

**Building a future for local news through news-academic partnerships:  
A white paper from the Center for Community News**

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June 2022

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## **I. Summary**

News organizations of every size have been diminished over the past 20 years due to a confluence of economic, social and economic forces, but none more than local news. Today, two thirds of U.S. counties have no daily newspaper and more than 200 have no local newspaper at all, leaving broad swaths of the population in news deserts (Abernathy). The impact of these expanding news deserts has profound implications for the success of our communities and the functioning of our democracy. Local news coverage is correlated with higher levels of civic engagement and voter turnout (Pew Research Center), better economic outcomes for residents (Gao et al), and lower levels of political polarization (Darr et al). It is in our collective best interest to stem the loss of local news organizations and build a more resilient model for the future. Such a change will likely require a reimagining of how newsrooms generate revenue, deliver content, reach younger audiences, and adapt to changing demands. The Center for Community News is founded on the belief that American colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to help address many of these questions, and that they have a moral obligation to step in to rebuild this essential function of a healthy democracy.

## **II. The State of Local News Today**

Early data suggests that news organizations of every size are in a more precarious position today than they were before the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic. According to the Press Gazette, the largest US newspaper circulations fell 12% in 2022 from the previous year. Local newspapers are on a similar trajectory, but while the pandemic may have exacerbated trends, it did not originate them. A 2020 Pew Research analysis of data found that weekday circulation was down 40% since 2015, (the first year available for such analysis) and total Sunday circulation had fallen 45% since 2015. The disappearance of local news outlets is only one unfortunate outcome of the diminishment of the industry, however. As Dr. Penelope Abernathy has documented, a significant number of remaining newspapers in the United States could today be considered “ghost newspapers” – outlets with so few journalists dedicated to local beats that nearly all of the substantive community coverage has vanished. This has been the fate of many of the papers purchased by the hedge funds and private equity behemoths that are acquiring distressed media assets to date (Gannett/Gatehouse, Digital First/Tribune, and Lee/BH media are the largest today). The presence of ghost newspapers can obscure the true number of substantive news sources in underserved communities across the U.S.

The reasons for this are myriad. Much of it can be attributed to the consumer shift to digital news consumption, which local news outlets had varied success in their transition to. The same Pew Research Analysis referenced above found that the overall decline in newspaper print readership corresponded to an increase in digital readership, though overall read time also declined. As

readers shifted to online news, advertisers were resistant to move with them, resulting in a precipitous drop off in advertising sales for news outlets large and small (Barthel).

Advertising losses have been a primary driver of the decline of local news, but certainly not the only one. The way Americans consume news, curate their exposure to information, and seek out information that reinforces their existing worldviews can be traced as far back as the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which allowed for the establishment of partisan national news options (Hmielowski et al.). These structural changes to the media landscape expanded news consumers' options for selective exposure, thereby limiting the viewpoints and information that many were encountering. These more polarized preferences in news consumption are observable in every aspect of the American news landscape today.

Despite these trends, there are reasons for hope. Over the past few years, more than half of all Americans have relied on local news at roughly the same level as national news for COVID-19 pandemic information (Shearer). Given the potential for local news to operate as an antidote to increasing polarization (Darr et al.) and its capacity to deliver comparatively trusted (Knight-Gallup) and pragmatic information in a crisis, it's promising that so many Americans reaffirmed its value at such a critical time for public health.

Today, organizations inside and outside the news industry are exploring creative ways to cover, deliver, and fund the news. It's these creative solutions that the Center for Community News seeks to harness and expand in the months ahead. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are

strategies that are working in select region and offer promises for the future of local news at a larger scale.

### III. Why Local News Matters

The presence of local news is associated with some of the most essential ingredients in a healthy democracy.

- **Local news supports civic ties and community engagement.** The roughly one-in-five U.S. adults (19%) who feel highly attached to their communities demonstrate much stronger ties to local news than those who do not feel attached (Pew Research Center).
- **Local news consumption is correlated with high voter turnout.** Those who say they always vote in local elections (27% of U.S. adults) display strikingly stronger local news habits than those who do not regularly vote in local elections (Pew Research Center).
- **Local news improves economic outcomes for towns and taxpayers.** Following a newspaper closure, municipal borrowing costs can increase by 5 to 11 basis points, and the loss of government monitoring is associated with higher government wages and deficits. Local newspapers hold their governments accountable, keeping municipal borrowing costs low and ultimately saving local taxpayers money.  
(Gao et al.)
- **Local news supports robust and competitive elections.** Areas served by newspapers with relatively sharp declines in newsroom staffing have, on average, significantly reduced political competition in mayoral races. Lower staffing levels at newspapers are also associated with lower voter turnout. (Rubado, Jennings)
- **Local news is a bulwark against political polarization.** In areas where newspapers have closed, voters rely more heavily on national news and partisan heuristics to make political decisions. Split-ticket voting in national elections decreases when local news organizations disappear (Darr et al.)

