from traditional notions of what journalism is was something that I encountered in multiple places. Whether it was voter guides, data maps, text services or public meetings, the idea of service journalism, or ‘news you can use’, has become the norm in many organisations in the US. Community engagement is seen as an important part of this work – even among the more established legacy media.

And with this change in function, also comes a changing idea of journalism’s role in society. For many, the idea that journalism should remain apart from the communities it serves is now in the past. More often I saw people take the view that local newsrooms should not be passive – instead they are an active part of the community and take a more active role in demanding change.

Sarah Alvaraz, founder of Outlier Media, a nonprofit newsroom designed to centre and respond to Detroiters’ needs, highlighted this when she said: “The big tension question currently is what is the point of the news? Just covering something is not sufficient any more. We have

CICERO INDEPENDIENTE

I met with April Alonso, co-founder of Cicero Independiente, in a back room of a church in her neighbourhood on the outskirts of Chicago. Cicero has had a reputation for corruption and a history of white supremacy. Despite having a population of over 80,000, previously it had no dedicated media. It only got media attention when something bad happened with reporters parachuting in from elsewhere. Despite having a largely Spanish speaking population, there wasn’t any media which catered to them.

The founders had taken part in the City Bureau civic reporting fellowship and wanted to bring something back to their own community. They began with a listening exercise, asking people what they’d want from a local publication. Cicero Independiente was set up as a bilingual online publication in response.

In one reporting project, they partnered with an investigative outlet to report on the issue of air quality in the neighbourhood. In order to make the reporting accessible they took it to a family day at a church with a visual representation of the findings, offering people free *agua frescas* drinks to encourage them to stop and chat.

to want to improve things. We take a more interventionist approach.”

Many are terming this new form of journalism as ‘civic media’, which can be defined as ‘any form of communication that strengthens the social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement among its residents’. When we spoke, Mike Rispoli, of Free Press, one of the authors of a seminal report, ‘Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs’, highlighted that “civic journalism is beyond experimentation. And unlike collapsing legacy media, it is strong and growing”.

Journalism needs to break free from the tradition and ego which holds it back

One thing that really stood out to me on my visits, was that one word – journalism – was no longer sufficient to cover the new and old way of doing things, even when prefixing it with qualifiers such as accountability, service, community etc. Whether the result of Trump's attacks on 'fake news', or the disgraced behaviour of those at the helm of British tabloids, for many 'journalism' has become a dirty word.

But it is not just the terminology that is diverging as 'civic media' takes hold as a new term, it is also the approach – as outlined above. Darryl Holliday, co-founder of City Bureau, believes that the sector will only get more diffuse as people lead it in different directions. He sees those who want to save it are seen as more conservative – with a small c.

Likewise, Terry Parris Jr, who has pioneered a more engaged form of journalism in a number of places, and now works at the New York Times, shared how he felt that "Journalism is not radical enough; it's still working in the confines of tradition and ego".



City Bureau believes journalism is a powerful tool that belongs in the hands of the people.

Join us as we build a newsroom that looks like Chicago.

A phrase that is now commonly used is 'to commit acts of journalism' implying how much of the most needed work can be done by anyone – not necessarily someone who has trained in journalism, as is the case with the ground-breaking Documenters project.

DOCUMENTERS, CITY BUREAU

Documenters was one of the key projects which inspired this Fellowship. It involves training citizens to go along to public meetings – of local governments, police boards and school boards – and then report on them. The edited notes from these meetings are made available to journalists in the area through a news wire service. These actions make public officials more accountable, engage citizens with democracy, and provide journalists with information for stories that they might not otherwise be able to report on.

It was launched by City Bureau in 2018, and so when I applied in 2019, it was still a fairly new concept operating just in Chicago. In the five years since, they have received huge amounts of funding to roll it out nationwide. It now operates across 15 cities (and that number is growing each year), and has trained over 2,200 Documenters, who have covered more than 5,000 public meetings.

They have found that just showing up to public meetings makes representatives more accountable, whether or not what happens at that meeting is widely reported. And as much as it is an opportunity for citizen journalism, the programme also works as an adult civic education programme. I spoke to founders, attended a Documenters community of practice meet up with City Bureau in Chicago, and an ice cream social with Resolve Philly and spoke to those at Detroit Outlier about how it is working there. I heard many stories of how those who had trained in the programme had gone on to start new initiatives, volunteer or get involved with community life in some way.

