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A GUIDE TO ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM

A toolkit to inform grantmaking and collaboration

By Fiona Morgan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona Morgan is an independent consultant based in Durham, North Carolina. A former journalist with a background in media research and engaged journalism practice, she works to improve local news and information ecosystems through applied research and the design and facilitation of public engagement.

In 2011, she authored one of the first in-depth case studies of a local news ecosystem as part of New America's Media Policy Initiative, bringing her expertise as a media reporter to map out a holistic picture of news and information in the Raleigh-Durham Research Triangle area of North Carolina. More recently, we engaged her as a local news consultant to author an ecosystem study that broadened that scope, looking at news and civic information across North Carolina. As journalism program director at the national nonprofit advocacy organization Free Press, she co-created and led the News Voices project in New Jersey and North Carolina. She founded Branchhead Consulting in 2018.

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING NEWS ECOSYSTEMS

The news has changed. Before the internet, we relied on newspapers, radio stations, and TV to find out what had happened that day. Today, there are seemingly limitless media outlets and information sources available on demand about every conceivable topic. Trust in familiar news outlets is down, while more people turn to social media to get information from their friends, influential people, and groups aligned with their personal views.

This proliferation of information sources coincides with a startling decrease in traditional journalism. The internet forever changed the business model for media, taking away the de facto monopoly news outlets had on readers and audiences and making it possible for advertisers to reach people directly. The evaporation of classified newspaper advertising in the early 2000s was the first wave of financial erosion in the news industry, followed by other forms of advertising, traditionally the main revenue driver of most media.

Nowhere has the loss of news outlets and the shrinkage of remaining newsrooms been more dramatic than at the local level. Despite the online explosion of news media in general, the availability of local news has declined dramatically. About 20 percent of all metro and community newspapers in the United States have gone out of business or merged since 2004, and more than 1,300 American communities have lost local newspaper coverage altogether.[1] The emergence of nonprofit news outlets and local news sites offers reasons for optimism, but so far the reach and capacity of those new outlets remain small, and the business model that will support them is not yet known.

Journalism is essential to our democracy, so the crisis in the industry has created a civic crisis. Loss of local news leads to lower civic participation, lower voter turnout in elections, fewer people running for local office, and less oversight of those in power.[2]

We believe philanthropy has a key role in supporting healthy local news and information. But how do you actually do that effectively? The news has changed, and so must the way we approach it to provide

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[1] Penelope Muse Abernathy, "The Expanding News Desert," Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, October 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/expanding-news-desert/.

[2] Josh Stearns, "How We Know Journalism Is Good for Democracy," Local News Lab, June 26, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://localnewslab.org/2018/06/20/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy/.

for our communities' basic needs and create a stronger future together. The dramatic remaking of media demands that we develop new tools and processes for understanding and funding the local news landscape. A foundational and powerful tool is a news ecosystem assessment, which provides funders with a comprehensive understanding of how the local news ecosystem is functioning.

Why study local news ecosystems?

The purpose of assessing a local news and information ecosystem is to take informed action. As funders concerned about the health of local communities and how those communities are informed and engaged, we recognize that this new landscape can feel daunting and impossible to navigate. How do we understand, fund, and support positive change?

Since 2011, Democracy Fund has been building stronger local news and information ecosystems as part of our efforts to strengthen our nation's civic life. We've commissioned studies from experts in the field and funded projects across the country that incorporate ecosystem assessments as part of their work. You can see some of those studies at LocalNewsLab.org.

As we've pursued this work, we've learned alongside partner foundations, community organizations, scholars, and others. Some have asked us for guidance on how they might undertake their own funding of journalism in their regions. A key way to start is to learn what is actually happening around you, including the gaps, opportunities, and needs of the community.

We commissioned this guide from author Fiona Morgan, a former journalist and expert in local news assessments, to bring together the work we've done and the work of others we've learned from about assessing and getting started funding news and information locally. While this guide is primarily designed for philanthropic organizations, we hope that others interested in improving local news and information could adapt it to suit their own research.

There is no magic bullet to solving this civic crisis. No one organization will save local news, nor will a single donor's check fix the systemic problems causing this crisis.

The good news is that, no matter how big or small your organization, you have a role to play in making the ecosystem stronger. By asking questions, listening, learning, sharing, inviting collaboration, and making strategic choices, you can make a difference.

About this guide

The field of news and information ecosystem study is relatively new but growing fast. There are many examples and resources. This guide is designed to introduce some of the ideas and options and help you find a path to understanding your own community's news and information ecosystem.

Throughout this guide, you'll find examples of how place-based funders, community foundations, and others took on projects to improve the ecosystems where they live. The information in this guide is based on Fiona Morgan's field research and original interviews with funders who undertook their own local news ecosystem studies to inform their grantmaking and collaborations. You'll find quotes from these interviews dotted throughout the guide and brief case studies about those projects at the end of it.

The section titled **"How to begin"** walks through basic concepts and approaches. Since we believe it is important to start with the community's needs, we begin with ways of thinking about the big picture of who makes up your community and how to understand both its information needs and the civic infrastructure in place to meet those needs.

"A deep dive into the media landscape" offers more in-depth research approaches to help you understand the media landscape. We'll explain how media markets work and help you scan legacy media sources, public media outlets, and other community media sources. We also give examples of nonmedia organizations that are part of the information ecosystem, such as broadband access, libraries, and civic data. This section identifies specific data sources and offers a few example assignments so you can see what those sources have to offer.

The **"Act on what you've learned"** section provides ways of sharing your findings with the people who've helped you and expanding the invitation more broadly to others in your community. We suggest ways to socialize your findings and help you move from study to action. We talk through ideas for small pilot projects that can help you get started and build momentum for future work.

Some of the research we describe is elaborate, but don't be overwhelmed: Assessing your community ecosystem need not be expensive, and there's no one right way to do it. That's why we include a guide at the end with ideas for how to "right-size" your assessment to fit your organization's capacity.

Finally, the **"Recommended readings"** section points out reports and resources we think are especially strong and relevant.

SECTION 1: WHAT IS A NEWS ECOSYSTEM?

How Democracy Fund defines a news ecosystem

Democracy Fund defines a news ecosystem as the network of institutions, collaborations, and people that local communities rely on for news, information, and engagement. Healthy news ecosystems are diverse, interconnected, sustainable, and deeply engaged with their communities.

This approach recognizes that where there once was a thriving news industry, dominated by big newspapers and TV stations in most localities, there are now struggling news ecosystems made up of small pieces loosely joined together. The health of a news ecosystem used to be rooted in the stability of a few big newsrooms, but today healthy news ecosystems are more diverse and dynamic. This reflects not only how media has changed, but also how communities get their information from different platforms and outlets.

A news ecosystem, like a natural ecosystem, is made up of networks of interdependent parts. A news ecosystem consists of anchor institutions (newsrooms, universities, libraries, government agencies), infrastructure (ownership, access to broadband, media training), and networks (informal information networks, platforms, people). The boundaries of news ecosystems are not uniform and have to be understood through the lens of people who inhabit them. An ecosystem is not just the collection of these parts but also the connections and relationships between them. When an ecosystem is healthy the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

> "Funders considering supporting local news, information, and media can take it as a given that the local news and information needs the investment. Undertaking an assessment to find out if and not how is a waste of time. They can also take it as a given that the public will tell them that they're not getting what they need, particularly the lowest-income groups and the communities of color who are not getting what they need. In fact, be prepared for communities of color in particular to talk about how much they've been harmed by negative and unfair media coverage."
>
> **– MOLLY DE AGUIAR**, INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

People at the center

An ecosystem approach to local news is fundamentally about putting a place and its people at the center of our thinking. When we begin an ecosystems assessment, we start by asking questions like:

- What kind of news and information do people need to manage their daily lives, make informed decisions as voters, and participate meaningfully in society?

- What kind of information is currently available to them, how do they access it, and how do they make sense of it?

- How does information circulate through the community? What are the networks and relationships that enable or inhibit that information flow?

- What kinds of opportunities are there for people to engage with information through discussion and debate? Or to share their own lived experiences, questions, and insights with others?

- How do the answers to these questions differ according to a resident's income, race, age, and geography?

- Who is part of a community's public conversation and who is not?

A news and information ecosystem is made up of much more than just news outlets. Through church bulletins, neighborhood listservs, art openings, and organizing meetings, community institutions play critical roles in informing the public and in facilitating civic response to information.

While access to technology and to the internet are important factors, technology is not nearly as important as trust. One of the most powerful and most trusted ways to spread information is by word of mouth.

Who do you turn to for information? The answer often depends on who you are, where you live, and what your life is like. Race, class, neighborhood, education, and language all play a role in who we trust and where we turn. These networks of trust may or may not be connected across different cultural communities within the same geographic community.

We can make our local news and information ecosystem stronger by recognizing these networks of trust and linking them together, allowing information to flow more freely between neighborhoods and people affected by an issue and those making policy decisions. Think of each network of trust as a channel converging with others into a mainstream of civic understanding.

> "Putting the people first was the most important element to our work. We didn't do this because we thought we could save newspapers or newsrooms. We found it important that people in small towns have access to information to help them become more engaged citizens, so they're able to make more informed decisions and they're connected with the national conversation, the regional conversation, and the local conversation. We felt that if people didn't have access to information, access to solutions-oriented information, it could be harmful to community."
>
> – LAMONTE GUILLORY, LOR FOUNDATION

SECTION 2: START YOUR RESEARCH

Step 1: Know your community

To understand a community's information needs and assets, you must get a bird's eye view of that community as a whole. We start here, before digging into news outlets, because the people — not the media — should be at the center of our thinking.

- **Define the geographic area:** Start by defining the area you want to examine: Which cities or counties are included in the scope of your assessment, and why?

- **Note basic characteristics:** The U.S. Census "QuickFacts" tool offers a great way to produce a snapshot of key demographic and economic characteristics, including population change over time, race and ethnicity, languages spoken, household income, and broadband access. Local universities or policy organizations may have even more fine-grained data, including information about literacy, workforce development, and differences across neighborhoods.

- **Evaluate economic conditions:** What economic conditions is your community facing? Who is bearing the burden of financial struggle? Who funds nonprofits and other civic efforts? Where are those investments going?

- **Find civic institutions:** What are the major civic institutions in your community? Include government, business, nonprofit, educational, and the arts as well as media. How healthy are those institutions? How have they adapted to change? What is the history of innovation and collaboration among civic institutions?

- **Identify leadership:** Who are the major players, the ones with the political or social capital to move things forward? Who are the people behind the scenes? How well does civic leadership represent the diversity of residents?

- **Learn the civic narrative:** What is the dominant narrative about the community? Is that narrative negative or positive? Who's telling that story? What impact does it have?

  The political climate of a state or city affects not just the news that gets reported and the civic narrative about a place (that it's "corrupt" or, alternatively, "on the rise"). Politics also affects the social sector's response — philanthropic funding, community organizing, protest culture, and so on.