The costs of political polarization, in particular, have come into stark relief in recent years as some of the most basic functions of our democracy falter, including the peaceful transfer of power and trust in election systems. There is a strong body of evidence to suggest that national news has exacerbated political and affective polarization of the American electorate, the most thorough and recent work coming from Ellger et al. It's a trend that continues to gain momentum with the closure of local newspapers around the country (Abernathy). When small and independent newspapers die, consumers are driven to rely more on national sources and partisan heuristics for policy decisions (Darr et al.). An MIT Sloan study from 2021 found that a decrease in local news coverage is associated with a decrease in split-ticket voting, or a higher likelihood of voters choosing candidates in one's political party at every level of government (Angelucci et al.). The presence of local news appears to have a mitigating effect on the nationalization and polarization of our voting habits level (Moskowitz).

Darr et al. investigated this effect when they studied what happened when one local newspaper eliminated discussion of national politics from its opinion pages. In this case, political opinions of heated national ideas were replaced by substantive and pragmatic discussion of local concerns – and polarization among readers slowed.

There are other possible explanations for why local news tends to resist the pull to the political extremes including the fact that local news outlets are by definition catering to a broad (as opposed to fractured) demographic, and it has been established that increased use of mainstream media is associated with a lower preponderance of conspiratorial thinking (Romer). Without the



same structural conditions at the local level that enabled partisan cable competition, local news consumers are forced to encounter viewpoints other than their own. It is this exposure to contrary viewpoints that may challenge the human proclivity toward confirmation bias (Ling). While uncomfortable, the dissonance these contradictory ideas may create also appears to play a critical function in our resistance to polarization (Boztas).

#### **IV. A Role for Higher Education**

In a 2021 essay for Times Higher Education, Meg Little Reilly and Richard Watts made the case for American colleges and universities to assume a more central role in restoring democratic practices and instilling in future generations the habits of a healthy democracy.

From the essay:

The great philosopher and psychologist (and University of Vermont alumnus) John Dewey established the notion of education as a social process: not preparation for life, but a correlative democratic experience in itself. He considered schools and civil society to be the two most fundamental elements of a functional pluralistic nation, working in tandem to create a more enlightened, informed and engaged citizenry.

When these ideas were first introduced in the late 19th Century, they were at odds with the fact that colleges were mostly self-contained islands for the privileged few. Since then, with the diversification of offerings and the democratizing effect of the American GI Bill, schools have woven Dewey's ideas into their pedagogy unevenly. Their failure to fully embrace the relationship between colleges and democracy has been to our collective detriment.

But what does fully realizing these ideals entail? It requires schools to double down on the holistic vision of college as a place to learn not only discrete facts and skills within

majors, but also the skills that make for active and engaged citizens, such as analytic and critical thinking, intercultural and global fluency, and ethical decision-making.

Equally important, this holistic vision must acknowledge that college is a social experience unlike any other: a place for young people to learn how to live independently as civil neighbours. It means that even as schools improve access with the technological advances that the pandemic prompted (such as hybrid classrooms), they must preserve the collective effervescence that only in-person experiences can provide.

Most importantly, colleges must lean into their role as pillars of democracy by making this commitment a fixture of their curricula. That entails meaningful opportunities for all students to engage with the democratic process in the real world, regardless of their area of study.

This argument is broader and loftier than simply a call to train more journalists, which many academic institutions are already doing successfully today. It's a call to find ways to integrate opportunities for students of every interest to interact with the fourth estate and develop an appreciation for its role in a thriving democracy. Colleges are in a unique position to help cultivate a more active citizenry, more critical consumption of public information, and more engagement with one another in the public arena. Some of the students in these programs will go on to be professional journalists and civic leaders, but all of them will be engaged voters for life. That may be the most enduring legacy of such programs – one that will benefit future generations.

With these goals in mind, the Center for Community News will harness and expand programs that are matching the passion of students and the resources of colleges with the needs of local news organizations. From reporting and research to business development and accounting, there are roles for students of vast interests to interact with the making of local news – and to help reimagine a model for local news that can thrive for years to come.

American colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to rebuild public trust and commitment to a common purpose by investing in the next generation of engaged citizens. We should seize the opportunity – for the good not only of our schools and our students, but of our democracy and our nation (Reilly, Watts).

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