Bettina Chang, co-founder and co-executive director of Chicago programs at City Bureau said: "Documenters programme came out of the realisation that not everyone wants to be a journalist. It's more based on the citizen science model. But just as with citizen science, citizen journalism doesn't have to be a free for all. People can be trained to do a repeated task, that is newsworthy, protected, and has guardrails. The more we did it, the more we realised it was nothing to be afraid of. Programme participants reflected this too."

3 Who gets to tell the story – and how they tell it – matters

As well as the different forms that journalism can take, how we tell the story, and who gets to tell it matters. Throughout history traditional journalism focusing on crime and violence has harmed certain communities, whether directly through scapegoating, stereotyping and othering, or more indirectly by wearing down a lack of pride in a community or trust in your neighbours.

Recognising this harm seems to make many of those in the journalism industry become defensive, but it is a crucial first step to improving the way things are done. In the US and Canada, following movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, more and more publications are reckoning with their past and attempting to right wrongs. Whether that's the negative portrayal of the Black Panthers and Black communities more generally, the unwillingness to cover indigenous people's stories, or the one sided approach to covering them.

There have also been attempts to lessen the harms caused to individuals who may have committed crimes in the past, and find that the permanent, searchable nature of online coverage is preventing them from moving on. Many newsrooms now have a 'right to be forgotten' policy that allows historic articles to be removed from their website if certain criteria are met.

People working in community-led journalism need to find the tools and methods that are most relevant and that create constructive conversations. Co-creational journalism involves working with community members to produce journalism content. This democratisation of journalism processes means that trained journalists are no longer the gatekeepers to information, but instead can function more as facilitators in a two-way process.



Philly Cam set up a popup newsroom in a parking bay in Philadelphia.

MEGAPHONE

I attended an editorial meeting of The Shift peer newsroom editorial meeting for Megaphone, a monthly magazine that is produced in collaboration with people with experience of homelessness, and sold by vendors on the streets of Vancouver as a means of income. We met in their offices in Downtown Eastside, an area known for complex social issues, as well as its community activism and art.

The meeting brought together people with different ages, backgrounds and experiences for a reflection on the latest issue, discussion of stories for the next month, and a chance to talk about what's happening in people's lives. It was honest, open and challenging at times. Everyone was treated like peers with all contributions equally valued. Not only was it teaching new skills to participating individuals, but it was a chance to change perceptions about an area too often shaped by journalists who don't live there.

Managing Editor Paula Carlson explains what The Shift is in the May 2023 issue of the magazine, writing:

"The aim is to have the framework of Megaphone 'shift' to being a more inclusive street paper, empowering those with lived experience to tell the stories that matter to them and their communities... Represented within The Shift are people with direct lived experience of poverty, homelessness, substance use, physical disabilities, mental illness, incarceration, racism, colonialism, immigration, Indigenous issues, LGBTQ2+ concerns and other important aspects of life that make up so much of the current public discourse and politics at all levels of government. Who better to have their voices heard?"

4 The future of journalism is collaborative

Traditionally, competition has reigned over collaboration in the field of journalism – particularly when it comes to different newsrooms. But the industry has changed and with it the social, technological and economic contexts in which it operates. The pressures this has put upon the sector has led to a need to find new ways of working and a rise in collaborative or cooperative journalism projects.

One of the first places I visited, The Center for Cooperative Media, based out of Montclair State University in New Jersey, has become a hub for research, resources and information on this new model. Their theory of change reads: ‘When industry-leading training is provided; collaboration is prioritized; timely research is shared; funding is put directly into the hands of the people who produce and distribute local news and information; and equity drives all decisions, it will result in more informed, engaged and strong communities.’

Obvious, right? It should be, but few are doing it quite so effectively as the groundbreaking New Jersey News Commons, the flagship project of the Center for Cooperative Media which was set up in 2012, to see what would happen if news and information systems work cooperatively. It has spawned many other projects and led the way for many across different areas including policy, funding, research and development.

I met with collaboratives of different forms in all the cities I visited. Just outside Chicago I met with the bilingual grassroots publication Cicero Independiente who had collaborated with nonprofit, collaborative, investigative news site Muck Rock. They worked together to investigate and report on the poor air quality in the local neighbourhood, allowing a community publication to take on a much bigger project than they might otherwise have the resources for.