You can create tables that compare these characteristics across geography (e.g., U.S. average, state average, specific cities, and countries). We suggest making note of the following variables:

- Population percent change (this is especially enlightening when comparing urban and rural areas)

- Population by age (for instance, comparing percentages of adults over 65 across communities may offer insight about demand for social services)

- Race and Hispanic origin (note that whites and non-Hispanic whits are separate categories; the cultural meaning of this distinction may vary depending on where you are)

- Percent foreign-born

- Owner-occupied housing unit rate (how many people own versus rent their home? Owners and renters have different information needs)

- Languages other than English spoken at home

- Households with a broadband internet subscription

- Total retail sales (this tells you something about the economy and community's attractiveness to advertisers)

- Mean travel time to work (people with long commutes may spend more time listening to the radio and podcasts and may struggle to be connected to civic life in their hometown)

- Median household income (HHI)

- Persons in poverty (adults and children)

- Population per square mile and land area in square miles (how densley populated is this community?)

Note that the smaller a geographical area, the more likely you'll need to use data from the American Community Survey (ACS) to get an accurate picture. Unlike the census itself, the ACS is complied from survey data collected over five-year periods, so the data may be labeled 2012-2016. Whichever years you use, make sure to be consistent so your comparisons are accurate.

- **Consider the political structures:** Where do decisions get made? Does the mayor effectively run the city, or does the city manager? Can local governments make big decisions, or are they beholden to the state legislature (as is the case in Dillon's Rule states)?[3] Do governments collaborate, or does each operate in a silo? These questions will inform the "need" side of the civic information equation.

As you dive into the specifics of local media, remember to hold this big picture in your mind. Keep the people of your community at the center for your thinking.

Step 2: Determine need and infrastructure

The framework we suggest boils down to two main questions: What is the need? And what is the infrastructure in place that could help meet that need?

WHAT'S THE NEED?

What are the information needs of this community, and how well are they being met?

In 2009, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy released a major report, "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age," which laid out much of the framework we use to understand local news and information needs.

Information needs are common to all communities, but the specific gaps tend to differ according to geography, history, and particular institutions.

How have local news outlets changed over time? In assessing the gaps between what people need and what they're getting, you'll look at the change in local media ownership and make note of the losses in reporting staff or closure of outlets. (See Section 3: A Deep Dive Into the Media Landscape for resources to help you find this information.)

Who has been left out of the public conversation? Even when newspapers were booming, many people in the community weren't served, or were badly served, especially people of color and low-income neighborhoods.

Which stories aren't being told? This is the heart of the question about information needs — what don't we know about what's happening, who's affected, and what could change?

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[3] For a succinct explanation of Dillon's Rule and Home Rule, see The National League of Cities, "Cities 101: Delegation of Power," December 13, 2016, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-delegation-of-power.

CRITICAL INFORMATION NEEDS

Scholars working for the Federal Communications Commission have defined a community's critical information needs as information necessary for community members "to live safe and healthy lives; have full access to educational, employment, and business opportunities; and to fully participate in the civic and democratic lives of their communities should they choose." Based on an extensive review of the literature, they came up with eight categories of essential information that people need "in a timley manner, in an interpretable language, and via media that are reasonably accessible."

Those categories are:

- Emergencies and risks
- Health and welfare
- Education
- Transportation

- Jobs and economic opportunities
- Environment
- Civic information
- Political information

WHAT'S THE INFRASTRUCTURE?

What exists to meet these needs, and how can we build on it?

- Who's working together? A survey of media outlets is part of the picture, but infrastructure is about how the pieces fit together. Look for collaboration among outlets, look for support organizations such as the state press association or philanthropic funders, and see how well those institutions represent the people who live in the community.

- Who's stepping up? The infrastructure is comprised of people, not just institutions. You're looking for leaders, not just in the media but in the community's civic life, people others trust and turn to.

- How well can local news adapt to change? You're also looking for resiliency and innovation: Community capacity depends largely on how well its leaders and institutions respond to change.

Consider these questions:
- What assets are particular to this place and its culture?
- Which institutions and people are collaborating?
- How could you connect existing assets and networks?
- What could you build on?
- Who can you rely on to build with you?

Rural communities may have a particular challenge when it comes to infrastructure, because communities with smaller populations tend to have fewer institutions to work with. In that case, it helps to look at regional institutions or core local institutions that may be willing to work regionally in a thoughtful way. It is also helpful to look at what type of infrastructure rural communities do have. While there may be fewer institutions, there are often informal networks and relationships that you can work with.

Finding the answers: Research methods

We've explored complex questions to ask about your local news ecosystem. To find the answers to these questions, it helps to talk to people with a broad range of perspectives. Here are a variety of methods to choose from based on what seems appropriate to your community.
Feel free to mix and match the research methods that best serve your questions and needs and match your capacity. While this is not an academic exercise, scholarship does offer useful tools. It's up to you how closely you want to hew to scientific standards.

Focus groups offer another way to elicit frank, direct insights from people in your community about their news habits, the sources they trust, and their concerns. Community partners can help recruit focus group participants with whom your organization may not otherwise have relationships. Local News Lab offers a [detailed guide on how to use focus groups](#) to assess local news ecosystems.[4] Focus groups were a key component of Philip Napoli's News Measures Project, a comparison of local news across three New Jersey communities.[5] They were also essential to the Lenfest Institute's study of Philadelphia residents' local news habits.[6]

Surveys elicit concrete responses from individuals. If done right, surveys can offer a quantity of responses from a broad enough range of subjects to infer things about the community as a whole. Such data can be valuable to social science and business. That type of survey, however, can be expensive. There may be a local poll or survey already in the field that could provide insight or that would be willing to partner by adding a question directly related to your research.

The Listening Post Collective used surveys, along with interviews, community workshops, and immersive observation, as part of their deep study of the information needs of Latino immigrants in Oakland, California. The surveys were designed to look like greeting cards, so that they were short and easy to fill out. The organization distributed them at public festivals, libraries, a mobile food bank, and local churches, garnering responses from 268 individuals.[7]

Content analysis is a systematic, quantitative way of analyzing text.[8] The process involves gathering content from a defined time period, having human beings code the content along certain categories, then using technology to analyze the patterns. In this context, content analysis can be a way to look at which outlets produce original local content, how much, and about which topics, among other things.

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4   Jessica Crowell and Kathleen McCollough, "Conducting Focus Groups to Understand Local News Audiences," Prepared for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Local News Lab, June 20, 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://localnewslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LNL-Guide-Focus-Groups_2017June20.pdf.

5   Philip M. Napoli, Sarah Stonbely, Kathleen McCollough, and Bryce Renninger, "Assessing the Health of Local Journalism Ecosystems: A Comparative Analysis of Three New Jersey Communities," Prepared for the Democracy Fund, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, June 2015, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://mpii.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/129/2015/06/Assessing-Local-Journalism_Final-Draft-6.23.15.pdf.

6   Michael X. Delli Carpini, Mariela Morales Suárez, and Burt Herman, "Being Informed: A Study of the Information Needs and Habits of Philadelphia Residents," The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, October 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/being-informed/.

7   Madeleine Bair, "Más Información: An Information Needs Assessment of Latino Immigrants in Oakland California," The Listening Post and El Tímpano, Internews, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.internews.org/resource/mas-informacion.

8   For a detailed explanation of content analysis as a research method, see "Content Analysis," Pew Research Center, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.pewresearch.org/methods/about-content-analysis/.

All of these methods are potentially complementary. Surveys, for instance, can give you a broad sense of people's attitudes and experiences and draw your attention to specific things you might want to investigate further. You can also include a question in a survey inviting people to volunteer for a focus group or one-on-one interview.

Step 3: Listen and share, early and often

We're smarter when we put our heads together, and that's certainly true when mapping local news ecosystems. Engaging stakeholders early and often can make your assessment richer and pave the way for stronger collaborations when you're ready to act on what you've learned.

Engagement can be as simple as occasional phone calls or coffee dates, keeping people informed about the process you're undertaking. It can mean monthly get-togethers at lunch or after work with a diverse group of colleagues in the field.

Broader community engagement is also a way to gather rich input from the people most directly affected by the quality of local news and information. In this guide, we'll explore ways to do that.

Choose your engagement methods

One of the many benefits of engaging your community is the valuable insight it brings. These practices can be a powerful way of gathering information.

- **World Café:** This method of facilitated discussion is great for exploring common interests and surfacing ideas. A World Café gathering typically requires between two-and-a-half and four hours. The format involves three rounds of small-group discussion, with participants circulating between each round, followed by a full-group report-back. The process is flexible and manageable for large and small groups, and offers an alternative to the panel discussion, as it flattens hierarchies and allows everyone to contribute and feel heard. The News Voices project uses the World Café method to put local community members and journalists on equal footing to discuss the community's information needs.

> "When you bring smart, thoughtful people to the table, they're able to collaborate in a very effective way. A lot of times in the funding environment, the community is brought to the table at the end. There's real value in bringing them in early to have community-led dialogue on what's needed."
>
> – **LAMONTE GUILLORY,** LOR FOUNDATION

- **Story circles:** Storytelling is a powerful way to build community. jesikah maria ross, community engagement strategist for Capitol Public Radio in Sacramento, has used story circles as a way to engage people with diverse experiences in meaningful conversations about social issues. The process ross uses typically lasts about two-and-a-half-hours, beginning with a mobile story booth to take photos of participants and collect their handwritten accounts of personal experience with the issue at hand.[9]

- **Design thinking workshops:** Gather small, diverse groups of people together and ask them to map the local news and information; you may be surprised at what arises. Local news consultants for Democracy Fund used small, participatory workshops to engage local stakeholders in a process of mapping the local news and information ecosystem in Chicago.

- **Ongoing gatherings:** Community engagement is a cumulative process, and there's much value in providing a consistent opportunity to come together monthly or even once a quarter.

> "Beyond the grantmaking, of course, getting people together is one of the most important parts of project like this. That's something we can bring to the table."
>
> **– KATIE BRISSON,**
> COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

Conduct interviews

Borrow this tool from journalism. Interviewing key stakeholders is a great way to get a lay of the land and understand what's particular about your community's needs and assets. Interviews were an essential component of my own report on North Carolina's local news ecosystem.[10]

CHOOSING WHO TO TALK TO:

Who can help you learn how things work in your community? That's the guiding principle behind stakeholder interviews. To make the best use of this method, gather a wide variety of perspectives. Reach beyond those people already in your social or professional circles.

There's no rule about how many interviews an assessment requires. A good start may be to make a list of eight to 10 people, ask those subjects who else you should be talking to, and then add them to the list. It's likely you'll have a dozen names in no time, and some studies involve two dozen interviews or more.

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[9] jesikah maria ross, "Story Circles: Contact Zones for Deep Listening," Medium, Sept. 2, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://medium.com/@jesikahmariaross/story-circles-contact-zones-for-deep-listening-b9d1c90be569.

[10] Fiona Morgan, in consultation with Melanie Sill, "Learning from North Carolina: Exploring the Local News and Information Ecosystem," Report for Democracy Fund, March 18, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/learning-from-north-carolina.

