Commonplace

Envisioning an expanded Corporation for Public Broadcasting to transform local public service newsrooms

Hilary Ross

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This piece is adapted from a longer [memo](#) written for the Federation for American Scientists' [Day One Project](#).

Over the past 20 years, as the Internet disrupted news business models and the national news industry consolidated, local news coverage has dramatically shrunk. Since 2008, American newsrooms [have lost almost a quarter](#) of their staff. About [half of all U.S. counties](#) have only one newspaper or information equivalent, and many have no local information source. Meanwhile, the remaining municipal and regional papers are being snapped up by hedge funds, which tend to make significant cuts in attempts to squeeze profits out from already struggling businesses. Just last month, the parent company of my hometown newspaper *The Baltimore Sun* [was purchased](#) by the hedge fund Alden Global Capital, along with *The Chicago Tribune*. During the pandemic, despite an influx of needed recovery money, newsrooms across the country have still had to lay off staff and close. *Poynter* has been [documenting](#) these layoffs, closures, and furloughs over the last year, including at more than ten outlets across my current state of Massachusetts.

The decimation of local news is an urgently worrying situation, as democracies need strong journalism to thrive. Local newsrooms inform communities, [increase accountability](#) for elected officials, [ground national debates](#) in local context, and contribute to local economies. For example, voters in local elections historically relied on local newspapers to cover candidates and make voting recommendations through editorial columns. Today, there is less of this coverage.

The depletion of reputable local newsrooms creates an information landscape ripe for manipulation. In particular, the shrinking of local newsrooms can exacerbate the risk of “[data voids](#)”, as coined by danah boyd and Michael Golebiewski, when good information is not available via online search and instead users find “falsehoods, misinformation, or disinformation”. ([Misinformation](#) is false content unintentionally shared; [disinformation](#) is false content designed to cause harm and intentionally shared.) For example, in 2019, the Tow Center at the Columbia Journalism School [documented 450 websites](#) masquerading as local news outlets, with titles like the East Michigan News, Hickory Sun, and Grand Canyon Times. But instead of publishing genuine journalism, these sites were distributing algorithmically generated, hyperpartisan, locally tailored disinformation. The growing popularity of social media as news sources or conduits to news sources—[more than half](#) of American

adults today get at least some news from social media—[compounds the problem](#) by [making it easier](#) for disinformation to spread. These problems will only become more pronounced if the market for local journalism continues to shrink.

Many organizations and people, especially in philanthropy, journalism, and academia, are working tirelessly to document the problems of local news, and sustain and transform local journalism. For example, the [National Trust for Local News](#) is pioneering new business models and capital structures, helping newsrooms stay in local hands. Together with the *Colorado Sun*, a public benefit corporation and new digital news site, the National Trust recently [purchased](#) twenty-four Colorado newsrooms, to keep them locally owned and working in the public's interest. As another example, [Report for America](#), a nonprofit national service program, placed 300 journalists in local news organizations across the country this year to report on under-covered issues; the organization aims to increase that number to 1,000 journalists within a few years. More broadly, numerous nonprofit digital outlets, including almost 300 affiliated with the [Institute for Nonprofit News](#), have emerged to fill information voids. (Though, these sites certainly have not made up for the massive numbers of journalism jobs and outlets lost over the past two decades.) And, many scholars, journalists, and advocates, for example [Victor Pickard and Timothy Neff](#) and [Martha Minow](#), are proposing paths forward for additional public funding and support.

Despite these efforts, newsrooms are closing, consolidating, and shrinking rapidly. And given the increasing pressures on the news business, maintaining local journalism requires treating it as a [public good](#). The scope of the local news problem is too big to be solely addressed privately; it deserves federal investment and attention.

Fortunately, we can look to history for inspiration. In the 1960s, the national information landscape in the United States had changed dramatically with the rise of widely available corporate TV and radio. At the time, the federal government recognized the need to reduce the potential harms and meet the opportunities that these information systems presented. Congress established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private nonprofit responsible for funding public radio and television stations and their programming. (For more background on the history of the CPB and the need to broadly imagine new forms of digital public infrastructure, see Ethan Zuckerman's essay [The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure](#).)

Public media is explicitly designed to fill gaps not addressed by the private market in educational, youth, arts, current events, and local news programming, and to serve all communities, including populations frequently overlooked by the private sector. CPB has a [mandate](#) to champion diversity and excellence in programming, serve all American communities, ensure local ownership and independent operation of public media stations, and shield stations from the possibility of political interference. Soon after its creation, CPB [established](#) the independent entities of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). (Critically, CPB itself does not produce content.) Today, primarily through funding NPR and PBS, CPB [supports](#) about 1,500 public television and radio broadcasters, many of which [produce and distribute](#) local news in addition to national news.

While the journalism industry is struggling, public media and CPB’s funding and support is a consistent bright spot. More than 2,000 American newspapers closed in the past 15 years, but NPR affiliates [added](#) 1,000 local part- and full-time journalist positions from 2011–2018 (though these data are pre-pandemic). Trust in [public media like PBS](#) remains high compared to other institutions; and [local news is more trusted](#) than national news. There is clear potential for CPB to help revive and transform the local news landscape: funding could help to develop community trust, strengthen democratic values, and defend against disinformation at a time when all three outcomes are critical.