In Denver, I met with the Colorado News Collaborative (aka COLab), whose mission is ‘to be a local media resource hub and ideas lab that serves all Coloradans by strengthening high-quality local journalism, supporting civic engagement, and ensuring public accountability.’ They help more than 170 news outlets across Colorado report important stories they couldn’t do alone. This includes partnering experienced investigative journalists with hyperlocal publications to provide the time and resources to investigate stories that might otherwise go under-reported. In doing so, this also upskills

local reporters for future investigations.

In Philadelphia, I visited the Lenfest Institute and heard about the Every Voice, Every Vote project: ‘a citywide coalition of community groups and media organisations coming together to elevate Philadelphia’s diverse voices, inform voters, and promote civic action around the 2023 City of Philadelphia elections’.

Also in Philadelphia, Resolve Philly began as a collaborative reporting project around re-entry from prison. Now known as the Philadelphia Journalism Collaborative, it is today a partnership of 29 local newsrooms focusing on issues that affect the daily lives of Philadelphia residents, dedicated to ‘bridging the divide between communities and journalists, and increasing community-centred, solutions-based journalism that promotes inclusivity and equity in news reporting’. I heard how there’s a real strength in the diversity of publications involved. Big newsrooms can learn from and use the trust that smaller publications have with their community to get stories they wouldn’t otherwise. And smaller publications can benefit from the resources that those big newsrooms can bring.

Collaboration has now become ingrained in journalism across the US. Researcher Sarah Stonbely at the Center for Cooperative Media said how the next evolution of this would be cross field collaborations with journalism organisations collaborating with those working in other sectors.



People from across the industry came together for a visioning day organised by the Colorado Media Project.

5 Journalists have to understand impact

We need to better understand the impact of journalism, and to be more intentional about the impact we want to make. We need to ask ‘who is benefitting from our journalism?’ because someone always is.

Impact goes beyond page views, or reach, and it also goes beyond policy change and official accountability. We need to understand the impact upon communities, in particular those which may have been harmed by journalism in the past – those which have been scapegoated, blamed and vilified. As Darryl Holliday said “news has always played a big part in dividing society, but hasn’t always been seen”.

This also happens at a local level as a response to the types of stories that make the news. Siani Colón, Editor of Kensington Voice, Philadelphia described how “Sensationalised reporting on our community has diminished trust of community in the media”.

Being intentional about impact and making efforts to produce it and track it, can ensure that impact made by journalism is positive. It also provides further opportunities for journalists to engage with the communities they serve, and in doing so create a 360 degree feedback loop that ensures journalism reflects society better.

The organisations I met with were tackling and tracking impact using a number of different frameworks. Some made use of the Impact Architects categorisation of impact type:

- Structural impact: Was there change on an institutional level such as policy change or institutional action?
- Community/network impact: Did something happen within a community or a network, such as a protest or community meeting?
- Individual impact: Was the impact by or involving an individual? Did they take action or change their opinion?
- Media amplification: Did other news organisations, nonprofits, etc, cite/quote, amplify, localise, or feature the work and/or data reporting of your newsroom?

However they thought about it, most teams had built impact tracking into their workflow. Some had hired ‘impact editors’ to both support their work to produce impact and also to monitor it.

RESOLVE PHILLY

Resolve Philly began life in 2017 as a collaborative reporting project around re-entry from prison – with 13 newsroom partners producing approximately 200 stories. This led to another collaboration, Broke in Philly, which reported on economic mobility and solutions to poverty. It has now evolved to include a number of different programmes including Equally Informed Philly, which aims to bridge the city’s information divide through text and place-based news and information delivery, as well as a hyperlocal outlet, Germantown Info Hub, and Shake the Table, a reporting and community engagement initiative to ensure greater local government accountability. They state that they are ‘an unconventional journalism organisation that challenges our industry to be more equitable, collaborative, and based in community voices and solutions’.

Eugene Sonn, Director of Collaborations, Resolve Philly: “We’re introducing ‘second bite of the apple’ for every story, so every story has a follow up piece of work, doesn’t have to be public, could be a meeting or something else. But this builds deeper engagement and trust.”



6 Change starts within – we need better newsroom cultures

One of the things that struck me in several of the newsrooms I visited was the rejection of typical newsroom culture. The journalism industry – like many industries – was traditionally a male dominated environment. The pressures of newspaper and broadcast deadlines led to unhealthy work environments and the stressful nature of the job often led to toxic newsroom culture.