Expect interviews to last between half an hour to an hour. The key to making the most of this time is to be thoughtful and strategic.

Interview journalists and former journalists, but not just those in print. Talk to management and earlier-career reporters in the field. Talk to folks in newspapers, local TV, public media, online startups, ethnic media, and alternative weeklies. Talk to a freelancer or two, not just those with salaried positions.

Whatever you do, don't speak *only* to journalists. Be sure to include people in civic life who are invested in civic information but aren't part of the news industry. Reach out to the person who runs the active local Facebook group, or the head of the block club. Find grasstops leaders (heads of community-based organizations), especially those who represent racial justice efforts, underserved neighborhoods, or other groups that might have a different perspective from a CEO.

Does your list of interview subjects look like the community? Do you need to hear from more people of color? More young people? More people from certain neighborhoods or sectors? Tap your networks to reach beyond the people you're already in touch with, and feel free to ask your interview subjects to help put you in touch. Time is limited, and no interview list is going to offer comprehensive points of view, but these interviews are an opportunity to reach beyond the usual suspects and bring new people into the conversation.

> "We brought journalists and community members together for design thinking workshops, and as part of that we went out and did man-on-the-street interviews....The process, I think, got us out of our journalistic thinking bubbles, and that was helpful."
>
> **– MELISSA MILIOS DAVIS, GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION**

SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS:

In your invitation, ask subjects for 30 minutes to one hour of time, if you both can spare it. Explain the basic scope of what you're trying to find out, and why you've chosen to talk to that person. Let them know what you intend to do with this information — this is an important moment to manage expectations about any grant funding or other commitments by letting people know where you are in the process and what will happen when.

When you speak, ask permission to record, and be clear about the terms of the interview, such as who will see it and what you'll do with the material. (A good way to proceed is to agree that only you and your core team will see the raw interview, and that nothing will be attributed to them in a public way without their approval.)

DECIDING WHAT TO ASK:

Here are a few sample questions you can use as a starting point. Adapt or add to them as you feel is appropriate.

- When you think about how people in our community get local news and information, what comes to mind?

- How have you been affected by changes in local news?

- Are there any particular sources you trust, or that you think are doing a good job of covering the local community?

- What stories do you think aren't being told that need to be?

- Besides media outlets, what do you think are trusted sources of information for you and other people you know? (Feel free to list examples included in this guide.)

- If you could wave a magic wand and change the local news and information in your community, what would you do?

On a practical note: The most time-consuming part of interviews by far is the transcription. If your budget allows, consider using a transcription service like Rev ($1/minute) to free up your time.

A view from the field: Scholarship on local news ecosystems

The sort of research we're discussing in this guide is highly practical — it's meant to be acted on. But much of what we've learned about local news ecosystems comes from academic scholarship. Scholars use social science and other methods to expand our understanding of the world, though they usually avoid making practical recommendations. The field of scholarly research on local news ecosystems is rapidly evolving. If you're interested in diving deep, and learning about the foundations of what we know, read on.

Sarah Stonbely, director of research at Montclair State University's Center for Cooperative Media, wrote in the trade publication *Nieman Lab*, "Despite the volume of research currently under way about news ecosystems, there is no gold standard."[11] As is often the case with research, there's a tension between depth and breadth, between a highly contextualized knowledge of a specific place and a replicable, scalable approach that allows for comparison across communities.

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[11]   Sarah Stonbely, "There Isn't One Best Way to Map Local News Ecosystems. But Can We Do It Better?" Nieman Lab, December 5, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/12/there-isnt-one-best-way-to-map-local-news-ecosystems-but-can-we-do-it-better/.

Case studies: This method most closely resembles the type of study outlined in this report. Case studies are a highly adaptable method that allows for deep context and exploration of a particular place. An excellent example is Pew Research Center's 2015 deep-dive into three communities — Denver, Colorado; Macon, Georgia; and Sioux City, Iowa. The study, *Local News in a Digital Age*, provides side-by-side comparisons of three very different communities, blending descriptions of the racial, ethnic, economic, and civic culture of each place with analysis of news habits, news content, and social media use.[12]

Digital ethnography: Michelle Ferrier, dean of the School of Journalism & Graphic Communication at Florida A&M University, has blazed trails in the field with the [Media Deserts Project](). She defines a "media desert" as a geographic area "lacking access to fresh, local news and information," a concept distinct from a news desert in that it accounts for "code, conduits, content and geography."[13] A key aspect of Ferrier's approach to mapping media deserts and community information assets is digital ethnography, using tools such as Google Earth (to digitally stroll the streets and see the community's built environment) and multiple social media monitoring tools to compile feeds from multiple sources (conventional media, government, civic institutions, etc.) to augment in-person engagement, stakeholder mapping, and content analysis.[14]

Broad and replicable: Philip Napoli's [News Measures Research Project]() at Duke University is developing tools to assess local journalism in three interconnected ways: 1) the nature of journalistic content; 2) assessing the needs, interests, and preferences of local news audiences; and 3) assessing the health and rigor of the local news infrastructures in communities. Napoli's research began with a comparative analysis of communities in New Jersey that included focus groups, content analysis, and other analytical methods. He adapted this analysis to make it scalable while accounting for complexity. In 2018, his team published an analysis of the robustness of local journalism in 100 communities, investigating the indicators that lead some local communities to receive more journalism that is original and local and that addresses critical information needs.[15]

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[12] Pew Research Center, "Local News in a Digital Age," March 2015, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.journalism.org/2015/03/05/local-news-in-a-digital-age/.

[13] The Media Deserts Project, "About the Project," Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://mediadeserts.wordpress.com/about/.

[14] Michelle Ferrier and Fiona Morgan, "Mapping Information Ecosystems to Serve Local News Needs," Slides from People-Powered Publishing Conference presentation, November 15, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.slideshare.net/locallygrownnews/mapping-information-ecosystems-to-serve-local-news-needs.

Some of the product of Michelle Ferrier's Media Seeds Project in Southeast Ohio is available at ZipIt.news. See, for example, http://zipit.staging.communityq.com/stories/adams-count-2,99.

[15] Philip M. Napoli, Matthew Weber, Katie McCullough and Qun Wang, "Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News," August 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Assessing-Local-Journalism_100-Communities.pdf.

What to expect, what to avoid

There are many ways to assess a local news ecosystem. While there's no wrong way to go about it, it may be helpful to consider the lessons others have learned.

It will take more time than you think: Even if you hire someone to conduct the research, know that an assessment will require capacity. Your organization will be most successful if you stay engaged. Budget your time accordingly.

Manage expectations: Be clear and consistent with stakeholders about what you know and don't know about your plans. If you're a grantmaking organization, you're already aware that grantseekers are looking for signals about where you plan to put your resources. Journalists and news organizations in particular may expect this process to lead to investments in specific organizations. Keep your options open and emphasize that the process itself is an opportunity to think collaboratively about what's possible.

Get outside your bubble: When time is scarce, we tend to lean on our most trusted sources. But the process of mapping your news and information ecosystem presents an opportunity to expand your networks and your frame of reference.

Shift your paradigm: Putting the people of your community at the center of your thinking may seem self-evident, but it may also be a very different approach than what you or your organization is used to. Use this process as a chance to reframe your thinking, because this moment demands big, bold changes in thinking.

Use your power: Whatever power your organization has as a convener, a truth teller, a bridge builder, or a trusted leader, use it. Use your power responsibly, recognizing the power dynamics that exist with smaller or less well-resourced organizations and those representing parts of the community that have historically been sidelined.[16]

> "There is not one solution. As funders, we have to push ourselves to be creative and flexible as we test out ideas."
> **– MOLLY DE AGUIAR,** INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

Don't do it alone: There is tremendous value in partnership, especially when taking an ecosystem approach. Reach out to like-minded organizations in your community to partner on an assessment and collaborative plan.

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[16]   Prudence Brown, a respected leader in place-based philanthropy, has written extensively on how funders can understand power dynamics in doing place-based work. See for instance her paper for Democracy Fund on the roles and practices of national foundations undertaking place-based partnerships: "Effective Place-Based Philanthropy: The Role and Practices of a National Funder," October 17, 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/effective-place-based-philanthropy.

Step 4: Make sense of it all

You've gathered quite a bit of information. Now, it's time to step back and assess what you've found. Here are some approaches for analyzing that material to look for patterns and opportunities.

Where is the need and where is the infrastructure?
Think back to the original questions. Healthy news ecosystems are resilient, so where do you see resiliency and adaptive responses to change?

What's the story? What story can you tell, based on what you know now? Sketch out that story and share it with key stakeholders to get their feedback. Consider what's specific to this community and what's part of the larger story of local news.

Which questions remain? What are the gaps in your understanding? You won't be able to answer all the questions at once, so make a list of what you don't yet know and consider how the next phase of engagement and feedback can address those questions.

Whose leadership can be developed? Who are the leaders? Who could be in stronger leadership positions? How can the leadership look more like the community? Who needs to be invited to the next round of conversations?

Who will build with you? Which organizations and people have demonstrated a knack for collaboration? What roles could they play? Are they equipped to use an investment or to play a leadership role in ecosystem building? How can you find out?

Are there multiplier effects? Are there hubs in place? How could they be made stronger and more effective? How could hubs outside traditional journalism or media become part of that work? Who and what provides the connective tissue within your ecosystem?

Which models could you try? Projects in other communities may offer inspiration and examples you can adapt to suit your own. Some of these models may be outside the world of media, in the arts or social services. Share these examples with stakeholders and potential collaborators to get their take on how they might play out.

> "Don't do your own study. Partner, convene, collaborate, and execute. I think there have been enough studies and reports and pilots. We've entered an environment where foundations can partner with other foundations or organizations doing its work and leverage their funding and knowledge."
> – **LAMONTE GUILLORY,** LOR FOUNDATION.

> "Invest in the people who will help you build networks."
> – **MOLLY DE AGUIAR,** INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

SECTION 3: TAKE A DEEP DIVE INTO THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Ready to roll up your sleeves and dig into the data? This section is where we get into concrete research methods, data sources, and nitty-gritty questions, all drawn from our own research projects.

There is no expectation that you would pursue every one of these questions. Our goal is to offer you options. Throughout this section, you'll see suggestions labeled "try it" to see what the data might have to offer in understanding your own community. You can think of these mini-assignments like a scavenger hunt.

What you're looking for

Local content: There's an awful lot of media out there, but not much original local news. Focus on finding out which outlets produce original local content and how much. How many minutes or hours does a radio or TV station devote to news and public affairs content? Is it syndicated or locally produced? What format is it in? How many staffers produce it?

Reach: How many people or households does an outlet reach? For print outlets, there should be circulation numbers available. Broadcast outlets will often include information about which cities or counties they reach. Some of this information may be available in marketing information for the outlet or in rate sheets for prospective advertisers.