Unfortunately, the rapid decline of local journalism nationwide has created information gaps that CPB—an institution that has remained largely unchanged since its founding more than 50 years ago—does not have the capacity to fill. Because its public service mandate still applies only to broadcasters, CPB is unable to fund stand-alone digital news sites. The result is a dearth of public-interest newsrooms with the skills and infrastructure to connect with their audiences online and provide good journalism without a paywall. CPB also simply lacks sufficient funding to rebuild local journalism at the pace and scope needed. Far too many people in the United States—especially members of rural and historically underserved communities—live in a “[news desert](#)”, or a community where residents have significantly diminished access to important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy.

Given the challenges of today’s information landscape, the Biden administration should work with Congress to reimagine and expand the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, by:

(1) Passing legislation to evolve the CPB into an expanded Corporation for Public Media. CPB’s current mandate is to fund and support broadcast public media. An expanded Corporation for Public Media (CPM) would retain all elements of CPB’s original [mandate](#), while additionally supporting local, nonprofit, public-service-oriented news outlets.

Under an expanded definition, what kinds of outlets would count as public media? This is a tricky question. Broadly, there are two core risks to consider and design against: first, the perpetual risk of government interference in public media, which CPB’s institutional design and norms have historically guarded against. (For example, there are no content or viewpoint restrictions on public media today—and there should not be in the future.) And second, a new risk that disinformation or propaganda sites, operating without journalistic practices, could masquerade as genuine news sites to apply for CPM funding. One of the most important factors in CPB’s success is its [ethos of public service](#) and the resulting positive norms; these norms and its institutional design are a large part of what makes CPB a good institutional candidate to expand.

To mitigate these two risks, legislation would need to include carefully designed criteria to be considered “public media” and then become eligible for federal funding. Broadly, local, nonprofit newsrooms should mean nonprofit or noncommercial newsrooms that cover a region, state, county, city, neighborhood, or specific community; it should not include individual reporters, bloggers, documentarians, etc. Congress should build on existing CPB eligibility requirements, such as active community advisory boards and regularly filed reports on station activities and spending. Congress members have [proposed](#) a Future of Local News commission to explore possibilities to sustain local news; this commission could be tasked with digging deeper into how the Corporation for Public Broadcast could best be evolved into a Corporation for Public Media, to address the disinformation and local news crises, while mitigating against risks.

Congress could also draw inspiration for eligibility requirements from the nonprofit Civic Information Consortium being [piloted](#) in New Jersey. The Civic Information Consortium is a partnership between higher education institutions and newsrooms in the state to strengthen local news coverage and civic engagement, seeded with an initial \$500,000 in funding.

(2) Whether or not the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is evolved into the Corporation for Public Media, Congress should double CPB’s annual federal budget allocation, from \$445 to \$890 million, to fund greater investment in local news and digital innovation.

CPB’s current appropriation is sufficient to fund some percentage of operational and programming costs at roughly 1,500 public broadcasting stations nationwide. But this is not enough. The media advocacy organization Free Press [estimates](#) the national “reporting gap” is roughly \$1 billion a year. Given that, CPB’s annual budget appropriation needs to be at least doubled. Increased funding would dramatically improve the local news and public media landscape, allowing newsrooms to increase local coverage and pay for the digital infrastructure [needed](#) to better meet audiences where they primarily are—online.

This funding should (a) specifically support local public-service journalism, prioritizing communities that have already become “news deserts”; are *at risk* of becoming news deserts; and have been historically underserved by media, including Black, Hispanic, Native, and rural communities. Importantly, the funding should be distributed through a structured formula—similar to CPB’s funding formulas for public broadcasting stations—that ensures these priorities, protects news coverage from government interference, and ensures high-quality news. And (b) support digital innovation for newsrooms, building on innovation projects like [NPR One](#), NPR’s app. This would help local, nonprofit newsrooms build the infrastructure needed to thrive in the digital age.

To be clear, while local news has a key role in democratic accountability and needs to be supported, historically, journalism has often reflected and maintained unfair and inequitable power dynamics. The press has helped create and continue racial, gender, and class hierarchies that persist today. In a recent op-ed, academic Sid Bedingfield [wrote](#), “Far from objective, the work of the Southern White press and its allies destroyed democracy in the South for nearly a century and crafted a racial hierarchy that infected modern America and endures today... This history highlights why African American journalists have been compelled to advocate for Black equality.” Investing in local newsrooms will only be truly transformative if those newsrooms adopt practices that are equitable and cover their communities with, as the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones recently [stated](#), “a clarity, skepticism, rigor, and historical dexterity that is too often missing from today’s journalism.”

Reimagining and expanding CPB into an institution capable of bolstering the local news ecosystem is necessary and possible; yet it will not be easy and

would bring risks. The United States is in a politically uncertain, difficult, and violent time, with a rapid, continued fracturing of shared understanding. Previously, the public media system has come under attack in the “culture wars”. Given that, many champions of public media are understandably wary of considering any changes to the CPB and public media institutions. But our country needs a robust network of local public media outlets as part of a comprehensive strategy to decrease blind partisanship and focus national dialogues on facts. Policymakers should be willing to go to bat to expand and modernize the vision of a national public media system first laid out more than fifty years ago.

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Hilary Ross works on technology and media policy. She is currently a Senior Program Manager at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. She wrote this proposal as a Fellow in the Day One Project’s Technology Policy Accelerator Cohort.