This was one of the reasons that many people had left their jobs working in legacy newsrooms. Instead they were seeking to build something that prioritises people over productivity. In Documented I saw how all members of the team were trusted to take an entrepreneurial approach to tackling their area of work. In Chicago, I attended a community of practice meeting that was set out as a space ‘to learn and unlearn’. In Denver, I heard that in order for newsrooms to better cover democracy, they need to become more democratic. I also heard how at City Bureau, the culture was established so that staff were encouraged to speak out when they weren’t happy – and they do.

In an article entitled ‘Rest At Work: Five Ways Resolve Philly Encourages Our Team To Rest’, Rasheed Ajamu of Germantown Info Hub writes: “As I frame it, rest is a birthright and rejection of grind culture, which, informed by capitalism, tells people they should constantly be working and creates a false sense of steady urgency. In response to grind culture, rest is how we create community healing, connection, and care of ourselves.”



In Resolve Philly, this manifests into certain work practices and policies which include: communicating ‘at-capacity’; respecting away hours; hybrid work model; unlimited paid time off; bi-annual breaks. Those involved with founding the organisation had worked in toxic work cultures and were keen not to do that here. They intentionally created a very informal and friendly work environment, and had just won an award for it.

INDIGINEWS

IndigiNews is an Indigenous-led online publication that practises ‘trauma-informed, culturally relevant and respectful journalism’. It was created through a partnership between Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) and The Discourse, but is currently in the process of becoming an independent organisation. I met with publisher Eden Fineday and editor Cara McKenna in Vancouver.

Their ethos is summed up by this note on storytelling intentions published on their website:

‘We are removing aggressive verbiage from our protocols. We no longer believe in the colonial mindset of ‘working hard,’ or doing things ‘rigorously.’ We aim to treat ourselves softly this year, especially as communities across Indigenous homelands continue to uncover the unmarked graves of our children...

‘Since its inception, IndigiNews has challenged the very concept of what “news” is. Our team is made up of both storytellers who don’t have a background in traditional journalism and those who do. We intentionally didn’t import newsroom culture into our storytelling lodge, and by doing so we have created something special. As paradoxical as it sounds, we’ve created something new that is also inherently old, since it is rooted in our traditions.’

7 Taking an ecosystem approach to community information

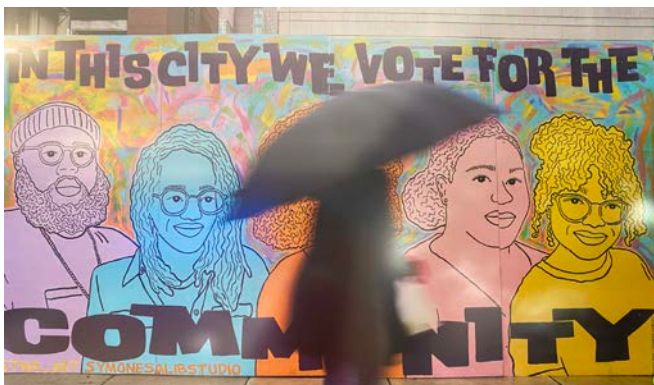
“Some journalists still think we’re the public square. We’re not. We’re just another voice hollering within it.”
Chase Woodruff.

Journalism does not exist in a vacuum. Instead it is one source of information trying to cut through the noise of the information overload in which we now live, particularly when it comes to digital information. And if trusted local news is no longer part of that, the void may be filled by corporate actors which can polarise rather than connect. Yet while grassroots, entrepreneurial projects are part of the solution, they are not the only solution. The ecosystem approach also recognises the bigger players, as well as community organisations, state institutions, funders and other bodies that make it up.

The information ecosystem can be defined as ‘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’.

In order to provide more effective journalism and ‘news you can use’, we also need to take an ecosystem approach to better understand how different information and community actors interact. As one speaker at a Colorado Media Project convention I attended in Denver put it: “the ecosystem approach to local news is about putting a place and a people at the centre.”

When talking about the work of Detroit Outlier, Candice Fortman has said: “It’s not good for us to be strong but the Detroit Free Press to be weak. We need the whole ecosystem to be strong.” She advocates for a “village methodology” that uplifts the many as opposed to the few.