Ownership: Finding out who owns what can be tricky, and it changes often, but it's important. Moreover, media outlets that share ownership may share staff or content. University of North Carolina's database includes information about newspaper ownership, though it may be worth verifying as it may change faster than the database can be updated. Many TV stations are owned and operated affiliates of networks, such as NBC and ABC, so it's worth making note if they're not. Some owners are controversial — for example, Sinclair Broadcasting, which in 2018 ordered local TV news anchors to read a pro-Trump script on the air.[17] While it's not always the case, local ownership can lead to more investment in original local news programming.

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[17] Jacey Fortin and Jonah Engel Bromwich, "Sinclair Made Dozens of Local News Anchors Recite the Same Script," The New York Times, April 2, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/02/business/media/sinclair-news-anchors-script.html.

What matters most: It's OK to be selective. Metro areas may have dozens or even hundreds of print publications circulating, and you don't have to include all of them. Consider which ones provide and serve the critical information needs you prioritize.

Media markets

Start by learning about the **media market** (or markets) in your area. A media market, or designated market area (DMA), is the geographic area where residents can all receive the same broadcast signals. These areas are comprised of neighboring counties and generally correspond to metro areas.

Quite a few media markets span multiple states, so that people living in that market may be getting most of their TV and radio news from stations located in a different state. That means they may not receive news about their state government, not to mention their municipal or county governments. Some people live at the intersection of two or more DMAs, meaning they receive broadcast signals from both. While that can mean more news, it also likely means their own town or county is at the periphery and doesn't receive much coverage from either market's stations.

Nielsen Media Research, a market research firm, ranks all 210 of the nation's DMAs annually according to the number of households within each one (New York is No. 1 with 7.1 million "TV homes").[18] The bigger the market, the higher the advertising rates stations in that market can charge. Some national advertisers buy only in large markets, meaning those highly ranked markets have access to ad revenue that other markets don't. As a result, larger market stations tend to have better resourced stations.

You can find the current year's DMA rankings on Nielsen's website. Internet searches can also turn up maps of DMAs throughout the country or a state, or lists of counties within a market.

TRY IT

- Which media market is my geographic area in, and what's its ranking?

- Are there multiple markets in my area, or does it lie in between markets? How does that affect news coverage? What are their relative rankings?

- What is the primary city in the media market (e.g., the Dallas in Dallas-Fort Worth)?

- How many counties are in this media market? How many municipal governments?

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[18] For more information, see The Nielsen Company, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.nielsen.com for more information. Note that DMAs are oriented toward television; Nielsen produces a separate set of rankings for the nation's 302 radio metros.

Legacy media

So-called "legacy media" generally includes the outlets that existed before the internet: the local newspaper, TV, and radio stations. It also includes the companies that own those outlets, though they may own digital outlets, as well.

To compile a list of print newspapers, start with the [database](#) available at UNC-Chapel Hill's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media.[19] This offers a map showing daily and weekly newspaper across the country, along with their owners, circulation (the number of copies the paper distributes), and other relevant data. You can also see where newspapers have shut down and how circulation has changed over time.

TRY IT

- Go to [USNewsDeserts.com](#) and choose your state from the drop-down menu on the first page.

- How many newspapers did your state lose between 2004 and 2019?

- How much has newspaper circulation declined in that time?

- How many Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers members are stepping up to fill that void?

- Look at the map. Which counties have the most newspapers, and which have the least?

- Find the county or counties you're most interested in on the map and consider looking at the daily and weekly newspapers listed there. Does the list look accurate? (If not, let the researchers know; they're perpetually improving their database.)

- Look up those outlets online and see what sort of digital presence they have.

You can verify or supplement these data in a few ways: Check out your state's press association and look for (or ask for, if it's not online) a list of its members. This should include most of the print outlets producing news in your state and may turn up some you weren't aware of. Look at the [Association of Alternative Newsmedia (AAN)](#) website for any member papers in your area.[20]

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[19] "Do You Live in a News Desert?" Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/.

[20] "AAN Publications," Association of Alternative Newsmedia, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://aan.org/member-directory/.

Commercial broadcast stations: For local TV, you can start by looking up network affiliates for ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox. Include Spanish-language outlets such as Univision, Estrella TV, and Telemundo, too. There may be a number of affiliates of lesser-known networks such as The CW or MyNetworkTV that primarily air syndicated entertainment programming; check to see if they also broadcast any local public affairs programming.

You can search for all the digital over-the-air television signals in your area at the FCC's website.[21] Your local cable company may have a list of stations on its site.

Radio is a bit more sprawling, so it may be harder to find an easy central repository of commercial radio stations in your area. The FCC has a searchable database of all licensed FM and AM radio stations, but it may take some combing through.[22]

TRY IT

The Federal Communications Commission has a lot of data about over-the-air broadcast stations. Unfortunately, it's not very user friendly. But it's worth checking out. Here's a simple way to wade in.

- Go to the FCC's Audio Division home page at https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio

- Click on "FM Query" on the left.

- Use the pull-down menu to find your state and enter a city name.

- Under the search choice "Output," choose "FM Short List" .

- Click "Results" to run the search.

- You should see a list of records that include the radio station call signs, frequency on the dial.

- You can now see who owns the license or permit to each of the stations.

- Click on the call sign and you'll see more technical information about the station's signal.

- From there, click on the "Links and Maps" tab to see inspection files and other data, which should include contact information and the physical address of the station's offices.

- Keep exploring this search to find more detail about specific outlets or conduct additional searches to get a picture of over-the-air broadcast media in your area.

- Keep in mind that stations that reach you may not originate in your city — to get a comprehensive picture of all the broadcast media that reaches you, you may need to broaden your search.

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[21] "DTV Reception Maps," Federal Communications Commission, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.fcc.gov/media/engineering/dtvmaps.

[22] "Broadcast AM and FM Radio Reports and Lists," Federal Communications Commission, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/radio-lists.

Public media

National Public Radio (NPR) offers a [database](#) of its stations on its website.[23] The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) offers a [database](#) of its stations, too.[24] Information about audience reach, budget, and programming should be easy to find on a public media station's website.

Consider the station's content: Does it broadcast primarily music, news, or a mix of both? Does it produce original programming or only syndicate national and international programs? Also consider what entity the station is licensed to: an independent nonprofit? a public university? a private college? state government? A station's licensee can tell you about its resources and its capacity for accountability reporting.

While people typically think of public media as NPR and PBS, there are other forms of public media that may provide important content and community connections.

For instance, Low-Power FM (LPFM) radio is a noncommercial license the FCC created in 2000 to allow for broadcasts under 100 watts, reaching an average radius of 3.5 miles.[25] There are approximately 2,400 LPFM stations in the United States, according to the FCC's [searchable database](#). Most are licensed to religious organizations. The number run by independent nonprofit organizations, however, is slowly growing thanks to the efforts of [Prometheus Radio Project](#), which provides policy advocacy and technical support to groups seeking to use LPFM licensing to produce participatory radio as a tool for social justice organizing and a voice for community expression.[26] If there's an LPFM radio station in your area, or one in the works, consider it as part of your ecosystem map.

Public Access, Educational, and Government (PEG) cable television channels are another form of community-oriented, nonprofit media. Funded primarily through cable franchise fees, PEG stations vary widely in their structure and orientation. Government channels often provide broadcasts of local government meetings, educational channels may broadcast courses, and public access provides an outlet

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[23] "Find NPR Member Stations and Donate," National Public Radio, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.npr.org/stations/.

[24] "Member Stations," Public Broadcasting Service, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/stations/.

[25] Federal Communications Commission, "Low-Power FM (LPFM) Broadcast Radio Stations," Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/lpfm.

[26] Prometheus Radio Project, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.prometheusradio.org.

for people to share their own programming. Some outstanding public access stations have filled gaps in local news and civic information production, and some provide low-cost training and educational opportunities for people interested in media and technology.[27] The Alliance for Community Media, a national organization with many PEG station members, can offer insight on how PEG fits into your community's ecosystem.[28]

Community and emergent media

Ethnic media: Newspapers, magazines, and digital publications that serve ethnic and foreign-language communities are vital to a community because they offer a voice and a sense of connection. Also sometimes called community, multicultural, immigrant, diaspora, minority, in-language, or ALAANA (African, Latinx, Asian, Arab and Native American) media, ethnic media historically have maintained strong bonds of trust with those they serve and made a powerful social impact as a result. For example, African-American newspapers were a major driver of the Great Migration.

There's no central database of African-American, Spanish-language, or other ethnic media outlets across the country, so finding a complete list of outlets will require some exploration. National Newspaper Publishers Association represents the Black press and has a directory of members on its site. A 2019 report from The Center for Community and Ethnic Media (CCEM) at City University of New York, titled "The State of the Latino News Media," includes a map and directory of report national map of Spanish-language news media serving local communities across the United States. The map continues to be updated.

CCEM has mapped ethnic outlets in New York City, and researchers there are working to develop a selective database of outlets across the country.[29] There are also some regional efforts of broader ethnic media directories. The Center for Cooperative Media is creating a study of outlets in New Jersey. The Chicago-based nonprofit Public Narrative maintains its own media guide that includes the city's community and ethnic media outlets. Ethnic Media Services is creating a new guide in California.

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27 Fiona Morgan, "Free Press: How Community Media Can Fill Local News Gaps," Blog, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, September 6, 2016, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://blog.grdodge.org/2016/09/06/how-community-media-can-fill-local-news-gaps/.

28 Alliance for Community Media, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.allcommunitymedia.org/.

29 The Center for Community and Ethnic Media at City University of New York's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism has recently expanded its research and engagement from the New York City metro area to a more national scope. It may soon provide broader resources for understanding ethnic media's role in local ecosystems. Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://ccem.journalism.cuny.edu.

Democracy Fund has published a series of reports that shine a spotlight on the important role of media by and for diverse communities in the United States, with more resources on how to find those organizations in your communities. They include resources on African-American media, American Indian media, Hispanic media, and ways to support diversity, equity, and inclusion in grantmaking.[30]

Your local library is another good place to look for local ethnic and community outlets. Check the newsstands at independently owned retail establishments or community institutions in neighborhoods with a high concentration of residents those outlets serve. Ask community stakeholders which outlets you need to know about.

You can also supplement these approaches with a manual internet search: try using keywords that include the name or nickname of the city, town, county, or region, along with media terms (in-language if searching for non-English-language outlets). For instance, "Cleveland" and "Jewish newspaper," or "Oklahoma" and "tribe news," or "North Carolina" and "noticias."

Emergent digital media: Digital startups are becoming increasingly important aspects of the local news ecosystem. Two national organizations have emerged to support these outlets; membership in one or more of these organizations may provide clues about the viability of a digital startup outlet.

LION Publishers supports digital publishers that focus on local journalism by providing education and training, networking, technical and legal support, and other services.[31] Members include both for-profit and nonprofit outlets. LION lists its members on its website; LION outlets are also included in UNC's news deserts database.

The Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) is a network of more than 200 nonprofit newsrooms across the United States. [32] The organization provides training, technical and legal support, and other resources, as well as fiscal sponsorship for organizations that don't yet have their own legal status. Because it vets members according to standards of journalistic practice and nonprofit governance, INN has become a trusted partner for philanthropic funders, leading to the NewsMatch matching grant program, which raised $7.6 million for participating newsrooms in 2018 — its third year.[33]

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[30] Angela Ford, Kevin McFall, and Bob Dabney of the Obsidian Collection, "African American Media Today," Democracy Fund, February 28, 2019, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/african-american-media-today; Jodi Rave, "American Indian Media Today," Democracy Fund, November 20, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/american-indian-media-today; Jessica Retis, "Hispanic Media Today, " Democracy Fund, May 13, 2019, Accessed October 25, 2019. Available at: https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/hispanic-media-today; Michelle Polyak and Katie Donnelly, "Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Journalism: What Funders Can Do," Democracy Fund, October 16, 2019. Accessed October 18. Available at: https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/advancing-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-journalism-what-funders-can-do.

[31] Local Independent Online Publishers, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.lionpublishers.com.

[32] Institute for Nonprofit News, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://inn.org/about/.

[33] "NewsMatch Raises $7.6 Million for Nonprofit News Organizations in 2018," Press Release, NewsMatch, February 12, 2019, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.newsmatch.org/info/newsmatch-raises-more-than-7-million-for-nonprofit-news-organizations-in-2018.

- What sort of independent online publishers exist in your area? There may be outlets you're not aware of doing great work.

- Go to INN.org.

- Click on "Member Directory".

- Choose your state and look at the outlets that appear. Check out their websites.

- You can also search members by focus area, as many cover specific topics such as the environment or rural issues, either nationally or regionally.

Journalism education and youth media

Journalism schools and campus media: The top journalism programs in the country are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC); a list of accredited institutions is available on ACEJMC's website.[34]

There are hundreds more programs that provide young people with opportunities to learn journalism and media skills, many at institutions with strong community ties. Consider all of the journalism and media training options in your area, including those at historically Black institutions, community colleges, and high schools.

Likewise, consider campus and student-produced media in your scan. Who produces it? How are students trained? Are they compensated? Does the publication produce coverage of the local (off-campus) community? While many student publications are run by school administration, a few are independent, which gives them more freedom to hold the administration accountable.

Youth media: Youth-produced and -led media provide a training ground for young people, not only to become journalists but also to become more informed and empowered participants in civic life. Young people also bring the perspectives of their own communities — those of their parents, grandparents, neighbors, and friends — into their storytelling.

We are not aware of a centralized database of youth media projects, and the platforms, content, and context of youth media can vary widely. Ask stakeholders about youth media or other youth-oriented arts and culture organizations that might have, or could have, a media component.

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[34] "Accredited/Reaccredited," Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: http://www.acejmc.org/accreditation-reviews/accredited-programs/accreditedreaccredited/.

Shortcut option: If you're willing to pay for it or have access through a library or business, tools like [Cision](), [Meltwater](), and others provide lists of media outlets that may save you some time.[35] Designed to aid public relations professionals seeking to pitch stories to media, these tools contain information about outlets across all platforms. They may not be comprehensive, however, so you'll want to make sure to look out for emergent digital, nonprofit, ethnic, and foreign-language outlets.

Beyond media: Map your community's information infrastructure

Now that you have a sense of the media outlets in your community, it's time to broaden the scope to think about your community's capacity to access, share, and make sense of news and information. This broader view will tell you about both the need and the infrastructure where you live.

Broadband: The FCC offers a searchable map of broadband access across the United States, but the map's data come from the industry itself and may overstate what's available. It also doesn't tell you how many people have adopted, or signed up for, broadband. U.S. Census data are a better source for that information.[36]

Data consistently show a strong correlation between income and broadband adoption, with poorer people less likely to be connected, or relying on lower-speed connections and less technologically advanced devices.[37] Even controlling for income, there are strong racial and ethnic components to the digital divide. As you consider your community's infrastructure, look for digital literacy programs addressing this divide.

Libraries: Public libraries are backbones of local communities, providing information and technology access and serving as conveners for civic engagement. They are some of the most accessible and trusted spaces communities have. There are nearly 17,000 public libraries in the United States.[39] Consider where library branches are located in your community, and take stock of the library's assets and offerings, including computer terminals, digital resources, training opportunities, programming, and physical space.

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[35]   "Cision Media Database," Cision, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.cision.com/us/products/database/.

[36]   Computer and internet use data are included in the U.S. Census's Current Population Survey (CPS). The most recent data from 2012 are included in American Fact Finder tables along with other CPS data. Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.census.gov/topics/population/computer-internet/data/tables.html; See also the NTIA's Digital Nation data explorer, which has data at the state level. Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.ntia.doc.gov/data/digital-nation-data-explorer.

[37]   Maureen Lewis, "Digitally Unconnected in the U.S.: Who's Not Online and Why?" National Telecommunications and Information Administration, September 26, 2016, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.ntia.doc.gov/blog/2016/digitally-unconnected-us-who-s-not-online-and-why.

Look up the libraries in your community. Consultant Marshall Breeding maintains a searchable database of public libraries across the United States at LibraryTechnology.org. Entries contain detailed information about each and every branch. How many residents does your local branch serve each year?

Neighborhood organizations and listservs: Each city has a different set of neighborhoods and different ways neighborhoods self-organize. Does your city have active block clubs, neighborhood associations, or other structures in place? Which neighborhoods are the most active? Which could use more resources to develop tools of communication and connection?

Local government outreach: In some places, local governments offer resources or training for neighborhood groups to come together, through block clubs or "neighborhood college," a training for residents in how their local government agencies work. Check municipal and county websites to see what sort of civic engagement opportunities may exist where you live, and how information flows through those interactions.

Houses of worship: Faith networks are strong networks of trust. Are there especially influential houses of worship in your community? Those known for being active in civic life? Those that invest heavily in communications through printed publications, video, or other forms of media? What sort of backbone organizations exist to connect houses of worship to one another or to other local community groups?

Cultural centers: For immigrant communities and other communities unified by language or culture, cultural centers are important hubs. They provide physical space, social activities, education, and opportunities to develop leadership. Consider how these centers already transmit news and civic information through publications, oral history, social media, or live events.

Advocacy and nonprofit communications: People who care about a particular cause or issue increasingly look to advocacy and nonprofit organizations as trusted sources of information, in part because those organizations typically focus on what actions people can take. Consider not just the influence of these organizations, but also the quality of the information they share: Is it verified and trustworthy? Does it amplify the work of journalists? How does it engage people effectively in working toward solutions?

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[39] Independent library consultant Marshall Breeding offers a database of the nation's public libraries, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://library-technology.org/libraries/uspublic/.

Social media: What matters here is not the platform, but the people. *Who* are the influential voices addressing local issues, on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.? Are there elected officials who are especially good at using social media to share information? How about activists or entrepreneurs? Which hashtags do they use? Make a list of these influencers and look at how they interact with those who follow them. This can provide a window into the conversations happening in different circles of the community.

Open government and civic data

The state of open government is a critical concern for anyone seeking to make their local civic information stronger.

Public records and public meetings are the most fundamental ways to keep an eye on what our government is up to. But laws and policies around open records and open meetings vary, and the practical application and compliance varies far more. In some communities, city council meetings are broadcast live, while others don't even allow cameras inside. In some communities, it can take a lawsuit to open up public health data that a neighboring community puts online for the world to see.

To understand the laws where you live, visit the Open Government Guide from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which offers a compendium on every state's open records and open meetings laws.[40] The National Freedom of Information Coalition is a national backbone organization serving freedom of information groups across the United States and can direct you to the counterpart organization where you live.

To assess the practical realities of accessing government information, you can use a scavenger hunt approach by seeing how easy (or difficult) it is to find basic information like city council meeting minutes, public officials' salaries, property tax records, restaurant inspection reports, public transit schedules, city or county budgets, or other data relevant to the information needs you've identified. Comparing your findings across local governments will demonstrate their comparative openness.[41] There may be civic technologists with self-organized groups such as Code for America in your community who are already exploring digital public records access and putting that data to work toward community solutions.

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[40] "Open Government Guide," Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.rcfp.org/open-government-guide/.

[41] The Knight Foundation includes a checklist for this "scavenger hunt" approach in its Community Information Toolkit, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.knightfoundation.org/features/kcic-resources/.

Philanthropic investments

Who's already funding media in your area, and what grants are they making? You can find out by searching Media Impact Funders' media grants data map, available online for free.

Developed in partnership with Candid, a nonprofit that offers searchable data on foundations and nonprofits, this map allows you to search data for more than 200,000 grants made in the media sector, broadly defined, between 2010 and 2015 (with continuous updates). The data are compiled from IRS Forms 990 and 990-PF, foundation websites, and other public sources.

There are five broad categories: "journalism, news, and information"; "Media content and platforms"; "media access and policy"; "media applications and tools"; and "telecommunications infrastructure." Subcategories break down the data further. These categories of media funding derive from what the foundations themselves report and what Candid staff determine.

There have been several reports on broad trends in the data this map contains since its release. But if you need more specific information about places, funders, and grantees, you can look at the data yourself.

Go to MediaImpactFunders.org and click on "The Field" and select "Media Grants Data Map." This will take you to the map home screen.

In the "location" search box, type in your state. You can see the total number of grants, total monetary value, total number of funders, and total number of funders at the top, with dots all over the map indicating recipients' location, with larger dots indicating more grants. (If you're looking at grants for an entire state, you'll see dots in each county.)

Click on a dot, and you'll see a row of totals for that location with an option to see more details by funder, recipients or grants. Click on any of those options and you'll see a list of these grants, which you can download as a CSV file. You can also click on a specific recipient and see all the grants they received from various funders. Keep playing with the data to see visualizations and more breakdowns by category.

SECTION 4: ACT ON WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

Even if you don't yet have a clear course of action in mind, you're ready to begin. The work you've done to map out the ecosystem is of great value to the people you serve, so share it. Invite the people who've helped you so far to reflect on the picture you've assembled, and get their feedback. Extend that invitation further, bringing in stakeholders and new potential partners. Tell the story, even if that story is still unfolding. Move from plans to action, starting with something small that you and your community can learn from.

Step 1: Get people together

Whether it's a lunch-time meeting, an evening event, or a two-day gathering, a convening is a great way to get feedback, socialize your findings, generate buy-in, and help people brainstorm with you about what to do next and how it could work. It's also a way to get a sense of people's commitment to keep working with you. How they engage in the process illustrates what type of partner they would be.

Invite feedback: The people who've taken the time to talk to you in this process are already invested in the outcome. You can honor that investment by keeping them updated and sharing what you've learned with them. Consider bringing them together in a group to thank them, share findings, and ask for their responses. They're likely to find value in the work and in the opportunity to meet with others. This sort of gathering is also an important test-run: If there are adverse reactions, this is the time to find out so you can adjust future communications. This core group may become some of the strongest advocates and ambassadors for the activities that emerge.