COLORADO MEDIA PROJECT

The Colorado Media Project ‘brings together funders, business and civic leaders, journalists, and community advocates who are concerned about the status and future of local news and information in the state’. Key elements of their strategy are to: encourage Coloradans to engage in shaping the future of local news; and to establish Colorado as a national leader. They state:

‘Our north star is not to salvage legacy systems of media, or to create a new single entity or outlet-to-eclipse-them-all – but to build a healthier, more equitable, solutions-focused local news and information ecosystem that supports vibrant communities across the state. To have impact at scale, CMP seeks to continue growing a broad-based coalition of mission-aligned journalists, funders, policymakers, and community partners in Colorado and nationwide who are building a healthier local civic news ecosystem that supports informed and engaged communities.’

I attended a five-year visioning exercise exploring the elements of a healthy local news ecosystem. It also served as the launch for their white paper entitled ‘Reimagining Colorado’s Public Square: What does a healthy local news and information ecosystem look like in five years from now – and how do we get there?’ I also attended the Colorado Press Association annual convention and the launch of ‘Amplify Colorado’ – an online guide to help newsrooms find diverse sources and community members to find local reporters.

8

Funders need to understand what's possible – and support it with core, multiyear funds



One of the biggest differences I saw between the UK, Canada and US contexts was the funding landscape. In the US, philanthropic funding is much more established generally with more wealthy individuals and tax incentives for giving. In recent years there has been an interest in funding local journalism, as a counterweight to the polarising effect of some of the national media, and the rhetoric around it.

While I was in the US, a coalition of funders named Press Forward announced a new \$500 million fund 'to strengthen local newsrooms, close longstanding gaps in journalism coverage, advance public policy that expands access to local news, and to scale the infrastructure the sector needs to thrive'.

“GIVE PEOPLE MORE AND LET THEM DO GOOD WORK WITH IT.”

While we may not have philanthropy culture in the UK, there are a number of funders who don't currently fund journalism but who are interested in supporting community development and cohesion initiatives, or those who care about promoting engaged democracy, or connected issues. Public interest journalism is not listed as a charitable purpose in its own right in the UK but in its charity registration decision the Charity Commission said: “journalism may be capable of furthering charitable purposes like the advancement of education, citizenship or community development, the arts, culture, heritage or science or human rights”.

But funding needs to be meaningful. This was something I heard from many organisations I visited. Often foundations and funders are only interested in funding new projects. This type of funding can actually be harmful to publishers who have to create and deliver new projects that can distract from the mission of their work.

Core funding and multi-year funding are currently quite rare unicorns in the UK, but that type of funding, especially that which can fund infrastructure, operations and salaries, has made a huge difference in the US. I heard one more refreshing approach to funding as well, with one funder telling me if funders want to invigorate and engage communities, they have to be in it for the long haul, not just one or two years – it takes time to build relationships.

Communities and organisations know best where money is needed and what it can be spent on, and funders need to trust them. But there are other types of support needed beyond funding, whether through training, resources or by providing back end support.

According to Molly de Aguiar, one of the key things needed was for funders to be trained on how to fund media, when it was something that has previously been unfamiliar territory. Local, place-based funders need to be incentivised to fund local news and supported to do so.

Also, funding civic media is different to funding traditional journalism. It can include community building activities and things like leaven events, neighbourhood guides and film-making for example. Communities thrive when they have good local information. Democracies thrive when people are more engaged and active. It's about ensuring people feel they belong.

9 Journalism is a public good and should be funded as one

We can't just rely on funding for journalism to come from philanthropic trusts and foundations, we also need to find other sources of funding. In the US, there have been some interesting examples of state and local government funding being made available for this public service.

Joe Amditis at the Center for Cooperative Media put this succinctly in a piece published on Medium:

When you walk into a public library, you are surrounded by rows and rows of books, all available to you free of charge. Libraries have long been an embodiment of public service. They're the cornerstone of informed communities and are publicly funded without question.

Now, imagine if someone suggested that we fund local libraries only until they can operate on membership fees and late charges. Sounds ridiculous, right? Of course it does.

It's obvious that free public libraries are a vital and worthwhile public service that deserve public funding. Yet, when it comes to local journalism – a service as

“WHY IS THE ONUS ON JOURNALISM TO BECOME A SELF-SUSTAINING ENTITY WHEN OTHER PUBLIC SERVICES ARE NOT?”

crucial to democracy as libraries are to education – that's the message we often hear from journalism funders.

The buzzword in journalism funding circles is “sustainability.” The idea is to give newsrooms just enough money to get by until they can eventually sustain themselves through ad revenue, subscriptions, memberships, and other market-based funding sources. But let's pause and consider this: Why is the onus on journalism to become a self-sustaining entity when other public services are not (and should not be) held to the same standard?

NEW JERSEY CIVIC INFO CONSORTIUM

The New Jersey Civic Info Consortium was founded after the Free Press Action Fund organised to convince the state to use the money it gained from selling public broadcast frequencies to the cable networks to invest back in public media. In 2018, the Civic Info Bill was passed by New Jersey. It states: ‘The purpose of the consortium is to advance research and innovation in the field of media and technology to benefit the State’s civic life and evolving information needs.’

Initially no funding was made available, but in 2020, the governor signed a budget that included \$500,000 for the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium. This has increased each year since. They aim to ‘foster increased civic engagement by providing financial resources to organisations building and supporting local news and information’. From 2021 to 2023, they awarded \$5.35 million in

grants to 52 organisations across 15 counties and more than 19 cities. Twenty-one of those organisations are led by a person of colour, and 26 projects are spearheaded by a person who identifies as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour).

Ayinde Merrill, Program Officer: “We believe in giving people money and letting them do good work with it. We don't micromanage. We trust people on the ground. This goes far in giving a sense of agency. As funders, we have to listen with open ears and ask ‘how can I best be an assistant to you?’ This is not a one or two year fix. You've got to be in it for the long haul to invigorate and engage communities.”

Madison McCool, Grants & Communications Manager: “How do we create news and info when there's deep mistrust of it? By empowering community members to get training and create their own. They know what your community needs the most.”

We need to organise and advocate for policy that supports local news

Across the US and Canada, local, regional and national governments are experimenting with policy which supports journalism. We need to do the same.

As Mike Rispoli put it: "Policy happens whether we participate or not, so we need to be part of the conversation and to organise and educate ourselves to do something. If we are going to bring about change in journalism, we need to learn more from others in community organising movements. In order to make change happen, you need to build political constituency and work at the local, state and federal level. Just as The New Jersey Civic Info Consortium used community lobbying to build public will."

The Media Power Collaborative is working to build a community and a political constituency, as well as education about policy that impacts media. It helps journalists to be organisers and, in doing so, builds power. It sharpens people's political awareness. According to organising methodology, to get people to act together, you have to develop strategy together, and to do that you need shared political/system analysis and to build connection. You need to build political education in order to get to agitation.

The Advertising Boost initiative from the Center for Community Media and Rebuild Local News successfully lobbied the New York City government to put 50 percent of their ads in community media. It is now trying the same in NY State. Ads also help with community legitimacy.

In Canada, the federal government supports the sector through the Local Journalism Initiative, in which outlets can apply for funded reporters to serve underserved audiences. Independent media felt they were being left out of this deal, so Press Forward formed after independent media publishers saw a need to speak with a collective voice. They are volunteer run and their main focus is on policy and galvanising movement.

REBUILD LOCAL NEWS

According to Rebuild Local News, to be safe and effective, public policies to help media need to be: nonpartisan (no ability for government officials to steer money to favoured news outlets), platform neutral (or bias toward a particular medium, print vs. broadcast vs. digital), content neutral (no government official deciding who gets what), local (the crisis is local – that's where the focus should be). A coalition of organisations working to save journalism has created a menu of different policies and draft bills that can be adapted and adopted by different governments.

Founder Steve Waldman told me: there are three legs needed for journalism sustainability: robust business models, increased philanthropy, and supportive public policy. Seeing a gap in the landscape, he pivoted his efforts to the third.

"With policy, we are in a pre-experimental phase. We need national, state and local legislation. But the notion that it's too hard to figure out just makes me laugh. We do it on so many different sectors."

Speaking about the ad boost initiative, he said: "getting an administration to invest half of its ad spend in community media seems like a no-brainer. It doesn't mean spending any additional money. It's a win win."



11

There has to be innovation within business models too

It is commonly said that there are three legs required to develop a media start-up: journalism, tech and business. One of things I heard is that while there is lots of innovation happening on the editorial side of things, there is not enough on the business side. And while more public and grant funding is part of the solution, there needs to be more innovation and more robust business models in order to drive up sustainable revenue streams.

There is an inherent tension between reach and monetisation. Much of the corporate approach to local news coverage is about getting maximum click so as many people read it as possible – no matter where they're based. This is detrimental to genuine, community-based local news. So much of business is based on scale, but what I heard is that it's better not to do so rather than serve a few communities really well.