Widen the circle: The research you've done has likely generated many names of people you want to reach out to but haven't yet been able to engage. By sharing your initial findings, you can invite them into the next stage of the process. Consider using some of the same engagement techniques we touched on earlier — the World Café or design-thinking workshop, for instance — to involve people in thinking through what you've learned and what you might do next. Again, there's value not only in the content but in the opportunity to network with others who care about these ideas.

> "We can provide common ground for coming together for the broader ecosystem — to get people thinking about collaboration instead of competition."
>
> **— MELISSA MILIOS DAVIS, GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION**

Make it public: Consider throwing the doors wide open and inviting the public to have a conversation about these ideas. A public event could focus the attention of important stakeholders onto these ideas. A listening tour could help you reach people and neighborhoods that you're not otherwise in touch with. This sort of event may be part of a pilot project, as described later when we look at different examples of how foundations have done this work.

Step 2: Find a center of gravity

Collaboration doesn't happen on its own. You're more likely to move this work forward if someone is thinking about it on a regular basis and keeping the fire burning.

Many ecosystems have found the need for a coordinator or hub organization that doesn't compete with other organizations but instead sees its role as a service to the field with the mission of building a healthy ecosystem.

Consider bringing a coordinator on staff or building that role into the grantmaking. This person could do regular check-ins with key people involved, plan and lead meetings, write blog posts, and scan for opportunities to take action or collaborate. See our case studies for four different examples of people and organizations playing a coordinating role to promote local journalism collaborations.

> "Think about who is in charge of making sure the work is connected and cohesive and moving forward. There has to be someone, some entity, charged with doing that, and grant-supported to do it."
>
> **— MOLLY DE AGUIAR,** INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

Step 3: Share your story

Tell the story of your work as it unfolds — why you did an assessment, how you did it, what you learned from it, and what happens next. Democracy Fund's internal evaluations have found that regular communications and storytelling about the work from this earliest stage is important to building a new vision, getting buy-in, and growing momentum.

The work of sharing your process and story is part of the work of assessing your ecosystem. The storytelling helps reflect the ecosystem back to itself. If done with a sense of openness, it invites feedback that helps you expand your analysis and learn even more.

Be strategic about what you highlight and emphasize. You have the power to lift up people and projects that might not otherwise get attention and to amplify voices that aren't often heard, including media entrepreneurs and juniors in the field. Storytelling allows you to put forward a vision of the ecosystem that centers voices more equitably.

Sharing what you're learning is also a matter of transparency. By telling people what you're doing, why, and how you're doing it, you can help them feel invited to join the conversation and make your work replicable. That transparency will earn trust, and it may inspire others in the community to partner with you.

You can tell your story through blog posts and social media, through in-person gatherings or webinars, or a dedicated website. For example, the Colorado Media Project has a dedicated website where the Gates Family Foundation and its partners share blog posts and reports.

One of the most popular storytelling methods is an email newsletter that pulls together the work of many people, all within the framework of the ecosystem. A newsletter reminds people that the work goes on, even if there's not a major outcome to trumpet, and it offers a platform where others can share their work. Democracy Fund consultant Melanie Sill uses the NC Local newsletter to do that in North Carolina.

Newsletters can be time-intensive, but they don't have to be. Weekly is probably too frequent to begin with, so aim for something less ambitious, but do put it on your calendar. Simple platforms like Mail Chimp are an option, but they're not necessary. The Local Fix, Democracy Fund's newsletter on local news, started out as an email with about 20 people in the BCC line. When thinking about the audience for a newsletter, begin with key stakeholders, the 20 to 50 people most likely to be interested, and who you want to bring along in creating a vision for the future. Over time, the audience will grow, and the newsletter will become more of a promotional vehicle for the work it highlights.

Try something

Now that you know the lay of the land and some potential partners, it's time to try something. What you do first will depend on — and should respond to — what you hear from your community about needs and assets, but some approaches that have worked elsewhere are outlined below. Keep the initial scope of the pilot small and short term, to maximize the chance of success and learn quickly from the experience. Early wins help create momentum for change in a complex system that tends to push back.

> "We know we're not going to fix the diversity of all our newsrooms with this amount of money. The [request for proposals] was pretty much like, 'Here's what we care about for these grants; tell us what you want to do.'"
>
> – KATIE BRISSON,
> COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR
> SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

Inform, inspire, implement: Many of the people on the ground in news ecosystems are working so hard just to keep afloat that they don't have time to search out new models, assess what's working, or figure out how to adapt it to their work or community. Guest speakers, social media, curated blog posts, and newsletters are tools to inform and inspire people. Coaching and small grants help adapt ideas to the local context.

> "Avoid going all in on a big expensive pilot. Better to start small, be flexible."
>
> **– MOLLY DE AGUIAR,** INDEPENDENCE PUBLIC MEDIA FOUNDATION

Give small grants: Grants of $1,000 to $5,000 can give organizations the chance to try new things, take risks, or catalyze collaborations. These dollar amounts may seem small, but if given with few strings attached, they can free up time and resources and encourage creativity and good will across the ecosystem. Key to this strategy is making sure you can support the organizations to share their learnings with each other and the broader field, so consider having communications capacity and support be part of this early stage.

Build a cohort: Whether they're current grantees, new ones or even potential grantees and stakeholders, consider bringing together people with a special stake in local news. Simply giving them the time and space to get together and talk about their work can make an impact. Creating space for people to build relationships around shared concerns and ideas goes a long way toward creating a more connected ecosystem and is often a prerequisite to deeper collaborations in the future.

Try a collaborative project: Sometimes the best way to build trust and connection across an ecosystem is through doing the work itself. A collaborative reporting effort can break through the noise to attract people's attention and have an impact. Pick a single relevant topic that many outlets can tackle from different perspectives across different platforms and support that. Examples of this approach include the "Dirty Little Secrets" collaboration on toxic pollution in New Jersey, the San Francisco Homeless Project, and Resolve Philadelphia's Broke in Philly project. Make sure one of the grantees is coordinating the collaboration and managing the project. Some organizations, such as the Center for Investigative Reporting and Solutions Journalism Network, specialize in that coordinating role.

> "Every two months, we bring together all the grantees, and they simply share with each other how their projects are progressing. Early on, we tried to program these meetings. We brought in national speakers. Finally, we said, 'Forget that, it's worth it just for them to update each other and make connections.'"
>
> **– KATIE BRISSON,** COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

SECTION 5: RIGHT-SIZE YOUR ASSESSMENT

Much of the work on information ecosystems has been done without a playbook. This guide is an effort to take examples of others' work to create a usable playbook. In this section, we'll synthesize examples into informed, if not fully tested, ways to design your own assessment. (See also the recommended reading for links to examples and tools you can use.)

You may be wondering, how much will this cost? How much time will it take? Who do I need to hire? These are the right questions to be asking, and we've attempted to address them to some extent. But the answers depend on many different factors, and the best approach is to tailor an assessment to both your goals and your capacity. We encourage you to talk to someone who's done similar work before. If you're ready to walk down this road, reach out to Democracy Fund's Local News Lab team, and they can connect you.

You don't have to do everything, and you certainly don't have to do everything at once. It's OK to start small and build over time.

What matters most is finding out what matters most to your community. For that reason, we recommend prioritizing community listening while managing realistic expectations. Be thoughtful about how much time and energy you ask of community members and try to communicate clearly about the outcome they can expect.

We also recommend engaging your organization's leadership in this work, because it's good for them to learn what the work is all about. Leadership's involvement also signals to people that this work is a priority, which may help to open doors. If you're looking for ways to make the case to your board of directors, Democracy Fund can provide guidance and connect you with other foundations, as well.

Be sure to check out the case studies, beginning on page 39, for examples of place-based funders who did scans in partnership with other organizations. Collaborations with other organizations are strongly advised.

> "One of the best things we did early on in our project was to have our foundation president sit in on a convening where the grantees were just sharing about their projects. Our president now has examples of the work she's heard about firsthand and is a big supporter of this in the community with her peers."
>
> **– KATIE BRISSON, COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN**

Version 1: Fellowship

1. Hire a graduate student or someone with a degree in communications or social sciences, preferably a person with some background in journalism. This person needs to be adept at thinking through complexity.

2. Ask the fellow to read a few of the ecosystem studies and guides, such as this one. A brief annotated bibliography can be useful.

3. Meet and draw up research questions together. Hone your questions and make your goals clear. Talk through the list of stakeholders and the methods they should use.

4. Look at the calendar and make a detailed plan for what you want to have accomplished by the end of the fellowship term. If your plan includes engagement events, schedule them early and offer help for event planning so your fellow can concentrate on the research.

5. Empower your fellow. Offer language to use when setting up meetings and reaching out to stakeholders. Make introductions. Set a realistic goal for the number of stakeholders you ask your fellow to interview or engage with. Insulate them from organizational politics.

6. Make time for multiple drafts and rounds of feedback.

7. Even if you don't plan to release the full report publicly, make sure there is something you can share at the end of the process, for the fellow's sake and yours. This could be a blog post or series of blog posts, or a slide deck.

Financial requirements: Salary, research costs if applicable, convening costs if applicable.

Capacity requirements: Immediate supervisor, staff support for stakeholder outreach, convening, etc.

Version 2: In-house, less than full-time

1. Get up to speed on the state of journalism by reading trade publications such as Nieman Lab, Poynter and Columbia Journalism Review. Attend a conference if possible, such as the Knight Media Forum, to get a lay of the land.

2. Reach out to organizations in the field that can share expertise and point to resources. Those organizations may include Media Impact Funders, Solutions Journalism Network, the Listening Post Collective, and the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University.

3. Remember that you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Determine what research and pilots already exist that you can cite and learn from. What specifically do you need to know about your community to move forward with a good strategy?

4. Find local partners and engage them early and often. Talk candidly about your needs and expectations. Consider a memorandum of understanding (formal or informal) if that helps establish clarity.

5. If you want to employ a research method, such as a survey or focus groups, that's beyond your staff's expertise, engage external help early on.

6. Assemble a committee to stay in touch with throughout the process. Meet to hone your research questions, talk through methods and findings, and troubleshoot.

7. Consider ways to engage stakeholders and the public throughout the process. If you can, share your learnings as you go. This may draw more partners and support.

8. Draft your findings in stages and solicit feedback. Use design to convey concepts visually. Put together slide decks to present to stakeholders.

9. Make a deadline to finish the fact-finding stage and move into strategy and implementation. You'll never know everything.

Financial requirements: Research, convening, and travel costs, if applicable.

Capacity requirements: Some percentage of the lead staffer's time, plus additional staff and leadership support.

Version 3: Outside consultant or grantee

1. Decide what sort of assessment you need: quantitative or qualitative? A comprehensive historical scan of local media, or something more focused on a specific issue, such as representation or digital startups?

2. Find a consultant with the orientation and background that suits those needs. Talk through methods and examples and share them with your leadership team.