As Jeanette Ageson, publisher of Canada's investigative journalism outlet The Tyee said: "The public good of journalism was created almost by accident when it was profitable. Now that the profitable part has fallen out, we need to save the public good part." It's important to explore if the public good part can be monetised, but also examine what the trade-offs might be.

For Michael Boldon of American Press Institute: "a healthy sustainable local news org pursues cultural competence, interrogates own work and practice, experiments and innovates in a local context, prepares for future in navigating the grey, collaborates to build capacity and trust and diversifies products and revenue streams."

Simon Galperin, Executive Editor of The Jersey Bee and CEO of Community Info Coop, talked about the need for a hub and spoke model for local news, with several hubs across each state, each with a number of spokes. He also described a news desert restitution model – in which you provide a basic service – step away – let it run itself – and then increase layers of service provision.

THE DISCOURSE

The Discourse is a digital news media company innovating new models for producing in-depth local journalism. It currently serves three different regions on Vancouver Island. It was launched in 2014, and has been through a number of shifts since then, and has seen other organisations develop and spin off: Discourse Publishing, bringing together community-powered news outlets, IndigiNews, and Indiegraf which works to empower entrepreneurial journalists to grow community-powered news. They prove that it's OK for an organisation to grow and develop in different ways than intended. They don't want to expand into all communities as they found that it's better business to serve a few communities really well.

They take a partnership approach – getting funding to work with partners and often publishing in bigger publications. They always aim to go deeper. Jacqueline Ronson, managing editor of The Discourse, told me that independent media providing quality journalism forces corporate competitors to do better. Like other successful community publishers, they began by going out into the community and asking what they should be reporting on. They found that local newspapers' coverage of issues was inadequate because of their links to local landowners and corporations.

Their aim is to build sustainability with what they have, and in doing so to solidify the organisation and its systems and structure. It was set up as 'for profit' as founder Erin Millar always wanted to prove that local news could be profitable.

What's happening in the UK

The Public Interest News Foundation (PINF), a charity set up in 2020 to 'support public interest news – ethical and impartial journalism that informs and empowers the public about the things that matter to all of us', has been carrying out research into the public interest news sector. The following findings are taken directly from its two most recent reports.

The PINF Index of Independent News Publishing in the UK, 2024⁵

- **Independent news publishers are not immune to the revenue challenges facing the broader UK media sector.** The average revenue of an independent news publisher is £62,000.
- **Cuts are being made to newsroom staffing.** The average publisher has just two FTE employees compared with last year's finding of three FTE employees – risking a downward spiral of reduced output and further reduced revenue.
- **Print is a concern for some, but an opportunity for others:**
 - Existing print publishers worry about rising costs and consider stopping production;
 - New entrants with a formerly online-only presence are taking their first steps in print publishing.
- **Abundant stories of the social benefits of independent news publishers exist** – they give voice to their communities, press local government to act, inspire larger publishers to pursue stories, and highlight wrongdoing.

The Local News Map, 2024⁶

Outlets, nations and regions, media types

- There are approximately 1,196 local news outlets in the UK, according to their local news definition an average of one outlet per 56,000 people.
- The greatest proportion of local news outlets operate in print and online (47%), followed by community radio (23%), online (23%), and then print-only (3%). Local TV and BBC Local Radio account for 2% of all outlets, respectively.

Deserts, oases and drylands

- There are 28 'absolute' news deserts in the UK (they lack any coverage from a local news outlet), while another 10 districts are 'relative' news deserts (they lack a dedicated local news outlet).
- 'News oases', the best served districts in the country, include Bath, Highland, and East Devon.
- Controlling for population, oases include several districts in the South West of England and the North West of Scotland. Notably, more populated districts are more poorly served once the number of outlets is compared to the population size of the area.

Ownership

- There are 419 publishers in the UK. The largest publishers by number of outlets, Newsquest, Reach, and National World, own 37.6% of the local news outlets, regardless of medium.
- For 101 (28%) Local Authority Districts a single publisher holds a monopoly, either due to being covered by solely one outlet, or by several outlets from the same publisher. Newsquest has 24 monopolies, while National World has 21.

⁵ <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/pinf-index>

⁶ <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/map>

Examples of Innovation in the UK

Greater Govanhill*

A community magazine, website and radio show that exists to: provide a platform for typically marginalised voices, break down cultural barriers, equip people to tell their own stories, and bring people together. The award-winning high quality print magazine is produced bi-monthly and takes a solutions focused approach to local issues, publishing in multiple languages to celebrate local diversity.