3. Determine the deliverables that matter most to you. Get clarity on what you need to make this work actionable.

> "This was not a hands-off, make-a-grant project for us. We've been on weekly calls, I've overseen interns. As a place-based foundation, we have to show leadership. It can't just be like, give it to a nonprofit and they'll figure it out. Our president has been willing to use his political credibility to say, 'This is my issue right now.' I really can't say enough about having leadership that is known and respected, sounding the alarm in the community."
>
> **– MELISSA MILIOS DAVIS, GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION**

4. Stay engaged. An outside consultant may bring a lot to the table, but they won't be able to leverage your knowledge and relationships unless you take part in the process. Budget time to offer background and share what you know. Make introductions. Check in frequently and make sure there's an open channel for questions.

5. If you plan to engage stakeholders or use focus groups, use your knowledge and relationships to make that process successful. Leverage community partnerships.

6. Budget time for drafts and feedback. Think visually.

Financial requirements: Consulting fees may range from $10,000 to $100,000 or more, depending on the scope of the study. Survey costs vary widely, too, with costs much higher for large-scale studies with statistical significance.

Capacity requirements: The staff lead working with the consultant should budget multiple hours early on and during the drafting and feedback stage, with smaller time commitments in between. Administrative support in the contracting phase.

SECTION 6: CASE STUDIES

The purpose of assessing your local news and information ecosystem is to take informed action. These case studies show how three different place-based foundations used research to inform an ecosystem approach to improving local news. *(Editor's note: Democracy Fund has funded or co-funded many of the organizations and initiatives mentioned in these case studies, and the author has participated in many of them through her work with Free Press, Duke University, and other programs.)*

Case Study #1: A place-based foundation in New Jersey paved the way for collaborative news ecosystems

Much of what we know about how to strengthen local news ecosystems is the result of experimentation. One of the pioneers of that work is Molly de Aguiar. Now president of the Independence Public Media Foundation in Philadelphia, she launched an ecosystem approach to media grantmaking while leading the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's Informed Communities program from 2011 to 2017. The network she fostered in New Jersey continues to thrive, and it serves as a model for statewide news infrastructure and national-local funder partnerships.

"What I did at Dodge is not the way that I think many foundations would undertake this work," de Aguiar said. "It wasn't rooted in a lot of assessment and research and convenings. We didn't have a budget to do that, and I was new at grantmaking, so I just jumped in."

Before the term "news desert" came into parlance, New Jersey was a prime example: Situated between the media markets of New York and Philadelphia, the state received little coverage from the major media in either. In a 2009 essay for *The New Republic*, Princeton sociologist Paul Starr bemoaned the end of "the age of newspapers" and predicted a new era of corruption, citing his home state as case in point. Drastic cuts at the *Star-Ledger* had hobbled statehouse reporting in a state known for flamboyant political scandals. Then in 2010, Gov. Chris Christie announced the state would eliminate funding for the New Jersey Network of public television and radio.

The Community Foundation of New Jersey convened a group of funders, academics, and public media outlets in 2010 to begin thinking about a way to respond to the crisis. The seed of an idea began to grow — creating a New Jersey-centric entity that could serve the state's news needs. Dodge was at the table, and its new president at the time, Chris Daggett, had a strong interest in advancing democracy and local media's role in it through the foundation's Informed Communities grantmaking.

By 2012, the Dodge Foundation made a grant to help establish the [Center for Cooperative Media](#) (CCM) at Montclair State University as a statewide hub for collaboration and experimentation.

"We were bound by a very small budget," de Aguiar recalled, "but we had a fundamental desire to support the entire ecosystem, and we believed that there needed to be an entity whose job it was to serve all of the newsrooms and journalists across the state. We were specifically looking for something that would be cohesive and collaborative."

When Dodge received a grant from the Knight Foundation's Community Information Challenge later that year, de Aguiar invested in a handful of media outlets and supported CCM's operations. She worked closely with CCM's leadership to convene across the state to better understand its information needs. Being part of the Knight cohort gave Dodge access to human-centered design workshops and help with network mapping.

An additional $2 million grant to Dodge in 2014 gave de Aguiar the resources to hire Josh Stearns to join her team and roughly tripled the amount of money she was able to grant over the next three years. While Stearns worked with five small newsrooms to understand their business needs, it was clear that community engagement needed to be addressed across the ecosystem. So Dodge made grants to the national advocacy organization Free Press for its [News Voices: New Jersey](#) project and to the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) to coordinate a [large-scale collaborative investigation on toxic pollution](#).

"The investments fed into one another and strengthened the entire ecosystem," she said. "While CCM was doing its work to serve newsrooms and build collaboration among them, the concurrent work by CIR and Free Press were also helping to build and strengthen the network of local newsrooms and journalists across the state. Those collaborations built on another's successes."

The investment from Knight also made is possible to fund more experimentation: de Aguiar connected New Jersey outlets with engagement services [Hearken](#) and [GroundSource](#) and hired the [Listening Post Collective](#) to work with [Jersey Shore Hurricane News](#). She made additional grants to CIR to produce a theater and comedy show based on the toxic pollution reporting, which helped bring Dodge's arts, environmental, and education grantees together with the media grantees.

"Through all of it, I learned some big lessons about ceding control of the grantmaking, trusting that the people closest to the work know what's best, including what resources they need. I did my best to bring them those resources and then got out of their way." De Aguiar also communicated frequently with grantees, encouraging them to connect with one another.

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[42] Leah Todd, "Mountain News Deserts: An Audit of News Ecosystems in Rural Communities of the Intermountain West," Produced by the Solutions Journalism Network for the LOR Foundation, May 2016, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/55558919/mountain-news-deserts.

"I've always felt the sweet spot for grantmaking is to provide both operating support and some experimental funds," she said. "It's important to offer stability, but I've seen great things come from giving organizations extra resources and encouragement to be creative."

Dodge also communicated publicly about the grantmaking through blog posts, conference presentations, and, eventually, co-founding the Local News Lab (now managed by Democracy Fund) as a resource for news organizations and funders.

Today, Dodge continues to build on the foundation of this collaborative news ecosystem. Meghan Van Dyk, the current program officer for Dodge's Informed Communities program, said this groundwork, as well as Dodge's belief in providing general operating support to grantees, "continues to shape our thinking as Dodge develops refreshed strategies through our new vision of an equitable New Jersey through creative, engaged, sustainable communities."

"The questions we're asking foundation-wide boil down to how Dodge can focus our resources so those most directly impacted by structural inequities have greater voice, power, and influence," Van Dyk said. "We value the role and importance of media and narrative in creating change and are exploring how our investments in the news ecosystem can ensure it is more reflective of and better serve African-American, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous communities."

Case Study #2: How deep listening in the rural West led to solutions-oriented collaborations

The [LOR Foundation](#), which serves rural communities in the Mountain West, hasn't traditionally viewed itself a media funder. In 2016, however, LOR undertook a groundbreaking and ambitious project: the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) (SJN), a nonprofit that trains journalists and fosters newsroom collaborations in solutions-oriented reporting. "We invest in communities, and we saw a community need," LOR's chief communications officer LaMonte Guillory explained. "Media and journalism happened to be that facilitator to make the community better."

The impetus for the project came from LOR's efforts to understand the foundation's role in the region, Guillory said. In learning about people's daily lives, LOR began to understand that people were turning away from traditional news sources to social media to find out what was happening in their communities, and they weren't getting the news they needed. LOR engaged SJN in a six-month process to understand the news habits and needs of people living in small towns across New Mexico, Colorado, and Montana. That assessment included surveys, focus groups, and content analysis, among other methods.[42] Only one in five people surveyed said their local news was consistently relevant and valuable. Jobs and the economy were top of mind for residents, who complained that news coverage focused too much on crime stories. People said news coverage was episodic and problem-centric, when what they wanted were context and solutions.[43]

LOR and SJN released the study publicly and moved on to piloting solutions. While similar studies had been done in major metro areas, none had ever focused on rural communities. "In the rural context," Guillory explained, "newspapers are really small and hyperlocal, and just focusing on one newsroom wouldn't solve the problem." The team recruited seven small news organizations in New Mexico and Colorado to be part of a collaborative experiment, producing solutions-oriented stories on a range of rural challenges, overseen by a project editor. The "Small Towns, Big Change" initiative produced more than 50 stories in 2017 on land and water issues, substance abuse, education, and rural economic development.[44] The next phase was "The Montana Gap," a series of stories in the magazine *High Country News*, with guidance from SJN, on how people in Montana communities are responding to changes in

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[43] Leah Todd, "Where's the Rest?" Solutions Journalism Network, May 19, 2016, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/wheres-the-rest-477bae120d2d.

[44] Keith H. Hammonds, "Having Ourselves a Ball in a Small Town," Solutions Journalism Network, March 28, 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/having-ourselves-a-ball-in-a-small-town-251dfb30822.

[45] See "The Montana Gap," High Country News, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.hcn.org/topics/the-montana-gap.

the economy and in population patterns.[45]

Guillory said LOR is eager to find additional partners. "We want to maximize the success we've had in New Mexico and Montana and invite other place-based funders to participate. We're trying to create an on-ramp and make it easy for other foundations to join this work.

"Some organizations fear they can't fund this work because they don't have enough money. But you don't need a large budget to make this happen. There's enough proof of concept out there in the field that you don't have to reinvent it. You don't have to do it alone. Join forces."

Case Study #3: Taking on Detroit's big challenges through informed engagement

Detroit has a lot going on when it comes to local news innovation. As one of the "Knight cities," it enjoys significant investments from the Knight Foundation, including a grant in 2013 to form the Detroit Journalism Collaborative, a partnership between public TV and radio stations, ethnic media outlets, digital education outlet Chalkbeat, and statewide nonprofit Bridge Magazine.

A few years ago, Knight began working with the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan (CF-SEM) on an initiative to lift up smaller media outlets and try innovative experiments. Katie Brisson, CF-SEM's vice president of programs, said Knight's Detroit program director Katy Locker wanted to root this new initiative at the community foundation because of its strong local relationships. The Ford Foundation joined the effort as well, bringing an interest in Detroit's robust ethnic media.

Before launching a new fund, Brisson said, "We wanted to ground ourselves in information." The foundation hired journalist Debra Adams Simmons to do a scan of Detroit's local news ecosystem.[46] She interviewed more than 60 stakeholders, including local journalists, civic leaders, corporate executives, clergy, entrepreneurs and citizens, along with national journalism experts. She also drew from published reports and other sources. Detroit has a history of journalism innovation and is rich in talent and collaboration, she wrote. Yet not only are headcounts at the major newspapers about a third of what they had been two decades ago, their staffs are even less diverse than before, which erodes trust. "Community engagement and public-affairs journalism both require journalistic relationships with the community, but many Detroit news consumers do not see themselves reflected in the news — or, often, in the newsrooms that create it," Simmons wrote. She saw opportunities in developing the city's talent pool and engaging in local communities.