The Scottish Beacon*

A collaborative of 24 independently run, community based publications located all over Scotland. The Scottish Beacon exists both as a network to connect publishers and share support, skills and resources, as well as a platform to amplify stories coming from Scotland's communities.

The Community Newsroom*

A collaboration between Greater Govanhill and The Ferret, this is a collaborative media hub in the heart of a community. It hosts regular events including 'open house' editorial meetings, a 'news club' as well as training workshops, community conversations, screenings and discussions.

Inclusive Journalism Cymru

A network to connect, support and campaign for those who've been marginalised or excluded by the journalism industry in Wales. They do this by supporting journalists, changing the industry and shifting narratives and rebuilding trust.

The Bristol Cable

A reader-owned media who produce award-winning local journalism, in print and online. They amplify marginalised voices, campaign for change, and hold power to account through groundbreaking investigations. Their mission is to redefine local journalism as a community asset, which is accountable to and serves the needs of local communities.

The Ferret

The Ferret is an award-winning investigative journalism platform for Scotland and beyond. It is a registered co-operative with places reserved on the board for both journalists and subscribers. This hybrid model means that when you subscribe to The Ferret you become more than just a passive supporter – people become part-owners of the project and can influence how it will develop.

Now Then Magazine

A worker-owned company and group of people, who believe that only deep-rooted, systemic change can address the social, economic and political challenges we collectively face. They use their platforms to explore this transition to a just society and a liveable planet, and ask how exactly we'll get there. They want to model a different kind of journalism – what we call 'storytelling' – that plays an active role in building the better world we so desperately need. We believe it's not enough to just commentate from the sidelines.

Social Streets CIC

A local news and media organisation that delivers social and economic impact. They aim to increase participation in the local community through the provision of trusted professional journalism and community journalism training. They offer digital training and mentoring programmes to ensure local communities have the skills to make the most from the local digital ecosystem.



*These initiatives were set up by Greater Govanhill CIC, founded by the author of this report.

What next?

A few reflections on what needs to happen in the UK in order to learn from the establishment of civic media in the US and Canada.

Journalists, and community media practitioners

- Don't be afraid to do things differently. Begin by really listening to your community.
- Provide the journalism that's needed, not what you want to provide. Create value for your readers in order to become more sustainable.
- Be more collaborative – with other outlets, but also with third sector organisations, community groups, and in how you create your journalism.
- Don't gatekeep. Recognise your blindspots, and the need for diversity in order to better reflect society.
- Think about the impact you want to make. Begin with that and work backwards to find new approaches to journalism.
- Educate yourselves on policy and political context in order to advocate for a better deal for publishers.
- Consider the ecosystem. Understand your role within that, and where the gaps are.
- The old reliance on advertising revenue as a business model is no longer going to work. We need to innovate within business models too.
- If you are beginning with a place of care for your community, there is no harm in rejecting objectivity norms and voicing your desire to make things better.

Funders

- Funding journalism may not be a common practice in the UK. But it should be. Community journalism is co-created with, by and for local communities. It elevates local voices and provides a platform for meaningful connection. Funders that might not have considered supporting traditional journalism should be thinking about funding civic media.
- Real change takes time. Multiyear, core funding is required, as opposed to project funding which can detract from the main mission.

Policy makers

- Journalism is a public good and should be supported as one. Imagine the impact on democracy and civic discourse without it.
- There are examples from across the world of where governments have supported journalism to good effect. Rebuild Local News in the US have created a 'policy menu' with example bills that local governments could adopt, such as those which promote: tax credits for small businesses to advertise with local news organisations; targeting more government advertising toward local newsrooms; fellowships or other support for reporters placed in local newsrooms.
- Many of these have also been considered for implementation in the UK. When the Scottish Public Interest Journalism Working Group published its own report in 2021, it set out eight recommendations for the Scottish Government which included:
 - Establishing the "Scottish Public Interest Journalism Institute" to develop and support public interest journalism in Scotland.
 - Enabling non-profit public interest news providers to register as charities.
 - Embedding media literacy in the school curriculum.
 - Conducting an annual audit of government advertising and allocating at least 25% of the budget to public interest news providers.
 - Engaging with the UK Government to create tax incentives for businesses to advertise with public interest news providers.

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Further Reading

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