While the scan involved big-picture thinking about the field of local news, the task for funders was to determine what they could feasibly do to make an impact with finite time and money. "The report is addressing big, big issues," Brisson said. "We had to pull from that, what tangibly can we do with grants that last a year?" Knight's focus is innovation, while Ford was concerned about representation. Together,

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[46] Debra Adams Simmons, "Detroit Journalism Landscape," Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, the Ford Foundation and the Knight Foundation, December 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://cfsem.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Detroit-Journalism-Landscape-Executive-Summary-DJEF-FINAL.pdf.

the three funders looked for new ways of doing things and authentic voices from the community. "We said, who's out there already trying some things that, with an infusion of cash, could really do it in a robust way? Who has ideas they haven't been able to try for lack of money?"

The Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund launched in 2017 and has now made more than $650,000 in grants to journalism projects reflecting diverse perspectives, and investing in New Michigan Media, a network of ethnic and minority newspapers.[47] Now in its third year, the fund also continues to support workshops and convenings within Detroit's journalism community.

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[47] Katie Brisson, Katy Locker, and Kevin Ryan, "Whose News? Elevating the Voices of Detroiters in Detroit's Story," Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, December 7, 2017, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://cfsem.org/whose-news-elevating-the-voices-of-detroiters-in-detroits-story/.

Case Study #4: The Colorado Media Project turns toward what comes next

The closure of the *Rocky Mountain News* in 2009 was a high-profile moment in the decline of print newspapers. Its loss continues to be felt in Denver, as the remaining daily newspaper, *The Denver Post*, declines under hedge-fund ownership.[48] Yet Denver is a dynamic city, with new digital publications emerging and both public media and community-based media holding steady.

"In Denver, the mood was urgent. Everyone was jumping to find 'a solution' to the gap being left by the Post," said Melissa Milios Davis vice president for strategic communications at Gates Family Foundation. "Tom [Gougeon], our president, felt we should explore this from the forward-looking, what's-next perspective. How can we, as Coloradans with that can-do attitude, get together and figure this out?"

The Gates Family Foundation in Denver has long supported local public media and a few other individual outlets, but as a place-based funder, it hadn't been looped into national conversations about the future of news. "We really didn't know at a deep level what was going on in the sector," said Milios. The organization wanted to better understand the local news and information ecosystem, including "the monumental shift in news consumption patterns and how best to meet the information needs of Coloradans."

In 2018, Gates drew on its relationship with JB Holston, dean of the University of Denver's Daniel F. Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science. Holston's team began by first looking at existing research, which fortunately included a relatively recent comprehensive study on Denver by the Pew Research Center. Holston also drew on a relationship with the Boston Consulting Group to look at business model concerns and the changing habits of Colorado news audiences, via a 2,000-person statewide survey.

A student group called Cultivo engaged community stakeholders in design-thinking workshops that involved "empathy" interviews with area residents. "That process pushed our thinking and got us out of our journalistic bubbles," Davis said. The foundation also engaged researcher Michelle McLellan to adapt questions   the Institute for Nonprofit News uses to survey its members to develop a survey of digital outlets in Colorado.

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[48] Libby Rainey, "The Rapid, Devastating Decline of the Denver Post," CityLab, May 15, 2018, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://www.citylab.com/life/2018/05/the-rapid-devastating-decline-of-the-denver-post/560402/.

McLellan's survey helped document and quantify what Davis and her colleagues suspected. "These are fragile businesses, and they're started by people with a lot of talent on the editorial side, but not a lot of capacity on the business side," Davis said. "We were able to quantify that with budget sizes and the percentage of spend on things like the business development and marketing, which is negligible. That's a data point we carry forward as we're talking to other funders, making the case for more investment and more support of those entities on the business side."

Every step of the way, the foundation has shared its findings online and engaged stakeholders — from the design-thinking workshops to sharing out the findings of McLellan's survey to posting the results of a large-scale survey of Colorado residents about their news habits. In-person events have sometimes included national experts in journalism and technology. "We were trying to bring the community along and up to speed by bringing in other voices that could reflect back what national conversations were going on and kind of elevate our thinking," Davis said. "We were building a constituency with at least some common understanding of what was going on."

In February 2019, the Gates Family Foundation announced more than $1 million in new investments in the Colorado Media Project, plus support from Democracy Fund and Denver University, and a goal to raise to $2.5 million over three years. The foundation also hired its first project director to lead the collaboration.[49]

[49] Tom Gougeon and JB Holston, "Announcing New Investments and Partners for Colorado's Local News Ecosystem," Colorado Media Project, February 1, 2019, Accessed April 29, 2019. Available at: https://coloradomediaproject.com/blog/2019/2/1/announcing-new-investments-and-partners-for-colorados-local-news-ecosystem.

RECOMMENDED READING

This section is an annotated bibliography of studies, reports, essays, and other work in the field of local news ecosystems.

Basics and background

Nancy Watzman's "What is a news ecosystem?" for Local News Lab is a straightforward primer, good for sharing with colleagues, stakeholders, and others who are new to this work.

 The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy released "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age" in October 2009, launching much of the work and foundation investment in ecosystem-building work in this field. This report broadened the scope of the conversation about the future of journalism by exploring the ways broadband access, libraries, and government transparency efforts relate to the flow of information in local communities and its impact on local democracy. Knight developed a Community Information Toolkit in 2011 that inspired much of our own methodology and continues to be a useful set of processes and resources, including a "community information scavenger hunt."

Penny Muse Abernathy's work on news deserts at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media looks specifically at the closure and consolidation of newspapers, especially smaller circulation papers, and the role of hedge-fund ownership. You can explore an interactive map or download her 2018 report, "The Expanding News Desert."

Philip M. Napoli, now at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, created a scalable, multi-modal assessment of the health of local news ecosystems including a scan of local outlets, focus groups, and content analysis. His research team began by looking comparatively at three communities in New Jersey in 2015 and noticed disparities in the number of local outlets and the amount of original, local news available. He expanded the scope of his assessment to include 100 American communities in an effort to scale the methodology.

Places and cases

Chicago: You may have heard of [City Bureau](#), a Chicago-based journalism outlet and news lab known for its [Documenters](#) program and its weekly public newsroom gatherings. City Bureau worked with the Center for Media Engagement at University of Texas-Austin to inform the [survey of public attitudes and preferences for local media in Chicago](#). Released in 2018, the survey provides [evidence to support City Bureau's mission](#) to serve the city's South and West Sides, whose residents are lower income and predominantly Black and/or Latinx. People living on the South and West Sides of Chicago feel underrepresented or poorly represented by local news media. Yet, the same residents are also the most interested in getting involved with Chicago news media — for example, volunteering to report on a public meeting.

Colorado: The [Colorado Media Project's website](#) is a repository for several studies the Gates Family Foundation and its partners have commissioned, including a large-scale survey of Coloradans' media habits, a scan of local digital outlets, and a report on local nonprofits news outlets.

Detroit: The 2017 assessment of the [Detroit journalism landscape](#) by Debra Adams Simmons informed the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan collaboration with the Ford Foundation and the Knight Foundation to launch the Detroit Journalism Engagement Fund.

Kentucky: A [comparative study](#) by Andrea Wenzel and Sam Ford used focus groups, diaries, and interviews to look at media trust and political polarization in the college town of Bowling Green and in rural Ohio County for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism in 2017. They went on to [document experiments in rural journalism](#) that came out of that research at the digital outlet The Ohio County Monitor.

New Jersey: The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's groundbreaking work in New Jersey is well documented in Molly de Aguiar and Josh Stearns' "[Lessons Learned from the Local News Lab](#)" report from February 2016.

New Mexico: The nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy organization New Mexico First worked with the Rio Grande Chapter of the Society for Professional Journalists to host focus groups in Portales, Las Cruces, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque, with support from the Thornburg Foundation and Democracy Fund. "[Advancing Sustainable, Reliable Journalism in New Mexico](#)" (2018) provides findings from those focus groups and a vision for journalism in the state.

North Carolina: "[Learning from North Carolina: Exploring the News and Information Ecosystem](#)" (2018) is a statewide ecosystem study that informed Democracy Fund's decision to establish the [North Carolina Local News Lab Fund](#).

Oakland: Madeleine Bair's work with the Listening Post Collective, documented in "Más Informacĺon: An Information Needs Assessment of Latino Immigrants in Oakland California" (2018), was the foundation for El TĺImpano, a local reporting lab.

Philadelphia: The Lenfest Institute for Journalism used focus groups to better understand the context in which Philadelphians experience daily news. "Being Informed: A Study of the Information Needs and Habits of Philadelphia residents," co-authored by Michael X Delli Carpini, Mariela Morales Suarez, and Bert Herman in 2018, reports that many people feel overwhelmed by the news.

Temple University professor Andrea Wenzel and coauthors Anthony Nadler, Melissa Valle, and Marc Lamont Hill did a comparative study of attitudes toward the media in urban and suburban Philadelphia for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. Through focus groups, diaries, and interviews, they found themes of distrust in the city's Germantown neighborhood and polarization in suburban Montgomery County.

Various locations: The Wyncote Foundation's 2019 report "Building Stronger Communities Through Media: Innovations in Local Journalism, Public Media, and Storytelling" is part of the foundation's effort to build the field of public media and journalism philanthropy. It profiles nine innovative local and regional projects in film, storytelling, engaged journalism, and more. It also includes resources of particular relevance to funders looking to research grantmaking in the field.

Approaches and resources

Pew Research Center is a vital source for ongoing survey research on news media. Its 2015 report "Local News in a Digital Age" offers an exceptional comparative deep-dive into the local news ecosystems of three American cities: Denver, Colorado; Macon, Georgia; and Sioux City, Iowa. More recently, Pew released a national survey in 2019 of local news attitudes and behaviors that includes an interactive map with data specific to 99 different cities (core-based statistical areas) across the United States.

"The Listening Post Collective Playbook" offers an accessible guide to the people-centered, listen-first approach the Listening Post Collective uses in their assessments and media projects. Listening Post Collective is a U.S.-based project of Internews, an international nongovernmental organization that's been working on freedom of expression in more than 100 countries over 35 years. The playbook is a scaled-down, simplified version of the framework and methodology on information ecosystems that Internews laid out in much greater depth in a 2015 report for the Rockefeller Foundation, "Why Information Matters: A Foundation for Resilience." That report, which includes case studies from multiple international projects and a pilot in Jakarta, Indonesia, will be of particular interest to organizations doing work internationally.

Pulse, a tool developed by Sarah Alvarez of Outlier Media and Andrew Haeg of Groundsource, is a simple survey conducted with communities via text message to assess residents' information needs. The tool is inexpensive and effective and can be conducted on a regular basis to get continuous updates about shifting information priorities in your community. Alvarez has led assessments for Chalkbeat Detroit and San Francisco-based KQED. Read more about Pulse here: "What Kind of Information — Not Just Content — Do You Need as a News Consumer?" and "Beyond Raccoons: Understanding the News Needs of a Community Can Be a Hard Climb (But We're Making It Easier)."

Local News Lab's "Focus Group Guide: Conducting Focus Groups to Understand Local News Audiences" by Jessica Crowell and Kathleen McCollough describes the focus group methodology that Napoli et al. used for the New Jersey study.